

**ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM AND  
COMMUNICATION**

**DECODING MESSAGES: A RECEPTION  
ANALYSIS OF HOW YOUTH MAKE SENSE OF  
HIV/AIDS MESSAGES OF YEBEKAL RADIO  
PROGRAM**

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RADIO PROGRAM**

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## **ACRONYMS**

**EE:** Entertainment-Education

**HAPCO:** HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Office

**IEC:** Information, Education and Communication

**IPS:** Inter Press Service

**MOE:** Ministry of Education

**MOH:** Ministry of Health

**MOI:** Ministry of Information

**UNAIDS:** United Nations Joint Program for HIV/AIDS

**UNESCO:** United Nations Educational, Science and Cultural Organization

## Abstract

Based on reception theory, this study was conducted to explore how high school youth in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, interpret and make sense of HIV/AIDS media messages, with particular reference to “*Yebekal*” HIV/AIDS Radio Program.

To generate appropriate data, a two stage triangulated research design, employing qualitative approach was devised. Using purposive sampling method, a total of 36 high school students in Addis Ababa who were well suited for the criteria, namely, who are between the ages 15-24, who know the program well and also who are willing to take part in the study were drawn from three high schools and participated in the study. The data was collected through focus group discussions and individual in-depth interviews.

This study elicited important insights in the understanding of how youth make sense of HIV/AIDS media messages. Accordingly, it was observed that there were incomplete understandings or decoding of the variety of messages included under the umbrella of the HIV/AIDS message of “*Yebekal*” HIV/AIDS radio program. The study also identified the poor listening habit of the youth because of the inconvenience transmission time of the program and its being not so entertaining as the main cause for the incomplete understanding of the whole messages of the program.

Besides, the study revealed that there were misunderstandings, misinterpretations of messages, negotiations of meanings as well as opposition of messages in some instances. Lack of complete and detail information, contradictory messages and also portrayal of females negatively in some instances were identified as potential sources for the misinterpretation, negotiation and opposition to some of the HIV/AIDS messages of “*Yebekal*” among its youth audiences.

Therefore, considering the interest, background and life style of the youth in the design and delivery of HIV/AIDS messages as well as providing complete and detail information in entertaining ways are paramount importance in reducing and avoiding the discrepancy of decoding messages among the youth audience.

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# **CHAPTER ONE- INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1 Background of the study**

The health status of its people and a country's development level are closely associated to each other. Accordingly, Poor health status leads to poverty (MOH, 2003:1). Ethiopia, being one of the least developed countries, its people suffers from many health problems. Communicable diseases such as diarrhea, malaria, HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis present the greatest health risks to the population (MOH, 2003:1).

Currently, HIV and AIDS is a threat for every nation. The epidemic continues to pose a threat to the development of Ethiopia currently infecting 1.5 million people. The adjusted HIV prevalence for Ethiopia in 2003 is 4.4% (urban 12.6 and rural 2.6%). The highest HIV prevalence still occurs in the age groups 15-24 (MOH, 2004:23).

The major mode of transmission of HIV in Ethiopia is unprotected sexual intercourse, which accounts for 86% of the reported cases in 2003. This is followed by mother-to-child transmission, which consists as much as 20% of HIV infection in the country. Contact with infected blood or contaminated instruments because of illegal medical and harmful traditional practices are constituted as a third mode of transmission of HIV in Ethiopia (MOH, 2003:61).

Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, has a total population of close to four million (The city government of Addis Ababa, 2003, CD-ROM. TIBEB Studio). Currently, it is estimated that around 241,000 people are infected with HIV and the prevalence in the adult population amounting to 14.6% in 2003 (MOH, 2004:23).

In the absence of a cure for it, most countries focus on preventing and controlling the spread of HIV/AIDS by educating their citizens about the danger of the

disease. Ethiopia is no exception. Many AIDS control programs in Ethiopia rely heavily on the mass media to disseminate information about the disease.

At present, there are no official statistics that indicate the number of radio receivers and television sets in the country. However, the Ministry of Information (2004:20), quoting a study conducted by UNESCO, reveals that there are 8 million radio receivers and over 1 million TV sets in the country.

In Ethiopia, where illiteracy is very high (42%) (World Bank, 2005) and the communication and transportation infrastructures are also poor, the impact of the print media in educating the public about HIV and AIDS is limited. Given that the majority of Ethiopians per capita income is around US\$ 115 (World Bank, 2005) which is less than the cost of a television set, the impact of television in this respect is also minimal.

By far the most important way of communication in Ethiopia is radio broadcasting which reaches the mass of the people in all parts of the country. According to MOI (2003:491), Radio Ethiopia, for example, in its national service, covers 100% of the country in short wave and 70% of the country in medium wave transmissions. And in its FM transmission it covers Addis Ababa and the surrounding areas.

Besides, according to Cherie, et al. (2005:69), the mass media, particularly Radio, are emerging as one of the most common sources of information about HIV/AIDS among youth in Addis Ababa. Having realized its potential, the radio broadcast is being used to address the public about the danger of HIV/AIDS through its informative, educative and entertainment programs.

A case in point is the “*Yebekal*” Radio program. This program, which is first, went on air in 2000, broadcast on FM Addis 97.1 radio station. The program presents its HIV and AIDS messages using a format that comprised of both edutainment

and serious genres. As an edutainment (EE) genre, it “combines entertainment with education in an integrated manner, most often seen in the use of radio and TV drama...” (Tuftte, 2003:85). The EE genre has a variety of formats including, music, drama, quizzes, etc. The serious genres, on the other hand, emphasize on factual information. It includes like news, interviews, etc.

Accordingly, “*Yebekal*” is produced including both edutainment and serious genres. For example, news, interviews with people from all walks of life and different professions , review of publications and research reports related to HIV/AIDS , *Sost Gulcha* meaning “towards marriage” (a program by which people living with HIV and those who are not positive can find love partners of their kind) are some of the serious genres. Its drama, short story, music, etc are the entertainment genres included in the program. The program is listened to by an estimated 3 million people in and around Addis Ababa (Pro Pride annual report, 2005:2).

## 1.2 –Statement of the Problem

It has been 30 years since AIDS education was initiated through the promotion of HIV and AIDS prevention messages using various communication methods. However, there are still more new HIV infections, which show that people either are not learning the message about the danger of the disease, or are unable or willing to act on it.

According to AVERT (2005), “If AIDS education that had been done up until now had been effective, there wouldn’t have been five million new infections” (AVERT, 2005: internet). When we look at the Ethiopian case, the situation seems to be similar. Although many people are now aware of the danger of HIV, the number of infections continues to climb with 50,000 new infections each year (MOH, 2004:9).

At the national level, the unadjusted HIV prevalence among the youth between the age group 15-24 was estimated 8.6% in 2003 (MOH, 2004:5). There are no current data that show the prevalence of HIV among the young between the age group 15-24 in Addis Ababa. However, the last estimates indicated that the HIV infection rate for young adults aged 15-24 years in Addis Ababa was 4.8% with a rate of 5.7% (3.6% in males and 6.9% in females) among young people in the inner city (Fontanet, *et al* 1998, quoted in Taffa, *et al.* 2002:4).

Many youth in Addis are still dangerously ignorant about the virus and the risk of infection. This is indicated by the study carried out by Cherie, *et al.* (2005) on the perceived sufficiency and usefulness of HIV/AIDS information, education and communication (IEC) messages among High School Youth in Addis Ababa. They found out that “although HIV/AIDS IEC messages have been effective in increasing youth awareness, misconceptions and misunderstandings about the modes of transmission and prevention of HIV/AIDS are widespread” (Cherie, *et al.* 2005:67).

As the Behavioral Surveillance Survey (BSS) of 2002 in Ethiopia indicated most youth (93.5% of the respondents in the survey) felt that they are not at risk or at low risk of being infected by the HIV virus. Amongst all youth, 17.4% of the respondents were having unsafe sex with their partners. In the survey, it was also observed that the rate of young males' sexual involvement with their commercial or non-commercial partners was higher than that of females (19.4% of male vs. 16.1% of female) (MOH, 2004:13-14).

All these shortcomings indicate that there has been a failure on the side of the HIV/AIDS communication messages. Any message should be "understandable, appropriate, timely, practically applicable, accessible and inline with the expectation and interest of the target audience" (Cherie, et al. 2005:75). However, youth in Addis appreciated none of the information source and messages in all these criteria, "which may be the cause for the misconceptions and reluctance to bring about the desired behavioral changes" (Cherie, et al.2005:75).

It is generally agreed that individuals never interpret or make sense of a particular message in the same way. In relation to the media message and audience relationship, the active audience theoretical perspective proposes that "media content is very dependent on the perception, experience and social location of audience members" (Jensen, 1991, cited in McQuail, 1997:101).

Brooker and Jemyn argue that "in principle a text may be read in a number of different ways, but in practice the audience's group affiliations and social preconceptions - factors such as age, ethnicity, social class, political convictions - will limit and shape the potential interpretations" (2002: 92).

According to McQuail, (1997), although the concept of content and audience relationship fits well to fiction messages, "we can't assume that even basic 'factual' information will be understood as sent" (1997:102). This fact reminds us

that while people's opposition or misunderstanding of message, including HIV and AIDS, can be attributed to several factors, one that cannot be over looked is the role of audience's potential interpretation or making sense of media messages in the effectiveness of addressing the public about the danger of HIV/AIDS.

When we come to Ethiopia, over the last 20 years, a number of formal and informal AIDS education programs have been carried out by government and non-governmental organizations using different communication methods. A number of media campaigns consisting of edutainment programs, a serial drama, radio phone-in-program, music concerts, and spots have been produced and delivered to the public including "*yebekal*".

While there are studies that asses the media's coverage of the HIV and AIDS epidemic and the construction of messages that are appropriate and relevant to the audience, there are no studies on how audiences interpret HIV and AIDS messages in Ethiopia.

### **1.3 -Objectives of the study**

The main objective of this study is to explore how high school youth audiences in Addis Ababa interpret the HIV and AIDS messages of the "*Yebekal*" radio program.

The specific objectives of the study are: to find out the listening habits of the youth audiences for "*Yebekal*";

- to assess youth audiences response to its messages of HIV and AIDS;
- to identify factors that influence youth audience's reception of the program in relation to the HIV and AIDS messages of the "*Yebekal*".

## 1.4 -Research Questions

- How is HIV and AIDS message of “*Yebekal*” radio program interpreted by high school youth audiences in Addis Ababa?

