

Exploring the representation of men who have sex with men (MSM) on the *Anova Health Institute* digital platforms

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ABSTRACT

South Africa is a country that is a largely patriarchal society with heteronormative attitudes being accepted as the norm. Many men who have sex with men (MSM) in South Africa are experiencing stigma and discrimination as a result of socio-cultural norms around masculinity, and negative perceptions of partnerships between MSM. In this regard, same-sex practices may be viewed as “un-African”; this is a myth as it anchored on an old practice of selectively invoking African culture by those in power. This paper focus on the representation of MSM as visually represented on *Anova Health Institute* digital platforms. *Anova Health Institute* is an NGO that empowers MSM and changes lives by promoting good health, quality of life, healthcare solutions, and support for MSM. *Anova Health Institute* was chosen as it has “a diverse MSM focused research agenda, including work on STI’s, clinical outcomes of HIV treatment, mental health issues, and intimate partner violence and prevention technologies” Furthermore, the paper reviews how *Anova Health Institute*’s visual representation of MSM does either perpetuate or go against these issues in their digital platforms. This paper seeks to describe in what ways, if at all, the three factors that socio-culturally contribute towards this negatively skewed representation of MSM (vulnerability, discrimination and stigmatisation) emerges through these forms of representation. A qualitative visual semiotics analysis was conducted towards critically analysing a non-probability purposive sampling of five (5) visual texts on the digital platforms of *Anova Health Institute* digital platforms. The findings revealed that MSM faces issues such as criminalisation, discrimination, marginalisation and stigmatisation. An additional major finding was that *Anova Health Institute* tries by all means to avoid these issues. This paper concludes with the recommendations on strategies to have more exposure to positive representation of MSM to decrease prejudicial, discrimination, stigmatisation and vulnerability of MSM.

Keywords: criminalisation; discrimination; men who have sex with men (MSM); stigmatisation

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Introduction

As the primary means of communication in society, the media plays a critical role in shaping public opinion. This communication may be interpersonal (one-to-one communication) or mass-related (one-to-many communication). This paper is particularly interested in the media's role in mass related communication instances in the South African context. With the launch of its 'Health4Men' program, *Anova Health Institute* has established itself as a leading institution in the development of suitable linkages to health services and information for men who have sex with men [MSM] (Anova Health Institute, 2022). Their main aim is to provide resources to MSM while also educating them about the potential health consequences of their sexual relationship, the organisation has made use of digital platforms to accomplish this purpose.

A patriarchal society with heteronormative attitudes is the norm in South Africa, which is a country with a considerable number of men in leadership positions. The Department of Health in SA (2019:1) states that "many males in South Africa who have male sexual partners are enduring stigma and discrimination as a result of socio-cultural norms around masculinity and negative attitudes of sexual partnerships between individuals of the same sex". In this context, same-sex practices remain stigmatised in South Africa, and in much of sub-Saharan Africa regarded as "un-African." However, this is a myth, as it is based on stereotypes ingrained in colonialism of people in power selectively referring to Africans (Department of Health, 2019:1).

Purpose/objectives

The purpose of this paper is to explore how men who have MSM are represented visually on the *Anova Health Institute's* digital platforms. Important to highlight is the way the study intends to incorporate the concept of men who have sex with men (referred to as MSM). Cannon (2022) asserts that men who have sex with men is a word that has been adopted as a means of categorising males who engage in sexual activity with other males, regardless of how they define themselves in terms of sexual orientation (Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual or Heterosexual). This definition is consistent with the approach taken by this study to define the idea of MSM. MSM is being used as an umbrella term to gather a diverse range of men who are united solely by their sexual behaviour, rather than by their self-identification as males. Men who identify as gay, bisexual, or transgender are among those who fall into this category. Additionally, these groups of men can include jailed males who self-identify as heterosexual, but who, because of their circumstances, engage in voluntary sex with other men as a means of surviving while confined. Other factors that may lead to males engaging in sexual activity with other men include homelessness, male prostitution (for financial gain), and a desire for sexual freedom and exploration, among others (Felson, 2021).

