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Beyond medical facts: Exploring artistic representations of HIV and AIDS

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Abstract
Introduction: HIV/AIDS is a multifaceted disease that has evolved significantly over the years, giving rise to a range of cultural, emotional, and symbolic representations. Its impact on individuals, families, and communities has fostered diverse perceptions, often expressed through artistic or metaphorical forms such as drawings and local expressions. This study investigates these visual and linguistic representations to better understand the socio-cultural complexity surrounding HIV/AIDS in Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo.
Objective: To explore the diversity of perceptions and symbolic representations of HIV/AIDS through analysis of drawings and local expressions.
Methodology: A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted in Brazzaville using a probabilistic sampling method. A total of 178 individuals aged 18 and above were randomly selected from various locations. Data were collected over six months using a structured questionnaire. Participants were asked to create a drawing or write a phrase that represented HIV/AIDS, and to share the local terminology for condoms and for individuals living with HIV. A qualitative analysis was conducted to identify key themes and patterns in the collected data.
Results: Participants used a wide range of visual and verbal metaphors to depict HIV/AIDS. Common drawings included awareness logos, viruses, vampires, snakes, genitalia, white blood cells, broken hearts, and knives. Phrases such as "killer monster," "divine curse," "incurable disease," and "living dead" reflected the perceived severity and emotional burden of the disease. Cultural diversity was evident in the local terminology used for condoms (e.g., capote, chaussette, pompet) and individuals living with HIV (e.g., aza na niama, sidéen, public danger). These representations underscored both awareness and persistent misconceptions about the disease.
Discussion: The study reveals a broad spectrum of symbolic interpretations, from fear-inducing and stigmatising imagery to more factual and humorous expressions. The diversity in representations reflects differing levels of knowledge, cultural influences, and emotional responses. Misconceptions about transmission and stigma were prevalent. These findings underscore the importance of culturally sensitive health education that addresses myths, fosters accurate understanding, and reduces stigma associated with HIV/AIDS.
Conclusion: Visual and verbal representations offer a valuable lens for understanding how HIV/AIDS is conceptualized within communities. These insights are crucial for designing effective awareness campaigns that resonate with local perceptions while promoting accurate knowledge and empathy towards people living with HIV/AIDS.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS, representations, perceptions, drawings, stigma, cultural expression, public health communication

Introduction
HIV/AIDS remains one of the most striking pandemics of our time, both in terms of its health impact and the social representations it elicits. Beyond its biomedical dimension, the disease is often invested in symbolic, emotional, or moral meanings. These representations, conveyed in everyday discourse, popular expressions, and artistic forms, have a profound influence on individual and collective behavior, in terms of prevention, screening and adherence to treatment.
HIV and AIDS is a complex disease that has given rise to many different representations and perceptions over the years. The disease has a profound impact on individuals, families, and communities. Over time, it has been surrounded by many representations and perceptions. Sometimes, individuals seek to express their understanding or interpretation of this disease through drawings or visual expressions. A drawing is a form of visual communication that

can be used to represent a variety of concepts, including HIV and AIDS [1]. Drawings can be used to illustrate factual aspects of the disease, such as transmission or symptoms. They can also be used to express feelings or opinions about the disease.

Similarly, an expression is a combination of words that can be used to convey an idea or feeling [2-4]. Expressions can be used to describe HIV and AIDS, to express feelings about the disease or to share information about the disease.

With this in mind, we looked at how some people have used drawings or expressions to represent or interpret the definition of HIV and AIDS. This approach uncovered the diversity of perspectives and meanings attributed to the disease, reflecting the complexity of its understanding in our society. These artistic or metaphorical forms can offer a fascinating insight into the different ways in which HIV and AIDS is perceived and understood in society. HIV and AIDS, as a complex medical reality, transcends the boundaries of science to become a lived experience, imbued with personal and collective meanings [5, 6]. Understanding how individuals conceptualize this disease goes beyond mere medical facts, requiring an exploration of subjective representations rooted in society, culture, and individual perceptions.

In African contexts, particularly in the Republic of Congo, HIV/AIDS continues to be the subject of strong stigmatization, fed by ancient fears, persistent myths, and a lack of understanding of the current realities of the disease. In everyday language, this stigmatization is reflected in terms that are sometimes violent, degrading, or humorous, both for the disease itself and for the people who suffer from it. On the other hand, some expressions reflect a desire to adapt, to be discreet or to protect, notably around the use of condoms. It is this diversity of perceptions - between fear, rejection, humor, and resistance - that the present study focuses on.

The aim of this study is to explore representations of HIV and AIDS through artistic and linguistic productions (drawings, expressions, local words) in the socio-cultural context of Brazzaville. The aim is to understand how the disease is perceived, named, and symbolized by the population, in order to identify the diversity of perceptions, the dynamics of stigmatization, and the levers and obstacles to preventing and combating.