In due course of the investigation, the study is also endeavoring to answer the following specific questions.

- What does the youth audience listening habit of “*Yebekal*” look like?
- What are the factors that influence youth audience’s reception of “*Yebekal*” HIV and AIDS message?

## 1.5 -Significance of the study

In Ethiopia there are no studies that show the diversity of ways in which audience interprets and make sense of what they listen to about HIV/AIDS information. Therefore, this study may help to understand how people interpret HIV and AIDS messages and what shape their potential interpretations. It also helps to know the social characteristics of those whose interpretation of a particular HIV and AIDS message are significantly different from those intended by the message producers.

It may also be useful to media institutions and others who are working on HIV and AIDS education and communication to consider youth audiences or target group social fragmentation and characteristics so as to produce appropriate messages.

It is also believed that this study might serve as a springboard for those who intend to carry out further study on this area.

## **1.6 -Scope of the study**

The scope of this study is confined to the exploration of how youth audience in Addis Ababa interprets HIV and AIDS messages of “*Yebekal*” Radio Program.

## **1.7 -Limitations of the study**

The universe of this study is all youth in Addis Ababa who are audiences of “*yebekal*” Radio program. Ideally, with no limitation on time and budgetary resources, one would include all the youth listeners of “*Yebekal*” in the study. However, because of lacking such resources, the number of subjects selected for the study is limited to a small number of youth audiences in Addis Ababa.

Since the subjects of this study are selected on the basis of their characteristics (age, sex, being in-school and being listener of the program) , it is wise not to assume that the samples are representatives of all youth audiences in Addis Ababa. As a result, the conclusions drawn from this study can not be generalized to the whole youth population. But, it is believed that the insight gained from the analysis of this study can be taken as a starting point for probing the issue further in the future.

## **1.8- Organization of the study**

This research paper consists of six chapters. Chapter one provides a background to the study, statement of the problem, objective, significance, and definitions of key terms. The scope and limitations of the study are also dealt with. The second chapter discusses with the socio-cultural context in which HIV/AIDS, youth and media in Ethiopia interplay. Also discussed are the vulnerability of youth to HIV, knowledge level of HIV/AIDS among the youth and what the youth think of the role of media in educating them about HIV/AIDS. Chapter three devoted to a review of related literatures, where the theoretical frameworks of this study are

discussed. The fourth chapter concentrates on methodological issues employed in this study. The chapter explains and justifies the choice of a triangulated research design. Chapter five presents and analyzes the findings. In chapter six, discussions and conclusions are dealt with.

## **1.9 Definition of Key terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined accordingly.

**Text:** refers to the message or content of radio programs or any mass medium.

**Reader:** refers to user, audience and viewers.

**Decoding:** refers to the process of interpreting media texts. In this study decoding and reading are used interchangeably.

**Gender:** the opportunities, roles, responsibilities, relationships, and personal identities a particular society prescribes as proper for women and men.

**Youth:** young people between the age group 15-24.

## **Chapter Two- Youth, HIV/AIDS and Media in Ethiopia**

### **2.1 Knowledge about HIV/AIDS among youth**

Ethiopia's current national HIV-prevalence estimate is 4.4 percent, with among the youth between the age group 15 and 24 was estimated 8.6 percent in 2003 (MOH, 2004).

Although Young people in Ethiopia are exposed to HIV in different ways, the main mode of transmission is heterosexual intercourse. As many studies reveals, heterosexual transmission is responsible for most infections in the 15 -24 age group, with a prevalence among females is three times greater than that of males (UNAIDS,2003:internet).

Despite the fact that knowledge of the cause, transmission and prevention is high among the youth, there are still misconceptions, such as transmission through casual contact and mosquito bites. For instance, Cherie, et. al. (2005:69) found out that almost all high school students in Addis Ababa knew at least three correct modes of transmission and at least three correct means of prevention. They also found out that there are still about five misconceptions shared by some students. According to Cherie, et. al., these misconceptions are:

transmission as a result of wearing clothes worn by people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA), sharing toilets with PLWHA, mosquito bites, eating and shaking hands with PLWHA. Similarly, the misconception that poor nutrition can lead to HIV infection was shared by 43% of the students. Nearly one third would not eat a meal with a PLWHA, and half would not live in the same house with a PLWHA (2005:69).

### **2.2 Vulnerability to HIV infection**

A variety of factors could place young people at the centre of HIV vulnerability. One is their perception of personal risk. Young people are much more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS Because of their incomplete social, emotional and psychological

development. As a result, they tend to experiment with risky behavior, often with little awareness of the danger (Population Report, 2005: internet).

Studies in Ethiopia show that many youth recognize that they are at high risk. However, they still involve in high risk activities. For example, the Behavioral Surveillance Survey (BSS) of 2002 in Ethiopia indicated most youth (93.5% of the respondents in the survey) felt that they are not at risk or at low risk of being infected by the HIV virus (MOH: 2004).

In Ethiopia, factors like religious and social norms, taboos about sexuality, a gender imbalance in approving when to have sex, pornography films, peer pressure, cultural shaping of young people's sexuality which gives the boy a right to have sex before marriage and feel less vulnerable to the unwanted consequences of sexuality are some of the factors that lead young people to be engaged in risky sex (Taffa, et. al. 2002:3-6).

These traditions and beliefs have lead many young people to ignore the risk of infection and thus to take no precautions. As a result, many youth have been involved in high risk sexual activity at their early age. In a survey conducted among high school students in Addis Ababa, for example, more than half of the participants reported that they were sexually active. Of these sexually active students, the majority experienced first sex between the ages of 14 and 16. The study also indicated that a great deal of these sexually active youth have experienced sex with more than one partner of which the majority reported knowing about condoms at the time of their first sexual experience, but very few of them said they had ever used condoms(Govindasamy, et. al. 2002:internet).

The other factor that can be attributed for the vulnerability of youth to HIV infection is anxiety and embarrassments. Because of the established cultural values, many societies, in general, and many young people, in particular, are anxious and embarrassed about discussing sex. Consequently, young people who are aware of the prevention methods of HIV/AIDS habitually lack the social

skills to do so. For instance, in most Ethiopian families, discussions about sex are still a taboo. As Taffa, et al. (2002:4-5) noted, there is lack of open discussion between parents and young people and also between young lovers, as they embarrassed to talk about sex.

What is more, youth become vulnerable as they feel less vulnerable for their personal risk. Since they do not believe that they can control their sexual behavior, there might be a tendency to avoid decisions about self-protection. As a result, young people often develop a perceptual defense mechanism to resist and control their stress and fear. According to Population Report, “denying risk is a common way that people cope with stress. Adolescents who deny their personal risk of HIV/AIDS can ignore AIDS-prevention messages, dismiss their relevance, or think that they do not bear responsibility for protection” (Population Report, 2005: internet).

### **2.3 Media and HIV/AIDS messages to the youth**

As the absence of cure for the HIV epidemic, it is now widely accepted that educating people about the danger of HIV/AIDS is the only way to prevent and control the spread of the epidemic. Thus, “bringing about positive results in the efforts to stem the prevalence of HIV/AIDS depends, among other things, on the existence of an informed public that is sensitive to the causes, spread and prevention of the epidemic” (UNESCO, 2000:11).

It is obvious that to create informed public about HIV/AIDS, the role of media is of paramount. The media can play crucial role in raising awareness and providing information on HIV/AIDS. According to Family Health International, studies in many countries show that “Mass media are increasingly important in most young people’s lives, and in many countries they represent excellent channels through which to reach youth with HIV prevention messages” (cited in UNAIDS,2004: internet).

It is obvious that to create informed public about HIV/AIDS, the role of media is of paramount. The media can play crucial role in raising awareness and providing information on HIV/AIDS. According to Family Health International, studies in many countries show that “Mass media are increasingly important in most young people’s lives, and in many countries they represent excellent channels through which to reach youth with HIV prevention messages” (cited in UNAIDS,2004: internet

In Ethiopia, the mass media are emerging as one of young people's most common sources of information about HIV/AIDS. In a study carried out among high school youth in Addis Ababa, for example, it was found out that “although the students were exposed to various inter-personal and mass media messages at different settings, radio and television were their main sources of information” (Cherie, et. al. 2005:69).

Similarly, Tamiru and Kebede indicated that “several studies reported from Addis Ababa revealed radio to be a powerful and important tool for the dissemination of HIV/AIDS messages to youth” (Tamiru and Kebede,2004: internet). However, it has been observed that in spite of “a high level of need and government supportive policy...in the context of radio programming, the available media interventions and the use of media for HIV were found to be very inadequate” (Tamiru and Kebede,2004: internet).

HIV/AIDS, they are also criticized for their poor communication of messages concerning HIV/AIDS. In connection with this, Cherie, et. al. (2005:72-76) points out that most young people in Addis criticized the mass media for delivering scary, incomplete, contradicting and conflicting messages as well as portrayal of young girls negatively which have been considered as sources of misconceptions.

The youth are directed by their emotions which can be accurate or inaccurate. They draw meanings selectively, based on their “individual and group psychological mindsets” (Cherie, et. al. 2005:75). Thus, so as to make messages about HIV/AIDS more acceptable by the youth, “the complex context within which youth make choices regarding sexual relations and their high risk sexual behavior” (Cherie, et. al. 2005:75) must be considered in the preparation and conveyance of HIV/AIDS message to the youth.

With regard to youth preference, choice of program format and time of transmission, Tamiru and Kebede (2004: internet) said that most youth prefer Monday to Friday evenings after 6 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday to listen to HIV/AIDS messages. On the other hand, in their study, Cherie, et. al. points out that “the best time to listen to a radio...message is in the evening after 8 p.m. and on weekends” (2005:69). As both Tamiru and Kebede (2004: internet) and Cherie, et. al. (2005:69) indicated drama, songs, stories and phone-in program formats are the preferred one amongst the youth for delivering HIV/AIDS messages.

There is general agreement of the need for audiences to be segmented so as to make the message more effective. Segmenting audiences based on their specific characteristics helps to “portray the place of the members of these segments in the larger society-their problems, triumphs, and futures” (Turow, 2003:170).

While explaining the need to define target group in our messaging, Nduati and Kiai also confirm that “even within the youth group there are considerable differences...Thus, interventions and messages need to be cognizant of these differences” ( 1997:205).

