



Research Article

A Multimodal Discourse Interpretations of Selected HIV/AIDS Health Awareness Posters

Olowu Ayodeji* , Aminu Segun , Olugbenga Samson Tope

Department of Languages, Rufus Giwa Polytechnic, Owo, Nigeria

Abstract

This study examined Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) awareness posters through the lens of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), investigating how visual, textual, and spatial elements converge to communicate public health messages. Drawing on an established social semiotic framework, the research analysed seven purposively selected posters from diverse organisational contexts which include governmental health agencies, international NGOs, and community-based advocacy organisations to explore how colour, typography, imagery, and layout interact to construct meaning and potentially influence audience perception. The analysis revealed that effective HIV/AIDS posters employed strategic combinations of semiotic resources to challenge stigma, promote testing, and encourage behavioural change. Findings indicate that the interplay between visual metaphors and linguistic choices significantly shaped message reception, with culturally resonant imagery and empowering narratives proving most semiotically effective. Three primary intersemiotic relationships were identified across the corpus: complementarity, elaboration, and tension. The most successful materials achieved complementarity, where visual and verbal modes reinforced one another coherently, while less effective materials exhibited modal tension. The study further demonstrated that typographic hierarchy, colour symbolism, especially the polysemic use of red and spatial organisation collectively function as meaning-making resources that extend well beyond aesthetic considerations. The AIDS ribbon emerged as a consistently deployed iconic symbol, accumulating layers of advocacy meaning across multiple posters. Conversely, materials that marked human bodies with disease nomenclature risked perpetuating the very stigmatising discourses they ostensibly sought to challenge. This multimodal approach offered valuable insights into health communication strategies, demonstrating how understanding the orchestration of multiple semiotic modes can enhance public health campaign effectiveness. The study contributes to both multimodal discourse theory and practical applications in health communication design, with implications extending to broader public health promotion contexts requiring sensitive, culturally appropriate, multimodal messaging.

Keywords

Multimodal Discourse Analysis, HIV/AIDS Posters, Health Communication, Visual Semiotics, Social Semiotics

*Correspondence: Olowu Ayodeji (olowuayodeji2015@gmail.com)

Received: 4 February 2026; **Accepted:** 21 February 2026; **Published:** 6 August 2026



Copyright: © The Author(s), 2026. Published by Science Publishing Group. This is an **Open Access** article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

1. Introduction

Public health campaigns have increasingly relied on visual communication to disseminate critical information about disease prevention and treatment [13, 15]. HIV/AIDS awareness posters represent a particularly significant genre within health communication, serving as frontline tools in global efforts to combat the epidemic [22]. These posters function not merely as information carriers but as complex multimodal texts that combine visual imagery, written language, colour schemes, and spatial arrangements to persuade, inform, and motivate target audiences [12].

The persistent challenge of HIV/AIDS education necessitates examination of how communication materials achieve their persuasive and informational goals. Traditional linguistic analysis alone proves insufficient for understanding poster effectiveness, as these artefacts inherently depend on the integration of multiple semiotic modes [10]. Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for investigating how different communicative resources work together to create meaning [12, 2]. This approach acknowledges that meaning-making in contemporary communication extends beyond written or spoken language to encompass visual, spatial, and gestural dimensions [25].

HIV/AIDS posters operate within complex social and cultural contexts marked by stigma, fear, misinformation, and evolving medical knowledge [23, 21]. The design choices embedded in these materials reflect assumptions about target audiences, cultural values, and communication strategies [24]. Understanding how these posters construct their messages through multimodal resources can inform more effective health communication practices and reveal underlying ideologies about disease, risk, and responsibility [7].

Although previous research has applied multimodal analysis to various health communication materials [18, 14], systematic investigation of how HIV/AIDS posters specifically employ intersemiotic relationships to construct empowering versus stigmatising discourses remains limited. Recent studies have examined digital health platforms [6] and social media health discourse [26], yet the foundational genre of printed health posters—particularly for HIV/AIDS—requires sustained analytical attention given their continued prominence in public health campaigns globally.

This study applies Multimodal Discourse Analysis to seven purposively selected HIV/AIDS awareness posters, examining how visual and verbal elements interact to construct meaning. The research investigates three primary questions: (1) How do HIV/AIDS posters utilise multiple semiotic modes to convey health messages? (2) What relationships exist between visual and textual elements in constructing persuasive narratives? (3) How do design choices reflect or challenge prevailing discourses surrounding HIV/AIDS? By analysing the interplay between typography, colour, imagery, layout, and linguistic content, this research seeks to illuminate the mechanisms

through which HIV/AIDS posters communicate complex health information and potentially influence public perception.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Multimodal Discourse Analysis: Theoretical Foundations

Multimodal Discourse Analysis emerged from social semiotics, challenging the traditional privileging of language as the primary meaning-making resource [12, 10]. Foundational work by Kress and van Leeuwen [12] established that all forms of communication involve multiple modes working in concert to produce meaning, with images possessing grammatical structures comparable to language. This theoretical perspective, further developed by van Leeuwen [25] and Bate-man [2], recognises that different modes possess distinct affordances and limitations, with certain modes proving more suitable for particular communicative functions. Critically, the social semiotic approach emphasises that semiotic choices are never neutral but reflect social power relations, cultural values, and ideological positions [24], providing robust analytical tools for examining complex visual texts like public health posters. This attention to the interaction between the verbal and the visual builds on Barthes' [1] earlier account of how linguistic messages can anchor or extend the meanings carried by an accompanying image.

2.2. Visual Communication in Public Health

Health communication research has increasingly recognised the significance of visual elements in conveying medical information and influencing health behaviours, with studies demonstrating that visual aids improve patient comprehension and recall, particularly among populations with limited literacy [27]. However, effectiveness depends on cultural appropriateness, clarity of representation, and alignment between images and intended messages [15]. Research on HIV/AIDS communication specifically reveals a historical trajectory from fear-based, stigmatising approaches toward empowering, human rights-oriented frameworks [21, 13]. This evolution reflects broader shifts in public health philosophy, emphasising agency, dignity, and community participation rather than moralistic judgement and victim-blaming narratives [22, 23].

2.3. Multimodal Analysis of Health Communication Materials

Recent scholarship has applied multimodal analytical frameworks to diverse health communication artefacts, demonstrating growing sophistication in these approaches.