Type of study and framework

This was a descriptive cross-sectional study conducted in Brazzaville, using probability sampling based on the availability of participants. The study is part of an exploratory approach aimed at gathering popular perceptions of HIV and AIDS through drawings, expressions and terms used in everyday life. This approach provides access to social representations that are often invisible in conventional epidemiological studies. It highlights the richness of popular language, the impact of cultural references, and the implicit mechanisms of stigmatization or normalization.

Population cible

The target population for this study was adults aged 18 and over, living in Brazzaville, able to express themselves autonomously in French or in the local languages used during the survey (Lingala, Kituba). Participants had to be in full possession of their mental faculties in order to ensure proper understanding of instructions and the expression of free and informed consent. Individuals meeting these criteria were included, while those under 18 years of age, those with manifest cognitive impairment or mental disability limiting communication or preventing valid consent, as well as anyone refusing to participate or withdrawing consent, were excluded from the study.

Sampling method

Sampling was probabilistic, with random recruitment of participants in various neighborhoods and public places in Brazzaville. This method aimed to obtain as diverse a sample of the adult population as possible.

Data collection procedure

Data were collected using a questionnaire comprising three open-ended questions, administered face-to-face in different areas of Brazzaville. Participants were asked to draw or phrase a visual representation of the expressions associated with HIV and AIDS, to mention the names used in their environment to designate condoms, and to indicate the local or slang names used to designate people living with HIV or AIDS. Responses were entered anonymously, without collecting any personal, biomedical, or nominative information.

Data analysis

The data collected was subjected to a thematic qualitative analysis. The drawings were grouped by recurring visual elements (symbols of death, virus, sexual representations, figures of struggle, etc.). Verbal expressions were classified into semantic and sociolinguistic categories, in order to identify dominant themes around the perception of HIV/AIDS, means of prevention and people living with the virus.

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in compliance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. A request for an opinion was submitted to the Comité d'Éthique de la Recherche en Sciences de la Santé (CERSSA) of the Ministère de la Recherche Scientifique et de l'Innovation Technologique, which issued a formal waiver of ethical approval (Lettre n°138/DGRST/CERSSA, December 2023), considering that the study did not involve any biomedical intervention or processing of sensitive data. Participants were clearly and transparently informed of the study's objectives, their rights, and the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained orally prior to each participation.

Results

A total of 178 people aged 18 and overtook part in the study. The results are presented in direct relation to the three questions posed to participants. The analysis enabled us to identify thematic categories based on the drawings, expressions and names collected, illustrated by verbatim excerpts.

1. Visual representations and expressions associated

Participants were invited to draw or write down what HIV and AIDS evoked in their minds. Analysis of the visual and verbal productions revealed representations dominated by fear, death, danger, and suffering (Figure 1).

Among the 178 participants, forty-one (41) drew a coffin, a cross or a symbol of danger, clear signs of the association between HIV and death. Eighteen (18) drew the AIDS logo, often stylized or accompanied by arrows and dark colors. Fifteen (15) depicted a virus, sometimes anthropomorphized or stylized. Fifteen (15) others used imaginary or mythological figures such as a vampire, a devil, a snake, or a ferocious animal called niama (Lingala for "animal"). Seven (7) drew genitalia, and four (4) depicted white blood cells fighting the virus. Two (2) people used emotional symbols: a broken heart and a sharp knife (Table 1). These visual representations convey fear, fatality, or threat. Some participants explained their drawings through verbal comments, of which here are a few illustrative extracts:

"I drew a coffin because this disease kills. Once you have it, you have no hope." (Participant #05, male, age 25)
"The knife I drew is to say that HIV cuts life in two." (Participant #38, male, 21 years old)
"It's like a vampire; it slowly drains you to death." (Participant #12, female, 27 years old)

In addition to the drawings, participants also expressed their perception of HIV through words or symbolic expressions, revealing other facets of their representations.
The written responses revealed a rich and emotionally charged lexicon, revealing the beliefs, fears and social judgments associated with HIV or AIDS. Forty-three (43) participants came up with key phrases or words to describe the disease. Among the most frequent expressions were complicated disease, killer monster, divine curse, incurable disease, sharp knife, living dead, invisible killer, unforgiving disease, programmed death (Table 2). A few examples of these expressions help us to better understand the social and symbolic weight attributed to illness:

"Back home, we call it 'the killer monster.' Because when you catch it, you don't live normally anymore." (Participant #19, female, age 22)
"We call it 'the three letters. Everybody understands, but nobody wants to say the word 'AIDS.'"(Participant #22, male, age 23)
"It's the curse of the infidels." (Participant #09, female, 31)
These expressions show that popular language conveys both ingrained fears and coded forms of communication. The following section explores this dynamic through the terms used to designate means of prevention, in particular condoms.

