

**Decoding LoveLife's billboards in a socio-  
culturally pluralistic South Africa**

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# 1 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Introduction

South Africa prides itself on being a rainbow nation with a rich diversity of cultures and religions. The South African population consists of the Nguni people (Zulu, Swati, Xhosa, Ndebele) who account for two thirds of the population; the Sotho-Tswana people (Southern, Northern and Western Sotho); the Tsonga people; the Venda people; Afrikaans people; English people; Coloured people; Indian people; the Khoi and San groups; as well as people who have immigrated to South Africa from other countries and who still maintain a strong cultural identity. According to the 2001 census, isiZulu is the mother tongue of 23,8 per cent of the population, followed by isiXhosa (17,6 per cent), Afrikaans (13,3 per cent), Sepedi (9,4 per cent), and English (8,2 per cent) (Statistics SA, 2001).

Given the cultural, religious and language diversity in South Africa, it becomes a challenge for all of those who design messages, aimed at developing our people, to recognise and understand the semiotic impact of cultural, religious and language differences in generating meaning from available messages (Fiske, 1990; Petersen, 1992; Steinberg, 1997; Chandler, 2002 ). This has implications for loveLife, which is one such generator of development messages.

loveLife is an established lifestyle brand which was launched in September 1999. It is the joint initiative of a consortium of leading South African public health organisations that are concerned with adolescent reproductive health in South Africa. These organisations include the Health Systems Trust, Planned Parenthood Association of South Africa and the Reproductive Health Research Unit (RHRU) of the University of the Witwatersrand, in coalition with more than 100 community-based organisations (CBOs) and non-government organisations (NGOs). loveLife aims to reduce the rate of HIV infection among young South

African adolescents by promoting healthy living and positive sexuality for young people between the ages of 12- to 17-year-olds (loveLife, 2000b).

loveLife asserts that approximately 40 per cent of South Africa's population is under the age of 15 and about 50 per cent of HIV infections occur before the age of 20. For these reasons, it believes that if dramatic action is not taken and current infection rates continue, half of all South Africans now under 15 could become infected with HIV (loveLife, 2000 b).

In response to these statistics, loveLife seeks to establish a new model for effective prevention of HIV infection among young people by achieving a carefully targeted reduction in high-risk sexual behaviour among young people. The plan is to achieve this goal through, *inter alia*, its brand-driven, 'innovative, nationwide media campaigns, which include the insertion of about 2 000 billboards (signs) across the country (loveLife, 2001b).

loveLife uses, *inter alia*, outdoor media (billboards) informed by specific loveLife guiding principles for the production of the billboards and messages. Outdoor advertising is traditionally associated with large billboards and posters advertising products and services. However, in its broadest interpretation, outdoor advertising includes all signs erected and displayed out of doors for the purpose of providing information, from small 'beware of the dog signs' on garden gates, to the more familiar giant billboards advertising products (Agnew, 1985; Velcich, 2000).

Velcich (2000) highlights the fact that the challenge in South Africa is its cultural diversity, and there is a need to give consideration to cross-cultural issues before we can say we are culturally sensitive. Therefore, when loveLife delivers a message on a billboard (sign), it expects that young people will be able to create and interpret the meaning of the message from that billboard. This is sometimes referred to as negotiation. Because of the diversity of languages, cultures,

religions and levels of education in the audience, the message on the billboard may be interpreted differently by various people (Steinberg, 1997). For this reason, it is important to understand the relationship between signs, their codes and the cultural context in which they operate.

This study wants to investigate how the representational codes used on the loveLife billboards perform a cognitive or ideational function. According to semiotics (Chandler, 2002), the meaning of the text (both verbal and visual) is open to different interpretations because it is open to the receiver and the social or communicative function they perform. These are in turn derived from the shared experience (conventions) of members of a particular culture (Fiske, 1990; Chandler, 2002). This hypothetically implies that in a culturally and socially pluralistic country, such as South Africa, members of the target audience may attribute different meanings to the messages on the loveLife billboards and may misunderstand them.

## **1.2 Problem formulation and the aim of the study**

In South Africa, development initiatives are encouraged by both individuals and institutions. Information also needs to be communicated to the South African public to support the ideals of development. These communications must take different codes into account. However, little has been done to emphasise the need for an understanding of the communication codes and their impact when communicating development messages (Snyman, 2001).

The aim of this study is, therefore, to investigate communication codes in order to establish what meaning end-users find in messages and whether or not these messages really bring about the desired understanding that can improve the target audience's quality of life (Snyman, 2001).

### **1.3 Research question**

The research question derived from these aims is:

To what extent do the sociocultural differences amongst South Africa's youth impact on their understanding of a selection of the loveLife billboards?

The study addresses the following sub-questions:

- How can semiotics be used to determine the way in which the multicultural South African youth interpret selected loveLife billboards?
- How are selected loveLife billboards interpreted by a variety of South African youths?
- Are the selected billboards successful – is the message communicated by the billboards understood as loveLife intended it to be?
- How do the cultural and social contexts of the selected youth groups impact on their interpretation of the selected loveLife billboards?
- How can cultural sensitivity inform and influence the process of designing outdoor media?

### **1.4 Value of the study**

The value of this study is rooted in the fact that South Africa is a culturally diverse country and that development messages, in order to be effective, must cater appropriately for this diversity. This is important, because if there is no acknowledgement of the role that communication codes play in a diverse country such as South Africa, then the development messages are unlikely to improve the target audience's quality of life as well as they could. The study hopes to inform the creators of development messages, specifically loveLife, of the importance of recognising these factors when producing effective messages.



## 1.5 Research design

The research uses qualitative research methods. Qualitative research generally attempts to

- understand issues from the viewpoints of the participants;
- describe the social conditions of participants so that the participants' views are not isolated from their contexts; and
- understand the participants' thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Struwig and Stead, 2001).

In qualitative research, data are not presented in a static, reductionistic and decontextualised manner. Prior research or theory is generally not heavily relied on to inform the research process. In qualitative research, the researcher tries to present the data objectively but realises that all data are value laden. He/she acknowledges that the researcher and the study are intimately connected and that the researcher cannot be completely objective (Struwig and Stead, 2001; Lincoln, 2000).

The research is descriptive and explanatory in nature and includes an emergent design. This means that in the early stages of the study, new information lead to the purposes or methods (e.g. sampling, methods of data collection) of the study being altered.

The research is based on grounded theory. Grounded theory is useful when theory is generated by the data that are collected from the sample used. Grounded theory is not primarily reliant on prior theory but is employed to structure the data from the sample. Once the data has been categorised by the researcher, the data may then be utilised to generate theory (See Chapter Three for a detailed discussion of the research methodology).

In this study interviews with research participants were used to gather information. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner in three provinces in South Africa: Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape.

## **1.6 Definitions of terms**

This section defines terms that are used in this study. These are defined to facilitate a better understanding of the discussions.

### **Brand**

A brand is an identifiable product, service, person or place with which the buyer or user perceives unique added values matching their needs most closely (De Chernatony and McDonald, 1992).

### **Codes**

A code is a system of meaning common to the members of a culture or subculture. Systems are governed by rules, which are consented to by all community members using that code. The study of codes, therefore, emphasises the social dimension of communication (Fiske, 1990).

### **Culture**

Despite an ongoing debate about the definition of culture, it could still be defined as a shared way of life that includes values, beliefs and norms, transmitted within a particular sociocultural system from one generation to the other.

### **Meaning**

We often use the word 'meaning' without giving a thought as to what we mean by it. The word often means different things at different times and 'meaning' has different dimensions. According to Fiske (2002) it refers to the sense people make of words.

### **Message**

In semiotics, the message is a construction of signs which, through interacting with the receiver (reader), produces meaning. The emphasis is on the text and how it is read by the reader during the process of reading (Fiske, 1990).

### **Outdoor advertising**

Outdoor advertising is traditionally associated with large billboards and posters advertising products and services. However, in its broadest interpretation, outdoor advertising includes all signs erected and displayed out of doors for the purpose of providing information, from small 'beware of the dog' signs on garden gates to the more familiar giant billboards advertising products (Velcich, 2000).

### **Semiotics**

Semiotics is the study of signs and the way they work. It is sometimes called semiology (Fiske, 1990). Semiotics does not define communication as a process of transferring a message from A to B, but as a generation of meaning from messages.

## **1.7 Outline of Chapters**

Chapter One contains the introduction and the outline of the study. The next chapter (Chapter Two) provides an explanation of why semiotics is important and relevant to help explain how the representatives of the diverse South African youth, with different sociocultural backgrounds, attach meaning to the HIV awareness campaign presented on the outdoor advertising media. Chapter Three describes the research design, including the role of the researcher, and procedures that were employed in the study. The research methods used are explained and a description of the research process is included. This chapter includes a discussion of the sampling strategies, data collection and data analysis procedures employed, as well as a description of what took place during the actual field work. In Chapter Four, the research findings are presented and

related to the outcomes of prior research on loveLife billboards. Chapter Five contains the conclusions, recommendations, and limitations of the study.

## **1.8 Summary**

This chapter focuses on social and cultural context within which this study is carried out and gives background on loveLife. It contains problems formulation and outlines the aim of the study, the research questions and the research design. The study uses qualitative research methods. Qualitative research is defined and the terms that are used in this study. The following chapter is the literature review.

## 2 CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the nature and role of Development Communication (DC) and other source materials and defines DC as a field of study. It provides an explanation of why semiotics is important and relevant to help explain how the representatives of the diverse South African youth, with different sociocultural backgrounds, attach meaning to the HIV awareness campaign presented on outdoor advertising media. It further provides an explanation of the loveLife billboards and seeks to explore how such devices are linked to the theories of DC.

### 2.2 The nature and role of Development Communication

There are many different perspectives about the concept of development, based on different disciplines or schools of thought. These perspectives have led to different theories about development. It seems as if development as a concept was first introduced by Ibn Khaldun, an Islamic social thinker, around 1332-1406 CE (Agunga, 1998). In *Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, the concept of development refers to basic causes of historical evolution in the economic and social structures of societies. Robert (1998) notes that Khaldun used the concept in a broader sense to mean the improvement of human societies. Development also implies a kind of teleology, an end towards which history is moving or should move. When applying development to a specific country or community, it should be recognised that 'their historical experiences will condition the stage in which they find themselves, which in turn, will determine the appropriate policies' (Robert, 1998).

This suggests that because of the 'historical evolution', the concept has acquired different meanings, depending on different schools of thought. The historical

evolution affirms that many development disciplines have evolved. Some were not progressive because they ignored a fundamental principle in development, namely that the local cultural context (including historical experience) determines the appropriate approach to be adopted during the development process.

Development thinking has, since the 1960s, demonstrated a paradigm shift away from modernisation theories to dependency theories and growth-with equity theories. Inherent in these are specific communication theories which range from the diffusion of information theory to a participatory communication approach and Development Support Communication (DSC) (Melkote, 1991; Servaes, 1995).

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was called the era of development, DC was considered to be one of the most strategically important concepts of development (Malan 1998; Melkote, 1991). DC is a field of study, a strategic school of thought in development studies which, despite its minimal recognition, has been part of the development endeavours in South Africa and elsewhere. Malan (1998) argues that the reason that DC has received so little attention is that it has previously not been regarded as part of culture. Like all cultures, it has been taken for granted. DC can be described as 'all forms of communication that are used for the improvement of material, cultural, spiritual socio-economic, environmental and political conditions of the society (Malan, 1998; Snyman, 2001). Therefore, DC takes into account sociological, psychological, political and cultural factors. Nunes (2001) further asserts that 'DC's role is to inform and motivate at national and local levels'.

At the Second International Conference on Discourse, Communication and Enterprise, DC was expanded to include an understanding of the various interrelated factors that influence economic growth and lift social welfare. It may be concluded, therefore, that DC 'aims at enhancing the understanding of broad economic issues that retard growth; boosting social intercourse; linking the needy to those with means; generating employment opportunities; enhancing the

understanding of sustainable development issues; encouraging people to generate income and wealth through value-adding activities, and promoting a society based on moral values and hard work' (Nunes 2001:10). The theoretical framework congruent with DC is discussed below.