It is stated in the “National HIV/AIDS Communication Guideline, Ethiopia” that communicators should consider the interest and characteristics of the various

segmented audiences in their HIV/AIDS message designs and delivery. Cognizant of the fact that every member of the audience is unique in responding to a single message, this Guideline noted that “In detailed audience segmentation, different groups within the same audience category may require different messages” (National HIV/AIDS Communication Guideline, Ethiopia, [no date]:14).

Although this national guideline urges communicators to consider the different audience categories in their messaging, what is happening now seems to be different. All the available literatures do not mention a single mass media HIV/AIDS program prepared for a specific part of audience in Ethiopia. Besides, as to my knowledge, most HIV/AIDS mass media programs including “*Yebekal*” are intended to the general public. There are no programs that entirely devoted to teach youth about HIV/AIDS, considering the interest, background and life style of the youth in their message design and delivery.

## **2.4 The “*Yebekal*” HIV/AIDS Radio Program**

Pro Pride is a local non governmental organization undertaking integrated urban development programs in three areas of Addis Ababa, namely *Merkato*, *Entoto*, and *Messalemia* areas. Livelihood promotion, non formal education, community based health care components with two medium level referral clinics, and cultural promotion are the programs that Pro Pride implemented in the above mentioned areas.

The activities under all these programme components have been undertaken with special emphasis on ensuring access of the poor and the disadvantage to different social service, institutionalizing these service and assisting community organizations to build their capacities and addressing other cross cutting issues such as gender and HIV/AIDS.

In order to fight the spread of HIV/AIDS, Pro Pride has been undertaking HIV/AIDS prevention and control activities under its health and cultural promotion components. With the objective of promoting behavioral change among the community and the public at large on different socio economic problems contributing to the perpetuation of poverty, PRO PRIDE has been undertaking three categories of activities: organizing stage shows, publication, and broadcasting a radio programme.

Radio programme has been the other important intervention of the organization, which Pro Pride used to sensitize and educate the public on problems, impacts and solutions of HIV/AIDS. It has been over five years now since the organization started broadcasting a radio programme called “*Yebekal*” meaning “That is enough” on FM Addis 97.1. Since the commencement of “*Yebekal*” radio programme in August 2000, over 800 programs have been produced and aired to an estimated 3 million listeners in Addis Ababa.

After participating in the Global Development Marketplace Competition organized by the World Bank and held in Washington DC in 2003, not only the program has won a trophy, the organization has also been awarded USD 166,227. With the help of this prize money, “*Yebekal*” has been on air in the MW frequency on the Ethiopian radio since February 2005, reaching an estimated 15 million people with its messages on HIV/AIDS. (At the time of this writing, the program on Ethiopia radio was stopped to be transmitted because of financial problem.)

When it was started in 2000, the main objectives of “*Yebekal*” radio program were to bring open discussions about HIV/AIDS among the society members and promote attitudinal and behavioral change: change in behavior towards means of transmission, protection, stigmatization and discrimination of people living with HIV/AIDS and voluntary counseling and HIV Testing. When first started to be aired, “*Yebekal*” was a 15 minuet program transmitted three times a week. But

after three months of transmission, the program has increased its stay on air to 30 minutes. The program is being transmitted on FM Addis 97.1 on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Within this 30 minute transmission time, the program has been broadcasting various stories of both edutainment and serious genres. Among these, the following are the major ones:

## **Monday**

Monday's "*Yebekal*" program includes specific program formats that focus on Art, Quiz and review of Research reports. In its *kine Tibebe* (Art) program, drama, short stories and interviews with popular artists will be entertained. The second type of program is *Admachoch Tetyeku* (quiz program). It is intended to encourage listeners' participation in the program by answering questions related to HIV/AIDS. The last program on this day is the review of research report. Under this program, various researches carried out on HIV/AIDS which shows the various aspects of HIV/AIDS will be discussed.

## **Wednesday**

Programs like *Esti Enenegager* meaning "Let's discuss", *Lene Belehe Sema* meaning "pay attention" and *Agatami* meaning "incidents" will be broadcasted. *Esti Enenegarer* is a program which presents gist of the week. It invites prominent and famous people to give a message on HIV/AIDS. *Lene Belehe Sema* (pay attention) is a program format that invites and talks people who have experiences in relation to HIV/AIDS. It presents what people said about HIV/AIDS on various occasions with the view to share their experiences to the listeners. *Zena* (the news program) will present timely and current issues related to HIV/AIDS. The other program included on this day is *Agatami* meaning "incident". It is a program by which HIV positive people share their experience of how they became HIV positive. It also presents people who are not positive to share the incident that made them vulnerable to HIV and advice other to be cautious of similar incidents.

## Friday

Friday's "*Yebekal*" transmission consists of three programs. The first one is *Sost Gulcha* meaning "towards marriage" is a program by which people living with HIV as well as those who are not positive can find love partners of their kind. The aim of this program is to help people to find their life partner and lead healthy life. It is also intended to encourage and show positive living for people with HIV. In its *yehetemet wetetoch* (review of publications) program, HIV/AIDS issues covered on different print outlets will be reviewed and presented in brief. The last program on this day is *Debedabewochathehu* (a program that presents listeners' letters). Letters will be selected and presented based on their contents that have something to contribute to the program or share something to the audience. On the average around 200 letters will be received each week from the listeners of the program.

**Source:** *Timiret*, Magazine (Dec., 2005:30-32), a special edition for PRO PRIDED 10<sup>TH</sup> Anniversary

## **Chapter Three- Review of Related Literatures**

### **3.1 Defining the Audience**

Today because of the technological advancement which causes an ever changing media environment, the concept of audience as “some form of a solidarity group...becomes problematic” (Liebes, 2005:356). Compared to the traditional notion of an audience, Ross and Nightingale also said that “there has been a rapid and dramatic expansion of what it now means to be an audience” (2003: 2).

Croteau and Hoynes describe the word audience as unfortunate term in many respects (2003:266). According to them, the media industry consider audiences as “...the image of a mass of passive receivers ingesting their daily dose of media products” (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003:266).

The idea of time and space is of paramount importance in defining audience. According to Croteau and Hoynes, as technological advancement compressed both time and space in communication, whatever happens in one area will be known all over the world almost instantaneously (2003:304). This implies that the concept of audience is no longer bound by space and time.

The rapid expansion of the internet technology has also created the new dimension in the notion of audience. It has brought new members of the audience family (Ross and Nightingale, 2003:5). While describing this situation, Ross and Nightingale write that:

The expansion of access to the internet has created virtual spaces where even smaller groups assembled. Meeting in time, but separated in space, the micro groups who frequently internet chat sites, gaming communities and other web-based activities are new members of the audience family (2003: 5).

The term audience has now broad meaning and is used to describe people who are engaged in accessing information in a manner that ranges from individual to large group activities. The word audience in media studies is often used as “a way of talking about people either as groups or as individuals” (Ross and Nightingale, 2003:4). In this sense, audience can refer to “large groups of people like mass audience for television, newspaper readership, the general public or even people attending a major sporting event or a rock concert” (Ross and Nightingale, 2003:4).

The word audience can also be used to describe groups of people who are bounded by some form of socio-cultural ties. These audiences can be labeled as what Ross and Nightingale called “audience formations” which are “shaped by pre existing social and cultural histories and conditions, and sometimes also by sense of shared interest that incline them to repeatedly use particular media vehicles” (2003:4).

It is obvious that being parts of a group or a mass doesn't ensure that we are audiences. To be described as audience, a group or a gathering of people has to fulfill something else which is more than being in a group or mass of people. This extra requirement is participation which should be arranged according to “power relations governing access to and use made of the informational dimension of the event” (Ross and Nightingale, 2003:5).

In a similar account of this, Liebes writes:

Being part of an audience...requires some form of real or potential sharing of an acknowledged (vocal or visual) text, with the variations of 'togetherness' in time and place depending on the medium, the genre and the situation of contact, accompanied by the knowledge that others are (or have, or will be ) viewing.  
(2005:5)

## **2.2 Categorizing Audience**

### **2.2.1 The mass audience**

In early times, audiences were assumed as a mass which consisted of a diverse gathering of people. The members of the mass audience were not viewed as individuals who are distinguished one another and behave autonomously. This concept of the mass audience developed along with the rise of the hypodermic needle theory which assumes the audience as an undifferentiated mass that was particularly susceptible to the powerful media influence (Wicks, 2001:37).

In this conceptualization of the mass audience, Potter argued that “the mass is not organized as a social unit and doesn’t adhere to any set of established social rules or convention” (cited in Wicks, 2001:37). At the time, the audience was seen as “isolated individuals, in a mass society, vulnerable to direct effects” (Liebes, 2005:361).

The concept of the mass audience started to be eroded with the rise of the limited effect theory in the 1950 and the subsequent audience centered theories that assume the audiences as active in various degrees (Wicks, 2001:37). Apart from the paradigm shift, the technological advancement has allowed the introduction of more media products and specialized media programs intended to specific audiences.

In relation to the effect of the technological advancement, Davis and Baran said that “new communication technologies have changed traditional notions of the mass audience, the mass communicator, and the relationship between the two” (2006:19). Turow,(2003) also pointed out that the advent of the “various array of media channels has had a fragmenting effect on audiences-as audience members move to watch, read or listen to a new channel, fewer people use any single channel” ( Turow, 2003:15).

In general, the paradigm shift -from effect to active audience theory-and the new media environment which offers the diverse media channels and media products intended for specific audiences has brought the notion of mass audience to be no longer dominant. Instead, the trend of audience segmentation has become outshined.

### **2.2.2 The Segmented Audience**

Following the collapse of the notion of mass audience, “the age of the segmented audience, enabling people to program their own media environment had arrived” (Wicks, 2001:38). This new trend can be described as what Turow, (2003) called ‘Audience fragmentation’ which refers to “the process of dividing audiences members into segments based on background and life style in order to send them messages targeted to their specific characteristics” (Turow, 2003:14).

Different scholars and media organizations suggest a variety ways of segmenting media audiences. One example of these is Turow, (2003:38) who maintained that media organizations segment their audiences into three broad categories, namely, demographics, psychographics, and lifestyle categories. Turow, (2003) further describes these categories as follows:

When we speak about demographics, we are referring to characteristics by which people are divided into particular social categories...Demographic indicators include such factors as age, gender, occupation, ethnicity, race, and income.

The second way to differentiate groups is by psychographics, or categorizing people on the bases of their attitudes, personality types or motivations.

