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An investigation into the popularity of Zimbabwe's first health communication soap opera, *Studio 263*. A qualitative reception study of Bulawayo students aged between 15 and 20 years.

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Journalism and Media Studies

Of

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By

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## ABSTRACT

Within the context of debates concerning the reception and interpretation of media texts by television audiences, this qualitative reception study explores how a sample of Bulawayo students negotiate meanings from Zimbabwe's first health communication soap opera, *Studio 263*. The study thus examines the reasons behind the popularity of this programme with this target audience.

The findings of the study reveal that meaning making is a complex process that is dependent on a variety of factors which include, among others, the socio-cultural context of media consumption, gender, economic disposition and age. It particularly maintains that gender and lived realities influence the interpretation and negotiation of meanings in this particular study.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the following people, for their immense contribution to the success of this study:

My beloved parents, for their love, support and prayers during the course of my study. You were my source of strength when challenges came my way. Thank you for everything and may God bless you abundantly for being great parents.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### **Introduction**

This qualitative reception study investigates the popularity of Zimbabwe's first health communication soap opera, *Studio 263* among Bulawayo school students. It is particularly interested in establishing how young people, who are the soap opera's target audience, negotiate health messages embedded in the drama. Further, it looks at the extent to which socio-cultural, gender, economic and class factors influence the decoding and negotiation of the messages. The study is informed by the broad theoretical framework of reception analysis and also draws on soap opera genre theory and health communication strategies such as entertainment-education and social marketing employed by the drama.

To position the study within its context, the first part of the chapter highlights the general background to the study, that is, the intensity of the HIV/AIDS situation in Zimbabwe and its effect on young people in particular, and the Zimbabwean society as a whole. The section also outlines the role played by the media in general, and *Studio 263* in particular in the fight against the epidemic. For ease of understanding the arguments presented in this study, the second section of the chapter presents a general overview of the plot and storyline of *Studio 26*. The last section outlines the research statement, objectives, motivation, significance, scope and also lays out the structure of the thesis.

### **Context: HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe**

Zimbabwe is rated among the leading countries in sub-Saharan Africa that have been severely affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic (USAID, 2002:1). With a population of close to 13 million people, one in every four adults is said to be infected with HIV, while over 1, 8 million people were living with AIDS in 2003 (Irving, 1998: 16; Plan Zimbabwe, 2004;USAID, 2004:1). In the same year, approximately 3 500 people died of the disease per week. It is also estimated that the disease is responsible for nine out of every ten deaths in the 15 to 49 year-old age group (USAID, 2004:1). Moreover, over twenty-four percent of sexually active adults in Zimbabwe are HIV – positive

(USAID, 2005). Worse still, the number of new infections, new AIDS cases and AIDS related deaths continues to increase in Zimbabwe (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005). The high death rate associated with HIV/AIDS affects key aspects of Zimbabwean life: the economic, political, cultural and social (USAID, 2004; USAID, 2005). The severity of the disease has prompted the government to put it on the national agenda by declaring it a national disaster and inviting all sectors of society to join hands in the fight against the epidemic (News 24, 2004; USAID, 2005).

### **The Socio-economic Impact of AIDS**

In addition to the suffering it inflicts on the infected and their families, HIV/AIDS has devastating social and economic consequences. Due to HIV/AIDS, life expectancy at birth has dropped from 58 years in the early 1980s to 37.8 years in 2004 and is expected to drop further (USAID, 2004). Similarly, the number of orphaned children in Zimbabwe has increased dramatically from 345 000 in 1988 to 1.14 million in 2003, with 4 out of every 5 orphans having lost one or both parents to HIV/AIDS (USAID, 2004). Economically, the negative impact of the disease has also been felt. Hence USAID (2005) argues:

The disease has severely reduced the country's workforce at the same time as the country is experiencing a severe economic downturn. If not contained, Zimbabwe's high infection rate will continue to curtail social and economic growth in the country.

Since this study is interested in how Bulawayo students negotiate HIV/AIDS messages carried by *Studio 263*, the researcher will focus mainly on contextual factors that affect this population group, the young people. Other population groups will only be briefly mentioned.

### **Young People and HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe**

While all population groups are affected, young people are much more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS than older people. This is because adolescence is a period of unpredictable behaviour as young people tend to experiment with risky behaviour, often with little awareness of the danger (Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health, 2001). Coupled with the above, most young people lack the judgement that comes with

experience and often cannot appreciate the adverse consequences of their actions (Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health, 2001). Youth aged between 15 and 24 years old in Zimbabwe are arguably the most vulnerable group to HIV and other STIs. Factors that increase their risks of exposure include (Population Reference Bureau, 2005):

- Early sexual experimentation
- Lack of knowledge about HIV/AIDS
- Social and urban changes in values
- Harmful cultural practices
- Economic insecurity

### **Early Sexual Experimentation**

Among the factors that increase the risk of HIV and other STIs among Zimbabwean youth is early sexual experience. Studies show that sexual activity begins at an early age throughout Zimbabwe. This is a particular concern in a country with a large and growing young population (Population Reference Bureau, 2005). Of Zimbabwe's 13 million people, more than 36 percent are 10 to 24 years old, according to UN estimates. The UNICEF (2001) study suggests that in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city, and this study's research site, 80 percent of in-school youth had their first sexual experience between ages 11 and 15. A 2000 survey conducted by Africare in the Mashonaland Central districts of Bindura and Mount Darwin shows that sex is initiated between 9 and 15 years for both boys and girls (Population Reference Bureau, 2005). Even though many Zimbabwean youth become sexually active at an early age, they, like many others throughout the world, encounter social, cultural, and economic barriers to the information and health services they need to protect themselves against sexually transmitted infections and other threats to their sexual and reproductive health (Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health, 2001).

Examples of these barriers are highlighted in the sections which follow.

To further demonstrate the vulnerability of young people in Zimbabwe, the Young Adult Reproductive Health and HIV/AIDS Survey (YAS, 2001-2002) collected data on HIV prevalence and behaviour among men and women aged 15-29 years in 2002. The results indicate that HIV prevalence among Zimbabweans aged 15-29 years is

higher among women (21.8%) than men (10.3%) and that the highest prevalence is found in the 25-29 year age group for both women (34.7%) and men (24.4%) (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005). While HIV/AIDS prevalence among young people in general is high in Zimbabwe, the situation is further worsened by the fact that these young people lack knowledge about the deadly disease, resulting in more daily infections. It is thus estimated that more than 50 percent of all newly reported HIV infections in the country are among people under the age of 18 (Population Reference Bureau, 2005).

### **Lack of Knowledge about HIV/AIDS**

In Zimbabwe, adults are said to have more knowledge than young people on sexually transmitted diseases in general and HIV/AIDS in particular (Population Reference Bureau, 2005). The country's young people are generally unaware of the risks of infection as revealed by the 1999 baseline study carried out in Gweru<sup>1</sup> on youth sexual and reproductive knowledge, attitudes and practices (Population Reference Bureau, 2005). The study revealed that 64 percent of youth in this central province felt that their chances of contracting HIV/AIDS in the next year were nil. They also strongly believed that the disease can affect their friends and not themselves in the near future. The young people's response is testimony to the ignorance that still exists among the country's youth as far as issues of HIV/AIDS are concerned. This response is not unique to Zimbabwean youth, but is typical of adolescents worldwide who may appreciate the dangers of HIV/AIDS, but believe that they are invulnerable themselves (Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health, 2001).

### **Social and Urban Changes in Values**

Besides lack of information and knowledge about HIV/AIDS, urbanisation, which has led to social changes and changes in values, is another factor that has increased the vulnerability of young people. Urbanisation, which saw many Zimbabweans including young people leaving their traditional families and villages for urban areas in search of employment, has led to the breakdown of support networks for young people (Population Reference Bureau, 2005). In their migration, young people leave behind grandparents, uncles and aunts who traditionally played a key role in their

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<sup>1</sup> Gweru is one of the main cities in Zimbabwe and is situated in the Midlands Province.

lives as far as sexual education is concerned. In the Zimbabwean tradition, parents cannot educate their children on reproductive health matters as this is the role of grandparents, aunts, uncles and other older extended family members (Population Reference Bureau, 2005). Therefore, urban migration has led to the loss of traditional support systems in Zimbabwe such as traditional sources of sex education. This situation leaves the youth vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection due to lack of guidance and ignorance respectively.

### **Harmful Cultural Practices**

In addition to the negative effects of the breakdown of the traditional family unit on young people's health education, some religious and cultural practices also place young women at risk of exposure to HIV/AIDS (Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health, 2001; Population Reference Bureau, 2005). An example of such a religious practice is that of the Apostolic Church which promotes marriages between young girls and older polygamous men as part of the church's religious policy and practice (Population Reference Bureau, 2005). While this practice may provide both the girl and her parents with financial security, it is potentially harmful since older men are associated with higher levels of HIV infection (USAID, 2002:1). Further, culturally, in the wider Zimbabwean society, older men prefer to have sex with young virgin girls because of a myth that suggests that sleeping with a young virgin "cleanses" one of HIV/AIDS infection (Population Reference Bureau, 2005).

### **Economic Insecurity**

If socio-cultural practices, urbanisation and lack of information put young people at risk of infection, the desire for economic security by young girls has also contributed to risky behaviour. Young women in Zimbabwe face social and economic pressure to engage in sexual activities for economic gains. Unlike most young boys who engage in sex for pleasure, prestige, and to prove their masculinity, most young girls engage in sexual relationships with older men for financial security, as the men can provide them with what is normally known in youth discourses as the three Cs, cash, cell phone and a car (Population Reference Bureau, 2005). Further, some young girls engage in sex work for a living in order to support themselves and their extended families.

With young people comprising a sizable proportion of Zimbabwe's population, government officials, health workers, the media and community leaders face the overwhelming task of meeting the reproductive health needs of this special group. The following section will focus on the Zimbabwean government's response to the disease and its effects on the nation.

### **National Response to HIV/AIDS**

Zimbabwe has increased its efforts to curtail the spread of HIV/AIDS since 1999 when the country declared HIV/AIDS a national disaster (News 24, 2004). The declaration was followed by the launch of a national AIDS Trust Fund in 1999, financed by a three percent levy on taxable income to finance HIV/AIDS prevention programmes (USAID, 2005). This made Zimbabwe the first country in the world to introduce an AIDS levy, showing the country's commitment to combat the deadly disease (USAID, 2005). In addition, the government has established a multi-sectoral response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic led by the National AIDS Council (NAC) which was established in 2000 under the auspices of the Ministry of Health (USAID, 2002:2). The partnership includes government ministries and departments, private sector, support groups for people living with HIV/AIDS, international organisations, and of relevance to this study, the media (USAID, 2005). Evidence of this combined effort against HIV/AIDS is seen in the contribution made by the private sector through financing media programmes that disseminate information on HIV/AIDS awareness, prevention and care, such as *Studio 263* (Financial Gazette, 2005). Furthermore, the country has also formulated a national HIV/AIDS policy which was officially adopted in December, 1999 along with a strategic plan that includes specific goals and targets. Some of the goals of the policy documents are to prevent the spread of the disease and to reduce its impact on the individual as well as the Zimbabwean society and economy as a whole.

The approach adopted by the government towards curbing the disease is an integrated one that includes prevention, care, support and treatment. It emphasises protection of human rights and dignity of people living with HIV/AIDS, avoidance of stigma and discrimination, recognition for gender sensitivity and respect for the rights of children and young people, and provision of antiretroviral therapy (USAID, 2005). *Studio 263*

has adopted the government's strategy and has incorporated the above factors as part of its main themes.

Among the various stakeholders that are involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS, is the religious sector. It educates young people on the dangers of the disease and the importance of abstinence and living a healthy and disease free life (United Methodist Church, 2000; Mwansa, 2002). Zimbabwe is largely a Christian society with between 60 and 70 percent of the population belonging to the mainstream Christian denominations (International Religious Freedom Report, 2004). It is thus important to note that the approach used by Zimbabwean churches in their awareness programmes emphasises HIV/AIDS prevention through delayed sexual activity as opposed to safe sex- because of religious beliefs that forbid pre-marital sex. Churches also encourage young people to undergo HIV/AIDS testing and counselling as well as caring for infected adults and children orphaned by the disease (United Methodist Church, 2000; Mwansa, 2002). All the above themes and issues are addressed by the soap opera *Studio 263*, as the second section will demonstrate.

In addition to the contribution made by the above sectors of the Zimbabwean society, the media are also expected to play their role in curbing the disease through educating and informing the nation on issues related to HIV/AIDS. *Studio 263* is the brainchild of efforts by the media, government, non-governmental organisations and the private sector. The choice of mass media and the entertainment-education genre to educate young people on HIV/AIDS was necessitated by the view that:

The mass media can be used to raise awareness in the policy area, to inform and encourage responsible behaviour and to publicise available services in the community. Programmes use a variety of formats to deliver appropriate messages to targeted segments of the population. Media and entertainment are often effective means to reach adolescents. (United Nations Population Fund, 2003)

Having outlined the socio-cultural, religious and economic impact of HIV/AIDS on the Zimbabwean population in general and young people in particular, and the Zimbabwean government's response to the disease, the next section presents an overview of *Studio 263*, the programme at the core of this research study.

### **Overview of *Studio 263***

*Studio 263* is Zimbabwe's first soap opera and the most popular television show in the country, written and directed by Zimbabweans (Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, 2002; USAID, 2005). It was launched in September 2002. The soap is named after Zimbabwe's international dialling code '263' and is currently the highest rated and longest-running television show in Zimbabwe with a dedicated viewership of over three million viewers<sup>2</sup> per episode (US Embassy, 2003; Population Services International, 2005). The drama is aired five times a week between 7.30 and 8.00pm just before the main evening news. This slot falls within prime time<sup>3</sup> when more than three million viewers are watching (Population Services International, 2005). The prime time scheduling is aimed at capturing maximum audiences both for educational and commercial reasons. The soap is also repeated every morning at 11.00 for the benefit of those who might have missed the evening episodes.

### **Funding of the Soap Opera**

At its inception, the soap was wholly funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the Zimbabwean branch of an international non-governmental organisation, Population Services International (PSI) (US Embassy, 2003; Population Services International, 2005). The role of USAID was to provide supervision on message content and quality through PSI, their contractor. In addition to the sponsorship of *Studio 263*, USAID funded another health developmental serial on radio, *Mopani Junction*, which addressed similar issues related to HIV/AIDS. The radio serial was meant to reach out to young people in the whole country, including the rural areas which *Studio 263* could not reach because of electricity constraints (USAID, 2004). It is important to note that although *Studio 263* was donor-funded, it is written and directed by Zimbabweans and located within the socio-historical and cultural context of Zimbabwe (US Embassy, 2003).

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<sup>2</sup>Zimbabwe Television Rate Card contains prime time viewing figures for use by advertisers and producers. Due to lack of resources, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) does not carry out individual programme research but uses time-bands such as prime time or day time viewership. Programme sponsors can however use their own resources to carry out surveys on the actual audiences. To date, no surveys on *Studio 263* have been conducted.

<sup>3</sup>Prime time, time-band stretches from 6pm to 10pm. The peak period is between 7pm and 9pm (ZBC Rate Card).

While the television drama was initially the brainchild of donor agencies, it has since been taken over by the country's sole broadcaster, Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) which now owns production rights. As donor-funded programmes have a stipulated life-span, USAID's commitment to the programme ended, resulting in the Public broadcaster taking it over. Since the withdrawal of the donors, the soap has faced financial challenges, but recently, in August 2005 a new sponsor, Doves Funeral Services, came to the rescue of the troubled production (Financial Gazette, 2005). Doves Funeral Services is a private company that, as the name suggests, offers funeral services.

### **Objectives of the Soap Opera**

*Studio 263* can be characterised as an example of the health communication and the 'entertainment-education' genre (see chapter two for information on this genre). The objective of the drama is to promote health and social change among young people by providing information related to HIV/AIDS in an entertaining and educational format (Institute for Health and Development Communication, 2004). While it entertains its target audience, *Studio 263* confronts issues that young Zimbabweans deal with on a daily basis, and seeks to provide choices, solutions and ideas to help the country's youth move towards a better future (US Embassy, 2003).

### **Target Audience**

The soap's target audience is Zimbabwe's young people of school going age as well as young adults (Population Services International, 2005). Although it is meant to reach out to all young people in the country, the soap only reaches urban youth who have access to television, while the majority of young Zimbabweans who live in rural areas are left out. The exclusion of young people in the rural areas is a result of the slow implementation of the rural electrification programme introduced in 1999 (Global Network on Energy for Sustainable Development, 2004:11). While its core viewers remain young adults, the soap has managed to attract older family members with its social relevance and family appeal (Population Services International, 2005).

## **Themes Addressed by the Soap Opera**

The television drama addresses a number of themes and sub themes which include the following: HIV/AIDS prevention (self respect, abstinence, dangers of unprotected sex), HIV/AIDS treatment and control (HIV testing and counselling, the use of Anti-Retroviral drugs (ARV), positive living and fighting stigma), love and relationships, teenage pregnancy, family matters, sexual coercion and gender equality. It is however noteworthy that the soap does not openly and effectively address issues of condom use because of cultural and religious views in which abstinence is encouraged and pre-marital sex condemned by the largely Christian Zimbabwean society. Hence it is argued "underpinning the plotlines is a message that offers social support for the choice of delayed sexual activity and living a healthy life" (US Embassy, 2003).

While this may be unrealistic given that young people indulge in sexual activities at an early age, it is noteworthy that for any media product to be effective in society, it has to conform to the socio-cultural context of the society within which it operates (Korzenny and Ting-Toomey, 1992:13; Grossberg et al, 1998:63). The above issues addressed by the drama can be summed up under the following themes: HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, family planning and youth (Institute for Health and Development Communication, 2004).

### **HIV/AIDS**

HIV/AIDS is the major theme of the soap opera. It can be broken down into various sub themes such as abstinence, knowing one's status, living positively, fighting stigma and seeking treatment. These themes are portrayed through one of the main characters, Tendai. Tendai is a young woman who falls pregnant in her teens by an unfaithful boyfriend who infects her with HIV/AIDS and later dumps her. She is left alone to fend for her fatherless baby and to deal with the disease on her own. After knowing her status, Tendai is determined to move on with her life.

Disclosure of one's status is an important element in fighting stigma for an HIV positive person (Population Services International, 2005). In light of this, Tendai seeks support from her family and friends in her bid to disclose her status publicly. By disclosing her status, she feels that she will be able to support other HIV positive people, to show how to live positively, and to fight the stigma. Despite

discouragement from her family who fear stigmatisation, she goes ahead and discloses her status publicly. She then goes through a difficult phase where she cannot have a genuine relationship as all her boyfriends desert her as soon as she discloses her status. However, after deserting and stigmatising her, all her boyfriends engage in deep thoughts over their own HIV statuses which remain unknown to them. They conclude that although she is living with AIDS, she is in a better position than they because she knows her status and can therefore prolong her life by living accordingly-unlike them.

The message depicted by this scenario is one which encourages young people to undergo voluntary testing and counselling in order to know their HIV status and then seek treatment if they are positive, or to continue leading a healthy lifestyle if they are negative. It is worth noting that in order to demonstrate the seriousness of the issue of knowing one's status and to 'get real', the *Studio 263* crew underwent voluntary HIV/AIDS counselling and testing in December, 2004 (Population Services International, 2005).

The HIV/AIDS theme is further portrayed through another main character, Muwengwa who was once a successful businessman but his business has since gone bankrupt due to mismanagement and promiscuity. Although married, Muwengwa engages in multiple extra-marital affairs with young girls and has unprotected sex, resulting in the birth of illegitimate children. He is represented as a sugar daddy who baits young girls with money and a flashy lifestyle. In the end he contracts the deadly disease.

### **Reproductive Health/ Family Planning**

This theme is depicted through a number of young characters who are encouraged to value their bodies and to respect themselves by abstaining from pre-marital sex. They are also encouraged to know their rights concerning their sexuality and to be able to plan their families according to their economic capabilities. Young girls who fall pregnant are advised to go for testing and undergo anti-retroviral treatment if they are positive in order to prevent mother to child infection. It is worth noting here that the depiction of the teenage pregnancy theme by the soap opera unveils unequal gender relations in which the emphasis is mainly on young girls, who are represented as the

chief culprits of risky sexual behaviour, compared to their male counterparts, who are left alone to make their own choices. This is evident in the programme's portrayal of teenage pregnancies as a result of sexual irresponsibility on the part of the girl.

### **The Youth**

The serial provides education on the importance of genuine relationships which are based on true love, rather than money and other material things. It does this through the depiction of young girls who fall prey to sugar daddies for the love of money, and young boys who go for sugar mummies in search of wealth. In both cases, the end result is HIV/AIDS infection for both girls and boys, plus pregnancy for the girls. Young people are encouraged to abstain until they meet the right partners who are also HIV negative like themselves<sup>4</sup>. While the soap endeavours to convey a moral message, it is rather unrealistic in a country where young people engage in early sexual activities as indicated above. Moreover, the situation is further worsened by the fact that ordinary people<sup>5</sup> especially young people, in Zimbabwean society are poverty stricken. As the discussion earlier on revealed, young girls engage in sex work for economic survival, so it would be more realistic to promote condom use than abstinence. However, due to cultural values mentioned above, the soap is silent on condom use. Promoting condom use might result in a public out-cry resulting in the drama being taken off the air.

The soap also encourages young women to be independent career women. This is achieved through the portrayal of one of the main characters, Vimbai, who is determined to fight for a place in the business world. She is determined to take control of her own life by being a successful career woman, the envy of all. She also goes against all odds to maintain her purity by refusing to engage in pre-marital sex.

### **Economic and Sexual Emancipation of Women**

The drama endeavours to educate young people, particularly women, on the importance of education and economic empowerment, which arguably also equates to

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<sup>4</sup> The soap is didactic in nature and hence seeks to promote normative morals acceptable to Zimbabwean society, even though they may be impractical given that teenagers engage in early sexual experimentation.

<sup>5</sup> The class status of the production is mainly lower middle class. However, the economic situation in Zimbabwe has reduced everyone to working class, as all classes are experiencing economic hardships, particularly, young unemployed youth.

sexual empowerment. This theme is portrayed through Muwengwa's wife, a business woman, who runs a hair salon and is married to a promiscuous and financially irresponsible husband. She is aware that her husband is unfaithful and hence refuses to engage in sexual activities with him until he undergoes HIV/AIDS testing. She insists that he goes for testing by using her economic muscle against her broke husband. She also goes for testing to verify that she was not infected by her husband before she started restraining him. She turns out to be HIV-negative. This gives her even more ground to refuse to be intimate with her promiscuous husband who does not know his status. Eventually, the husband goes for testing and is positive. The wife supports him by providing a healthy diet which is meant to prolong his life. The two then agree to practise safe sex to protect the wife from infection.

The lesson here is that only economically empowered<sup>6</sup> women can negotiate sexual relations with their husbands and in so doing protect themselves from contracting HIV/AIDS. On the other hand, those women who are heavily dependent on their husbands for financial support, do not have much say in sexual matters and in the process endanger their lives<sup>7</sup>. Worth noting is the fact that in reality, even economically advantaged women find it difficult to restrain their promiscuous husbands from engaging in sexual intercourse with them because of the patriarchal nature of the Zimbabwean society. Men still have an overruling say in sexual matters in most families. The other lesson for married couples is that they should know their status in order to practise safe sex and prolong their lives if they are positive.

