

## **Selling Products: An Advertising Response to Entrenched Dental Poverty in the UK**

Relationships in society are increasingly mediated by images and imagery communication (Grady, 1996; O'Halloran, 2023). This intricate relationship of representation, encoding/decoding and meaning making is known in visual sociology as iconic communication (Grady, 1996; Mullen, 2024). Reductive technologies of iconic communication are employed by advertisers to simplify this composite relationship to succinctly convey social messages and meanings (Deacon, *et al.*, 1999).

This paper employs analytical tools afforded by the visual sociology framework to examine complex relationships amongst images, image producers, and society. It seeks to explore neoliberal exerted social stresses impacting on the lives of children through their dental care and oral hygiene opportunities. Wherein, decoding socially located images affords the possibility to empirically investigate formative social structure, social organisation and cultural meaning in society. Achieved through a visual analysis of a mass-consumer toothpaste brand, advertised on a billboard sited in an unremarkable 'everyday' part of Greater London. The paper develops inquiries into social processes which determine the presence of this image at this moment in society. Positing that the image forms part of an advertising campaign which seeks to discursively reverse normative 'common sense' assumptions of what constitutes optimal oral health for children. Wherein, the advertisement represents a communicative vehicle to transform long-standing health discourses in response to sociocultural changes affecting vulnerable populations (BMA, 2016; Dorling, 2024).

Interpreted as a 'visual commons' resource, the image utilises contemporary societal discourses, particularly those related to iconic/symbolic racialised notions of deprivation. Notwithstanding, the liminality of the piece functions to actively perpetuate these contentions. In turn, realised through the use of dualisms such as: said/unsaid, pleasing/displeasing, and explicit/implicit binary framing techniques. Visually, the communication simultaneously reinforces established notions of aesthetic beauty (Eagleton, 1990) while offering the possibility of idiosyncratic transformation beyond the traditional social framings of dental beauty aesthetics (Kieran, 1997).

In providing a detailed analysis of the image and interpreting its social meaning, this study illuminates the broader social context that produced this advertisement. Thus, contributing to the discussion of visual communication in advertising employed to convey social messages and meanings, particularly in the context of children's oral health. Wherein, it clarifies the complex interplay between contemporary neoliberal pressures, societal changes, and the representation of health in mass communications.

**Keywords:** Social Inquiry, Poverty, Dualisms, Racialisation, Neoliberalism, State Regression, Childhood Poverty

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**Figure: 1.** Aquafresh Billboard Advertisement: 'Perfect teeth are just healthy teeth.'

**Location:** Worcester Park, South London.

**Advertising Agency:** Grey London

**Campaign:** Perfect teeth are just healthy teeth.

**Manufacturer:** Haleon plc.

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