The third broad way to describe media audiences is by using life style categories. By this we mean finding activities in which potential audiences are involved that mark them as different from others in the audience or in the population at large ( 2003:38).

This new trend of segmenting audiences is appreciated for its provision of ample opportunity where “audiences members find it easier to identify news papers, television programs and other media suited to their tastes” (Wicks, 2001:192). Others consider the implications of this new trend positively as “the seeds of a new cultural democracy in which alternative meanings circulated and communication patterns are as much people-to-people as they are top down, creating spaces for new forms of public communication and participation” (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003:332).

However, this idea is challenged by some who maintained that dividing audience members in to segments “encourages social divisions by emphasizing differences between people, not their similarities” (Turow, 2003:204). As Croteau and Hoynes also indicated opponents of audience segmentation believe that this trend breaks down “the common cultural bonds- reinforced and reproduced by mass media- that formed the basis for a national identity...” (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003:332).

In the contemporary media environment, we might see some media continue to produce programs at targeting the mass audience. In any case, however, although these situations are somehow a deviation from the current practice, “the trend towards producing programming with ever narrower audience segments is clear” (Wicks, 2001:39).

## **2.3 Theoretical overview of audience studies**

Before embarking on reviewing the reception paradigm in depth, understanding of the concepts of the dominant paradigm is important.

In the early days of media, looking at audiences as passive and media as powerful was a dominant view in explaining the relationship between audiences and media. This view was reflected by the traditional effect theories which are

also known as the magic bullet theories. This effect paradigm emphasized the power of media in determining how audiences think and behave (Williams, 2003:206).

However, study after study proved that media were not powerful and had no direct effect on people's attitude or opinion, as people also could be influenced more by other factors like education and social position (Davis and Baran, 2006:135). In a similar account of this, McCullagh also points out that media do not have the power to exploit audiences (McCullagh, 2002: internet). Quoting Katz and Lazarsfeld (1995), he further explains the reason as follows:

Knowledge of an individual's interpersonal environment is basic to an understanding of his exposure and reactions to the mass media. ... This environment constitutes, as it were, a set of defenses against the influence of the media ( 2002: internet).

By the mid 1970's, the use and gratification theory emerged as a reaction to the effects studies. The use and gratification theory was characterized by its basic assumption that audiences "actively involved in selecting messages to gratify individual needs" (Pitout, 2001:244). As being an opposite of the early effect theories, this theory assumes media "with no effect on their audience...with power resting with individuals who determine what part the media play in their lives" (Williams, 2003:166).

The uses and gratification theory was criticized for its incapability of clarifying human interaction with media. Reimer criticized it for its focus on individualism, ignoring "the context with in which media use takes place" (cited in Pitout, 2001:244). Grossberg, Wortella and Whitney, quoted in Pitout, (2001) also challenged the use and gratification theory. They said that it provides "no understanding of the connection between our individual psychological needs and the influence of cultural and social contexts on our media use and interpretation of media messages" (Pitout, 2001:244).

Following the decline of the media effects tradition, the new audience theory called the reception theory emerged with new definition of audience-media relationship.

## **2.4 The Reception Theory-concepts and meaning**

Reception theory or analysis is a more humanistic approach as compared to the previous audience study traditions. Davis and Baran define reception theory as “audience-centered theory that focuses on how various types of audience members make sense of specific forms of content” (2006:276). The focal characteristic of this theory, according to Williams, is its emphasis on the “ability of audiences to appropriate the meaning they want from popular media and cultural forms” (Williams, 2003:199).

Reception analysis is more concerned in understanding and explaining the way audiences make sense of media messages. Reception scholars believe that media texts are open to a number of interpretations. Pitout explains the assumptions they hold on to support their argument as follows:

Because very few messages are self explanatory and transparent, we must engage with or act upon a text to produce meaning...A text always contains blank (gap)... we fill these blanks with our knowledge, or private and public experience and our frame of reference, which is an inescapable part of our social and cultural life-world ( 2001:245).

The reception theory is interested in what audiences do with the media as the use and gratification theory does. However, it does not confine itself in answering what people are doing with media in their every day life. Instead, it goes beyond this. This theory is also more concerned in understanding “how audiences actively engage in the process of generating meaning and the factors out side the media that shape the sense they make of media messages” (Williams, 2003:193).

In dealing with how audiences interpret media messages, there are two approaches. These are, the German reception aesthetics, also called reception analysis, and the encoding/decoding model of reception developed by the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Pitout, 2001:243).

### **2.4.1 The encoding /decoding model**

The encoding -decoding model is concerned with how individuals make sense of media text in their social situation and thus shifts attention away from the intention of the text's originator or encoder as the locus of meaning.

The encoding/decoding model was first developed in 1977 by Stuart Hall who adopted the cultural effect approach to explain the message-audience relationship. The encoding/decoding model is interested in a "dynamic understanding of how the media constructs meaning and how people make sense of what they see, hear and read" (Williams, 2003:196).

Hall's model does not focus on individual's media usage. Rather, it gives emphasis to "how different social contexts and backgrounds" (Williams, 2003:196) influence individual meaning making.

Hall argued that "certain groups had the power to impose their values on society and the media played a central role in this process" (Williams, 2003:195). Consequently, struggles among different social group within the production process to dominate the message could result the encoding of several messages in media text though only one dominant message emerges reflecting the meaning preferred by the powerful group in the society.

According to Hall's encoding-decoding model, the process of making meaning or decoding is also open to a number of interpretations as the ability of individuals to give meaning for a media text is determined by the social context they are living in.

Recognizing social factors, mainly class, Hall's model distinguishes three decoding options of media content: dominant, negotiated and oppositional. A dominant reading implies that the audience accepts the preferred meaning without question. A negotiated reading involves the audience understanding the preferred meaning, but opposing its application to specific cases. An oppositional reading implies that the audiences completely reject the preferred meaning (O'shaughness, 1999:59, William, 2003:195 and Griffin EM, 2006:378).

### **2.4.2 Reception Analysis**

Reception analysis has increasingly stressed the power of audience and audience's autonomy to interpret media texts as they wish. Reception studies put much emphasis to the power of audience as it derives from "their critical and creative abilities to resist the media" (Williams, 2003:201). In relation to their freedom, Williams said that audiences can extract "positive meanings and pleasure from the output of the media, even when it is contrary and hostile to their views" (2003:206).

Unlike the previous audience studies that focused on factual and serious genres like news, great deal of reception studies focus on entertainment programs. Most of the reception studies in the 1980's are related with soap operas, romance novels and women's magazines (Eldridge et al. cited in Williams, 2003:198). They also devote much attention to one section of the society that is, women readers, viewers and listeners (Williams, 2003:198).

Reception scholars also prioritize the issue of pleasure. These scholars claim that audiences' enjoyment is an interpretive engagement that shows the run away of their problems or negotiation of audiences with media messages (Croteau and Hoynes 2003:297). They argue that the pleasure we derive from the media will take us in to an imaginary world through which we can escape our every day problems (Pitout, 2001:259). This is also supported by Williams, who points out, "Having fun, taking pleasure from and indulging in fantasy in the

process of media consumption is an act of resistance, a politically progressive stance against the dominant ideology of the established order” (2003:201).

## **2.5 Interpreting media messages**

Pitout defined interpretation as “the result of the process of negotiation between texts...and readers...situated with in specific social and cultural contexts” (2001:244).

Scholars in cultural studies proposed the idea of polysemy to describe the concept of multiple interpretations in media messages. Fiske (1986), a leading scholar in cultural studies, holds the notion of polysemy. According to him, “whether it is a music video, an advertisement, a TV news bulletins or a feature film, the media text is made up of a variety of images and words from which can be chosen a range of meanings” (cited in Williams, 2003:201).

For Fiske (1986), the power of audience in making sense of media text is dominant and only dependent on the text and the social factors that influence the beliefs, attitudes and viewpoints of the audiences. Fiske also argues that some interpretations are more pleasurable and enjoyable than others. He believes that the pleasure audiences extract from media texts comes from their active engagement in making sense of media texts which results in assigning meaning that opposes the existing social, political and cultural order (cited in Williams, 2003:201-202).

Although Fiske’s arguments were accepted by some, he was challenged by a number of scholars. For instance, Dahlgren and Gray criticized Fiske for his overstatement of audience interpretive autonomy and the polysemy nature of media texts. They argue that “although viewers interpret specific programs in different ways, they are to an extent limited by their own social positions and also the limitations and closure of the text itself” (cited in Pitout, 2001:253)

Croteau and Hoynes (2003:272-273), on the other hand, claim that the argument which states media texts can be interpreted infinitely ignore the role of social context in which we experience and interpret media products. Not only media texts but also our social location has influence in our interpretation of media texts. In connection with how our social world influences audiences' meaning making, Croteau and Hoynes state the following:

...our lives unfold in specific social locations. Our age, occupation, marital and parental status, race, gender, neighborhood, educational background, and the like help structuring our daily lives and our media experience(2003: 273).

The process of interpretation is not only restricted to the family level but also involves "our social group membership or interpretive communities to which we belong" (Pitout, 2001:258). Audiences do not merely engage with media texts and assign meanings to the intended message. They also engage with media in social settings and consume media products in group. Besides, croteau and Hoynes points out that "although our media consumption is an individual activity at the beginning, it would be part of our social lives as we share and talk about what we consume with our friends, colleagues or neighbors" (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003:267).

As media texts contain variety of meanings, they might be interpreted in a number of ways. "For what the text means to one person is not necessarily the same as it means for some one from another group-even close friends disagree in their interpretation of the same text" (Pitout, 2001:253).

The active audience theorists argue that media texts contain neither one meaning nor limitless meanings. However, though audiences may construct various meaning for a single message, one interpretation emerge as common and dominant. This dominant reading can be taken as the most agreeable meaning (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003:273-274).

Besides, there is a possibility where alternative interpretations may exist. According to Davis and Baran, audience members might oppose or misinterpret media text and “come up with an alternative or negotiated meaning that differs from the preferred reading in important way” (2006:276).

In general, it is possible to say that while interpreting media texts, audience members employ their own negotiated or oppositional decoding to the preferred readings, “presumably for personally relevant ends” (Davis and Baran, 2006:295).