### **Research Statement**

Most research conducted on the reception of media messages in Zimbabwe is quantitative in nature<sup>8</sup>. Its goal is to find out numerically, a particular programme's popularity with its target audience, so that producers can lure advertisers and potential

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<sup>6</sup> Economic empowerment of women in the Zimbabwean situation does, to a certain extent, result in their ability to negotiate sexual activity with their spouses, while at the same time women who are financially secure do not engage in sex work for money-hence the emphasis on economic security by the soap opera.

<sup>7</sup> Financial dependence of women on male members of society is still a common practice in Zimbabwe as the society is highly patriarchal.

<sup>8</sup> Economic constraints in Zimbabwe make it difficult for companies to carry out qualitative audience research as this is an expensive and time consuming exercise. To cut down costs while maximising advertising revenue, most companies resort to quantitative research where quick and less expensive methods such as surveys are used to convince advertisers that their programmes are audience pullers.

sponsors. This is demonstrated by the following statement from the Zimbabwe All Media Product Survey (ZAMPS) about *Studio 263*:

The Zimbabwe All Media Products Survey (ZAMPS) revealed that the messages conveyed by the drama influenced 48% of 15-19 year olds to delay sexual activity, 33% of 25-29 year olds to use voluntary counselling and testing services; and 26% of 25-29 year olds to discuss HIV testing with their spouse/partner. (USAID, 2005)

The above statement reveals the supposed influence of the soap opera messages on its audience in numerical terms and not qualitative terms. But this qualitative study is concerned with how young people, who are the target audience of *Studio 263*, negotiate the health messages conveyed by the drama, in relation to their lived experiences. It also seeks to investigate how other factors such as the broader socio-cultural and economic contexts, class, gender, and age inform their interpretation of the messages (Livingstone, 2004:79). The research thus asks the question, "what sense do the viewers of *Studio 263* make of the messages carried by the programme?"

### **Objectives of the Study**

This research seeks to establish the reasons behind the popularity of the drama among students in Bulawayo, the second largest city in Zimbabwe. It is particularly concerned with how the target audience makes sense of this educational drama given the argument by reception analysis that the meaning of a media product neither lies in the media text nor audience, but is produced at the interface of the two entities (Schroder et al, 2003:126). The research therefore hopes to establish the different ways in which youth from different socio-cultural backgrounds make sense of the soap opera in the light of their everyday lives.

### **Motivation of the Study**

This study is motivated by the apparent contradiction between the moral stance taken by the soap opera in its address of HIV/AIDS related issues, and the social statistics that show that Zimbabwean youth engage in sex at an early age, thus increasing their risk of contracting HIV/AIDS (Population Reference Bureau, 2005). The researcher finds this contradiction between the moralistic nature of the soap and its popularity worth investigating. I am therefore interested in unpacking why audiences are attracted to *Studio 263*.

### **Significance of the Study**

I am concerned with understanding how health messages dealing with the sensitive issues of HIV/AIDS and reproductive health can best be communicated to young people. The study will contribute to research on different patterns of audience reception of health-related messages in different genres of the media. It will be useful for further research into the reception of HIV/AIDS messages by adolescents. The study is therefore a contribution to the fight against the deadly epidemic that is bedevilling societies the world over.

### **Scope of the Study**

This study will limit itself to the final moment of the culture circuit<sup>9</sup> which is the reception end. This is because the study's objective is to investigate the reception processes and not the production or texts moments of the culture circuit. In light of the above, the study will focus on the influence of the audience's lived experiences and other factors that inform their interpretive patterns.

### **Thesis Outline**

This thesis is divided into six chapters. This chapter outlines Zimbabwe's HIV/AIDS situation with an emphasis on its effects on young people who are the main focus of the study. A brief description of *Studio 263* is also presented to enable the reader to follow the thesis arguments on the drama. The last section states the research problem, the objectives, motivation, significance, and scope of the study. It also presents the organisation of the entire thesis.

Chapter two lays out the theoretical framework informing the study. The crux of the chapter is on the active role played by media audiences in negotiating media texts (Thompson, 1988:375; Moores, 1993:1; Schroder, 2003:109).

Chapter three presents the justification of the qualitative methodology employed by the study and the qualitative data collection techniques used. The chapter also outlines the challenges faced during data collection and analysis.

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<sup>9</sup> The circuit of cultural products consists of four moments- production, texts, readings and lived cultures (Johnson, 1983:48).

In chapter four and five, the study's findings are presented and discussed in line with the theoretical framework and literature reviewed in chapter two. Chapter six presents the concluding reflections of the study and recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework that informs the study. The chapter presents a broad literature review of the different approaches to understanding the relationship between the media and their audiences. It then moves on to discuss reception theory which is the main theory informing the research. The second part looks at genre theory and its mediation of producers, texts and audiences; the health communication strategies employed by the soap, and the soap opera genre in particular into which *Studio 263* falls. This chapter forms the conceptual basis on which the study is grounded. It thus provides the theoretical framework that will be employed to analyse the research findings in chapter four and five.

This study is situated within the broad theoretical framework of reception analysis, which emphasises the negotiation between texts and readers situated within specific socio-cultural and historical contexts (Moores, 1993:32). As a great deal of research has been done on the reception of media messages and the nature of audience response, I will trace the main research traditions that examine the nexus between the mass media and their audiences (Thompson, 1988:375). These different approaches to audience research provide a background to the theoretical framework informing this study as they examine the development of the audience-text relationship from all-powerful texts to all-powerful audiences, and finally to a negotiation between media texts and audiences in their construction of meaning (Strelitz, 2000:37). These traditions are encapsulated in effects research, literary criticism, uses and gratifications (U&G), cultural studies and reception analysis (Curran et al, 1987: 5-7; Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:207; Morley, 1992:45-49). The first part of this section will focus on the discussion of each of the research traditions while the last section will be dedicated to a discussion of the key elements of the reception analysis theory.

'Media effects' is the term given to a school of audience research that looks at the direct relationship between the media and the attitude and behaviour of audiences (Casey et al, 2002:78). Mass communication research has been sustained and

informed by concerns with its effects on the moral, political and economic lives of its audiences (Curran et al, 1987:57; Frenzel-Zagorska, 1988:397; Silverstone, 1990:173; Moores, 1993:5). These 'moral panics' were caused by the widespread fear that modern media technologies might have detrimental effects on supposedly weak minds, such as those of children, women and uneducated people (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:208; Silverstone, 1990: 177).

The tradition asked the question, 'what do the media do to the individual'? This fear gave rise to much research on the effects of the use of different media. It was assumed that these effects could be identified and analysed in terms of the changes which the media were said to have effected on the behaviour of individuals exposed to their influence (Hall, 1982:56). It conceived of media messages as symbolic stimuli having recognisable and measurable physical characteristics. To this end, the mainstream research, which was behavioural in nature, applied scientific methods to empirically investigate media effects on 'mindless' recipients (Pitout, 1998:65). Underpinning this research was the conception of the media as having power 'to inject' a repressive ideology directly into the consciousness of the masses (Morley, 1992:45). The positivist views on media effects can be summed up thus:

The positivist tradition championed the view that the media propelled word bullets that penetrated deep into the inert and passive victims, all that needed to be done was to measure the depth and size of penetration through modern scientific techniques. (Curran et al, 1987:58)

Theorists working within the media effects tradition differ in their political perspectives and their focus on short term behavioural changes or long term cultural and ideological changes (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:209; Strelitz, 2002:13). However, what they do share is the view that the media, as powerful social institutions, are able to infuse their audiences with messages and this affects their behaviour (Strelitz, 2002:13). Theorists that can be grouped into this tradition are the Frankfurt School theorists, liberal pluralists working within the behavioural effects tradition, critical theorists, political economy approaches to the media, and psychoanalytic theories of text/audience relationships, best represented by what has come to be known as the 'British Screen Tradition' (Strelitz, 2002:14). When mapped onto the circuit of culture which constitutes four moments- the production, texts,

readings and lived cultures-this tradition, which focuses on media power in determining meaning, falls within the 'production' and 'texts' moments of the circuit (Johnson, 1983:48; Strelitz, 2002:14).

While it was generally agreed that the media could have social effects, what was being questioned by critics of the effects tradition was the scientific method of researching media audiences which they argued, was sociologically naïve (Morley, 1992:45). This accusation was based on the argument that the tradition ignored other factors affecting the reception of media messages such as the socio-cultural context, or the lived experiences and the active role played by audiences in interpreting media messages. Instead, the approach turned people into zombies, cultural dupes, and passive consumers to whom things happened as the miraculous powers of television affected them (Morley, 1992:18).

Like the effects tradition, literary criticism falls under those audience research traditions that can be termed message or text-based studies whose main focus is the analysis of the content of the message and its effects on the audience (Morley, 1992:46; Strelitz, 2000:38). This tradition views media texts as carrying an aesthetic experience which calls for expert interpretation. It suggests that readers learn appropriate responses to literary texts (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:211). Like the effects tradition, literary criticism still asks what the structure of literary texts may do to readers, rather than what readers may do with media texts.

If the media effects and the literary studies approaches were preoccupied with asking what the media do to individuals, uses and gratifications (U&G) research reversed the question posed by these traditions and instead asked, what do the individuals do with the media and what gratifications do media users derive from them (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:210)? Thus, the active audience was born in this tradition. The U&G tradition arose following dissatisfaction with the normative tradition of effects research, and a reassessment of the impact of the mass media on audiences in the 1940s in which it was concluded that the media have limited effects (Curran et al, 1987:58; Morley, 1992:50):

The realisation within mass-media research that one cannot approach the problem of the 'effects' of the media on the audiences as if contents impinged directly on the passive minds, that people in fact assimilate, select from and reject communications from the media led to the development of the uses and gratifications model. (Morley, 1992: 50)

The uses and gratification tradition is essentially grounded in the social psychology of individual needs (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:210; Silverstone, 1990:177). It highlights the important fact that different members of the mass audience may use and interpret any particular media text or programme in a different way from what the communicator intended, and in quite different ways from other audience members (Morley, 1992:50-51). The approach views audience members as active rather than passive, and as being capable of manipulating the media rather than being manipulated by them (Curran et al, 1987:58).

The uses and gratifications model has been criticised for its concern with how individuals use the media as resources to satisfy their needs and achieve their goals while totally ignoring the question of cultural and social mediation (Silverstone, 1990:177; Morley, 1992:51). Like the effects tradition, U&G has been accused of being sociologically deficient as it views the audience as an atomised mass of individuals abstracted from groups and sub-cultures which provide a framework of meaning for their activities (Morley, 1992:51). Morley thus argues, "the limitation of this perspective is that differences of response or interpretation are attributed to individual differences of personality" (1989:17). The tradition has also been criticised for romanticising or overplaying audience freedom, while completely ignoring issues of ideology and social structure (Moore, 1993:7). Strelitz supports this view, arguing that theories that focus on the interpretive freedom of audiences cluster around the 'readings' and 'lived cultures' moments of the culture circuit (2002:14).

Like uses and gratifications research, cultural studies is another tradition that argued for the active role of media audiences. However, the early strand of the tradition viewed media audiences as being subjected to the ideological work performed by media institutions which together with the family and school were considered part of the ideological state apparatuses (Moore, 1993:6). This approach argued that people were passively manipulated by the dominant ideology inscribed in media texts.

Readers of media texts were reduced to textually inscribed subject positions and

cultural dupes (Moore, 1993:6). This textual determinism of the early strand of cultural studies was challenged by the critical paradigm that developed within the tradition in the 1980s (Moore, 1993:6; Dahlgren, 1997:51).

This major turn is commonly known as the ethnographic turn to qualitative audience research (Dahlgren and Corner, 1997:51). A more fruitful model of the relationship between texts and readers was put forward that proposed that texts offer particular ideological readings encoded into them by the producers, but that readers as active decoders would not necessarily accept the encoded meanings and positions prescribed by the text (Moore, 1993:6). The argument championed by this ethnographic turn was that if meaning was negotiated, then media audiences have much greater interpretive freedom than traditional critics of ideology gave them credit for (Dahlgren and Corner, 1997:55). Therefore, in the new strand of cultural studies, "the image of the powerful media gave way to an image of powerful audiences who could make sense of media output in virtually unlimited ways" (Dahlgren and Corner, 1997:7).

Fiske (1987) is one cultural studies theorist who took an extreme position in this regard. As Strelitz notes, "it is the writings of John Fiske which critics usually hold up as exemplifying what they regard as the cultural studies' drift into uncritical populist politics" (2000:40). His conception, on the one hand, of media texts as providing multiple potential meanings and pleasures, and of audiences on the other hand, as active, powerful and possessing an oppositional stance in their cultural struggles against the dominant powers, has been dismissed as a narrow and uncritical celebration of popular readings at the expense of questions of power (Strelitz, 2000:40). Other critics have also argued that cultural studies' stress on the active role of consumers has been carried too far (Modleski, 1986:11). Hence Silverstone argues:

There is a danger, however in pursuing the active audience too far. In some recent work, (especially Fiske, 1987), the audience is granted an imperial sway over the products of mass culture, relatively unconstrained by text, ideology or social structure. This romanticism confuses the difference between power over a text and power over an agenda...it is a confusion generated in an unexamined elision of the individual and the structural. (1990:177-8)

Despite the extreme stance taken by the work of Fiske (1987), it is argued that Fiske in particular, and the turn to ethnography in general, has provided an important corrective to the ideological homogenising tendencies implicit in critical theory (Strelitz, 2000:41). Further, within this variant of cultural studies, there has been an acknowledgement that capitalist societies are divided societies and that the construction of meaning from cultural consumption is deeply implicated in ongoing social struggles (Fiske, 1987: 255). Fiske's other contribution is that while he accepts that the forces of domination are powerful, his main concern is with the way subordinate groups and cultures resist these forces through popular cultural consumption.

Hall's (1980) seminal article, 'Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse' that was first published in 1973, and later published in an edited version in Hall (1980) marked the move from textual determinism to qualitative empirical audience research. The article portrayed mass communication as a complex, non-linear signifying process (Casey et al, 2002:81; Schroder et al, 2003:128). His model has set the agenda for much reception research to the extent that all work on empirical reception research makes reference to it (Schroder et al, 2003:128). The model argues that the communicative process has to be taken as a whole with the moment of production or encoding at one end and the moment of reception 'decoding' at the other end (Moore, 2003:17). It derives from the semiotic notion of coding which emphasises that the production and consumption of media texts are social processes through which meaning is constructed, although that meaning is never inevitable, permanent or fixed (Moore, 1996:16; Casey et al, 2002: 81; Schroder et al, 2003:128). This assertion will inform this study which seeks to investigate how meanings selected and constructed by the producers of the soap opera, *Studio 263* are negotiated by Bulawayo students with different cultural and interpretive codes.

In the Encoding/Decoding model, Hall suggests that media messages are inscribed with the preferred meaning or reading by their encoders, through mass media production routines (1980:136). The inscribed or preferred reading promotes taken-for-granted meanings that serve the interests of the dominant social groups (Schroder et al, 2003:129). However, the meanings preferred by the encoders of the messages cannot be guaranteed because readers can make their own meanings out of media

texts. Depending on the reader's social position in relation to the dominant ideology embedded in media texts, Hall suggests three possible readings: the dominant, oppositional and negotiated (Hall, 1980:136).

Morley's (1992) later work suggests a more complex audience-text relationship than the one proposed by Hall (1980). In his '*Nationwide*' study, Morley set out to investigate the different forms of negotiation and resistance that the current affairs programme encountered from different audience groups (Morley, 1992:91). From the results of the focus group interviews, Morley argued that there are more factors than social class that influence the different readings of media texts. These include: gender, race, socio-economic, educational and cultural interpretive competences (Morley, 1992:93). As Fiske notes, "what Morley found was that Hall had overemphasised the role of class in the production of semiotic differences and had underestimated the variety of readings that could be made" (1987:268). Hall's three categories of reading were therefore found to be too simplistic (Fiske, 1987: 268). Morley argued that the socio-cultural context of media consumption is also important, hence the need to look at both the micro-contexts of consumption as well as the macro-structural processes (1992:40). Morley sums up the argument thus:

To understand the potential meanings of a given message we need a cultural map of the audience to whom that message is addressed - a map showing the various cultural repertoires and symbolic resources available to differently placed subgroups within that audience. Such a map will help to show how the social meanings of a message are produced through the interaction of the codes embedded in the text with the codes inhabited by the different sections of the audience. (1983:117)

Morley's work has subsequently come to be identified largely with the ethnographic approach to media studies (Morley, 1992:13).

Reception analysis may be regarded as the most recent development in the area of audience studies that draws its theory from the humanities, and its methodology from the social sciences (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:214; Schroder et al, 2003:123). It develops what can be referred to as audience-cum content analysis which is both qualitative and empirical in nature (Jensen, 1988:3). The tradition shares the ambition of uses and gratifications research that conceives of recipients as active individuals who can do a variety of things with the media in terms of consumption, decoding and

social uses (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:217). Like cultural studies, reception analysis views media messages as culturally and generically coded discourses, while defining audiences as agents of meaning production who can formulate their own meaning and even oppose what is arguably the dominant meaning in media texts (Fiske, 1987: 267; Livingstone, 2004:79). Two key elements of reception analysis relate to how audiences make sense of media texts, and secondly, the importance of the socio-historical and cultural contexts in meaning construction-in other words, the role played by lived experience in the interpretation of media texts (Pitout, 1998: 65).

The focus of reception analysis is on how viewers/readers of media texts actively make sense of these texts and integrate them into other aspects of their lives (Thompson, 1988:375; Moores, 1993:1; Schroder, 2003:109). As Hansen et al note:

The turn in the media audience research of the 1980s and 1990s was away from questions about media influence and effects on audience behaviour and beliefs, toward concerns with how audiences interpret, make sense of, use, interact with and create meaning out of media content and media technologies. (1998:259)

The tradition argues that meaning-making is a complex process: meaning is never just transferred from the media to their audiences but is generated through the interaction between audiences and texts (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990: 214; Casey et al, 2002:81). It argues further that media meaning processes are arguably embedded in the social contexts of everyday life in which people use the media. The family, peer groups, school, class and gender are key contextual factors that affect meaning making (Morley, 1992:57; Schroder et al, 2003:124). Thus, Livingstone (2004:79) contends:

Viewers' interpretations diverge depending on the symbolic resources associated with the socio-economic position, gender and ethnicity although some possibilities for critical or oppositional readings are anticipated, enabled and restricted by the degree of closure semiotically encoded into the text.

This part of the chapter has outlined the key elements of the reception analysis theory that informs this study. It argues that the theory is best understood by tracing the developments of other traditions that look at the relationship between the media and their audiences. These include: the media effects, literary studies, uses and

gratifications and cultural studies traditions. Tracing these traditions highlights the move from the conception of media audiences as passive victims to whom things are done, to active participants in meaning construction. The second part of the chapter will discuss key elements of the genre theory and also outline how *Studio 263* combines health communication strategies with the soap opera genre.

### **Genre Theory**

Soap opera belongs to a genre system which governs the division of mass-produced media fiction into distinct kinds, such as romantic novels, detective stories, westerns, thrillers, hospital dramas, sitcoms as well as soap operas (Fiske, 1987:109; Gledhill, 1997:351). Genre can thus be defined as “a cultural practice that attempts to structure some order into the wide range of texts and meanings that circulate in our culture for the convenience of both producers and audiences” (Fiske, 1987: 109; Casey, 2002:108). A particular genre category refers to the way individual programmes which belong to it can be grouped together in terms of similar plots, stereotypes, settings, themes, style and emotional effects (Gledhill, 1997:351). The conventions shared between different programmes in a genre invoke certain audience expectations about the kind of stories and effects they offer. A genre product can thus be recognised by its similarity to other products of its kind. This similarity has led critics to dismiss genre products as predictable and formulaic (Fiske, 1987:110; Gledhill, 1997:352). Fiske argues that generic conventions are important in television because they are a prime way of understanding and constructing the triangular relationship between texts and audiences, texts and producers and producers and audiences (1987:110).

The genre system produces a variety of products which are meant to appeal to different audiences and to attract new ones too. Thus, there are genres targeted at different audiences such as females and males. It can thus be concluded that genres are gendered and that the diversity of tastes and competences is socially organised and patterned (Brunsdon, 1981:36; Moores, 1993:30).

Genre theory is important to this reception study, because, as Moores (1993:29) argues, it is important for reception ethnographers to be sensitive to programme-type

preferences, thus the kinds of material that interest different cultural groupings and hence their taste across a range of genres.

*Studio 263* is a combination of different genres. While it is fundamentally a soap opera, it also uses health communication strategies, entertainment-education and social marketing to communicate health messages to young people (Scott, 2005). Health communication encompasses the study and use of communication strategies to inform and influence individual and community decisions that enhance health (National Cancer Institute, 1989; Piotrow et al, 1997:2).

'Entertainment-education' or 'edutainment' is a hybrid genre which combines information, education and entertainment (Pan American Health Organisation, 2004:1). The strategy aims at maximising the reach and effectiveness of health messages through the combination of entertainment and education (Rogers et al, 2000:81; Waisbord, 2001:7). As an instrument for social learning, 'entertainment-education' seeks to influence social values and behaviour, particularly those of adolescents through the use of television and radio soap operas (Brown, 2000:35; Pan American Health Organisation, 2004:1).

The entertainment-education strategy has been used in recent years to address a variety of social problems which include, population growth, gender inequality, environmental pollution and, relevant to this study, HIV/AIDS prevention and control (Rogers et al, 2000:82). In terms of addressing HIV/AIDS prevention and control, the strategy has been mainly used in the form of popular radio and television soap operas such as *Soul City* and *Yizo Yizo* in South Africa, *Twende na Wakati* (Lets go with the times) in Tanzania, *Tinka Tinka Sukh* (Happiness lies in small things) in India and *Nshilakamona* (I have not seen it) in Zambia (The Research Partnership and SABC Education Television, 1999:14; Rogers et al, 2000:82). Zimbabwe's entertainment-education television soap opera, *Studio 263* also falls under this strategy (Institute of Health and Development Communication, 2004). The strategy views the media as an efficient means by which to impart knowledge, generate emotion, garner support, model skills, and stimulate information seeking within audiences defined on the basis of health risks (Winett and Wallack, 1996:174).

The strategy is premised on the view that education does not necessarily need to be dull but it can incorporate entertainment formats to generate pro-social attitudes and behaviour (Waisbord, 2001:7). Waisbord argues further that this approach could solve the problem that audiences find social messages unappealing and boring and instead prefer to consume entertainment media. Another premise of the strategy is the view that individuals learn behaviour by observing role models, particularly in the mass media. The characters are thus designed to provide negative role models who are supposed to be condemned by the viewers and positive ones whom it is hoped will be emulated by the audience (Waisbord, 2001:7). Role modelling of characters in the health soap operas is also intended to stimulate interpersonal communication about sensitive issues of HIV/AIDS by members of the audience. Like entertainment-education, social marketing is also concerned with social change at individual and social levels.

The term 'social marketing' refers to the application of marketing practices to non-profit and social purposes (Ling et al, 1992:342; Waisbord, 2001: 7). The primary objective of social marketing is to change behaviour by minimising audiences' perception of the costs of accepting the product, while simultaneously maximising their perceptions of the potential benefits (Winett and Wallack, 1996:175). The media are thus used to convey information, teach skills and generate support among individuals (Winett and Wallack, 1996:173).