2. Names given to condoms in local sociolinguistic environments

Participants shared the names used to designate condoms in their environment, their jargon, or their mother tongue. The results reveal a linguistic richness marked by creativity, humor, concealment, or protection. As for the expressions used to describe HIV, forty-three (43) people expressed themselves: twenty-four (24) people described HIV and AIDS as a complex and feared disease, a killer monster, a divine curse, an incurable disease, a fearsome killer, a sharp knife, the living dead, a deadly disease or a dangerous disease. Six (6) people defined the acronyms HIV or AIDS.
Five (5) people wrote that HIV and AIDS is transmitted through sexual contact. Only four (4) people know that HIV and AIDS is spread through sexual contact and other means. Two (2) people wrote "the three letters" to mean HIV or "the four letters" to mean AIDS. One person wrote that HIV and AIDS mean sick people. Another person described AIDS as an imaginary syndrome to discourage lovers. The different names for condoms collected from respondents show the diversity of terms used in different regions, communities, or social settings. The names most frequently mentioned were: *Capote* (24), *Chaussette* (20), *Bottine* (15), *Préservatif* (11), *Condom* (8), *Sachet* (7), " *Pompet"* (7), *Potca* (3), *Préso* (3), *Niama* (2), *Capotino* (2), *Ngiri*, *Ami* 3, *Capaya*, *Dicapate*, *Ekori*, *Boing*, *Boite noire*, *Voisin malamu*, *Soukoula matakou* (9) (Lingala: "clean your buttocks") (Table 3). As for the expressions used to describe HIV, forty-three (43) people expressed themselves: Twenty-four (24) people described HIV and AIDS as a very complicated disease, a killer monster, a divine curse, an incurable disease, a fearsome killer, a sharp knife, the living dead, a deadly disease or a dangerous disease. Six (6) people defined the acronyms HIV or AIDS.
Five (5) people wrote that HIV and AIDS is transmitted through sexual contact. Only four (4) people know that HIV and AIDS is spread through sexual contact and other means. Two (2) people wrote "the three letters" to mean HIV or "the four letters" to mean AIDS. One person wrote that HIV and AIDS mean sick people. Another person described AIDS as an imaginary syndrome to discourage lovers. The different names for condoms collected from respondents show the diversity of terms used in different regions, communities, or social settings.

3. Creative or imaginative names

In addition to the classic terms, participants expressed a great deal of linguistic creativity when referring to condoms, mobilizing humor, metaphor, cultural coding, or symbolic protection. Sixty-three (63) people mentioned at least two other creative or imaginative names, illustrating a desire to circumvent embarrassment or adapt the discourse to specific social contexts. These names include, for example : bonbon, chapeau, Yamakassi, sécurité, cheval, missile, protège, prudence, cartouche, anti-balle, ok, cookie, bracelet, capo-capo, antimine, poche, mwana-ndéa, comprimé en sachet, imperméable, accusé, mail-bo, mbombo (Table 4; Table 5). Research in sociolinguistics has shown that popular names for health objects, such as condoms, play a role in their social acceptability [7-9]. These terms constitute a form of cultural reappropriation that can be mobilized to create more inclusive awareness campaigns.
Figure 2 (word cloud) below provides a visual illustration of this lexical diversity, translated into English to make it accessible to an international readership. This word cloud highlights the most frequently cited terms and testifies to the symbolic weight attributed to the means of protection against HIV/AIDS, often charged with implicit cultural meanings.

4. Verbatim illustratifs

To better understand the meaning and use of these terms in everyday discourse, some participants provided verbal explanations for their choice of words. These verbatims highlight the concern for discretion, popular humor and the protective function of the condom in collective representation.

"We say condom or sock, but young people also say 'bonbon' or 'pompet'." (Participant #41, female, age 26)
"I use 'cookie' or 'anti-ball'. It's more discreet when you're talking about it with friends."(Participant #13, male, 30 years old)
"At home, we say 'voisin malamu', which means good neighbor, the one who protects." (Participant #27, male, 22 years old)

5. Names used to designate people living with HIV and AIDS

Participants shared the names or expressions used in their environment to designate people living with HIV. The analysis reveals a predominance of stigmatizing terms, often violent or dehumanizing, but also the existence of more neutral or euphemistic formulations, reflecting a certain desire for discretion or indirectness. Among the most frequently cited expressions are: aza na niama (32 mentions), which in Lingala means "he/she has the animal", *les trois lettres / les quatre lettres* (23), *séropositif* (13), *sidéen ou sidatique* (12), *aniati mine* (10), *vivant mort*, *tube sec*, *nguenga*, *clame*, *gombé*, *mbembi*, *capaya*, *sens interdit*, *danger public*, *récepteur*, *mourant*, *ninja*, *diable* (Table 5; Table 6). These names convey a range of perceptions, from fear to derision to exclusion. A few extracts illustrate the social charge contained in these terms:

"Aza na niama, it means 'he has the animal'... it's like he's not a normal person anymore." (Participant #17, female, age 25)
"They're called 'the living dead'. It's sad, but people are afraid of them." (Participant #08, male, age 40)
"People call it "AIDS" or "public danger", but it's scary. It's not right." (Participant #11, female, 33)