### **2.3 Theoretical framework**

As indicated in the previous section, there is a pool of theories which are congruent with DC. These include diffusion of innovations, the two-step flow, DSC and participatory communication.

The diffusion of innovation theory used in the modernisation approach towards development, states that the role of communication is to transfer technological innovations from development agencies to the clients. It was thought that this would create an appetite for change through raising a climate for modernisation amongst the members of the public (Servaes, 1995). This typical modernisation approach favours two-way and horizontal communication. Modernisation, in this context, is defined by Rogers (1983) as a process of diffusion whereby individuals move from a traditional way of life to a more complex, more technically developed and more rapidly changing way of life.

Research has been conducted on the diffusion model to prove the hypothesis that the mass media exerted a great influence in the 1940 US presidential election. The researchers concluded that voting decisions were chiefly influenced by personal contacts and face-to-face persuasion (Servaes, 1995). The party that won the elections had adopted a two-step flow approach, door-to-door and face-to-face persuasion. The two-step flow approach has two elements: one is the notion that a population is divided into active and passive participants; another is that the notion of two-step flow influences at a personal level. The conclusion, therefore, was that mass communication is less likely to have a direct effect on social behaviour.

Another theory congruent with DC is participatory communication. Yoon (1997) states that the participatory communication approach was also developed as a response by communicators to the shift towards participation in development. Interpersonal and traditional methods encouraged the development and use of participatory communication methods, which had been ignored until then. In this approach, the question of who initiates a communication and how decisions are made leading up to the communication becomes more important than what is being communicated. Communicators are no longer neutral movers of information, but are intervening actively to trigger changes aimed at encouraging people's participation. The approach also accommodates cultural and other differences (Yoon, 1997; Snyman, 2001).

The participatory approach emphasises the importance of the cultural identity of local communities and of democratisation and participation at all levels (Yoon, 1997; Snyman, 2004). Freire (in Servaes 1995) states that this is the beginning of the right of all people, 'individually and collectively, to speak their word; this is not the privilege of some few men, but the right of every one. Consequently, no one can say a true word alone'. He adds that shared information, knowledge, trust, commitment and a right attitude is very important in any decision-making process in development projects.

Participation implies a high level of public involvement in communication systems. This includes an involvement in the production process and also in the management and planning of communication systems (Snyman 2004). Self-management is the most advanced form of participation. The public exercises the power of decision-making and is also fully involved in the formulation of communication policies and plans. 'Public' refers here to audience (Servaes, 1995).



Finally, the Development Support Communication (DSC) approach can be defined as a discipline that combines a marketable expertise in doing both mass communication and development theory and process (Agunga, 1998):

There is no shortage of impressively credentialed professionals in mass communication. Likewise, people in development theory and process abound. There are just not many who combine a marketable expertise in doing both. This is the discipline called Development Support Communication.

This section has focused on the theoretical framework congruent with DC. The following section focuses on the relationship between audience participation, information and knowledge, and the significance of this relationship in making sense of development messages.

## **2.4 Understanding development messages**

### **2.4.1 Audience participation**

Experience in the development communication process has taught that the sustainability of any development communication process is not just a matter of availability of physical resources as inputs in the process (Agunga, 1998; Yoon, 1997). Audience participation (public participation) is a critical condition for the success of a development communication initiative. This is discussed by various authors (Pretty (1998), Snyman (2001), Yoon (1997), Mody (199, Doak&Doak) In his paper entitled *Participatory Learning for Integrated Farming* Pretty (1998) assumes that for agricultural development to be sustainable, the application of participatory approaches will have to be strengthened. He bases his reasoning on two schools of thought and practice that have evolved as an attempt to involve people in some aspects of the planning and implementation of development projects. These schools of thought mainly state the advantages of audience participation.

One school views participation as a means to increase efficiency. The central notion is that once people get involved, they are more likely to agree with and support the new development initiative. The other school views participation as a fundamental right, in which the main aim is to initiate mobilisation for collective action, empowerment and institution-building.

Comparative studies of development projects have identified the advantages of audience participation for improving the effectiveness of development messages (Pretty, 1998; Agunga, 1998; Yoon, 2001). These include:

- Increased mobilisation and ownership of policies and projects
- Greater efficiency
- Better understanding and social cohesion
- Better cost-effectiveness
- Greater transparency and accountability
- Increased empowerment
- Strengthening of the capacity of people to learn and act

There has been a growing interest in audience participation in some African countries where the concern is to increase food production on farms. Based on the studies of Pretty (1998) and Agunga (1998), the best evidence of the impact of audience participation is that 86 projects in 40 countries in Eastern and Southern Africa improved the lives of at least 230 000 farming families. By then, over 6 million hectares of land were being farmed with sustainable agriculture methods and all projects were working in a participatory fashion with local people. According to Agunga and Pretty, the more people are involved in development, the more the message becomes effective (Agunga, 1998; Pretty 1998).

Pretty (1998) suggests that the term 'participation' should not be accepted without appropriate clarification. He provides a typology of audience participation:

- Manipulative participation
- Passive participation
- Participation by consultation
- Participation for material incentives
- Functional participation
- Interactive participation
- Self-mobilisation

For the purposes of this study, the focus is on the definitions of the last two types of audience participation. Audience participation could improve the effectiveness of development messages; therefore, interactive participation and self-mobilisation are more relevant than the other types of audience participation.

In interactive participation, people participate in joint analysis of the problem, development of action plans and formation or strengthening of local institutions. Participation is seen as a right, instead of as a means to achieve project goals. The groups take control over local decisions and determine how available resources are used. In self-mobilisation, people participate by taking initiatives, independently of external institutions, to change systems. They consult external institutions for technical advice they need, but retain control over how resources are used (Pretty, 1998).

Yoon (1997) discusses four different types of participation that can be used in most development projects that claim to be participatory in nature. These are:

- Participation in implementation
- Participation in evaluation
- Participation in benefit

- Participation in decision-making.

Some development initiatives provide people with opportunities to participate in four of these ways and some do not (Yoon, 1997).

During any audience participatory communication process information and knowledge is exchanged and created. The following section focuses on the important role of communication in information provision and knowledge generation.

#### **2.4.2 The importance of information and knowledge to participation**

It is common knowledge that access to information and knowledge is an essential factor if the disadvantaged, marginalised and the poor are to improve their lives and the lives of others (Global Knowledge Partnership Strategy, 2005). The advantages of audience participation discussed above are a result of information shared during the process as well as knowledge acquired as the process unfolds.

Mchombu (in Leach 1999), states that 'information is now accepted as an important factor in the sustained development of any society because it reduces uncertainty and enhances awareness of possible actions to take to solve the problem'. Wakelin and Simelane (in Leach 1999) focus on the importance of information provision in capacity-building and in empowering communities, and argue that a lack of information acts as a barrier to development. Information provision has been termed a formidable factor in determining whether development efforts in Africa are successful or not (Leach, 1999).

Information and knowledge are not the same, although the terms are often used interchangeably. The definition of knowledge has kept great philosophers occupied for thousands of years. Information can be made tangible and

represented as objects outside the human mind. Knowledge, on the other hand, is a much more intangible and an elusive entity (Stenmark, 2001). It is commonly said that 'knowledge is power'. Knowledge of behaviour change is not only necessary for the benefit of communities, but also for the benefit of development specialists. Panos (1998) states that 'true knowledge is more than information' and includes, in the definition of knowledge, the meaning or interpretation of the information and a lot of intangibles, such as the tacit knowledge of experienced people that is not well articulated but often determines collective organisational competence.

The concepts 'participation' and 'information' and 'knowledge' complement each other. Participation increases the chances of acquiring more information and consequently knowledge. The more knowledge one has, the more likely one will be able to make informed decisions. Knowledge also increases chances of social or behavioural change and participation increases a sense of ownership, which increases the chances of sustainability of a development initiative. The more participation there is, the more powerful the development message becomes (Agunga 1998; Pretty, 1998; Stenmark 2001).

An understanding of the public (audience) implies an understanding of the sociological, psychological, political and cultural factors that exist within a particular community. Blumer (1986) and Denzin (1995) state that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them and that these meanings are derived and modified from a process of social interaction that people have with their associates. Communication and common language for communication provide the mechanisms for meaning that they share. The context is important because the generation of meaning from a message depends on the context in which that message is being read or interpreted (Fiske, 1990). A discussion of the relationship between the message, context and meaning follows in the next section.

## **2.5 Meaning and context: why messages fail**

### **2.5.1 Semiotics**

This section reviews the question of how and why messages fail and uses semiotic theories to define the relationship between context and meaning. The study of the relationship between message, context and meaning is part of semiotics. Semiotics is the study of how meaning occurs in various forms of human communication including, pictures, language, performance, using signs and the way they work (Fiske, 1990).

The loveLife campaign uses verbal and visual text (words and photographs) on billboards, which have to be interpreted by members of the target audience, who use their own experiences as a frame of reference. Their experiences shape the representational codes of the target audience. This study utilises theories of semiotics to investigate how the representational codes used on the loveLife billboards perform a cognitive or ideational function. This function includes conveying information or ideas about things absent from the message, and involves the creation of a message or a text that is independent of the communication situation.

Semiotics describes 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 upon recognition by its users that it is a sign' (Fiske, 1990). The meaning given to a sign is informed by the context in which the person who interprets the sign exists. Semiotics, therefore, does not define communication as a process of transferring a message from A to B, but as a generation of meaning from messages. Semiotics involves the study of meaning, signs, codes and reader. These concepts are discussed below.

### 2.4.2.1 Meaning

The word 'meaning' is often used without any thought as to what is meant by it. The word is used to convey different things at different times. Berlo (1960) describes the following dimensions for the word 'meaning':

The denotative or referential dimension refers to signs that denote or refer to things out there. A structural dimension refers to a meaning given by the formal grammatical structure of the code. The contextual dimension refers to the meaning that people get from the context surrounding the sign, and finally, the connotative refers to the meaning (often highly personal), which individuals associate with a sign. This highlights the previous experience of a person with the word or a sign.

The study of meaning involves these three elements:

- The sign
- That to which the sign refers
- The users or receivers of the sign

In his analysis of signs, philosopher and logician Peirce (in Fiske 1990) argues that the above three elements are three points of a triangle. Each of these elements is closely related to the other and they can only be understood in terms of each other.

What Peirce is saying is that a sign refers to something other than itself: an object. Somebody understands this object, which means the object has an effect on the mind of the user. This effect is called 'interpretant' (Fiske, 1990). He emphasises the fact that an interpretant is not the user of the sign, but is 'the

proper significant effect' because it is in fact a mental concept produced by the sign and by the user's experience of the object. This means that the proper 'significate' effect is not fixed, but may change, within limits, according to the experience of the user. These limits are social conventions which allow for social and psychological differences between users (Fiske, 1990). Social and psychological differences between readers or receivers influence the way they understand an intended message.

Peirce's approach differs from that of Saussure's. Saussure, a Swiss linguist, concerned himself with the way signs (words) relate to other signs. He perceived a sign as a physical object with a meaning and distinguished two parts to a sign: the signifier (the image as we perceive it) and the signified (the mental concept to which it refers). This mental concept is common to all members of the same culture who share the same language. He states that 'the sign consists of its physical form plus an associated mental concept, and that this concept is in its turn an apprehension of the external reality' (Fiske, 1990). Thus, the sign relates to reality through the context of the people who use it.

While Peirce concerned himself with the relationship between object and external meaning, Saussure called the relationship between the signified and the external reality or meaning 'signification'.

In response to this, Fiske argues that there are similarities between Saussure's approach and Peirce's approach. He concludes that what is important to remember is that the mental concept of the physical existence of a sign (signifier) is a product of a particular culture (Fiske, 1990: 46). He uses as an example the word 'ox' and says:

It is obvious that words, the signifiers, change from language to language. But it is easy to fall into the fallacy of believing that signifiers are universal and that translation is therefore a simple



matter of substituting a French word, say, for an English one and the meaning is the same.

