

**INSTITUTIONALISED STEREOTYPING: PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED ON THE MEDIA'S SOCIAL MARKETING OF THE HIV AND AIDS PANDEMIC: A CASE OF THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED PEOPLE AT KAPOTA SCHOOL OF THE BLIND**

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**ABSTRACT**

The persistence of the politics of social segregation, stigmatization and victimization of the visually impaired in mainstream society is symptomatic of the institutionalized stereotypical presentation of such physical defects by powerful socializing agents such as the mass media. When one factors in the HIV and AIDS pandemic, the visually challenged suffer a serious dilemma. In this scenario, whether the mass media becomes a vigil or villain of the 'blind' becomes a contested issue. It is within such a controversial and sensitive framework that this research was carried out to explore the actual practical experiences and perceptions of the visually challenged people themselves, on the mass media's social marketing of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. The investigation employed the qualitative research methodology in which unstructured interviews and focus group discussions were the main data collection instruments. Giddens' (1984) Structuration Paradigm and McComb and Shaw's (1972) Agenda Setting theory underpinned the research. Purposive sampling was used to select the study sample. By and large, the research established that there is a glaring mismatch between the mass media policies and practices and the peculiar information requirements of the visually impaired, in the social marketing of the HIV and AIDS scourge. The study also established that the agency of the visually-impaired as independent actors had enabled them to cope and manage by resorting to TV and radio, HIV and AIDS campaigns and resource persons as survival options.

**Keywords:** HIV and AIDS; Blindness; Mass Media; Segregation; Zimbabwe

**BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

Researchers have cultivated some aggressive and scholarly 'appetites' in exploring topical subjects such as the mass media, HIV and AIDS and disability. However, little attention has been paid on the triangular reciprocal interplay of the mass media, HIV and AIDS and disability. It is against such a background that this study sought to explore the tripartite reciprocal interplay involving the mass media, HIV and AIDS, social marketing and blindness. The research aimed to offer an exploratory study of the actual insights and specific practical experiences of the visually-impaired pertaining to the mass media's purported roles of educating, mobilizing and informing them on the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Central to the study were also the official perceptions of authoritative figures from mass media, disability and HIV and AIDS organizations. The study also investigated how 'the blind' cope within the context of the limitations inherent in the mass media approach in socially marketing the HIV and AIDS scourge.

The mass media, which include television, radio, newspapers and film have increasingly been hailed and celebrated as indispensable means of access to knowledge on critical emergent socio-economic issues (Berger, 1998). For instance, the print and electronic media have largely been centerpieces in informing, educating and mobilizing communities on the HIV and AIDS scourge. Although, the mass media seem to have done all this with some measurable degree of distinction, controversy looms when the blind audience is included. The seeming mass media 'victory' and sense of accomplishment in socially marketing the pandemic fade into oblivion given the barrage of stigmatization, and discrimination that is ceaselessly targeted towards the visually-impaired, by mainstream society in general and the mass in particular. Such exclusivist tendencies seem to have their immoral foundations in Jackson's (2001) observation that blindness has since time immemorial, been associated with social stigma, evilness, punishment for transgressions and asexuality. Subsequently, in the wake of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, the mass media have increasingly been oblivious to the special information needs of the 'blind.'

While in principle Jackson (1992) postulates that relevant and accurate HIV and AIDS information, in an appropriate form for specific groups is a harbinger to the amelioration of the devastating effects of the pandemic, the mass media seem to have taken no heed of this 'tip-off.' For instance, in Zimbabwe, there is no educational information on the HIV and AIDS catastrophe written in Braille. The print and electronic media have been immensely absorbed in, and consumed by, a one-dimensional and limited focus on the able-bodied audience in the dissemination of HIV and AIDS education. By and large, the mass media have apparently lacked "appropriateness" (no Braille format) with a view to socially marketing the pandemic to those with visual-impairment. The mass media seem to make no deliberate attempts to present HIV and AIDS information in a form tailor-made to be in harmony with the limitations of "blindness". Such glaring shortcomings by the mass media offered too sound, a background to necessitate this study.

Furthermore, the effective social marketing of HIV and AIDS information has increasingly been complicated by the generally held, yet ill-conceived belief that 'the blind' are asexual (UNAIDS, 2001). The misplaced notion that blindness equates to a passive sexual desire has culminated in the catastrophic exclusion and alienation of the visually impaired from intervention strategies and HIV and AIDS programs. Likewise, the mass media has erroneously associated blindness with asexuality resulting in the mass media formulation of policies and procedures that effectively relegate the visually impaired from accessing crucial HIV and AIDS information. Nevertheless, Jackson's (2001) revelation that blindness is no exemption from HIV and AIDS infection can be a major springboard from which the mass media could take a cue, and then endeavor to meet the specific information needs of the blind in the wake of the pandemic.

