

“Scrrrutiniize!”

The story behind the *South Park* of anti-HIV adverts

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“You wanna beat HIV?” Victor the taxi driver asks the camera. “You need to understand the language of love – the scrutinization of the linguistical examination. Check out the chief over here.”

A businessman comes to the fore. His eyebrows and arms sway and jerk like a clumsy marionette.

“Comrade, sir, are you faithful to your wife?”

“I am faithful to my wife”, the man says.

“Faithful?”

“Faithful.”

“Are you faithful?”

“Sure, sure, faithful.”

Their heads bobble and slide side-to-side, and zoom toward the camera and back into place again.

“Are you sure?”

“Faithful.”

“You’re very faithful.”

“Faithful.”

“But check what is he really saying”, Victor says slyly. He pulls a “truth” bullhorn from his back pocket.

“Are you faithful?” he asks to the businessman, with the truth-horn in his face.

“I am faithful”, the man says robotically, “to make sure she doesn’t find out about my lovers.”

Victor, voiced brilliantly by comedian Joey Rasdien, then offers two staples of traditional HIV instruction: get tested and wear a condom, “my bru”. But somehow it comes off only as brotherly prodding, not patronizing advice.

Indeed, the entire advert, which is part of a series created for the Scrutinize campaign, has the mood of a rude comedy short, not a sex-ed lesson.

And yet, it is a sex-ed lesson in every respect, and a meticulously researched, carefully crafted and very expensive one at that.

The Scrutinize ads were “never devised to be a public service announcement”, said Cal Bruns of marketing firm Matchboxology, which oversaw their creative design. “The whole campaign was designed with the same kind of inspiration and professionalism that you would use for a campaign for Coca-Cola or Toyota. And that’s what makes it totally different than every other [HIV] campaign in South Africa right now”.

Five Scrutinize animated adverts – called “animerts” – have saturated prime-time TV so far this year, and two new spots began running this week. Over four months this winter, more than nine in ten South Africans saw one or other of the ads, and the TV spots have been reinforced with Scrutinize-themed peer education materials and university campus visits.

The series is just one of several mass media HIV campaigns in recent years, but it's the first to use animation – and the first, Matchboxology claims, to personify HIV as a character (a sneaky ninja).

It's also the first to utilize several recent studies on behavioural causes of HIV transmission in South Africa, and most elements in the Scrutinize series are drawn directly from one of several national studies.

The adverts particularly focus on warning against multiple and concurrent sexual partners, which, according to research, is rarely thought of as a contributor to HIV transmission.

When protagonist Victor challenges the “faithful” businessman, for instance, he's not just being sassy. The 2005 Nelson Mandela Household Survey showed that over 27% of males and 6% of females aged 15-24 had had multiple partners in the previous 12 months, and the 2006 HIV/AIDS National Communication Survey confirmed these numbers.

Even the fact that Victor is a taxi driver was based on statistical research – taxi drivers are especially likely to have multiple partners.

Moreover, when two of the spots talk about “sugar daddies and mamas,” it's because studies have shown transactional sex with more than one person to be as common among young men as among young women.

The Scrutinize adverts also emphasize condom usage, even for those not engaging in casual sex. This came after the Mandela Survey showed that only 25% of regular partners – though not necessarily monogamous ones – use condoms.

Research also indicated that some South Africans are still wary of Choice condoms, the government-sponsored brand, after a corrupt inspector allowed millions of faulty condoms to pass into public usage. This led to one advert, with guest celeb-host Sophie Ndaba, devoted to demonstrating the extensive temperature and pressure tests that Choice condoms must pass.

“Ja, you want to beat HIV, but you think condoms are kak, eh?” chides Victor, now dressed in a white lab coat. “Let's apply some science to that hypothesis”.

And he does.

Behind its applied science, the creative inspiration for the Scrutinize animerts came largely from satirical animated series like *The Simpsons* and *South Park*.

The latter show is the animerts' most noticeable influence. Its irreverent characters, their oversized bobble-heads and its method for transmitting social messages are particularly similar.

When developing the feel of the Scrutinize ads, “we started with a *South Park* mentality”, Bruns said. The show “deals with racism and other heavy issues, but it does so in a funny way”.

The environs, characters and attitudes of the animerts, however, are very much “South African inspired” as well, he said.