For the purpose of this study, this means that a young, rural person will have a different mental concept of the loveLife billboards to that of a young person living in an urban or semi-urban area. The 'signification' of the billboard is as culturally specific as the linguistic sign of the billboard message in each community.

The signifieds (mental concepts) of loveLife billboards are determined by the culture or subculture to which the receiver belongs. They are part of the linguistic or semiotic system that members of a specific culture use to communicate with each other (Delate, 2001). Saussure calls this relationship 'values' and it primarily determines the meaning.

Explaining three concepts used in this study as discussed by Fiske (1990) is important for an understanding of how these concepts interact with each other in order for messages to be understood. They are the following:

- **The sign itself.** This consists of the study of different varieties of signs, of different ways in which they convey meaning and of the way they relate to the people who use them. Signs are human constructs and can only be understood in terms of how people put them to use.
- **The codes or systems into which signs are organised** refers to the ways that a variety of codes develop in order to meet the needs of a society or culture, or to explore the channels of communication available for their transmission.

Codes are important during the 'negotiation' process. A code is a system of meaning common to the members of a culture or subculture (Fiske, 1990). Systems are governed by rules, which are consented to by all community

members using that code. The study of codes therefore emphasises the social dimension of communication.

These codes are referred to as signifying codes. There is a difference between a code of behaviour and a signifying code, but these are interconnected. The signifying code cannot be separated from the social life or practice of its users. The language used, for instance, cannot be separated from the social life of a particular group. Codes have a number of units from which a selection is made. They all convey a meaning, dependent upon the agreement amongst their users and a shared cultural background. They perform identifiable social or communicative functions. They are also transmittable by appropriate media and/or channels of communication.

- **The culture within which these codes and signs operate** is in turn dependent upon the use of these codes and signs for its own existence and form.

For the purpose of this study the following two features are highlighted:

- All codes depend upon an agreement amongst their users and a shared cultural background.
- All codes perform identifiable social or communicative functions (Fiske, 1990).

According to the theory of semiotics, the meaning of the text (both verbal and visual) is open to different interpretations. This is because the meaning depends on codes and codes depend upon an agreement amongst their users and the social or communicative function the codes perform. These aspects are in turn derived from the shared experiences (conventions) of members of a particular culture. This hypothetically implies that in a culturally and socially pluralistic country, such as South Africa, different members of the target audience may

attribute different meanings to the messages on the loveLife billboards and may misunderstand them.

In semiotics, the reader of the message plays an active role. 'Reading' refers to a process that occurs when the receiver or reader of the message interacts or negotiates with the text in order to discover the meaning in the text (Fiske, 1990: 4). According to Fiske (1990), this negotiation takes place as the reader brings aspects of his or her cultural experience to bear upon the codes and signs which make up the text. This also includes some shared understanding of what the text is about. For example, readers with different social experiences or from different cultures may find different meanings in the same message. But this does not necessarily mean the communication has failed; instead, it verifies the view that a message is not something sent from A to B.

Semiotics defines social interaction as that which constitutes an individual as a member of a culture or society (Fiske, 1990). Thus, one member of a culture or society is likely to respond broadly the same way as the fellow members of his/her culture would respond to a message. This is further confirmed in reception studies and other research work done in this field (Snyman, 2001).

#### **2.4.2.1 Reception studies and other studies**

The above discussion highlights the importance of context in the reading or interpretation of a sign or message. Snyman (2001) traces the historical development of reception studies and compares it with the recent trends in communication research. Her findings indicate that considerable gaps in interpretation may exist between sender and receiver. This is mainly caused by a lack of understanding about the life-world of the end-user and results in the absence of a common codal system between the person who communicates and the one who receives the communication. This study again emphasises the importance of the relationship between the text and the context within which that

text is designed and received. According to the study, a text is always received within a specific sociocultural context of an interpretive community. That community provides the frame of reference that determines perception and interpretation. A receiver can only interpret a text according to the socially mediated knowledge and values of that interpretive community (Snyman, 2001).

Reception studies might give answers to the question of why messages fail in development communication. This is probably caused by a lack of understanding of the broader context of the end-user which, means there is an absence of a common codal system between communicator and receiver.

Fiske (1990) refers to these misunderstandings, caused by different sub-cultural experiences, as a difference in 'reading' or 'aberrant decoding'. He describes aberrant decoding as something that happens when a message is read by a member of a culture different to that of the person who created the message, who brings different codes to it. Aberrant decoding thus produces a different meaning to the intended meaning. Aberrant encoding is an encoding that fails to recognise that people of different cultural or sub-cultural experiences will read the message differently and that in so doing will not necessarily be blameworthy (Fiske, 1990: 83).

As was indicated at the beginning of this section, this study uses the theories of semiotics to investigate how the representational codes used on the loveLife billboards perform a cognitive or ideational function. The loveLife phenomenon now requires further explanation. The next section focuses on loveLife as a phenomenon of development communication.

## **2.5 The loveLife phenomenon**

This section provides a background discussion on loveLife as an organisation, the rationale behind loveLife's campaign and its communication strategy. Part of

the rationale is outlined in the first chapter. This section later also discusses the reaction to the loveLife campaign.

### **2.6.1 Rationale behind the loveLife campaign**

The motivation for the loveLife campaign is that 52 per cent of young South Africans have full penetrative sex by age 16, with five main predictors of early sexual behaviour, including:

- Coercion
- Transactional sex (sex for money)
- Pessimism
- Low self-esteem
- Peer pressure (loveLife, 2003)

The foundation of loveLife's communication strategy is open communication about sex, as indicated by the motto 'Talk About It'. The key behaviour changes shown to positively affect the course of HIV epidemics in countries where significant reductions in HIV infection have been recorded are the following:

- Delay in first and secondary sexual experience
- Reduction in the number of sexual partners and risky sexual encounters
- Protection physically and emotionally when deciding to have sex

These three predictors are the hooks around which this phase of loveLife's ongoing campaign were developed.

loveLife asserts that the best approach for changing the course of the HIV epidemic is to influence the sexual behaviour of young people before they become sexually active. Unless South Africans can achieve this, the current cohort of 16 million South Africans under the age of 15 will move into the high-

risk pool (15- to 24-year-olds) at just the time that the epidemic is peaking. Projections are that, in the absence of an effective primary prevention strategy, 50 per cent of those young people will contract HIV/Aids (loveLife, 2003).

International evidence shows that early, open, frank discussion of sexuality is fundamental to promoting responsible sexual behaviour, delaying initiation of adolescent sexual activity, reducing teenage pregnancy and combating the HIV/Aids epidemic. To further support this, loveLife refers to the major international meta-analyses of over 1 000 sexuality education programmes worldwide, published by the World Health Organisation. These programmes provide strong evidence that confirms that frank discussion of sexuality, in the context of sexuality education, does not promote promiscuity or lead to earlier onset of sexual activity: 'On the contrary, failing to provide frank information misses the opportunity to reduce the risks of unwanted pregnancy, HIV/Aids and STI's' (loveLife, 2003).

### **2.6.2 loveLife's communication strategy**

In response to the problem of HIV/Aids, loveLife seeks to establish a new model for the effective prevention of HIV infection among young people by reducing high-risk sexual behaviour among young people. According to a loveLife brochure published in 2001, the plan is to achieve this goal through, amongst other methods (such as the use of radio, TV, loveLife games, Y-centres, etc.), its brand-driven 'innovative nationwide media campaigns', which include the insertion of billboard (signs) across the country.

loveLife (2001a) describes its communication strategy as follows:

loveLife's communication strategy has evolved from the early brand awareness development phase to increasingly more pointed messaging designed to increase understanding among the target

group of the values and behaviours most likely to reduce their risk of HIV infection. loveLife's creative design is deliberately bold and controversial to trigger 'Talk About It' and sustain repeat engagement over the life of each creative phase of the campaign.

According to loveLife, the positioning of the loveLife brand provokes discussion, sustains target group engagement with the brand and promotes loveLife's tollfree helpline, thethaJunction. Billboards form an integral part of a comprehensive multimedia communication strategy supported by one-on-one interaction with the target group through loveLife's national network of multiple community-level platforms. The target group is all 12- to 17-year-olds across South Africa (loveLife, 2003).

loveLife believes that such creative treatment should reflect attractive, healthy young people in fun and loving situations. The messages are designed to imply mutual (male and female) empowerment in an aspirational genre and to challenge young people to integrate the key 'delay, reduce, protect' messages into their regular behaviour and relationships. The creative treatment also want to converse that responsible sexual behaviour does not imply an end to sensuality and the images therefore have a sexual edge to them

loveLife measured its impact during a national survey conducted in November 2001. According to loveLife, this survey showed that 62 per cent of young South Africans are aware of loveLife. Of those who know about loveLife, 76 per cent say that loveLife has made them more aware of the risks of unprotected sex; 65 per cent say that loveLife has caused them to delay or abstain from sex; 64 per cent say that loveLife has created opportunities for them to talk to their parents about HIV/Aids (loveLife, 2003).

## **2.6 Reactions to the loveLife campaign**

The loveLife campaign has been met with severe criticism. While the campaign has been the most talked about HIV/Aids prevention initiative, it has invited tremendous and robust discussions and criticism from diverse sources, some of which are explored here.

### **2.6.1 Coulson's study**

Coulson (2000) reviewed the effective use of mass media as a critical component of HIV/Aids prevention in South Africa by discussing three initiatives that utilise the national mass media platform for prevention, namely the Beyond Awareness II Campaign (now completed), Soul City and loveLife. In this review, Coulson examined three critical areas for mass media work: the conceptualisation and strategy phase; the research and development phase; and the evaluation, impact and cost-effectiveness of mass media campaigns for HIV/Aids prevention. The review provides useful models and schools of thought which can inform the development of public health communication campaigns.

On concept and strategy, the review states that loveLife and Beyond Awareness II demonstrate an appreciation of theoretical frameworks, but did not formally develop a working model (Coulson, 2000). She congratulates loveLife for reflecting principles of the Ottawa Charter:

loveLife is at pains to emphasise the need for a fresh approach to HIV/Aids prevention that is not led by mass media ... Notably, loveLife promotes the establishment of youth Y-centres (which operate as multi-functional lifestyle and health centres), support to the National Adolescent Friendly Clinic Initiative, and a school sports programme. (Coulson, 2000: 6).



This encouragement is not only for loveLife's mass media (billboards), but for its whole communication strategy. She further supports loveLife's response to the post by CADRE (2002), discussed below, confirming that the billboard campaign should not be isolated from the whole loveLife strategy. The billboards cannot bring about behaviour change on their own. Coulson (2000) states that 'the criticisms levelled at loveLife fail to appreciate the potential of billboards within the integrated loveLife strategy where media is not a stand-alone component, and therefore has the potential to be used strategically and to great effect'.

### **2.6.2 Delate's study**

Delate (2001) reviews the billboards of the loveLife campaign. Delate's study tests the meanings and interpretations that target audiences interacting with loveLife billboards ascribe to the brand, and the extent to which loveLife's messages assist in developing a national discourse around the issue of adolescent sexual behaviour in South Africa. Delate argues that meanings are not fixed, but open to interpretations, which are informed by culture, language and socialisation and, therefore, the interpretation of the billboards was influenced by the above-mentioned factors.

### **2.6.3 The Halperin and William study**

Halperin and William (2001) state the following:

South Africa's most visible response to the crisis is misguided. It focuses unprecedented resources on a Madison Avenue-style HIV prevention campaign targeted at young people. What is needed instead is a broad mobilisation of civic, religious and other grass-roots communities, combined with clear and committed political leadership aimed at changing fundamental patterns of sexual behaviour (29).

Responding to the use of English, they write that ‘colourful posters carry similar cryptic word pairs, also in English rather than the local language’.