Another very controversial notion in the Zimbabwean context is that the purported chief custodian of HIV and AIDS victims, (both the affected and infected), the National AIDS Council of Zimbabwe (NAC), does not even have a deliberate long term media strategic plan for the blind. To this effect, Jackson (1992) reiterates that NAC and major media houses in the country have no strategic plans in sight, which seek to reconcile blindness with appropriately packaged HIV and AIDS information. While strategic planning provides the motivation and impetus for future implementation, the non-existence of such planning in organizations that claim to champion the interests and rights of all citizens, in the wake of catastrophes such as the AIDS pandemic, typifies a gross error of negligence. In particular, this implies that marginalized minorities such as the visually-

impaired are from the onset effectively excluded and discriminated against in their pursuit of their inalienable right of access to health education on HIV and AIDS.

The historical foundations of the exclusivist practices and negative attitudes of society towards the blind also give a credible background to this research. Barnes (1991) refers to how biblical narratives generally characterize the blind as poor beggars and downtrodden entities whose visual defectiveness was interpreted as a punishment for their transgressions. For the record, in the book of Mathew “Blind Bartimeaus” is portrayed as a beggar who sat by the roadside and whom the multitudes scolded and instructed to 'shut up' when he called on Jesus to heal him. Barnes (1991) further notes that such ill-conceived notions and attitudes towards the blind have been extrapolated to contemporary times where the blind have been regarded as lesser beings and objects of charity. It therefore suffices to argue that such barbaric, archaic and baseless perceptions and attitudes have precipitated into a vicious cycle in which the 'blind' are underrepresented (in media employment) and misrepresented (media content) in the wake of the HIV and AIDS scourge. According to Coleridge (2003), the later scenario alienates the visually impaired from HIV and AIDS education, which in turn exacerbates their vulnerability to the global pandemic.

Historically, Barnes (1991) traces the evil roots of the relentless indifference towards the blind to Hitler's exclusive Fascist ideology. This ideology provoked a celebration of the glorification of the physically and mentally 'perfect' human being, and the extermination of people with disability, since the disabled were considered to be “imperfections which contaminated the genetic stream.” In reiteration, Freire (1984) narrates how the Nazi Euthanasia Project portrayed the disabled as 'useless eaters' making no contribution to society but draining resources. Such an inhumane conceptualization of the blind seems to have persisted over time, long enough to permeate and inform contemporary social structures like the mass media. No wonder why mainstream society has sometimes upheld the myth that the disabled are asexual (UNAIDS 2001). All these notions and attitudes seem to explain why the mass media has preoccupied itself with targeting the able-bodied in marketing HIV and AIDS information, to the detriment of the disabled in general and the visually-impaired in particular. Ultimately, the media has erroneously dissociated HIV and AIDS education with the visually-impaired, to the extent that all about the mass media, regarding ownership, control, content and function seem to be indifferent to, and/or in disarray with the special media needs of the visually-impaired in the wake of the HIV and AIDS scourge

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Much as the mass media can be hailed as centerpieces in the dissemination of crucial HIV and AIDS education to the public, they can equally be condemned for their exclusive focus on an able-bodied audience. The general social stigma associated with blindness as well as belief in the misconception that blindness is synonymous with asexuality seem to have culminated in the mass media's catastrophic relegation, exclusion and alienation of the visually-impaired from critical HIV and AIDS information. Mass media policies and practices are, by and large, incompatible with the effective dissemination of HIV and AIDS education to those with visual impairment. The Zimbabwe National Aids Council and local media houses have hardly come up with media policies that prioritize the special information needs of the visually impaired, against the backdrop of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. More so, the prevalence of a knowledge gap in so far as reconciling the tripartite interplay of the

mass media, blindness and the social marketing of HIV and AIDS is symptomatic of a further complication of the problem. Since sustainable solutions usually stem from an 'insider view' of the victims, the need to capture the actual views and experiences of the visually impaired with the mass media provoked this research.

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The study aimed to assess the perceptions and experiences of the visually- impaired on the mass media's social marketing of the HIV and AIDS pandemic to the blind audience.

### **SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES**

- i. To discover and document the perceptions and experiences of the visually- impaired on the mass media's dissemination of information on the HIV and AIDS pandemic.
- ii. To examine the official insights into how the mass media affect dissemination of HIV and AIDS education to those with blindness.
- iii. To establish how the visually impaired cope and manage in the wake of the limitations inherent in the mass media's approach in socially marketing the HIV and AIDS scourge.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is mainly grounded in Giddens' (1984) Structuration Theory, and partly, in McComb and Shaw's (1972) Agenda Setting Theory. Giddens maintains that structure and agency are necessarily, dialectically and intimately related. The theory postulates that structure has no existence independent of the knowledge that actors have about what they do in their daily activities. Briefly, the theory's central argument is that structures are both means and ends of social action.

