

Setting as a Emblematic Vehicle for Verbalization of Health and Family Planning Messages: A Case Study of Siri: A Kenyan Serial TV Drama

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Abstract

How does **Setting** in Film give meaning to action and produce meaning for the audience? One of the most noticeable techniques in a serial drama production is the **mise-en-scene** technique. This paper examines the role of **Setting**, an element of **mise-en-scene**, in a serial drama edutainment. The study contends that in the hands of skilled E-E (Entertainment-Education) producers, setting and objects placed on the set (Props) become concrete vehicles for impacting on an E-E serial drama edutainment. By viewing **Setting** both as an entity and a symbol as well, SIRI a locally produced serial drama in Kenya is dissected with the objectives to examine the contribution of **Setting** in the realization of emerging themes. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) which revolves around the process of learning directly related to the observation of models forms the theoretical basis for the study. The study avers that, enlivened by the actors presence, charged by the dialogue and quickened in the audience imagination, **setting** and objects placed on the set take on a life of their own as they weave in and out of a drama's action; impacting on an E-E serial drama's edutainment.

Introduction

In designing an entertainment-education *serial drama*, first, a central theme is decided upon based upon a needs assessment survey of the target audience (Singhal, Rogers & Brown, 1993). Ethics related to this central theme are then derived; for example, HIV testing, family harmony, spousal communication and PMTCT, among others (Singhal, Rongers & Brown, 1993). These values are then defended by characters in the course of the drama.

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SIRI provides plotlines embedded with information that raises awareness and promotes safer alternatives crucial in changing high-risk behaviours related to HIV / AIDS and family planning. The HIV/ AIDS scourge is a major public health issue today world over as the number of people dying of HIV/AIDS raises concern. According to the AIDS Epidemic Update (2011) from the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), as of December 2010; an estimated 34 million people were living with HIV/AIDS. The rate of new infections is also alarming and containing the incidence of new infections continues to be a great challenge worldwide. HIV/AIDS has affected individuals and devastated communities globally. According to Brown, Kiruswa and Fraser (2005), the pandemic not only touches the lives of those infected, it also impacts the lives of virtually every one, posing multiple challenges and serious threats to human society in general.

In many countries, HIV & AIDS programs are integrated with Family Planning (FP) in order to improve efficiency since unprotected sex may lead to STIs, HIV, and unintended pregnancies. FP is in itself a major health and economic issue. In just over four decades, Kenya's population has increased from 10.9 million in 1969 to an estimated 40 million people today (The Kenya population data sheet, 2011). This development is attributed to declined mortality rates and increased birth rates. Whereas reduction of mortality rate is an achievement, increased birth rates on the other hand is both a health risk and an economic problem. While most women welcome pregnancy and childbirth, the risks of illness and death associated with these events are very high. For this reason, women are encouraged to give their bodies enough time to regain health after giving birth and before conceiving again. Spacing children has been found to result in healthier infants with lower risks of low-birth weight, nutritional deficiencies, and infant death (Cleland et al., 2007). Thus, FP greatly enhances chances of child survival. By encouraging the take up of Family planning, governments around the world are focused on combating poverty in order to achieve a range of health and development goals,

There is no single formula for a film maker to fuse themes into a script and onto the screen. Therefore, E-E producers and directors are obligated to find out the best way to bring out an idea or concept that is central to a story. Whereas there are different ways that a filmmaker can to bring out themes, the utility of *setting* on emerging themes of HIV/AIDS and Family Planning (FP) is the contractual obligation of this paper.

