



**THE STRUGGLE FOR MEANING:
A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF INTERPRETATIONS
OF THE LOVELIFE HIS&HERS BILLBOARD CAMPAIGN**

By Richard Delate, November 2001



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Introduction

loveLife, created in 1997/8, is a joint initiative by a consortium of non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) concerned with adolescent reproductive health in South Africa namely: Advocacy Initiatives, Health Systems Trust, Planned Parenthood Association of South Africa and the Reproductive Health Research Unit (RHRU). The annual budget for Love life is R150 million with core funding provided by the Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation (R100 million), the National Department of Health (R25 million) and R25 million coming from additional sources. Its core partners are the Department of Health, the National Youth Commission, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and UNICEF (Love Life Brochure).

loveLife aims to reduce the rate of HIV infection among young South African adolescents by promoting sexual health and healthy lifestyles for young people aged 12-17. It expects to accomplish its goal through a brand driven, sustained multi-dimensional national programme focussing on making condom usage part of youth culture; establishing adolescent friendly reproductive health services; education; community outreach and institutional support (Love Life, 2001, p.8). Chief Executive Officer for loveLife, David Harrison explains that there are two sides to the loveLife model for influencing the sexual behaviour of young people.

*“One is putting the message out to young people the other is to help them internalise what it is we are trying to do. So the two sides of loveLife are the high powered multimedia on the one hand but on the other hand the service development, institutional support and the outreach. So that is the model these two working together media and interaction, this constant to and fro”.*¹

The messages of the loveLife billboards have generated considerable discussion within the media and amongst communications experts in South Africa. The debate has concentrated on the meanings and interpretations of the intended target audience to the messages being employed by loveLife in support of its campaign.

In a letter to The Star (June, 2001) Father Francois Dufor comments that when he asks teenagers what the loveLife Billboards mean to them “they don’t even know what it refers to”. Daniel Halperin and Brian Williams writing in the Washington Post, “This is no way to fight AIDS in Africa” (2001) describe the loveLife campaign as being misguided focussing unprecedented resources on a Madison Avenue style HIV-prevention campaign targeted at young people. In addition they argue that while one of the main goals of loveLife is to promote condoms these are never explicitly mentioned in the media campaigns of loveLife despite research indicating low condom usage amongst the target population that loveLife is trying to reach. In an article entitled “Talking about HIV/AIDS – The loveLife Campaign” by Plus News, an electronic HIV/AIDS news service, it is argued that the controversy

¹ Interview with David Harrison, Chief Executive Officer: Love Life, July 2001, Johannesburg

surrounding the loveLife campaign is owing to its “in your face and obscure style of conveying messages about HIV/AIDS”.

loveLife on the other hand maintains that its target audience understands the messages of its billboards and substantiates this with research undertaken entitled “loveLife Communication – market penetration and message take out”. The research consisted of a random survey of 1000 respondents, 600 young people and 400 parents, undertaken in September 2000. The survey indicated a 57.5% awareness of loveLife brand after the first year of the programme. (loveLife, 2000, p. 2).

When shown images of the loveLife billboards, 66.5% of respondents indicated that they recognised the billboards. In a population-based survey, 58.3% of respondents felt that they were ‘about real life,’ 12.4% felt that the billboards did not affect them, while 27.2% felt that the billboards make them think and 5.9% felt they were encouraging sex (loveLife, 2000, p. 5).

LoveLife currently spends R13 million per annum on its billboard campaign, and a further R5-million on mobile outdoor media². Through utilising semiotics and a qualitative research approach the purpose of this enquiry is to test the meanings and interpretations that the target audience interacting with the loveLife billboards ascribes to the brand, and the messages and the extent to which this assists in developing a national discourse around the issue of adolescent sexual behaviour in South Africa. It is argued that meanings are not fixed but open to interpretation informed by culture, language and socialisation. loveLife assumes a high degree of brand awareness, as indicated by their research mentioned previously, which would enable those reading the billboards to provide a framework in which to contextualise the message. However, a quantitative analysis is limited in providing in-depth analysis and understanding of what loveLife is about would provide the handle according to which the messages on the billboards are interpreted.

Semiotics – The study of Signs

Semiotics is the study of how meaning occurs in language, pictures, performance, and other forms of expression through the use of signs and the ways in which they work. The conceptual tools of semiotics are signs and codes. Semiotics views signs as the basic building blocks of communication. A sign is something physical, perceivable by our senses, it refers to something other than itself and it depends on recognition by its users that it is a sign. It is only given meaning if it has a use to people. The interpretations or meanings given to a sign are informed through the culture, attitude and emotions that the reader applies to the sign. Therefore the reader is seen to be playing an active role in the generation of the meaning of the text (Tomaselli, 1996, pp. 29-30, Fiske, 1990, p.41).

