

# HIV/AIDS Campaigns as Signifying Processes

## *Group Dynamics, Meaning-Formation and Sexual Practice*

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### Abstract

This chapter examines university students' interpretations of the notions of 'abstinence' and 'be faithful', based on a reception study conducted to explore students' responses to ABC and VCT campaigns at three universities in KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. Using Reception Theories and Hermeneutics, the study examined the structures and processes through which university students make sense of the ABC and VCT campaign messages and the impact of these campaigns on students' sexual practices. Empirical evidence from the study suggests that the nature of cognitive influence and social action that behaviour change communication messages generate amongst the audience-publics, ultimately depends on how the meanings interpreted from the messages articulate with the situated discourses that led to the formation of those meanings.

**Keywords:** HIV/AIDS campaigns, communication, behaviour change, youth, sexual practices, South Africa

### Introduction

Studies in many countries have shown that young people engage in unprotected sex in spite of their high levels of exposure to communication campaigns aiming to encourage behaviour change. Recent communication surveys in South Africa, for example, have demonstrated high levels of exposure to HIV/AIDS communication campaigns and a near-universal awareness of HIV/AIDS (Kelly, 2005; Pettifor, 2004). However, the sustained high level of HIV infection, in spite of these interventions, remains an enigma (Swanepoel, 2005). A study conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2005 concluded that: 'with respect to HIV prevalence and behavioural response it is clear that, in spite of massive investment, there has been inadequate progress in addressing HIV

prevention' (Shisana et al., 2005, p. 74). Currently, the national HIV prevalence in South Africa is estimated at 10.6% with about one in every three (32.7%) of females and 15.7% of males aged 25-29 currently infected with HIV (Shisana, et al, 2009). These statistics illustrate that young people continue to bear the brunt of the epidemic regardless of the fact that the majority of the behaviour change programmes are primarily targeted at them. Indeed, the unprecedented spread of HIV among the South African youth has been associated with sexual risk-taking (Harrison, 2005; Soul City, 2007).

Studies have been conducted to investigate the indeterminate correlation between exposure to behaviour change communication and the high levels of engagement in sexual risk-taking. Most writers argue that behaviour change communication programmes fail because they often fail to critically address the underlying social, cultural and economic conditions that may inhibit individuals' ability to carry out certain decisions at individual level, irrespective of their awareness of HIV/AIDS and knowledge of HIV prevention methods (Airhihenbuwa & Obregon, 2000 ; Airhihenbuwa, Makinwa, & Obregon, 2000; National Cancer Institute, 2005; Swanepoel, E. 2005; Swanepoel, P. 2005; Swanath & Finnegan, 2002; Yzer, 1999).


In his analysis of the impact of Soul City communication programmes, Thomas Tufte suggests a new dimension that can productively be utilized to understand the link between communication interventions and individual/social change (Tufte, 2003). Tufte calls for the understanding of how audiences make sense of communication texts that they get exposed to through the HIV prevention campaigns. This approach is based on the evolving field of audience research, which conceptualises the meaning of media products as emerging at the point of interaction between the text and the audience (Hall, 1996). As pointed out by Tufte (2001), audience research is founded on three premises: That the audience are not passive receivers of information, but rather actively participate in the process of creating meanings out of the messages they have access to (Fiske, 1989); that media texts can carry more than one meaning (polysemy of the text) (Hall, 1996); and that meaning of a text is a product of many other texts (intertextuality) (Fiske, 1987)




## Theoretical background: HIV prevention communication as a signifying process

Jeff Lewis has defined culture as 'an assemblage of imaginings and meanings that may be constant, disjunctive, overlapping, contentious, continuous or discontinuous. These assemblages may operate through a wide variety of human social groupings and social practices'. He argues that 'in contemporary culture these experiences of imagining and meaning-making are intensified through the proliferation of mass media images and information' (Lewis 2002: 15). Lewis further points out the ambivalent relations between culture, media and the audi-

ence: culture is not only a product of the mediation process but also forms the resource within which this process itself is formed. Audiences' experiences of HIV prevention texts thus not only derive from a particular culture, but are also part of a continuous process that shapes the formation of that culture.