McCombs and Shaw's (1972) Agenda Setting theory posits that there is a positive direct correlation between the rate at which the media cover a story and the extent that the public think that the story is important. Hence, its two assumptions are that; the media do not reflect reality, they filter and shape it, and the media's concentration on a few issues leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues (Berger, 1998).

Giddens' postulation on the duality of structure and action is an acknowledgement that structures make social action possible, while simultaneously social action makes those structures. Thus, the reciprocal interactive process between the two aspects becomes decisive in the nature of the social character of either of the two. Within the context of this study, the mass media, as a social structure that endeavors to disseminate HIV and AIDS education, has no existence independent of the knowledge that actors such as its individual employees or audience (the blind in this case) have about their daily activities. The mass media as a structure, whose very nature derives from the agency exercised by those who own and control it, in turn influence and make its blind audience to respond in specific ways. Thus, in this study, the perceptions and experiences of the blind on the mass media's social marketing of the HIV and AIDS epidemic derive from such an interactive duality of structure and social action.

Again, borrowing from Giddens (1995), in as much as structure is constraining it is enabling. Likewise, in this research, the mass media may constrain on both its able-bodied and blind audience, when according to the Agenda Setting theory, it concentrates on a few issues and subjects leading this audience to perceive those issues as having precedence over other issues. For instance, in this study, the media's selective preoccupation with a particular audience or content form, in socially marketing HIV and AIDS information, may culminate in a similar selective preoccupation by the audience. By converse, such selectivity by the mass media can enable agents to come up with independent opinions, dispositions and action based on free will so that they redeem themselves from the vices and caprices of skewed dissemination of information on the pandemic.

Giddens (1995) also notes two concepts of structure namely rules and resources. Rules are procedures that individuals may follow in their social life; thus, they may be societal values, norms or expectations. Resources refer to authoritative, non-material resources that result from some individuals being able to dominate others. Within this research, these two concepts were used to underpin explanations on how the mass media enhance or deter the dissemination of HIV and AIDS education to the visually impaired. For instance, a non-material resource such as the decision making power wielded by mass media moguls, can be used to either enhance or militate against the information needs of the blind in the wake of the HIV and AIDS scourge. Such a resource has a great bearing on media policies and practices, which in turn are key ingredients to media effectiveness.

Berger (1998) also makes reference to McComb and Shaw's (1972) assumption that the media do not reflect reality; instead, they filter and shape it. In this study, such a theoretical assumption comes in handy in explaining the media's stereotypical images of blindness against the backdrop of endeavors to inform the blind on the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Thus, by factoring in the concept of agency and transformation whose centerpiece is the 'reflexive monitoring of actions', the Structuration paradigm offers a theoretical framework within which stereotypical media images of blindness can be addressed. 'Reflexive monitoring of actions' entails the ability of agents to actively think of their actions, and to consider if their objectives are being met. If they are not, agents are expected to transform their patterns of interaction, and behave in new ways. Similarly, such transformation may also be expected of actors in the mass media so that they portray realistic media images of blindness, with a view to effectively disseminating HIV and AIDS knowledge to the blind.

Another important aspect of Giddens' (1984) Structuration Theory is its realization that humans have a basic desire of predictability in social life. This translates into what Giddens (1995) typically refers to as, the human need for "ontological security", or the confidence and trust that the social world is, as it appears to be. This may be linked to 'the basic human security system' essentially a natural concern with the physical and social survival of the body. In this research, the mass media's performance in socially marketing the HIV and AIDS pandemic to the blind has to measure up to the level of offering ontological security that the blind audience require especially within the realms of an incurable disease. More so, the blind's perceptions and experiences with respect to the media's social marketing of the HIV and AIDS epidemic may increasingly be shaped by the ability of the mass media to guarantee this ontological security to a vulnerable and a visually-impaired audience.

Also, in his theory, Giddens (1995) directs attention to the issues of 'determinism and voluntarism' in which he tries to reconcile the “deterministic” view that human behavior is entirely controlled by external forces, and the 'voluntaristic' stance, which upholds the essence of individual choice and free will. This seems to qualify for the presence of choice in every human action irrespective of external constraints in the reproduction of structures through human interaction. In this study, external forces may be equivalent to media policies and practices tailor-made to suit the physical conditions of blindness, free will can equate to the self-realization that blindness itself is the moral imperative through which discriminatory social marketing of HIV and AIDS to the blind can be transformed. In all, the striking compatibility between the theories and this research made it inevitable to ground the latter in the former.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research was grounded in the qualitative research methodology. In this study this method was extensively used to solicit full, in-depth accounts of the perceptions and experiences of the ten (10) visually-impaired subjects and five (5) able-bodied officials on the mass media's social marketing of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. The methodology was also used to capture how the visually impaired overcome the mass media's limitations in the dissemination of information concerning the HIV and Aids of the pandemic. The qualitative research methodology was really interactive, as it enhanced the active and extensive reciprocal interaction of the researcher and the target respondents. More so, true to Neuman's (2000) observation, the qualitative methodology was able to capture the rich, natural and valid data on the real-life experiences and true perceptions of the fifteen subjects under study. Again, by assuming an interpretive approach, the methodology allowed the researcher to interpret and ascribe meanings to the experiences and perceptions of the subjects as they interacted with the mass media.