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Before the internet, homophobia and stigmatisation were practiced through institutions such as religion and social expectations that were founded on patriarchal values (Gomez, Cumsille & Barrientos, 2021:1789). Following the findings of this article, it is reasonable to conclude that some representations of MSM in the mass media may also be contributing to the continuous stigmatisation of MSM. And how does the visual representation of MSM at *Anova Health Institute* either reinforce or contradict these beliefs in their digital platforms' portrayal of these MSM? This is the primary question that underpins the research paper's overall goal and determination. Following the findings of a study by Felson where he concluded that MSM are being victimised and discriminated against in society because of their sexual behaviour (Felson, 2021). MSM are being stigmatised since it is assumed that they transfer HIV infection to other people.

This paper seeks to describe in what ways, if at all, the three factors that socio-culturally contribute towards this negatively skewed representation of MSM (vulnerability, discrimination, and stigmatisation) emerges through these forms of representation. In South Africa, many of the above stated reasons also form part of the motivation behind the sexual activity of MSM. Many men who have sex with men (MSM) in South Africa are experiencing stigma and discrimination because of socio-cultural norms around masculinity, and negative perceptions of partnerships between MSM. To support this statement, in a study by *Anova Health Institute* (2022) about the challenges faces by MSM when comes to accessing health care specifically focusing on Johannesburg and Cape Town. The findings indicated that one in ten South African MSM at some point, report abuse and discrimination at all levels of the healthcare sector.

This paper seeks to explore how MSM are represented visually on the *Anova Health Institute's* digital platforms with a view of achieving the following objectives:

- To investigate if *Anova Health Institute* digital platforms have an influence on society's perception of MSM about the representation of MSM.
- To find out if the representation of MSM contributes to the current social discourses pertaining to vulnerability, discrimination, and stigmatisation amongst MSM.
- To investigate whether *Anova Health Institute* digital platforms representation of MSM has a negative or positive impact.

Overview of Literature

The literature of this study covers representation theory and visual semiotics.

Representation theory

"Representation can only be analysed in relation to the actual concrete from which the meaning assumes in the concrete practices of signifying, reading, and interpretation," as stated by Hall (1997:9). Analysing the images and words that are used to circulate symbolic meaning is a part of this process. Hall (1997) classified interpretations of representation into

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the following three categories: (1) Reflective language is used in situations in which the words reflect a meaning that already exists in the world of things, people, and events. (2) Intentional refers to the use of language in which the speaker expresses his or her own personal intended meaning. (3) Constructionism is a philosophical position where meaning is created in and through language. In addition, Hall (1997:25) claims that the constructionist approach has had the most significant impact on the field of cultural studies in recent years. Hall (1997) broke the constructionist approach down into two major models, namely the semiotic approach and the discursive approach. The way in which people, places, and groups of people are portrayed in the media is a powerful force that shapes the cultural understanding of these things. This includes people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or any other non-gender conforming identity (Kaur, 2021). Furthermore, it is essential that people in MSM see themselves represented in media. Because it reassures them that they are not the only ones going through the things that they are going through. Seeing accurate representation validates their experiences and affirms their existence. On the other hand, the absence of representation frequently contributes to the creation of hostile environments, which are extremely upsetting for MSM. It is easier to fight ignorance and stereotypes when people are accurately represented.

Semiotics Analysis

Semiotics is the study of signs and what they mean in society (Halliday, 1978:232). In this way it is something that can stand in for something else is a sign. In other words, a sign is anything that can send a message. Words, drawings, photos, and even street signs can all be signs because they show what something means. In essence, semiotics is a field of study that looks at signs and how they work together to communicate meaning (Ahmed & Sharaan, 2022). Meaning is, therefore, not a fixed thing that comes from the text itself. Instead, meaning comes from how people interact with the text. Arafah et al. (2020) says that codes are so important to understanding semiotics that it is not clear if something is a sign at all if it does not seem to follow a code. All codes are systems, but not all systems are codes. Both the people who make signs and the people who read them, use these codes to ensure, the message sent is close to the message received.