Within a culture, mediation occurs through an exchange of signs. Charles Peirce, one of the pioneers of semiotics, defines a sign as follows:

gn, or *representamen*, is something which stands for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*.' (CP 2.228) (Jensen, 1995: 21).


In the context of HIV prevention communication, texts such as  'Abstinence',  'Be faithful',  'Condomise and Know Your Status' (VCT), are seen in Peircian perspective as representamens, signs which stand for certain realities that exist outside these signs. When audiences encounter these signs through communication campaigns, other signs are then formed in their minds which then become interpretants of the first signs. Audiences therefore make sense of the first signs based, not on the signs themselves, but rather on the interpretants of those signs. However, as pointed out by Peirce, the interpretant "is neither identical with the interpretive agent, nor an essence representing the content of that person's thoughts. Being a sign, the interpretant itself calls up another interpretant, and so on *ad infinitum*" (Pierce cited in Jensen, 1995: 22). Peirce's notion of interpretant is thus key to uncovering the ambiguities involved in the mediation of 'Abstinence', 'Be faithful', 'Condomise' and 'Know your status' among university students.

### *The triad of signification: campaign messages, audience interpretations, and behavioural modification*

Based on Peirce's notion of interpretant, Klaus Jensen has suggested a useful framework for analysing the interaction between the mass media signs, audience decoding processes and the influence of texts on audiences. Jensen observes that the meanings in mass communication are generated through a semiotic continuum involving three interrelated stages of interpretants: the Immediate, Dynamical and Final interpretants (Jensen, 1991, 1995). Peirce conceived of immediate interpretants as "the total unanalyzed effect that the Sign is calculated to produce, or naturally might be expected to produce" (Pierce, 1958: 413). This corresponds to Stuart Hall's (1996) notion of the *preferred* meaning and, in the context of HIV prevention communication, it corresponds to the meanings that the ABC and VCT texts are designed to produce amongst the audiences.


The second category of interpretants, the Dynamical Interpretant, "consists in direct effect actually produced by a Sign upon the interpreter of it" (Peirce, 1958: 413). This consists of the actual meaning that the audiences derive out of their interaction with the media texts. According to Jensen, interpretation at the level of Dynamical interpretant is not necessarily based on the media discourses

themselves but rather on the social context within which these discourses attain their relevance. New meanings may thus be generated at this level depending on the nature of the codes of interpretation that exist within a social unit within which the text is being interpreted. From a mass communication perspective, Hall further points out that:


 The lack of fit between [meanings] has a great deal to do with the structural differences of relation and position between broadcasters and audiences, but it also has something to do with the asymmetry between the codes of 'source' and receiver at the moment of transformation into and out of the discursive form.' (Hall, 1996: 44).

Individuals thus generate their interpretations of media texts out of a collection of meanings that exist within their cultural space and which have been shaped by social, historical and material conditions (Lewis, 2002).

The impact of media texts can be conceptualised through Peirce's third level of interpretants, the Final Interpretant. Final interpretant refers to "the effect the sign would produce upon any mind upon which circumstances should permit it to work out its full effects" (Peirce, 1958, p. 413). In the context of HIV prevention communication, it is at this stage that campaign messages are expected to lead to behaviour modification, the ultimate objective of the campaigns. Peirce argues that the final interpretant provides the final link where the media text may lead to behaviour modification:

 It can be proved that the only mental effect that can be so produced and that is not a sign but is of a general application is a *habit-change*; meaning by habit-change a modification of a person's tendencies towards action, resulting from previous experiences or from previous exertions of his will or acts, or from a complexus of both kinds of cause.' (in Clarke, 1990, p. 24; Jensen, 1995, p. 24)