## **CHAPTER FOUR-METHODOLOGY**

As being an explanatory research project, the purpose of this study is to elicit and analyze how high school youth in Addis Ababa interpreted the HIV and AIDS message of “*Yebekal*” radio program which is engaged in sensitizing listeners to the issue of HIV and AIDS. To generate appropriate data, a two stage triangulated research design, employing qualitative approach, was devised. In this chapter I describe the two stages and discuss the sampling process and data analysis procedures.

### **4.1- THE SAMPLING PROCESS**

As it is stated earlier, the main objective of this study is to explore how high school youth audiences between the age group 15-24 in Addis Ababa interpret the HIV and AIDS messages of the “*Yebekal*” radio program. The very reason why participants of the study were limited between these ages is that the prevalence of the epidemic in this age group is very high (Ministry of Health, 2004:23).

“*Yebekal*” is not a targeted program to a specific part of the society; rather it is prepared and transmitted targeting the general population. However, as being part of the society, youth also receive messages from this radio program. As a result, the target population of this study is all youth listeners of the program in Addis Ababa as “*Yebekal*” radio program is transmitted on F.M Addis 97.1, whose area of coverage limited around Addis Ababa. However, because of the budgetary and time constraints, the study was limited to a small number of high school youth.

The study design included a focus group discussion and semi-structured in-depth individual interviews with high school students in Addis Ababa. For the focus

group discussion and in-depth individual interviews, I employed a two stage sampling process - one for the selection of schools and the other for the selection of student participants.

In the 2004/2005 academic year, there have been 78 governmental and non-governmental high schools in Addis Ababa which has accommodated about a total of 107,782 students. The enrollment annual growth rate was 7.5 % (MOE, 2005:26-30).

All high schools that enrolled Ethiopian students in grades 9 through 12 for the 2005–2006 academic year were considered for the study. Schools with a special student population (such as prisoners), foreign community schools, and students needing special assistance (such as the visually impaired) were excluded from the study. Then, out of the remaining 23 high schools, three high schools were selected using simple random sampling method. Accordingly, *Tikur Anbessa*, *Higher Four*, and *Addis Ketema* secondary schools were selected as the settings for this study.

As it is clearly put in its objective, the study was not concerned with why youth do not listen to the program. Instead, it was interested in exploring how those youth between the age group 15-24 in Addis Ababa, and who are regular listeners, understand and make sense of the messages of the program. If one has a complete list of all these youth audiences, it would be possible to have a truly representative sample of the target population either using a randomly or a systematic sampling method.

However, for one reason, it was impossible to do this. since there is no a complete list of all these youth listeners, some youth who may not listen to and have no idea about the program at all might be included in the sample, as the selection was taking place randomly. This made the sample to have elements, which were out of the sample frame. As a result, the subjects of this study were selected purposively using a non-random sampling method.

Accordingly, using purposive sampling method, twelve students-six male and six female students from each school, that is, a total of 36 students, who were well suited for the criteria, namely, who are between the ages 15-24, who are regular listeners of the program, and who are willing to take part in the study were selected from these three schools.

While selecting the subjects from each school, an attempt was made to include students from grade 9 through 12. To secure access to reach each section of grade 9 through 12, voluntary teachers were approached. And then, these teachers were asked to read the criteria for students and take the name of the volunteers who wanted to take part in the study (if there are any at all) until the required number, i.e. twelve-six male and six female-students in each school was obtained. After the subjects of the study were selected, six focus groups were formed.

Subjects for in-depth interviews were drawn from the participants of the six focus group discussions. The participants were selected based on the criteria, namely, being the most expressive and being eager in the focus group discussions. Accordingly, a total of 12 participants, two from each focus group, were taken for individual in-depth interview.

## **4.2- DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

Reception researches mainly use the two main alternatives of in-depth interviews- focus group and individual interviews- to study how people make sense of a media product (Schroder et. al. cited in Mabweazara, 2006:5). Accordingly, as being a reception analysis, this study used a two stage triangulated method, which employs qualitative data gathering approaches.

The first stage of the triangulation was a focus group discussion, which was intended to examine how high school youth in Addis Ababa perceive and interpret the HIV and AIDS messages of "*Yebekal*" radio program.

A focus group discussion offers opportunities for obtaining in depth responses to how people think and feel. Strelitz, (2005) quoting Deacon et. al. (1999) writes: this method has been used widely in media studies to explore “the social context of media consumption and the creative role that audience members play in decoding media texts” (Strelitz, 2005:91). Kitzinger also noted that focus group discussion helps researchers to reveal “the parts that often remain untapped by more conventional data collection techniques” (1995:1).

“A focus group is characterized by homogeneity...in terms of variables such as age gender, education, family characteristics, or use of a particular mass medium” (Du Plooy, 2001: 305). Consequently, to set up the focus groups in this study, a criterion was sex with sufficient class or grade level variations among the members.

Quoting Morley (1986), Williams, (2003) points out that along with age and ethnicity , gender is significant social variable “ in shaping the way in which people decode media messages” (2003:197). Besides, in many societies, gender stereotype and power relationships are still important social constructions. As they are deeply rooted social practices, “gender stereotypes often find their way into the media, because journalists and editors are products of the society they are brought up in” (IPS, 2002:23).

Consequently, these inherent media practitioners’ gender biases will be reflected on the way they report on and portray the images of women and men. So, if this may have been the case then, I decided to conduct separate focus group discussions with male and female participants with the view to see whether or not there is opposition, negotiation or acceptance of messages because of gender representation.

Homogeneity of participants in terms of sex was maintained with six focus group discussions consisting of six participants held for each sex group. Each group was moderated by the investigator and an assistant moderator. The themes for discussion in the focus group discussions included the youth listening habit of "*Yebekal*" radio program and their interpretations of the specific messages of the program.

During the discussion, as an aided recall, samples of the program were played to the participants. Then, the moderator made the participant talk about the program's to get their interpretation of its HIV/AIDS messages. All the discussions held in each focus group were recorded. Notes were also taken to see what sort of information was being secured and what was missing during each discussion. So as to keep the discussion on the right track, based on the themes of the study, a discussion guide was devised (see appendix).

The second stage of the triangulation was an in-depth interview with selected participants of the focus group discussions. Cognizant of the fact that focus group data should be supported with a range of data collected through different research methods, individual in-depth interview method was used as a follow up to focus group discussion.

Individual in-depth interview method is believed to yield different kinds of information from focus group. Schroder, et. al. quoted in Mabweazara, (2006) explains that individual in-depth interview is important as it circumvents the fear and shyness of participants in expressing their typical views and experiences in a group discussion (Mabweazara, 2006:12). For this reason, individual in-depth interview can be taken as best method to explore "an issue that is felt by the individual to be too sensitive to talk about in the presence of others, other than a researcher who grants the informant full anonymity" ( Schroder et. al. cited in Mabweazara,2006:12).

Besides, during the focus group discussions, it was observed that some of the participants had hesitant stands on the issues discussed which might be the influence of other participants' ideas. It was also noticed that although there were participants who had strong arguments and keen to forward it, they were inhibited by their shyness to speak and argue more on issues raised during the discussions.

Taking these in to consideration, an in-depth interview method was employed to further elaborate the data generated using the focus group discussion and solicit additional insights that could not be obtained through the group discussions. At this stage, then, a total of 12, semi structured in-depth individual interviews were conducted.

Since the in-depth interview was a supplement for the focus group discussions, the discussion guide applied to the focus group discussions (see appendix) was used to guide the interview.

As for the convenience and comfort of the participants and the investigator, both the focus group discussions and the semi-structured in-depth interview were conducted at the premises of the three schools.

### **4.3 Data Analysis Process**

The focus group discussion data was analyzed qualitatively. After the data was collected through tape recordings and note taking, the tapes were transcribed to capture all of the main idea in to words of the participants and then, translated into English. Then, to make the qualitative analysis more systematic, the data was categorized into a common frame of analysis; in this case, a set of responses with similar themes as structured in the discussion guide (see appendix). The data gathered from the in-depth interview was categorized similarly.

After that, the responses that seem to belong together in each category were interpreted, summarized and presented including direct quotes of the participants which were believed to be representative of the responses to particular issues under discussion.

## **Chapter Five-Findings and Data Analysis**

In this chapter, an attempt is made to analyze the data obtained from the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. Some of the issues rose in the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews are analyzed simultaneously as they deal with the same idea.

As it is already mentioned in Chapter One, the main objective of this paper is to explore how high school youth Addis Ababa interpret the HIV and AIDS messages of the “*Yebekal*” radio program.

As the interview guides for both the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were organized around the two major themes pertaining to the main objective of this study, the information obtained was also analyzed under these two themes. The first theme focused on assessing the listening habit of “*Yebekal*” by the participants of this study. The second theme was concerned with how youth in school interpret the HIV and AIDS messages of the “*Yebekal*” radio program.

### **5.1 Listening habit of “*Yebekal*”**

The focus groups and in-depth interviews conducted showed that the youth participating in this study consider Anti-AIDS clubs and peers as their main source of information following the mass media. Most of the discussants indicate that discussion with parents or family members on sexual and HIV/AIDS issues is too hard. Even it is possible to do so, the discussion will not be open. As a result they prefer mass media particularly radio and television as their source of HIV/AIDS information.

As far as I am concerned, I first learnt about HIV/AIDS when I was member of the Anti-AIDS club in my school. But I have got detail information about HIV from mass media i.e. radio and television. (Eighteen-year-old female participant)

You know parents do not discuss such matters openly with you. If they do, they don't tell you much about it, except that the disease is very dangerous and that you should be careful. So, the only sources you have got are mass media. (Seventeen-year-old male participant)

I have learned about HIV/AIDS a lot from HIV/AIDS radio programs like "*yebekal*" and the *Sunday live phone-in program* on FM Addis 97.1. Besides, since discussion with parents or family members is too hard, I sometimes talk and discuss about HIV/AIDS with my intimate friends. (Seventeen-year-old female participant)

When asked which HIV/AIDS program on FM Addis 97.1 radio station is their favorite one, almost all put Sunday's HIV/AIDS live phone-in program as first and "*Yebekal*" as their second favorite.

"*Yebekal*" radio program is appreciated for its contribution to the national effort in raising awareness about the spread of HIV/AIDS. The focus groups and in-depth interviews undertaken indicate that most of the participants believe the program helps them in acquiring basic knowledge about HIV/AIDS. The youth in general conceived the program as their main source of HIV/AIDS information along with television, anti-AIDS clubs and friends. This is illustrated in the following quotes, taken from the focus group discussions.