The field of visual semiotics is the focus of this study. Visual Semiotics is a young subfield of semiotics that investigates the ways in which visual signs or visual images communicate meaning. Ahmed & Sharaan (2022) says that "denotation" is simply figuring out what a sign is; it is when we notice something with any of our senses. On the other hand, Siregar (2022) says that a sign's denotation is its literal or dictionary-based meaning. Using the theory of semiotics as a guide, the author of this study conducted a thorough analysis of a variety of visual texts. The theory of Roland Barthes' (1977) Order of Signification, which is applicable here, is used to conduct the analysis. This study applies denotation, connotation, and myth, which are three distinct conceptions of meaning developed by Barthes (1977). The concept of

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denotation, in which the signifier and the signified work together to form a sign, is the first order of signification. The next level of signification will work at the level of connotation, and at this level, the sign that was formed at the previous level will transform into a signifier, which in turn will produce another signified and produce yet another sign. In the process of signification, the literal meaning of a sign is referred to as the sign's denotation, whereas the personal or socio-cultural interpretation of a sign is referred to as the sign's connotation.

Methodology

This paper makes use of a qualitative non-probability judgement sample of five (5) visual texts of MSM found on the *Anova Health Institute* platforms. Using judgement sampling the researcher was able to gain access to the visual texts that offered the most relevant information regarding the objectives of this study. The power of non-probability sampling comes in the researcher's capacity to select information based on his or her own subjective judgment, as opposed to selecting visual texts at random from a pool of options (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). This is a highly significant finding since not all the visual texts contained the necessary information required for this study. Because of this, the researcher looked for visual texts of this kind concerning MSM on the website as well as on its Facebook page. The texts were collected between February 2017 and December 2017 and were used in this study. Both the research method and the theoretical framework of semiotics and representation were used in the data analysis. This method permits an in-depth study, which provides an indication into the codes used to generate the representation MSM. The study of semiotics provides a method in addition to a language for describing and interpreting the process by which myths and ideologies are created and deployed to legitimise actions (Apolte & Müller, 2019:18). Focusing on this study, semiotics plays a significant role in determining how meanings and myths develop over the course of time in response to the changing political, economic, and social environment in South Africa. The shapes, expressions, colours, text, and gestures that make up the signals that are presented in each of the chosen visual texts are analysed in order to gain an understanding of the messages and meanings that are being communicated by the signs that are being shown in each of the visual texts.

Results and Discussions

The findings of this study are presented according to Roland Barthes's Semiology (denotation, connotation, ideology and mythical).

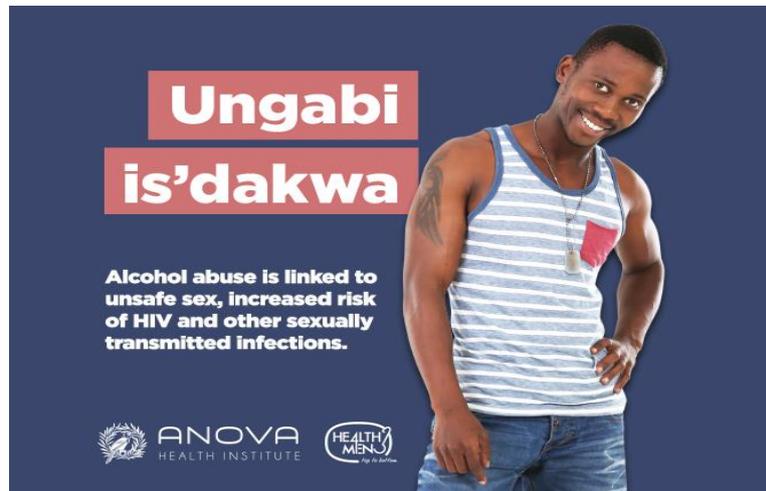
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Figure 4.1: "Ungabi Is'dakwa" (Anova Health Institute February 2017)