Jensen re-emphasises the significance of the Final interpretant as the final stage of the mediation process by asserting that it is at this stage that media discourses may significantly alter the cognition and action of the audience-publics (Ibid). Nevertheless, the kind of cognitive change and action may not necessarily be in line with the intentions of the communication campaigns. As Stuart Hall points out, the nature of influence produced by the media text in terms of alteration of cognition and social action, largely depends on the kind of meanings generated out of the text:


 For this message can have an effect (however defined), satisfy a need or be put to a use, it must first be appropriated as meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings which 'have an effect', influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological and behavioural consequences.' (Hall, 1996, p. 43).

It is within this framework that this study examined the meaning-formation processes that university students undergo in their interaction with the ABC and VCT discourses that they constantly encounter through a variety of media. The

ultimate objective of behaviour change campaigns is to disseminate information aimed at persuading individuals to change their sexual behaviours from highly risky sexual practices such as having multiple sexual partners, to less risky practices such as mutual faithfulness between sexual partners, abstinence, or using condoms during sexual intercourse.

The literature reviewed above illustrates that meanings generated by the audiences do not necessarily correspond to those intended by the message originators and, more so, may not generate the kind of impact designed by the communication. A clear understanding of the audiences' responses to campaign messages, therefore, requires an in-depth analysis of the conditions under which those texts were interpreted and the processes within which meanings are reproduced, or new meanings generated.

## Methods

This study was conducted at seven campuses in three universities in KwaZulu-Natal (five campuses at University of KwaZulu-Natal and one campus each at University of Zululand and Durban University of Technology). A total of 1400 students (200 from each campus) were selected to participate in the survey through a multi-stage sampling procedure. In-depth interviews were further conducted with 24 students and three HIV/AIDS programme administrators drawn from across the three universities. Participant observation was also used to collect data prevention campaigns. 

The main thrust of the study was to develop a hermeneutic analysis based on the interview responses, which were then used to complement the hard data generated from the survey and observations. The in-depth interviews were designed to generate textual experiential narratives to give nuance to the survey data. The interviews focused on: respondent's perceptions of and attitudes towards HIV/AIDS; respondent's understanding of A, B and C and VCT prevention strategies, including their perceptions on the relevance of each approach; respondent's sexual behaviours; and the social norms influencing respondent's sexual behaviour and perceptions towards HIV prevention strategies. Interview questions were carefully worded to avoid narrowing down responses to particular issues (Smith & Osborn, 2003) and were mainly focused on uncovering the symbolic senses and structures of understanding (Ricoeur, 1980; Heidegger, 1962) through which students interpret the behavioural change texts. Textual narratives obtained through the in-depth interviews thus provided the basis for an hermeneutical analysis which focused on understanding students' interpretations of behaviour change communication messages, and the processes through which those interpretations are produced. The study adopted what Anthony Giddens (1987) calls a "double hermeneutic" approach, which involves the researcher trying to make sense of the way the respondent makes sense of his/her world.

This paper draws on survey data and the in-depth interviews conducted with the students to analyse meaning-formation with regard to the notions of 'abstinence' and 'be faithful'. The paper further examines how these interpretations not only shape, but are also shaped by, the students' understanding of their everyday experiences especially with regards to sexual practices and lifestyles within the campuses environment.

## Key Findings

### *Group dynamics and meaning-formation*

Information obtained through in-depth interviews suggests that the majority of students who had not engaged in sex prior to joining university had their sexual debut during their first year of study at the university. This is also supported by the findings of the quantitative survey which established the majority of students had their sexual debut at 18, the average age for the first year students in this study. Group dynamics played a crucial role in influencing engagement in sexual activities/non-activity. Empirical evidence indicate that students were under enormous pressure from their peers to engage in sex as Mnqanyi, a third year black male student at Westville campus, explains:

'The thing is, like us, the students, no let me say like us boys who are living here, we used to talk about our girlfriends ok, maybe someone say, 'hey, I was sleeping with my girlfriend and hey, it was enjoyable'. All those stuff you see, and yourself, you want to express yourself to your friends, ok, and I have to go and sleep with my girl so that I will come and give my friends a feedback that 'hey, it was enjoyable', I was having that. So the competition starts there and not abstaining [...] we're busy, and you know all these stuff, not abstaining.' (Mnqanyi, July 2008, interview).