Oyeboade and Unuabonah [14] analysed COVID-19 public health posters in Nigeria, revealing how visual metaphors, colour symbolism, and typographic choices combined to communicate urgency whilst navigating cultural sensitivities. Similarly, Nascimento and Bezerra [14] examined Brazilian sexual health campaigns, demonstrating how visual representations of diverse bodies challenged heteronormative assumptions through careful orchestration of gaze, framing, and compositional choices. Studies specifically addressing HIV/AIDS materials have expanded significantly, with Pham [20] applying multimodal critical discourse analysis to campaigns in Southeast Asia, revealing how poster designs reflected and reinforced particular ideologies about gender, sexuality, and social responsibility. Hiippala [9] analysed HIV prevention infographics, demonstrating how information architecture and visual hierarchy construct particular narratives about risk and agency. Collectively, this research demonstrates that multimodal analysis illuminates how health communication materials function as complex semiotic artefacts, with design choices carrying profound implications for how publics understand health issues and how affected communities experience recognition or marginalisation [5, 6].

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs qualitative multimodal discourse analysis to examine HIV/AIDS awareness posters as complex semiotic texts. The research adopts Kress and van Leeuwen's [12] framework for visual grammar, supplemented by van Leeuwen's [25] work on colour as semiotic mode and Bateman's [2] approach to spatial organisation. This framework enables systematic analysis of how visual, textual, and spatial resources interact to construct meaning within health communication materials.

3.2. Methodology and Corpus Selection

This study employs purposive sampling to select seven HIV/AIDS awareness posters for multimodal discourse analysis. The selection criteria prioritised posters that: (1) demonstrate varied semiotic approaches (photographic realism, symbolic representation, illustrative design), (2) target diverse audiences (general public, at-risk populations, specific demographic groups), (3) originate from different organisational contexts (governmental health agencies, international NGOs, community-based advocacy organisations), and (4) employ distinct rhetorical strategies (empowerment narratives, medical information dissemination, stigma confrontation, behavioural change promotion). Posters were sourced from publicly available health communication archives and organisational repositories, ensuring accessibility for analysis. This purposive selection strategy enables systematic comparison across

communicative approaches whilst acknowledging that findings derive from this specific corpus. The study does not claim statistical representativeness of all HIV/AIDS awareness materials; rather, it offers in-depth qualitative analysis of how diverse semiotic strategies operate within this genre. Generalisations should be understood as identifying potential patterns and mechanisms rather than universal characteristics of HIV/AIDS poster communication.

The analytical framework applies Kress and van Leeuwen's [12] grammar of visual design, systematically examining: (1) representational structures (narrative vs. conceptual representations, depicted participants, visual metaphors), (2) interactive dimensions (gaze, social distance, perspective, modality), and (3) compositional features (information value through spatial placement, salience through size and contrast, framing through visual boundaries). For each poster, the analysis proceeds through descriptive cataloguing of semiotic resources, examination of inter-modal relationships, and interpretation of potential meanings and ideological implications. Throughout, the analysis distinguishes between observable semiotic features (what is present in the text) and interpretive claims about meaning effects (how features might be understood), recognising that actual audience reception involves complex negotiations between textual affordances and reader resources.

It is important to note that this study analyses posters as texts-in-themselves, examining their semiotic construction and potential meaning affordances. The research does not include empirical audience reception studies, behavioural impact assessments, or cross-cultural interpretation analysis. Claims about 'effectiveness' refer to semiotic sophistication and alignment with established health communication principles rather than measured behavioural outcomes. Generalisations extend only to similar poster-based health communication materials employing comparable multimodal strategies, not to HIV/AIDS communication universally or to different media forms (video, digital interactive content, etc.).

By analysing the interplay between typography, colour, imagery, layout, and linguistic content, this research seeks to illuminate the mechanisms through which HIV/AIDS posters communicate complex health information and potentially influence public perception. The findings contribute to theoretical understanding of multimodal communication while offering practical insights for public health practitioners designing awareness campaigns.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

The analytical procedure followed a systematic three-stage process for each poster:

- 1) **Representational Analysis:** Examination of what is depicted (participants, objects, settings), how narrative or conceptual processes are represented, and what visual metaphors are employed.
- 2) **Interactive Analysis:** Investigation of how posters posi-

tion viewers through gaze direction, social distance (intimate, personal, social), perspective (eye-level, high, low angle), and modality markers (realism indicators).

- 3) Compositional Analysis: Evaluation of information value through spatial placement (left-right, top-bottom, centre-margin), salience through size and contrast, and framing through visual boundaries and colour use.

Following this systematic cataloguing of semiotic resources, intersemiotic relationships were examined. This shows how visual and verbal elements interact to create complementary, contradictory, or elaborative meanings. Finally, interpretive analysis considered potential ideological implications of design choices. It is however acknowledged that actual audience reception depends on viewers' cultural backgrounds, prior knowledge, and interpretive frameworks. These are factors beyond textual analysis.

3.4. Scope and Limitations

This study analyses posters as texts, examining their semiotic construction and potential meaning affordances. The research does not include empirical audience reception studies, behavioural impact assessments, or cross-cultural interpretation analysis. Claims about 'effectiveness' refer to semiotic sophistication and alignment with established health communication principles rather than measured behavioural outcomes. Generalisations extend to similar poster-based health communication materials employing comparable multimodal strategies, not to HIV/AIDS communication universally or to different media forms.

4. Data Analysis

This poster employs a stark visual metaphor that demands careful analysis. The composition centers on a dark-skinned figure in a vulnerable, crouched position against a black background, creating what Kress and van Leeuwen [12] term high modality through realistic photographic representation. The typography combines cursive script for "Black as" with bold, three-dimensional lettering for "AIDS" in red—a colour carrying multiple semiotic associations with danger, blood, and the iconic AIDS ribbon [11].

The spatial arrangement positions the text centrally over the human figure, creating an intersemiotic relationship where the body becomes literally marked by the disease name. This visual strategy reflects what van Leeuwen [25] identifies as symbolic attribution, where visual elements carry abstract meanings beyond their literal representation. The red horizontal line at the top functions as a framing device, drawing the eye downward through the composition [2].

From an interpretive perspective informed by critical discourse analysis, this poster's approach raises significant ideological concerns. The visual metaphor linking race directly to disease potentially reinforces stigmatising discourses that

Treichler [23] documented in her analysis of AIDS as an "epidemic of signification." Rather than challenging prevailing stigma, the design choices may inadvertently perpetuate associations between blackness and disease that have historically marginalised affected communities [13]. The vulnerable bodily positioning combined with the racial framing contradicts contemporary best practices emphasising empowerment rather than victimisation [21].