## **JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY**

The study is going to show the perceptions and experiences of the visually impaired on the media's social marketing of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. It will also assess the role of the media in dissemination of HIV and AIDS to people with blindness. This information will provide the basis, impetus and rationale for the need to come up with the necessary legislative and policy frameworks which are pro- disability, with particular emphasis on reconciling the limitations caused by blindness with appropriately packaged HIV and AIDS education materials for the visually impaired. Policy makers, NGOs and mass media institutions can use the research as a springboard from which to launch policy changes and campaigns which prioritize and affirm the moral imperative to harmonize policies and practices with the physical condition of blindness in the wake of the HIV and AIDS scourge. The research will trigger a possible change of attitude, perceptions and beliefs of the general public towards disability in general and blindness in particular. The social stigma associated with blindness will thus diminish, resulting in the combined and concerted effort by the general public to co-opt the visually impaired as equals in accessing health information on the HIV and AIDS pandemic

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

This section presents the findings from the unstructured interview and the focus group discussions. They are presented by objectives.

## **The Perceptions and Experiences of the Visually Impaired on the Mass Media's Social Marketing of the HIV and AIDS Pandemic to a Blind Audience**

Respondents conceded that, by and large, the mass media is biased towards the able-bodied respondents at the expense of disabled audience. The visually-challenged respondents, thus emphatically maintained that the mass media had alienated and relegated them from mainstream HIV and AIDS education.

Findings from both the unstructured interviews and focus group discussions unearthed the revelation that most of the respondents felt that most media organizations excluded those with blindness from employment in key media posts. They therefore, lamented that they were underrepresented at top-most media organizational levels. The respondents thus, argued that such a scenario from the onset alienated and estranged the blind from the crucial decision-making process. To this effect, one respondent remarked, "...have you ever, in your lifetime, witnessed any visually-impaired top executive sitting over a board meeting at any media organization in this country?" Most respondents, in the FDGs reiterated that the exclusion of those with blindness in top mass media positions meant that there was no one to represent them at that level so that they could influence policies and practices to be in line with needs of the visually-challenged.

In the FDGs, the participants' central argument was that such an exclusivist tendency (exclusion of the blind from employment) by the mass media fraternity was largely attributed to mainstream society's erroneous perception of disability (blindness) being synonymous with inability. One respondent noted, "As long as media images of blindness continue to be shaped by the able-bodied chief executive and intended for an able-bodied audience, stereotypes about the 'blind' would continue." This, the respondents maintained, would increasingly dissociate the visually-challenged from the mass media's dissemination of HIV and AIDS information to them.

Interviewees conceded that the mass media in general and the print media in particular, were characteristically absorbed in broadcasting HIV and AIDS information to an able-bodied audience. Respondents complained that newspapers, pamphlets, magazines and books bearing HIV and AIDS education were hardly written in Braille. The findings showed that the visually impaired audience has been increasingly eliminated from having access to and making informed decisions from HIV and AIDS information due to the 'inappropriate' form in which the mass media presented it.

In the FDGs there was a heated debate as participants vehemently protested that information on condom use was always arrayed through pictorial demonstrations and ordinary print. They argued that, despite being important, information presented in this format was practically irrelevant and obsolete to them. To this end, one visually-impaired, questioned how they were expected to make effective use of a condom when instructions on its use are not in Braille but in pictorial form, yet they are blind. Thus, to a greater extent the broadcasting HIV and AIDS information has not benefited the visually-impaired people.

With particular reference to the electronic media, participants in the interview, by and large, maintained that despite offering HIV and AIDS information through auditory perception, radio, and television also have own shortfalls. They argued that the intended visual effects of television and film became insignificant in the context of a visually challenged audience. Other respondents further lamented at how the television and radio adverts on HIV and AIDS were dominated by the able-bodied as main characters. There was a general consensus among the participants that such biased adverts served to reinforce the ill-conceived notion that the visually impaired are asexual, thereby increasing their susceptibility to the HIV and AIDS pandemic.

### **Misconceptions about Sexuality of the Visually Impaired**

In the focus group discussions, participants unanimously conceded that mainstream society, the mass media and some of the visually impaired themselves, steadfastly hold on to the ill-conceived myth that blindness was synonymous with asexuality. To present the general feelings and perceptions of the participants in summary, one respondent noted that the visually challenged are often viewed, or even some of them view themselves as having no sexual libido. He further commented that they are just like any other persons in so far as having desire to have sex matters.