According to the Halperin and William study (2001), very few of several hundred young people who participated across the country showed any clear interest in loveLife’s communications, although they showed concern and obsession with the issue of HIV/Aids. The study also asserts that ‘though one of the main goals of loveLife’s other activities, as most HIV-prevention initiatives, is condom promotion, that is never explicitly mentioned in its media campaigns’. (Halperin and William 2001)

#### **2.6.4 CADRE response**

The Centre for Aids Development, Research and Evaluation (CADRE) posted an article on the Communication Initiative, dated 16 October 2002, in response to the loveLife programme, identifying two main problems (quoted directly from CADRE’s post):

- **Poorly conceived messaging**

The billboard messages are said to be highly problematic, both in terms of content and in terms of reach. Billboards do not allow for audience segmentation by age. It is questioned whether a six-year-old learning to read by scanning roadside billboards such as ‘Sex is sex: show me the money’ or ‘I only do it skin-on-skin’ or I wanted to wait, but Abram was inside me before I could say no’ can make sense of the messages.

- **Poor understanding of youth audience**

Lovelife’s understanding of the target audience (12-17) is questioned. 12- to 14-year-old young people are very different emotionally, intellectually and sexually to 15- to 17-year-olds. They have special and different needs in terms of sexuality education and any dialogue around sex requires an informed and

framework of support. loveLife's approach contradicts the carefully planned approach to sexuality education that is followed by the Department of Health and Education's school-based Life Skills programme. It is also said to contradict value systems indigenous to young South Africans. Other questions that were raised are the following. What of the distinct psycho-social needs young people have in relation to HIV/Aids? What of the distinct problems of orphaned young people? What of the trauma of loss of family members, parents, siblings to Aids? What of sexual coercion? Rape? What of the very real needs and concerns of parents? Where is the genuine involvement of communities, parents, teachers, PLWHAs, community-based organisations?

The argument in this article is relevant for this study because it highlights the need to acknowledge that South African youth is not homogeneous and their ability to understand the messages is influenced by their socio-cultural environments.

### **2.6.5 The Communication Initiative**

An interactive debate about how effective or ineffective loveLife is took place in 2003 between academics, activists, agencies and organisations through the South African discussion forum, the 'Communication Initiative' (<http://www.comminit.com>). This debate is particularly relevant because it took place just before the loveLife billboard bampaign for November 2002-May 2003 was launched. A number of concerns were raised and it would be interesting to find out if this debate had any effect on the campaign. The views of a number of participants in the debate are discussed here.

Halperin (2003) poses a number of thought-provoking questions:

- Why are all the messages based on the assumption that all teenagers use vulgar language when communicating about sex?
- Why is there a subtle yet discernable assumption that only African teenagers are vulnerable to infection with the HIV virus? Why is it assumed that the only way to reduce teenage infection rates is to target those already sexually active?
- Why is no effort made in the ads displayed on the billboards to offer an alternative to sex namely abstention until a more mature age? Why do the billboards ads entrench the view that it is perfectly okay to engage in sex at 14 or 15 as long as condoms are worn?
- Why does loveLife want to teach parents how to talk to their children when they offend such parents by running ads that run counter to the moral and cultural values that parents teach their children in the home?
- Why does loveLife not cater for 80 per cent of teenagers in this country whose first language is not English, including those who do not understand or speak English?
- There surely must be other means of communicating messages in a South African and especially African cultural context. There must be people active in African communities who can advise loveLife.

The debate on the importance of recognising culture in the loveLife campaign is further taken up by Karnell. In response to the view on the forum that insisted that morality has little place in the context of the epidemic, Karnell (2003) states that 'the author's rejection of morality denies us the opportunity to use morality as a tool to bring about behaviour change. In fact, the quest to develop effective prevention messages rests largely on finding the cultural and social elements which support decisions to avoid risk'.

The language being used in the billboards has been criticised for being too complex. Patient (2003) posted a statement on the Communication Initiative observing the following:

Many of [loveLife's] adverts and billboards require way too much lateral thinking, which would be fine in the sophisticated First World environment, but to fool themselves for a moment that these ambiguous slogans effect any kind of behaviour change is naive in the extreme. They are obscure and abstract and our society is years away from putting the pieces together.

On the same day, a research psychologist, Orr, takes this point further by saying that 'if educated people in South Africa have difficulty fathoming the implied messages on the loveLife billboards, I have no doubt that the general population has not got a clue regarding their messages. Keep in mind that the home language of most of the target group(s) is not English'.

#### **2.6.6 *Fair Lady* magazine**

An article appearing in the women's interest magazine, *Fair Lady*, states that some audience members have claimed that the 'vague and often contradictory messages of loveLife billboards may undermine the aims of the campaign by positioning sex as being hip and cool, with less emphasis on safe sex'. Furthermore, 'the campaign's predominant use of English is viewed as problematic because it is neither spoken nor understood by many South Africans' (Delate, 2002).

#### **2.6.7 loveLife's for us – A survey of SA youth 2001**

The latest 'nationally representative' survey of 12- to 17-year-olds, entitled ***loveLife's for us – A survey of SA youth 2001*** notes that 62 per cent of the target group responded in the affirmative when asked if they had heard about loveLife. An attempt is then made to demonstrate that awareness about loveLife has translated into action on several fronts. The data in this study, however, is presented in simple frequency table format, with little comparative analysis

between measures. No comparative reference is made to a similar survey conducted in 2000 and many questions are raised in this regard, including: how did loveLife cause 78 per cent of those who had heard about its programme to use condoms, 69 per cent to reduce their number of sexual partners, 63 per cent to be more assertive about condom use, and 20 per cent to have more sex? How compelling and powerful is 'hearing about loveLife'?

The report also contains a number of internal contradictions that raise unsettling doubts about research integrity. For example, there are concerns about whether it is possible that a 'nationally representative sample' elicited the finding that 23 per cent of those who knew about loveLife reported that they knew via a loveLife Y-centre, when there were only seven Y-centres in discrete communities countrywide at the time of the survey.

In the preamble, loveLife responds by first acknowledging that 'preventing the spread of HIV among South Africa's young people is a huge challenge, and no one has all the answers – including us. That is why we welcome constructive dialogue and discussion on this important issue'. However, loveLife repeats the statistics being questioned by CADRE (2002), but adds that 'obviously self-reported behaviour change is open to questions of reliability, but even if these statistics were divided in half, it is a significant response and if the kind of response based on the survey is sustained, it is likely that loveLife will have a significant impact on the HIV transmission rate among South Africa's youth' (loveLife, 2001:7).

The **2002 loveLife Report on activities and progress states** that comparisons with youth population distribution show that the outdoor campaign was slightly slanted towards the more urban and wealthier provinces. The reasons for this include the fact that billboards generally are located where there are high population concentrations and established infrastructure. In order to reach rural

areas, loveLife uses its multimedia approach that relies heavily on radio (loveLife, 2002).

This report also raises many concerns, including:

- If the focus of loveLife is the urban and wealthier youth, how could it have had an effect on the behaviour of the youth in the rural areas?
- Is there no established infrastructure that can be used in the rural areas? If not, what about the youth in these areas?
- How can loveLife assert (p. 20) that there is no substantial difference between urban and rural respondents with regards to brand awareness?
- Does awareness imply behaviour change? What about the difference between awareness and understanding?
- If over 2 million teenagers in the rural areas and 700 000 in the urban areas and approximately 92 per cent of South Africans have access to radio, how many of the rural target audience have access to radio and how much of loveLife's programmes are heard on radio stations?
- What about the difference in awareness and understanding between the respondents?

It is also interesting to look at the summary of the findings of the 2002 report compared with the results of the previous survey conducted in 2001. According to the 2002 report, at the end of 2002, 62 per cent of the sample of 2 204 young people was aware of loveLife. In the 2001 report, 67 per cent were said to be aware, which could imply that the level of awareness has come down. The difference between an awareness and an understanding of the messages and the implications of this are not discussed. Around 70 per cent of those who had heard of loveLife said that loveLife 'made them think about safer choices'. 60 per cent of respondents who had heard about loveLife said that it caused them to talk to family and/or friends about sex, sexuality and relationships. The same

proportion (60 per cent) reported positive adaptive behaviour in response to the campaign.

### **2.6.8 *Mail and Guardian***

On the 24 August 2005, an article was posted on loveLife programme. In the article Rena comments on various aspects of the loveLife campaign and provides an analysis of loveLife's goal to cut infection rates amongst South African teenagers in half by 2004. The analysis states that while there is some anecdotal evidence that suggests that loveLife has helped South Africans talk more openly about sex and provided many schoolchildren with knowledge of HIV/AIDs, there are few signs so far to suggest that this new knowledge is prompting the youth to delay sex or reduce the number of sexual partners. In fact it asserts that some of the loveLife's promotional materials seem to encourage sexual experimentation. Further more it argues that current billboards bear an ambiguous message and maybe compounding the problem as it glamorises sex. Making reference to a 2003 study commissioned by loveLife to analyse one of its billboard campaigns, it confirms that poor, rural and black students (these are most at risk of contracting AIDs) have the most difficulty grasping the message.

The analysis questions the impact of the programme and it calls for more research to understand the impact of the programme and suggests that the concerns raised about loveLife should be part of a healthy debate about the best way to tackle the epidemic. (Rena, 2005)

## **2.7 Summary of the critique**

The discussion in this section has focused on the loveLife communication strategy and criticism levelled at this strategy. The discussion mainly emanates from the fact that when loveLife delivers its messages on billboards, young people are required to create and interpret the meanings of the messages on the billboards – they must negotiate the messages. However, because of the



diversity of languages, cultures, religions and levels of education in the target group, one message on one billboard can have many different meanings, depending on how it is interpreted. In the loveLife reports discussed above, this diversity is not explicitly acknowledged. This puts the effectiveness of the campaign into question and raises the question of whether loveLife takes into account or understands the relationship between signs, their codes and the cultural context in which they operate. Does loveLife assume that a homogeneous young South African target audience exists?

## **2.8 Summary of the chapter**

This chapter outlines the main points that have emerged from the literature review, which provide the basis for the development of this study namely: the concept of development communication and its role, role of audience participation, role of information and knowledge to participation, role of semiotic theories in definition and understanding the relationship between context and meaning and how lack of understanding affects effectiveness of the messages, understanding of life-world of the end user from reception studies, loveLife phenomenon and the (critique) reaction to loveLife campaign. These points set up a conceptual tool for an analysis of the research finding which will be discussed later in this study. The following chapter discusses the research design and methods employed during this study.

### **3 CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the research method and the procedures that were followed when conducting this study. A qualitative research design was adopted.

#### **3.2 Research methodology**

Research methods are vehicles through which researchers attempt to provide answers to questions. The process of research aims to provide answers to research questions and sometimes raise more questions for further research. Research is a process and not an act. It begins with initial curiosity about what, how and why something is happening the way it does and at a particular time. Then, with time, questions develop and an understanding of the phenomenon is sought.

The study has adopted a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research is research that views experiences from the perspectives of those under study in a non-prescriptive way. This method offers an opportunity to obtain an independent response from the research participants as to how and what they think and feel about an issue being researched, thereby giving an insight into the attitudes, beliefs, motives and behaviour of the research participants. The method provides a comprehensive description, analysis and understanding of the socio-cultural context of the research participants (Struwig and Stead, 2000).

As explained in the previous chapters, the central question of this study is concerned with to what extent the socio-cultural differences amongst South Africa's youth impact on their understanding of the loveLife billboards. The study addresses the following specific questions:

- How can semiotics be used to determine the way in which the multicultural South African youth interpret the loveLife billboards?
- How are certain loveLife billboards interpreted by a variety of South African youths?
- Are the billboards successful – is the message intended by loveLife communicated effectively?
- How do the cultural and social contexts of the selected youth groups impact on their interpretation of the loveLife billboards?
- How can cultural sensitivity inform and influence the process of designing outdoor media?

This research is exploratory because very limited research has been done on this specific topic. As a result a qualitative research design was chosen in order to use tools that would lead to openness and flexibility and allowing unexpected experiences to be addressed. Other reasons for this choice are discussed below.

### **3.2.1 Qualitative research design**

Qualitative research is a non-numerical method carried out for the purpose of discovering concepts and relationships in raw data (semi-structured interview transcripts) and then organising these into a theoretical explanatory scheme (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). It is concerned with the quality rather than the quantity of data. The study uses the inductive method to allow for a detailed observation of the socio-cultural context of the participants and moves towards more abstract generalisations.