Sex was often socially constructed by students as 'cool', hence those who were abstaining from sex were socially ostracised as they were considered as being 'uncool'. Students who were abstaining were socially constructed as being 'abnormal', naïve and – among females – unattractive. This process of othering served to create the hierarchy within the student's social system where students who remained abstinent were considered to be of lower status than their sexually active counterparts. Consequentially, social exclusion was used as a weapon to pressurise sexually non-active students into engaging in sex in order to identify with the 'cool' group. Thus, some students indulged in sexual activities in order to gain social acceptance by proving that they were also 'cool'. Sex was a ritual through which individuals were initiated into the 'cool' group, where they would be able to talk about sex with peers:

'[...] it's not cool to be a virgin, it's not. You don't have anything in common with those around you. [...] Students our age, at this day and age, are sleeping

around, they have boyfriends, they have girlfriends and if you are, if aren't having sex with anyone at that time, you are not cool [...] it's practically not in fashion to be a virgin' (Sithole, March 2008, interview).

For others, like Zama, a first year black female student at Howard College, engaging in sex was seen as a way of asserting oneself. Female students who were not approached by males were considered to be unattractive. Engagement in sexual relationships, amongst some females, was thus a way of demonstrating their attractiveness amongst peers:

'When you're a girl, if guys don't approach you then you don't feel pretty like all the others who are getting attention. So you wanna prove that you're also attractive, you are also capable of attracting guys' (Zama, March 2008, interviews).

What is significant in this study is not just the nature of power dynamic that influenced the students' engagement/non engagement in sex, but also the way in which these sexual identities supplied the discourses through which students made sense of sexual practice and the HIV prevention texts.

### *Meaning of sex and the interpretations of 'abstinence' and 'be faithful'*

In "When is Meaning? Communication Theory, Pragmatism, and Mass Media Reception", Klaus Jensen argues that 'Mass-mediated signs give rise *not* to a transmission of entities of meaning, but to specific processes of reception that are performed by audience acting as cultural agents or interpretive communities' (Jensen, 1991, p. 3). Jensen identifies three types of conditions that constitute interpretive communities: discourses and genres, practices, and social institutions. In the context of this study, the interpretive communities were mainly constituted along the various sexual identities that were often defined by the socially constructed meanings about sex. Sexual identity, in this case, does not refer to the homosexual-heterosexual dichotomy as the phrase is often used in contemporary literature (Makhubele, Ntlabati, & Parker, 2007). Instead, it relates to the sexual action/non action and the various sub-categories within the heterosexual collective as explained in the previous section. The discourses about sex and HIV/AIDS within these interpretive communities supplied individuals with the interpretive repertoires through which they made sense not only of their sexual practices, but also of the texts relating to HIV prevention. This process reflected the dialectical relationship between meaning-formation and culture, where culture served as a means of generating meanings which then constitute that culture (Lewis, 2002). Interpretations of the notions of abstinence, be faithful and condomise thus varied amongst the two main categories of interpretive communities as discussed in the following subsections.