Nobody dares to talk and discuss openly about sexual issues and HIV/AIDS in my family. The only way I can get information on these matters is radio, particularly "*Yebekal*", which is educative as well as entertaining for me. (Eighteen-year-old male participant)

"*Yebekal*" teach me a lot about HIV/AIDS, especially about positive living. I mean any one who is HIV positive can live and do any thing if that person take care of himself (Seventeen-year-old female participant)

My parents are very religious and I brought up with the believe that every illness including HIV can be cured with *Tsebel* (holy water). However, I started to believe that HIV has no cure after I became regular listener of *Yebekal*. (Eighteen-year-old male participant)

I was very afraid of HIV positive people and I saw them as very dangerous. Now, I am changed thanks to "*Yebekal*".  
(Sixteen-year-old male participant)

However, a considerable number of the participants in this study reported that they listen to "*Yebekal*" occasionally and they don't make a conscious plan to listen to the program on its transmission time and days. Some of the responses offered by the discussants are as follows:

Although I know the program is educative, informative and to some extent entertaining, I listen to it when I have got spare time. You know, as a student, I have to study hard.  
(Eighteen-year-old male participant)

I know it is popular program, but I don't listen to it, waiting for its transmission time keenly as I do for music variety programs. However, if I arrive while it is being aired, I listen to it.  
(Seventeen-year-old female participant)

Only on Mondays, I wait for its transmission time to listen to the program because there is drama on that day.  
(Eighteen-year-old-female participant)

The participants also gave reasons for not listening to the program regularly. Most of them identified its time of transmission, family members and program interest as potential reasons. With regard to its time of transmission, they noted that:

The time is not convenient. For example, in our home, my mother and I are the only audiences. My father and my brother come to home after 8 PM in the evening most of the time. And they don't have a chance to follow up the program.  
(Seventeen-year-old female participant)

At its time of transmission, many of us might be outside home: at school, at church following religious education, having tea and coffee with friends or on journey to home. So, even they would get a chance to listen to the program, they may or may not listen to the whole program. (Nineteen-year-old male participant)

So as to be listened regularly by the majority of the people, they suggested the time of transmission of the program to be after 8 PM or 8:30 PM in the evening. Some of the suggestions forwarded by the discussants are the following.

It would be nice if it is broadcasted after 8 PM in the evening when everybody is at home. (Eighteen-year-old male participant)

At any time on Sunday, as it is leisure time for most of us. (Nineteen-year-old male participant)

I think after 8:30 or 9 PM in the evening is the best time to reach every body. (Eighteen-year-old-female participant)

Regarding the interference of their family members, the majority of the discussants and interviewees confirmed that they don't have any problem in listening to the program. They said that no one interferes in their listening. However, some indicated that their family members undermined or hindered their listening. This was illustrated in the following quotes.

There is problem in our family. Especially, my father does not want me to listen to the program. When he finds me listening to the program, he shout on me to turn off the radio and focus on my studies. (Seventeen-year-old female interviewee)

Whenever I turn on the radio and listen to "*Yebekal*", my mother start to complain. But, when there is drama, she listens to it attentively. (Sixteen-year-old Male participant)

In our home, my father prefer to listen to serious matters like politics and my brother is interested in listening to music. Then, when they are home, it is difficult for me to listen to "*Yebekal*", as they change the channel to other radio station to listen to what they want. (Eighteen-year-old-female interviewee)

As it is clearly noticed from the above quotes, the reasons why their family members oppose them while they listen to the program were attributed to cultural and family sanctions. Some of them said that their parents still view listening, watching or talking about sexual matters as protest against the societal norms. So, whenever they found them listening to such things in the radio or watching films that deal with sexual matters though it is educational, they consider you as you are becoming ill-mannered. As others claim, since some family members, particularly the elder ones, control the radio gadget, they are the one who decide which channel to listen to. And most of the time, they give priority for their own interest, ignoring the interest of other members.

Concerning its way of presentation, most discussants pointed out that the program is not as such entertaining; rather it tends to incline more on presenting serious genres. For most of the participants, except its Monday transmission, the program is boring. They contend that it has no entertaining elements like jokes, music that are appropriate to youth. Although the program includes drama and narration of short stories, it does not give much time to these entertain as well as educating genres.

For many years, I heard about HIV/AIDS and now I am tired of listening about it unless it comes through in the form of entertainment.  
(Seventeen-year-old male participant)

To tell the truth, yebekal is not an interesting program. Many youth including me do not give it much concern as we give for the live phone in listener's music choice program.  
(Eighteen-year-old-female participant)

It is not attractive. You know it doesn't include jokes, music and so on. So, though the information provided by the program is important, it has been coming boring as it is not presented in an entertaining way.  
(Eighteen-year-old-female participant)

On the other hand, few argue that the program is doing well. They said that since the program stays on air for a very short time, the time allotted to its

transmission shouldn't be wasted by music and the like. According to them, they still need more information on the epidemic.

We have enough entertaining programs on the various mass media channels. We can entertain ourselves by listening or watching these program selectively. What we don't have now is information that saves the live of many. (Nineteen-year-old male participant)

I think the program is doing well with the limited time it has. And, it should give priority for educating people and providing more information on the epidemic. (Eighteen- year-old male participant)

In general, the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews reveal that the listening habit of the “*Yebekal*” radio program by the participants of this study is not regular. They listen to the program occasionally and also accidentally with no predetermined plan to listen to the program.

## **5.2 Interpreting HIV/AIDS Messages of “*Yebekal*”**

### **5.2.1 Incomplete decoding of the whole messages**

Messages on the transmission and prevention of the virus, stigma and discrimination, voluntary counseling and HIV testing and positive living are the main concerns of the program. However, many of the discussant thought that the program is all about the danger of HIV/AIDS. When asked to identify the main messages that the program wants to communicate, they failed to mention some of the main messages other than HIV/AIDS transmission and prevention, and stigma and discrimination messages.

What I hear on the program most of the time is about the danger of HIV/AIDS and we should always be cautious not to be infected with HIV. (Seventeen-year-Male participant)

It always talks more about how can protect ourselves and advises us not to discriminate against people living with HIV virus. (Eighteen-year-old-female participant)

It always tells us to be cautious and also not discriminate against HIV positive people but this is not what I want now. I want it to tell me how I can care for AIDS patients without putting me at the risk of infection. (Nineteen-year-old male participant)

In these examples, it is clear that most youth do not give much attention to every bit and part of the program messages conveyed through the various items of the program, which might result in an incomplete decoding of the whole messages.

The thought that the program presents its content in a scary and boring way was also a source of audience resistance to the messages. This is illustrated in the following expressions of men's discussions:

I heard the program for more than five years. Now I am very tired of listening about the danger of the virus all the time.  
(Nineteen-year-old male participant)

Sometimes, what I listen to from its start to its end is terror. Thus, when it starts, I turn off the radio and play the tape recorder  
(Eighteen-year-old-male participant)

I don't know why but I feel uneasy when I listen to the program except its drama. My mother is physician. She always tells me that their teaching is scary and goes against what medical and HIV/AIDS centers teaching way.  
(Eighteen-year-old-male participant)

### **5.2.2 Misinterpretation and negotiation of meanings**

The focus group discussions and in-depth interviews indicated not only there is an incomplete understanding of the whole message of the program but also confirmed that there is misinterpretation of the intended messages of the program. This was evident with its specific program called *Sost Gulcha* meaning "towards marriage" (a program which helps people living with HIV and those who are not positive to find love partners). The main message the program wants to communicate through this specific program is to show that being infected with the

virus doesn't mean we will necessarily die. Instead, it is possible, with AIDS, to live positively, even having family.

As it was observed in both in-depth interviews, almost all the participants appreciated the program. However, in both focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, a strong negative attitude was reflected towards this specific program for its inclusion of people who are not infected with HIV.

It is ok for people living with HIV/ADS. But, how could people marry each other only knowing each other through the radio program. (Eighteen-year-old-female interviewee)

I know it is good for people living with the virus as it allow them to find their love partner in a society where no one dare to expose himself as HIV positive. But it will be good if it doesn't entertain those who are negative (Seventeen-year-old male participant)

Since there is humiliation in our society, *Sost Gulcha* is best for those people who are living with HIV/AIDS and need to have love partner. What is odd for me is those participants who are not positive. What a hell they afraid of choosing their future life partner in person. (Eighteen-year-old-male participant)

Let me accept that it is important for HIV positive people. But, what is the use of helping others? It goes against our culture. How dare female ask a man for marriage? As far as I know, men are assumed to ask for marriage not by letter but in person or send go-between. (Eighteen-year-old female interviewee)

However, it should be noted that the reason why the program includes those who are not positive is to reduce the feeling of being discriminated that arise among HIV positive people. Accordingly, only one participant pointed out the reason why the program allows those who are not positive to participate. She said:

I am not so sure but I think it includes people who are not positive just to ensure and promote that there is no discrimination against HIV positive people. (Seventeen-year-old female participant)

From the above quotes, it is possible to infer that although they like and appreciate the program, they soon oppose its inclusion of people who are not HIV positive. As it is also clearly indicated in their responses, the main reason for their opposition to the program is its inclusion of people who are not positive. This might be because of the established cultural and traditional norms that assume only men to ask marriage either by himself or through go betweens. However, this was happened as a result of incomplete and detail information about the program objectives and purposes among these youth. In short, It was obvious that most of the participants were situated neither in a position of total conformity nor in total opposition to the program. This implies that there is a negotiated reading in this regard among the participants.

Besides this, the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews confirmed that there were varying interpretations of the message of *Sost Gulcha*. As both focus group discussions and in-depth interviews revealed, the primary message of *Sost Gulcha* was not decoded as intended. Many of the participants of this study understood the intended message (being infected with the virus doesn't mean we will necessarily die. Instead, it is possible, with AIDS, to live positively, even having family) in various ways. This can be observed in the following quotes:

What I understand from the program is if HIV positive people married each other, it is possible to control the spread of HIV/AIDS, as the virus will remain with them.  
(Seventeen-year-old male participant)

I think if HIV positive people married each other, they would have an opportunity to have free sex as they wish.  
(Eighteen-year-old-male interviewee)

I think it is intended to teach us about the importance of sticking to one partner. (Seventeen-year-old-mal participant)

It seems to me that it encourages people to marry and protect themselves from HIV/AIDS. (Sixteen-year-old-male participant)

From the ideas forwarded by the participants about the message that *Sost Gulcha* wants to communicate, we can easily identify that the intended message of the program was not understood as intended.