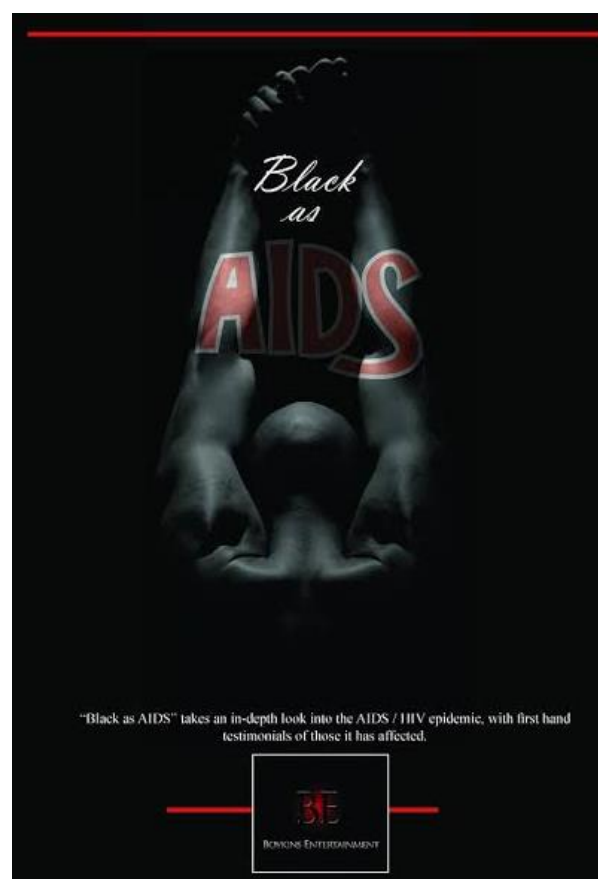


Figure 1. "Black as AIDS" (Poster 1).

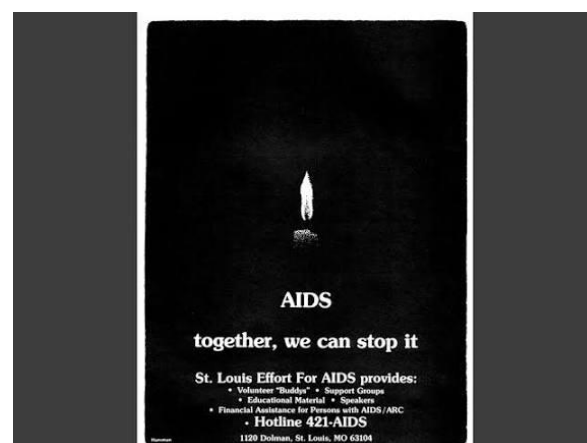


Figure 2. "Together, We Can Stop It" (Poster 2).

This poster demonstrates a minimalist approach to HIV/AIDS communication. The composition features a white candle flame against a black background, functioning as a powerful visual metaphor for hope, remembrance, and collective action. The stark contrast between light and dark creates what Kress and van Leeuwen [12] describe as salience through tonal differentiation, designed to draw viewer attention to the central symbolic element.

The typography employs white sans-serif font that supports legibility against the dark background while creating visual cohesion with the candle flame. The message "together, we can stop it" positions audiences as empowered agents capable of collective action, reflecting the shift toward more positive messaging that Stephenson and Jadhav [21] identified in contemporary HIV/AIDS communication. This representational strategy can be read as constructing viewers not as vulnerable victims but as active participants in disease prevention.

The spatial organization creates a clear reading path from the visual metaphor downward to the organizational information, demonstrating effective information hierarchy [2]. The inclusion of multiple service offerings—volunteer opportunities, support groups, educational material, and speakers—communicates what appears to be a comprehensive approach to HIV/AIDS response beyond simply providing medical information. This multimodal integration of visual symbolism with practical resources exemplifies how effective health communication combines emotional resonance with actionable information [27].



Figure 3. "World HIV/AIDS Day: A Look into Africa" (Poster 3).

This poster employs several powerful semiotic resources. The central image features clasped hands photographed in black and white, creating what Kress and van Leeuwen [12] term a demand picture through the direct gesture toward viewers. The monochromatic treatment of the hands contrasts sharply with the vibrant red AIDS ribbon, creating salience through colour modulation [11].

The clasped hands function as a visual metaphor for solidarity, support, and human connection—directly challenging the isolation and stigma historically associated with HIV/AIDS (though actual viewer interpretation depends on cultural context and prior knowledge) especially in Africa [22]. The deliberate desaturation of the photograph (a formal choice) focuses attention on human connection rather than individual identity, potentially avoiding the problematic racial associations present in Poster 1 while still acknowledging the disproportionate impact on African communities through the textual message.

The red ribbon serves as an instantly recognisable symbol carrying decades of advocacy history and meaning [22]. Its placement in the upper right creates visual balance while functioning as what van Leeuwen [25] describes as a symbolic attribute—an element carrying meaning beyond its literal representation..

The interactive element indicated by the hand cursor icon suggests digital engagement, reflecting how contemporary health communication extends beyond static posters to encompass participatory platforms (Djonov & van Leeuwen, 2018). This multimodal integration of traditional visual advocacy symbols with digital affordances demonstrates the evolution of HIV/AIDS communication in networked environments.

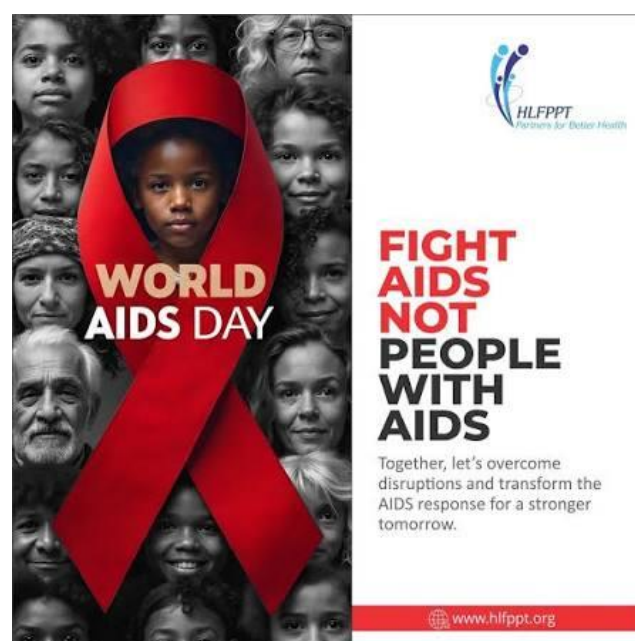


Figure 4. "Fight AIDS Not People with AIDS" (Poster 4).

This poster presents perhaps the most sophisticated multi-modal composition among the analysed materials. The background consists of a photographic collage featuring diverse faces—varying in age, gender, and ethnicity—all rendered in black and white. This visual strategy humanises those affected by HIV/AIDS while emphasizing the epidemic's universal reach across demographic boundaries [14].

The central red AIDS ribbon provides symbolic meaning and compositional focus. The vibrant colour creating maximum salience against the monochromatic background [11]. The ribbon's overlay upon the human faces creates intersemiotic meaning where the symbol and the people become visually integrated, suggesting that AIDS awareness must center on human dignity and rights rather than abstracted medical discourse [5].