As social marketing media campaigns are crafted according to the needs, preferences and values of the audiences being addressed (Winett and Wallack, 1996:175), they have been described as "a responsive process of two-way communication that originates with the public health organisation and is informed by the expressed preferences of the target audience" (Walsh et al, 1993:109). From the above discussion, it is apparent that social marketing draws its strength from realising the importance of socio-cultural contexts in drafting health messages (Hugo, 2000:103).

*Studio 263* evidences the social marketing strategy in the following ways. Like a social marketing media campaign described above, *Studio 263* was the brainchild of a health organisation, Population Services International, who funded the programme at its inception, after identifying the youth as the population at risk of HIV/AIDS. By

using local script writers, cultural ideas and characters, the soap opera seeks to educate and entertain young people in a culturally acceptable way as advocated by social marketing. The social marketing employed by the soap involves marketing health issues that are related to HIV/AIDS with the aim of promoting social change. Some of the social practices that are promoted by the soap are outlined in chapter one of this thesis. Amongst others, it seeks to market ideas about abstinence, positive living, fighting stigma, sexual emancipation, love and relationships. These issues are carefully packaged and marketed in the form of a soap opera which entertains, while also educating the population group viewed as being at risk, that is, young people.

### ***Studio 263 and the Soap Opera Genre***

A very basic definition of soap opera is that it is a continuous drama that is usually transmitted daily during prime time for half an hour to an hour (Hobson, 1982:33). It has narrative plots and storylines that continue over one episode to another, as opposed to a series which has self-contained episodes (Hobson, 1982:32; Geraghty, 1991:3; Matelski, 1999:3). Thus one of soap opera's distinctive features is its resistance to narrative closure (Allen, 1985:37).

Since its origins, soap opera's primary audience has been female because it addresses female-type of issues or subject matter in which women exercise a socially mandated expertise and concern (Modleski, 1982; 102; Allen, 1985:138; Gledhill, 1997:366). These issues include family, community, relationships and personal life (Gledhill, 1997:366). Notably, the number of men who watch soap opera has increased considerably making it a female genre no more (Allen, 1982:134). Changes in audience constitution can be attributed to changes in the structure of the soap opera, which now includes all-encompassing themes that appeal to all audience types rather than to women alone (Geraghty, 1991:4).

One of the factors that makes soap opera popular is its realism (Livingstone, 1989:68). Soap operas are designed specifically to connect with everyday life and aim to reflect social reality (Newcomb, 1982:123; Livingstone, 1989:56). They offer a fictional experience which audiences encounter as part of a routine in which fiction and everyday life intertwine (Gledhill, 1997:340-1). The British form of the genre arguably contains more references to social problems than any other forms of mass

entertainment (Hobson, 1982: 28; Mumford, 1995:164; Matelski, 1999:1; Casey et al 2002:225). By addressing social issues, the television serials are commended for their ability to open up debate for public discussion of emotional and domestic issues which are normally deemed private. Because of its strengths, the genre is often thought of as responsible, realistic and educative (Livingstone, 1989:56).

Reception studies of soap opera have shown that viewers enjoy the empirical realism of soap operas (Livingstone, 1989:68). The term 'realism' seems to have many meanings when applied to representations in television. Ang argues that *Dallas* fans in her study, "*Watching Dallas*" judged the programme in terms of two types of realism: emotional, and empiricist realism. The empiricist conception of realism was based on the 'genuineness' of characters and situations in *Dallas*. Those viewers who expected empirical realism measured the screen representation in terms of the objective social reality at a denotative level (Ang, 1985:45). On the other hand, emotional realism was exhibited by viewers who read the programme at the connotative level in which the people and situations were taken as real even though at the denotative level they continued to be seen as unrealistic.

Similarly, Ellis (1982) concluded that cinema and television audiences have various kinds of expectations about realism. He argues, "the term realism is used to describe a whole series of principles of artistic construction and of audience expectation alike" (1982:6). The expectations include that the representations on screen should have "surface accuracy" and should conform to audience expectations of events, thus audience notions of common sense and taken-for-granted notions of events. He therefore asserts that there is no realism but realisms (1982:7-8).

If social themes add to the reality of soap opera, identification with characters also plays an important role. Viewers tend to identify with certain characters in the film whom they claim have to cope with problems very like their own, thus making soap operas extremely 'life-like' (Hobson, 1982:28). It is this multiple identification with a number of characters which is a strong element in soaps' ability to engage their audiences so powerfully (Geraghty, 1991:18). In light of this, Lacey argues that "by watching how ordinary people deal with ordinary problems, audiences can compare characters' experiences with their own" (2000:224).

Livingstone concludes that character identification appears to play a larger role in the experience of viewing soap opera than in other genres (1989:58). Despite this identification, audiences still distinguish between the fictitious world of acting and the real world. This is contrary to arguments that audiences cannot distinguish between fact and fiction or that they fail to realise that characters in a soap are not real (Geraghty, 1991:23).

In addition to its address of social issues and role modelling of characters, soap operas' organisation of time and space is another element that adds to its realism. Time and space in soap opera is organised to coincide with real time. This is achieved through reference to important events which are happening in the real world (Hobson, 1982:34). This has the effect of making the programme appear realistic (Matelski, 1999:3).

Apart from realism, another attribute of soap opera is its educational value. Livingstone argues that soap opera producers, in addition to attracting a large audience, appear to have specific social awareness-raising aims with respect to contemporary social, moral and political issues (Livingstone, 1989:56). Casey et al thus conclude, "soaps are often a talking point for people, through them we are able to communicate with others and to share information, views and feelings about a range of personal and social issues" (2002: 224).

In addition to their realism and educational value, soap operas offer their viewers a form of entertainment through escapism (Livingstone, 1989:67). Escapism suggests that the viewer is running away from their problems and seeking diversions, even if momentarily (Hobson, 1982:130-131; Radway, 1984:222). In her study, "*Reading the Romance, women patriarchy and popular literature*", Radway established that by reading romance novels, the women argued that they were able to escape the harsh world for a few hours. Soaps are thus liked for their ability to remove viewers from their own worlds (1989: 67).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the theoretical framework on which this study is premised, which is reception analysis. It did this by tracing different traditions that examine the

relationship between the media and their audiences. The second and third parts of the chapter discussed other conceptual factors that have a bearing on this research. These are: genre theory, health communication strategies and the soap opera genre respectively.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

This chapter discusses the research methodology used in the investigation of how Bulawayo school students aged between 15-20 years negotiate messages conveyed by the educational soap opera, *Studio 263*. This audience reception study is positioned within the qualitative tradition which emphasises the need to study audience activity in its natural setting, using qualitative methods as tools for the collection of naturalistic data derived from the respondents' own conceptual frameworks (Morley, 1992:185). The study will employ the focus group interview as the single substantive mode of data collection (Hansen et al, 1998:260).

The first part of the chapter outlines the research design and the justification of choice of qualitative methodology and method over quantitative methodology. The second part looks at the physical location of the study, sampling of group participants and the various stages that were involved in conducting the focus group interviews. The last part outlines the data collection and analysis methods employed by the study.

#### Research Design

The overall plan of this research project follows the outline stated below. The study is grounded on reception analysis which is predicated upon the qualitative methodology (Jensen, 1988:4). The main data collection technique employed by the study was the focus group interview. Group interviews were preceded by a qualitative content analysis of *Studio 263* in general and one sample episode in particular, in order to establish the preferred readings proposed by the producers of the soap opera before taking it out to be viewed and decoded by the group members (Morley, 1992: 92). A qualitative thematic analysis of data collected from the group discussions concluded the research (Vaughn et al, 1996:103). The following are the stages of the research design that were implemented by this study: qualitative content analysis of *Studio 263*; focus group interviews and qualitative thematic analysis of data.

### **Qualitative Methodology Choice**

Research methodology can be divided into two paradigms or traditions: quantitative and qualitative (Bryman, 1988:1). Bryman argues that these two types of inquiry are sometimes viewed as competing views about the ways in which social reality ought to be studied, and at other times treated as different ways of conducting social investigations (Bryman, 1988:5).

Quantitative and qualitative research methodologies operate within different epistemological frameworks (Schroder et al, 2003:23). Quantitative research's epistemological underpinnings are that of the natural sciences and positivism (Bryman, 1988:13). The basic theory of positivism is that the scientific method is suitable for studying all forms of knowledge, including social phenomena (Bryman, 1984:76; Bryman, 1988:14). In summary, quantitative research's main concerns are reliability, objectivity, representativeness, generalisability, replication and validity of research findings (Schroder, 2003:20).

On the other hand, the qualitative methodology is underpinned by a philosophy different from that informing the quantitative methodology. Unlike quantitative methodology which draws the bulk of its intellectual inspiration from natural science and from certain tenets of positivism, qualitative approaches draw their strength from their philosophical underpinnings or the assumptions of phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, verstehen, ethnography and naturalism (Bryman, 1984: 77; Bryman, 1988:50; Lindloff, 1995:21 Deacon, 1999:7). The above intellectual underpinnings have overlapping boundaries and are all committed to studying the lived experience of the social phenomena being investigated in their natural contexts and from their own perspectives, thus 'seeing through the eyes of the people being studied'. Thus, qualitative methodology is therefore said to be, "an approach to the study of the social world which seeks to describe and analyse the culture and behaviour of humans and their groups from the point of view of those being studied" (Bryman, 1988:46). Deacon sees it as being concerned with, "meaning making and exploring ways that people make sense of their social worlds and how they express these understandings through language..." (Deacon, 1999:6).

In my choice of methodology for my study, I followed the advice that the choice of a methodological approach is a pragmatic one that should be determined by the particular type of data needed to answer the research question (Bryman, 1984:83; Jensen, 1988:4; Morley, 1992:13). It is in this light that the qualitative methodology was chosen over alternatives because of its suitability for studying how *Studio 263* audiences make sense of the programme in their natural environment, as opposed to subjecting audiences to laboratory experiments and structured surveys, a method employed by quantitative research (Jensen, 1988:10). The other reason for the choice of qualitative methodology is that reception research is predicated upon the qualitative approach. Since this study is located within the reception analysis theoretical framework, I found it appropriate to position it in the same methodological framework (Jensen, 1988:4; Schroder et al, 2003: 125). The other reasons for my choice of qualitative research over the quantitative methodology are outlined below.

Qualitative approaches, also known as interpretive, have the advantage of enabling a holistic investigation of the interpretation of meaning. This is because they are known to pursue in-depth understanding of those being investigated as opposed to generalisation (breadth) which is the concern of the quantitative tradition (Wimmer and Dominick, 1991:139; Schroder et al, 2003:13). Frey et al concur adding that qualitative observations provide greater depth of information about how people perceive events in the context of the actual situations in which they occur (1991:99; Bryman, 1984:82).

In its investigation, the tradition uses naturalistic methods of inquiry as opposed to positivist approaches that use natural science methods to study audiences. It also has the advantage of having the most appropriate methods of capturing the inside views of those being investigated (Bryman, 1984:78). Hence Schroder et al (2003:125) argue:

The preferred methodological approach of reception research is the qualitative interview. The combined phenomenological and hermeneutic pursuit of verbalised audience experiences that are as authentic as possible has caused reception research to adopt a method of inquiry that enables audience members to render their media readings in accordance with their own life world categories.

From the above discussion, it is apparent that qualitative methods are useful in examining frames of interpretation audiences bring to bear in their use of media as a resource in their everyday life (Hansen et al, 1998: 257). It is the above strengths of the qualitative methodology and its associated techniques that prompted me to employ this tradition in collecting data from *Studio 263* audiences. Before embarking on the field research by means of focus group interview, I first conducted a qualitative content analysis of *Studio 263* in order to elucidate the basic codes of meaning encoded into the soap opera by the producers.

### **Qualitative Content Analysis**

Qualitative content analysis can be viewed as preparation for focus group interviews. It is a technique used for analysing the content of media texts and their whole construction which includes, themes, ideas, symbols and messages (Hansen et al, 1998:94). Unlike quantitative content analysis that is preoccupied with the frequency of appearance of certain themes, qualitative content analysis adopts a critical and interpretive approach that looks at the meanings embedded in texts as well as the organisation and presentation of language and images in the same.

In reception analysis, it is important for the researcher to carry out a comparative empirical analysis of media discourses and content structures with those of the audience in order to understand the process of reception, in light of the view that meaning is defined by both the text and its audiences (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:214; Hart, 1991:60). Qualitative content analysis is also useful in allowing the researcher to have an insight into the assumptions that lie behind the content of the media text and those made about the audience as these are critical to the understanding of messages conveyed by the text and meanings decoded by audiences (Morley, 1992:84). The analysis is therefore instrumental in detecting the preferred readings of the text as well as investigating what is included and excluded or foregrounded and backgrounded by the text (Fairclough, 1995:104). See Appendix 3 for the qualitative content analysis of the sample episode of *Studio 263* and chapter one for the qualitative content analysis of the whole programme.

Having established the underlying messages conveyed by the soap opera, through qualitative content analysis, I used the information to form part of the themes in the

interview guide. I also used the information during the group discussions as a guideline in teasing out what the group members perceived to be messages conveyed by the programme. In the following section, I discuss the advantages of using focus group interviews as the main data collection technique. This is followed by a discussion of how I went about using this method to collect my data.

### **My Choice of Method**

#### *The Focus Group Interview*

The choice of focus groups for this study was informed by the desire to examine how media audiences relate to, make sense of, use, negotiate and interpret media content through conversation and interaction in a more natural setting and frame than that of surveys or experiments (Hansen et al, 1998:261). Another reason is their strength in eliciting large amounts of quick and rich data from many respondents while also engaging the subject fully on a given topic (Lunt, 1996:89; Marshall and Rossman, 1999:108). This method is also cost effective yet a wider range of people can be interviewed within the same limitations of time and resources (Fontana and Frey, 1994:365; Hansen et al, 1998:258).

Focus groups can be defined as a qualitative data gathering technique that involves bringing together groups or a series of groups of selected individuals to discuss a specific topic in the presence of a moderator (Fontana and Frey, 1994:365; Lunt, 1996:80). Krueger defines a focus group as a "carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions in a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment"(1988:18; 1986:1). Focus group interviews have become one of the most popular means of analysing media audiences, in particular, they have become closely associated with the reception paradigm (Deacon, 1999:55).

The goal of this technique is to investigate the collective construction of media interpretations between respondents in the focus group (Morley, 1980:23). My choice of focus group interviews was particularly influenced by the realisation that the generation of meanings and interpretations of media content is 'naturally' a social activity and not an individual one as posited by positivist techniques such as surveys (Hansen et al, 1998:261). Hence focus groups can be said to mimic the way that

everyday media interpretations tend to be collectively constructed by people in their social environment (Deacon, 1999:55). Thus, Morgan argues:

The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in the group. (1988:12)

The focus group can therefore be viewed as a public sphere where individuals discuss issues freely and openly, and in the process generate rich and believable qualitative data, well suited to detailed interpretive analysis (Lunt, 1996:88; Deacon, 1999:55). Their strength lies in their ability to create a candid, normal and natural environment that allows participants to discuss, debate and disagree about key issues (Wilkinson, 2004:180, Vaughn et al, 1996:4; Marshall, 1999:115). In addition, group interaction also allows respondents to react to and build upon the responses of other group members. This leads to the production of detailed accounts than those generated in individual interviews (Wilkinson, 2004:180).

Focus groups have their own disadvantages. These include the fact that some group members may dominate the discussion and attempt to impose their opinions, and in the process limit diversity of views expressed and consequently the quality of data gathered (Wimmer and Dominick, 1991:146; Hansen et al, 1998:263). Secondly, group discussions tend to work towards a consensus where common views prevail and dissenting ones are marginalised (Hansen et al, 1998:263). This tendency to build consensus works against the whole purpose of holding focus groups hence Vaughn et al argue, "the purpose of the focus group interview is not on consensus building, rather it is on obtaining a range of opinions from people about issues" (1996:5). It is interesting to note that these disadvantages are however seen as strengths by some scholars who argue that they make focus group interviews more 'natural' and so closely resemble real life in which some individuals are more influential and dominant than others (Liebes and Katz, 1990:29; Hansen et al, 1998:263).

Another weakness of the method is that, unlike individual one-to-one interviews where the researcher has more control over data collected, in focus group discussions the researcher has less control in managing the data being collected (Morgan,

1988:20). However, an alert and skilled moderator can prevent the above occurrences from taking place by directing the discussion (Lunt, 1996:93).

### **The Physical Location of the Study**

Although *Studio 263* is aired on national television and is received by all urban dwellers with television sets in Zimbabwe, this study looks only at the reception of the soap opera by Bulawayo students. This decision was determined by the magnitude of this research project and justified on the grounds that Bulawayo is Zimbabwe's second largest city after Harare. It therefore has a cross-section of cultures, different economic backgrounds and schools, all of which are relevant to the study's objectives.

### **Conducting the Focus Group Interviews**

In conducting my focus group discussions, I followed the following steps: determining the sample size, recruitment of participants, interview setting, my role as a moderator, the interview guide, data collection and data analysis (Vaughn et al, 1996:36; Hansen et al, 1998:264).

In qualitative research, the assumption that the bigger the sample the better, is challenged because qualitative studies are less concerned with producing findings that can be generalised more widely than in providing insights into complex human and social phenomena in specific circumstances (Deacon, 1999:43). In support of small samples used in qualitative research, Jensen and Rosengren argue, "if for example the task is to tease out subtle details from informants about their reception of television fiction, it is no use of course, to turn to a representative sample of a national population. Such a task requires small-scale, in-depth studies..." (1990:23). Thus, in its sampling, the tradition is not concerned about the representativeness of the sample. This means that smaller samples are used in qualitative research than in quantitative research (Deacon, 1999:43).

However, worth noting is that qualitative research has no definite guidelines on the issue of sample size, and as a result, theoretical and empirical requirements of the study as well as the availability of time and resources seem to decide the size of samples (Deacon, 1999:43). It is thus argued that there is no consistency in sampling

procedures used in focus group research and that the sampling methods used are hybrids of already existing sampling strategies (Deacon, 1999:55).

This study used non-random sampling-also known as purposive or judgemental sampling method-to sample the schools and the focus group participants (Deacon, 1999:50). In total, the study had a sample of three schools and thirty two respondents-one focus group in each of the two single-sex schools and two in the co-education school. Each focus group had eight participants. The criterion used to select the schools and participants is outlined below.

Since the research was concerned with investigating the 15-20 age-groups, the study purposively selected three high schools in Bulawayo that were likely to have a cross section of students within this age-group who represented different cultural and social classes. These variables are important in decoding media texts and had to be included in the sample (Ang, 1985:21; Morley, 1992: 93). The high schools that were chosen are: an all girls school (Evelyn High School), an all boys school (Milton High School) and one co-education<sup>10</sup> or mixed school (Nkulumane High School).

Evelyn Girls High School is a government funded up-market girls' boarding and day school which is located in the Bulawayo city centre. Milton High School is one of the oldest and up-market government funded boys' boarding and day school, located in one of the city's middle class suburbs. Evelyn and Milton High Schools are 'former group A' schools, a name that refers to schools formerly attended by middle class students, as evidenced by their middle class locations. These schools are generally on the expensive side and out of reach of many working class students.

On the other hand, Nkulumane High school falls under 'group B' schools which are mainly for working class students. Nkulumane High school is a government funded, mixed day school located in the high density area of Bulawayo. It is attended by boys and girls mainly from the neighbouring locations. The school has relatively lower school fees which are affordable to the working class community within its location.

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<sup>10</sup>'Co-education' or 'Combined education' is a term used in Zimbabwe to refer to mixed sex or 'combined sex' schools, as opposed to single sex schools.

My choice of boarding and day schools, middle and working class schools sought to highlight possible differences in the decoding of the soap opera by students from the two types of schools, given their different socio- cultural and economic backgrounds. Similarly, my choice of both girls and boys schools was influenced by the desire to investigate the influence of gender on interpretation of media texts. Having established the three schools that I wanted to use in my research, I had to find a way of gaining entry into them.

I accessed the three selected schools by physically visiting them and introducing myself to the headmistress of the girls high school and senior teachers in the boys and mixed schools, as the headmasters of the two schools were not available during my visit. The introductions entailed a lengthy discussion of my research topic, objectives and the use to which the data would be put. Fortunately, in all three schools this proved to be a simple task as all concerned authorities were willing to assist. In the one school, the process was much easier as one of the authorities turned out to be my former teacher, hence she was confident that my request was genuine. Having been granted permission to interview the students, my next step was to establish how I would recruit my group participants from these schools.

My aim was to recruit clearly identified individuals who could best address the purpose and goals of the research (Vaughn et al, 1996:48). Hansen et al advise, "individuals who are invited to participate in a focus group must be able and willing to provide the desired information and must be representative of the population of interest" (1998:265). In this study, participants were drawn from those students who are regularly exposed to the programme and had something to say about it (Schroder et al, 2003:159-160). To this end, the study employed purposive sampling in the form of snowball sampling to recruit young people from the three schools to participate in the discussions (Frey et al, 1991:135; Deacon, 1999:50). I chose this sampling method because, unlike random sampling, it allowed me to balance the groups by ensuring that social demographics such as gender, age, class and other variables important to this research, were represented in the group (Hansen et al, 1998:274). Snowball sampling involves getting to know some informants and having them introduce the researcher to others (Taylor, 1984:83). This means contacting an individual who then

suggests further acquaintances who are then asked to bring together a specified number of individuals to the focus group discussion (Schroder et al, 2003:162).

My task of recruiting group participants was made easier as the authorities in the three schools assigned senior teachers to organise the participants for me. All I had to do was to outline the qualities I needed in the participants such as their age- groups and a variety of socio- cultural and class backgrounds in each group. I also emphasised the need to recruit regular viewers of the programme in order to have a meaningful discussion. Having obtained the details of the type of participants I needed, the senior teachers delegated the recruitment task to the head girls and head boys respectively, as they were in constant touch with the students and thus knew their viewing practices. The head girls and boys then approached regular viewers of the programme in their classes. These students in turn identified more students in other classes whom they knew watched *Studio 263*. This went on until the required number of girls and boys from each school was met.

In the two boarding schools, Evelyn and Milton High schools, I made an effort to also recruit naturally existing viewing groups to form part of the discussion groups. Naturally existing groups, also known as pre-constituted groups exist independently of the research. Drawing participants from naturally existing groups had the advantage of producing rich data as participants already knew each other and socialised together before the research (Deacon, 1999:55). This atmosphere promoted ease of discussing issues freely as respondents were comfortable with each other's company as opposed to researcher constituted groups where strangers were brought together resulting in intimidation of less confident group members (Deacon, 1999:56). My next step was to determine the number of groups and participants.

There is no consensus on the acceptable number of focus groups and participants in each group (Hansen et al, 1998:268). However, it is argued that where focus groups form a central and more substantive part of the data collection of a study, six groups are justified (Hansen et al, 1998:268). An important fact to consider here is that the number of focus groups depends on the aims and magnitude of the research (Deacon, 1999: 56). Arguably, there should be an adequate number of groups to reflect the range of participants needed to fully cover the topic (Vaughn et al, 1996:49).

The norm in focus groups is to hold different groups until there is a convergence of themes, and no new information being produced (Taylor, 1984:92; Lunt, 1996:82-83; Vaughn et al, 1996:49; Schroder et al, 2003:160). Vaughn et al (1996:49) argue that participant responses can start to be redundant and predictable after about four group interviews. For maximum benefit, I held a total of four focus group discussions, one group discussion in each of the two single-sex schools and two group discussions in the mixed school. This number of groups was adequate for intra-group and inter-group variations in participant responses. It was also a practical number given the limited scope of the study and the resource constraints in Zimbabwe where the study was located.