The failure of the program in giving complete and detailed information on how things would go after HIV positive people find their love partner also contributed for the misunderstanding of the intended messages. For example, it seems that the meaning of the explicit message of *Sost Gulcha* led them to understand the intended message in such a way that if people with HIV married each other, their sexual relationship with their partner would be the same as those who are not positive.

This was apparent from the responses of the participant. In one group discussion, seventeen-year-old female discussant argued with the moderator:

Participant- I think the program is telling us that HIV/AIDS means nothing. It is like any other illness. Take cancer or diabetes. They are not curable. So people living with HIV can marry and lead positive life.

Moderator- Let's assume two people who are HIV positive married. How do they make love?

Participant- Just like any one else.

The same response was also observed in one of the in-depth interview with the nineteen-year-old male participant.

Interviewer- Do you think people living with HIV make love as others do?

Interviewee- Undoubtedly!

Interviewer- How?

Interviewee-since both are positive, they can do sex as they wish.

Interviewer- what about using condom?

Interviewee-It is their choice. They may or may not use condom.  
But, as both are positive, why should they bother?

Interviewer- There might be a possibility of having different kind of HIV among the couples. And If they do sex with out condom, they may develop a new strain of the virus which is different from the one they acquire already, which is in turn dangerous for them. What do you think of this?

Interviewee- HIV is HIV. Is there any other HIV?

From these responses, we can understand that there is lack of knowledge on how people with HIV can have safer sex practice. As it is known, having unsafe sex puts a person at risk of getting sexually transmitted diseases, many of which are sever in person with HIV. Besides, coming into contact with body fluids of other person who has HIV may develop a new strain of virus which is more dangerous than the one they have already.

However, when we look at closely the responses of the participants, it appears that the information on how to live positively- about their health, their relationships with friends and family, and how to have safer sex should be conveyed along with *Sost Gulcha* in order to avoid the misunderstanding.

### **5.2.3 Misinterpretation and oppositional decoding**

The focus groups and in-depth interviews undertaken also revealed that there is misinterpretation of messages as a result of contradictory messages that comes from different sources; amongst them, peer groups, Anti-AIDS clubs, media and religion. As clearly reflected in the focus group discussion and in-depth interviews, the participants pointed out that what they learn in their Anti-AIDS clubs and what they see in reality do not go with what the media, in this case *Yebekal*, advocates.

A case in point is the use of condoms as a prevention method. As most of the participants have been learnt that condom is not reliable at all from Anti-AIDS clubs in their schools, almost all of the participants were in a position that oppose media's advocacy of condom as alternative prevention method. These annoyed exclamations were used among the youth to express their feelings.

I do not think we can reduce the spread of HIV unless we totally abandon using condom. (Eighteen-year-old female participant)

When I hear about condom in yebekal or other media, I feel we are still playing hide-and-peek. In the name of reducing the risk, how they encourage people to engage in risky behavior. (Seventeen-year-old male participant)

Whenever they tell you to use condoms, they tell you without the proper reference of how to use it. What the media, including yebekal doing in relation to condom is fun for me.[laugh] (Seventeen-year-old male participant)

An eighteen-year-old male participant in one of the male focus group discussion had this example to say when opposing the media's advocacy of condom use.

For me, mass media are reliable sources of information. But what they are doing now is like telling you: please, steal but be careful not to be caught by police.( Eighteen-year-old male participant)

These students hold the position against condom use as they have already learned and accepted abstinence as the only HIV prevention method. However, when they come to the media and listen to programs like "*Yebekal*", while promoting the reliability of condom usage, they become confused with which to believe. This is illustrated in the following quotes:

In our Anti-AIDS club, we learn Abstain as the only HIV/AIDS prevention method. But when we go outside, we hear yebekal or other media teaching condom as reliable and safe. In the same breath, you will be at a complete loss. (Eighteen-year-old-female participant)

Why don't they teach us about Abstain?  
(Sixteen-year-old male participant)

Had it been true that all condoms are reliable and safe as they advocate,  
what is the use of transmitting competing condom advertisements?  
(Eighteen-year-old-male participant)

The other contradictory message that the participant identified in relation to HIV/AIDS message in yebekal program was its portrayal of the epidemic. The program's representation of HIV/AIDS as an ordinary disease might be considered as an attempt to reduce the exaggerated fear perceived to be existing in the society. However, the meaning of this message is open to different interpretations.

Considering the epidemic as any ordinary illness was interpreted by some as a pretext so as to avoid stigma and discrimination against HIV positive people. On the other hand, others decoded this message with the understanding of HIV/AIDS as an ordinary disease. Among the discussant, one female and male responded respectively that:

I think in early days of the epidemic, the education to prevent and control the spread of the disease was given in a scary way to make people afraid of becoming HIV positive. We know what this cost us now; Stigma and discrimination against people with HIV. And, it seems to me that what they are doing now is to correct their previous mistake. But they are doing the same mistake (Eighteen-year-old female participant)

Mass media do not still represent the broad face of the epidemic. Rather they prefer to portray the pandemic as normal like common cold, cancer or diabetics. As a result, many people are not afraid of becoming infected with HIV as they were before.  
(Seventeen-year-old male participant)

From the participants' responses as shown above, it is possible to see that what the media represent the disease in its messages goes against and contradict from what they see in reality. These respondents also show their fear that this

trend would cost us a lot some times in the future unless it is corrected soon. Accordingly, it is possible to see that there was an opposition to messages that depict the HIV/AIDS as an ordinary disease.

In one of the in-depth interviews, a nineteen-year-old male conformed to the above ideas and also asked that:

Whatever media you listen to, you soon realize that they represent the incident of becoming HIV positive as nothing. Had it not been a threat, why should we devote all our effort, time and money.  
(Nineteen-year-old male interviewee)

But, few participants also understood this message as it is, that is, HIV is like any ordinary disease. They argued that nobody deserves to become HIV positive, but sometimes it happens. We should accept it as those infections that are not curable. Some of these participants, in fact, said that:

HIV/AIDS kills if it is not given due attention and care. What about others? For example, let's take diabetes. It also kills if you don't take care of it. Both have no drugs that can cure them but drugs that keep people alive for many years. Sometimes I don't see any difference.  
(Seventeen-year-old female participant)

People with HIV live many years before they become ill. People infected with cancer also live many years with out becoming ill. So, why should I consider HIV/AIDS as extraordinary and worry about it?  
(Seventeen- year- old male participant)

From the responses of those who decoded the message that promote being at ease with the HIV infection, it can be easily noticed that their cautions for not to be infected with HIV is most likely lower than that of those who see the epidemic still dangerous.

### 5.2.3 Portrayal of gender and oppositional decoding

The feeling of being portrayed negatively also created oppositional decoding of messages to some extent in the program. As focus group discussions and in-depth interviews carried out separately for males and females indicated that both to some extent felt that the program portrayed them negatively. Especially female group discussants reported that although “*Yebekal*” portrays females positively in its most programs, they still feel that most of the times, females are represented negatively in its drama.

In its specific program *Esti Enenegager* (meaning guest of the week), I see women who are in a position of power. But in its other programs like *Agatami*, dramas, mostly females are portrayed as victims and this doesn't comfort me.  
(Eighteen-year-old-female participant)

Most of the time, in its drama the female characters are depicted as sex worker, the one who have many sex partners for material needs and also as victims in all respect. And I will be surprised and ask myself that is it the only way to teach about HIV/AIDS?  
(Seventeen-year-old female participant)

I know there are people who are not unfaithful and also cruel enough to abuse others. Although this is not always the case, the media, including *yebekal* sometimes emphasize It. I think they may do this to attract audiences, as it grab the peoples attention.  
(Eighteen-year-old-female participant)

Although they feel that females are misrepresented in some instances, they all realized that the program does not under represent them in terms of its coverage and participation. As an evident, some of them pointed out that their stories are not missed from the program.

I hear issues related to women and also when they voice on matters that concern them. (Eighteen-year-old female participant)

And also, one participant indicated the inclusion of female producers in the program as an example.

I don't see any male domination in the program. If you follow regularly, you will notice that even some of the producers and presenters are females. (Seventeen-year-old participant)

On the other hand, a few discussants in male group said that although it is not serious, there is misrepresentation of them in some instances as being offenders and negligent. However, for the majority of the male discussants this was not an issue.

## Chapter Six- Discussion and Conclusion

### 6.1 Discussion

In a situation where there is no curable drug and medicine for HIV/AIDS, most nations, including Ethiopia focus on fighting the spread of the disease by educating and equipping their citizens with the necessary information about the disease. To reach the general population with these messages, mass media have been used extensively. However, as media messages are very dependent on the interpretation abilities of audience members, it is very vital to be ensured that these HIV/AIDS messages decoded as they intended.

In Ethiopia, information on whether or not these media messages are understood as they are intended by audience members is almost non existent. This study, therefore, explored how high school youth in Addis Ababa interpret HIV/AIDS media messages, with particular reference to the “*Yebekal*” HIV/AIDS radio program. In fact, as this study was limited to a small group of high school youth, its findings cannot be generalized to the whole youth population. However, it is believed that the findings offered some important insights into the understanding of how youth make sense of HIV/AIDS media messages.

As other studies such as Cherie, et. al. (2005:69) and Tamiru & Kebede, (2004: internet) conducted in Addis Ababa indicated that for most youth in Addis Ababa, the main source of information about HIV/AIDS were mass media, particularly radio. It was also observed in this study that most of the participants consider Anti-AIDS clubs and peers as their main source of information following the mass media, particularly radio and television. When asked which mass media HIV/AIDS program they prefer most, almost all put FM Addis radio station Sunday’s HIV/AIDS live phone-in program as first and “*Yebekal*” as their second favorite.

Communication barriers or obstacles such as communication skills, attitudes, knowledge level, social system and culture can affect communication process, “resulting in misunderstanding, lack of response or motivation and distortion of the message” (HAPCO, [no date]:9). Accordingly, this study found out that it was surprising and at the same time ironical that although most youth participants of this study identify “*Yebekal*” as their main source of HIV/AIDS information, they neither listen to it keenly nor make plan to listen to it regularly. As the findings indicated, the youth listen to the program by coincidence and sporadically. Being not so entertaining, its inconvenient transmission time, and interference of family members were among the reasons provided by the youth for not listening to the program.