The typography employs a clear hierarchy with "WORLD AIDS DAY" in bold text, followed by the powerful imperative statement "FIGHT AIDS NOT PEOPLE WITH AIDS." This linguistic choice directly confronts stigma and discrimination, positioning the disease and not the individuals affected, as the appropriate target of public health efforts [20]. The message construction reflects what Stephenson and Jadhav [21] identify as a human rights framing that challenges the moralistic and punitive approaches characterising earlier AIDS communication.

The tagline creates further empowerment: the phrase positions collective action as central to effective response, aligning with contemporary public health messaging emphasising community solidarity and systemic transformation rather than individual blame [15]. The organizational branding maintains visibility without overwhelming the human-centered message, demonstrating effective balance between institutional presence and advocacy goals—though empirical audience research would be needed to confirm reception.

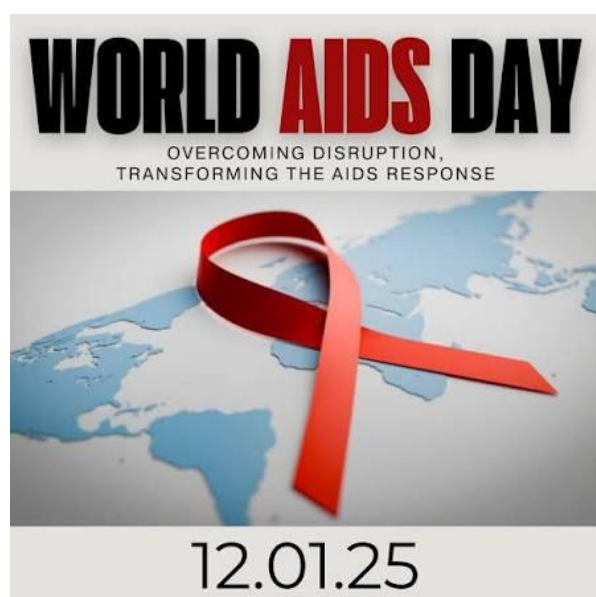


Figure 5. "World AIDS Day: Overcoming Disruption" (Poster 5).

This poster employs global visual metaphors to communicate the pandemic's worldwide scope. The central image features a three-dimensional red ribbon positioned over a world map rendered in blue tones, creating clear symbolic representation of HIV/AIDS as a global health challenge. And indeed, no continent of the world is free from this pandemic. The ribbon's dimensional rendering provides depth and materiality, making the symbol more visually prominent [12].

The typography demonstrates clear information hierarchy with "WORLD AIDS DAY" split between black and red colouring, drawing attention to "AIDS" through colour contrast [2]. The subtitle frames the challenge through the lens of resilience and transformation rather than crisis and fear, reflecting the evolution toward more hopeful messaging in HIV/AIDS communication [13].

The inclusion of a specific date (12.01.25) provides temporal specificity while the clean, minimalist design enhances accessibility across diverse audiences. The light background creates high contrast with the text, enhancing readability. This is an important consideration for health materials intended for populations with varying literacy levels [4]. The spatial organization guides the viewer's eye from the event identification through the visual symbolism to the specific date, creating a logical reading path that combines awareness-raising with actionable information about when engagement can occur.

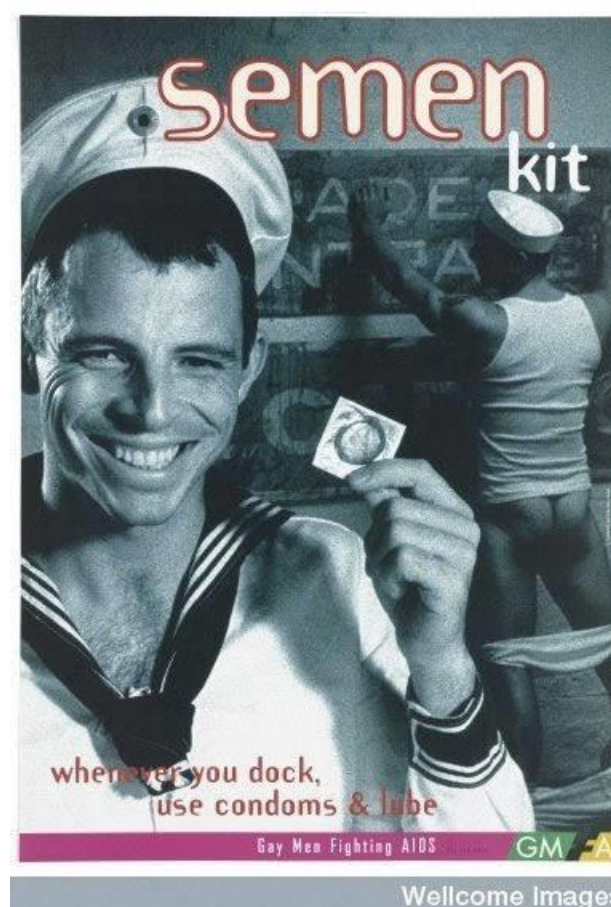


Figure 6. "Semen Kit" (Poster 6).

This poster represents a targeted approach to specific at-risk populations, specifically addressing men who have sex with men (MSM). The visual composition features a smiling sailor holding a condom, with background imagery showing intimate male contact. This direct representation of same-sex relationships challenges the heteronormative assumptions that Nascimento and Bezerra [14] identified as common in sexual health communication.

The typography playfully integrates "semen" and "kit" through creative spacing and layout, using wordplay to address a serious health topic while maintaining engagement. The tagline employs frank, colloquial language that acknowledges actual sexual practices without euphemism or 'medicalised' terminology. This linguistic choice reflects research showing that effective sexual health communication must speak directly to audience experiences using language communities actually employ [26].

The nautical imagery carries cultural coding related to masculinity and maritime tradition while simultaneously acknowledging that sailors, as mobile populations, face particular HIV vulnerability. However, the poster's visual representation also raises questions about stereotyping through its reliance on specific cultural imagery to represent gay male sexuality. The composition demonstrates the challenge of creating targeted messaging that acknowledges community-specific risks without reinforcing limiting stereotypes [20].

The attribution to "Gay Men Fighting AIDS" establishes source credibility within the community being addressed, reflecting the importance of community-based organizations in HIV/AIDS prevention [22]. This organizational positioning creates trust through insider status while the Wellcome Images attribution suggests institutional support and legitimacy.