Furthermore, the research findings laid bare the respondents' views that the misconception of equating blindness to asexuality, had resulted in mainstream society and the mass media excluding, the visually-impaired from invaluable HIV and AIDS education. No wonder why the mass media had made no attempts to design media policies and programs that commensurate with the peculiar conditions of visual-impairment. Responding to how the visually-impaired felt by such mass media negligence based on the ill-conceived myth, respondents concluded that being blind is a painful experience which attracts social stigma since anyone can make any irrational statements about the disability.

The focus group discussions showed that all the participants agreed that much as mainstream society has identified blindness with inability, the mass media has identified it with economic insignificance. Subsequently, the subjects posited that the mass media has been oblivious to the health needs (in the form of HIV and AIDS education) of the visually impaired since the latter have erroneously been labeled as having no economic value. According to the findings, it is this perception that has resulted in the print and electronic media disseminating HIV and AIDS information in a form that is not in harmony with the information needs of the economically-productive (the able-bodied). The findings therefore revealed that, by being merely blind, one was automatically relegated to the realms of the economically-dependent, resulting in the mass media being insensitive to their quest for HIV and AIDS information.

### **The Impact of the Mass Media on the Dissemination of HIV and AIDS Education to the Blind**

The findings from the unstructured interviews acknowledged that to a limited extent, radio and television programs on HIV and AIDS had managed to inform the able bodied audience, while neglecting the visually impaired audience. Interviewees alluded to the increasing detrimental tendency of the media in the social marketing the HIV and AIDS pandemic to the blind. To this effect, the following were the main arguments that were raised.

Official at Kapota School of the Blind conceded that the mass media offered a stereotyped representation of blindness. They illustrated how both the print and electronic media presented blindness as: an emblem of evil; a loss of one's humanity; maladjustment and asexual menace. It was revealed in the findings that, in particular, stereotyping blindness as a sexual menace had culminated in mainstream society and the mass media itself associating disability with asexuality. Thus, the respondents maintained that, the misconception of associating disability with asexuality has been disastrous in the wake of the HIV and AIDS scourge. They argued that this is especially so, since it has resulted in the uniformed and catastrophic exclusion of the blind from tailor-made or deliberately designed social marketing of the HIV and AIDS pandemic.

One official went on to suggest that the missing puzzle piece in the stereotypical of the blind is the portrayal of these people as an integral part of society. He further revealed that when the visually impaired appear in the media, their presence and actions are determined by the nature of their disabilities. The findings therefore exposed that such misrepresentations precipitated a situation whereby the media actually serve to make the blind increasingly susceptible to the HIV and AIDS pandemic, instead of educating them on the incurable ailment.

Three official respondents revealed how disheartening it was, that major media organizations and HIV and AIDS organizations in Zimbabwe, had no strategic plans insight whatsoever, which sought to reconcile blindness with appropriately packaged HIV and AIDS education. The interviews revealed that since 1980 no media houses (both private and public), no film producers, and no Aids Councils had made deliberate attempts to produce, in pictography and autography HIV and AIDS education material written in Braille. The situation of the blind is worsened by the fact that blindness has emerged to be no exemption from HIV and AIDS infection. As a result, the authoritative respondents unanimously agreed that, the continued absence of mass media strategic plans and policies that seek to harmonize the physical limitations of blindness and effective dissemination of HIV and AIDS would perpetually surrender the blind to the vices and caprices of the pandemic.

Generally, the official respondents from mass media corporations argued that most private media organizations are bent on maximizing returns on investments. As a result, their 'conventional' target market mainly constitutes an economically productive able-bodied audience. This regime of customers is more likely to access television infomercials and newspapers than their blind counterparts. The interview findings emphatically exposed that targeting minority media consumer groups such as the visually-impaired was a drawback since the costs of presenting HIV and AIDS education in a form compatible with blindness far outweighed the benefits. Failure to afford such media was attributable to stigmatization, hence marginalization. Very few blind people live above the poverty-datum-line. The respondents therefore unanimously conceded that, for most private media corporations, it made no economic sense to invest in the Braille system for a 'poor' minority of the visually challenged audience, who cannot afford to by a newspaper.

Deliberations from interviewees laid bare the fact that the unidirectional or one-way-communication configuration of popular mass media like the press, television and radio lacks the immediate feedback system from recipients. As a result, whether real communication had occurred between the sender and recipient could not be confirmed. The interviewees lamented that this scenario even painted a gloomier picture for a 'blind' audience, which coming from an already marginalized background

of living on the peripheries of society, is denied the opportunity to express concerns, fears and threats to producers, editors and filmmakers. This was especially so against the background of the mass media's purported roles as mobilizes, educators and informers of the 'blind' on the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Although the lack of a comprehensive feedback system also negatively impacts on the able-bodied audience, its impact is more severe and dehumanizing on an already stigmatized visually impaired audience.