If the number of focus groups held is important, group size also plays a crucial role in determining the quality of the resulting discussion (Lunt, 1996: 82). There is a wide range of proposed participant numbers for focus group interviews. Some scholars propose between 5-10 (Deacon, 1999:57), 6-10 (Hansen et al, 1998:270; Lunt, 1996:82), 8-12 (Vaughn et al, 1996:49), while Schroder et al argue that student projects should have 3 to 4 people to enable the moderator to sufficiently manage the group (2003:162). However the main point is to ensure that the composition of the sample allows for diversity of views (Schroder et al, 2003:160). It is important therefore to have a group that is big enough to generate vibrant debate and small enough to allow the moderator to manage it well, and give everyone an opportunity to express their unique perceptions fairly (Merton et al, 1990:137; Vaughn et al, 1996:50-51). Large groups inhibit discussion and are difficult to manage while small ones may fail to generate debate, can be dominated by a few members, and also cause participants to feel obligated to speak, thereby creating tension and discomfort in the group (Vaughn et al, 1996:51).

In light of the above theoretical guidelines, this study had a maximum of eight participants per group. This number promoted a vibrant discussion and everyone had the opportunity to air their views. It also allowed for ease of identifying participants' voices during the transcription of the recorded material for analysis, as opposed to the hassle caused by big groups. The table below highlights the composition of the four focus group interviews held.

### *Composition of Groups*

School	Date & Time	Group Composition	Age Distribution	Ethnic groups	Venue
Evelyn High	17 -11-05 1110hrs-1250hrs	Girls only	15-18 years	Ndebele (5) Shona (2) Chewa (1)	School Library
Milton High	18-11-05 1000hrs-1110hrs	Boys only	15-17 years	Ndebele(4) Shona (3) Shangani (1)	Class-room
Nkulumane High	21-11-05 1200hrs-1330hrs	Boys only	15-17 years	Ndebele (4) Shona (3) Tonga (1)	Researcher's relative's home
Nkulumane High	22-11-05 0900hrs-1030hrs	Girls only	15-17 years	Ndebele (4) Shona (2) Sotho (1) Tumbuka (1)	Researcher's relative's home

Single-sex focus groups were held in all schools. This was necessitated by the researcher's interest to investigate the influence of gender on the negotiation of media messages, that is, how boys-only and girls-only groups, composed of students from different social classes and socio-cultural backgrounds negotiated meanings conveyed by the soap. The separation of sexes promoted an open environment for discussing issues of sexuality. Mixed groups tend to inhibit open and vibrant discussions where discussions of sensitive issues like HIV/AIDS are concerned. This is in light of the fact that the context and company of media consumption also affect meaning construction (Morley, 1992:228). Having determined the number of groups to be held and established the right number of participants for the group discussions, I had to decide on an appropriate setting.

The researcher is aware that the interview setting should provide an atmosphere and tone to facilitate participants' comfort and willingness to disclose information and to stimulate a group conversation (Vaughn et al, 1996:52; Hansen et al, 1998:272). The

venue should also be convenient for all participants, none threatening, informal and homely (Lunt, 1996:82; Hansen et al, 1998:271; Schroder et al, 2003:150).

This study chose neutral venues for all group discussions, where everyone was comfortable and at ease (Schroder et al, 2003; 150). The researcher sought permission from the boarding school authorities to use their facilities for the two boarding schools' groups. In the all-girls school, the interviews were held in the library while in the all-boys school they took place in one of the classrooms. Such venues had the advantage of being familiar to the respondents and therefore created a conducive environment for discussion. In the case of the mixed day school where there were no viewing facilities at the school, an alternative venue was sought at the home of the researcher's relative. This venue was also conducive for the participants as it was a homely setting where *Studio 263* consumption took place. After securing the appropriate venues for the four discussion groups, I had to come up with a guide with which to direct the discussions.

#### *The Interview Guide (See Appendix 1)*

The purpose of the guide was to serve as a map to chart the course of the interview from the beginning to the end (Vaughn et al, 1996; 41). In other words the interview guide was like my research agenda (Shroder et al, 2003:156). I prepared the interview guide in advance to avoid forgetting essential points as well as to keep the focus of the group on subjects relevant to the research objectives (Hansen et al, 1998: 274; Schroder et al, 2003:156). My guide included an overview of the topic, framing and sequencing of important themes, key points, questions and issues, areas of discussion as well as guidelines and interview procedures (Lunt, 1996: 82; Vaughn et al, 1996: 41). In drawing up a clear interview guide, my aim was to tease out salient issues pertaining to how socio-cultural, gender, ethnic, class and other factors influence the negotiation of messages conveyed by the soap opera, as well as the reasons for its popularity. I tried to be consistent in the use of the guide in all focus group discussions held by the study.

Before the interview guide was used in the actual focus groups with students from the three Bulawayo schools, I pre-tested it or piloted it in order to see if the themes and questions outlined in the guide were comprehensibly structured and coherently

arranged, and whether they generated the desired discussion and responses relevant to the research objectives (Hansen, et al, 1998:265). The pilot study was done with five Zimbabwean students at Rhodes Campus in October 2005. These students followed *Studio 263* when they were in Zimbabwe during the school break, hence a meaningful discussion was held with them. The results of the pre-test were helpful in that they assisted me to restructure some questions in the interview guide as well as to add and even exclude others that did not add value to the study. Having piloted the guide, I was now ready to use it in Zimbabwe with the actual participants.

#### *My Role as a Moderator*

The role of the moderator is central to the success of a focus group interview (Vaughn et al, 1996:74). My role as a moderator was to facilitate and stimulate the discussion among participants and not to dominate or lead it (Hansen et al, 1998: 272). Hence it is argued that focus groups depend heavily on the skills of the moderator who must know when to probe for further information, when to stop respondents from discussing irrelevant topics and how to get all the respondents involved in the discussion (Lunt, 1986: 93; Wimmer and Dominick, 1991:147; Hansen et al, 1998: 272).

As a moderator, I had to establish rapport with group participants and create an enabling environment for a fruitful, open and honest discussion that yielded high quality data (Hansen et al, 1998:273). This entailed having good listening skills, being approachable, accommodating, sensitive and responsive to individual needs and showing interests in participants' responses (Vaughn et al, 1996:87). As is pertinent to reception analysis, I first exposed all the four groups to a sample, 30 minutes episode of *Studio 263* which was screened before any discussion ensued (Morley, 1992:91; Hansen et al, 1998:275). Before commencing all four focus group discussions, I asked the participants if they were comfortable with using English or whether there was a need for us to use Ndebele and Shona as well. Fortunately, all students were comfortable with English, thus English was used through out all focus group discussions.

During the discussions, I ensured that all issues outlined in the interview guide were discussed. I however took care not to follow the guide in a rigid fashion, thus, I was

flexible and allowed a free discussion of emerging issues while also managing time spent on each issue (Morgan, 1988:56). Further, care was taken to ensure that a reasonable balance of issues was maintained (Hansen et al, 1998:272). To this end, I kept one person or a few individuals from dominating the group by encouraging the quiet ones to participate in order to ensure the fullest coverage of the topic (Fontana and Frey, 1994:365; Wilkinson, 2004:179). Most importantly, I asked focused and open-ended questions that teased out the reasons for the popularity of *Studio 263* among the participants, while at the same time ensuring that the group remained focused on issues relevant to the research (Vaughn et al, 1996:82). I also avoided asking leading questions but stuck to general ones that allowed group members to express their opinions. Further, I constantly made follow ups and deep probing for elaborations where I felt participants were unclear or where I wanted more information on points raised. During the discussion, I allowed unexpected themes that were not in my interview guide to surface (Marshall and Rossman, 1999:114). This increased the quality of the data.

#### *Data Collection*

All focus group interview proceedings were recorded on audio cassette tapes (Hansen et al, 1998:277). I checked all recording equipment before starting each discussion to ensure smooth recording of proceedings and to avoid disappointments. However before recording, I sought the participants' permission to record the discussions and guaranteed them of the confidential and anonymous use of the recorded material (Vaughn et al, 1996:52; Hansen et al, 1998:277). In addition to the recorded material, I also kept notes on key issues emerging from the proceedings for purposes of comparison with the recorded material and also as a back up plan in case part of the material was lost or damaged.

At the beginning of each discussion, I asked all participants to introduce themselves for ease of identification when transcribing the data. The 'on-tape' identification was matched with a standard questionnaire that was completed by each participant prior to the discussion (Hansen et al, 1998:278). (See Appendix 2 for the standard questionnaire). The questionnaire contained general information on the name, sex, age, residential location, ethnic group and the approximate number of times the participants had watched *Studio 263*. This information was useful in relating the

individual contributions to their social class and socio-cultural background presented in the standard questionnaire.

In total, five one-hour long audio cassettes were recorded from the four group discussions. The girls-only groups had the longest recordings as they had more issues to discuss compared to the boys-only groups. I transcribed all recordings soon after each group discussion to avoid forgetting important points as well as for ease of analysis and reference (Hansen et al, 1998:278). My interview transcript was forty-seven pages long.

### *Data Analysis*

When all the data had been collected, I had to analyse it in order to establish the reasons behind the popularity of *Studio 263* and to assess how different students interpreted the messages conveyed by the soap opera. To this end, I had to categorise all responses following the themes that emerged from the forty-seven paged interview transcripts. Some themes came from the interview guide while new themes were not ignored but also categorised. My choice of thematic analysis was consistent with the argument, "the unit of analysis in focus groups is the thematic content or discourse used in the group" (Lunt, 1996:92). Similarly, Vaughn et al (1996:103) argue that qualitative analysis of focus group data involves identifying themes and 'big' ideas and then providing supporting evidence for these themes from participants' quotes or researcher's notes. The major themes that emerged from the interviews, among others are: *Studio 263* is realistic, *Studio 263*'s characters as extensions of the real world; *Studio 263* as an educational medium; *Studio 263* as entertainment; *Studio 263* as a local production and the paucity of other viewing material.

When all the themes had been consolidated into a single interview transcript, I then adopted a critical ethnography or critical realist position to analyse the data. This is in light of the argument that the researcher should not simply accept what the respondents tell her but take into account that interview data should be critically analysed and interpreted:

Statements from focus group interviews...are not simple representations, true or false of what people think.....interview statements are in a strong sense of

the word 'data' and they become sources of information only through analysis and interpretation. (Jensen, 1982:240)

### **Difficulties Encountered**

While the research process in general went well, there were however some challenges that I encountered during data collection. Data collection logistics were a challenge because November is a month where Zimbabwean students write examinations and thereafter close for the long December holidays until the following year. Worse still, in November 2005, the Zimbabwe school calendar changed to accommodate the senatorial elections that were due to be held at the end of November 2005. This meant that schools had to close two weeks earlier than usual to allow teachers to be polling officers and schools to be used as venues for the elections. The implications of the above were that exams had to be held early and students released early for the holidays. It was therefore difficult to get the senior teachers to organise the required number of students with the desired characteristics, at a time convenient to all of them, as the students had different exam timetables. However due to my persistence and frequent visits to the authorities, I managed to get the students and to conduct all the focus group interviews before schools closed at the end of November.

Technical problems were another challenge that I encountered during data collection. At one school, the discussion was delayed by a technical fault on the video cassette recorder (VCR) that the school had offered me to use. The VCR and the tape which had a recording of the sample episode of *Studio 263* were not compatible. This problem occurred despite the fact that the machine had been pre-tested a day before the discussion. An alternative VCR had to be sought. This incident delayed the group and kept us all waiting while the technical faults were being rectified, as we could not start the discussion without viewing the sample episode. To avoid wasting the students' time, I decided to serve refreshments during the delay and to carry out introductions. Luckily after the refreshments, the group was able to watch the episode and thereafter to commence the discussion.

A third challenge was the poor recording quality. In some cases, particularly in the first group interview, the first part of the recording was poor thus it was difficult to identify the different voices during the transcription. I resorted to using the notes that I had taken to complement the recording. To avoid this voice identification problem in

the rest of the groups, I asked the participants to say their names before making their contributions. This idea worked well and it became easier to link the contributions with each participant. I also had to keep on playing the tape during the interviews to ensure that it was surely recording as the first tape had missed some sections of the discussion.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I outlined the research methodology and methods that were employed by the study to investigate the reception of *Studio 263* by Bulawayo students. The qualitative methodological approach and techniques were found to be the most appropriate data gathering approaches for this study. This is because of their strength of allowing the study of media audiences in their natural contexts where media consumption occurs and from their own perspectives. The chapter also discussed the three stages of the research design: qualitative content analysis, focus group interviews and qualitative data analysis. The focus group interview was the main data gathering method for the study while qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### **Introduction**

Having collected the data from the focus group interviews and categorised it into main themes extracted from the interview transcripts as outlined in chapter three, in this chapter and the next one, I face the difficulty encountered by qualitative media researchers of finally telling stories about the stories which our respondents have chosen to tell us (Morley, 1992:182). In both chapters, I focus on the reasons given by the focus group participants for the popularity of *Studio 263* among Bulawayo students in line with the research objective.

In this chapter, I will concentrate on the theme of 'Realism'. I will discuss how the students viewed this concept in relation to their lived experiences. This entails picking sub themes from the soap opera which they gave as examples of realistic issues portrayed by *Studio 263*. These include HIV/AIDS, the dangers of unprotected sex, abstinence, living positively, stigmatisation and teenage pregnancies. I will also discuss other issues they raised which relate to realism-such as real life events which are cited in the soap. To further explain their conception of realism, I have also cited issues and events from the soap which they found unrealistic. In the last section of the chapter, I discuss realism in terms of how *Studio 263* characters are viewed by the students as extensions of real life. Before addressing 'realism', I first discuss the informants' viewing context, as it impacts on meaning making (Morley, 1992:228).

#### **Viewing Context**

This section on viewing context is divided into two parts. The first part addresses the students' viewing patterns, that is, how often they watch the programme. This is important in addressing the research objective of investigating the popularity of the programme. The other section addresses the domestic viewing context in which *Studio 263* consumption takes place.

Most students interviewed said they were great fans of *Studio 263*, watching the programme religiously from Monday to Friday. Other students said although they

were regular followers of the programme, their viewing was sometimes disrupted by frequent electricity cuts<sup>11</sup> which caused them to miss some episodes. Those who are at boarding school only watched it frequently during the vacation as during the school term they will be at hostels where they have to follow the school routine which does not coincide with the screening of the programme. Moreover, household chores and schoolwork (homework) were also cited as another form of disruption together with other forms of entertainment such as video hire and DSTV<sup>12</sup>. The following extracts outline the informants' viewing patterns:

**Speaker four:** I am a regular viewer. I always say...man I have to watch the next episode.

**Speaker seven:** I watch it everyday except on Tuesdays because I will be at church.

**Speaker five:** I always watch *Studio 263* except when we have problems of electricity.

**Speaker three:** I watch it maybe four times a week depending on whether I am on duty to wash dishes or not.

**Speaker one:** I watch it maybe three times a week. At times my parents do not allow us to watch television because they want us to be studying at that time.

**Speaker eight:** I usually watch it maybe two to three days in a week because on some days I would be watching movies.

From the above statements, it is clear that television viewing does not occur in isolation but is part of other household and social routines. This is evident in the students' discourses where household chores, church, study and other activities interfered with their viewing of *Studio 263*. This is consistent with Ang's assertion that watching television is the ill-defined shorthand term for the multiplicity of situated practices and experiences in which television audiencehood is embedded (1990:163).

My findings substantiate Ang's (1990) analysis of television viewing while also confirming Hobson's results of her study of *Crossroads* viewers where she discovered that most of her female viewers intertwined their viewing of *Crossroads* with household chores such as preparation of meals, cleaning the house and attending to

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<sup>11</sup> The Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA) has introduced frequent power cuts as part of the load shedding exercise meant to conserve electricity by limiting the units consumed by every household each day. Load shedding occurs on different days and times for different suburbs hence some of these power cuts fall on days and times when the soap *Studio 263* is being screened.

<sup>12</sup> DSTV (Digital Satellite Television) is accessed by a privileged few in Zimbabwe as most people do not have access to foreign currency for subscription payment. Because the national television channel is considered boring by most people, other forms of entertainment such as video hire are quite popular among those who cannot afford DSTV.



children (1982:111). She thus concluded that watching television is part of the everyday life of viewers and that family situations change both the ability to view with any form of concentration and also the perspective which the audience has on a programme (1982:110).

Having established that most of the participants were regular viewers of the programme and that they went out of their way to watch it and did not only watch it because it happened to be screened when they were there, my next step was to enquire about their viewing environment and other social conditions that could affect their viewing. This is because the viewing situation is very different for different people (Hobson, 1982:111). Moreover, viewing conditions impact on meaning making, as argued by reception theorists, "in the study of television, there is a need to analyse the socially differentiated conditions within which individuals receive television messages, as media situational constraints affect meaning production in the specific situation of media use" (Thompson, 1988:375; Schroder et al, 2003:125).

The majority of my informants watched *Studio 263* with their parents and siblings because, unlike Western soap operas, it did not have pornographic scenes which could make it uncomfortable to view with older or younger members of the family, in a traditional Zimbabwean family set up. In traditional Zimbabwean families, young people are discouraged from watching television programmes that contain sex and other intimate scenes such as kissing and even strong language, as these are believed to influence them into practising culturally unacceptable forms of behaviour transmitted by the modern media. In other words, this shows that most Zimbabwean parents believe in the media effects thesis where the media is seen as having direct and detrimental effects on supposedly weak minds such as those of young people (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:208; Silverstone, 1990: 177). They do not believe that young people are capable of negotiating messages from media texts in virtually unlimited ways. The excerpts below highlight the students' domestic viewing contexts:

**Speaker three:** I normally watch *Studio 263* with my parents. Actually *Studio 263* is a soap but you don't find other things like pornography in it, like you would in Western soaps.

**Speaker four:** I watch it with my parents and sisters because it usually comes when we are having our evening meal.

**Speaker two:** I watch it everyday with my mum. When my brother is there he does not watch *Studio 263* because he feels that it is useless...[Laughter].

**Speaker seven:** I usually watch it with my parents and my sisters except for my elder brother who doesn't like it.

**Speaker eight:** I usually watch it with my two sisters. They are great fans. It's now like a drug to them: they always watch it...sometimes I watch it with my mum. My dad doesn't watch it.

**Speaker six:** I watch *Studio 263* almost everyday with my mum and my two sisters and dad doesn't watch *Studio 263* cause he feels he will be wasting his time.

**Speaker five:** I usually watch it most of the times with my friends.

It is noteworthy that girls said they watched the programme with their parents and siblings but their fathers and brothers were not interested as they felt it was time wasting. This observation is linked to the genre theory argument that different genres appeal to different audience members and as such, soap opera tends to appeal to female members more than to their male counterparts (Brunsdon, 1981:36). This topic will be discussed in detail in chapter five. Of significance on the viewing context was that only boys said they watched the programme with both their friends and families, while girls watched it only with their parents and siblings.

A possible reason for the differences in the viewing contexts between men and women is that *Studio 263* is screened in the early evening between 7.30pm and 8.00pm. At this time, girls are expected to be at home doing household chores while boys have the freedom to go out and be with friends. The fact that boys can watch the soap with peers while girls watch it only with their family members can also affect the mediation of the messages carried by the soap, and hence cause young women and men to have different interpretations of the programme. To reiterate, this is in line with Morley's (1992:228) observation that the company of viewing affects the negotiation of messages. Schroder et al (2003: 5) concur, arguing that peer groups particularly affect the way individuals use and make sense of media material. Having outlined the importance of the viewing context in meaning making, in the next section I discuss realism as one of the main reasons for the popularity of *Studio 263* among Bulawayo students.

### **Realism - Thematic**

My major finding was that most students cited realism as the reason for the popularity of the programme among young people. This confirms Strelitz's argument that an important consideration in deciding the popularity of a programme is the degree to which audiences find it 'realistic' (2002:187). Realism has been quoted in many studies involving soap opera audiences as one of the factors that attracts viewers to different programmes. For example, in her study "Watching *Dallas*", Ang (1985) established that the majority of her forty-two respondents cited realism as the reason for deriving pleasure from *Dallas*.

She observed that her viewers judged the programme according to two types of realisms, empiricist and emotional realism (Ang, 1985: 37-45). The empiricist conception of realism was based on the 'genuineness' of characters and situations in *Dallas*. In other words, it was realism on a denotative level in which a literal resemblance is sought between the fictional world of the text and the real world as experienced by the audience member (Strelitz, 2002:188). Empirical realists expected to see in the film, events and situations which mirrored their real life and coincided with the social reality of ordinary people and their real problems such as unemployment, as opposed to fiction (Ang, 1982:35-6). These viewers made a comparison between the realities 'in' and 'outside' a text, and a text that was viewed as rendering 'unrealistic' social reality was perceived as bad (Ang, 1985:36).

Ang however criticises the empiricist conception of realism arguing that television programmes are texts and as such they are a result of selection and construction of the real world. This means that media texts can never be totally realistic, "there can never be any question of an unproblematic mirror relation between text and social reality: at most it can be said that a text constructs its own version of 'the real'" (Ang, 1985:37).

Emotional realism was cited by viewers who read the programme at the connotative level, in which the people and situations were taken as real even though at the denotative level they continued to be seen as unrealistic. This means that emotionally, the events and situations were understood as realistic despite the fact that they were not real (Ang, 1985:45).

Arguing on similar grounds, Ellis (1982) reiterates that cinema and television audiences have various kinds of expectations about realism. The term realism he argues is used to, "describe a whole series of principles of artistic construction and of audience expectation alike" (1982:6). Like Ang's empiricist notion of realism, Ellis argues that the audience expects the representation on screen to have "surface accuracy" and that it should conform to audience expectations of events (audience notions of common sense and taken-for-granted notions of events). This means that it should explain itself adequately and conform to expected notions of psychology and character motivation (1982:6-7). Like Ang, he concludes, "there is no realism but realisms" (Ellis, 1982:7-8).

The above analyses by Ang (1985) and Ellis (1982) help to explain the different responses given by students when asked why they liked *Studio 263*, and why they thought the soap was popular among Bulawayo students. Like Ang's viewers, the students' views on realism can also be categorised into emotional realism and empiricist realism. I will discuss both views, thus- those who felt the soap was realistic at both the connotative and denotative level as well as those students who read the programme at the denotative level only.

Most students found the soap realistic because it was linked to what they could relate to in their everyday lives or lived cultures and experiences. Through the realistic situations that are portrayed by the soap, the viewers said they were able to learn different lessons from them such as how they can react to and handle similar situations if they befell them. The way these students perceived realism can also be explained by the soap opera theory which states that soap operas are designed to connect with everyday life and aim to reflect social reality (Livingstone, 1989:56). This is also reiterated by Newcomb (1982:123) who concurs that the interest of soap operas resides in the claim that they portray a life parallel to that of its viewers. Therefore, by viewing *Studio 263*, the students felt that they could see their own social realities being reflected in the soap. It is thus apparent that they believed in the empiricist conception of realism where representations on screen were seen as having "surface accuracy" and conforming to their expectations of real life events. Their conception of *Studio 263*'s realism is evident in the following excerpts:

**Speaker seven:** I like *Studio 263* cause it's more realistic you know...what we want are things that we actually face ...situations like Tendai, Vimbai and things like that. Some of those things happen in our everyday lives and in our families...so I like it because it is realistic and also interesting. It's not like the other boring films because in it we watch things that really happen you know.