#### **Interpretations of abstinence**

Interpretations of Abstinence, amongst the sexually abstinent students appeared to draw predominantly from the religious or traditionalist discourses. The major-

ity of respondents in this category perceived abstinence as an effective strategy, even though reasons for abstaining were often associated with the religious or traditionalist moral codes. Pre-marital abstinence was perceived in terms of morality and, consequentially, as the most effective and acceptable way of preventing HIV infection. Whilst responding to a question asking what she thought about abstinence as HIV prevention strategy, Amina equates abstinence with virginity, and regrets that she cannot abstain now, since she is no longer a virgin:

'I wish I could turn the hands of the clock but, aah, because right now I am trying to establish a healthy relationship between myself and my God. And I wish I could be a virgin again because, for me, Virginity means virtue, yeah abstinence not only helps you in bridging up the gap between you and your God, it saves you from emotional stress.... Even looking at our African culture, many cultures, African cultures that I know, they attach importance to virginity and chastity, and it is the pride of the family to send, to give a young lady to her husband as a virgin as a bride and that I uphold. I'm an African woman, I am a typical African woman who can't compromise cultural values that I think is safe importance' (Amina, June 2008, interview).

Amina's perspective integrates both religious and traditional cultural perspectives of morality. Sex was understood in this framework as a means of reproduction and the pleasure of sex was to be enjoyed only within a marital relationship. Pre-marital sex was thus conceived as immoral or sinful and, in Amina's account, creates a 'gap' between individuals and God.

Some, like Zodwa, a third year black female student at the University of Zululand, conceptualized the practice of abstinence as a cultural practice. In Zodwa's account, abstinence (which in this case is conceived as virginity preservation) is celebrated even though it is not seen in terms of HIV prevention, but in terms of obedience to culture. As Zodwa explains, her desire to abstain is mainly driven by the need to preserve virginity, rather than preventing HIV infection:

'Yeah, it [abstinence] works, 'cause the first thing it helps, myself I am still a virgin. My culture, when you are eighteen and you are not still a virgin (sic), your parents will be instructed to disown you' (Zodwa, March 2008, interview).

To prove that she is still a virgin, Zodwa undergoes virginity testing every three months. It would seem that the practice of abstinence, for Zodwa, is not out of a personal choice to avoid HIV infection, but is motivated by the fear of embarrassing herself and her parents. In Zulu traditions, the chief would demand a fine from the father whose daughter was found during virginity testing to have 'tainted the community' by losing her virginity. The girl would also be socially ostracized (Bruce, 2004; Leclerc-Madlala, 2002).

Amongst most sexually active students, abstaining from sex was seen as being 'abnormal', thus the abstinence message was often considered by some as an attempt to deny individuals the pleasure enjoyed by 'normal' people. Mqanyani explains in his response to the interviewer's question asking him whether many students go for an HIV test:



'I think other students, they go. More students who used to go there is (sic) those who are churching (sic), who are going to church 'cause they know that 'aah obvious I'm having Jesus on my side' and like they know that they are not sleeping around, they're not like normal people like us, who are just living freely like us' (Mnqanyi, June 2008, interview).

By representing those students who practise sex as normal, Mnqanyi, in essence, perceives those abstaining from sex as abnormal. In addition, those who are sexually active are represented as 'living freely'. Normality for him is associated with the freedom to engage in sex.

Amina, however, later regrets having lost her virginity – and thereby creating a 'gap' between herself and God. She now feels guilty of having engaged in immorality.

For David, a third year white male student at Pietermaritzburg campus, abstinence is more of a religious doctrine, which does not apply in real life:

'I really don't know, it seems to me like it comes from some Christian community, like Catholic Church, and I don't think it works for me; definitely, it has no connection to myself. I don't, I cannot identify myself with such a campaign because obviously everyone wants to have sex so that's not the real option, so yeah, I don't think it's good.' (David)

Oppositional reading of abstinence was particularly common among students who perceived themselves as having been denied the opportunity to enjoy sex by their parents, prior to joining university, and those who did not subscribe to the religious or cultural beliefs of chastity and virginity preservation. Entry into university, for some, marked the end of parental sexual control. They thus conceived engagement in sex as an exercise of freedom from sexual control.