This research method emphasises the importance of the social and cultural context of the research partners and is suitable for the study that investigates the understanding of the billboards. According to Henwood and Pidgeon (1995), the qualitative paradigm privileges the search for meaning, understanding, or

*verstehen* (being sensitive to people's own understandings as seen from their local frames of reference or from inside their own socially situated phenomenal worlds), rather than abstract, universal laws. This suggests that the meanings of social practices and statements depend on the context in which those occur.

### **3.2.1.1 The grounded theory approach**

The grounded theory approach is appropriate for the topic and the goal of the study. It is a systematic research approach for the collection and analysis of qualitative data for the purpose of generating explanatory theory that furthers the understanding of social and other phenomena (Charmaz, 1995; Chenitz and Swanson, 1986; Riessman, 1994). According to Henwood and Pidgeon (1995), the approach of grounded theory is suitable for use with any form of structured material, including interview transcripts of participants' accounts, newspaper reports or fieldwork observations. The grounded theory approach provides the framework for taking interview material, intuitions and understandings to a conceptual level and provides the guidelines for discovery and formulation of theory or a set of assumptions (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

The procedures of grounded theory are designed to develop a well-integrated set of concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of the social phenomena under study (Charmaz, 1995; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In this study, the grounded theory approach was used to extract categories of relevant information pertaining to the research topic, rather than to develop a complete theory. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), the above procedure assists in building a dense, tightly woven explanatory theory, which is developed through sensitivity in integration of the data, so that it approximates the reality which it represents.

The grounded theory approach, like most other forms of qualitative research, is highly effective in areas in which little research has been done, such as the topic of this study. Another advantage of the grounded theory approach is the fact that

the process of analysis can be stopped at any time to report findings before a complete theory is developed and without losing the attention (Chenitz and Swanson, 1986).

Therefore, instead of producing an explanatory theory, the aim of the analysis here is to select, focus and fully explore a limited set of categories that seem particularly relevant to the topic being studied.

### **3.2.1.2 Symbolic interaction**

Grounded theory is rooted in the implications of symbolic interaction (Denzin, 1995). According to Chenitz and Swanson (1986), symbolic interaction is a theory about the inner or experiential aspects of human behaviour, that is, the study of human conduct and human group life. It focuses on how people define events or reality and how they act in relation to their beliefs in natural or everyday settings.

Blumer (in Chenitz and Swanson, 1986) and Denzin (1995) expand that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. These meanings are derived and modified from a process of social interaction that a person has with his/her associates. Communication and common language for communication provide the mechanisms for meaning that is shared.

Therefore, using the symbolic interactionist viewpoint, grounded theory provides an approach for describing the sociocultural processes that assist the target group of loveLife to make sense of the billboards.

### **3.2.2 Data collection methods**

The researcher selected semi-structured interviews as an appropriate form of data collection for this study. Interviews have a high response rate since there is

a face-to-face encounter with the participants, which facilitates their cooperation. The researcher can also observe the surrounding environment and use non-verbal communication, as well as allow participants to speak in the language with which they are most comfortable.

Interviews were conducted by the researcher, assisted by an assistant in the case of Venda respondents because of the researcher's limited understanding of Tshivenda. Interviews were all recorded on a tape recorder and additional notes were taken during interviews.

The researcher mainly conducted the interviews himself, with the exception of those in Tshivenda, in order to record the information and to direct and probe the flow of ideas. This technique helps to clarify concepts and problems with the respondent and allows for the establishment of a list of possible answers or solutions. It also allows for the discovery of new aspects of the problem by investigating in detail some explanations given by respondents (Bless & Higson Smith, 1995). In grounded theory, data collection and analysis are interrelated processes (Bowers, 1988; Corbin and Strauss, 1990). This means that data analysis is necessary from the start because analyses of data from the first interviews will produce hypotheses, which in turn will guide further data collection.

The interview method could, however, result in discomfort on the part of the respondent, who might not want to share some information with a stranger (the researcher). The researcher had to deal with this by meeting the participants at their level and by relating to their experiences. The age of the researcher (relatively young) meant that participants could relate to him and were put more at ease during interviews. The researcher's experience as a social scientist, working with people of different ages and different backgrounds, made it possible to use this method.

### 3.2.3 Sampling

The data was gathered by means of semi-structured interviews during October 2003. The participants were purposefully sampled and were all selected because they are central to the research question. The location of the participants (where they live) was crucial to obtaining suitable answers to the research questions – people from a variety of sociocultural locations had to be chosen. As a result, stratified purposeful sampling was used. Stratified purposeful sampling is appropriate if the purpose of the sampling is to determine variations in participants' responses (Struwig and Stead, 2001).

According to Struwig and Stead (2001), qualitative research focuses primarily on the depth or richness of the data and therefore qualitative researchers generally select samples purposefully. In purposeful sampling, the research participants show certain characteristics in which the researcher is interested. According to Lincoln and Guba (in Struwig and Stead, 2001), the characteristics of purposeful sampling include the following:

- The total sample is not drawn in advance. Characteristics of what may comprise the final sample are considered (e.g. gender, age, area of residence).
- The sample size is not finalised before the study commences and may change as the study progresses.
- Each sampling unit is selected only after the information of the previous unit has been analysed.
- An additional sampling unit is required if the previous unit provides insufficient information or if contrasting information is needed.
- As additional information is required, more specific sampling units are sought. This could be based on new insights or hypotheses being developed as the study progresses.

- The sampling of new units continues until there is no new information obtained from additional samples.

In each province, participants were selected from a rural and an urban/semi-urban area. The purpose was to determine whether there is a discrepancy in the understanding of the messages on loveLife billboards between rural and urban/semi-urban participants and the reasons for any variations. In order to make a relative generalisation of the whole population, participants were selected from three provinces in South Africa.

In KwaZulu-Natal, participants were from Mvundlweni rural village, which is governed by a traditional authority, and from uMlazi township. Mvundlweni is one of the rural areas in Pietermaritzburg with some infrastructural development. According to the traditional authority, the level of education amongst the target group is still low and English is not the first language in many schools. uMlazi is regarded as a semi-urban area because it is a township.

In Limpopo province, participants were from Mukomawabani rural village, which is governed by a traditional authority, and from Sibisa in Thohoyandou, an urban area. Mukomawabani is a remote rural area in Limpopo province with very limited infrastructural development. The level of education is very low and access to the area by a car is very difficult. The socio-economic profile of the general community is also very low.

In the Western Cape, participants were from KwaLanga a semi-urban/township area and from Bonteheuwel, an urban area. Bonteheuwel is a predominantly coloured community fewer than 10 kilometres away from KwaLanga. KwaLanga has a loveLife Y-centre and therefore the Y-centre is within 10 kilometres of Bonteheuwel.



Interviews were carried out with 72 participants between the ages of 12 and 17. This is the target age group for the loveLife campaign. Because of time and financial constraints, the sample size could not be bigger than 72. In each province, there were 24 participants (12 participants from the rural and another 12 from the urban/semi-urban environment). Four participants were interviewed at a time in groups of two girls and two boys.

### 3.2.3.1 Sampled loveLife billboards

Three billboards were selected for the study from the November 2002-May 2003 campaign. These billboards are explained here according to the rationale provided by loveLife (2002)

#### 3.6.1.1 Billboard A: 'One roll-on all women want'



Fig. 3.1 Billboard A

According to loveLife, the billboard concerns the following:

Protection – condom use, protecting partners, friends, community, people with Aids, communicating with friends/family/children, the future: shared responsibility and positive lifestyles. It portrays the condom as a “love device” that is normal and natural, and anticipates enhanced sexual experience. It shows a woman in control of a loving, non-coercive sexual situation.

According to loveLife (2002), 84 per cent of youth suggest condoms 'are easy to get hold of'; reported condom use in their last sexual intercourse has varied in studies among youth from 18 per cent to 52 per cent. More than half (53 per cent) of sexually experienced youth say that they used a condom only 'some of the time' or 'never' when they had sex in the past year.

### 3.6.1.2 Billboard B: 'No pressure'



Fig. 3.2 Billboard B

According to loveLife (2002), this billboard tackles the fact that 'peer pressure, coercion and violence are the primary influences on premature adolescent sexual debut and characteristic of general adolescent behaviour'. This billboard shows a loving couple relaxed in each other's company, but in a sensuous setting. It states: 'be in control of your relationships. Understand your partner. Sex should not be the basis of a loving relationship' (loveLife, 2002).

### 3.6.1.3 Billboard C: 'Everyone he's slept with is sleeping with you'



Fig. 3.3 Billboard C

loveLife (2002) states that this message is aimed at a 'reduction in the number of partners, casual sex, commercial sex, lack of knowledge, risky situations, non-consensual sex', resulting in 'healthier lifestyles'. It personalises the risk that your partner may have a history of sexual behaviour that you are not aware of and that is what puts you at risk. According to loveLife, 30 per cent of youth report having more than one sexual partner at 'the present time': 72 per cent of young men in KwaZulu-Natal, 41 per cent in the Eastern Cape, and 26 per cent in the Western Cape (loveLife, 2002).

### **3.3 Permission to do the study**

In the case of rural areas under the leadership of a traditional authority, permission was first obtained from the traditional authority and from the parents of respondents. In urban/semi-urban areas, permission was obtained from the local authorities, youth organisations in which the respondents participate and from the parents of respondents.

All the participants had to consent by signing a consent form. These participants were available and willing to take part in the study without any reward. Youth organisations, local leaders and local community members also assisted with the identification of participants in the same age group.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

The audiotapes recordings were transcribed from oral to text form and translated into English. The transcribed data were encoded using grounded theory's coding procedure, namely open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This requires that chunks or units of meaning from the data are identified, labelled as concepts and grouped into categories.

The procedure involves a close assessment of the texts for distinct units of meaning. In open coding, the researcher compares events, actions and

interactions with others for similarities and differences (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). These units of meaning are then labelled as concepts, using appropriate language, and grouped into as many open-coded categories as possible. The objective in this procedure is to generate a developing set of categories and their properties, which fit, work and are relevant for the integrity of theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1978).

There are rules that govern the open coding to ensure its proper use. The first rule is to ask questions of the data, which the researcher has to keep in mind from the start. Questions such as: What is this data a study of? What category of codes does this incident indicate? What is happening in the data? According to Glaser & Strauss (1978), these types of questions keep the researcher theoretically sensitive and transcending when collecting, coding and analysing data.

Secondly, the researcher has to analyse the data line by line while constantly coding each sentence. Glaser & Strauss (1978) states that the line-by-line approach forces the researcher to verify and saturate categories, minimises missing important categories, produces dense rich theory and gives a feeling that nothing has been left out.

### **3.5 Validity and reliability**

Interpretative validity was obtained by asking participants to comment on the interpretations of the researcher after all the interviews had been completed. A comparison between previous research and reports about loveLife and the interviewed data assisted in determining whether the perspectives of various sources were being contradicted or not.

### **3.6 Summary of the chapter**

The chapter has focused on discussing the research method and procedure. The research used a qualitative research design and method and the grounded theory method and procedures were explained. Standards of validity and reliability were considered. The next chapter focuses on a discussion of the research findings.

## 4 CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study based on the data obtained from the participants in the selected three provinces. The research findings are discussed and summarised in the main categories namely distribution, branding and understanding of the billboard messages. The understanding of the meaning of the billboards was the focus of the study and this category is dealt with in detail.

### 4.2 Distribution of the billboards

Participants were questioned about the distribution of the billboards in order to establish whether they had previously seen the billboards and tried to interpret them. To the question ‘Where have you seen these three billboard pictures before?’ the following responses were obtained in Venda:

‘We have only seen these on TV and magazines but there aren’t any pictures around town in the form of billboards’ – urban participant from Sibisa in Thohoyandou

‘We don’t have a lot of things around here such as electricity, water, TVs, so we only hear about loveLife on radio. If possible, why doesn’t loveLife distribute information around here in the form of pamphlets or billboards and also change the language according to place?’ – rural participant in Mukomawabani

None of the urban/semi-urban participants in the areas of uMlazi and Bonteheuwel had seen all three billboards in their areas. As one participant in Bonteheuwel stated: ‘I have not seen any of the three, I am seeing them for the

first time.’ A participant from the semi-urban township of KwaLanga pointed out that he had seen the billboards at the Y-centre in the township.