**Speaker four:** As I said *263* is very realistic, I learn a lot of things from the Vimbais you know, especially for us young ladies that you can make it in life without having to have loose morals you know and things like that...

**Speaker five:** I also like the fact that it's realistic as it touches on every aspect of life.

To further demonstrate *Studio 263's* reality, the students argued that they found it more realistic compared to other soap operas they watch. The extract below shows the importance placed by the students on being able to identify their own situations which they face as Zimbabweans in the film, as opposed to imagining other situations experienced by other people in other countries which they have never come across themselves. It can thus be said that the realism which they enjoyed in this local production, is also linked to their being Zimbabwean, thus their Zimbabwean identity:

**Speaker five:** Like I said *263* is very realistic, you know with the other films, well for us people in Zimbabwe basically they are not really realistic you know, fine you can imagine and all that. With *263* you know, you can actually see yourself in that particular situation...the difference is in terms of technology. Their [Western] soaps are advanced while ours are not...but ours are more realistic to us than theirs...

Strelitz's study of the 'homeland' viewers, established that largely working class students found "greater realism" in local productions because they connect more with their own lived reality than students from the middle class (2002a: 467). He however noted that empiricist notions of realism were not solely class-based but cut across all classes, "recourse to empiricist notions of realism was also encountered in my interviews with African urban, middle class students..." (Strelitz, 2002:190). My findings confirm Strelitz's conclusions, as class did not seem to play a major role in influencing the way the students perceived *Studio 263's* empirical realism. Students from both working and middle classes had similar responses to the soap's relationship to their lived experiences. Both groups were more interested in the empiricist notion of realism than the emotional one.

To further demonstrate how an individual's personal and cultural reality mediates their understanding and interpretation of media messages, students cited personal

experiences and cultural practices such as lobolo<sup>13</sup> (bride price) that linked with what they had seen on *Studio 263* as evidence of the soap's realism. This is exemplified by the following extracts:

**Speaker two:** I think *Studio 263* relates to real life because some of the things we see actually happen in real life. For instance Jabu and Sibho are trying to get married but it's difficult for them because they have no money. Their situation is found in our real life where men have to pay lobolo before marrying...

**Speaker seven:** How I relate *Studio 263* to real life...you can look at Mai Huni's relationship with Vimbai. They are not really in good books. If I relate it to real life, I have experienced such things. I stay with my brother and stuff and he doesn't really love me. I don't get the love I deserve from him, so I relate it to real life...

Reception analysis argues that media audiences engage with media texts and negotiate different meanings from them and thus integrate them into other aspects of their lives (Thompson, 1988:375; Moores, 1993:1; Schroder, 2003:109). I found this true of the students in that they picked themes from *Studio 263* which they found directly connected to their everyday lives. The students discussed how they related to these themes and how they would incorporate the new information obtained from them in their lives. This is consistent with Hall's (1980) preferred reading theory which posits that those viewers whose social situation aligns them comfortably with the dominant ideology, would produce dominant readings of a text by accepting its preferred meanings. On the other hand those whose social situation places them in opposition to the dominant ideology, would oppose the meanings in the text (Hall: 1980:136).

The following section presents the dominant readings of the soap made by the students. I refer to the themes as dominant readings because they are identical to those that the encoders (*Studio 263* producers) intended to portray as outlined in chapter one of this thesis. In this section, I thus present the main themes given by the students as examples of realistic messages portrayed by the soap opera. HIV/AIDS emerged as the most popular theme chosen by all students, other related themes are: the dangers of unprotected sex, abstinence, knowing one's HIV/AIDS status, living positively, fighting stigma, HIV/AIDS treatment and teenage pregnancy.

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<sup>13</sup> Lobolo is the traditional bride price paid to the girl's family by the fiancé before the two can stay together as man and wife. The amounts vary from one cultural group to the other. Nowadays, the amount charged corresponds with the girl's education level. The more educated the girl, the higher the lobolo and the less educated she is the lower the bride price charged for her.

## *HIV/AIDS*

Most students identified HIV/AIDS as the main theme of *Studio 263*, with some of them labelling the soap, "an anti-AIDS campaign". At the same time, the students were able to link it with their own circumstances. For instance, one student relates the disease closer to home where he cites a former classmate as a victim of the epidemic. To him the disease is not distant but real and tangible. This makes the soap very realistic for him as he has tangible evidence of the deadly disease's occurrence. To put it in Ang's (1985) words, to this viewer, the soap portrays both empirical and emotional realism, as he can both physically and emotionally relate to the impact of the disease. Similarly, speaker six relates it to himself, first as an African and then closer to home, as a Zimbabwean:

**Speaker seven:** I think *Studio 263* is basically about HIV/AIDS awareness. It relates to real life ....right now, HIV/AIDS statistics say that teenagers are mostly affected by the HIV/AIDS virus...so I take it that *Studio 263* is an *anti-AIDS campaign*.

**Speaker one:** I think what happens in *Studio 263* happens here also because there was this girl I used to learn with, she was made pregnant while she was still young and now I think she is suffering from HIV/AIDS...so it's real, those issues really happen.

**Speaker six:** I think the depiction of HIV/AIDS by the soap is real cause it happens, if you look at all the five continents, Africa has the highest rate of people infected with HIV/AIDS ...also in Zimbabwe HIV/AIDS is on the rise.

**Speaker two:** I think at first when Aaron Chihundura Moyo was still writing the script for *Studio 263* mostly it focused on HIV/AIDS but I think it has changed a bit and it is now teaching about real life situations...

Of significance is speaker two's comment cited above. She argues that *Studio 263*'s plot has since changed from what it was at its inception. Her argument was echoed by other informants who felt that initially, *Studio 263* was strictly about HIV/AIDS prevention, but has taken a new twist as it now addresses life in general. It is interesting to note that she cites the change in script writers as the reason for the change in the direction taken by the soap. This shows that soap opera viewers follow these programmes religiously and can even go out of their way to find out more information about them, such as who writes its script, who has left the soap and who has joined it. This observation was also noted by Hobson's (1982) study in which women followed all developments concerning the soap and knew a lot about their favourite characters' personal lives (in real life) and other issues surrounding the programme (this will be further discussed under the soap opera characters section).

Hobson's experience and my experience with the *Studio 263* viewers show how deeply soap opera viewers engage with the genre.

### *The Dangers of Unprotected Sex*

Another theme through which the students noted the soap's portrayal of realism was the dangers of unprotected sex. Most students identified this theme and cited characters from the soap that had contracted HIV/AIDS due to unprotected sex. It is worth noting how they picked different characters who had been involved in this practice showing how closely they follow the events in the soap:

**Speaker eight:** We are shown the dangers of unprotected sex through Muwengwa who gets an STD when he sleeps with Eve and this really ruins his life.

**Speaker five:** I think it addresses it through Tendai and Kenge who are now suffering from HIV/AIDS because of unprotected sex.

**Speaker one:** I think the issue of unprotected sex is coming out. The message is loud and clear...you do it unprotected, you get into trouble...you do it protected you are safe ...or not do it at all.

It is interesting to note how the male student above thinks that the message on unprotected sex is "loud and clear", further confirming Hall's (1980) preferred reading theory. It is apparent that this viewer is a dominant reader of the producers' messages and he is accepting the message as it is. While the students mentioned contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS as the deadly result of unprotected sex, the girls-only groups mentioned pregnancy as a result of unprotected sex. This can be because they are the ones who become pregnant biologically and not boys. Boys did not find this an issue at all, so for them HIV/AIDS was the main concern. This goes to show how media messages are decoded according to how closely they link to one's situation. This is clearly spelt out by Morley who argues, "when interpreting media messages, individuals have different relations to sets of discourses, in that their positioning in the social formation will determine which sets of discourses a given subject is likely to use" (1992:57).

### *Abstinence*

A third element of realism depicted in the soap is abstinence. Students advocated abstinence and condemned pre-marital sex. They were all aware of the consequences of not abstaining and showed their stance by condemning characters in the soap that

did not abstain (Tendai, Muwengwa, Dread Welly, Ayanda) while commending those who abstained (Vimbai and Sibbo). This is evident in the following discussion:

**Speaker four:** I think the best way is not to have sex before marriage at all.

**Speaker one:** I think *Studio 263* teaches us to abstain. Looking at Vimbai's life, she abstains up until now she is abstaining and *I have also been abstaining cause I think it's the right thing to do and besides other methods like condoms, I don't think they are ok but I think abstinence is the best.*

**Speaker four:** Abstinence is addressed through Sibbo, James and Vimbai. It teaches us that if we abstain we will be safe but if we indulge like Welly and Tendai we will get into trouble because these girls our age also deal with sugar daddies like Muwengwa which leaves us young boys who date them vulnerable.

Notably, girls from all ethnic groups represented in the groups (Ndebele, Shona, Chewa, Tumbuka and Ndau) advocated abstinence more than boys. This can be explained by the nature of social education girls get from their parents and aunts on the importance of keeping one's virginity/purity<sup>14</sup> until marriage. In addition to the cultural education girls get, the largely Christian Zimbabwean society also expects girls to remain virgins until marriage, hence abstinence is promoted over safe sex. Given the above cultural and religious expectations on girls, abstinence became the ideal thing for these female students. As the above excerpts reveal, some of the girls even went as far as saying they have also been abstaining as they feel indulging in sex even when one uses condoms is not right (see speaker one above). These responses from the girls about abstinence support reception analysis's assertion that media messages are negotiated differently by cultural and sub-cultural groups. Thus Schroder et al (2003:124) argue:

Situational and social contexts of reading affect the meanings actualised by audiences and that the interpretive codes are acquired socially by individuals interacting with other individuals in socially organised structures such as in family, peer groups, school, class and gender.

Based on Schroder et al's analysis, gender seemed to play a significant role in the girls' interpretation and understanding of abstinence as compared to boys who were not as emotionally involved as girls. Only one boy seemed worried by the fact that if girls do not abstain they put young boys at risk of contracting the deadly disease, HIV/AIDS. His concern was one sided as he felt it was the girls and not boys who ought to abstain for the benefit of boys and not themselves (girls). Another male

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<sup>14</sup> In the Zimbabwean society and culture, a girl is expected to remain a virgin until marriage. Premarital sex and illegitimate children are considered a disgrace by the society.

student echoed the same sentiments when he expressed his desire to get a girl who abstains like one of the female characters, 'Vimbai' in the soap:

**Speaker one:** ...I like Eve, not Eve, Vimbai...look at what she does, not only does she not have it unprotected but *she doesn't have it at all*. We see her refusing to have sex with Tom...*I wish I could get a girl like that...* [laughter].

It is interesting to note the irony in the above utterance where the male speaker wishes to get a girl who has been abstaining. It is ironic in that once he gets the girl, she will no longer be a 'girl like that'. This shows how the socio-cultural context of media consumption affects the decoding moment. These boys have been socialised into believing that girls should keep their purity while it was acceptable for boys to indulge. It can also be argued that because the soap opera operates within certain cultural and social frameworks, it only represents female characters as abstaining, while not a single male character is depicted as doing the same. This observation shows how encoders of media messages try to design messages which are culture specific and acceptable to the target audience. However, in so doing they promote certain cultural practices which may have detrimental effects on society.

Another significant observation was that views on abstinence were not unanimous even within the girls' camp. Among female students, there were some girls who felt that the soap and Zimbabwean culture in general glorified abstinence but did not show the rewards for it. They argued that if abstinence was as important as they were meant to believe, at least the soap should have shown what those characters who practised it stood to benefit. The excerpt below shows the debate that occurred in one of the girls groups on the portrayal of abstinence in *Studio 263*:

**Speaker one:** As for me I think it [*Studio 263*] shows the consequences of not abstaining from sex and stuff, like Tendai, she is a very good example you know, she became infected with the HIV virus, it's like she was introduced to the adult world at a tender age and it's not nice.

**Speaker four:** We are shown the consequences of not abstaining but can we see the rewards of abstaining? Look at Vimbai, hey she is abstaining and looking after her body and all but we are not shown what she is getting from abstaining or the motivation for it.

**Speaker three:** I think we see a reward through Sibbo because most girls think that if they abstain the guy would leave them but with Sibbo the guy hasn't left her.

The above extract is significant as it illustrates how participants in focus group discussions discuss and debate media messages amongst each other as they do in real life exchanges when they watch programmes and discuss them with family, friends and relatives. It also shows how audiences can be emotionally involved with the media text and thus not take what it communicates at face value but try and make up their own meanings from it. This is consistent with Hobson's findings that, "the message is not solely in the text but can be changed or worked on by the audience as they make their own interpretation of a programme" (1982:105). The above girls were working with the text and making their own interpretations of what the production set out to communicate, as indicated by their different views on abstinence. The extract above also illustrates Casey et al's (2002:82) observation:

The meanings preferred by the encoders of the messages cannot be guaranteed by the encoders because, on the one hand, media texts are polysemic and on the other hand, readers with different socio-cultural codes will therefore interpret the messages differently.

From the objectives of *Studio 263* outlined in chapter one of this thesis, it is clear the producers of the soap intended to portray abstinence as ideal and hoped that all young people, who are the target audience of the soap will interpret the soap in a similar way and not question its benefits. Contrary to their wishes, the students seemed to be more active interpreters. Thus, not only did these girls make their own interpretations of abstinence, they opposed what both the text and their culture expected of them.

#### *Knowing One's HIV/AIDS Status*

This was another theme depicted by the soap, which the students found realistic. The majority of the students seemed to agree with the soap's message that encouraged viewers, particularly young people to go to New Start Centres<sup>15</sup> for testing so that they could live according to their statuses. Most of the participants cited positive living as one of the benefits of knowing one's status (positive living will be discussed later in the chapter). Protecting unborn babies was given as the other reason for testing. The students also observed that the soap accurately represented what happens in real life regarding the issue of knowing one's status, in that in Zimbabwe, many

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<sup>15</sup> New Start Centres are HIV testing centres that are sponsored by Population Services International (PSI). They are located in all cities and towns of Zimbabwe. PSI, who were the first sponsors of the programme, flight adverts during the screening of *Studio 263*, advertising these centres and encouraging young people to go for testing.

people are afraid of going for HIV testing. The following are the students' discourses on knowing one's status:

**Speaker five:** When Tendai went for HIV/AIDS testing, she found that she was positive...*she also did this to protect her unborn child* and also to protect her boyfriend, Bruce...*so it's a way of trying to protect others and how you can protect yourself also.*

**Speaker eight:** I think knowing one's status helps in real life, like if we look at the Muwengwa family, Mrs Muwengwa knew that her husband was promiscuous so she didn't want to indulge in sexual activities with him without first knowing his HIV/AIDS status, so in a way *knowing one's status helps*. It helped her to plan for her husband like what type of food he should eat ...

**Speaker three:** Tendai's going public about her status although her family didn't want her to do so is similar to what happens in real life. Families are embarrassed by having HIV positive people.

**Speaker six:** It also shows us that in society some people don't want to be tested as they are afraid, like Muwengwa, it was really a hard time for him to go to the New Start Centre to get tested eventually he did go with the catalyst of the wife ....and he tested positive.

It is noteworthy that although the issue of knowing one's HIV/AIDS status was read dominantly by the students, there are some male participants who made oppositional readings of this message. While most students were in favour of knowing one's status, some boys seemed to subscribe to the common view that, "what you don't know doesn't hurt you". Despite the bold message put across by the soap that encourages them to go for testing and counselling, the boys argued that it is better not to know one's status at all, as knowing would affect one mentally and physically resulting in the pre-mature death of the individual:

**Speaker six:** I think knowing your status at times can be a mental crucifixion...yah you die quickly if you know that you are HIV positive. If you don't know you can just live your life but once you know I think you die early....[laughter].

The differences in perception of the above issues reaffirm reception analysis' conclusion that, "the text can no longer be seen as a self sufficient entity that bears its own meaning and exerts a similar influence on all its readers, rather it is a potential of meanings that can be activated in a number of ways" (Fiske, 1987:269). It also shows that television audiences are a heterogeneous group which has different relationships with the text resulting in multiple interpretations of the same text (Fiske, 1987:266).

### *Living Positively*

A fifth element of realism chosen by the informants was living positively. The students felt that the soap depicted this theme in line with what they had seen happening in real life. They cited some characters who were seen as living positively by avoiding multiple sexual partners, eating nutritious food and getting support from other family members and people in general. The informants felt that they could use the advice given by the soap in their own lives as well:

**Speaker two:** We see it in Tendai who gets advice from her family about how she should live...*even us in real life* we can get advice when we are HIV positive.

**Speaker three:** I think it's possible to live positively cause if you look at Tendai, she is living positively and is trying to tell the whole nation about her status. She also knew what nutritious foods she had to eat and not to go about having sexual intercourse with people because she knew her status.

The students seemed to relate to this message in similar ways. They all agreed with the producers' preferred reading which encouraged them to be positive about HIV/AIDS. It is worth noting that the discourses which they used to express themselves on this issue are the same discourses used in the HIV/AIDS adverts flighted by Population Services International (PSI) during the screening of the soap opera. Examples of such discourses include: "Don't be negative about being positive" and "Having HIV/AIDS does not mean the end of the world", "Being HIV positive does not mean that you will die" and "HIV/AIDS is like other terminal illnesses such as diabetes and cancer". The extracts below show how these discourses were articulated by the students:

**Speaker five:** In Tendai we can see that you can live positively and that *you mustn't be negative about being positive* because *it doesn't mean the end of the world. HIV/AIDS should be like other diseases which are life-long like diabetes and other diseases ...and discovering that you are HIV positive doesn't mean you have AIDS already.*

**Speaker eight:** *Living with HIV/AIDS doesn't mean the end of the world.* If you look at Tendai at first she wasn't strong and she couldn't accept the fact that she was HIV positive but in the end she was strong and she told Eve to go and get tested so that she could know her status. *Being HIV positive doesn't mean that you will die, you can live long as long as you eat healthy food and avoid having unprotected sex cause you can spread it to other people.*

The use of the advertisement's discourses by the students exemplifies the observation by media analysts that media messages are mediated by many other things including

other media texts. In a way, this shows some form of inter-textuality between different genres.

### *Fighting Stigma*

First, the students spoke of HIV/AIDS and they also mentioned the dangers of unprotected sex, abstinence, knowing one's status and living positively, as realistic issues addressed by the soap. Fighting stigma was another realism element they observed. Students could identify with this theme and even cited their own life practices that were linked to stigmatisation of people living with HIV/AIDS:

**Speaker five:** Yes we identify with this issue as it happens in everyday life. People with the HIV virus are stigmatised everyday even some of us here do that, we joke and laugh about it at times...[laughter].

This statement was mentioned amidst laughter by everyone in the group (boys group). This goes to show how lightly these boys perceive HIV/AIDS and how they are also involved in the stigmatisation. I observed that the girls' reaction was different from the boys'. The girls did not laugh about this issue but treated it with seriousness and caution as seen in the excerpt which follows:

**Speaker eight:** In the soap we see tete telling Tendai that she is a moving grave. You don't have to stigmatise people with HIV/AIDS, you have to treat them fairly...they have made a mistake. We all make mistakes and we learn from our mistakes. So we have to accept it as it is.

The different reactions to the disease exhibited by the different genders can be related to the wider socio-cultural context of Zimbabwe<sup>16</sup>. In Zimbabwe, HIV/AIDS prevalence among the 15-29 years age group is higher among women than men (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005). As such, women are more sensitive to the disease than men and are realistic about their proximity to it. On the other hand, most men distance themselves from HIV/AIDS and as a result they take HIV/AIDS messages lightly while women pay more attention to them. Furthermore, women are expected by society to bear the HIV/AIDS burden which includes nursing the sick, while men often run away from such responsibilities. The above facts were

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<sup>16</sup> United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM, 2002:5) – Southern Africa Regional Office, in their report entitled, *Gender and HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe, a community based research* established that women tended to accept and bear the HIV/AIDS burden in accordance with what culture and society “considered as the norm” as opposed to males who ran away from HIV/AIDS related responsibilities.

established by the United Nations Development Fund for Women's community based research on gender and HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe (UNIFEM, 2002:5). (See footnote number sixteen). The situation described by the UNIFEM report is confirmed by my findings where, in all four focus group discussions, girls, because of society's expectation of them regarding the disease, discussed it and its effects with emotion and much involvement, while boys handled it casually.

#### *HIV/AIDS Treatment*

The seventh theme through which realism was depicted by the drama was its portrayal of HIV/AIDS treatment. There were mixed views on the way the soap addresses the issue of HIV/AIDS treatment. Some students argued that the soap addresses the issue of treatment through the recommended diet for people living with HIV/AIDS as well as traditional ways of dealing with the virus. This can be linked to some cultural practices and beliefs that exist in some sections of the Zimbabwean society in which traditional healers<sup>17</sup> are still believed to be capable of treating HIV/AIDS:

**Speaker six:** I think the issue of HIV/AIDS treatment is addressed in the soap because if we look at Tendai's aunt, she is trying to convince Tendai's mother to take Tendai to the rural areas to have some traditional rituals and to get herbs with which to treat Tendai...so I think that is how they are trying to depict HIV/AIDS treatment.  
**Speaker two:** It is also addressed through diet, like in this other episode Muwengwa says "Ndirikutoda muriwo unedovi" [I want vegetables with peanut butter] just because he heard that if you eat those things the virus will not spread fast.

Other participants felt that the soap did not address the medical treatment of HIV/AIDS. It is interesting to note that the students were using their knowledge of the disease and its treatment in real life to interpret the soap. The excerpt below shows how the students expected to see characters in the soap being advised to use anti-retroviral and related drugs, which is the real life treatment of the disease and not traditional medicine which they believed did not treat the disease. By realising that the soap was ironically discouraging traditional treatment of HIV/AIDS, we can see how the students are active decoders who are able to unearth hidden messages in media texts. Further, the students' desire to see the realistic treatment of HIV/AIDS in the soap also confirms Ang's (1985) concept of empirical realism in which viewers

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<sup>17</sup> In Zimbabwe, some traditional healers claim that they can cure HIV/AIDS. Desperate people suffering from the disease fall prey to these traditional healers whose only interest is financial gain. *Studio 263* is trying to show that these traditional herbs can never cure HIV/AIDS.

expect programmes to reflect empirical events and situations that tally with "surface reality":

**Speaker seven:** I think the issue of HIV/AIDS treatment is silent because we don't see a situation whereby they talk about the anti-retroviral drugs and so forth...so I think the issue of AIDS treatment is not addressed in *Studio 263*...it emphasises stigma and discrimination and how to tell other people about one's HIV status....

Another related issue which the group participants failed to agree on was whether the soap realistically portrayed condom use as a way of protecting people from HIV/AIDS infection. The views given by the students were varied: it was as if they watched different versions of *Studio 263*. Some students argued that the soap did not attend to the issue of condom use:

**Speaker seven:** .....at the same time the soap is silent on condom use though we are made to assume that Tendai contracted AIDS because he slept with Kenge without a condom....

Others felt that while the soap may not be dealing with the issue boldly as it does with other issues, it did depict this theme, though it only showed infected people using condoms while the uninfected were encouraged to abstain. However, the overall conclusion by the students was that abstinence was advocated by the soap as opposed to condom use because the former reduced one's chances of contracting the disease:

**Speaker five:** The use of condoms is mentioned in *Studio 263* because when we look at Wellington or Tendai, when they went to test for HIV/AIDS at the New Start Centre, they were advised to use a condom ...so the use of condoms is advised in *Studio 263*, that is, when to use it ...however condom use is not mentioned a lot, it is only mentioned when going for counselling or help on one's HIV status...so that is when it is mentioned...*I think the soap promotes abstinence more than condom use because it reduces the chances of being infected with HIV/AIDS.*

The influence of the students' lived cultures was also evident in their discussion of condom use. It was fascinating to observe how participants were against public promotion of condom use on national television:

**Speaker six:** *Studio 263* addresses this [safe sex] through adverts on condoms...all of a sudden you see adverts talking about condom use....then *that's the part where I just switch off* cause I think it's not appropriate and it's too much. I think a soap should be about entertainment...a soap, no matter what should entertain.