² Interview with David Harrison, CEO of loveLife and Judie Nwokedi, Media Manager for loveLife, July 2001,

Charles Sanders Peirce, provides the following description of the elements of signs: A *sign (representamen)* refers to something other than itself. It stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It is understood by somebody that is it has an effect in the mind of the user – the *interpretant*. In other words it is a mental concept produced both by the sign and the users experience of the sign. The interpretant is not fixed but may vary within limits according to the experience of the user, the limits of which are defined according to social convention. The variation within them allows for the social and psychological differences between users (Fiske, 1990, p. 42, Hawkes, 1977, p. 126-127).

Peirce proposes a triad of signs which are not mutually exclusive kinds of signs but three modes of a relationship between sign and object or signifier and signified which coexist in the form of a hierarchy in which one of them will eventually have dominance over the other two. Therefore one sign may be composed of various types. The nature of the signs ultimately dominant mode will depend on its context.

A sign is considered to be *iconic* if it looks like the object signified, bearing a resemblance to its object. The similarity or resemblance proposed by the sign is to be acknowledged by its receiver. This is most apparent in visual signs. For example signs denoting ladies and gentlemen's lavatories are icons. (Tomaselli, 1996, p. 30; Hawkes, 1977, pp. 128 –129, Fiske, 1990, p. 47).

An *indexical* sign draws attention to the thing to which it refers. The relationship is concrete, actual and usually of a sequential, causal kind. In other words it signifies the existential relationship to the phenomena it depicts such as smoke which is an index of fire (Tomaselli, 1996, p.30; Hawkes, 1977, p. 129, Fiske, 1990, p.47).

A *symbolic* sign has no obvious connection to the idea it represents except through convention, agreement or rule in our culture that it does. The relationship between signified and signifier is unmotivated or arbitrary and requires the presence of an interpretant to make the signifying connection. Words, colour and numbers are symbols. It is important to note that the use of symbols is cultural interpretation. (Tomaselli, 1996, pp. 30-31; Hawkes, 1977, p. 129, Fiske, 1990, p.48).

Signs are strung together in codes which enables a coherent meaning of the sign to be developed when they are linked according to socially agreed rules, emphasising the social dimension of communication. Codes therefore perform a social and communicative function with the meaning being generated only making sense if certain rules are followed in speaking, writing, photographing and so on. Codes are arranged in patterns by the makers of messages which gives rise to a text, transmittable by an appropriate media and/or channels of communication. A text has two dimensions that of the product and text as the interaction between the reader/viewer/listener (Tomaselli, 1996, pp 31-33, Fiske, 1990, p.64-65).

The generation of the meanings of messages is regarded by semiotics as an active process. The making of meanings or messages is known as encoding and the interpreting of the

messages is known as decoding. The idea elicited through decoding is known as the text or interpretant which is the meaning generated in the mind of the person/viewer/listener/reader who decodes the sign or message. The term reading is preferred as it implies an active negotiation on the part of the interpreter. Semiotics does not distinguish between the encoder and decoder. The interpretant is the mental concept of the user of the sign, whether this be speaker or listener, writer or reader, painter or viewer. Decoding is as active and creative as encoding. Therefore it may happen that the encoding intended by the author may not necessarily coincide with the meaning understood by the reader or intended by the producer of the message resulting in discrepant decoding (Fiske, 1990, p.42- 46; Tomaselli, 1996, p. 32).

The semiotic struggle is borne out of the struggle that occurs between the makers of messages and the receivers of messages. As Parker notes communication is not necessarily linear but is a deeper, multifaceted process, where messages are shaped by subjective responses. Semiotics provides the tools according to which the messages developed by the makers of the messages can be evaluated in terms of the interpretations and meanings of the target audience to the messages (Tomaselli, 1996, pp.29-32; Parker, 1994, chpt 2, p.12 of 31)

As such semiotics provides the tools according to which an evaluation of the messages depicted by the loveLife billboards can be evaluated. It is argued that billboards as a medium for information are only given meaning when they are interpreted in the minds of the reader as such. Semiotic also enables us to study the images surrounding brands which enable consumers, or users of a service to form a mental vision of what and who a brand stands for. Specific brands are selected when the images that they convey match the needs, values and lifestyles of consumers (de Chernatony & McDonald, 1992, pp. 137-139).

Billboards as a Medium

As a medium billboards are advertisements, placed upon structures along major transport routes and at places where people converge. They rely upon colour, pictures and a few words to convey a message. After delivering the message in its desired form or size, the medium is no way responsible for securing reading or attention to the message which is the responsibility of the advertiser (Agnew, 1985, p.93).

Research undertaken by the University of Alberta found that the effectiveness of a billboard is dependent upon the message style, number of messages, linkage of the product and service being displayed to a brand, the use of illustrations, legibility and copy length and the mixing of media for greater impact. (Outdoor Network Australia, pp 2-15).