Utility of Setting on Emerging themes: HIV/AIDS

The argument on HIV/AIDS begins with the death of Suleiman, a foreman at Majani tea firm. Suleiman's death raises concerns on the increased number of workers at Majani tea firm who had died of HIV/AIDS in the past one year. A concern of Mr. Majani on the number of people dying on his firm is also a global concern. The number of people dying of HIV/AIDS is alarming across the globe as most people with HIV are unaware of their HIV status. Scaling up HIV testing is a critical step for HIV/AIDS prevention. Distressed by this high rate of death, Mr. Majani declares compulsory HIV testing for all his workers and asks Tom, his firm manager, to organize and ensure that every employee at Majani firm takes the test. The debate on HIV testing is executed on different fronts. First, the drama presents mandatory HIV testing as a violation of human rights. According to UNAIDS/WHO policy statement on HIV testing, the conditions of the **3 Cs** advocated since HIV testing became available in 1985, continue to be founding principles for the conduct of HIV testing of individuals. Such testing of individuals must be: **confidential**, be accompanied by **counseling**, and only be conducted with informed **consent** of the individual (UNAIDS/WHO, 2004). This means that the conditions under which people undergo HIV testing must be anchored in a human rights approach. However, when Mr. Majani declares compulsory testing for his workers, he clearly fails to consider their rights to testing.

With mandatory testing denoting an infringement of workers' rights, other options can be explored to have workers tested. Persuaded that there are alternatives to mandatory testing, Rita (Mr. Majani's wife) undertakes to convince Mr. Majani to conduct a road show at the firm and give workers an opportunity to test at their own will. Road shows have been employed profitably in Kenya to educate the citizenry on many issues of concern. Road shows combine entertainment with education. When Mr. Majani finally yields to his wife's suggestion, the combination of education and entertainment at the road show makes learning about HIV/AIDS a more engaging experience and offers a ground for self-initiated HIV testing for the Majani workers. *Setting* at the road show is consistent with the idea of voluntary HIV testing and the need to offer client initiated testing as workers get a chance to test at their own will. Through song, dance and involvement of the community in the road show (**Fig 2**), several workers including other Majani residents take the initiative to test (**Fig 1**).



Fig 1: Sister Immaculate addressing Majani residents waiting to test for HIV virus.

(Courtesy PSI, *SIRI* DVD)

Fig 2: Guest performer Susan Owiyo performing her song *Ukimwi mbaya* (AIDS is bad) at the road show with actor Lucy Wangui (*Vioja Mahakamani*) (Courtesy PSI, *SIRI* DVD)

The debate on HIV testing is also looks at modalities of preventing mother to child transmission (PMTCT) of HIV/AIDS. On knowing their HIV status, many couples would want to avoid becoming pregnant. PMTCT reduces the number of AIDS orphans, whose life chances are seriously diminished because they have lost a parent, particularly the mother. With no home testing kits, health institutions and VCT centers are considered best suited for offering PMTCT services. *Setting* at Majani clinic (**Fig 3**) is consistent with this argument. In order to increase access to HIV testing and counseling, it is obligatory to raise awareness on the accessibility of services and of the benefits that accrue out of knowing one's HIV status. While the set acts as a container for the events taking place, the hospital *setting* (**Fig 3, Fig 4**) of the serial lent itself well to the realities of dealing with HIV testing of patients and their families; thus scaling up HIV testing as a critical step for PMTCT.



Fig 3: Majani Clinic (Courtesy PSI, SIRI DVD)



Fig 4: Beth and Tom during a HIV test at Majani clinic. (Courtesy SIRI DVD Episode 11)

Setting also raises the role of the male partner in reproductive issues and his involvement in PMTCT. This is debated via the physical distance between Jack and his wife Wilmina and Tom's appearance at the local bar with Njoki. Jack resides and works in Nairobi while his wife Wilmina lives in the village. This is a common scenario with many Kenyans who migrate to the urban centres to look for employment. This culture of keeping the families apart encourages men to seek sexual gratification outside marriage and ultimately engenders high levels of prostitution. Through *setting* such as the bar (**Fig 5**) where Tom meets with Njoki and the physical distance between Jack and Wilmina, the viewer can infer the role of the male partner in PMTCT; where acts of infidelity and distance between married couples can occasion serious results. Both Spouses are risk of contracting HIV as well as infecting each other with the virus. Eventually, Beth tests positive (although Tom tested negative) and Jack dies of HIV/ AIDS; putting Wilmina at risk (although she did not go through with the test).