While some expressions are strongly stigmatizing, others, like the three letters or aniati mine ("he trampled an animal"), reflect an attempt to name without offending, through euphemism or misappropriation. This reflects the tension between recognition of the disease and social rejection of the sufferer. We have listed the names given to people who have contracted HIV and AIDS: Aza na niama (32 people), Four letters (23 people), Séropositif (13 people), Sidéen (12 people), Aniati mine (10 people), Sens interdit, Clame, Tsangi, Akoufa lobi, Sidanien, Tube sec, Nguenga or Loves women (8 people equally distributed), Affected (7 people), Living dead (7 people), Public danger (7 people), Aza na bord (3 people), Sidatic (3 people), Carrier of the virus (3 people). Thirty-nine (39) people gave more than two (2) names to a person living with HIV and AIDS: "Aza-na-singa, Gombé, Aza-na-yargo, Mourant, Rassasier, A mbembi, Dida-na-dida, Essouli, Pour sa santé, Personne mince, Ninja, le Diable, les Récepteurs"

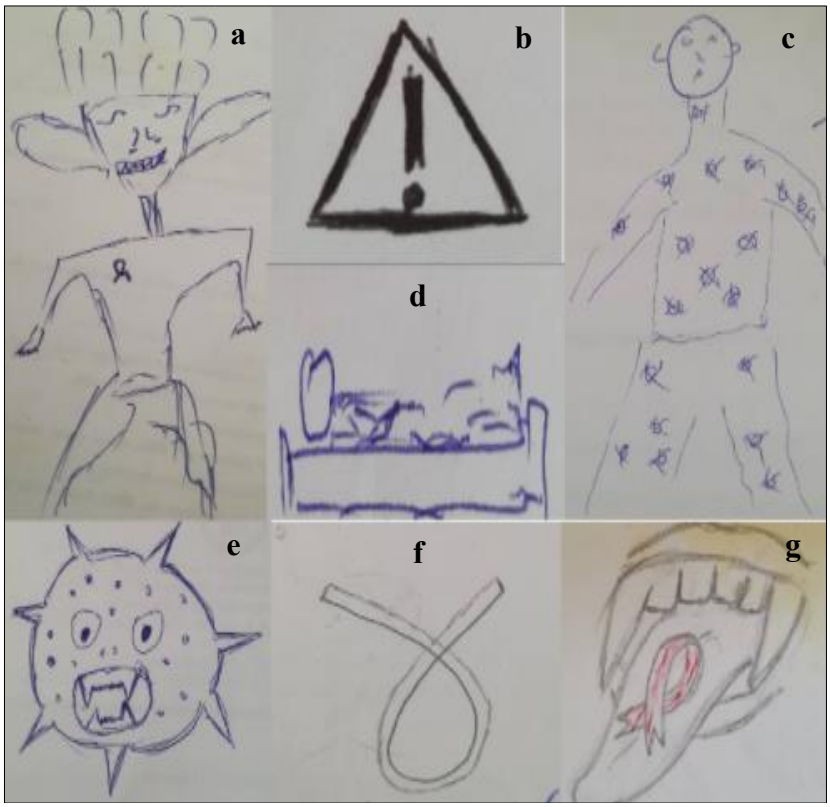

Fig 1: Pictorial representations and perceptions of HIV and AIDS

a: "Vampire", a metaphorical image evoking aspects of fear or a destructive impact associated with HIV and AIDS. An inevitable and irreversible transformation of the disease
b: Symbol representing "danger/attention", an image that evokes the threat or seriousness associated with the disease but can also underline the social stigma and prejudice associated with HIV and AIDS.
c: "Living dead", an image referring to the notion of the disease affecting the immune system and gradually weakening a person.
But it could also symbolize the way some people perceive people living with HIV and AIDS, associating them with a negative or frightening image.

d: "Dying person", this representation refers to the progression of the disease to an advanced stage, which leads to serious complications and inevitably to death.
e: "Killer monster", a metaphorical representation of the seriousness of the disease and its devastating effects on people's health. This metaphor can also underline the frightening and uncontrollable aspect of the disease, thus arousing feelings of fear and urgency to take preventive and treatment measures.
f: "Logo for the fight against HIV and AIDS", this expresses that some people are aware of the fight or struggle associated with this disease and certainly have knowledge about prevention and the fight against stigmatization. Hence the inverted logo, a sign that the disease is not positive and that nothing can be expected from it.
g: "The tongue of a snake associated with the HIV and AIDS logo and the two teeth representing gravity", an artistic representation that provokes a number of reflections. The snake's tongue as a symbol of deception or malice associated with HIV and AIDS could symbolize the perception of the disease as a pernicious/false/disintegrating threat or the representation of misinformation.