There was no evidence of the billboards ever having been put up or seen in any of the rural areas. The rural participants had never seen the billboards before, and this may be one of the reasons why they struggled to make sense of the billboards. The same was the case in the towns in urban areas, for example, Thohoyandou. Some of the participants had read about the loveLife campaign in magazines at school, seen it on TV and had heard about it on the radio, but had never seen the billboards.

### **4.3 Branding and meaning**

The second category involved the awareness and comprehension of the loveLife brand independent of the billboards. Considering that a brand is a symbol that enables people to interpret images, feelings and stereotypes (Delate, 2001), the following questions aimed to establish whether the respondents know the loveLife brand and what it stands for: ‘What is loveLife?’ ‘What is it about?’ ‘What does thetaJunction refer to?’ and ‘What does thetaJunction mean?’

It was crucial to establish whether respondents understood the meaning of the signs on the billboards themselves or whether they attributed meaning to the billboards because of an awareness of the loveLife brand and their perceptions of what the brand is about.

Some respondents associated loveLife with sexual relationships, while some had no idea what the brand stands for:

‘loveLife is about sex – semi-urban participant in uMlazi

‘I don’t know what is the billboard saying but I see loveLife, so this is about making love’ – rural participant in Mvundlweni

‘They guide young people on relationships and pregnancy’ – urban participant in Bonteheuwel

‘I just know there is loveLife I don’t know who or what it’s about’ – rural participant in Mukomawabani

In the previous chapters, the question was raised: how compelling and powerful an awareness of the loveLife brand? The general finding of the study was that participants were aware of loveLife as a brand and, to a greater extent, some rural participants aspired to being part of the brand, even though they didn’t know what that entailed. For example, in rural Venda, respondents indicated that ‘we would like to be like them’ (meaning other children featuring in loveLife programmes on TV or the radio) by, for example, dressing as they do. In other words, they would like to be part of the loveLife subculture and are attracted to it.

This fascination with the brand had not necessarily brought about an understanding of the intended meaning of loveLife’s messages. Participants were interested in the loveLife subculture rather than the message portrayed by loveLife. When they noticed the brand icon that symbolises loveLife on the billboards, they contextualised the message and were influenced to interpret the message in a certain way. The most popular understanding of loveLife amongst participants was that it is about sex, love, relationships, HIV/Aids.

Thehta-Junction is a neologism composed of a Xhosa and English word with the meaning a place (junction) where we could talk together (thetha). Some participants had, however, no idea what thetha-Junction means. As indicated in the following responses to questions about the meaning of thethaJunction:

‘We don’t know’ – rural participant in Mukomawabani



‘I think it’s about two married people going to their honeymoon where no-one else disturbs them in whatever they want to do’ – urban participant in Thohoyandou

‘I only know that it’s a place where people talk about everything good/bad.’ – urban participant in Thohoyandou

‘I think it’s about two people who love each other and have found a private place where no one else disturbs – urban participant in Bonteheuwel

Some included the concept of “talking” but not in the way loveLife intended it

‘I think they talk about sexually related issues and advise on HIV/Aids’ – urban participant in Bonteheuwel

It is interesting to note that the respondents saw thetaJunction on the billboards and knew that it was connected to loveLife. However, this did not translate into an understanding of what thetaJunction stands for. Many of the respondents in all three provinces, both rural and urban/semi-urban, generally did not understand what it refers to.

Delate (2001) notes that ‘the symbolic value of a brand 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.’ This implies that the respondents’ experience with the brand shapes their understanding of the billboard messages. Three years after Delate’s study (2001), the associations in the minds of the participants of what loveLife symbolises still refer to a variation of meanings, like

instructions about sex, love, relationships, HIV/Aids. Some participants still had no idea what loveLife was all about or what thethaJunction means.

#### **4.4 Understanding the meanings of the billboards**

This category outlines the main research questions that refer to the respondents' interpretations of the selected billboards. The data obtained from the interviews are organised in the following five subcategories based on the questions asked during the interviews: interpretations of the billboards (where differences and similarities between urban, semi-urban and rural participants are explained); interface between text and picture; the impact of culture on understanding; overall understanding of the messages; levels of understanding.

In the following section the categories will be discussed first by explaining and motivating the questions and by secondly presenting the findings based on the analysed data obtained from responses to the questions.

##### **4.4.1 Interpretations of the billboards**

The questions asked in order to determine how respondents interpreted the billboards are explained here.

###### **1. *What came into your mind when you first saw these billboards?***

Billboard A: 'One roll-on all women want'

Billboard B: 'No pressure'

Billboard C: 'Everyone he's slept with is sleeping with you'

This question was asked in order to establish the respondents' initial reactions to the billboards, which could be based on their socio-cultural background.

**2. What do the following words that you see on these billboards mean to you?**

Billboard A: 'One roll-on all women want'

Billboard B: 'No pressure'

Billboard C: 'Everyone he's slept with is sleeping with you'

The question was asked to establish the capabilities of the respondents to understand the complex symbolic language used on the billboards in order to determine whether the respondents can understand the meaning and interpret the message.

**3. Do you find it difficult to understand these billboards? If yes, why?**

This wanted to establish whether or not the respondents found it difficult to interpret and understand the verbal and visual messages on the billboards.

**4. What have you learnt from these billboards?**

This was aimed to establish whether any lessons were learnt from the billboards, and whether the lessons flow from an understanding of the intended message. In other words, was there a correlation between what was understood from the message and the lessons learnt from the message?

**5. Can you think of anything that should be changed on this billboard?**

The last question wanted to elicit the respondents' opinions of how the billboard messages can be made simpler to understand, if they found them difficult to interpret.

In the responses to these questions, distinct similarities and differences between rural and urban/semi-urban respondents were found. Only the answers of the

participants who actually responded and whose responses were meaningful to the research are included.

#### **4.4.1.1 KWAZULU-NATAL (MVUNDLWENI AND UMLAZI)**

##### **Similarities between urban/semi-urban and rural respondents in KwaZulu-Natal**

Most of the semi-urban and rural respondents had never seen the billboards, but those few who had seen some of them acknowledged that the Billboards A taught them to use a condom. The majority of the participants who indicated that the meaning of the message on Billboard A was about condom usage were already sexually active (this was established from their responses after being asked whether they are sexually active). What was interesting, was the interpretation of the participants from the urban/semi-urban area that where there was a condom, there had to be sexual activity. This inference actually raises questions whether or not loveLife promotes abstinence or sexual ability.

There was a fair understanding of the risk of infection or HIV involved when having more than two partners. Boys from both rural and urban/semi-urban areas acknowledged this risk but were not necessarily against the idea of having unprotected sex. For some female respondents having sex was perceived as something that brought economic benefits (money to buy drinks, sweets etc). For an example if you weigh interests of having protected sex and having sex for such gains, sex with benefits seemed to be of a higher priority more so than having protected sex. For example, one respondent stated 'you must have sex with the man who has money so that he buys sweets and cooldrinks for you.' This does not suggest that they are involved in prostitution, but refers to the transactional nature of sex.

None of the respondents from rural and urban areas could adequately explain the verbal texts on the billboards. Most of the respondents did not understand the

complexity of the language used in the billboards. When they were looking at the visuals, they took a guess on what the billboard was about with no reference to what the text was saying. For example, when asked what the words on Billboard C meant ('Everyone he's slept with is sleeping with you'), some of the responses included 'All the males just want to sleep with you as a woman,' and 'All men want to romance women'. The picture next to the text message did not help them to understanding the text. Respondents interpreted these independently from one another and their interpretations were based on something familiar to them, for example, a roll-on (deodorant), which they know is used for armpits. This was related to something secretive and therefore the interpretation of secret lovers. Most of the respondents understood the message on Billboard C ('No pressure').

Their attempt to understand was based on their personal experiences. Some of them indicated that they were sexually active and when they looked at the visuals, they saw naked bodies and made the connection to sex, which is something they have done. For example, one respondent said that 'this is something I have done before so I understood.'

Generally, the respondents learnt something from the billboard messages. The lessons that respondents took away differ, depending on whether the respondents are from a rural or an urban/semi-urban area. For example when asked what have they learnt from the billboards, their responses were:

'Concerning sex, I have not learnt anything' -rural respondent

' ... if you are not married, you must use a condom when having sex' -urban respondent

Respondents from the urban area understood the messages better than rural respondents, who struggled to understand English. For example, a respondent from the urban area indicated that 'We have learnt that we must use a condom and we should not rush into sex and talk to parents about sex,' which is almost

exactly the message that loveLife is trying to communicate. A rural respondent said that 'even though it is difficult to talk about sex with our parents, we have learnt that we should talk to our parents about sex,'

In both the urban/semi-urban and rural areas, there were respondents who indicated that they did not learn anything. The reason for this, amongst others, was that in most cases some of them were not aware of loveLife or these billboards.

### ***Differences between urban/semi-urban and rural respondents in KwaZulu-Natal***

While the urban participants responded to many questions during the interviews, most of the time there was no response from the rural participants.

The responses of urban participants were interesting because they also mentioned the involvement of parents when talking about sex and sexuality issues. Talking to parents about sex was not a popular concept with the rural group. The rural participants were also shy about discussing some of the topics around sexuality brought up by the research while urban respondents were open and seemed to be interested in the topics.

From the responses of urban participants, it is evident that they are familiar with sex and sexual activity. Most of their interpretations indicated that they thought that the billboards were merely about sex. They thought that the billboards were about events either before or after having sex. This shows knowledge of what goes on before and after having sex. They obtained this knowledge from various sources; for some, it was from personal experiences while some respondents in the rural areas idealised and romanticised billboards.

#### 4.4.1.2 LIMPOPO (MUKOMAWABANI AND SIBISA -THOHOYANDOU)

##### *Similarities between urban/semi-urban and rural respondents in Limpopo*

Many participants in Limpopo had not seen these billboards before. However, when they saw them during the research study, they indicated that the first thing the billboards made them to think of is sex. In fact, some indicated that the billboards encourage sex. I quote 'loveLife is encouraging sex' –urban respondent. Some indicated that the billboards warn against 'having unprotected sex' and that the billboards are also encourage them to use condoms for example, 'Sex is a good thing but when you do it you should use protection'-urban respondent. These respondents tended however to be older than others and most of them indicated that they had come across loveLife material elsewhere, outside their communities.

There was an understanding of the importance of condom usage and the risk of contracting HIV during unprotected sex. However, this is not solely based on the encounter with these billboards. Some respondents has heard of the loveLife campaign in other media like radio, TV and magazines.

Based on my observation, there were obvious cultural differences between the urban and rural participants. The urban respondents felt that there had been a change from a 'traditional' culture to a culture where blacks and whites can be involved in romantic relationships, which, they say, was never allowed before in their cultures. For example, 'Billboard C shows that there is an understanding and good relationship between blacks and whites.'

Misunderstanding also has its roots within cultural observance. This means that culture still influences the ability to understand the intended message. For example, those who are not allowed to talk about sex or are not comfortable

doing so because of cultural backgrounds were unlikely to understand the meanings.

### ***Differences between urban/semi-urban and rural respondents in Limpopo***

There were also differences between rural and urban respondents in Limpopo. Most rural participants had never had any direct experience with loveLife or its materia; they had only heard about loveLife somewhere (on the radio or TV), so it was difficult to get any response from them. Urban participants had a better understanding of loveLife, even though they were unfamiliar with the billboards. This was attributed to the fact that they talked about loveLife at school, they read magazines, watched TV, etc. They were also more open than rural respondents when talking about sex.

There was a fair understanding of the verbal text on the billboards by urban respondents while the rural respondents showed no comprehension what so ever.