This can be linked to the largely Christian Zimbabwean society which advocates abstinence over premarital sex. Promoting condom use is viewed as a way of promoting immorality, premarital and extra-marital sex, all of which are seen as a disgrace. Therefore, if *Studio 263*, which is screened on national television, was to advocate condom use publicly, it would attract a public outcry as this would be like going against the cultural and religious practices of the society. It is from this viewing context that these boys interpret condom adverts flighted during *Studio 263*.

### *Teenage Pregnancy*

The eighth and final theme identified as realistic in the soap was teenage pregnancy. Unlike in the discussion of most themes outlined above where there were different views, there seemed to be unanimous agreement among participants in all discussions on this theme. All the students agreed that the theme was realistically portrayed and that they had all encountered teenage pregnancy in real life. However, like the theme of abstinence, girls' groups were more vocal on this issue than boys' groups. Their contributions revealed that they felt their proximity to the issue more than the boys. Perhaps this is because it is the females who are victims of teenage pregnancy and who shoulder all the blame from society while the male perpetrators are not equally affected (see discussion on gender representation in chapter five). In the following extract, girls from different groups voice their concerns about teenage pregnancy in their society:

**Speaker two:** I think *Studio 263* relates to real life. Yah, teenage pregnancy is on the rise right now. Let's look at Tendai, she got pregnant when she was at school. Most girls here in town whether in the locations or in the low density suburbs are getting pregnant at a tender age. It relates to real life, most of them are getting HIV/AIDS.

**Speaker six:** I think that the teenage pregnancy part is realistic because teenagers tend to be rebellious and they think they can be independent and what, what, what and it makes them make wrong decisions in life.

While all these girls seemed to acknowledge that teenage pregnancy was on the rise, they had different views on the reasons for the increase. Speaker six, cited above, feels that teenagers are to blame because of their headstrong and rebellious behaviour. Other speakers did not know the reasons, but were aware that the practice was common in their everyday lives.

Apart from the above themes that the students cited as evidence of *Studio 263's* realism, they also cited some real life events which featured both in the soap and also in the Zimbabwean society. This is consistent with the soap opera's organisation of time and space. Time and space in soap operas is organised in a manner that is supposed to coincide with real time (Hobson, 1982:34). Coincidence with real time is highlighted when special calendar times like Christmas and New Year or Valentine's Day are made part of the events within the serial with appropriate reference being made both visually and in the storylines. Reference to important events happening in the real world has the effect of making the programme real as viewers can relate to events in the soap as parallel to their own lives (Matelski, 1999:3). Failure by programme makers to reference significant events which are happening in the real world detracts from the programme's reality effect (Hobson, 1982:34).

Events cited by the students include, Christmas, Heroes gala<sup>18</sup> and Homelink<sup>19</sup>. They argued that *Studio 263's* inclusion of real life events that occurred in the Zimbabwean society not only increased its realism but also caused it to be informative. The following excerpts show how the students perceived the reality effect of these events on *Studio 263*:

**Speaker two:** *Studio 263* informs a lot because they go hand in hand with current real life issues.....if its *Christmas*, they act on things relating to Christmas like what happens to families during Christmas time. Some families don't care much about Christmas like Joyce's family but Vimbai's family cares and Angie likes lots of gifts.

**Speaker four:** *Studio 263* is realistic in that it goes along with current occurrences. For instance, in one episode, Welly took Mr Shereni's car which had been sent for repairs in preparation for the *Heroes gala* which was happening in real life.

**Speaker five:** Also, remember at that time when *Homelink* was just introduced, we heard that Mai Jari sent money through the Homelink, it all looked real.

To sum up the students' views on realism, I will give a summary of the rest of the issues portrayed by *Studio 263*, which they felt were found in Zimbabwean society in general. These include: family problems, business challenges, issues of inheritance, the plight of widows, relationships, the generation gap, and the conflict between

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<sup>18</sup> Heroes' gala is an annual event celebrated in Zimbabwe in August in commemoration of the Zimbabwe liberation fighters who died during the independence struggle.

<sup>19</sup> Homelink is a money transfer service introduced by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe with the aim of collecting foreign currency from all Zimbabweans living abroad. Zimbabweans in the diaspora are encouraged to send their money through certain Banks recommended by the central Bank in order to ensure that all the foreign currency goes to the central bank and not to the black market.

Christianity and tradition. It is this proximity to their lived realities which made the soap to appeal to them, and thus popular among young people. I concur with Hobson's assertion:

The production policy of including social problems in the series greatly contributes to the viewers' perception of reality of events in the soap. Since the problems they introduce do actually exist, they are another way in which the audience can see that the serial is based on reality. (1982:122)

Having discussed how most students interpreted realism in *Studio 263* in terms of both empirical and emotional realism, I will now look at those students who, while they agreed that the soap was realistic, still felt that there were some unrealistic events and issues in the soap. This group perceived realism at the denotative level only and hence found some representations that did not tally with the real world they experienced. For example some students felt that Tendai's going public with her status and the reaction she got from people was not realistic. Other participants picked the business scenes as being unrealistic:

**Speaker four:** Some issues are realistic but others are not realistic at all, for instance the point where Tendai tells people her status, I think that was not so realistic because although it's preached everyday that don't stigmatise, it's not like that. People are so scared of the disease so much that if you tell them that you are HIV positive, suddenly you will be on your own. She was stigmatised for a short time...it wasn't realistic, her family rejected her for some time but then, after maybe a week, they were back together...I think that was ...a bit unrealistic.

**Speaker three:** We also find that the soap has business people and they have offices right... most of the time we are taken into their offices and we find that like in Muwengwa's office there is no computer whatsoever just files piled on his desk and the work space is clear ...for a businessman it doesn't work. At least he is supposed to have a computer even if it's switched off, it's fine. We need some signs of work and it's so unrealistic...also when Mai Huni and Jacob have an argument she just walks away, and yet it won't be lunch break or anything and you wonder if she does any work...also Joyce most of the times she just looks at the computer not doing anything...at least they should show that they work... yah there are some parts which are really not realistic.

### **Realism through Characterisation**

My findings revealed that the other reason for the popularity of *Studio 263* among Bulawayo school students was that they found most of the characters in the soap realistic and hence they could identify with them and learn from them. Many studies on audience reception of soap opera have come up with similar findings. In her study, Livingstone found that the majority of her viewers enjoyed watching soap opera

because they felt they could establish some relationship with characters (1988:70). This relationship was graded from the characters they could relate to, through to those they could identify with. Several of her viewers commented that characters became like friends or family to them. Ang (1985) also established that the more 'genuine' a character appeared to be, the more she is valued (Ang, 1985:33). It emerged that students liked characters because they were considered as extensions of real life, shared similar values, were role models, and good actors. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

Most informants preferred characters that were 'real' and hence were seen as extensions of the real world. Being extensions of real life meant that the characters had to behave in ways similar to real people. For instance, one student's relationship with some characters was so close that he felt he had experienced what one character in the soap had experienced. Another student argued that one of the characters in the soap acted like his mother. The following discussion shows how students picked characters whom they claimed acted in a 'realistic' and not 'fake' way:

**Speaker four:** Muwengwa is actually someone who is real. A part of him I have experienced. I also know of someone who is like him. With Eve, its real...my mum was like that rather [laughter].

**Speaker six:** My favourite character is definitely Tinotenda Katsande... what's her acting name? Joyce, cause personally I think she is real, that's why I like her...the others...like Vimbai they are so fake, maybe I can relate to the way Joyce is portraying her character, people who are like that are exactly like that.

**Speaker five:** My best character is Tendai. She acts herself, when she has a problem she can't solve, she asks people about it and that is what people do in reality.

**Speaker three:** I think the role played by tete is interesting and real in that it is both traditional and cultural because in real life, some things we may solve them culturally and some things we may solve them through faith you see.

**Speaker one:** I like DWP [Dread Welly] because what he does, having dreadlocks and all, is what really happens amongst some of the boys here, he is very real.

Characters were also liked for sharing the same values and beliefs with the viewers. For instance, those students who are Christians liked Christian characters for the simple reason that they shared the same Christian values. Others felt their worldviews were the same as some characters hence they could relate to them. For others, characters' moral standards were the yardsticks used for judging them as good or bad. The exchange below is an example of the students' debates on their favourite characters' values:

**Speaker seven:** I like Mai Jari because she is the only person that I can say is a Christian ...people like Mai Huni are pretenders, they go to church while at the same time collect herbs from Nangas. Mai Jari is my best character because she shows her love for the church.

**Speaker two:** To me, Muwengwa is tough, he's got confidence, he's got vision...*basically that's what I think life is all about*...you are tough, confident and you have a vision, what else do you want to see in a man... [laughter]?

**Speaker one:** I also like the role played by Tendai...being positive. If you are positive you will succeed.

**Speaker six:** I think I really like Vimbai cause she is a hardworking girl who is like straight and who likes to finalise things and in a way put things straight.

Role modelling by some characters was also cited as one of the reasons students liked *Studio 263*. This is in line with the objectives of entertainment-education strategy which posits that individuals learn behaviour by observing role models (Waisbord, 2001:7). Waisbord adds that in health communication, soap opera characters are designed to provide negative role models who are supposed to be condemned by viewers and positive ones whom it is hoped will be emulated by the audience. Role modelling of characters in health soap operas is also intended to stimulate interpersonal communication about sensitive issues of HIV/AIDS by members of the audience. The same sentiments are echoed by Livingstone who argues:

To learn from, or be influenced by characters' actions in the drama through such processes as identification or role modelling, one would expect the viewer to judge the character's behaviour or problem as relevant to his own situation. (1989:59)

The above analyses help to explain the students' sentiments. They all said they learn a lot from their favourite characters who acted as role models. The lessons learnt ranged from moral lessons such as abstaining, through to various characteristics like being bold, precise with people, confident, belief in oneself, problem solving, honesty, kindness and patience. The excerpts below demonstrate how students identified with their role models and the lessons they learnt from them:

**Speaker one:** From Vimbai I learn a lot of things, but out of that I think abstaining you know...I learn that abstaining doesn't mean that I will be an outcast. If you are abstaining you know when you are going around town just shaking your ass, you know that you've got something that you are proud of you know, that other people don't even have so I have learnt a lot from that.

**Speaker eight:** My favourite character Joyce inspires me you know, she really shows girl power. She doesn't let anyone fool around with her she just shows them who is the boss you know. She also helped me to be precise and call a spade a spade.

**Speaker four:** I learn to be honest, kind and patient from Mai Muwengwa. She was patient with Muwengwa, if it was someone else she was just going leave him.

**Speaker three:** I think my favourite character is Tom Mbambo. He shows that we have to believe in ourselves.

I also established that some characters found favour with students because they were good actors and played their roles well. This involved being articulate, not forgetting their lines and expressing the right emotions when faced with certain situations as well as being presentable and convincing:

**Speaker three:** My favourite character is Joyce. First things first, she is Hollywood type. She is excellent, you know, she is a natural you know when she is acting, *she doesn't forget her lines like it's coming from her head...* the way she dresses, everything is just good about her.... Tom is another good actor, like Joyce, she is Hollywood type, though I would say second to Joyce and he really portrays a businessman character, he is ruthless he is always smart, stays in a nice house and drives a smart car ...

**Speaker seven:** My favourite characters are Mai Jari and Vimbai, they do not forget their lines and *know how to act*.

**Speaker three:** I forgot to mention that Mr Wakanaka is also a good actor who really likes his job as a lawyer.

It is interesting to note that the above exchange about good and bad acting shows how students are aware of the difference between the fictional world of the soap opera and their real world. This is contrary to soap opera critics who argue that soap audiences cannot distinguish between fact and fiction and that they fail to realise that characters in a soap are not real (Geraghty, 1991:23). Refuting the above claim, Allen (1985:91) argues that the soap opera text constantly walks the line between one that can be read as fiction and one that spills over into the experiential world of the viewers. As the above excerpts reveal, students could easily separate the real world and the fictional world of acting.

From my findings, I found the assertion about health communication and entertainment-education strategies on how students learn through condemning negative role models, to be true (Waisbord, 2001:7). In the group discussions, I noticed that students disliked characters who exhibited values that differed from their own. In summary, the reasons they gave for disliking certain characters ranged from, promiscuity, corruption, jealousy and evil. The health education strategy argues that by identifying and disliking these negative characters, young people also tend to reject the behaviour related to the characters and adopt the recommended health strategies portrayed through positive characters, as the above discussion shows (Winnet and

Wallack, 1996:173). The following exchange shows the students' reasons for disliking certain characters:

**Speaker four:** I hate Eve because she is not straight, she is only after money from Muwengwa but doesn't really love him. I also hate Jacob because he is trying to get the company unlawfully.

**Speaker seven:** My worst character is Mai Huni because she hates Vimbai and is jealous of her to the extent that she ends up poisoning Jacob and says it's Vimbai.

**Speaker six:** My worst character is Anna cause she gets everything through the downfall of others. She was responsible for Vimbai's not participating in the Miss Zimbabwe contest. So you see, she made the downfall of Vimbai and then gained from that, that is not good. We don't have to reap by cheating others... you don't have to gain by the downfall of others.

While most characters were disliked for being negative role models, others were detested for being unrealistic in that there were no real life characters like them. Lack of acting skill, eloquence and fluency were also cited as part of the reasons for detesting some characters in the soap:

**Speaker six:** I don't like Vimbai. Everyone loves Vimbai...she is so straight. I mean very few people in this world are like that...very few and well not people I know of...I therefore feel that she is unrealistic.

**Speaker three:** My worst character is tete, she chops English first of all and I remember one episode when she was given coke and she drank it like she was drinking hot tea ...when she is acting you know she forgets her lines and she stammers ...she is not good.

**Speaker five:** My worst character is Sibó because she is too jumpy and ends up having some confusion...I think there was an episode where she changed her lines from what they were...but it was all so confusing and all that.

**Speaker seven:** My worst character is Mai Jari...maybe because she is new in the industry but she is not a good actor.

**Speaker four:** I think Mai Huni is also not a good actor cause she shows too much emotion and overreacts in an unrealistic way.

My findings also confirmed what most researchers on the reception of soap opera established, that soap opera audiences follow characters' lives in real life and become familiar with the history of certain characters to the extent that they have access to knowledge which is well beyond that given in a particular episode (Geraghty, 1991:14). During the group discussions, students kept on citing real life issues involving *Studio 263* characters which they had found out on their own outside the programme. These issues included the real life behaviour of some characters. This shows the extent to which viewers are engrossed in soap opera:

**Speaker eight:** *Studio 263* actors have to improve on their behaviour because if you just buy *Trends* magazine ...on the first page you will see the story, *Studio 263* actor has done this and that, so it's not a good thing because news spreads very fast like in Zambia they are now watching *Studio 263*, they know that these actors have done this, this one has beaten a wife... so they have to improve.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I analysed the focus group data under the main theme, 'Realism'. My findings indicated that realism was the major reason for *Studio 263*'s popularity among Bulawayo school students. In my analysis I explored two notions of realism established by Ang (1985), namely, empiricist and emotional, in relation to the students' discourses on realism. The analysis also benefited from insights obtained from scholars such as Strelitz (2002a) and Ellis (1982) on audience perception of realism. My conclusion on realism visa-vis the students' interpretation of the soap was that most students read the soap at a denotative level, that is, the empiricist notion of realism where they expected to see real life events and situations represented in the soap as opposed to fictional or 'unrealistic' events. However, other students were comfortable with both denotative and connotative (emotional realism) meanings of events in the soap. The last part of the chapter focused on how the students viewed *Studio 263*'s characters as extensions of the real world. I argued that their choice of favourite and worst characters was based on the realism of characters as well as their proximity to the students' lived cultures and everyday experiences. Furthermore, I maintained that their awareness of the characters' acting ability shows that their appreciation of 'realism' is part of their 'willing suspension of disbelief'.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION CONTINUED

#### **Introduction**

Chapter four looked at realism as the main reason for the popularity of *Studio 263* among Bulawayo students. This chapter discusses the other reasons for the popularity of the programme among this target group. The reasons fall into the following themes: *Studio 263* as an educational medium; *Studio 263* as entertainment; *Studio 263* as a local production and the paucity of other viewing material. The last part of the chapter looks at how the students interpreted gender representations in the soap. The inclusion of the gender representation theme was necessitated by the recurring contradictory views that I got from the separate girls- and boys-only groups regarding the representation of women and men in the soap. I heeded the advice by qualitative researchers that new unexpected themes should not be ignored in the analysis, but that attention should also be paid to them (Vaughn et al, 1996).

#### ***Studio 263* as an Educational Medium**

From my findings, I established that students viewed *Studio 263* as a medium of education. This is consistent with the findings of soap opera audience researchers that viewers learn different 'lessons' from the soap opera programmes they watched and that they take the genre seriously, expecting personal involvement, learning experiences, and a reflection of their society (Livingstone, 1989:67). It is the viewers' involvement with soap opera and its characters that allows for learning opportunities about contemporary social, moral and political issues. Due to its social awareness raising aims, the genre is often thought of as being responsible, realistic, and educative (1989:56). These sentiments are echoed by entertainment-education theorists who argue that soap operas are one of the best methods of communicating knowledge about sensitive, yet crucial, social issues such as HIV/AIDS, population growth, gender inequality and related topics, to adolescents because the genre can effectively combine serious education with entertainment and thus appeal to young people (Rogers et al, 2000:81).

By 'education', the students meant that this particular programme communicated messages which young people found useful. Similar to Livingstone's (1989) and Rogers et al's (2000) assertions above, the students seemed to learn lessons relating to contemporary social and moral issues such as HIV/AIDS, abstinence, responsibility, life experiences, gratitude and other issues that directly affect young people. The discourses they used to express the educational value of the soap were: "it teaches us...", "it helps us...", "it educates us ...", "it informs us..." and "it addresses..."

**Speaker three:** *Studio 263* is popular among young people because it addresses issues that affect us youth directly, like sexual issues that we do not know much about, unlike other programs that do not address the youth. We identify with it a lot.

**Speaker six:** It also helps us not to rush for things that are not of our age like having sex with girls like what Tendai did with Kenge and to be responsible and to avoid sex before marriage.

**Speaker seven:** I think the soap opera *Studio 263* is popular among young people because it informs them on the dangers of HIV/AIDS. It also educates them on how they can prevent it by living a healthy life style.

It is noteworthy that issues relating to sexuality mentioned by the students are considered taboo, and consequently are not often discussed openly in the largely conservative<sup>20</sup> Zimbabwean society. In traditional Zimbabwean society, the lessons that *Studio 263* is teaching young people are delivered by aunts and grandmothers, for girls, while uncles and grandfathers teach boys (De Ruijter, 2001). However, since the traditional family unit has been broken by urbanisation and other economic factors that have seen different members of the extended family living apart from one another, *Studio 263*, in particular, and the media in general, have taken the place of the traditional educators. They have become an important source of sexual socialisation for teenagers in the modern day Zimbabwean society. Furthermore, using genres such as the health education soap opera to address such sensitive, but vital social issues, is the only way to by-pass cultural restrictions and to ensure that they form subjects for public debate.

Another interesting observation was the way the students contrasted the educational value of *Studio 263* with other local soap operas, *Amakorokoza*<sup>21</sup> (gold panners) that

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<sup>20</sup> In the Zimbabwean society issues of sexuality are considered 'taboo', as such they are restricted to the private domain because of their sensitivity (De Ruijter, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> *Amakorokoza* is a local drama which focuses on illegal gold panners and their social life.

they watched on the national channel (ZBC<sup>22</sup>). They argued that, unlike *Studio 263* which focuses on issues targeted at young people, the other local dramas had no messages specifically directed at this age group, hence they learnt nothing from them. This argument is evident in the statements uttered by the following speakers:

**Speaker four:** Yah *Studio 263* is good, there are other soaps like *Amakorokoza* which have nothing to teach the youth... but with *Studio 263*, I personally make sure that by 1930hrs I would have finished my work and everything I would be doing and ready to watch *Studio 263* cause I learn a lot from that socially.

**Speaker one:** I like *Studio 263* than *Amakorokoza*. What I like from *Amakorokoza* is the way they speak...I like slang... [laughter] but you don't learn much from *Amakorokoza*, but from *Studio 263* you learn a lot.

The above arguments, in which the students professed that they learnt nothing from other soap operas they watch, is simplistic. For instance, politically, the soap opera they cited as having nothing to teach them, can actually teach about the local social history while other programmes may teach them different things as well. Secondly, it is apparent that the students are not aware that learning can be an unconscious process whose results are often intangible. As such, they might have been unaware of what they gained from watching other programmes. It also appears that their definition of 'learning' was restricted to lessons about health related issues, and not lessons on other topics such as politics, economics, religion and other social issues.

Another possible explanation for the students' conclusions about the educational value of *Studio 263* in comparison with other programmes, can be attributed to the way this particular programme addresses them. While there may be teaching in both soap operas, the findings revealed that *Studio 263* addresses young people in a unique way. It employs young characters which they can identify with, and at the same time it addresses issues pertaining to this age-group (HIV/AIDS), that are not addressed by other soap operas or sitcoms screened on national television. For these reasons, the students felt that this particular soap was specifically designed for them, unlike the rest of the programmes that target all audience groups. In other words, the students have 'constructed' *Studio 263*, as the only educational programme for young people on national television. This explains their bias in terms of its educational value.

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<sup>22</sup> ZBC is Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, the country's sole broadcasting station.

While in all groups, the informants used the phrase, "it teaches us..." I noticed that in the girls-only groups, the lessons derived from the soap were personalised as opposed to boys-only groups. This is evident in the way girls picked lessons such as teen pregnancy, that were specific to their gender in addition to the general lessons applicable to them as teenagers or young people.

**Speaker six:** *Studio 263* teaches young girls to be careful. The fact that Tendai got pregnant shows that she is not the first girl to get pregnant it happens in our real life most girls get pregnant while they are still at school and they can't even get an education...so as girls it teaches us to be careful.

The assumption made by the above informant that the soap 'teaches' young girls to be careful, could be both positive and negative. It is positive in that it instils moral values in young girls and alerts them of social ills that can befall them as teenagers.

However, it is negative in its implication that young girls must be careful as opposed to being thoughtful and adventurous. While girls are taught to be careful, boys have freedom to be adventurous. It is interesting how boys did not derive any lessons that taught them to be careful or at least that encouraged them not to take sexual advantage of girls. Hence, the assumption made by society is that women need to be taught to be careful while the same value is not deemed necessary for men. This shows that health education in particular, and other forms of social education in general, are gendered.

The students' ability and willingness to learn from *Studio 263* confirms claims by health communication's social marketing strategies that, health appeals are crafted and carefully delivered in order to persuade audiences to voluntarily adopt the new health product (Winnett and Wallack, 1996:173). This is true of the students interviewed in that they seemed voluntarily to adopt the health strategies and messages proposed by the soap such as, abstinence, living positively, taking responsibility for their lives, and going for HIV/AIDS testing and counselling. This is also consistent with the health communication objective of changing the target audiences' behaviour by minimising audiences' perception of the costs of accepting the product, while simultaneously maximising their perceptions of the potential benefits (Winnett and Wallack, 1996:173). For a discussion on how the students

viewed the potential benefits of abstinence and other health messages conveyed by the soap, please see chapter four of this thesis.