Appendix: Glossary of local terms used to refer to condoms and people living with HIV and AIDS

To make it easier to understand the cultural, slang and local language used by participants, an explanatory glossary is appended. This glossary presents the meaning of the expressions and names mentioned to designate HIV and AIDS, people living with the virus, and condoms. This approach aims to contextualize the results for an international English-speaking readership, and to highlight local linguistic richness while respecting the ethical principles of neutrality and non-stigmatization.

a) Tables summarize the representations, expressions and terms collected

Table 1: Types of visual representations of HIV and AIDS (n = 178)

Drawing representation	Number of participants	Number of participants (%)
Croix, cercueil ou symbole de danger	41	23.0
Logo VIH	18	10.1
Virus	15	8.4
Vampire, diable, serpent, "niama"	15	8.4
Organes génitaux	7	3.9
Globules blancs en guerre contre le virus	4	2.2
Cœur brisé	1	0.6
Couteau tranchant	1	0.6

Table 2: Expressions used to describe HIV and AIDS (n = 43)

Frequently used expression	Number of quotes
Maladie très compliquée	11
Monstre tueur	9
Malédiction divine	6
Maladie incurable	5
Couteau tranchant	4
Vivant mort	3
Tueur invisible / Maladie qui ne pardonne pas	3
Les trois lettres / Quatre lettres	2

Table 3: Terms used to designate condoms (n = 178)

Term used	Number of quotations
Capote	24
Chaussette	20
Bottine	15
Préservatif	11
Condom	8
Sachet	7
Pompet	7
Potcha / Potca	3
Préso	3
Capotino	2
Others (bonbon, missile, etc.)	63 (multiple responses)

Table 4: Names given to people living with HIV and AIDS (n = 178)

Term or expression	Number of quotes
Aza na niama	32
Les trois lettres / Quatre lettres	23
Séropositif	13
Sidéen / Sidatique	12
Aniati mine	10
Sens interdit, clame, etc.	8
Danger public / Vivant mort	7
Tube sec, Gombé, Capaya, etc.	39 (multiple answers)

b) Appendix: Glossary of local terms used to refer to condoms and people living with HIV/AIDS

To make it easier to understand the cultural, slang and local language used by participants, an explanatory glossary is appended. This glossary presents the meaning of the expressions and names mentioned to designate HIV and AIDS, people living with the virus, and condoms. This approach aims to contextualize the results for an international English-speaking readership, and to highlight local linguistic richness while respecting the ethical principles of neutrality and non-stigmatization.

Table 5: Terms used to designate condoms

Local term	Meaning / English translation	Context of use
Capote	Condom (slang)	Colloquial French term
Chaussette	Condom	Metaphor linked to form and function
Bottine	Condom	Popular variant, sometimes humorous
Préservatif	Condom	Formal medical term
Condom	Condom	Term borrowed from English
Sachet	Condom	Reference to plastic packaging
Pompet	Condom	Young people's slang, urban use
Potcha / Potca	Condom	Local term or distorted according to region
Préso	Condom	Colloquial abbreviation of "condom"
Capotino	Condom	Affective or humorous diminutive
Bonbon	Condom	Imaginative term, often used in discreet or youthful contexts
Yamakassi	Condom	Term borrowed from youth language (inspired by action film)
Anti-balle	Condom	Protective metaphor: "against bullets"
Missile	Condom	Metaphor of power or protection
Biscuit	Condom	Discreet name to avoid judgment

Imperméable	Condom	Evokes the physical barrier against STIs
Bracelet	Condom	Playful misappropriation of the term (circular shape)
Ngiri	Condom	In Lingala, sometimes used to designate a rolled-up object
Voisin malamu	Condom	In Lingala: "good neighbor" - suggests discretion and protection
Soukoula matakou	Condom	In Lingala: "clean your buttocks" - indirect expression evoking prevention

Some terms may vary according to neighborhood, generation, or social group. This glossary aims to reflect this linguistic richness while ensuring that the reader understands.

Table 6: Terms used to describe people living with HIV and AIDS

Local term	Translation/ Meaning	Comment
Aza na niama	"He has animal" (Lingala)	Stigmatizing, dehumanizing term
Trois lettres/ Quatre lettres	HIV and AIDS	Indirect way of referring to HIV infection and AIDS
Séropositif	HIV-positive person	Medical terms, sometimes stigmatizing depending on the context
Sidéen / Sidatique	Person with AIDS	Colloquial or pejorative term, to be avoided
Mourant, vivant mort	Dying / Living dead	Extreme metaphors of disease perception
Danger public	Public threat	Stigmatization based on fear of HIV
Tube sec, Ninja, Récepteur	Metaphoric terms	Distorted or ironic representations
Gombé, A mbembi, Capaya	Slang names	Slang names, varying according to the region
Aniati mine	Infected person	Term in local language meaning "the one who has the thing"
Aza na bord	He is on the edge	Expression linked to the idea of advanced illness

Note to English-speaking readers

Some of the terms presented above may be considered stigmatizing or offensive. Their inclusion in this glossary is strictly for analytical and sociolinguistic purposes, to illustrate how HIV and AIDS are perceived and named in everyday language in Brazzaville. The use of these terms in this study in no way reflects an endorsement or trivialization of their content.