Fig 5: Tom and Njoki at a local bar (Courtesy PSI, S/RI DVD)

S/RI underscores the use of condoms as critical in the fight against HIV/AIDS. As Experts endeavour to search for new preventive technologies against the HIV / AIDs scourge, the condom is the single, most efficient, available technology to reduce the risk of sexual transmission of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). As a *prop*, the condom has been foregrounded considerably in the Television drama and recommended in helping prevent new infections. According to 'Family Planning Saves Lives' report (2009), consistent and correct use of condoms can significantly reduce the rate of new HIV infections. Moraa unswervingly apprises Paul that the only way they can only make love if he gets a condom. In subsequent scenes in the drama, Adze finds a TRUST condom wrapper in the tea fields (**Fig 6**) as nearby Paul and Moraa have sex (**Fig 7**).



Fig 6: Adze holds up a condom wrapper
(Courtesy SIRI DVD Episode 3)



Fig 7: Paul and Moraa after being found by adze having sex in the fields.
(Courtesy SIRI DVD Episode 3)

In these scenes, the condom is used to accentuate the woman's role in the prevention and/or fight of the HIV/AIDS scourge. *SIRI* avows that the woman has the right and power to determine what pattern of sexual life she wishes to engage in. By foregrounding the debate about condoms, the TV drama affirms that women can take charge of their lives and are indispensable in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Testing HIV positive is among a few things that can engender real trepidation in many a people's hearts. Because of the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS; many people do not wish to know their status. Notification of a positive HIV test result can profoundly affect a person's mental and physical well-being (Abercrombie, 1996). After Tom and Beth finally take the test, the results show discordance where Beth tests positive and Tom tests negative. These results dumbfound the couple as illustrated in **Fig 8** and **Fig 9**.



Fig 8: Tom's reaction to HIV test results (Courtesy PSI, *SIRI* DVD)

Fig 9: Beth's reaction to HIV test results (Courtesy PSI, *SIRI* DVD)

On realizing that one is HIV positive, adjusting to the new life concomitant with the new status may be an emotional road. The drama does not reveal Beth's psychological condition after Tom leaves until when Phoebe comes to visit. Through *setting*, the drama shows Beth's psychological devastation caused by the news of her HIV positive status as well as lack of support from her husband Tom. Through the *setting* (a grubby kitchen area), the audience can deduce that Beth is going through psychological trauma that has caused a sense of neglect. *Setting* and objects placed on the set, subsequently, stimulate a sense of verisimilitude - making the situation look plausible – put in Beth's shoes, any human being react and behave like her. Through *setting*, *SIRI* goes ahead to declare that a HIV positive a woman can live a positive life and beget a HIV negative child. We later see through the *setting* (**Fig 10**) Beth's transformation after being encouraged by Phoebe that she can still live a positive life produce an HIV a negative child. The now clean home depicts Beth's psychological transformation and when Tom comes back to beg for forgiveness (**Fig 10**), he finds Beth already living positively with her new status.



Fig 10: Beth cleaning up her house as Tom begs for forgiveness (Courtesy PSI, SIRA DVD)

Through *setting*, *SIRA* provides some applicable information regarding HIV/AIDS; Testing, prevention, role of both male and female partners in the fight against HIV/AIDS and the possibility of living a positive life after testing HIV positive. While tailored communications are viewed as more relevant and credible and are easily remembered (Kreuter, et al 1991), this paper also notes that the serial drama fails to include *props* crucial to significant action-taking. The TVdrama fails to include the HIV testing kit as a *prop* both at the clinic and at the road show. Thus, the audience is forced to assume, without having beheld the testing kit. Most times, the audience will remember what they saw rather than what they heard in a serial drama or film. It is therefore important to tailor setting and objects placed on the set in a germane and credible way. A test kit for HIV is useful for the early detection and treatment of the virus and is subsequently fundamental to the improvement of the quality of life for HIV positive individuals. Hence, availing it in a set makes the action taking place more believable. From the perspective of treatment for HIV/AIDS, themes cast by the serial drama are mainly relayed through dialogue. The serial drama fails to make any use of *props* concerned with medication for HIV/AIDS or PMTCT. Such insufficient information can make it intricate for someone who is infected to understand options available and therefore make an informed choice. Thus, excluding some significant *props*, the serial drama partly lost an opportunity to enhance its educational value with regards to HIV/AIDS.