In this figure, there is an image with text that says "Ungabi is'dakwa." This is a language message. "The literal message according to Ahmed & Sharaan (2022) cannot have any real qualities; it can only have relational ones". To figure out the literal meaning of this visual text, you need to look at both parts at the same time. This means that drinking too much can lead to unsafe sex, which can increase the risk of HIV and other STIs. "Don't be a drunkard," which is written as "Ungabi is'dakwa," is an isiZulu (the biggest language in SA) phrase. People should not drink too much because it can lead to unsafe sex, which can then make the risk of HIV and STIs higher. Unsafe sexual activity is the leading factor in the transmission of this virus. Consumption of alcohol has, for an exceptionally long time, been linked to the prevalence of HIV. However, it has not been determined conclusively whether unsafe sex that was associated with drinking alcohol was the actual cause of HIV infection, or whether certain personality traits, such as a desire for sensation or risky behaviour, were the actual causes of drinking alcohol and engaging in unsafe sex.

Alcohol abuse is depicted as a dangerous substance that links to unsafe sex, which also leads to an increase in the risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections based on figure 4.1. This conclusion is based on the correlation between alcohol abuse and unsafe sex (STI). In addition, a study that was conducted by Cannon (2022) concluded that excessive drinking leads to increased risks of HIV and other STIs because of unsafe sexual behaviour. Consumption of alcohol has a direct influence on a person's intention to engage in risky sexual behaviour, particularly in MSM. To put it another way, the more you drink, the more likely it is that you will act upon your intention to engage in risky sexual behaviour. The names of both organisations are included in the graphic text (*Anova Health Institute* and *Health4Men*). The name "Health4Men" is a brand. The colour blue is used for the entire

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background of the visual text image. The colour blue is frequently associated with the concepts of "depth" and "stability". This colour is representative faithfulness, wisdom, self-assurance, faith, the truth, and heaven.

The visual image of a gentleman can be seen standing on the right-hand side of the picture frame. An unusual way of striking a pose for the camera is shown in the accompanying visual. The gentleman is depicted with a smile, which demonstrates that he is pleased, kind, and amused to spread out the message to MSM regarding the risk factors that alcohol abuse is linked to. A gentleman can be seen in the image donning a vest with a blue and white striped pattern and a red pocket, both of which are complementary to the text of the headline. Once more, he is clad in blue jeans and is wearing a necklace. This visual text image depicts a gentleman in a masculine manner, which indicates that not all MSM are classified as being thin, chubby, or feminine.

The visual can be interpreted to mean something entirely different than what it is attempting to communicate on a literal level thanks to the connotative meaning. To concentrate on the connotative meaning is to ascertain the signified, which, in Ferdinand de Saussure's view, is a concept that is evoked by a word, sound, or image (Goldsmith & Laks, 2019: 134). In addition, when we talk about connotative meaning, we are referring to the social, cultural, and historical meanings that are added on top of the literal message that the photo conveys. Looking for a connotative meaning requires one to examine something intently and provide their own interpretation of what they find. When searching for connotative meaning, one should look at the interventions of the photograph; this includes framing, distance, lighting, focus, and speed. It is as if, in the beginning, there was a brute photo on which man would lay out, with the assistance of various codes, the signs drawn from a cultural code. The connotative meaning adds depth and dimension to the literal one.

Figure 4.2: HE IS GAY AND WE ACCEPT HIM FOR WHO HE IS (*Health4men* April 2017)



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When one examines Figure 4.2, they will notice that the message conveyed by the visual text is to put an end to discrimination against MSM and same-gender attraction. This visual text's denotative meaning refers to the representation of four individuals, including one who is standing with his back to the camera lens. When looking at this visual text, one must unquestionably rely on the text to understand what is being said. The black and white clothing that they are shown to be wearing can be seen in this visual text. They are smiling, which indicates that they are okay with him and that they are happy for him. Their facial expression shows that they accept him. Because we try each day to understand the feelings of the people around us, the facial expressions that these people are displaying in this visual text are important. This functions as a narrative component that shapes how we interpret the visual texts and images.