Fig 2: Word cloud translated into English, representing the main terms and expressions used by participants to talk about HIV and AIDS, people living with HIV and condoms

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore representations of HIV and AIDS through artistic and linguistic productions (drawings, expressions, local words), in the socio-cultural context of Brazzaville. The results revealed a diversity of perceptions, marked by fear and stigmatization, but also by popular creativity.

Linguistic and cultural integration

Participants expressed their vision of HIV and AIDS through symbolic drawings and metaphorical expressions. linguistic and cultural integration in prevention strategies. The results of this study reveal a strong presence of symbolic and emotional representations of HIV and AIDS in popular discourse. These representations are shaped by the local socio-cultural context and manifest themselves through images, metaphors and colloquial expressions, often far removed from biomedical language. The most frequent representations associated the disease with death (coffin, cross), danger (snake, knife) or monstrous figures (vampire, devil). The perception of HIV as a curse, a "killer monster", or even "the animal" (niama) testifies to the fact that the disease is rooted in a collective imagination combining fear, moral judgment and confusion. According to several anthropological studies carried out in sub-Saharan Africa, social representations of HIV are often based on negative symbols linked to death, curse and monstrosity [10]. These cultural representations reflect the way in which local societies give meaning to the disease through their belief systems and collective emotions.

These expressions convey a strong emotional charge. The local names attributed to condoms and to people living with HIV reveal deep-rooted cultural perceptions, often ambivalent between humor, dissimulation and stigmatization. This complexity underlines the importance of integrating linguistic and cultural dimensions into health policies. Several authors stress the need to adapt public health messages to the specific cultural and linguistic referents of target communities [11]. By taking these dimensions into account, we can better capture the attention of populations and improve the effectiveness of preventive messages. Effective communication on HIV cannot ignore the way in which populations name, visualize and interpret the disease. Adapting messages to local referents means not simply translating media, but rethinking content according to collective imaginations and specific social dynamics.

The survey results show that people's perceptions of HIV and AIDS vary. Some see it as a deadly disease, a threat or a dangerous element. For others, it's a virus, an evil creature or a sex symbol. These different representations reflect the knowledge and experiences of the people interviewed. People with limited knowledge of HIV and AIDS may perceive it as an incurable and fatal disease [12]. On the other hand, people with more in-depth knowledge may understand that it is an incurable disease [13, 14], but one that can be managed with appropriate treatment and care [15, 16]. Significant progress has been made in the treatment of HIV and AIDS, but no cure has yet been discovered [17].

Participants' responses reveal a diversity of perceptions and understandings of HIV and AIDS. The expressions used, such as “very complicated disease”, “killer monster”, “divine curse”, “incurable disease”, “fearsome killer”, “sharp knife”, ‘undead’, “deadly disease” or “dangerous disease”, reflect the seriousness and fear associated with this illness in the collective imagination. These terms underline the emotional impact and negative perception often associated with HIV and AIDS. The definitions of the

acronyms HIV and AIDS given by six people show a certain technical knowledge of the disease. On the other hand, only five people mentioned transmission by sexual contact, which nevertheless reflects an awareness of the main route of transmission of this disease. And only four people knew that the disease could be transmitted by other means. Previous surveys have also shown limited knowledge of HIV transmission routes outside sexual intercourse [18]. This underlines the importance of reinforcing education on other modes of transmission, such as needle sharing or mother-to-child transmission.

Humorous expressions such as “the three letters” or “the four letters” add an interesting dimension to the perception of HIV and AIDS, while the comparison of AIDS to an “imaginary syndrome to discourage lovers” reflects a misguided but creative understanding of the disease. AIDS is a real and serious disease, and such interpretations do not reflect the reality of the situation. These responses underline the importance of clear and accurate communication to dispel the misconceptions and stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS. Scientific literature emphasizes that misconceptions about HIV fuel stigmatization and hamper prevention efforts [19]. A lack of scientific understanding is often compensated for by popular, sometimes stigmatizing beliefs, which reinforce the marginalization of people living with HIV. One person wrote that HIV and AIDS are synonymous with sick people, which may reflect a misperception or stigma associated with the disease, given that HIV and AIDS can affect all categories of the population, regardless of age, gender or sexual orientation [20]. The drawing of a sharp knife to represent HIV and AIDS is an interesting and suggestive interpretation.