### ***Studio 263 as Entertainment***

Another reason for the popularity of the health drama was its entertainment value. The findings revealed that students perceived 'entertainment' in three forms. The first element of entertainment is humour. Humour can be defined as something that evokes feelings of amusement in other people and makes them laugh (Ross, 1998:1). The extent to which people find things humorous depends on a variety of factors, such as geographical location, culture, maturity, context and level of education (Ross, 1998:2). This makes humour a highly subjective experience which depends on its audience to be effective. Humour can be found in a figure of speech in the form of hyperboles, use of idioms, comic sounds and funny words that make them amusing in a language.

Given the above analysis of humour, my findings showed that the students found the soap opera humorous in different ways. Firstly, it was through the soap's employment of verbal humour. This was achieved through the use of Shona idioms and funny words and phrases in that language. This had a comic effect on its audience, because idioms are not commonly used in everyday speech. Furthermore, what made the language use more humorous was the effect of using a vernacular language in a predominantly English<sup>23</sup> soap opera. Examples of verbal humour in *Studio 263* are expressed in the excerpts cited below:

**Speaker seven:** *Studio 263* is humorous because of the way Muwengwa and tete use Shona words and idioms, it's really funny.

**Speaker eight:** *Studio 263* entertains, that's why it's popular. The way tete acts and speaks like when she said to Jabu and Sibho, "aziva kwake aziva kwake" [each person should go to where they belong]... [laughter] you know I really enjoyed it.

**Speaker one:** We young people get so much entertained by the language and funny scenes in *Studio 263* that is why we love it and that is why it is popular I think...

**Speaker six:** *Studio 263* is different, *it came with a new style*, that is why I like it. It's unlike the usual dramas we are used to, most of which were in vernacular, at least this one is English, so many people can understand. It's also nice as it uses Shona and Ndebele sayings here and there...we love this.

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<sup>23</sup> *Studio 263* is predominantly in English. Ndebele and Shona, which are the other official languages together with English, are also used moderately. The majority of the Zimbabwean population is Shona while the Ndebele are in the minority. Therefore, more Shona is used than Ndebele.

I found the idea that students were amused by the use of vernacular in the soap significant. Commonly, one language is used through out soap operas in Zimbabwe: this can either be local vernaculars or English. It can thus be assumed that the students are attracted to this soap opera because of its diversion from the norm, which in their discourses they have termed, 'a new style'. Thus, in addition to English, this particular programme also talks to them in their own languages, thereby making it even closer and realistic to them. It is noteworthy that the inclusion of vernaculars in predominantly English soap operas is becoming common in African soap operas such as *Generations*, *Scandals*, *Muvhango*, among others. However, in Zimbabwe, this is still a new and rare phenomenon, hence the reason for *Studio 263*'s popularity among young people.

In addition to verbal humour, the second form of humour used in *Studio 263* is in the form of funny scenes and events. In their discussions of these humorous scenes, the students giggled and laughed through-out. What was particularly striking in this discussion was the way they found a certain scene humorous, which when closely scrutinised, could be considered serious and not humorous. The incident involved the beating up of a man who had made a teenage girl pregnant, by the girl's father and brother. It is surprising how an issue involving statutory rape could be represented in humorous terms by the producers of the soap opera, as this raises crucial questions about what social message the treatment of this social evil is sending out. My contention, based on my informants' discourses which condemned the disrespectful conduct of the man who had disgraced the teenage girl, and other men who do the same in society in general, is that the producers used humour to highlight the prevalence and seriousness of statutory rape in society and by so doing, they are ridiculing and not condoning it. To further substantiate this claim, the students argued that the 'culprit' who had made the girl pregnant did not show any remorse and by so doing evoked the girl's father and brother's anger resulting in the beating. This further shows that the use of humour here can also be possibly interpreted as an appeal to the audience to treat statutory rape more seriously and not to laugh about it. While this may have been a humorous scene, the message it sends out is a warning against future offenders that they are bound to face the same fate as this man, that is the beating and even a jail sentence which he later received. This is consistent with Ross's (1998:2) observation:

Humour has various effects, whether these are intentional or not. It is simplistic to say that it's just for a laugh. There may be a target for the humour- a person, an institution or a set of beliefs - where the underlying purpose is deadly serious.

The following exchange typifies one of the group sessions on entertaining scenes, events and story lines in the soap:

**Speaker two:** I think *Studio 263* informs, educates and entertains, for entertainment sake, let's look at when people are fighting, you can laugh...let's take the situation when Kenge was beaten by Mr Jari and Jabu it was so nice and we were entertained.

**Speaker four:** *Studio 263* is really entertaining because there are some funny things like when that guy went for his brother's funeral...then he had to come back to town for the Miss Harare show and he was chased by lions. I thought that was funny.

**Speaker six:** There are programs I just don't watch cause they are boring, so to a certain extent, *Studio 263* is entertaining, and that is why we young people like watching it.

Of significance is that humour is not an aspect of the conventional soap opera genre. Therefore, *Studio 263* is different from the conventional soap opera genre. Thus, by going out of the generic norm and employing humour, *Studio 263* can be said to have used this approach to attract its target audience. This could be one of the reasons the students found this soap opera different from the rest, and therefore enjoyable. The tendency to divert from generic convention has the effect of creating new meanings and appeal to audiences, as we have seen in the above discussion. Hence Gledhill argues, "new meanings and generic innovations are produced by breaking rules, pushing at boundaries and redefining difference (1997:358)".

Furthermore, the use of entertainment in health communication is consistent with the argument by entertainment-education theorists that where adolescents are concerned, "education does not necessarily need to be dull, but it can incorporate entertainment formats to generate pro-social attitudes and behaviour" (Waisbord, 2001:7). Waisbord argues further that this approach solves the problem that audiences find social messages unappealing or boring and instead prefer to consume entertainment media. As speaker six above indicated, programmes that do not incorporate entertainment (humour) are considered boring by young people and as such, they do not watch them. Another form of 'entertainment' students derived from *Studio 263* was in the form of escapism. Escapism is defined as flight from one state of being to another more desirable one (Radway, 1984:222). Hobson concurs that escapism suggests that

viewers are running away from their problems and seeking diversions, even if momentarily (1982:130-131). Those informants who cited escapism as the entertainment value they got from *Studio 263* said by watching the programme, they became so engrossed in the story line that they ended up forgetting their own problems and instead got lost in the fictitious world of *Studio 263*:

**Speaker one:** I think *Studio 263* entertains us through the different characters that it portrays and also when certain situations occur, *they make everyone to forget the problems that they are having* and you laugh it out while watching *Studio 263*.

I noticed that the students' escapism was similar to that of Radway's (1984) Smithton women in her study, *Reading the Romance*. One of the women said by reading romance novels, "I am able to escape the harsh world for a few hours" (1984:221). This is similar to the reason given by the student cited above, who said she is also able to escape from her problems by watching *Studio 263*.

A third aspect of entertainment was the appeal of the soap opera genre used by *Studio 263*. My findings on this theme showed that the soap opera genre is gendered. This conclusion was necessitated by the different attitudes towards the soap opera genre by female and male respondents. Girls were in favour of the soap opera genre while boys disliked it.

Girls said they were tired of other forms of health education such as talk shows and documentaries which were used to package health messages directed at young people. Further, they argued that other genres were not as appealing to them as the soap opera form. As indicated by the excerpts cited below, female students felt that soap operas afforded them the opportunity to follow the whole HIV/AIDS story and action from disease contraction, through living positively up until the death of the infected character. In other words, they were drawn by the narrative structure and flow of the genre. Thus, they enjoyed following the unfolding of the plot from beginning, through middle to the end. They argued further that soaps also keep them in suspense so much that they always want to see the next episode. This was contrary to talk shows which were viewed as dull and unreliable since one could not follow the story of how the speakers were infected, but had to just rely on the speakers' word of mouth. It can possibly be concluded that they were attracted by both the narrative structure and the

serial nature of the soap opera genre as opposed to the self contained style used in series and talk shows. Thus, the generic construction of the soap opera can be said to address female informants in a particular manner which appeals to them much more than other generic productions. The following excerpts testify to the girls' preference of the soap opera genre:

**Speaker two:** I think basically the soap opera form is excellent cause first things first, it catches people's attention for instance, on the television programme line up you see *Studio 263* then underneath it you see an AIDS talk show. Seriously speaking how many people would go for the AIDS talk show or compare the number of people who would go for the AIDS talk show and for the *Studio 263* part...

Also on the soap opera part, the acting part, we see that Tendai has AIDS, we saw how she got it, now she's just got the virus, we are going to see when she has developed the AIDS part, when she starts to waste away...until she dies. You don't get that from talk shows. On talk shows you just tell them that I got my virus like this, you might even be lying who knows. Seeing Tendai dying in the soap really strikes a nerve that ah! If AIDS does this to you I don't want the virus.

Another reason for their preference of the genre was its familiarity with this gender. Girls said they were familiar with the soap opera genre as they watched other soaps that are locally, regionally and internationally produced. They argued that *Studio 263* compared well with the other soaps they watched. Thus the girls were comfortable with the way *Studio 263* engaged them, as compared to other genres:

**Speaker two:** I like soap operas, for instance compare *Studio 263* with *Backstage*, they are trying to spread the same message that is HIV/AIDS.

**Speaker four:** I like soap operas. I also watch *Generations*, *Isidingo*, *Passions and Bold*. *Studio 263* is similar to these soaps though it's locally produced.

**Speaker three:** I watch soap operas a lot. My favourite is *Days of our Lives* because it is a mixture of everything, action, drama... I think *Studio 263* compares well with them as a soap.

In other words, what they liked was the excitement of knowing what to expect from the genre and by so doing derived satisfaction from seeing their expectations being fulfilled. This confirms genre theory's assertion that generic texts spell out to the audience the range of pleasure it might expect and thus regulates and activates memories of similar texts and the expectations of that particular one (Fiske, 1987:110). Gledhill concurs, "the conventions shared between different programmes in a genre invoke certain audience expectations about the kind of stories and effects they offer" (1997:351).

Perhaps it is the gendered character of the soap opera genre which caused the girls to enjoy the way *Studio 263* addressed them as females. Soap opera is said to be more popular with female audiences than males, although male audiences are also on the increase (Allen, 1985:134). Arguably, for viewers to understand and enjoy soap opera, they have to possess certain skills such as sensitivity, perception, intuition and concern with personal life, most of which are associated with femininity (Brunsdon, 1981:36). Notably, these qualities are part of the socialisation of women. Therefore, because of their socialisation, women are skilled readers of the genre (Geraghty, 1991:167). From my observation of the way both girls and boys engaged with *Studio 263*, it was apparent that girls were more involved with the soap opera than boys.

What is noteworthy here is that, while soap operas are said to address feminine themes which attract female audiences, *Studio 263* addresses themes that appeal to both men and women, as issues of health cut across gender. Moreover, the soap employs a balance of female and male characters, in order to reach both male and female adolescents. Hence, what may be unique about this soap opera and thus attractive to female audiences, is its narrative mode of address, which is more popular with women than men. Women prefer more 'talk' to 'action', while men favour more 'action' and less 'talk' (Allen, 1985:92; Gledhill, 1997: 355).

While soap operas were found to be appealing and entertaining, talk shows were dismissed as unappealing and ineffective in communicating HIV/AIDS messages. This was because, in the girls' view, young people had become resistant to them (see excerpts below). I found this assumption simplistic, considering that while genre may contribute to the appeal and interpretation of media messages, there are other factors that affect the decoding of health messages, among which are, gender, age, socio-cultural contexts and class.

Unlike *Studio 263* which arguably handled issues of HIV/AIDS in a manner that captured young people's attention, talk shows were seen as exaggerating the effects of the disease and thus failed to make an impact among young people. Of interest here is how the students equated the frequency of media publicity of an 'issue' with its reception. They argued that 'too much' media publicity met with audience resistance. The assumption is that less publicity translates to favourable reception. Others

believed that the more HIV/AIDS is publicised by the media, the more audiences accepted it and changed their behaviour (see speaker seven below). As I argued above, their perception shows an uncritical understanding of the reception process as a whole. They failed to understand that, whether messages were under or over-publicised, did not influence their reception by young people, as the process of reception is not as linear as they assume. The following exchange on the handling of HIV/AIDS messages by the media occurred in one of the girls' groups. It was interesting to observe how seriously the participants were involved with the media text. This experience also testified to the mediation of media messages through group interaction:

**Speaker five:** I am for HIV being exposed through item... soaps...and I am against talk shows in that if everyday we see people coming out on talk shows saying I've got AIDS and I eat this...now we won't fear anymore we will be just like so all these people have it even if I am to have it akuselandaba [it doesn't matter]...and I think maybe it also encourages people to be resistant to the HIV/AIDS messages because the more we preach about it the more it encourages people to say now it's just there, there is nothing to fear...[laughter].

**Speaker one:** I agree with the early speakers, I think the more the HIV virus is exposed to the community I mean like when it becomes common you know, I think the more people won't take it seriously or fear it and the more people won't take it that its reality. They will take it as a headache as when you are having flu or a cold or something like that you know...people won't be on the watch out they will be like anyway anyone can get it, you can get it, I can get it, so be it you know...yah!

**Speaker seven:** I beg to differ. I think that personally the more we hear of HIV/AIDS the more we will refrain from things which make us get it cause if you watch those adverts like 'Handina kucrossa red robot' [I didn't cross the red robot], the people will be looking healthy but you can tell that there is some element of sickness you know, I am telling you, you guys you wouldn't like to be like that so I think it's ok cause it makes us aware that these things are there and we have to behave well.

Contrary to girls who found the use of soap operas in packaging health messages entertaining and appealing, boys preferred other genres such as talk shows, documentaries, music and celebrities (role models). It is interesting that while girls enjoyed the narrative aspect of soap operas, boys disliked it and instead preferred non narrative forms mentioned above. This might point to the gendered nature of different forms of media communication. Such contradictions may even point to the complexity of gender, not only in generic constructions, but in society in general. The following excerpts highlight the reasons given by boys for disliking soap operas:

**Speaker five:** I feel that we should be having more realistic talk shows than soap operas. Of course we have Mai Chisamba's<sup>24</sup> but really it addresses women, men, adults...if we could have talk shows for youths and teenagers.

**Speaker three:** I think I don't like soap operas....I think I like talk shows like this new talk show called '*Time Out*' cause it teaches us about problems faced by people.

**Speaker one:** I think even music can do...some of the musicians for instance can sing about it [HIV/AIDS] and we can listen to it. This will be a better way of learning something because the musicians will be my role models.

**Speaker six:** I think the message should be spread in all those ways, which are, drama, talk shows and soap operas, such that if a person doesn't like a talk show then he watches other programmes.

**Speaker seven:** I think I agree with Michael in that I don't like soap operas because they tend to take a very long time to end...you can not keep on watching and as a result you will end up losing focus unlike dramas...

From the boys' discourses, I noted that what was particularly unappealing in soap operas had less to do with the issues they addressed, but more with the nature of address which did not appeal to them as men. For instance, they singled out soap opera's resistance to narrative closure and their serial character, as one reason for their lack of appeal. They argued that *Studio 263* has been going on for too long and that they do not have the patience and time to follow it until it ends (see speaker seven).

A second aspect of soaps which they disliked was their predictability. They wanted something more challenging than predictable soap opera story lines. The speaker cited below dislikes the genre, and especially *Studio 263* which he feels is not a good enough soap opera, in terms of the actual content and story line:

**Speaker six:** I don't like soap operas because they have a problem of being predictable. If you watch *Passions* for two days, you know exactly what is going to happen... everything. *Studio 263* is worse, also some story lines are forgotten...you will never know what happened in the stories though they may come back after a while...soaps are supposed to be so dramatic and make people to go out of their way to watch them...but *Studio 263* doesn't have that pull...I don't think the story is so material. Personally that's what I think.

What is being commented on here, are the technical aspects of the Zimbabwean soaps. The speaker's dislike of *Studio 263*, as a soap opera, relates to a common discourse of quality, in terms of narrative and other technical inadequacies of local programmes (Strelitz, 2002: 199-205).

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<sup>24</sup> Mai Chisamba Show is a talk show which focuses mainly on social issues such as marriage, religion and other family related problems. Its target audience is married people with families and older members of society.

### **Studio 263 as a Local Production**

Another reason for the popularity of *Studio 263* among young people lay in its being a local production. In their arguments, it was apparent that the students liked the programme because they could relate to it first as Zimbabweans, and then broadly as Africans. These students found the local production appealing because of the familiar way it addressed them. Their views demonstrate the influence of lived experiences on the reception of media messages in that the closer to home the programme is, the more likely it is to reflect the day to day lives of the local viewers, and thus the more popular it becomes. These findings are consistent with Strelitz's (2002a:467) observation that his 'homeland' informants liked local productions because they connect more with their own lived reality than foreign films. The exchange below shows the students' support for this local production:

**Speaker six:** I like *Studio 263* simply because it's Zimbabwean, we are all Zimbabweans and there is this whole concept of Zimbabwean and African things. As Africans, we like African things. Have you seen the way people are going crazy over Nigerian movies cause it's African we can relate, I think that's why. It's similar with *Studio 263*, we like its being Zimbabwean. My dad never calls it *Studio 263* but *Studio 22*, cause that's how he is but then he watches it. There was a time when our tv developed a problem like it would get hot and then go dark... I remember my dad would switch it on at exactly 7:30 and after the film is over he would switch it off. I would say he was and is still a staunch *Studio 263* fan...so it's for everyone...because we can all identify and relate with it because it's our own local production...

**Speaker one:** *Studio 263* is our very own, it's a ZBC production, that's the main reason why I like it although it's not perfect, it's got its faults here and there but it's an improvement, we are coming up.

The concept of local content in Zimbabwe is significant. Until 2001, Zimbabwean television and radio were dominated by foreign programming. In an endeavour to promote the growth of local television and radio production industry, the former Minister of Information and Publicity in the President's Office introduced a seventy-five percent local content quota policy, on both television and radio, in 2001 (Zimbabwe Broadcasting Services Act, 2001: 30; Zim Observer, 2005). The quota was later increased from seventy-five to a hundred percent local content. This meant the withdrawal of all foreign programmes from national television and radio and the introduction of locally produced ones. Among those withdrawn were international soap operas, *Santa Barbara*, *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Falcon Crest*, *Neighbours* and *Carson's Law*. *Studio 263*, *Amakorokoza* and other locally produced films ushered in a new era on national television.

The move to promote local programming was supported by many Zimbabweans who felt that it would instil national cultural values, particularly among young people, as opposed to western practices promoted by foreign programming. Given this background to local programming, it is therefore understandable why the students cited *Studio 263*'s being a local production, as one of the reasons for their attraction to it, and hence its popularity. To them, *Studio 263* is about identity and being proudly Zimbabwean, as symbolised by the soap's name '263' which is Zimbabwe's international dialling code. The proudly Zimbabwean promotion is similar to the 'Proudly South African' campaign in South Africa.

It is interesting to note that in qualitative research, there are always contradictions that researchers find in the informants' discourses. In my research, such contradictions existed as well. For instance, some students criticised *Studio 263* for its low technical standards which are associated with local productions. To them, it rated low in comparison with other internationally produced soap operas (see discussion above). On the other hand, other students liked the fact that it is a local production and this made them enjoy it despite its weaknesses and poor production quality. These contradictions confirm reception theory's assertion that different members of the audience make sense of media texts in different ways (Casey et al, 2002:82), and as such may like and dislike the texts for different reasons.

### **The Paucity of Other Viewing Material**

If some students watch *Studio 263* for educational, entertainment and other reasons discussed above, others watch it simply because they have nothing else to watch on the local television station. While some students said they went out of their way to watch *Studio 263* (see discussion on this in chapter four of this thesis under 'viewing context'), others said they only watched it because they had no options as there were no other interesting programmes to watch. *Studio 263* is the only thing they could watch, coupled with the fact that it is screened everyday during prime time<sup>25</sup>:

**Speaker five:** It's popular because it's the only thing people can watch...there is nothing else to watch on ZBC, other programmes are boring.

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<sup>25</sup> Prime time, time-band stretches from 6pm to 10pm, the peak period is between 7pm and 9pm (ZBC Rate Card).

Having discussed the reasons for the popularity of *Studio 263* among Bulawayo students, in the next section I discuss how the students perceived gender representations in the programme, in light of the view that soap operas are open texts which are likely to activate multiple meanings from the active audience exposed to them (Allen, 1985:82).

### **Responses to Gender Representation in *Studio 263***

To create a conducive environment for both boys and girls to discuss sensitive issues of sexuality and gender, the study held separate girls and boys-only groups. This was after a realisation that mixed groups can intimidate participants and hamper their freedom to air their peculiar views for fear of being booed by participants of the opposite sex. The separation worked well in all groups and open discussions were held, particularly on gender representation.

The differences in views concerning the representation of both female and males by the soap emerged when I asked the separate groups to comment on how the popular drama, *Studio 263* handled girls and boys in conveying health related messages to young people. I asked this question as a way of probing whether the way the different genders were represented in the soap had anything to do with its popularity among one or both genders. The responses received were divergent, but clearly divided along gender lines, although there were some cross-gender similarities.

Since they are oppressed in society and treated as second to boys, girls were quick to identify the oppression they faced in reality, mirrored in the soap. Thus, they felt gender representation in the programme was biased in favour of men. The female informants argued that the soap did not portray gender equity, but instead depicted young girls and women as the 'weaker sex', objects, inadequate and gullible as compared to men, who were treated as better than women in everything. This representation of women was said to be the same in both the domestic and business spheres. This is evident in the exchange that follows:

**Speaker one:** In most parts of the soap I think women and girls are portrayed as *objects* you know, like *play things*. Let's take Vimbai for instance, she's been hurt more that twice and that shows that men don't value us.

**Speaker six:** Yes, I agree with her...and also it's as if *a woman's place is in the kitchen*, so it shows that *if we are not careful men can take us for granted and degrade our status in society*.

**Speaker four:** We also find that *women's views are not considered*. Jacob despises Mai Huni's suggestions about the company. He always thinks that what he thinks is right. He thinks *women have nothing constructive to say, their views are not important that's why* he fought to be the boss of the company because he did not want to be under women.

**Speaker eight:** Women are also viewed as if *they cannot be leaders of anything*. In one episode, Mai Huni picked up the phone and Jacob grabbed the phone from her and answered it as if she is not qualified to do anything and that men are better than women in a way.

**Speaker five:** I think there is *discrimination when it comes to men having equal rights with women in Studio 263*. Let us focus on the Jari family. Jabu used to call himself Nevanje (first born son, the one who inherits everything). He made a lot of mistakes which even embarrassed the family. But when Tendai got infected with HIV/AIDS they felt she had let the family down. Just because she was a girl, she didn't have the power to come out in the open and pour out her heart.

Of significance is that while the majority of the girls felt unfairly portrayed by *Studio 263*, there was no consensus among the girls on their representation. Contrary to the view that women were constructed as second to men in the soap, some girls argued that the soap actually empowered women and portrayed them as leaders, independent and successful people who were not hindered by their gender to attain their goals. The following is an excerpt from the girls-only group in which women were viewed as being empowered by the soap:

**Speaker One:** I think men think that they are superior to us women...the soap shows that this is 2005, the new millennium we *women are climbing up the ladder* you know, we are going to stand where the men are standing and maybe even push them down and be on top.