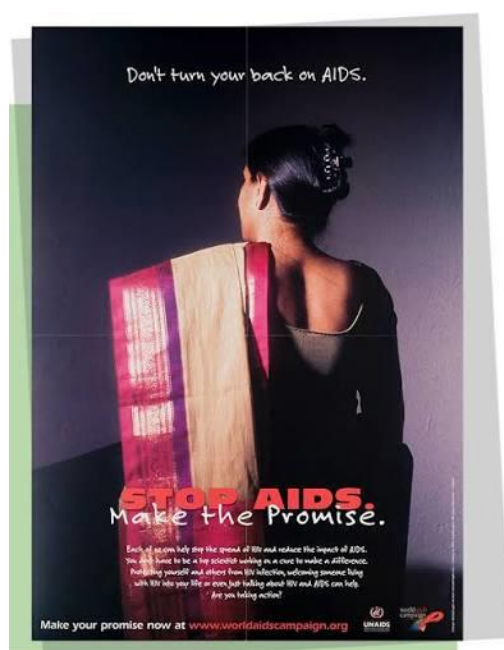


Figure 7. "Don't Turn Your Back on AIDS" (Poster 7).

This poster employs a powerful visual metaphor through its central image: a figure shown from behind, literally turning their back to the viewer. The composition creates what Kress and van Leeuwen [12] describe as an offer picture, where the subject does not engage directly with the viewer but presents a situation for contemplation. The turned back becomes a visual representation of denial, avoidance, and the social abandonment of those affected by HIV/AIDS. But in this case, the blame is on those who turn their back on people suffering from HIV/AIDS. This poster ultimately condemns such action. This is common in African settings where the whole family members turn their backs on anyone who contacts and suffers from HIV/AIDS in the family.

The colour palette combines dark tones with pink highlighting on what appears to be informational material, creating visual interest while directing attention to the prevention message. The typography employs handwritten-style font for "Don't turn your back on AIDS," creating a personal, intimate tone that contrasts with institutional health messaging [9].

The phrase "Make the Promise" positioned prominently in the lower composition transforms the poster from simple awareness-raising to a call for committed action. This linguistic framing constructs viewers as moral agents capable of making and keeping promises, positioning HIV/AIDS response as an ethical obligation rather than merely a health concern [5]. The inference is to commit viewers into promising never to turn their backs on sufferers of HIV/AIDS. The detailed body text provides specific behavioural guidance while acknowledging the reality of living with HIV, demonstrating the integration of medical information with human dignity frameworks.

The organizational attribution to the World AIDS Campaign establishes global scope while the URL provides a pathway for continued engagement beyond the poster itself. This multimodal integration of visual metaphor, persuasive language, practical information, and digital connectivity demonstrates sophisticated understanding of how multiple semiotic resources must work together to achieve communication goals [3].

4.1. Findings and Analysis

This section presents findings organised according to the three research questions, analysing each poster systematically before synthesising patterns across the corpus.

4.1.1. Research Question 1: Utilisation of Multiple Semiotic Modes

The first research question investigates how HIV/AIDS posters utilise multiple semiotic modes to convey health messages. Analysis reveals systematic deployment of visual, textual, chromatic, and spatial resources across all seven posters.

(i). Figure 1: "Black as AIDS"

This poster employs photographic realism (high modality) featuring a dark-skinned figure in vulnerable positioning

against black background. Typography combines cursive script for 'Black as' with bold three-dimensional lettering for 'AIDS' in red—a colour carrying associations with danger, blood, and the AIDS ribbon. Spatial arrangement positions text centrally over the human figure, creating symbolic attribution where the body becomes marked by disease nomenclature. The red horizontal line functions as framing device, directing visual attention downward through the composition.

(ii). Figure 2: "Together, We Can Stop It"

This poster demonstrates minimalist approach featuring white candle flame against black background—a visual metaphor for hope and collective action. Stark tonal contrast creates salience, drawing attention to the central symbolic element. Typography employs white sans-serif font maintaining legibility whilst creating visual cohesion with the flame. The spatial organisation establishes clear reading path from visual metaphor to organisational information.

(iii). Figure 3: "World HIV/AIDS Day: A Look into Africa"

Central image features clasped hands in black and white photography, creating demand picture through direct gesture. Monochromatic treatment contrasts with vibrant red AIDS ribbon, creating salience through colour modulation. The composition employs symbolic representation (hands as solidarity) whilst incorporating interactive digital affordances (cursor icon).

(iv). Figure 4: "Fight AIDS Not People with AIDS"

Photographic collage featuring diverse faces in black and white, humanising those affected whilst emphasising universal reach. Central red ribbon provides symbolic focus against monochromatic background. Typography employs clear hierarchy with imperative statement directly confronting stigma.

(v). Synthesis: Semiotic Mode Utilisation

Across all posters, visual modes dominate compositional space, with imagery serving as primary meaning-carrier. Colour operates symbolically, particularly red (danger, blood, AIDS ribbon) and black/white contrasts (seriousness, universality). Typography functions hierarchically, establishing information priority through size, weight, and colour. Spatial organisation creates reading paths directing viewer attention through strategic placement. The interplay demonstrates that HIV/AIDS poster communication depends fundamentally on orchestrated deployment of multiple semiotic resources working simultaneously.

4.1.2. Research Question 2: Visual-Textual Relationships

The second research question examines relationships between visual and textual elements in constructing persuasive

narratives. Analysis identifies three primary intersemiotic relationships: complementarity, elaboration, and tension.

Complementarity occurs when visual and verbal elements reinforce similar meanings. Poster 2 demonstrates this through alignment between candle flame (visual metaphor for hope) and verbal message 'Together, we can stop it' (collective empowerment). The modes work in concert, with neither redundant nor contradictory.

Elaboration appears when one mode provides specific information the other lacks. Poster 4's visual collage (diverse faces) elaborates the verbal imperative 'Fight AIDS Not People' by visually demonstrating the human diversity affected, whilst text provides explicit anti-stigma directive not immediately apparent from imagery alone.

Tension emerges in Poster 1, where empowering verbal message potentially contradicts vulnerable visual positioning and problematic racial framing. This modal contradiction may undermine intended message effectiveness, demonstrating that successful HIV/AIDS communication requires careful attention to intersemiotic alignment.

4.1.3. Research Question 3: Design Choices and Discourse

The third research question investigates how design choices reflect or challenge prevailing discourses surrounding HIV/AIDS. Analysis reveals both perpetuation and contestation of dominant narratives.

Challenging stigma: Posters 2 and 4 explicitly confront stigmatising discourses through empowering frameworks. Poster 4's imperative 'Fight AIDS Not People' directly repositions the disease rather than individuals as appropriate target, whilst diverse facial representation challenges marginalising visual conventions. These choices align with contemporary human rights approaches to HIV/AIDS communication.

Perpetuating problematic associations: From an interpretive perspective, Poster 1's direct linkage between racial identity and disease nomenclature risks reinforcing stigmatising associations historically used to marginalise affected communities. The vulnerable bodily positioning contradicts contemporary emphasis on empowerment and agency.