Studies in health psychology have shown that violent or frightening visual representations reflect a high level of social anxiety about illness [21]. These emotional images are not insignificant; they contribute to the construction of a collective imaginary in which illness is perceived as an imminent threat. Each person may express their perception in a unique way, and in this case, the use of a sharp knife probably evokes notions of danger, cutting or vulnerability. In the case of the person who pulled out the knife, it's likely that he or she has been exposed to negative representations of HIV and AIDS. She may have heard that the disease was fatal or incurable. They may also have been exposed to stigmatizing images of people living with HIV and AIDS. It's important to understand this representation of HIV and AIDS, as it can contribute to the stigmatization and discrimination of people living with HIV and AIDS. One of the most important societal dimensions is the risk of stigmatization and discrimination, which is fuelled by ignorance of the basic modes of HIV transmission and unfounded fears of contagion, as well as by moral judgment and personal prejudice against the groups most affected by the epidemic [22].

It's important to remember that HIV and AIDS are diseases, not crime, and that people living with HIV are not criminals. People living with HIV and AIDS are not dangerous or violent. They are simply people with a disease. Previous studies have already shown that HIV and AIDS are diseases that can be controlled and treated. With appropriate treatment, people living with HIV and AIDS can lead long and healthy lives [23]. These interpretations offer an artistic and emotional perspective on how a person perceives HIV and AIDS. They also underline the importance of taking these diverse representations into account when raising awareness and communicating, in order to better understand individual perceptions and tailor messages accordingly. It is necessary to promote an accurate and informed understanding of HIV and AIDS to combat stigmatization, prevent transmission and support people living with the disease.

Strategic use of popular terms

The study also revealed a wealth of lexical terms used to designate condoms. It is important to note that condom names can change over time. For example, “capote” was the most common name for a condom in Brazzaville a few years ago, but is now rivaled by other names, such as ‘chaussette’ and “bottine”. Informal or vernacular names are also more common in some parts of the city. For example, “ngiri” is a common name in southern Brazzaville, while “yamakassi” is a common name in northern Brazzaville. Imaginative or creative names are more common in informal conversations. For example, “bonbon” is a common noun in conversations between young people. Names linked to the function of the condom are more common in HIV and AIDS awareness campaigns. Some nouns are also linked to the condom's function. For example, “safety”, “horse”, “missile”, ‘protect’ and “caution” suggest that the condom is used to protect against Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and pregnancy. Other names are more imaginative or creative. For example, “bonbon”, “chapeau”, “anti balle”, “ok”, ‘cookie’ and “impermeable” suggest different ideas about condoms. These names - capote, chaussette, cookie, anti-balle, bonbon, voisin malamu - reflect both a community appropriation of the discourse on prevention and a strategy for circumventing embarrassment or taboos. These terms, far from being anecdotal, can be powerful levers for reinforcing adherence to health messages. Their reintegration into awareness-raising campaigns, in the form of positive, humorous or participatory slogans, would not only capture the attention of target audiences, but also build a more inclusive and accessible form of communication. The aim is to transform these words from the field into tools for health education and promotion. Some authors even recommend incorporating these terms into communication campaigns to facilitate understanding and acceptance [24]. The use of colloquial, creative or humorous language can help break taboos and open intergenerational discussions on sexuality.

The most common names for a person living with HIV vary according to the language spoken. For example, “aza na niama” is the most common name in Lingala, while “seropositive” is the most common name in French. Informal or vernacular names are also more common in some parts of the city. For example, “sidéen” is a common name in urban areas, while “aniati mine” is a common name in rural areas. They can be used in a colloquial or stigmatizing context. Names linked to a person's serological status are more common in medical or associative circles. Imaginative or creative names are more common in informal conversations. It's important to note that the names given to people with HIV and AIDS can change over time. For example, “AIDS sufferer” was a common term a few years ago, but is now seen as stigmatizing [25]. Some terms are also linked to a person's serological status. For example, “infected” and “carrier of the virus” suggest that the person is a carrier of the HIV virus. Other names are more

imaginative or creative. For example, “undead” and “public danger” suggest that the person is dangerous or dying. It's important to note that some of these terms can be stigmatizing or offensive to people living with HIV and AIDS. It is essential to promote a respectful, non-discriminatory and caring attitude towards people affected by this disease. The recommended terminology for referring to people with HIV and AIDS is “person living with HIV and AIDS” (PLWHA) [26]. This terminology is inclusive and respectful, as it focuses on the person rather than the disease. It's important to use this terminology in all contexts, including informal conversations. By using this terminology, we help to fight stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV and AIDS [6]. The diversity of condom names may reflect cultural influences, community language or individual perceptions of sexual protection. These results underline the importance of taking linguistic and cultural diversity into account in sexual health awareness and education programs.

The results of our study on the representation of HIV and AIDS through drawings or expressions are interesting. The different interpretations reflect the complexity of perceptions associated with this disease. Representations such as the cross, the coffin, the danger, the HIV and AIDS logo, the virus, the vampire, the devil, the snake, the genitals, the warring white blood cells, the broken heart, and even the addition of an animal with the legend “Niama” show a variety of symbols and emotional associations. Qualitative interviews could have been conducted to better understand these representations and the reasons behind these artistic choices. Why do some people associate HIV with negative elements such as the cross, the coffin or evil entities, while others opt for symbols of struggle or more abstract representations such as a broken heart or an animal bearing the legend “Niama”? These results could also provide important points for improving awareness and prevent campaigns by adapting messages to different perceptions. Analysis of the data collected so far opens the way to many other research possibilities in the field of HIV and AIDS communication.