Similar research undertaken in South Africa on AKA Instant Energy Food indicates that the use of outdoor advertising is effective in increasing brand awareness. What makes the use of outdoor media effective in achieving brand awareness is the subliminal manner in which

outdoor communicates. Such awareness is accentuated when the creative execution of the message is bright, bold and visually stimulating³.

Where outdoor is utilised to supplement television it can sustain awareness levels initially established by television⁴. As loveLife relies upon public service announcements on television, television programmes and radio spots the use of the billboard advertising takes on an added significance in generating brand awareness and getting its message across with the objective of getting South Africans to “talk about it”.

The use of the outdoor media by loveLife

The principles guiding the development of the loveLife billboards and messages are that it has to:

- Stand out above the media clutter
- Be contemporary in terms of its look and feel, use of font and language.
- Appeal to the aspirations of young people
- Be frank and straightforward.
- Be sophisticated with the messages appearing risqué in appearance but also conservative.⁵

loveLife has 1 043 billboards across South Africa. The sizes of billboards vary from supersigns (5mX20 or 4.5mX20 or 12mX9m) to 48 sheet posters (3mX6m)⁶. Maps were provided by Corpcom which indicated the placement and various sizes of the loveLife billboards.

Judie Nwokedi-Fortuin, Media Manager for loveLife, explains that the rationale behind the use of the outdoor media is that, “right now in the South African market below the line media is proving to be the most powerful. People wanting to extend market reach realise now that the way to go is to be in the streets where most people live...To inform, to influence, to manipulate the market, you have got to get to where the people are”⁷.

In terms of the placement of the billboards loveLife has “focussed the weighting more in terms of communities that do not have and there is also so much media clutter in urban areas so if you are just going to add your billboard its just another billboard, you do not really have meaningful impact”⁸.

On its billboards, loveLife aims to keep the messages to a minimum to grab and sustain the attention of its target audience and others interacting with the messages. However the messages are expanded upon in the use of other media. For example loveLife advertisements on taxis encourage the viewer to call the Thethajunction for “free sexual health information”.

³ Handout provided by Tony Davidson, Outdoor Advertising Association of South Africa, 2001

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Interview with Judie Nwokedi-Fortuin, Media Manager: loveLife, July 2001, Johannesburg

⁶ Interview with Max de Jongh, Senior Marketing Manager, Corpcom, July 2001, Johannesburg

⁷ Interview with Judie Nwokedi-Fortuin, Media Manager: loveLife, July 2001, Johannesburg.

⁸ Ibid

On television pictures are added which enables loveLife to tell a story. This provides for a contextualisation of the campaign as an adolescent sexual health campaign⁹. It is interesting to note, however, that no explanation of the word Thetajunction is provided on the billboard.

See front for graphics depicting the HIS&HERS billboards.

Branding

de Chernatony and Mc Donald (1992, p.18) define a brand as an identifiable product, service, person or place with which the the buyer or user perceives unique added values matching their needs most closely. While the marketer instigates the branding process. The mental evaluation that the purchaser or user gives to the brand determines the final form that the brand takes.

While the functional capabilities of a brand is important, brands enable the consumer or user to communicate something about themselves. Brands as a symbol enable people to interpret images, feelings and stereotypes. The symbolic values of brands enables people to interpret and understand their environment. However, symbols acquire their meaning in a cultural context which needs to be appreciated in understanding the encoding and decoding process. As a communication device, brands must be highly visible, used by a group of people that have a distinguishable characteristic which facilitates recognition of a particular stereotype. Advertising is crucial in reinforcing the covert message displayed by the brand (de Chernatony & McDonald, 1992, pp137-144).

Research undertaken by Outdoor Network Australia (pp. 7-10) indicates that where a brand icon is used on a billboard it can significantly increase an advertisements memorability by up to 40% compared to those not using a brand icon. However, this can only be achieved if there is a high degree of brand awareness or if the creative execution of the message enables the reader to place the brand within a given context.

LoveLife's branding strategy recognises the high degree of brand awareness, association and loyalty amongst young South Africans. David Harrison explains that loveLife aims to *"create a brand so strong that young people who want to be hip and cool and the rest of it want to associate with it. That is the first step, unless you have got that level of identification...that level of association...you are not going to be able to start conveying messages to young people"*.

"LoveLife positions itself as an aspirational brand for young people as there is a direct correlation between young peoples sexual behaviour and their sense of confidence in the future. Those young people who feel motivated who feel that they have something to look forward to they are the ones who protect themselves, who ensure that they do not get HIV/AIDS. It's all about the social discount rates that young people apply to future benefits.

⁹ Ibid.

So our whole essence is ...constantly trying to make the link between what you do today and the future”¹⁰.

Through combining the words love and life the brand aims to project an image which is positive towards life and love¹¹.