Utility of setting on the accruing theme of Family Planning

Here, we analyze the function of *setting* in relaying the theme of Family Planning (FP).. The theme of FP is mainly discussed in plots presented by Martha and Truphosa. The two women may have problems that require FP but their realities are dissimilar. Martha already has five children and she is pregnant with the sixth child; and her husband Isaiah still demands that she bear him three sons. Truphosa, on the other hand, is uncomfortable with the family planning method she is currently using. From the story, she and her husband Musembi had visited the clinic and she had been given birth control pills. However, despite using the contraceptives, she is vomiting and she is afraid that she could be pregnant.

The first theme communicated through *setting* is the economic degradation associated with lack of FP. This film maker's position is verbalized by the size and nature of Martha and Isaiah's house. The drama presents the couple living in a thatched mud hut; symbolically representing their economic status, which the viewer can attribute to their failure to adopt a family planning method. Secondly, the TV drama argues that with lack of necessary resources, raising a big family can be stressful. Children are a blessing and are received with delight. However, raising a child requires significant amounts of resources and the more the children, the more the resources required. According to Cleland, et al., (2006), homes with many children often become poor and stay poor. Also, children from such homes tend to be less educated and receive less nutrition than children from smaller families. This debate is clearly brought out in episode one as both Isaiah's family and Mr, Majani's family sit out for breakfast. In **Fig 11**, Martha shakes her head when she sees the only remaining flour as she prepares porridge for her family. Comparatively, while Martha is struggling to feed her family (**Fig 11**), Mr. Majani household can afford a decent breakfast with tea, bread, juice and assorted fruits for breakfast (**Fig 4.112**). These objects on the setting (food stuff) support the argument that homes with many children often become poor and stay poor and also have a tendency to receive less nutrition than smaller families might.



Fig 11: Martha checks out the remaining flour to make porridge. (Courtesy PSI, *SIRI* DVD)



Fig 12: Majani's family having breakfast (Courtesy PSI, *SIRI* DVD)

There is also the psychological degradation that comes with raising a big family with limited resources. In episode two, Martha is sacked from work and on getting home, she finds Isaiah with a new hoe. This torments her psychologically as she gets into the house and begins to cry. She cannot understand how Isaiah would opt to buy a new hoe while there is no food to eat. With the new hoe, the TV drama brings the psychological degradation associated with lack of enough resources to feed a family. From these discussions, *SIRI* manages to present the economic and mental decrepitude associated with lack of FP through the *mise-en-scene* element of *setting* together with objects on the set.



Fig 13 Isaiah's family outside his mud hut having breakfast. (Courtesy PSI, *SIRI* DVD)

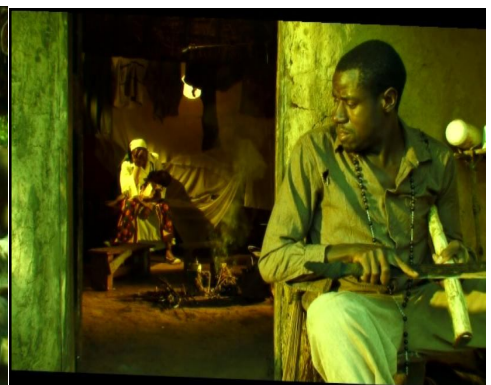


Fig 14: Isaiah listens to Martha cry at the background. (Courtesy PSI, *SIRI* DVD)