Representing diversity: Several posters (3, 4, 6) demonstrate intentional representation of diverse populations, challenging homogenising assumptions about HIV/AIDS. Poster 6's direct representation of same-sex relationships contests normative frameworks, whilst Poster 3's focus on Africa acknowledges disproportionate impact without stigmatising imagery.

This multimodal discourse analysis of seven HIV/AIDS awareness posters demonstrates that effective health communication requires sophisticated orchestration of multiple semiotic resources working in strategic integration. The analysis confirms that contemporary meaning-making extends beyond language to encompass visual, spatial, chromatic, and typographic dimensions that interact to construct complex messages. HIV/AIDS posters function not as simple information

carriers but as intricate multimodal texts where design choices shape how audiences understand disease, risk, identity, and appropriate response.

Posters demonstrate significant variation in navigating the complex challenges characterizing HIV/AIDS communication. The most effective materials employ empowering frameworks, construct audiences as capable agents, utilise culturally resonant symbolism whilst avoiding stereotyping, explicitly challenge stigma, represent diverse communities with dignity, create clear information hierarchies, and achieve intersemiotic complementarity between visual and verbal elements.

Conversely, less effective materials demonstrate modal contradictions where visual and verbal elements work at cross-purposes, potentially stigmatizing representations that mark bodies with disease, fear-based approaches emphasizing threat over agency, and insufficient attention to accessibility across diverse literacy levels. These problematic approaches highlight how health communication can inadvertently reproduce the very stigma, fear, and marginalization it ostensibly aims to combat when designers fail to critically examine the ideological implications of semiotic choices.

The analysis contributes to multimodal theory by demonstrating how the frameworks developed by Kress and van Leeuwen [12], Bateman [2], van Leeuwen [25], and subsequent scholars provide robust analytical tools for understanding complex visual health texts. The research extends existing multimodal scholarship on health communication [5, 9, 14, 16-18, 20] by providing detailed analysis of how specific design choices in HIV/AIDS materials construct meaning, invoke ideologies, and potentially influence public perception and behaviour.

Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for public health practitioners, graphic designers, and communication specialists developing HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns and by extension public health campaigns. Effective materials require moving beyond aesthetic considerations to understand how semiotic resources function grammatically, culturally, and ideologically. Designers must critically examine whether visual representations empower or victimize, whether linguistic framing constructs agency or passivity, whether colour symbolism activates intended associations, whether spatial organization creates accessible reading paths, and whether modal elements work in complementarity or contradiction.

The research also highlights the importance of cultural competence and community engagement in health communication design. Materials must resonate with specific cultural contexts, employ imagery and language communities recognize and value, and avoid reproducing stereotypes even when targeting particular demographic groups. The tension between acknowledging community-specific risks and avoiding stigmatizing representations requires careful navigation through participatory design processes involving affected communities in material development [22, 5].

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. This analysis

examined seven posters representing particular historical moments, geographic contexts, and communication strategies. Different materials from other regions, time periods, or target audiences might yield different findings. The analysis focused on static poster texts without examining actual audience reception, interpretation, or behavioural impacts. Future research employing reception studies, audience interviews, or behavioural outcome measures could complement this textual analysis by investigating how diverse audiences actually interpret and respond to these multimodal messages [15].

Additionally, the study analyzed posters as isolated texts rather than examining their function within broader communication campaigns or their interaction with other media platforms. As Djonov and van Leeuwen [6] demonstrate, contemporary health communication increasingly operates across multiple platforms where meanings emerge from intertextual and intermedial relationships. Future research could examine how poster materials interact with digital media, community organizing, clinical communication, and policy advocacy within comprehensive HIV/AIDS response strategies.

The evolution of HIV/AIDS communication from fear-based, stigmatizing approaches toward empowering, human rights-oriented frameworks demonstrates how health messaging both reflects and shapes cultural attitudes toward disease and affected communities. As medical advances transform HIV/AIDS from fatal diagnosis to manageable chronic condition, communication materials must evolve to emphasize testing, treatment adherence, viral suppression, and the possibility of living full lives with HIV. This requires moving beyond awareness-raising toward more sophisticated messaging addressing treatment literacy, stigma reduction, and health system navigation [21].

The multimodal perspective proves essential for understanding and improving HIV/AIDS communication because these materials inherently depend on integration of visual, verbal, spatial, and chromatic resources. Analyzing language alone provides insufficient understanding of how posters communicate; examining images without attending to typography, colour, and composition proves equally inadequate. Only through comprehensive multimodal analysis can researchers and practitioners understand the complex semiotic work these materials perform and design more effective health communication that achieves intended persuasive, informational, and empowering goals [3].

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that HIV/AIDS awareness posters represent sites where medical knowledge, cultural values, social power relations, design expertise, and advocacy goals converge to create meaning. The semiotic choices embedded in these materials—which colours to employ, which bodies to represent, which words to emphasize, which spatial organizations to create—carry profound implications for how publics understand HIV/AIDS, how affected communities experience recognition or marginalization, and how societies respond to ongoing epidemic challenges. Criti-

cal multimodal analysis illuminates these dimensions, contributing to more ethical, effective, and empowering health communication practices that honor the dignity and agency of all people while advancing crucial public health objectives.

The study's contribution extends beyond HIV/AIDS communication to broader health promotion contexts. The analytical frameworks and findings offer insights applicable to diverse health topics requiring sensitive, culturally appropriate, multimodal communication strategies. As visual communication becomes increasingly central to public health practice, understanding how multiple semiotic modes interact to construct meaning, shape attitudes, and potentially influence behaviours becomes essential for all health communication practitioners. This research provides both theoretical frameworks and practical insights advancing that crucial understanding, demonstrating how rigorous multimodal analysis can improve health communication effectiveness.

4.2. Synthesis and Implications

The multimodal analysis of these seven posters reveals significant variation in communication strategies, ideological positioning, and effectiveness. These posters demonstrate sophisticated orchestration of visual metaphors, empowering linguistic choices, and clear information architecture that Djonov and Zhao [6] identify as characteristic of effective health communication. These materials challenge stigma through dignified human representation, employ culturally resonant symbolism like the red ribbon, and construct audiences as empowered agents rather than passive victims.

Conversely, poster 1 demonstrates how design choices can inadvertently reinforce the very stigma they presumably aim to combat. The literal marking of black bodies with disease language perpetuates racialised associations that public health efforts should actively dismantle [23]. This poster significantly associates the disease with black coloured race. This finding underscores the importance of critically examining not just what health messages say, but how visual and linguistic elements combine to construct particular understandings of disease, risk, and identity [18].