“Talk About it” – The loveLife pay off line

“Talk about it” is the entree to all the loveLife messages. “Talk about it” was conceived as international research had shown a correlation between open and frank discussion with young people around issues pertaining to sex and a delayed onset of sexual activity (Interview with Love Life, 2001). The use of the word “it”, a neutral word, enables Love Life to hinge all its messages on this line. Talk about it aims to encourage talk about:

- Healthy, positive approaches to sex, sexuality and sexual health
- Communicating more openly about sexual expression
- Alternatives to sexual intercourse and choices regarding sexual pleasure
- Sexual rights and exercising those rights
- Safer sex options and contraceptive choice
- The concept of a positive lifestyle (Love Life, 2001, p.18).

loveLife aims to encourage “Talk about it” in all elements of social networks with and amongst children, parents, young people, religious organisations, leadership which are all regarded as interconnected networks. loveLife acknowledges that “Talk about it” in itself is not going to bring about sexual behaviour change but that it is the foundation upon which such change can be effected (Interview with Love Life, 2001).

However as Littlejohn (1999, p. 80) points out words such as “so, and, about, sure” and “it”, do not represent objects. Meaning in this instance is not derived through the sign-object relationship but by the sign-sign relationship which is determined by how the communicators have used the signs to convey their messages. The line “talk about it” on the loveLife billboards could be described as indexical directing the reader to interpret what they are supposed to talk about in the context of understanding the brand, loveLife, and the messages and graphics that are portrayed in the billboard.

Thetajunction

Thetajunction, a combination of the Nguni word for talk and junction the English word for coming together is intended to reinforce the notion of talk about it. Thetajunction, as a sub-brand of loveLife, is the name given to the helpline that loveLife operates where young people can phone in and obtain advice on sexual health issues. On its billboards there is no

¹⁰ Interview with David Harrison, Chief Executive Officer: loveLife, July 2001

¹¹ Interview with Judie Nwokedi, Media Manager: loveLife, July 2001

clarification about what Thetajunction stands for whereas as on the advertisements on the taxis this is clearly stipulated.

The loveLife billboard messages and graphics

This research is limited to the His & Hers campaign undertaken by loveLife from June until October 2001. In an article in the Sunday Times (08 July 2001), Judie Fortuin-Nwokedi explains that the loveLife Communications is “*all about the future: bigger, brighter, better. A future full of promise, choices and many different decisions to make*”. *His & Hers is about two people sharing responsibility, talking, communicating and taking charge of their lives...When it comes to our hearts, talking, babies, condoms, sex and sexuality, the responsibility is his, hers, yours and mine.*

The puzzle is part of the shared responsibility the puzzle piece was looking at two pieces not really relating which piece was his and hers two pieces making a whole. The two pieces being a him and her two people in a relationship. The campaign also focussed on gender emphasising the responsibility of both males and females in sexual relationships¹².

Hypothesis and Research Methodology

The description provided has resulted in a number of questions concerning the use of the outdoor media in support of the loveLife campaign. These include:

- Whether there is sufficient understanding of the brand loveLife to enable the target audience to have a context in which to interpret the messages of the billboards;
- To test the meanings that the target audiences assign to the messages of the loveLife billboards and whether these match the intended meaning of shared responsibility;
- Whether the loveLife billboards are working towards developing a national discourse on issues pertaining adolescent reproductive health;
- Whether the sub-brand Thetajunction is self evident to the target audience as a helpline dedicated to meeting the needs of adolescents concerning their sexual behaviour.

Qualitative research offers techniques for obtaining in depth responses to how people think and feel. It enables programme management to gain insight into the attitudes, beliefs, motives, and behaviours of the target audience. It is interpretive rather than descriptive. Focus Groups, which form part of qualitative research, are widely used in the social sciences and came into being after World War II when it was utilised by Paul Larsfeld and Robert Merton to evaluate audience responses to radio programmes. Focus groups are an established research tool in the area of programme evaluation, marketing, public policy, advertising and communication (RATN, 1999, p 1-2-1; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990, pp. 9-10)

Focus groups enable the researcher to obtain general information about a topic of interest, to diagnose the potential for problems with new or existing programmes and to generate

¹² Angela Stewart, Information Manager: Love Life, November 2001

impressions of programmes. de Chernatony and Mac Donald (1992, p. 147) argue that semiotics as a qualitative market research tool enables marketers to “*identify the rules of meaning that consumers have devised to encode and decode symbolic communication so as to make better use of advertising, design and packaging*”. Through undertaking a qualitative semiotic analysis enables the marketer to gain a better understanding of the cultural relationship between brands and consumers.

Information provided by the Outdoor Media Association of South Africa suggests that in evaluating billboards researchers should use both unaided and aided recall. Unaided recall is when the participants are asked to describe which billboards they have seen in the past week and what appealed to them about that billboard. Should participants recall, in this instance the Love Life Billboards, and are able to describe them it shows that the audience is familiar with billboards. This allows for probing of the elements of the billboard that most stood out to them and what they found appealing or not appealing about the billboards. Aided recall is where participants are shown samples of the billboards and asked to indicate which one they have seen. This provides for the discussion to then focus on the specific billboards.