### **STRATEGIES DEvised BY THE VISUALLY-IMPAIRED AUDIENCES**

Findings from the interviews and focus group discussions exposed that, owing to the unavailability of print media written in Braille, the visually impaired had to extremely rely on radio and television. The ten visually impaired interviewees appreciated how radio and television through their auditory nature facilitated their decoding of HIV and AIDS information through the sense of hearing. In the focus group discussions participants acknowledged that radio broadcasts were doing a commendable job in educating, informing and mobilizing those with blindness on critical HIV and AIDS issues.

Making reference to the appropriateness and effectiveness of the electronic media in disseminating information on the pandemic, one interview commented that 'although we are visually-impaired, television and radio, through multifarious programs on the pandemic allow us the greatest opportunity to learn through effective listening.' Findings from the focus group discussions revealed that the radio, due to its ability to capture an audience even in the remotest of areas, and being auditory-oriented, provided the best available option for the visually challenged. According to the participants in the focus group discussions, the radio had made the 'blind' increasingly aware of, and makes informed decisions about the HIV and AIDS pandemic.

The respondents also maintained that mobile units of various organizations, which include the National Aids Council sometimes, carry out HIV and AIDS awareness campaigns. They argued that they also attended these and relied especially on their sense of hearing to capture crucial information on the HIV and AIDS scourge. Although these campaigns are a rare occasion, we regard them as our indispensable and precious source of knowledge on the pandemic. However the limitations of these campaigns, for the visually-impaired is that most of them live humble lives and spend most of their time begging insomuch that they do not have time to attend these campaigns.

The central argument in the focus group discussions was that 'blind' people who cared about their health found it increasingly useful to consult their able-bodied counterparts so that they clarify and elaborate pertinent issues about the HIV and AIDS scourge. The participants reiterated that, there was no need to be proud or remain in the 'stigmatized' realm of blindness at the expense of their own health. Thus, they found it imperative to rely on their able-bodied counterparts to get adequate and useful information about the HIV and AIDS catastrophe.

### **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

From the findings, reveals that the experience of the visually-impaired with the mass media in so far as the social marketing of the HIV and AIDS pandemic is concerned, are rife with multifarious socio-economic structural barriers, threats as well as

glimpses of opportunities. These experiences and perceptions are an outcome of a complex interplay of mainstream society's attitudes, beliefs and perceptions on blindness in general, and the mass media's own extension of these perceptions in particular.

The findings found out that the reality that the exclusion of visually impaired personnel in key media positions was a major structural barrier to the meaningful dissemination of HIV and AIDS education to a visually impaired audience. This seems to be in harmony with Karpf (1988) argues that the mass media's topmost offices are dominated by the able-bodied inasmuch that the visually-impaired lack representation at this level. Borrowing from Giddens' (1984) Structuration Theory, it suffices to characterize the exclusion of those with visual impairment from influential media positions as constituting social action, which has gradually graduated into the persistent socially structured non-representation of the 'blind' in most media organizations. Such exclusion usually stems from mainstream society's ill-conceived perception of associating disability with inability. Thus, such misplaced perceptions have found their way into social sub-structures such as the mass media, where they have further been consolidated, reaffirmed and upheld. The mass media itself being a socializing agent has in turn inculcated these misplaced misconceptions about the inability or ineffectiveness of the disabled, into mainstream society. In all, according to Giddens' (1984) analysis of structure and agency, the non-representation of the visually-impaired in the key mass media positions has been both a product and cause of the institutionalization of the alienation and relegation of those with blindness from the essential decision-making process at higher media organizational levels.

Thus, by dominating top media positions, the able-bodied attain an authoritative non-material resource which according to Giddens' (1995) Structuration theory enhances their domination of the decision-making process so as to influence media policy and practices that are at variance with the special information needs of a 'blind' audience. Hence, the mass media as a structure has constrained on those with visual impairment by excluding them from the key decision-making process, thereby denying them the chance, to influence media policies to do with recruitment, media content and image creation so that they are in harmony with blindness. To this end, Cumberbatch and Negrine (1992) posit that as long as the media continue to be controlled and shaped by the able-bodied and intended for an able-bodied audience, the information needs of the disabled will continue to be overlooked. Likewise, the Zimbabwean print and electronic media have to date failed to come up with HIV and AIDS information written in Braille.