The analysis confirms that effective HIV/AIDS posters require careful integration of multiple semiotic modes working in complementarity rather than contradiction. Colour symbolism, typographic hierarchy, visual metaphors, spatial organization, and linguistic framing must align to create coherent messages that inform, persuade, and empower audiences [28]. The red AIDS ribbon emerges across multiple posters as a powerful unifying symbol carrying decades of advocacy meaning, demonstrating how established visual codes can efficiently communicate complex ideas when properly deployed [22]. This red ribbon has over time become synonymous with HIV/AIDS.

These findings carry significant implications for public health practitioners designing awareness campaigns. Under-

standing how audiences interpret the interaction between visual and verbal elements enables more strategic communication design that achieves intended persuasive and informational goals while avoiding unintended stigmatisation [15]. The multimodal perspective advanced by Kress and van Leeuwen [12] and elaborated by subsequent scholars provides essential analytical tools for evaluating and improving health communication materials in an increasingly visual communication landscape.

4.3. Colour Symbolism and Emotional Resonance

Across the analysed posters, colour emerges as a primary semiotic resource carrying significant communicative weight. The ubiquitous use of red colour in the AIDS ribbon, typography, and highlighting creates what Kress and van Leeuwen [11] term "affective meaning" through cultural colour associations. Red simultaneously signifies danger, urgency, blood, passion, and solidarity, functioning as a polysemic symbol that operates differently depending on its compositional context and combination with other semiotic modes.

The strategic deployment of monochrome versus colour creates hierarchies of attention and meaning. Posters 3, 4, and 5 employ desaturated photography contrasted with vibrant red elements, directing viewer focus toward symbolic representations while de-emphasizing individual characteristics [2]. This chromatic strategy serves dual purposes: creating visual salience for key messages while potentially avoiding the problematic racial coding evident in Poster 1. The black-and-white treatment of human subjects emphasises shared humanity and collective experience rather than demographic difference, aligning with contemporary anti-stigma frameworks [5].

The darkness characterising several posters (particularly 1, 2, and 8) creates somber emotional tones consistent with the seriousness of the health threat. However, this tonal choice risks reinforcing associations between HIV/AIDS and death, fear, and hopelessness that characterised earlier panic-driven campaigns [13]. The tension between communicating appropriate seriousness and avoiding counterproductive fear appeals represents an ongoing challenge in HIV/AIDS communication that these materials navigate with varying success.

4.4. Typography as Meaning-Maker

Typographic choices across the posters reveal strategic decisions about authority, accessibility, and audience relationship. The prevalence of bold, sans-serif fonts (particularly in posters 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6) creates what van Leeuwen [25] identifies as "institutional voice". This is a typography that conveys authority, clarity, and official health communication. This contrasts markedly with the handwritten-style font in Poster 7, which creates intimacy and personal connection, positioning the message as coming from a concerned peer rather than an impersonal institution [9].

The capitalisation strategies employed across posters merit attention. Full capitalisation in "WORLD AIDS DAY" and "FIGHT AIDS NOT PEOPLE WITH AIDS" (Poster 5) creates visual emphasis while conveying urgency and importance through what Bateman [2] terms "typographic loudness." This capitalisation strategy serves to amplify key messages within the overall composition, ensuring these elements achieve primacy in viewer attention hierarchies.

The integration of text with visual elements demonstrates varying levels of sophistication. Poster 1's placement of "AIDS" directly over the human figure creates problematic visual fusion between identity and disease, while Poster 5's strategic positioning of text around—rather than on—human faces maintains the dignity and agency of represented individuals. These compositional choices reflect underlying ideological assumptions about the relationship between people and disease that Pham [20] identifies as central to HIV/AIDS discourse construction.

4.5. Visual Metaphors and Symbolic Representation

The posters employ diverse metaphorical strategies to represent HIV/AIDS and appropriate responses. The candle in Poster 2 invokes remembrance, hope, and vigil traditions, creating emotional resonance through culturally familiar symbolism [12]. The clasped hands in Posters 3 function as metonymic representation of solidarity, support, and human connection [22].

The turned back in Poster 7 represents perhaps the most conceptually sophisticated visual metaphor, transforming bodily orientation into symbolic commentary on social abandonment and denial. This visual strategy demonstrates what Forceville [8] terms "pictorial metaphor," where concrete visual elements represent abstract concepts through structured mapping. The metaphor operates on multiple levels: individual denial of personal risk, social abandonment of affected communities, and political neglect of the epidemic [14].

The AIDS ribbon achieves iconic status across multiple posters, functioning as what Peirce [19] would classify as a symbol. This is a sign whose meaning derives from social convention rather than visual resemblance. The ribbon's evolution from activism symbol to universal awareness marker demonstrates how visual elements can accumulate layers of meaning through historical and consistent use and cultural circulation [22]. Its presence immediately signals HIV/AIDS context while invoking decades of advocacy history, community organizing, and social movement activity.

4.6. Representation of Human Subjects

The visual representation of human bodies and faces across the posters carries profound implications for how audiences understand their relationship to HIV/AIDS. Poster 5's diverse

demographic representation challenges the narrow associations linking HIV/AIDS exclusively to particular communities, instead presenting the epidemic as affecting humanity broadly [14]. This inclusive representational strategy counters the stigmatizing discourses Treichler [23] documented, where AIDS became constructed as disease of marginalized "others."

However, the representations also reveal tensions in how to depict affected communities without reinforcing stereotypes or creating voyeuristic dynamics. The vulnerable bodily positioning in Poster 1 risks reproducing what Lupton [13] critiques as the "victimization" of people living with HIV, constructing them as passive sufferers rather than empowered agents. Conversely, the smiling sailor in Poster 6 presents positive representation but potentially relies on stereotypical cultural imagery in ways that may limit rather than expand understanding of diverse gay male experiences [20].

The decision in several posters to show hands without faces (Posters 3) or backs without frontal identity (Poster 7) navigates the challenge of depicting HIV-affected communities without exposing individuals to potential stigma or privacy violations. This partial representation strategy maintains human presence and emotional connection while protecting anonymity, reflecting ethical considerations in health communication imagery [28].

4.7. Linguistic Framing and Discursive Positioning

The verbal text accompanying visual elements constructs particular subject positions and relationships between audiences and HIV/AIDS. The imperative constructions prevalent across posters ("Fight AIDS," "Don't turn your back," "Make the promise") create direct address that Fairclough [7] identifies as constructing audiences as capable agents obligated to act. This linguistic strategy contrasts sharply with earlier AIDS communication emphasizing victimhood and vulnerability, instead positioning viewers as empowered participants in collective response [21].

The framing of AIDS as collective challenge requiring unified action ("together, we can stop it," "overcoming disruption, transforming the AIDS response") reflects what Djonov and Zhao [6] term "solidarity discourse," constructing HIV/AIDS as shared social problem rather than individual moral failure. This discursive shift carries significant ideological implications, relocating responsibility from individuals to communities and institutions while challenging victim-blaming narratives that have historically characterized AIDS discourse [23].