In selecting the sites it was decided not to include a site where loveLife had a functional presence (i.e Y-Centres) but that there should be billboards in the areas in which the study was conducted. The Mpumalanga site had no billboards in the town, however, there were billboards in the towns in the vicinity of the site. It is argued that differences in exposure to media may result in differences of meanings and values being attributed to the brand loveLife and the messages being employed. The use of the English language and the combination of Zulu and English in the word Thetajunction, for example, may impact upon the meanings attributed to the brand loveLife and the messages of the billboards. The cultural setting of the three sites may also impact on the ability of the youth to discuss issues pertaining to sex and sexuality which is the ultimate goal of the loveLife mass media campaign

Using a convenience sample four focus groups were undertaken involving four schools one in Mpumalanga and three in Gauteng. The participating schools included both previously advantaged schools and disadvantaged schools. In the case of Mpumalanga, the Department of Education in this province assisted with the identification of the school. In Gauteng the three schools were directly contacted and the Department was informed that the study was being undertaken. So as not to disrupt the school programme most of the focus groups took place after school hours and lasted for approximately an hour and a half to two hours and were conducted on the school premises.

Table 1: Sites selected for focus groups

Province	Town/City	Male	Female	Age range
Mpumalanga	Pilgrims Rest	7	3	13-16
Gauteng	Pretoria	4	4	15-16
Gauteng	Atteridgeville	4	4	15-16
Gauteng	Johannesburg	5	4	15-16

School staff assisted with the identification of the participants. Criteria were that the groups comprise between eight and twelve participants ranging in age from 13 to 16 years of age, include both genders, and where possible, have a racial mix.

The focus groups were run by a facilitator assisted, in some cases, by a note-taker. All focus groups sessions were tape recorded, with additional notes being taken during the sessions. The discussion guide included:

- An overview of media access;
- Assessment of general and loveLife specific billboard recall (unaided);
- Assessment of loveLife branding (unaided);
- Review of interpretation of various elements of the billboards (aided with photographs of the billboards)

Findings

Fiske (1990, p.39) notes that for communication to take place messages need to be created from signs which stimulates the generation of meaning that relates to the meaning generated in the message in the first place. It is only through sharing the same codes and using the same sign systems that the two meanings generated will approximate one another.

The Outdoor Network Australia (pp. 7-10) indicates that a brand icon used on a billboard can significantly increase an ads memorability by up to 40% compared to those not using a brand icon. The use of a brand icon enables the reader of the messages to contextualise the message by acting as a symbol of the organisation being advertised directing the reader to decode the codes of the messages. As Tomaselli (1999: pp. 32-33) notes there is usually a significant fit between a genre's implicit semiotic instructions on how to read the text and the and the general message usually inferred by the readers of the text. This implies that upon seeing the brand icon the reader will be directed to create meaning through relating it to his, her experiences, attitudes and emotions which can be informed through education, the mass media, language etc. This is illustrated in the following quote on Levi jeans by one of the participants:

At Menlyn there was this huge poster of Levis twisted to fit. That was a really nice advert its looks like the jeans are the wrong way round and the pockets are in the wrong places and everything. What that means to me is that we associate Levis with like stylish clothing. (Male participant, Pretoria 1)

The focus groups undertaken indicate that the use of the icon 'loveLife' on the billboards have contributed towards a high degree of awareness of an entity called loveLife by all groups, with the exception of one, having recalled the loveLife billboards when asked to describe the billboards they had seen in the past seven days. The interpretant or mental image generated in the minds of the participants of what that icon symbolised, however, varied from

viewing loveLife as an HIV/AIDS programme, teaching about love, sex and safe sex with others having no idea of what the aims and objectives of loveLife are.

AIDS. That AIDS programme (Group discussion, Johannesburg)

*Talk about it for AIDS or for having sex, talk about it sex
(Male participant, Johannesburg)*

I think they teach people about love¹³ (Male participant, Pilgrims Rest)

*They teach people to use condoms when they have sex
(Male participant, Atteridgeville)*

Boy: But I don't know what love life is about

Girl: exactly because you cannot really say what this organisation is for

Fac¹⁴: So the brand lovelife?

Girl: It does not mean anything to us

Boy: Is lovelife like a condom brand?

Girls: No that is lovers plus

(Group Discussion, Johannesburg)

This indicates that being able to recall a billboard does not imply an understanding of the brand which is expected to be generated through the mental image that the brand icon creates in the mind of the reader. Branding enables the reader to decode the icon and generate an association with the meaning of the brand, in the case of loveLife 'to talk about it', amongst other associations. Where a low level of awareness of exists of the symbolism of the brand icon it is important for the advertiser to keep the messages simple, predictable and repetitive so that the target audience can then develop an understanding of the product or service. If the underlying meanings of the brand icon are not immediately apparent, or the messages conveyed alongside the brand icon, are not interpreted as intended, there is limited attention given to the advertisement or a discrepant decoding of the messages may occur.