### Interpretations of 'be faithful'



Concurrent sexual relationships was often understood by the sexually abstinent students as immoral, and being faithful to one partner as the ideal form in a marital relationship. When asked what he understood by 'Be faithful', Sithole replied that it meant 'that you are supposed to be in a marriage' (Sithole, March 2008, interview). Others, such as Khan, perceive Be faithful in terms of lifetime commitment:

'For me, be faithful is being with one partner for a long period, indefinitely. It is just dedicating yourself to one person and spending, well, hopefully, the rest of your life with that person.' (Khan, August 2008, interview).

Amina intends to begin practising 'being faithful' when she gets married. Her view is based on her religious belief, in which to 'be faithful' to a marriage partner is a pre-condition:

'When I get married I should be able to observe the, amh, the conditions that surround the Christian marriage and being faithful is one of those conditions.' (Amina, June 2008, interview).

Amongst the majority of participants, the notion of 'Be Faithful' was understood as a commitment to either a marital relationship, or one that culminates in marriage. The significance of this view is that the 'Be faithful' message was mainly seen to appeal only to those who were engaged in a 'serious relationship' – one that leads to marriage – or to those who are already in marriage. In this view, the perceived reason for engaging in a sexual relationship greatly influenced the perception of the necessity to 'Be faithful' to a sexual partner. Others, like Zama, thought that females engage in sexual relationships with concurrent sexual partners because 'they just [want] to experience the different things with different people' (Zama, March 2008, interview). Such sexual relationships seem to be driven by the desire to have fun derived from sexual pleasure, rather than engaging in a committed relationship. Those who did not consider themselves to be in a 'serious relationship' did not find it necessary to practice partner fidelity; hence 'Be faithful' does not apply to them, as Dlamini explains:

'It doesn't really work, it doesn't cause [...] here at varsity you can't be like with one person you're with and think that this is the person you will spend the rest of your life with. This is varsity. You are here to have some fun, study and leave [...] you can't start talking about being faithful.' (Dlamini, June 2008, interview).

For others, like Thenjiwe, however, the main reason why students did not practice being faithful was because they were in sexual relationships for reasons other than marriage:

'They don't even get into relationships because they really like the person... They know they are not in the relationship for the right reasons so it's really hard for them to try and trust the person and remain faithful' (Thenjiwe, April 2008, interview).

'Liking' the partner was seen in this account as a pre-condition for a 'serious relationship'. This, in contrast, seems to suggest that other forms of relationship were not driven by the 'liking' of the sexual partner, but by other factors. In the quantitative survey, close to half of the students (38.9%) claimed to be in a sexual relationship for fun/companionship, whereas others cited economic reasons (7%) or just because everyone else was in a relationship (10%). By confining 'Be faithful' to a marital or a committed relationship, this discourse seems to exclude those who do not consider themselves to be in such a relationship from practising partner fidelity. Zama, for example, explained that she was not practising 'being faithful' because she was not ready to commit herself to her current sexual partner:

I am not ready for commitment, you know, and amh, being this appreciating that it means being faithful (Zama, March 2008, interview).

The underlying connotative meaning of 'Be faithful', as understood here, is that you only need to be faithful to your sexual partner if you are married or in a committed relationship. Individuals who are not in a committed relationship do not necessarily need to be faithful to their partners.

Be faithful, in this account, was conceptualised in terms of caring for the sexual partner and ensuring that one did not place their lives at risk by engaging in unprotected sex. In this understanding, concurrent sexual partnership was permissible as long as one undertook steps to ensure that one's main sexual partners were protected from infection by, for example, using condoms with other sexual partners. Cheating on the sexual partner was considered in terms of putting the life of the sexual partner at risk by engaging in unprotected sex, hence one could still be faithful while having more than one sex partner:

The negotiated meanings of 'Be faithful' were noted to be common among students who were engaged in concurrent multiple relationships and especially those who reported being in relationships for fun and companionship. It would seem that their negotiated interpretations of the concept of 'Be faithful' served to rationalise their sexual behaviours as they saw themselves as being outside of the category of those who were expected to practise partner fidelity.