The respondents also made reference to how misconceptions about the sexuality of the visually impaired had made the mass media oblivious to their HIV and AIDS information requirements. Just as the UNAIDS (2001) findings asserts, it was established in the research findings that mainstream society regards blindness as being synonymous with asexuality. Jackson (2001) also noted that, disability is regarded as a sexual menace and blindness is associated with sexual passivity. According to Keynes (1996) these perceptions are just exhibitions of one's intellectual observations which in reality lack feasibility. Actually, it is a matter of one's attitude towards blindness and not a scientifically proven fact that the 'blind' are asexual. To this effect, Jackson (1992) maintains that, it is attitude that disable. If able-bodied people did not react with prejudice, horror, distaste and anxiety to people with blindness, they would not mistake blindness for asexuality. In line with this argument, Jackson (2001) makes the insightful revelation that blindness; failure to walk, talk or hear has been found to be no exceptions

from HIV and AIDS infection. This revelation has been a demystification of the myth that people with disability are asexual. In so far they are equally sexually active as their able-bodied counterparts; the visually impaired are vulnerable to the pandemic. Therefore, the mass media should not use the myth of asexuality of the 'blind' as a basis for ignoring their concerns in the wake of the deadly HIV and AIDS pandemic.

As part of their experiences with the mass media, the visually-challenged singled out exclusionary HIV and AIDS educational materials as also complicating and compromising their quest for survival in a society threatened by an incurable ailment. While in principle, Jackson (1992) rightfully postulates that accurate HIV and AIDS information, in an appropriate form for different groups is an important part of the communication process, in practice, the mass media has taken a diametrically opposed position. In particular, the print media as a structure seems to have adopted it as a rule to unifocally present HIV and AIDS education in conventional print instead of Braille with a view to serving a visually challenged audience. Consequently, the visually impaired have been catastrophically eliminated from having access to, and making informed decisions from broadcasted HIV and AIDS information. Despite Thompson's (1995) assertion that one of the ways that the HIV and AIDS scourge could be reduced is the dissemination of appropriately packaged educational material, the print media has lacked in this appropriateness with a view to socially marketing the pandemic. In this respect, the mass media, thus fails to offer the 'ontological security' that Giddens (1995) alludes to, in his Structuration Theory. Again, the print media's preoccupation with HIV and AIDS educational material written only in ordinary print and not in Braille authenticates Mc Comb and Shaw's (1972) deliberation in the agenda setting theory that the media decides for the public what to think as important. Hence, the general public would think that HIV and AIDS education is only a preserve of the able-bodied.

In respect to exclusionary HIV and AIDS educational materials, participants in the focus group discussions and interviews agonized at how television and radio advertisements and programs on HIV and AIDS were dominated by the able-bodied as the main characters. One respondent remarked, "Ever since the HIV and AIDS pandemic was advertised on television and radio infomercials, I have never heard any featuring blind characters." This near exclusion or total exclusion of the visually-impaired from media agendas or programs qualifies into human action that according to McComb and Shaw's (1972) agenda setting theory reflects a gross filtering and misrepresentation of reality by the electronic media. For instance, while in reality visually impaired couples get infected and affected by the pandemic, no billboard, television and press adverts on HIV and AIDS feature visually impaired couples. Such is the filtering and shaping of reality by the mass media. The general consensus by respondents in the research, that such biased media agendas (in which no disabled characters feature) served to reinforce the ill-conceived notion that the 'blind' are asexual. By making people perceive blindness as being synonymous with sexual passivity, the mass media make the general public to prioritize HIV and AIDS information needs of the able-bodied to the detriment of the visually impaired.

Further, the research findings also revealed that the visually impaired respondents acknowledged that radio and television had done a commendable job in disseminating HIV and AIDS education to them. Taking a cue from Thompson's (1995) deliberations, this scenario was mainly attributed to the fact that by capitalizing on the power sound, the electronic media has

managed to appropriately package HIV and AIDS educational material in a form comprehensible to the visually impaired. Through the 'listen and learn' style, the electronic media has enhanced the decoding of critical HIV and AIDS information by those with visual defects since they cannot decode by reading, but by listening. This scenario typifies Giddens' (1984) postulation that structure is also enabling. The electronic media, as a structure, has in this case enhanced and enabled meaningful acquisition of invaluable HIV and AIDS information to the visually challenged. That is, the electronic media has managed to instill a sense of confidence and trust within the visually impaired that the world of HIV and AIDS social marketing has their concerns at heart. By enabling the visually challenged to have access to such information, ontological security has come in the form of the 'blind' being availed the chance to make informed decisions and choices within the context of a deadly disease.

The interview responses from authority-bearing officials also exposed the contributions of negative media images in the dissemination of crucial HIV and AIDS education to a visually impaired audience. In light of this, Cumberbatch and Negrine (1992) maintain that as long as media images of disability continue to be shaped by able-bodied people and intended for an able-bodied audience, stereotypes about the 'blind' will continue. The stereotypical presentations of blindness as an emblem of evil, as an object of charity and as a sexual menace are true to the basic tenet of the agenda setting theory that the mass media do not reflect reality. For instance, the mass media's portrayal of blindness as a sexual menace is flawed, and this misconception has been disastrous within the context of HIV and AIDS pandemic, since it has resulted in the exclusion of the visually-impaired from intervention strategies and mitigation measures against the deadly disease.