The text serves as the image's primary point of focus. The anchorage serves as a control and bears the responsibility for how the message is used (Siregar, 2022). Based on that, this visual text image would not have been able to successfully convey the intended message if it had not been accompanied by the linguistic message. The visual text image of the gentleman facing the backwards of the camera would not have been enough to tell the audience why they are required to accept gay people, and it is almost impossible to notice. Figure 4.2 contains a few instances of the word "HE", which, according to its definition in the dictionary, refers to males. Someone who has feelings for people of the same sexual orientation is referred to as "gay".

This visual text consists of four individuals who, despite the gentleman's apparent sexual orientation, appear to accept him regardless. His mother and father are the first people on the top left, and they introduce themselves by saying, "he is our son." The people in the top right corner are those who are his siblings, and they state that "he is our brother." Finally, on the bottom right is his pastor, who says that "he belongs to my church," and the third person on the bottom left is his friend, who says that "he is my friend." There are numerous instances of the word "HE." The fact that he has two female siblings and a male friend who claims to be his friend is evidence that he is content with his sexual orientation. Additionally, the fact that the male friend could be heterosexual. As a result, he does not pass judgment or discriminate against him. The word "he", "him", and "we" are all examples of collective nouns.

In the African cultural perspective, once a man reaches adulthood, there is an expectation that he will start his own family by getting married, most importantly to a woman (Jones, 2019: 456). It is believed that being gay is a source of shame, and therefore the cultural view does not condone or accept same-gender attraction. On the other hand, homosexuality is often seen as something that is both unnatural and inhuman in churches. On this visual text image, we see different perspectives that depict the pastor accepting the gentleman for who he is. The pastor shows this not trying to change him. The personal pronoun "he" appears five (5) times in the visual image, and each time it refers to a different part of the body.

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MSM are being discriminated against in the community and criminalised; this includes the churches, which believe that homosexuality is a sin and unnatural. Another major issue was that this research project was being conducted in a country that has no legal protections for homosexuals. In addition to this, Madinga et.al (2020:18) point out that there has been an increasing amount of evidence that gay people have been rejected, isolated, discriminated against, and condemned as sub-human. Some conservative churches misinterpret biblical passages to make their case for condemnation more compelling. For instance, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is frequently used as an example of a passage in the Bible that justifies condemnation, even though this passage deals with judgment. Drawing inspiration from the Dutch Reformed Church, the gay debate was formally introduced during the General Synod of 1986. At that time, homosexuality was viewed as a deviant form of sexuality, and gay practices and gay relationships were disapproved of because they were going against the will of God.

People are taught to accept MSM and to stop discriminating against them using this visual text image. There is an emphasis on the phrase "HE IS GAY AND WE ACCEPT HIM FOR WHO HE IS" thanks to the use of capital letters. Because this message is so vital to the community, the author chose to write it in all capital letters to attract the attention of the readers and encourage them to accept each other as MSM members regardless of their sexual orientation. Once more, this visual text image depicts an unusual way of posing for the camera, that of having the back captured by the camera. He turned his back to the camera and gave the photographer access to shoot his posterior region. This is done to pique the interest of the reader and to guarantee that the intended recipient is brought to their full attention.

The word "Zwakalani" originates from the Zulu language. The phrase "comes together" is what this word means when translated into English. This word can indicate that when we come together as a community or as a country, we can easily put an end to the discrimination that is directed toward MSM; however, to combat this discrimination, all that is required of us is to come together and act as if we are a single entity. A symbol of acceptance can be seen superimposed on top of this word in the form of two hands clasped together in a welcoming gesture. The website of *Health4Men* has been omitted from this visual text image to make room for information about how to obtain more information on how to stop the discrimination of MSM. This information can be found at the bottom of the image (www.health4men.co.za).

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Figure 4.3: “Being shame free keeps me healthy” (*Anova Health Institute* March 2017)



In Figure 4.3, the denotative meaning of this visual text is the handsome gentleman with a bright smile wearing a short white sleeve t-shirt, unbuttoned black leather body warmer and a black wristwatch. The gentleman is denoted as masculine, folding his hands, and having combed out black hair. Furthermore, the image has a text written ‘Being shame free keeps me healthy’, the text is written in white font colour which is shaded in red. In this visual text, the elements of the written text on the left of a frame points of interest would therefore seem to be more important.