There were some differences between urban and rural participants in terms of cultural observance. The rural participants were more explicit about the impact of culture on their abilities and openness when talking about sex or relationships. For example a general finding is that in the Venda, Xhosa and Zulu cultures, the fact that a woman has slept with a number of men before marriage is taken into account and this is generally expressed in most rural communities as a concern based on culture. The urban respondents, on the other hand, did not expressly mention this as a concern in the interviews. This difference between rural and urban respondents on the same issue is influenced by cultural background. Explaining what Billboard A meant, one rural respondent said for instance ‘You must talk before having sex because at the end of the day no man wants to marry a woman who’s been having sex all her life.’ This response is influenced by the values that are still preserved within her culture.



In the rural areas, some participants did not express any lessons learnt because they had never seen the billboards and those in urban areas felt that they did not learn anything because they learnt more about loveLife and messages in other loveLife campaigns than the billboards.

#### **4.4.1.3 WESTERN CAPE (KWALANGA AND BONTEHEUWEL)**

##### ***Similarities between urban and semi-urban respondents in the Western Cape***

In both semi-urban and urban participants, sex is the primary idea that comes into mind when they interact with these billboards, especially those in the township. The central idea of practising safe sex by using condom was fairly well understood because there is a condom visible on Billboard A. Whether they have had sex or not, they seemed to understand the basic objective of Billboard B, which is not putting pressure on one's partner. However, they were not sure whether this billboard was about before or after having sex; again there was an emphasis on sex.

The text on Billboard A ('One roll-on all women want') is a difficult message for most of the respondents in this province, both from semi-urban and urban areas. The complexity of the language made it difficult for most participants to understand. Only one participant from the urban area understood it, and it was confirmed that she attended one of the best schools in Cape Town. For example when asked what it means the response was:

'if you have sex once, you will always want it' –semi urban respondent

'once you use it, all girls want to use it' –semi urban respondent

'they just want a man to put one roll-on' - urban respondent

'all women want safe sex' - urban respondent

On the texts on billboards B and C, the respondents indicated general comprehension. Most respondents could indicate that billboard B involves a discussion about sex.

While some of the participants understood the basic meanings of the messages, there were those who showed no comprehension, from both urban and semi-urban areas. Based on observations, respondents from both groups found it easier to guess what the visual message was than to read and understand what the verbal messages meant.

### ***Differences between urban and semi-urban respondents in the Western Cape***

While there were similarities, some differences were also observed between respondents. The differences between urban and semi-urban participants in understanding the billboards were not significant. This could be attributed to the fact that, geographically, urban and semi-urban participants do not live far from each other (Bonteheuwel and kwaLanga are within 10 kilometres of each other). Their understanding of the billboards was limited but better compared to that of rural respondents in other provinces. This was attributed to the fact that there is a Y-centre in kwaLanga and therefore loveLife is known there, even though there was a lack of understanding of its messages as communicated on the billboards.

There seems to be a greater awareness amongst urban respondents about use of condom for contraception and avoiding HIV/AIDS than amongst the rural respondents.

#### **4.4.2 Interface between text and picture**

Respondents were asked whether there was a difference between looking at the text or picture independently and looking at the two together. The objective of this

question was to establish whether the respondents' interpretation of the billboards differed when they first read visual or verbal signs or when they read both codes at the same time. This was to determine whether participants would be likely to interpret the billboard without reading the text message because of its complexity. The following responses indicated that participants looked at the pictures before the text:

'I first looked at the picture because I saw that they were doing it' – rural participant in Mvundlweni

'I looked at the picture and I was like, *hawu*, this is something I saw on TV, why are they doing this? My mother then told me what was happening' – semi-urban participant in uMlazi

People interact differently with visual and verbal signs (Fiske 1990). This was confirmed in this study. Participants related better to visual than to the verbal signs alone probably they did not understand the verbal codes. Participants looked at the visual image first. The meaning they created was based on the visual signs. Only then did they read the verbal sign. Even if they did not understand the verbal, they still attribute meaning to the billboard based on the visual image only.

There was no major variation between urban/semi-urban and rural participants regarding this observation. The respondents were asked to explain what they understood to be the meaning of the billboards based on the images only. The following responses were relevant:

'I would think that billboard B is encouraging me to have sex using a condom and that it's enjoyable because these people look like they are enjoying' – urban participant in Venda

‘Billboard B, they are saying that sex is a good thing and enjoyable, which is wrong because many will be doing it without a condom and then die of Aids’ – urban participant in Venda

The picture on Billboard A was mostly positively interpreted, probably because it shows a condom. The participants were able to conceptualise the billboard as talking about sex or condom usage. This confirms the discussion above on the interaction between visual and verbal signs. A reasonable conclusion could be drawn here that, for loveLife, this is a shift in the right direction, in response to criticism that condom usage was not explicit in their previous phase of the campaign. However, it is worth noting that there is not a clear understanding amongst all the respondents of the billboard’s message. Some participants believed that the visual signs here signify that it is acceptable to have sex and that is encouraged, as long as they used condoms.

When respondents from rural Venda were asked to look at the text alone in order to determine the level of language complexity, they did not fare very well. Only very few could respond because most of them did not understand the language. This confirms what Fiske (1990) noted, that ‘words are just symbols that do not have an obvious connection to the ideas they represent’ and that ‘the connection of idea is a matter of conventions or agreements.’ Our understanding depends on our knowledge and understanding of a language we learn through education and association and informed by culture (Delate, 2001).

None of the participants in any of the provinces was sure of the meaning of the billboards, whether they looked at the images and text independently or together. About 85 per cent of urban participants understood Billboard B (‘No pressure’) and about 52 per cent of rural participants understood this billboard. All participants felt that the verbal signs were too complicated.

#### 4.4.3 Overall understanding of the messages

The participants were asked what their understanding of each billboard was when looking at both the picture and the text. The responses were then compared to the message that loveLife intended to communicate with each billboard. This question was important because it looked at respondents' abilities to decode the message encoded in the text by both visual and verbal signs.

##### ***Billboard A: 'One roll-on all women want'***

According to loveLife (2002), this billboard is about 'protection, condom usage, shared responsibility, communication' and portrays a condom as 'a love device, normal, and natural and anticipates enhanced sexual experience'. It shows a woman in control of a sexual situation and shows a non-coercive situation. The majority of urban/semi-urban participants had a better idea of the intended message compared to rural participants.

##### ***Billboard B: 'No pressure'***

According to loveLife (2002), this billboard is about 'peer pressure, coercion and violence. It shows a loving couple relaxed in each other's company, but in a sensuous setting. It is about being in control of your relationships. It promotes understanding of one's partner and that sex should not be the basis of a loving relationship.' About 65 per cent of urban/ semi-urban participants and about 22 per cent of rural participants could decode the intended meaning of this billboard to some degree and the rest did not understand the billboard at all.

##### ***Billboard C: 'Everyone he's slept with is sleeping with you'***

According to loveLife (2002), this billboard is about the 'reduction in the number of partners, casual sex, commercial sex, lack of knowledge, risky situations, and

non-consensual sex.’ It personalises the risk that your partner may have a history of sexual behaviour that you are not aware of and that is what puts you at risk. Even though many urban/semi-urban participants did not understand this billboard, they had a better idea of the intended message compared to those in rural areas.

The definition of literacy states that literacy is somebody’s ability to read and understand, to write and interact. ‘To be illiterate is to be outside the print culture and by definition, disadvantaged; the literate can both read and write, decode messages from others and encode his/her own’ (Bhola, 1990). Being able to read the text does not imply understanding of the billboard messages.

This argument was evident for Billboard C (‘Everyone he’s slept with is sleeping with you’): most participants were able to read the text but did not understand the meaning. This was not the case with Billboard B (‘No pressure’), where most of them were able to perceive something close to the intended message. This could be attributed to the fact that most of the participants, especially in the rural areas, had never seen the billboards before and the level of engagement with the billboards was very low. Bhola (1990) states that in print media, one must acquire a basic level of skills in breaking the codes. The use of English language instead of a mother tongue and the sometimes ambiguous language used on the billboards made it difficult for those who were not equipped with those skills to understand the codes.

#### **4.4.4 Levels of understanding**

The analysis regarding comprehension is concluded by an attempt to organise comprehension according to different levels. When considering the intended objectives of the billboards as discussed above, different levels of understanding could be full understanding; selective (partial) understanding; no understanding, misunderstanding or dangerous understanding.

Full understanding refers to respondents understanding the precise meaning of the billboard messages. Misunderstanding or no understanding or dangerous understanding refers to respondents not understanding the precise meaning of the billboard messages. Their misunderstanding at times can be dangerous in the sense that they perceive the message to be teaching them something that would be dangerous to their lives. Selective (partial) understanding does not refer to an absolute misunderstanding or no understanding of the billboard messages, but to a partly incomplete understanding of the intended meaning. A discussion of the achievement of these levels among respondents follows. The intended meanings of the three billboards are discussed above and used as a measure of understanding.

### ***Full understanding***

Amongst the respondents in this study, there were those who fully understood the meanings of these billboards, as demonstrated by the following responses:

Billboard A: 'It shows us that we must use a condom' – rural participant Mvundlweni

Billboard B: 'They respect each other' – rural participant in Mvundlweni  
'They must not put pressure on each other' – rural participant in Mvundlweni

Billboard C: 'If somebody has sex with two people he could have HIV' – urban participant in Thohoyandou

### ***Selective (partial) understanding***

Many respondents partially understood the meanings, especially those in the urban/semi-urban areas, as demonstrated by the following responses:

Billboard A: 'Okay, on this billboard that shows a condom on the girl's hand, it seems like this guy is telling the girl they should have unprotected sex. If he wasn't, the condom would not be on the girl's hand. Not using a condom nowadays is a very bad idea, this world is upside down with all this diseases which is why I am saying that sex shouldn't be rushed into. It has its right time so when we involve ourselves in sex we should be ready' – rural participant in Venda

Billboard B: 'I think it says that if you are still young you must not have sex' – semi-urban participant in uMlazi

Billboard C: 'He does not want to die alone, he is not using a condom' – semi-urban participant in kwaLanga

'On board C, they are showing what loveLife talks about, so when I look at this board I think oh, so this is how people have sex and it looks like it feels nice, but then again I don't think it's good because it's unprotected' – urban participant in Thohoyandou

Billboard C is intended to discourage multiple partners, and it is dangerous to interpret it as the latter respondent did. However, it must be acknowledged that the respondent is aware of the fact that it might be unprotected and that is not right.



### ***Misunderstanding, no understanding and dangerous misunderstanding***

Some respondents misunderstood the messages or did not understand them at all. At times, their misunderstandings were dangerous, as demonstrated by the following response from a rural participant in Mvundlweni to Billboard A: 'All women should have secret lovers on the sides.'

Though many respondents fully or partially understood Billboard B, there were also those who did not understand or misunderstood it, as demonstrated by the following response: 'I think they have finished having sex' (urban participant Bonteheuwel). This is a misunderstanding in the sense that the billboard is not meant to demonstrate whether or not they have finished having sex, but to send a message about people putting pressure on each other in a relationship, including pressure to have sex when a partner is not ready.

One response to Billboard C illustrates a dangerous misunderstanding of the billboard message: 'On board C, I see a guy and a girl freely enjoying their friendship' (rural participant in Venda). The picture has nothing to do with happy friendship.

#### **4.4.5 The impact of culture on understanding**

The respondents were asked questions about whether they thought that their culture influences their understanding of the loveLife billboards. These questions were asked in order to establish whether culture impacts on the understanding of messages and whether there was a difference in this regard between rural and urban/semi-urban respondents.