This was evident with participants in the focus groups where there were varying interpretations of the loveLife brand and messages. This is made more complex when the associated messages are themselves iconic. For example, when asked to describe through unaided recall, billboards that they had seen in the last week and what they liked about them participants said:

*In the last week I saw a love life billboard and it just had a man and a woman
(Female participant, Atteridgeville)*

You know those pictures you put on toilets like and it said his and hers. It didn't really – it was like ok his and hers whatever it didn't really interest me and it

¹³ Following further probing during the discussion it emerged that the word love is ambiguous as it could also imply sex.

¹⁴ Fac = facilitator

didn't really tell me what they wanted actually. It didn't really give me any information about what it was there and what it was about so I lost all interest in looking at any billboard. (Female participant, Pretoria 1)

Everything about AIDS everytime I think loveLife I see that pink and purple puzzle, ah (Female participant, Johannesburg)

In these examples, it is clear that any intended associations with the brand icon are overshadowed by complex iconic and symbolic representations or “messages”. Readers are not readily able to see beyond the represented forms to derive meaning. The billboard medium limits capacity to convey complex meanings. It should be noted that in using unaided recall, only one participant indicated that she knew what loveLife symbolised, and her interpretation of the billboard. For this participant loveLife was seen as providing reliable information on sex and also encouraging her to seek more information so that she could make informed decisions about sex.

Love Life, they are just plugging them (billboards), just to show what is life, what is going on with life and process of growing up... loveLife they are using them to notify of the process of growing up like having kids and what is going on with kids and a man and a woman what is going on if they mate and what is going on that kind of thing. (Female participant, Atteridgeville)

Participants in Pilgrims Rest indicated that loveLife was seen as providing information about love. In this group the word love was used rather ambiguously and following considerable probing one boy indicated that love meant sex.

Male participant: It teaches us about love

Facilitator: What do you mean by love

Male participant: It teaches us about sex

(Pilgrims Rest)

Apparent from the discussions was that participants familiar with what the brand symbolised, obtained that information through other mediums. Participants with a greater diversity of media at their disposal were less inclined to be familiar with the loveLife programme than youth who predominantly watched SABC 1/2/3 and e-TV or listened to local language radio stations or Y-FM. Types of programming accessed included soap operas such as “Generations” and “Days of our Lives”, youth drama such as Yizo-Yizo, films, cartoons and music programmes.

Table 2: Media accessed by participants

Province	Town/City	Media
Mpumalanga	Pilgrims Rest	Television (SABC1/2/3 e-TV); local language radio stations.
Gauteng	Pretoria	Television (SABC1/2/3, e-TV, DSTV/MTV); Y-FM, 5-FM and Metro; magazines and internet
Gauteng	Atteridgeville	Television (SABC1/2/3 e-TV); Y-FM, Metro and local language stations; magazines
Gauteng	Johannesburg	Television (SABC1/2/3, e-TV, DSTV); Y-FM, Highveld, 5-FM; magazines

As Judie Nwokedi-Fortuin indicated loveLife aims to keep the messages on the billboards quite limited, expanding upon them through the use of other media.

It should be noted though that the emotions associated with a brand inform the mental image and attitude towards the brand. In two of the groups surveyed a strongly negative attitude existed towards the issue of HIV/AIDS, and this in turn informed their attitude to the billboards.

Male participant: Ja the design is pretty modern and stylised and simple. It is not something you are going to spend a while reading at or anything. But maybe you can say it is not hip and cool cause we do not like whats behind it. Its not the actual billboard itself which isn't cool.

Facilitator: When you say that you don't like what's behind it what do you mean?

Male participant: Well it doesn't really appeal to us. It doesn't interest us. Like we have said we switch off when we hear about AIDS that's why we rather see some other billboard with the same design that would be more interesting.

(Discussion, Pretoria)

We don't want to hear about AIDS. It seems the only issue in South Africa is AIDS. (Female participant, Johannesburg).

Participants who saw loveLife as an AIDS campaign were unsure how it related to HIV/AIDS, given the absence of the red ribbon AIDS icon. This suggests the importance of association, if loveLife intends to be perceived as related to HIV/AIDS.

Interpretation of the brand icon is made more complex by adding messages that are not readily decoded. The billboards reviewed in this instance incorporated a central theme – HIS and HERS. It was intended that this reinforce the theme of shared responsibility and joint

decision making. Pictures and words as symbols are open to a wide interpretation informed by culture and our experiences. In the focus groups the words HIS and HERS had varying meanings, that were strongly influenced by yet another series of iconic representations. For example, the toilet door symbols for male and female were interpreted as bathrooms – one for him and one for her.