The word "shame," which is used when the message is disseminated, simply refers to the awareness of something shameful and the negative feelings that are associated with acts of wrongdoing in the past. On the other hand, the word "free" signifies that the person who is conveying the message can behave in any way that he chooses without being concerned with what other people will think about him; as a result, this allows him to maintain a healthy lifestyle. The primary text of this visual image reads "Being shame free keeps me healthy". This text is written in a white font, which represents peace, and is shaded with a light red colour. It is aligned to the right. Because there is a break between the text of the heading and the text of the subheading, the readers are guaranteed to view the information in its proper context, which is at the very top of the page and is not obscured by any other texts. Grey black, a colour typically associated with masculinity, serves as the background for this visual text image. The message conveyed by this visual text is that MSM should not feel ashamed or embarrassed about themselves but should let their sexuality define them and be proud of it. A person's shame can lead to several negative effects on their health, including increased levels of stress and depression, as well as an increase in the likelihood that they will abuse substances and drink to excess. A healthy lifestyle can be significantly improved by first

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coming to terms with one's sexuality and then learning to stop caring about what other people think of them. The clear majority of MSM are reluctant to go to clinics to discuss the health problems that they are currently dealing with because of their stigma. MSM are urged not to be embarrassed by the message that has been placed in this visual text image; rather, they are encouraged to have health conversations with *Health4Men* clinical nurses because this will help them.

Figure 4.4: “RESPECT YOURSELF. RESPECT YOUR PARTNER. YOU ARE WORTH IT! (Anova Health Institute June 2017)



Figure 4.4 has an image of two gentlemen, an image of Table Mountain, visual image shot at one of the townships in (Cape Town) and which depicts two men holding hands. They are both located in the appropriate spots within the image. On their left, there is a written text in all capital letters reading: ‘Ukwazana’ – which is promoting men’s sexual health and challenging prejudice. The two gentlemen are being denoted as being in love, supporting each other and thinking about their future. The denotation of Table Mountain is that it is significant for tourist attraction, and it has an unusually rich biodiversity. Two hands joining each other can be a sign of love, support and spirit of harmony and peace.

This visual text image depicts an unusual way of posing for the camera as the subject is facing backwards, which enabled the photographer to capture a picture of the subject's rear end as a result. Both are looking in the same direction, which is toward Table Mountain. It is clear from looking at this visual text image that the photograph was taken in Khayelitsha, which is in Cape Town. They are currently traveling throughout the Khayelitsha neighbourhood while spreading the word on the N2 highway. This could be done to spread the word about MSM (homosexuality), considering the tragic event that took place in

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December 2016: the murder of a 22-year-old lesbian woman whose body was dumped on the N2 highway after she had been killed (Mamba Online, 2016).

The words "RESPECT YOURSELF" are written in the text that is located at the bottom of this visual text. BE RESPECTFUL TO YOUR SPOUSE/PARTNER. YOU ARE WORTH IT!". All the words in the text are written in capital letters, and the font used is white. The image contains two separate instances of the word "RESPECT." The community will be able to respect MSM society if it learns to respect the word "RESPECT." Simply respecting yourself and the person you are in a relationship with will go a long way toward earning the community's and the MSM society's respect. The concept of respecting one another can lead to honesty, trust, and communicating openly and honestly with one's partner.

There is a word written in IsiZulu called "Ukwazana" that can be translated from that language into English as "to know each other." This word is located on the image's left-hand side. On top of this word are two hands appearing to shake hands with one another. One can deduct from this that getting to know one another is of the utmost importance, as it provides the community with the opportunity to gain experience more about MSM and the struggles that they are experiencing. The question that can be asked is: how are we going to get to know each other? Simply holding MSM health talks on a regular basis and focusing on subjects that are relevant to MSM to provide the community with more information regarding MSM is all that is required.