Other than the dilapidation that is associated with lack of FP, *setting* highlights on different barriers that inhibit the uptake of FP. Personal beliefs and values shaped by both culture and religion can inhibit the uptake of FP (Srikanthan & Reid, 2008). Most couples, especially in Africa, believe that their families are not complete without a boy child. African traditions and some other cultures in the world have always looked at the girl child as a lesser child. Like many other women, Martha is forced to conceive over and over again in order to bear a boy child; resulting in a big family that she cannot provide for. Isaiah and Martha's religion does not articulate norms relevant to family planning; nor does it communicate compliance. According to McQuillan (2004), religion will affect fertility behaviour when it: (1) articulates norms relevant to fertility; (2) can communicate these values and promote compliance; and (3) is central to the social identity of its followers. Isaiah's bible (**Fig 15**) is a symbol of the religious bondage that causes Martha not to seek any sort of family planning. Through the bible, *SIRI* underlines stress how religion can encumber an individual; hindering him/her from making informed decisions concerning family and health.



**Fig 15 Isaiah Scolds Martha for Leaving the Children Alone at Home
(Courtesy PSI, *SIRI* DVD)**

The role of the male partner is also crucial in the uptake of Family Planning. As head of the family, a man can have a positive influence in the uptake of FP since in most homesteads in Africa; women are forced to comply with their husbands' decisions. When Isaiah finds the pills Martha received from Wilmina, he not only scolds her (**Fig 16**) but also he declares days of prayer and fasting (**Fig 17**).

Later in the drama, when Martha presents him with a condom, he disgustingly tosses it away; showing that he neither esteems nor agrees with the idea of family planning. The condom and the daily pills are significant *props* in the theme being radiated here, underscoring the role of the male partner in the uptake of FP.



Fig 16: Isaiah scolds Martha over family planning pills. (Courtesy PSI, SIRI DVD)



Fig 17 Isaiah take his family through prayers and fasting. (Courtesy PSI, SIRI DVD)

Where there is compliance, there are various options that a woman has in regard to choosing a FP method. Family planning clinics are sources of knowledge for birth spacing and help make known the benefits of spacing births (Gold, et al., 2009). Eager to confirm if she is pregnant, Truphosa visits the clinic to consult with sister immaculate on why she feels nauseous after taking the daily pill. During this visit, Truphosa is taken through the various family planning methods that a woman can choose from.



Fig 18: Sister immaculate takes Truphosa through the Various Family Planning options (Courtesy PSI, *SIRI* DVD)

The hospital *setting* (**Fig 18**) of the serial TV drama lends itself well to the realities of dealing with family planning. The *setting* is appropriate for the action taking place and *Props* and decor placed on the scene; various family planning methods and wall posters further play a more active function in the drama in the construction of the theme of family planning and the importance of visiting the clinic for consultation.

Conclusion

This paper sought to identify if *setting* in film can be said to contribute to the realization of accruing themes of Family Planning. *SIRI* lends itself to be an entertainment education initiative because of the various themes presented throughout the drama, which include HIV/AIDS and Family Planning. This study's findings are that; (1) *Setting* was able to convey the Kenyan experience of the many themes obtaining in the drama which include HIV/AIDS and Family Planning. The serial drama captures the emotional, physical and social degradation associated with lack of family planning in the Kenyan community. (2) *Setting* was also able to raise the argument on the role of the male partner in FP as well as possible barriers that can impede the uptake of FP. (3) One aim of *SIRI* was to encourage the uptake of services offered by the ministry of health and this was well captured in the drama by discouraging sharing of family planning pills and presenting Majani clinic as the best place to seek family planning services and VCT services. (4) To some extent, *setting* was also able to bring out some themes regarding HIV/AIDS; HIV testing, prevention, and living positively if tested positive. However, several arguments concerned with HIV/AIDS came out through dialogue. While in general *Setting* provided the backdrop for the unfolding action, the drama omitted *props* that would have made a crucial contribution to the thematic aspect of the serial drama.

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