With regard to youth preference, choice of program format and time of transmission, studies (Tamiru and Kebede 2004: internet and Cherie, et. 2005:69) conducted revealed that said that most youth prefer Monday to Friday evenings after 6 p.m. and weekends to listen to HIV/AIDS messages. Besides, drama, songs, stories and phone-in program formats are the preferred one amongst the youth for delivering HIV/AIDS messages.

The findings of this study also indicated that the youth prefer *Yebekal* HIV/AIDS radio program to be aired, in the evening after 8 p.m. and on weekends so as to listen to it more attentively. The youth interviewed also said that they want the messages to be presented in a way that entertain and educate them. So, these findings show that while communicating with youth on issues of HIV/AIDS, one should consider delivering the messages at the right time and place with good presentation that attract the youth.

It was also observed, although to a lesser extent, that there was family member influence on youths listening habits. As Croteau and Hoynes (2003:273), points out we are not simply free of constraints while we confront with media messages.

Factors like age, parental status, gender neighborhood and the like shape our media experience (2003:273). Pitout also indicated that our family setting and our social group membership in which our media consumption takes place have influence in our interpretation of media messages (2001:258).

This study also proved that family settings have influence in the listening and making sense of media messages among the youth who participated in this study to some extent. As the findings indicated cultural and family sanctions were the major reasons for the youth not to listen to the program regularly. It was noticed that some parents despise the messages of the program and associated it with being ill-mannered as it talk about sexual matters which they consider it as taboo. This might result in lack of motivation which could be the cause for not listening to the program attentively and regularly. And this, in turn, might be the potential factor for the incomplete understanding of the variety messages included in the program.

As the findings show, although messages on prevention and control, positive living, voluntary counseling and testing, stigma and discrimination are the main messages concerns, the participants still felt that the program emphasized more the danger of the disease. This incomplete decoding of message implies that there is a lesser attention given by the youth to the program because of its inconvenient transmission time, family members' sanction and unattractive presentation. This, in turn, is believed as a source of the incomplete understanding of the variety messages of the program on the side of the youth audience.

Hall's encoding/decoding model distinguishes three decoding options of media content: dominant, negotiated and oppositional. Though audiences may construct various meaning for a single message, one interpretation emerge as common and dominant. This dominant reading can be taken as the most

agreeable meaning or preferred reading (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003:273-274). A negotiated reading involves the audience understanding of the preferred meaning, but opposing its application to specific cases. An oppositional reading implies that the audiences completely reject the preferred meaning (O'shaughness, 1999:59, William, 2003:195 and Griffin EM, 2006:378).

In this study, it was observed that there was a negotiation of meaning. This was evident particularly with regard to is specific program called *Sost Gulcha*. As the findings show, although the youth who participated in this study didn't oppose the importance of this program, they had a strong negative attitude towards its inclusion of people who are not HIV positive. As a result, many youth showed a lesser interest in listening to this specific program. Here, it is possible to say that they were situated neither in a position of total conformity nor in total opposition to the program. This implies that there was a negotiated reading in this regard among the participants.

In relation to this specific program, i.e. *Sost Gulcha*, it was also observed that there was not only a negotiation of meaning, but also misinterpretation of the intended message of the program as a result of lack of complete and detailed information that should be conveyed along with the program. Reception theorists assume that very few messages are self explanatory and transparent. Since media text often contains blank (gaps), audiences are required to fill these gaps with their own "knowledge, or private and public experience and frame of experience, which is an inescapable part of our social and cultural life world" (Pitout, 2001:245). Fiske (1986), a leading scholar in cultural studies, also contends that "the preferred reading cannot completely contain all the bits and pieces that compose the text. People can put these bits and pieces together in different ways to produce different version of the text" (cited in Williams, 2001:201).

The findings of this study also confirmed that the lack of complete information or the gap in the media text may result in misinterpretation of the intended messages. In the case of *Sost Gulcha*, for example, the main message the program wishes to communicate is that being infected with the virus doesn't mean we will die. Instead, like any one else, it is possible to live positively, and even have family. However, the findings indicate that most of the participants decoded this intended message differently. Some of them believed the program wanted to tell them that if HIV positive people married each other, they would have a chance to have unrestricted sexual relationship with each other. Others thought that the program wanted to communicate about the importance of sticking to one partner. Still others believed it was intended to encourage people to marry so that they would be safe from HIV/AIDS.

From these findings, it is possible to conclude that the failure of the program to give complete and detailed information on how things would go after HIV positive people find love partner of their kind, also contributed for the misinterpretation of the intended message. What's more, what we have seen in the case of *Sost Gulcha* would make it clear that any message needs to be repeated, in various forms, until people understand it properly. Otherwise, it will create a gap in understanding the message which, in turn, results in the misinterpretation of the intended message.

While interpreting media texts, audience members also employ their own oppositional decoding to the preferred readings. According to Davis and Baran (2006:277), in some instances, audiences might engage in oppositional decoding. Quoting Jesus Martin-Barbero, Davis and Baran explain that audiences are capable of exploiting contradictions that enable them to resist...media messages (Davis and Baran, 2006:277). This study also discovered that although it was to a lesser extent, there was an oppositional

decoding and misinterpretation of messages in relation to the advocacy of condom use.

It was observed that almost all the participants were informed about condoms as unreliable prevention method from their Anti-AIDS clubs. Obviously, this teaching and what they experience in their daily lives, contradict what this radio program advocates. As a result, many of them were against the advocacy of condom use as an alternative prevention method. It was also noticed that some of them were confused as to which to believe, as they consider media as provider of reliable and accurate information. As Fiske (1986) points out, “the ambiguities and contradiction that fill media texts create the opportunity for audiences to exercise their creative and critical interpretative abilities” (cited in Williams, 2003:201-202). Clearly, it was apparent in this study too that being exposed to messages that are contradict each other have the potential to create a misunderstanding of messages or will result in the complete avoidance of the intended messages.

It was also observed that the media, including “*Yebekal*”, portrayal or representation of the epidemic as any ordinary disease was intended to reduce the exaggerated fear existing in the society and also to avoid the stigma and discrimination against HIV positive people. However, the findings of this study revealed that this message was open to various interpretations. As the findings indicate, although many of the participants interpreted the message as intended, some decoded the apparent meaning with the understanding and acceptance that the disease is just like any other diseases. As a result, considering the epidemic as any ordinary illness was seen to have taken away the fear of the epidemic and thus resulted in the potential consequence of being careless in ones sexual behavior.

Quoting Morley (1986), Williams, (2003) points out that along with age and ethnicity , gender is significant social variable “ in shaping the way in which

people decode media messages” (2003:197). As gender stereotypes types and power relationships are deeply rooted social practices, “gender stereotypes often find their way into the media, because journalists and editors are products of the society they are brought up in” (IPS, 2002:23). Accordingly, these inherent media practitioners’ gender biases will be reflected on the way they report on and portray the images of women and men.

The findings of this study revealed that though it wasn’t significant, the feeling of being portrayed negatively was reflected among the female participants and it was a source of discontent for some of them. It is obvious that the media has to be accurate, fair and balanced in its portrayal of males and females so as to ensure gender equality. The findings indicated that the feeling of being portrayed negatively was articulated more by females than males. Although “*Yebekal*” was appreciated for its fair coverage of females in terms of participation and mainstreaming their issues, it was also criticized for its portrayal of women negatively in some instances, particularly in its dramas.

At any rate, however, this might create dissatisfaction among the group members who think they are portrayed negatively, which in turn could result in the oppositional decoding of messages. This may suggest that the need to consider and look at gender issues carefully in each story so as to achieve effective HIV/AIDS communication.

## 6.2 Conclusion

As already stated in chapter one, the major objective of this study is to explore how high school youth audiences in Addis Ababa interpret the HIV and AIDS messages of the “*Yebekal*” radio program. Although this study is limited to a small group of high school youth in Addis Ababa and its findings can not be generalized to the whole youth population, the findings are believed to offer some important insights into the understandings of how youth make sense of the present HIV/AIDS media messages.

Accordingly, this study elicited important insights in the understanding of how youth make sense of HIV/AIDS media messages. It was observed that there were incomplete understandings or decoding of the variety of messages incorporated under the umbrella of the HIV/AIDS message. Besides, misunderstandings, misinterpretations of messages, negotiations of meanings as well as opposition of messages in some instances were observed.

The study also identified the main causes of these incomplete understandings, misinterpretations and oppositional decoding. The poor listening habit of the youth towards the program as a result of inconvenience transmission time and being not so entertaining were identified as factors for the poor listening habit which, in turn, resulted in incomplete understanding or decoding of the whole messages of the program.

What is more, lack of complete and detail, targeted messages, contradictory messages and portrayal of females negatively in some instances were also identified as sources for the misinterpretation, negotiation and opposition to some of the HIV/AIDS messages of “*Yebekal*” among its youth audiences.

Therefore, designing messages that are culturally, age and gender appropriate and also providing complete and detailed information in an entertaining ways will be recommended so as to reduce the misinterpretation, negotiation and oppositional decoding of messages among youth.

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# **Appendix: Guide for focus group discussions and Individual in-depth interviews**

## **1-Demographics**

- Name
- Age
- Grade level
- gender

## **2-Sources of Information about HIV/AIDS**

- What is your main source of information about HIV/AIDS
- Which one do you prefer most as source of information? Why?

## **3- Listening habit of Radio**

- How often do you listen to radio?
- Do you plan to listen to radio?
- Which radio station do you listen to most?
- Do you listen to FM Addis 97.1?
- How often and what program do you listen most?

## **4-Listening habit of yebekal radio program**

- How often do you listen to yebekal?
- Do you listen to yebekal most often alone or with family members?
- What other media they prefer to listen to about HIV-AIDS
- What do you Like and dislike most about the program
- How do you evaluate its presentation (in terms of language,) What do you feel about the time of its transmission and the time allotted?

- What do you think the most important thing the program should do to improve its service to you and the community?

### **5-Understanding of its main concern and messages**

- On what message do you think the program emphasizes more?
- What type of message would you like to receive (facts, real peoples experience, entertaining messages, scary messages, educative and entertainment etc.)?
- To whom do you think the program is well suited (intended)?
- Who is often portrayed positively in the “*Yebekal*” program? Male or Female?
- Who is often portrayed negatively in the “*Yebekal*” program?
- What do you think Yebekal wants to tell you through its specific programs like *Sost Gulcha* which means “towards marriage” (a program by which people living with HIV and those who are not positive can find love partners of their kind).