*I think that if you were driving past and you just saw two toilet people you would not really look. I am serious. It sounds wrong if you rode past and would go wow, look back again... or did I see right?
(Female participant, Pretoria)*

The billboard depicting the male and female figures was mostly recognised as being a symbol for a boy and a girl. However the relationship between his and hers was open to interpretation from representing the male and the female organs, to being indicative of sex by depicting two naked people and representing “toilet people” with:

Female Participant: One gender goes to the toilet for one reason and the other gender goes to the other toilet for another reason

*Male Participant: But I really don't understand two people being naked...
(Group discussion, Pretoria)*

Ja its like they are going to have sex or something I don't know (Female participant, Johannesburg)

Male participant: It means love

Female Participant: It means a man and a woman

(Group discussion, Mpumalanga)

The puzzle piece created further interferences and was interpreted by some as a condom or a sexual act. According to loveLife, the puzzle piece depicted on all the billboards was aimed at reinforcing the notion of shared responsibility. Two of the groups decoded the puzzle piece as an index drawing attention to the action of having sex even when probed on each of the billboards.

Is it not like the guy and the girl (ja exact). Its just I think the connection between the guy and the girl if they go together. I don't know. (Female participant, Pretoria 1)

I think that jig saw puzzle is a guy and a chick combining (Male participant: Johannesburg)

Facilitator: And the puzzle piece?

Participants: Sexual... All of them are sexual

(Group discussion: Johannesburg)

In another group the puzzle piece was viewed as an icon for condoms symbolising the need to use condoms:

Female participant: ...it was a billboard about loveLife it was showing a man and female and in between it was showing a condom showing that a male and female must use a condom just to have safe sex and AIDS is there it kills also we all know that.

Female Participant: Lovelife, I saw a condom and a man and a women

(Group discussion, Atteridgeville)

The image of the baby on one loveLife billboard was correctly identified by most participants as representing a baby which enabled the participants to decode the message as indicative of the need for both males and females to take responsibility for the outcomes of unsafe sex.

I think it his and hers and when you make the decision to have sex you must take responsibility to look after the child. (Male participant: Johannesburg)

If you and a girl decide to have a baby your putting two together and your are going to have to deal with the consequences. (Male participant, Johannesburg)

Where the interpretant generated in the mind of the reader did not match what the icon or picture represented resulted in a discrepant decoding of messages. In some instances the picture of the baby was seen as symbolising a girl, a lady, a teddybear where this occurred the result was uncertainty as to what the meaning of the billboard was.

Facilitator: If we look at this picture what do you think does HIS & HERs mean?

Group: Don't understand

Female participant: Don't understand if its she or he, don't understand him or she. Don't understand whether it him or she sleeping

Male participant: Don't understand if it's a teddy bear, a baby or a girl

(Group discussion, Pilgrims Rest)

The only reason why I did not get it because I did not see the baby I just saw some person (Female participant, Johannesburg)

The lack of understanding of what the brand loveLife symbolised also resulted in a discrepant decoding of the messages. A girl pointed out that:

If you think about loveLife it is about AIDS and then you probably think that the baby is most probably sick. (Female participant, Johannesburg)

Most participants identified the icons of the hearts as an index for love. The relationship with the words HIS & HERS was not apparent to the groups. A participant in Johannesburg described this billboard as ‘Kak’ (derogatory for being rubbish) emphasising it about three times. In addition the groups looked for symbolism of colour to determine which heart was indicative of the girls and which was indicative of the boys. It was also evident that this was the billboard that most of the participants had not previously seen.

I don't really understand this cause I know there are two hearts there but what do they say his and hers, what like two people falling in love. HIS and HERS doesn't make sense to me (Male participant, Pretoria)

I think the hearts are becoming one and love (Female participant, Johannesburg)

Boy: It explains love

Boy: When you love each other

Girl: When you love your girlfriend

Girl: They love each other

(Group discussion: Pilgrims Rest)

All the groups identified the speech bubbles as indicative of stressing the need to talk about it. It was interesting to note that urban participants felt that people from the rural areas would not be able to understand what the speech bubbles represent. However, rural participants clearly identified the symbols as speech bubbles as being from cartoons, same as the participants in the urban areas. However, the rural participants indicated that they thought what the bubbles meant was that people should talk about ‘love’ which was used rather ambiguously throughout. One participant indicated:

This is my father and my mother and they want to (Male participant, Pilgrims Rest)

The use of symbolic approaches to messaging in these examples, clearly shows the limitations of intended interpretations versus actual interpretations. In particular, it is important to note the uniformity in discrepant decoding (eg. Puzzle piece becomes condom or sex act). Also notable is the wide range of interpretations, and divergent meanings associated with the

billboard “messages”. It is not clear what the benefits of inexplicit messaging are, given that readers have very little idea of what they are expected to understand – ie. LoveLife’s notion of “message take out” falls into question, given that what is “taken out” is often a discrepant interpretation..