When asked if they thought that their culture had anything to do with their understanding of billboard messages, respondents made the following comments:

‘Yes, because when we grew up we were not allowed to look at stuff like these (pointing at the billboards) and we got used to that. For example, when I saw any picture of naked people or relaxing like that I would look away in shame and now it has become a well known topic and it’s harder to get used to it just like that and it is harder to understand because of that.’ (Rural respondents from Limpopo)

‘Yes, because in the olden days guys and girls had a particular age wherein they were allowed to get married and only then could they start having sex, it wasn’t like it is nowadays.’ (Urban respondents from KwaZulu Natal)

‘When I look at it now I think our parents are to blame because they didn’t even tell us about the changes in our bodies when we grew up, we didn’t even know a thing about menstruation and if they can’t talk about something that natural talking about sex is out of the question.’ (Rural respondents from Rural Limpopo)

it seems that culture does influence respondents’ understanding of the billboards messages. This is observed especially within the rural respondents. When asked whether they thought that loveLife would be allowed to put up these billboards around in their rural areas, one respondent in rural Venda stated:

‘Yes, as long as they explain to the chief and the elders what is going on and it would be easier if they were written in Tshivenda’- respondent from rural Venda

Our cultural experiences have an impact on the way we understand things. In rural areas, there is a high level of discomfort when talking about sex. Some parents still don’t talk to their children about sex and issues involving sex and some children are not comfortable talking to their parents about sex either. This

is because of the socio-cultural context in certain societies. The lack of conversation and exchanging of views about sex limits the possibility of conveying the intended meaning of the billboards. It is possible that the parents don't understand the meaning of the billboards themselves. The situation might be worse in rural areas where some of the parents are not literate themselves.

While there was a low level of discomfort among the urban/semi-urban respondents with regard to talking about sex, the cultural difference between urban/semi-urban and rural participants was pronounced. For urban/semi-urban respondents, cultural issues were not indicated as an important factor that contributed to the lack of understanding of the messages. This is only in terms of traditional culture that is shaped by our customs and traditions taking into account that urban areas also have culture that is influenced by western way.

The urban culture also has a significant role it plays. In this culture respondents have more exposure to sexual matters. This also influenced responses from the respondents.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

In KwaZulu Natal, the rural and some urban respondents found the billboards difficult to understand. Urban respondents indicated that the TV exposure helped to understand the billboards. The rural respondents indicated that they have learnt little from the billboards, whereas urban respondents mentioned that they have learnt to use a condom and that they should talk to their parents. Both rural and urban respondents refer to the language used and recommended either the use of Zulu or simpler language.

In Limpopo, the rural respondents indicated a lack of understanding and ascribed it to their lack of knowledge about sexual matters. The one urban respondent whose response was recorded ironically claims understanding but does not.

Urban respondents managed to grasp most of the message content while most disturbing lessons were learnt by rural respondent. “anyone who is not circumcised can have sex with anyone he wants”. Requests to change the language to a local language was also made.

In Western Cape, all respondents indicated a relative ease in understanding the billboards while they were contradicted by others. The semi-urban learnt basic lessons like use of condom, no forced sex or multiple partners, while urban respondents showed a deeper understanding. All respondents asked for simpler and a variety of languages and clearer visuals,

#### **4.6 Summary**

This chapter has discussed the findings of the study. It has discussed and summarised the research findings within categories, specifically looking at the questions in the interviews that focus on meaning, interpretation and the understanding of the billboards. This chapter has drawn differences and similarities between rural and urban respondents in all three provinces.

The next chapter further discusses the findings in relation to the assumptions made based on the literature review and concludes the study.

## 5 CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Introduction

This final chapter integrates the research findings with the literature and the previous studies. It does this by focusing on each sub-question of the research question in order to answer the main research question and finally makes recommendations.

### 5.2 Answers to the research questions

#### **How can semiotics be used to determine the way in which the multicultural South African youth interpret the loveLife billboards?**

The study found that both rural and urban/semi-urban participants showed a limited understanding of the meanings of the billboards. The fact that participants could not successfully decode the visual and verbal signs as intended led them to make the connection between loveLife, as a brand, and sex or love. The first thing that comes into their minds when they see loveLife is therefore sex or love. This recognition of the loveLife brand influenced the way they interpreted the messages.

Semiotics again proved to be a suitable theory according to which 'we can develop an understanding of branding and messaging through determining interpretation by the reader' (Delate, 2001). For effective communication to take place, messages need to be created from signs which stimulate the generation of meaning that relates to the meaning generated in the message in the first place (Fiske, 1990). Semiotics helps us to understand the importance of signs and that such signs are derived from the shared experience (conventions) of members of a particular culture. This implies that it is only through sharing of the same codes and using the sign systems that the two meanings generated will approximate one another. If the principle of sense making as explained by semiotics is taken

into account when these messages are designed, understanding of the billboards could improve.

### **How are certain loveLife billboards interpreted by a variety of South African youths?**

The study found that, despite a general awareness that loveLife brand connotes sex and many different meanings were attributed to the loveLife billboards. The variety of interpretation was the result of different factors: (1) the language barrier, especially for rural participants (complexity of language as indicated above). The language was not simple enough for the target group to decode. (2) Limited exposure to sophisticated media-like lifestyle represented on the billboards. (3) Limited exposure to these billboards, especially in rural areas, and exposure to other loveLife programmes (such as radio, TV, loveLife games, etc.). (4) Relationship between verbal and visual sign

The study found that the general interpretation of the meaning of the loveLife billboards is that they are about sex, love. There is also some level of awareness about safe sex and HIV/Aids prevention. The findings of this study, however, could not establish whether this can be attributed to the loveLife programme or to interventions by other campaigns, like Soul City etc. The fact is that the billboards are not just about safe sex or just sex (and do not simply promote sex, as some respondents believe they do). According to loveLife, the messages are more focused than this (see discussion in Chapter Three). In general the study indicates that most of the respondents do not understand the meaning of the message as intended by the loveLife producers

As Delate's (2001) this study also found that there is a significant difference between an awareness of the brand and the understanding of the billboards (Delate, 2001). The loveLife billboards contextualised the message and lead the respondents to interpret the message according to the way they understand the

loveLife brand e.g. sex, love and safe sex. This did not lead to an understanding of the billboards, but actually often resulted in a misunderstanding of what the specific message of the different billboards are.

### **Are the billboards successful – is the message communicated by the billboards having the effect desired by loveLife?**

loveLife messages affect different groups of young people differently. The effect depends on a number of factors, including some discussed in this study, namely the age and level of education of the target audience, literacy level, level of maturity, experience, cultural influence and other socio-economic factors which determine accessibility to the loveLife programme.

loveLife's primary goal is to reduce the rate of HIV infection amongst 15- to 20-year-olds in the next five years by 50 per cent. Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that with its 'comprehensive multimedia communication strategy', loveLife may have made some contribution to the awareness of HIV/Aids and safe sex. This contribution is however considerably lower in rural/semi-urban areas due to less exposure to loveLife campaign. The study could not determine what effect the billboards as such had. Given the fact that the billboards were in most cases not correctly interpreted and that respondents referred to the billboards as part of the loveLife programme that they had seen or heard about elsewhere, the conclusion is that the impact of the billboards as such is very low.

### **How do the cultural and social contexts of the selected youth groups impact on their interpretation of the loveLife billboards?**

The study found that cultural and social context do have an impact on the interpretation of the billboards. Cultural influences affected participants from rural areas differently to those in urban/semi-urban areas. Cultural and social contexts

play an important role in the respondents' interpretation of messages and therefore should be taken into account when designing a message. Those in rural areas indicated that, their culture prevents their parents from easily talking to them about love, safe sex and relationships. They are less knowledgeable about sexual matters and are more conservative regarding casual sexual relationships. For the billboards to be put up in the rural areas, for example, requests for approval from the traditional authority or community would have to be made, informed by the cultural context of an area. They also found it difficult to talk openly about the billboards. Respondents from urban area are open about sexual matters and willing to discuss (their) sexual behaviours. They also indicated that they talk to their parents about it.

Both respondents from rural and urban area found it difficult to relate with and understand the verbal sign in the billboards. The study also found that sub-cultures, informed by a specific social context, influence the way the target audience interprets the message. Young people have developed their own language that is used in specific geographic areas or by specific groups. The vocabulary used by the rural youth was different to that of the urban/semi-urban youth. This informed the context within which the billboards were interpreted by participants.



## **How can cultural sensitivity inform and influence the process of designing outdoor media?**

The findings suggest that cultural and social context must be taken into account when designing a message. This is in line with the theories as discussed in chapter 2 and collaborate with other studies. This requires the designers of messages to have a comprehensive understanding of the semiotic importance of the role of social convention in choosing the signs and codes of messages. An understanding of the diverse cultures of the target group of loveLife billboards is likely to improve the effectiveness of the messages. In this regard this study cautions producers to remember that the South African youth should not be seen as homogeneous audience.

### **5.3 Recommendations**

The following recommendations for the improvement of the billboards have been developed from these findings. Some of these were made by participants themselves.

- loveLife should simplify the billboards and the language.
- Where appropriate, loveLife should use the indigenous language.
- loveLife must involve youth from all sectors when designing its messages.
- loveLife must focus on rural youth as a priority.
- loveLife must take into account the socio-cultural and religious environments of the participants and strive to provide perceptions of alternative lifestyles that show firm connections with people's cultural environments and backgrounds.
- loveLife must understand the context in which people are living. Many people in South Africa live in extreme poverty. loveLife must, therefore, be involved in multidimensional strategies dealing with HIV/Aids and poverty alleviation.

- loveLife could team up with other organisations working for the same goal in order to share ideas and experiences of best practice. It is the combination of efforts that will make a difference.

#### **5.4 Limitations of the study**

The study had some limitations. The study did not look at whether awareness about safe sex and HIV/Aids is attributed to the loveLife billboards only and how much of an influence this campaign had compared to the programmes of other organisations. It also did not establish whether there is a difference in the interpretation of males and females within the target group, with specific reference to whether male participants find it easier to talk to their parents than female participants do. The grouping of the semi-urban and rural participants does not imply that these are homogeneous groups, but was done because of financial and time constraints. The study did not differentiate between youth of different ages within the target age group (12- to 17-year-olds) or at their school grades to determine their level of engagement with the billboards. These areas require further research work. Although the restricted sample of respondents in the study is too small to generalise the findings, the geographical spread of the respondents indicate that similar findings might be found in other geographical areas.

#### **5.5 Conclusion**

South Africa is a culturally diverse country. Development messages must cater appropriately for such diversity. The study has established that if there is no acknowledgement of the role that communication codes play in development messages aimed at a diverse target group, such as in South Africa, the development messages will not improve the target group's quality of life. The creators of the development messages should be informed of the importance of these factors so that they can better attain their communication goals. loveLife's

messages can be better communicated if the socio-cultural contexts of loveLife's target group are taken into account.

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## 5.6 Annexure: Interview Schedule

### Annexure A

#### Interview schedule

Mr. Thandisizwe Diko (MA Development Communication)

#### Research question

To what extent do the socio-cultural differences of South Africa's youth impact on the understanding of three of the LoveLife billboards?

#### Proposed interview schedule

##### Question 1

- 1.1 What is LoveLife?
- 1.2 About what is LoveLife?

##### Question 2

- 2 The research participants will be shown the pictures of the three billboards (attached) before asking the following questions
  - 2.1 Where have you seen these three pictures before?
  - 2.2 What made you notice the billboards when you first saw them?
  - 2.3 What came into your mind when you first saw these billboards?
    - 2.3.1 Billboard A
    - 2.3.2 Billboard B
    - 2.3.4 Billboard C
  - 2.4 What do the following words that you see on these bill boards mean to you?
    - 2.4.1 Billboard A: "One roll-on all women want"
    - 2.4.2 Billboard B: "No pressure"
    - 2.4.3 Billboard C: "Everyone he slept with is sleeping with you"

##### Question 3

- 3.1 What does theta-junction refer to?
- 3.2 What does theta-junction mean?

##### Question 4

- 4 What have you learnt from these billboards?/

##### Question 5

- 5 Can you think of anything that should be changed in these billboards?

##### Question 6



6 Do you find it difficult to understand these billboards?  
If yes why?

1.1.

1.2. **Question 7**

7 What do you think: Does LoveLife encourage sex or does it encourage us to abstain?



### Billboard A



### Billboard B



### Billboard C