Figure 4.5: "WE'RE THE BRAVE" (Anova Health Institute May 2017)



Figure 4.5 is an image that contains a group of LGBTQ community who are marching for gay pride. This visual text has a message written "WE'RE BRAVE ENOUGH TO BE OPEN

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ABOUT OUR SEXUALITY. WE'RE DEFINITELY BRAVE TO OPEN ABOUT OUR STATUS.”

In this figure, WE'RE DEFINITELY BRAVE TO OPEN ABOUT OUR STATUS". Because of reading these written texts, two concepts—"sexuality" and "status"—have been floating through my head. This suggests that they have no doubts about being open about their sexual orientation as well as their sexual status. Because this word is used in the visual text image, it conveys the idea that the individuals in question are prepared to suffer through or deal with any criticism or discrimination without displaying any sign of anxiety. Most members of the media are reluctant to come out about their sexual orientation because they are afraid of being victimised, discriminated against, and the belief that they are responsible for the spread of HIV and AIDS. They are still hiding their sexuality in the closet (as stated in the introduction of this paper).

This visual text also depicts individuals carrying boards, one of which is coloured yellow and the other of which is coloured red. They both have the hashtag #IAMWHOIAM written on them, and the banner has the hashtag #BRAVEENOUGH written on it. On Twitter, the labelling of messages according to their subject matter was initially accomplished using hashtags (Sagolla, 2019:167). The utilisation of these hashtags might make it possible for the tweets to be viewed by tens, hundreds, or even millions of additional users who are interested in the corresponding subjects. Once more, the LGBTQ pride flag is depicted on this visual text image, and it features a variety of colours that stand for peace. The stripes on the flag are red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet. The flag itself is comprised of these six colours. LGBTQ social movements frequently make use of a rainbow flag like this one. One can draw the conclusion that there is a sense of pride among these people as they march based on this flag.

Following a discussion of the denotative and the connotative aspects of the term, the primary focus of this investigation is on ideology, which may be conceptualised as a "world view" (Ahmed & Sharaan, 2022). In addition, Lacey argues that ideology does not provide a 'window on the world,' but shapes how a person perceives the world. Based on the analysis of the visual texts (Figure 4.1 – Figure 4.5), the fact that there are diverse ways of looking at the world demonstrates that even though ideology has a significant impact on the way that we see things, it does not have a monopoly on meaning. However, after looking at these visual texts, the researcher concluded that ideology cannot be destroyed solely through an examination of its connotations. Instead, ideology is very resistant to a deconstruction of its ideas because the language that is used to deconstruct it is itself a product of the ideology. For instance, looking at these figures of visual text analysis reveals that the concept of "common sense" is one that suggests itself to be rational and natural. Arafah et al. (2020) on the other hand, indicate that common sense is something that arises because of people being socialised and told what to think. In fact, Barthes (1977) proposes that the viewer of an image

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simultaneously receives both the perspective (denotative) message and the cultural (connotative) message, and that the denotative message is comprised of what is left in the image after the mental removal of the connotative sign. When people read, they bring with them their own personal experiences and understandings of images, language, and the world. This gives meaning to the words and pictures they encounter. The ideological viewpoint, which is conceived of as the outer ring, is formed by our interpretations of the images and texts that we meet, as well as the fundamental components of design (Aiello, 2020) and the organisational patterns of visual images.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how men who have sex with other men (also known as MSM) are portrayed on the digital platforms of the *Anova Health Institute*. To accomplish this goal, five (5) visual texts were analysed. The representation theory and visual semiotics served as the theoretical foundations for this investigation. The results of this study are in line with previous research and the findings of several other studies that have been conducted in the field of media and sexual representation. The representation MSM is a topic that has been researched and written about by several different authors. For example, if people consume only heterosexual versions of sexuality and have no access to alternative sources of information (such as in their social environment), they may have little choice but to accept the representation of MSM stereotypes in mainstream media that they imagine must be typical of all MSM. This is because they have no access to other sources of information that could provide them with alternative information. In addition, society creates characteristics and assumptions related to the biological sexes, with qualities being laid out to define what is appropriately masculine and feminine. For example, most people have trouble accepting MSM. As a result, these individuals are always the targets of homophobic attacks because of their physical characteristics.

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