Notably, several posters explicitly name and challenge stigma through direct linguistic intervention. Poster 5's command to "Fight AIDS Not People with AIDS" makes stigma visible and positions it as inappropriate, directly confronting discriminatory attitudes through clear prohibitive language. This explicit anti-stigma messaging represents a significant evolution in HIV/AIDS communication, acknowledging that

social attitudes constitute barriers to effective response requiring direct address [5].

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that HIV/AIDS awareness posters function as complex multimodal texts requiring sophisticated orchestration of visual, textual, chromatic, and spatial resources. Analysis of seven purposively selected posters reveals that effective materials employ empowering rather than victimising frameworks, achieve intersemiotic complementarity between modes, utilise culturally resonant symbolism whilst avoiding stereotyping, and explicitly challenge stigma through direct linguistic and visual intervention. Conversely, less effective materials display modal contradictions, potentially stigmatising representations, and insufficient attention to ideological implications of design choices.

The research extends multimodal discourse analysis by demonstrating its utility for health communication critique, contributing to theoretical frameworks and offering practical insights for campaign design. Key limitations include the focus on textual analysis without empirical audience reception studies, the specific geographic and temporal context of selected materials, and the purposive rather than representative sampling approach. Future research should incorporate audience reception studies to examine how diverse viewers actually interpret multimodal health messages, investigate how poster materials function within broader multimedia campaigns, and explore cross-cultural variations in multimodal health communication strategies. As HIV/AIDS transforms from fatal diagnosis to manageable chronic condition, communication materials must evolve to emphasise treatment literacy, viral suppression, and possibilities for living full lives—requiring continued analytical attention to how multimodal resources construct evolving health narratives.

Abbreviations

MDA	Multimodal Discourse Analysis
DA	Discourse Analysis
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome

Author Contributions

Olowu Ayodeji: Conceptualization, Data curaion, Methodology, Writing – original draft

Aminu Segun: Funding acquisition, Investigation, Formal Analysis

Olugbenga Samson Tope: Resources, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-music-text* (S. Heath, Trans.). Fontana Press.
- [2] Bateman, J. A. (2008). *Multimodality and genre: A foundation for the systematic analysis of multimodal documents*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [3] Bateman, J. A., Wildfeuer, J., & Hiippala, T. (2017). *Multimodality: Foundations, research and analysis—A problem-oriented introduction*. De Gruyter Mouton.
- [4] Bezemer, J., & Kress, G. (2019). *Multimodality, learning and communication: A social semiotic frame*. Routledge.
- [5] Caple, H., & Knox, J. S. (2021). Multimodal analysis and digital technology. In C. Thurlow, C. Dürscheid, & F. Diémoz (Eds.), *Visualizing digital discourse: Interactional, institutional and ideological perspectives* (pp. 91-108). De Gruyter Mouton.
- [6] Djonov, E., & van Leeuwen, T. (2018). Social media as semiotic technology and social practice: The case of ResearchGate's design and its potential to transform social practice. *Social Semiotics*, 28(5), 641-664. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2017.1412376>
- [7] Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. Routledge.
- [8] Forceville, C. (2008). Metaphor in pictures and multimodal representations. In R. W. Gibbs, Jr. (Ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of metaphor and thought* (pp. 462-482). Cambridge University Press.
- [9] Hiippala, T. (2021). An overview of research within the Genre and Multimodality framework. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 42, 100518. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2021.100518>
- [10] Jewitt, C. (2009). *The Routledge handbook of multimodal analysis*. Routledge.
- [11] Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2002). Colour as a semiotic mode: Notes for a grammar of colour. *Visual Communication*, 1(3), 343-368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/147035720200100306>
- [12] Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- [13] Lupton, D. (1994). *Medicine as culture: Illness, disease and the body in Western societies*. SAGE Publications.
- [14] Nascimento, R. G., & Bezerra, F. A. S. (2020). Multimodal analysis of sexual health campaigns: Visual representation and social inclusion. *Social Semiotics*, 30(4), 512-529. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2019.1625308>
- [15] Noar, S. M., Benac, C. N., & Harris, M. S. (2007). Does tailoring matter? Meta-analytic review of tailored print health behaviour change interventions. *Psychological Bulletin*, 133(4), 673-693. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.133.4.673>

- [16] Olowu Ayodeji and Susan O. Akinkulore. (2015). 'Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Selected Advertisement of Malaria Drugs'. *English Review: Journal of English Education*. 3(2).
<https://journal.uniku.ac.id/index.php/ERJEE/article/view/205>
- [17] Olowu, Ayodeji (2022) 'Nigeria 2015 Presidential Election: a Multimodal Discourse Interpretations of Selected Cartoons of TELL's Newsmagazine. *KIU Journal of Education (KJED)*. Volume 2, issue 1, pp 35-42.
<https://kjed.kiu.ac.ug/article-view.php?i=12&t=nigeria-2015-presidential-election-a-multimodal-discourse-interpretations-of-selected-cartoons-of-tell%27s-news-magazine>
- [18] Oyeboode, O., & Unuabonah, F. (2020). Multimodal analysis of COVID-19 public health posters. *Visual Communication Quarterly*, 27(4), 188-203.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15551393.2020.1832138>
- [19] Peirce, C. S. (1931-1958). *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Vols. 1-8, C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, & A. W. Burks, Eds.). Harvard University Press.
- [20] Pham, T. H. (2022). Multimodal critical discourse analysis of HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns in Southeast Asia: Ideology, gender, and representation. *Discourse & Society*, 33(2), 245-264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265211052384>
- [21] Stephenson, N., & Jadhav, S. (2010). 'I wouldn't know what to say': Identity, empathy and the constitution of subjectivity in response to HIV prevention campaigns. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 12(1), 73-86.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13691050903272308>
- [22] Sturken, M. (1997). *Tangled memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic, and the politics of remembering*. University of California Press.
- [23] Treichler, P. A. (1999). *How to have theory in an epidemic: Cultural chronicles of AIDS*. Duke University Press.
- [24] Hodge, R., & Kress, G. (1988). *Social semiotics*. Polity Press.
- [25] van Leeuwen, T. (2005). *Introducing social semiotics*. Routledge.
- [26] Zhao, S., & Zappavigna, M. (2018). The interplay of (semiotic) technologies and genre: The case of the selfie. *Social Semiotics*, 28(5), 665-682. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2018.1504724>
- [27] Houts, P. S., Doak, C. C., Doak, L. G., & Loscalzo, M. J. (2006). The role of pictures in improving health communication: A review of research on attention, comprehension, recall, and adherence. *Patient Education and Counseling*, 61(2), 173-190.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pec.2005.05.004>
- [28] Ventola, E., & Moya, A. J. (2020). *Multimodality and aesthetics*. Routledge.