The loveLife billboards aim to encourage a national discourse on adolescent sexual behaviour. However, this is disincentivised through obscure and complex messaging. For example, when participants were asked if they have or would discuss the billboards with anyone the response was emphatically negative in all groups.

The thing is if you don't understand it you don't want to make yourself look stupid and go up to somebody and you know do you understand that and its plain and simple. So I do not think that many people like to speak about the billboards when they don't understand its embarrassing to ask what it means (Male participant, Pretoria)

These are the only ads that people don't really speak about because they don't understand them. (Female participant, Johannesburg)

I really don't see how it can achieve anything through posters and billboards honestly I don't see what they achieve through this what does it do. (Female participant, Johannesburg)

If I was sexually active and I saw this thing it does not teach me anything more. (Female participant, Johannesburg)

Over and above purposive messaging, the billboards also consistently incorporate parallel “branding” in the form of the ThetaJunction helpline. Fiske notes that words are symbols with no obvious connections to the idea it represents whose connection with its object is a matter of convention, agreement or rule (Fiske, 1990: 48). Our understanding of words is dependent on our knowledge of a language which we learn through education and socialisation and is informed by our culture.

The use of the sub-brand Thetajunction as the loveLife tollfree number caused confusion in most groups. It was assumed that most youth would be able to understand the word Thetajunction a combination of the Nguni word for “talking” and the English word “junction” which is a place for coming together. Youth unfamiliar with the word “theta” had difficulty in interpreting the word. Most groups were unsure as to whether it was “theta” or “theeta.” The unfamiliarity with the word “theta”, the confusion on which word was being used and in one group unfamiliarity with the word “junction” resulted in difficulty in understanding of the aims of the toll free number. However once explained by a fellow participant who was familiar with the word they were able to interpret what Thetajunction represented.

I did not know what Theta meant but now that ... has told me it means to talk about or to speak, it becomes clear that I can phone that number and speak

about my problems so maybe if it was like english or something else I would understand it better (Male participant, Pretoria)

Male participant: Its like when you go and play soccer and some other players makes a junction

(Group Discussion, Pilgrims Rest)

The use of two brand icons on the billboards resulted in confusion on what the second icon 'Thetajunction' represented. Reading billboards the brand icon allows us to interpret the message and to derive at the action that the advertiser wants us to undertake. The use of two brand icons on the billboards thus resulted in confusion with Thetajunction being described by three groups as the advertising agency. It was particularly interesting that participants did not recognise loveLife as the communicating agency.

And also Thetajunction now that you mention the helpline I know what it is. Before I couldn't quite work out if you were supposed to phone and discuss your problems or if it was a design company. I did not know. (Male participant, Pretoria 1)

Facilitator: Who do you think the advertiser is?

Female participant: Some stupid person at the Thetajunction (Johannesburg)

Facilitator: Can you tell me what Thetajunction means?

Female participant: Maybe an organisation that we have to contact if we want to know more about these billboards (Atteridgeville)

Apparent from the data is that when there is a discrepant decoding of Thetajunction the young people indicate that they would not use the number.

Female participant: I have always seen loveLife as an AIDS programme ok that's why for instance when they say talk I would say it would be for AIDS that have problems

Male participant: Talk about it for AIDS or for having sex, talk about it sex

Female participant: You have the child line if you have been abused like by someone but why would I phone this. What is this number?

Female participant: Is it for AIDS or sex?

(Group discussion, Johannesburg)

The following suggestions on how loveLife could improve on its campaign were made by the participants.

- Keep the messages simpler
- Involve young people in testing the messages to see whether they are appropriate
- Create advertisements that appeal to youth
- Love life should make it clear what they do.

Conclusions

This study set out to investigate the relationship between the loveLife brand, and interpretation of messaging on loveLife branded billboards. Semiotics provides the foundation according to which we can develop an understanding of branding and messaging through determining interpretation by the reader. There was clearly a limited understanding of the brand, and this inhibited the decoding of the meanings of the messages displayed on the loveLife billboards.

Meanings associated with imagery were consistently discrepant, and led to divergent interpretations of the billboards. It was interesting to note however, that in some instances, there was a uniformity in discrepant decoding (eg. The puzzle piece and condoms). This confusion was a disincentive to discourse, and rather than “talk about it”, youth were more inclined not to engage in discourse for fear of seeming foolish.

The junction as a sub-brand was confusing to the participants who were unable to decode its meaning owing to language limitations resulting in its immediate connection to talk about it not being clear. It was thus unclear that the billboards were promoting a helpline service that youth could usefully call.

LoveLife should aim to ensure that when designing future campaigns that the meanings are clear to the target audience that they are trying to reach. The specific interpretations that loveLife seeks, and the action that loveLife wants the readers to undertake needs to be foregrounded.

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