## Discussion

Interviews summarised above illustrate the intersubjective nature of meanings relating to the understanding of sexual practice and interpretation of HIV prevention texts. The phrase "we/students", instead than "I/myself" was common in responses to questions asking about sexual behaviour and meanings associated with HIV prevention texts. This indicates a collective rather than individualised way of thinking within the groups. Individuals saw their behaviours through the collective lens of the group rather than the individual perspectives. This resonates with the process of social interaction described by Berger and Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966). Drawing on Mead's concept of symbolic interactionism, Berger and Luckmann argue that individuals construct their own identities through their social interactions with others. These collective identities, in the context of mass communication, define the formation of the audience categories through which individuals interact with media texts. Jensen employs Fish's (1979) notion of 'interpretive communities' to describe these audience groups and points out that interpretive communities are not just defined by their roles within their social formations but, more importantly, "by the strategies of understanding by which they engage mass media contents and other cultural forms" (1991, p. 13).

Amongst students in this study, meaning formation was often a collective process that was defined by group dynamics, rather than individual cognitions. Through a process of social interaction, students constituted themselves into various cultural categories which then supplied them with the discourses and interpretive strategies through which members of the group made sense of HIV/AIDS, sexual practice, and HIV prevention texts. Relationships that existed within these cultural categories were not just social relationships, but also power relations with social hierarchies and systems of control such as exclusion and inclusion. Consequently, individuals' behaviours were often aligned towards group mean-

ings, hence the categories of sexual activity/non activity existed as a continuum of possibilities. Individuals' frames of reference were re-fractured through the collective lens of the group, hence, interpretations of HIV prevention texts often drew from the group. The codes of interpretation were underpinned by their daily experiences within their social groups hence, meaning-formation was a complex process that drew from a totality of competing discourses, ideologies, structures and social norms within the students' social networks.

Students who subscribed to the religious and/or cultural ideals of pre-marital chastity often understood the concept of abstinence from the religious and traditional cultural perspective, as a religious, moral practice and virginity preservation. This group of students perceived abstinence as an effective way to avoid HIV infection even though abstaining, for them, was primarily motivated by the desire to uphold cultural or religious ideals, rather than avoiding HIV infection.

On the other hand, students who did not subscribe to the religious/cultural ideals of pre-marital chastity often interpreted abstinence appositionally, as sexual abnormality or denial of sexual pleasure. Some argued that "normal people" engage in sex, hence those who "claimed" to be abstaining were considered "abnormal". Among other students in this category, the call for abstinence was often understood as an attempt to deny individuals the opportunity to engage in sexual pleasure. Some argued that abstinence can be implemented successfully if the decision comes from individuals themselves rather than "being told what to do". This illustrates that the resistance that the notion of abstinence encountered was often a result of the way the message was communicated in the moralistic discourses of culture and religion, rather than to the concept itself.

## Conclusion

It is plausible, thus, to conclude that HIV prevention campaigns that appeal to individual action may become futile in the context where individual cognitive changes depend on the changes within the collective frames of understanding.

This study has illustrated, that besides understanding other structural and contextual factors that influence sexual behaviour, there is also need to conceptualise the meaning formation process as one of the key factors that may influence individual behavioural responses to HIV prevention communication. The findings of this study have also demonstrated that in order to understand the impact of HIV prevention communication campaigns, it is important to move beyond the assessment of changes in individuals' knowledge, attitudes and behavioural practices relating to HIV/AIDS, to the actual analysis of the mediation processes that are involved in HIV prevention campaigns. As this study has illustrated, such an approach will provide a clearer picture, not only of the kind of meanings generated by the audiences, but also the structures that lead to the formation of such meanings and thus explain why communication campaigns may fail to influence behavioural change.

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