**Speaker seven:** The soap actually portrays *women as bread winners* especially in Mai Vimbai's case. After Mr Jari died, she doesn't just sit back and cry, we see her going to Mauritius to fend for her family. We also see Vimbai playing a leading role in the modelling agency, so it shows that *women can lead* and fight for their families.

**Speaker three:** It also shows that *for women, the sky is the limit* for us, you can get to do anything you like as long as you have determination. For example Vimbai started off with nothing but is now one of the top dogs at JH Construction and is earning quite a lot and is able to support her family. Other women have church projects too.

Perhaps this perception of the construction of women in the soap can be attributed to the view that these girls read only those messages that are favourable to them as women. To them, what is foregrounded is the desirable representation of women in the soap and society in general. Thus, their interpretations may possibly point to their resistance to the background image of women as second to men. It is also apparent that these girls felt empowered themselves in reality, and hence were quick to relate

this to female representations in *Studio 263*. In the same way, the first group felt undermined by society and thus read the same meaning from the soap as well.

If girls used their social reality and experiences to interpret gender representation in *Studio 263*, boys also drew from the same lived reality to decode gender constructions. What I found interesting was the way the interpretations differed, which can obviously be attributed to the differences in socialisation that the two sexes get in society. As such, it was not surprising that boys felt that the representation of both females and males in the soap pointed to gender equity, and thus accurately portrayed women and girls:

**Speaker five:** I think the soap is trying to show that *young girls are gullible*...let's tell the truth, *that is how girls are*, no offence let's just tell the truth ...[laughter] but then they go crazy for stupid things like old men with money and stuff like that. That's what they are trying to show, Ayanda and other girls as very gullible.  
**Speaker six:** Girls can be taken advantage of, all you need is ...you need words...[laughter]...girls just want to be loved, ok everyone wants to be loved but then with girls its serious...this is what the soap shows.

The boys' arguments are typical, sexist remarks made about girls in Zimbabwean society. It is noteworthy that the male speaker above uses his cultural or lived reality to construct girls as 'weak', 'gullible' and 'unreasonable', always running after 'stupid' things and old men. This is a common ideology held by most boys and men in the largely patriarchal Zimbabwean society, where girls are viewed as weak as compared to boys and as such, they are believed to make wrong decisions and poor judgements both in business or private relationships. This image of girls is further necessitated by the harsh economic situation in Zimbabwe where many young girls indulge in sexual relationships with older men for financial gain. This phenomenon is commonly known in the youth discourses as the three Cs that is, a car, cash and a cell phone (Population Reference Bureau, 2005). Given this socio-cultural context, it is thus not surprising that the male student above genuinely believed that the representation of females in the soap mirrored what they were like in reality.

However, here too, in the boys' camp, there was no consensus among boys on the representation of women in the soap. As the above discussion revealed, some boys felt females were portrayed for what they are in reality, others differed and instead

thought that girls were empowered in the soap as they held high positions at work and most of them owned companies:

**Speaker six:** I think generally the soap shows the position of women and young girls as empowered because most of them have high posts. Mai Humi owns JH Constructions. Vimbai, Sarah and Mandy also have their own companies. So they are showing that *women are empowered* and have a major role to play.

A different view was that the soap did not show a balanced representation of men and women. They maintained that girls were portrayed as sexual objects that were used by men and then dumped. However, those boys who felt this way were in the minority:

**Speaker four:** I think girls are negatively portrayed in *Studio 263* because if you look at Ayanda, she was being used by Tom Mbambo who promised to marry her but that did not happen so I think that is unfair. At the same time Tom Mbambo was also trying to seduce Vimbai...so Tom was double crossing the two, Vimbai and Ayanda...and that was unfair because it implies that girls are just sexual objects.

While differences in the perception of the representation of women in the soap, between boys and girls, were attributed to the differences in socialisation of the two genders in Zimbabwe, here, the discrepancies on the same issue among the boys can be accredited to the differences in the socialisation of 'individual' boys. Some boys belong to families that still uphold strong traditional views and attitudes towards women, while others are from families that have accepted gender equity. In the traditional Zimbabwean family, boy children are treated with more love and esteem, as they are heirs. On the other hand, the perception and attitudes towards girl children are different, less love and esteem. This is because girls are seen as being temporarily with the family before they are married, and thus can not be relied on, unlike boys who are permanently available to support the family. These attitudes and perceptions about boys and girls instil in boys, a mentality that views women as less important and thoughtful than themselves.

On the other hand, in a modern family set up, both the girl and boy children are given the same love, respect and responsibilities. This is because women have proved to society that they are equally capable of achieving everything that was traditionally reserved for men. Therefore, depending on the type of family they come from, boys will have different views on women, as witnessed in the group discussions. My

assertion is consistent with Schroder et al's (2003:5) argument that individuals' membership of different families in the course of their life history affects the way they interpret and use media material.

The influence of the family, the socialisation process and the larger socio-cultural context in reception of media messages, was further seen in the different ways boys and girls interpreted a particular gender-related incident that occurred in the soap opera. What was particularly interesting in the way the students decoded this gender issue, was the way boys and girls contradicted each other on the treatment of one female character, Tendai, who got pregnant in her teens by an elderly man, Kenge, and was expelled from home by her parents. From the way girls and boys contradicted each other, one would have thought they were discussing different incidents or programmes for that matter. The different interpretations of this incident are also consistent with the argument that what audiences read is determined by pre-conceived ideas and opinions which they bring to the programme (Hobson, 1982:105). This was true of the girls and boys in my focus groups whose interpretation of the cited incident was based on cultural understandings.

Girls, because of their proximity to the female victim in the soap, could relate to and identify with her ordeal. As such, they argued that the treatment of the female character was unjustified and unfair. They felt that the blame was shifted to the girl who was ridiculed for being irresponsible for getting pregnant at a tender age, before finishing school, and out of wedlock. On the other hand, Kenge, the man who made her pregnant got away with it. They felt that the fairest way to deal with this situation was to punish both parties concerned:

**Speaker four:** For Tendai, it was like it's all her fault you know...umntwana ongangawe [a young girl like you] getting pregnant before you even finish your school and the like, but for Kenge, no one really minded...he was really proud of it that he slept with a girl and all...I think the blame was supposed to be delegated to both of them.

Interestingly, one boy of all the sixteen boys interviewed expressed sentiments that were similar to those of girls. He felt that the girl was not fairly treated as she was punished while nothing was done to the man. This cross-gender interpretation shows

the complexities of meaning making, in that there is no uniform way of making sense of a media texts both between and within the same gender. The following is what the male informant felt:

**Speaker seven:** I think Tendai is the one who was mostly blamed especially by her mother because she ended up being sent to her rural home because she was pregnant unlike Kenge. I think a fair way of treating Tendai and Kenge's situation was to reason with both of them in order to come up with a solution that suits both of them.

Ironically, the rest of the boys felt the man was given more blame than the female. Their reading was completely the opposite of what the girls above felt:

**Speaker six:** I think Kenge was blamed most and Tendai was not blamed at all. He *was given hundred percent blame* because they said he took advantage of Tendai. He is even in jail now.

In their justification of the treatment of the female character, boys cited cultural and traditional values which they used to qualify their views. They condoned the handling of the incident by the girl's parents as 'culturally acceptable', because girls are supposed to abstain from sex until marriage. The assumption is that, if they do not adhere to this cultural expectation, then they deserved to be punished, just like the female character was punished by her parents. To the boys, this was culturally acceptable because of the patriarchal nature of their socialisation, where girls are supposed to be 'brought up with morals', but there is no similar requirement for boys. The long excerpt which follows is a good example of how the larger socio-cultural context of media consumption can influence meaning making processes. The speaker below uses what he has experienced in his lived reality to interpret the incident:

**Speaker six:** I agree with what her parents did...[laughter] have you ever been really really angry at your little brother or little sister that you just want to punch them? You have...but then now imagine... you are a mother, and *culturally, as a mother, your role in raising children is to make sure the girl child is brought up with...what do you call it...yah... morals...*and you hear as a mother ukuthi (that) your daughter is pregnant...Personally I think the reaction that Mai Jari had is very real, it happens in society because I know people who got pregnant and they were kicked out of home. Culturally, I find it unacceptable for girls to get pregnant before they are married...

Notably, I observed that class did not play a role in the different readings of gender portrayal by both female and male informants, as there were cross-class similarities. This is consistent with Morley's (1992:93) findings that in addition to social class,

there are other variables such as gender, socio-economic, educational and cultural interpretive competences that played an important role as well.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the other reasons for the popularity of *Studio 263* among Bulawayo students. The findings revealed that the programme is popular for different reasons such as its educational and entertainment value, the appeal of the soap opera genre, being a local production, and the scarcity of other viewing material. The conclusions drawn from the findings were that the students' interpretations of the soap were varied. In most cases, the informants read the text in relation to their gender while in other cases, there were cross-gender similarities. What was particularly noteworthy was the influence of the students' lived realities, gender, socio-cultural contexts such as the family, school and peers on their interpretations. It was thus apparent that the boys' and girls' reading of the text was a direct result of the larger socio-cultural environment in which they consumed *Studio 263*. However, the main conclusion I drew from the analyses in both chapter four and this chapter is that the reception of media messages is a complex process that is characterised by contradictions and heavily dependent on a wide range of factors.

## CHAPTER SIX .

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I present concluding reflections and recommendations derived from this research exercise. The aim of this qualitative study was to investigate the popularity of Zimbabwe's first health communication soap opera, *Studio 263* among Bulawayo students aged between 15 and 20 years. My objective was to explicate the different interpretations and sense that the young people made of the health soap opera. In my investigations, I assessed the interplay between lived realities, socio-cultural context, social class, age and gender on the decoding of health messages conveyed by this media text. This chapter is subdivided into three main sections which summarise the main findings of the study. They are: the importance of the socio-cultural context in the construction of meaning; the impact of gender on meaning making; and the role played by genre in health communication. The last section presents my closing note.

#### **Importance of Socio-cultural Context/Lived Realities**

After conducting this inquiry about meaning making processes of television audiences, I confirmed, among other things, that making sense of media messages is indeed a complex exercise that is dependent on, and influenced by other factors such as gender, social class, economic disposition and of relevance to this section, socio-cultural context of media consumption (Thompson, 1988:378; Schroder et al, 2003:124). This conclusion is drawn from my observation of how students drew from their socio-cultural contexts or lived realities to negotiate meanings from the health soap opera *Studio 263*.

Of significance is the realisation that most health messages conveyed by *Studio 263* were dominantly decoded by the students because they found them to be in line with their own lived realities. They also found this local soap useful to their everyday lives because of its relevance to their immediate circumstances as opposed to Western soaps such as *Passions*, *The Bold and the Beautiful* and the *Young and the Restless*, among others. This means that the encoders of the programme took time to study the

socio-cultural experiences of their target audiences before crafting the health messages. This is consistent with the Health communication argument that for health messages to be effective, they have to be relevant to the socio-cultural context of the target audience (Hugo, 2000:103).

While most of the health messages were dominantly interpreted by the informants, there were others that did not fit well within the socio-cultural context of the students, and as such received an oppositional reading. Among these were intimate scenes where characters kissed in public. In their criticism of such occurrences, the students argued that in their African and Zimbabwean cultural contexts, kissing was considered a private affair and thus could not be screened on national television. They accused the producers of bringing in a Western phenomenon to their society and thus found this disturbing and unwelcome. This is evident in the following speaker's remarks:

**Speaker five:** I have something to say to the producers of *Studio 263*, on the part of them introducing kissing in front of us. They should understand that this soap opera is watched by a lot of people, grannies, mothers, fathers and children, and that this is an African community, and not the United States, where such things are acceptable and common. They should not take everything from the Western soaps as we are not comfortable with it here in Zimbabwe.

A related issue involved the mention of condoms in the soap opera and also in advertisements flighted during the screening of the soap. Most students opposed this message citing that public promotion of condoms went against their values, cultural experiences and expectations. Their interpretation was a result of the influences of the socio-cultural and religious beliefs of the largely Christian Zimbabwean society which advocates abstinence as opposed to condom use. While at the onset of my study, I found it ironic for the soap to promote abstinence as opposed to condom use in a society where young people engage in sex at an early age, my findings and the Zimbabwe socio-cultural situation outlined above are explanations of why the soap handled the issue the way it did.

The conclusion and recommendation that arise from the project is that in crafting health messages or any other communication for that matter, producers should pay

attention to both the immediate and larger socio-cultural contexts within which the target audience lives. As the study shows, failure to align health communication with the context of media consumption contributes to oppositional readings while adherence to the context of consumption helps achieve the goals of the encoders. However, I will be quick to raise my concerns that while it is beneficial to model media messages along cultural practices, the problem is that such messages at times tend to endorse even the bad practices which hinder safe and progressive health practices in societies.

Another recommendation that arises from this audience reception study is that audience researchers must endeavour to understand the situational contexts which affect the interpretation of messages by cultural or sub cultural groups, if audience behaviour is to be fully understood. In conducting this study, I had the advantage of sharing the same socio-cultural context as my informants. This made it easier for me to understand and contextualise most of the issues that arose from their discourses and to immediately link them with the relevant socio-cultural practices concerned.

### **Impact of Gender on Meaning Making**

Another of the study's conclusion is that gender plays a significant role in the interpretation of media messages. It is noteworthy that other audience reception studies have established that in addition to gender, other variables such as social class, economic disposition, education level and cultural competences influence the reading of media texts (Morley, 1992:93). However, based on the findings of this research, my contention is that gender had more influence on the way young people read *Studio 263* messages than all other variables mentioned above.

While my sample was drawn from both middle and working class schools, the interpretations were not divided along the same class lines, but instead transcended social class, economic disposition and other factors. In most cases, the decodings varied according to the informants' gender. In their discussions of most topics, girls from both middle and working class schools seemed to concur while the same applied to boys. This is not to say that there was uniform interpretation of the programme among same sex groups, as there were isolated cases of cross-gender readings and intra-gender differences, but that there were similarities in the perception of certain

issues such as abstinence, teenage pregnancies, HIV/AIDS, among others, within the same gender. This gender divide can be explained in terms of the different socialisation which girls and boys receive in the Zimbabwean society.

The study also established that gender insensitivity in the construction of media messages can lead to oppositional readings by the affected gender. This was evident in the way girls felt the programme did not portray gender equality, but represented women as the weaker sex and second to men. On the other hand, boys were content with the portrayal of both men and women. While the producers of the programme may not have foreseen the decoding of the message in this manner, this goes to show that indeed there is no single way of decoding media messages by an active audience. However, I contend that efforts should be made to ensure that health messages depict gender equality, given the rise of gender sensitivity among young people.

#### **Role Played by Genre in Health Communication and Audience Studies**

In addition to the important roles played by the socio-cultural context and gender in decoding media messages, the study also established that choice of genre in packaging health communication is crucial. While the soap opera genre was popular with the informants, it is noteworthy that it is still more popular with women audiences than with men. This means that if health messages are to appeal to all sectors of the target audience, there is need for a diversified approach. This may entail the use of other genres which include talk shows, dramas, music, and celebrity role-modelling, among other genres recommended by the young people.

If genre is important to health communication, I established that it is also crucial to audience studies in general. As the findings revealed, knowledge of a particular generic programme affects the decoding of messages. In turn studying audiences' preference of a particular genre is useful in understanding their interpretive patterns. Therefore, it is crucial for audience researchers to pay more attention to the different media genres, and audience preferences of particular genres over others, if the relationship between media messages and their audiences is to be fully understood. This finding is consistent with Morley's advice that audience research should move beyond the framework of the decoding model into that of genre theory, which offers a

better and more flexible model of understanding the text-audience relationship (1981b:10).

### **Closing Note**

In my closing note, I wish to highlight that this qualitative study achieved its objective of investigating what it is that makes *Studio 263* so popular among Bulawayo students. In a nutshell, I established that the soap's appeal is based on its realism, educational and entertainment value, as well as the popularity of the soap opera genre, particularly with female audiences. Being a local Zimbabwean production also attracted young people who felt they could relate to and identify with it. However, while most students gave the above as their reasons for liking the soap, a few said the scarcity of other viewing material on the national television channel was their reason for watching the soap.

I feel that this qualitative study will contribute immensely to Zimbabwe's Health Communication sector which currently has never carried out a qualitative reception study of HIV/AIDS communication targeted at adolescents. I also hope that the study's findings will be useful in crafting more appealing health communication messages targeted at young people. Young people are a vulnerable group, and their health is of national importance as they are tomorrow's leaders.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

TIME ALLOWED: 1 1/2 hours

#### INTRODUCTION- MODERATOR

##### A. WELCOME

Welcome and thank you for coming to this focus group. Each of you has been selected to participate because your point of view is important to my study. I know that you are very busy and I greatly appreciate your contribution to this project. This interview is not a test, and it should not in any way be viewed as a series of questions with right or wrong answers. Remember, I am interested in what you think and feel. I want to know your opinions on the programme regardless of whether they are similar to or different from those of other group members.

##### B. STATEMENT OF THE PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW

The purpose of this focus group interview is to find out why the soap opera, *Studio 263*, is popular among young people. What are the issues that are addressed by the programme that interest you and what are your reasons for watching it?

##### C. GUIDELINES TO FOLLOW DURING THE INTERVIEW

There are a few guidelines I would like to ask you to follow during the focus group interview. First, you do not have to speak in any particular order. When you have something to say, please do so. Second, please do not speak while someone else is talking, kindly wait for your turn. Third, remember that there are many people in the group and that it is important that I obtain the point of view of each one of you. Fourth, you do not need to agree with what everyone or anyone in the group says, but you do need to state your point of view without making any negative comments about other people's contributions. Finally, because we have limited time together, I may need to stop and redirect our discussion. Please feel free to ask any questions you may have before we begin. We will begin by introducing ourselves followed by the completion of a

short questionnaire. We will then watch one episode of *Studio 263* together before we engage in our discussion.

#### **PERMISSION TO RECORD ALL PROCEEDINGS**

- a. Seek permission to record all proceedings
- b. Assure them of confidentiality and anonymous use of material

#### **GROUP INTRODUCTIONS**

- a. Round of introductions by participants
- b. Completion of standard questionnaire

#### **SCREENING OF *STUDIO 263* EPISODE**

- a. Screening of one video-recorded episode of *Studio 263* (30 minutes long)

#### **GENERAL QUESTIONS**

1. What happened in the episode we have just been watching?
2. What is *Studio 263* mostly about?
3. How often do you watch the programme?
4. Who do you normally watch it with?
5. Who do you think is the target audience of the soap opera?
6. What do you like about the soap and why do you like it?
7. Does it relate to your own socio-cultural experience? In other words, does it help you in any way in your everyday life or do your everyday life experiences help you to understand the drama?
8. Do you think the issue of HIV/AIDS, stigma, teenage pregnancy and other issues addressed by the drama are realistic, do they happen in real life or they are just fictitious?
9. Does the form of the film (soap opera as opposed to serious AIDS talk shows) appeal to you and does it help you to understand the issues addressed better?
10. If not, how best do you think such issues of health education should be packaged for young people in order to effectively achieve the objective of informing and educating them?

11. Do you like soap operas? Which other ones do you like and what do you like about them? How does this one compare with them, what similarities and differences can you identify?

## **THEMATIC QUESTIONS**

### **HIV/AIDS**

1. What is the main theme of the film? What else does it talk about?

### **GENDER REPRESENTATIONS**

1. How are young girls and women in general represented in the soap opera?  
Probe: What do you think about the way girls who fall pregnant out of wedlock are treated? For example Tendai.
2. How are boys and men represented by the soap?  
Probe: Are men who get girls pregnant outside marriage treated the same way as the pregnant girls (for example Kenge), if not why do you think it is like that?
3. What is a fair way of treating both girls and boys who are in such situations?

### **CHARACTERS**

1. Who are your favourite characters in the soap opera and what do you like about them?
2. Which characters do you dislike and what don't you like about them?
3. Do you find the characters real, how are they similar or different from real people?  
Probe: Do you know any people like the *Studio 263* people?
4. Do you learn anything from the characters, if yes, what do you learn?

### **FOCUS GROUP CHECK LIST**

Observe how groups of boys and girls only negotiate messages from the soap opera.

- ✓ Note any differences that may occur.
- ✓ Observe how different class schools' participants interpret messages.

- ✓ Note the way different age groups, cultural and ethnic groups decode meaning.
- ✓ Note any other differences that are evident in the way different groups make sense of the soap opera.

### **CLOSING STATEMENT**

As we come to the end of the discussion, may I remind you that the audiotape will be transcribed. You will all be assigned false names for the purpose of transcript and data analysis so that you will remain anonymous. Thank you for your contributions to this project, your honest responses will be an enormous asset to my work. Once again, I very much appreciate your involvement.

## APPENDIX 2: STANDARD QUESTIONNAIRE

The information contained in this questionnaire will be used exclusively for the purposes of this research project. You are therefore kindly requested to complete it as accurately as possible.

1. What is your name?

.....

2. How old are you?

.....

3. What is your ethnic group?

.....

4. What is the name of your school?

.....

5. What form are you in?

.....

6. Where do you stay?

.....

7. Approximately how many times have you watched *Studio 263*?

.....

### **APPENDIX 3: QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF A SAMPLE EPISODE OF *STUDIO 263***

#### **Themes**

As posited by the qualitative content analysis theory, it is important to pick themes and the whole construction of the media text, in order to ascertain the messages preferred by the producers (Hansen et al, 1998:94). In the episode that was analysed, I picked the following themes and ideas which the producers of the soap appeared to be putting across.

#### **Stigmatisation of People Living with HIV/AIDS**

The theme is portrayed through Tendai, one of the Jari daughters who is infected with HIV/AIDS. She is chased away from home by her brother Jabu because she went public with her HIV/AIDS status. The family felt that she had disgraced them and hence should be punished through eviction. Tendai becomes destitute and is offered shelter by a sympathetic HIV/AIDS counsellor Mrs Adams.

#### **Tradition Versus Christianity**

This theme is portrayed through tete (the aunt) and Mrs Jari (brother's wife). The aunt is discouraging Mrs Jari, her late brother's wife from remarrying a man of her choice saying this went against tradition. She is advocating the traditional way of handling this issue which suggests that she should practice traditional widow inheritance where one of her late husband's brothers is supposed to inherit her. Alternatively, if she had no intentions of practising the above tradition, she is supposed to remain a widow for the rest of her life and not bring a man of her choice, that is, a stranger into the Jari family. These traditional suggestions proposed by the husband's sister do not go down well with Mrs Jari who is not a traditionalist but a practicing Christian. She feels that the aunt's suggestions are going against her Christian values and beliefs. She instead advocates freedom of choice which is suggested by Christianity. This leads to a heated argument between her and her sister in law and the Jari family as a whole.

### **Corruption**

The episode also depicts the corruption that takes place at JH construction, a family business owned by a widow, Mrs Huni. Her late husband's brother, Jacob Huni connives with the company lawyer, Mr Wakanaka and succeeds in using illegal means to acquire the highest number of shares in the company. This move angers Mrs Huni and in her anger she destroys the forged documents and poisons the scheming brother-in-law. While the brother-in-law is fighting for his life in hospital, Mrs Huni becomes the prime suspect and is under investigation by the police. Meanwhile, the other core-owners of the company, the late John Huni's daughters, Joyce and Vimbai get to hear about Jacob's illegal shares deal with the lawyer and are equally shocked and outraged.