Victor, his friends and his female opposite, a shebeen queen (female bar owner), are all identifiable local characters, said Bruns.

They're also full of tough-love and in-your-face talk about personal responsibility. They're uninhibited by taboo, and they hit sex, love and HIV head-on, said Richard

Delate, who coordinates the campaign for the Johns Hopkins Health and Education Program.

During the adverts' rigorous focus group testing, he said, participants sometimes suggesting changing key elements they didn't like, but the creators were careful not to "water down" the message.

"It's okay to make people uncomfortable", Delate said.

Some also felt uneasy with the use of animation, although most viewer responses have been enthusiastic, he said.

The look of the adverts was developed by independent animator Jill Slabert, who used a relatively inexpensive collage technique to combine simple drawings with photographed objects. The collage animation of the BBC children's show *Charlie and Lola*, strangely enough, was a major aesthetic inspiration, Bruns said.

Primary funding for both the Scrutinize campaign and its supporting research was provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAid) and the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (Pepfar).

US government AIDS funding has drawn criticism in the past for overemphasizing abstinence and underemphasizing condom use, but Delate praised its offers of assistance and its hands-off approach.

Other USAid partners now want to use Scrutinize characters and materials, he said.

In addition to USAid funding, jeans-maker Levi's helped with the campaign's launch costs and live university events, and the partnership with its product provided Scrutinize with an "almost priceless" youth brand association, Delate said.

When the animerts were developed, SABC, eTV and MTV also waived over half of the R26-million in ad costs to air the 40- and 60-second spots.

There are plans for 10 more animerts to air next year, and Delate and Bruns hope to exploit the concept's growing brand image for some time to come.

"We want to develop the characters", Bruns said. "It's not a one-off thing; that's not how we're approaching it. We think it could have longevity".

Like, say, *South Park*.

All seven Scrutinize adverts may be watched online, at www.scrutinize.org.za.

Additional tidbits and potential captions:

[Potential caption for the closing frame]

The Scrutinize adverts' closing tagline – "Let's flip this HIV to HI-Victory!" – was a "conscious effort to give people their role in the bigger picture", said Cal Bruns, their creative director.

[Potential caption for the Condom Wise animert]

While a Choice condom makes a cameo in most of the adverts, it stars in one, in which it demonstrates its durability and quality as a hip-hop parody of the dancing, cane-toting Looney Tunes amphibian Michigan J. Frog.

[perhaps too obscure a reference?]

[a section that didn't fit anywhere, even though the "jean manufacturers" quote fits so well with Levi's sponsorship of Scrutinize]

Scrutinize may be unique, but it's not alone, and Delate is quick to point out that his series doesn't necessarily hold the key to HIV prevention.

"Asking why there are so many HIV campaigns in South Africa is like asking why there are so many jean manufacturers", he said. "You have to tackle it from different angles".

While Victor takes jabs at risky day-to-day sexual behaviour among wide swaths of the population – Scrutinize's target audience is "18-32-year-olds" and "men aged 24-45+" – the well-known loveLife campaign focuses on a different niche. It helps young people make good life choices in spite of tough economic circumstances.

[a complete transcription of the advert "What's My Risk"]

Victor, protagonist taxi driver: Eh, my bru, it's your turn to play: "What's My Risk?"

[shift to them in a cable car, ready to jump out]

V: Time for the parachute?

Hapless, his friend: Haha, no risk, man.

V: Riiight. So you think you da man, eh? ... And no parachute? [takes it away]

H: Waaa! High risk, high risk, high risk, high risk.

[shift to them standing the middle of traffic]

V: How 'bout crossing this road?

H: Hey, plenty risky, man.

V: Ja, now you a quick learner, my bru.

[shift to them standing with women]

V: And how about unsafe sex with one girl?

H: Absolutely no risk, man.

V: And another?

H: No risk.

V: Another?

H: [bug-eyed] No risk!

V: And another?

H: Definitely no risk!

[HIV ninja beats him up]

H: No, no, no, no, nooo!

[ding, ding, ding]

V: I'm sorry, you lo-oose.

H: What?

V: Be wise, unsafe sex is risky. But unsafe sex with more people is even more riskier. Eliminate the element of surprise. Fewer partners in a lifetime narrows risks. Use condoms all the time. Scrutinize! Let's turn this HIV into HI-Victory.