According to the findings, the missing puzzle piece in the stereotypical presentation of the visually impaired by the media is the portrayal of these people as an integral part of life. Such lines of arguments find similarities in Keynes (1996) concepts of Agency and Transformation whose catchphrase is the 'reflexive monitoring of actions.' The latter refers to a situation whereby people or actors should think about their actions and evaluate whether they meet their objectives. If actions fail to meet objectives, actors transform these actions accordingly. Similarly, the respondents were advocating a situation whereby the mass media had to reflexively monitor its actions towards the visually impaired audience and transform interaction patterns from a negative portrayal of blindness to a positive one. To borrow from Coleridge (1993) such change would need to include a provision of access to all facets of life, something that would only happen, when people with blindness are asked about their attitudes, feelings and needs and not just given what others think they need.

During the research interviews, respondents also lamented at the total absence of both short-term and long-term mass media strategic plans for the visually impaired. One respondent even went on to reveal the further complication of this scenario in the wake of HIV and AIDS by commenting, "...the situation of the blind is worsened by the fact that blindness has emerged to be no exemption from HIV and AIDS infection." In Zimbabwe, the National Aids Council which claims to be chief custodian of HIV and AIDS issues ironically has hardly any deliberately designed strategic plan that seeks to match HIV and AIDS educational media with the physical limitations of blindness. The same can be said about major media houses, both public and private. Instead, major mass media institutions have chosen to unifocally preoccupy themselves with disseminating HIV and AIDS information that is solely compatible with the able-bodied audience. According to Giddens'

(1984), it can be argued that the Zimbabwean media houses seem to have failed to reflexively monitor their actions inasmuch that the mass media as a structure, has according to McComb and Shaw's (1972), continuously set media agendas (strategic plans) that only meet the needs of the able-bodied. There is thus the great need for mass media institutions to monitor their own actions and transform them so that they also prioritize the health education needs of the visually-impaired, especially against the background of the HIV and AIDS catastrophe.

The research findings also unearthed structural barriers such as the mass media's profit-oriented approach and the absence of a valid and reliable feedback system as posing major threats to the successful dissemination of HIV and AIDS knowledge to those with blindness. The prioritization of profit maximization especially by the private media houses has, with disastrous outcomes, relegated the usually economically deprived 'blind' to the periphery of social marketing of HIV and AIDS information. The central argument to this mishap is that these media institutions associate blindness with poverty and philanthropy. To this end, Freire (1984) documents how the 'blind' have historically been portrayed as objects of charity and drainers of economic resources. Taking a hint from Giddens' (1984) Structuration Theory, it appears that the lack of a reflexive monitoring of actions by media organizations seems to have culminated in these organizations seeing no economic sense in writing HIV and AIDS issues in Braille. The main argument is that the majority of the visually impaired cannot afford to buy newspapers, magazines and journals written in Braille.

The study findings also revealed that in order to cope in a hostile mass media environment, the visually impaired resort to the effective use of radio and television, attend HIV and AIDS awareness campaigns as well as make reference to able-bodied resource persons who are conversant with the dynamics of the pandemic. Thus to borrow from Giddens' (1984) Structuration Theory, despite the mass media being a constraining structure on the HIV and AIDS information needs of visually-challenged, agency by the latter has ensured their ontological. The visually-impaired have exercised autonomy, free will and have made independent choices to ensure that they get access to crucial HIV and AIDS information despite the fact that the structural barriers within the mass media in particular, and those in mainstream society in general are stacked against the visually challenged.

## **CONCLUSION**

The research endeavored to investigate and capture the perceptions and experiences of a visually-impaired audience on the mass media's social marketing of HIV and AIDS information, to examine and establish official insights into how the mass media enhance or deter the dissemination of HIV and AIDS education to those with blindness and to establish how the visually-impaired cope and manage in the wake of the limitations inherent in the mass media's approach in socially marketing the HIV and AIDS scourge. The study established that the perceptions and experiences of those with blindness were marred by relentless stigmatization, attitudinal vices and caprices, crude misconceptions and the politics of exclusion by the media. These largely critical perceptions and experiences included discriminatory HIV and AIDS educational material, regarding the 'blind' as asexual, exclusion from key media positions and prioritization of the economically productive. The electronic media was hailed for being sensitive to the decoding capacity of the visually impaired. Official insights increasingly criticized the mass media for peddling negative images of blindness, lacking a strategic plan for the blind, prioritizing

economic gains at the expense of the visually impaired and lacking a reliable feedback system. The study also discovered that in order to cope in the limiting media realm, the visually impaired resorted to sound-oriented media, attended AIDS awareness campaigns and consulted resource persons conversant with HIV and AIDS issues. In all, the ensuing recommendations serve as possible measures that could be adopted, if the ontological security of the visually impaired is to be guaranteed within the context of the HIV and AIDS catastrophe.

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