Community dialogue as a lever for change

The diversity of representations gathered in this study argues in favor of setting up structured community dialogues that recognize and value local knowledge. These exchanges, conducted in open, participatory settings, would enable us to gradually deconstruct stigmatizing stereotypes, correct misconceptions, and co-construct prevention messages in tune with socio-cultural realities. This dialogue needs to be supported by local players (community leaders, educators, health workers) trained in cultural mediation. The aim is not only to transmit information, but also to listen, understand and negotiate points of view, to support sustainable changes in behavior that respect local identities.

Putting existing literature into perspective

The results of this study confirm observations already made in the literature on the social representations of HIV and AIDS, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Mahajan *et al*. (2008) point out that stigmatization often stems from collective fear and lack of information [27]. Boneh & Jaganath (2011) show that theatrical, artistic or symbolic representations of HIV serve to externalize deep-seated anxieties but can also reinforce certain stereotypes [28]. Our data perfectly illustrate this ambivalence: images of death and monster coexist with more informed forms, such as the HIV logo or white blood cells fighting the virus.

The use of expressions such as “the three letters” or “the good neighbor” (to designate a condom) also shows the existence of a coded language that enables taboo subjects to be broached in restricted social contexts, often between peers. These observations tie in with Goffman's work on the social management of stigmatization.

Theoretical, practical and political implications

The data confirm that HIV and AIDS cannot be reduced to a biomedical reality: it is also a symbolic, socially constructed object, perceived through cultural, emotional and moral filters. This study makes an original contribution by showing that popular artistic forms (drawings and slogans) mirror the collective perception and social burden surrounding the disease. An analysis of the terms used locally to designate people living with HIV not only explores the dynamics of stigmatizing language but also points the way to the reappropriation of a more inclusive vocabulary. The results of this study highlight the need to integrate linguistic and cultural dimensions into prevention, communication and sexual health education strategies. Indeed, the words, expressions and drawings collected reveal a collective vision of HIV and AIDS that are emotional, coded and socially situated. Awareness-raising campaigns must therefore be based on the terminologies used by the communities themselves, valuing expressions with protective connotations (“protection”, “security”, “good neighbor”) and gradually deconstructing stigmatizing terms such as “living dead”, ‘niama’, “public danger”. These adjustments can help reduce the distance between public health messages and real life. Community health workers and communicators also need to take into account the diversity of cultural references when adapting educational materials. Popular condom names can, for example, be reused in positive, humorous or participatory messages, to reinforce adherence without offending sensitivities. What's more, the results show that popular condom names are not only numerous but also carry a rich symbolism. These names - sometimes humorous, metaphorical or functional - could be reinvested in positive, inclusive communication campaigns, particularly among young people or in informal settings, to encourage condom use without provoking rejection or embarrassment.

Finally, structured community dialogue is essential if local perceptions of HIV and AIDS are to be recognized, understood and used as levers for lasting behavioral change. Such dialogue would strengthen the legitimacy of prevention initiatives and increase the involvement of the populations concerned.

Limits and prospects

This study had certain limitations, in particular the lack of interviews. Individual interviews or focus groups would have provided more detailed and in-depth information on people's representations and perceptions of HIV and AIDS. In addition, although the sampling was probabilistic, it is important to note that the results of this study may not be generalizable to the entire Congolese population.

This study did not include interviews or focus groups, which limits the depth of interpretation of certain symbols and expressions. In the future, it would be useful to complement

this descriptive approach with more interactive qualitative methods (semi-directive interviews, focus group discussions) to delve deeper into the logics of representation. However, this exploratory approach has laid a solid foundation for further qualitative research.
Furthermore, although sampling was probabilistic, the results cannot be generalized to the entire Congolese population. Selection was limited to voluntary individuals capable of expressing themselves on the subject, which potentially excludes certain vulnerable sub-populations. The study relies on the free expression of volunteers, which could introduce a selection bias.

Research prospects
This exploratory study paves the way for further, more in-depth and diversified research. In the near future, semi-structured interviews and focus groups will be conducted to provide a more detailed analysis of social relationships, cultural resistance and strategies for circumventing HIV and AIDS-related norms. It would also be judicious to develop awareness-raising tools co-constructed with the communities, based on the words, images and stories collected. Such an approach would make it possible to design more firmly rooted interventions, encouraging the active participation of populations and a sustainable fight against stigmatization and misinformation.

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Data availability statement
All result-based data are in the manuscript.

Declarations
The study is based solely on anonymous expressions and perceptions of HIV and AIDS, with no collection of personal, biomedical or sensitive data. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to inclusion. They were given the opportunity to ask questions and to withdraw their consent at any time without a consequence. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. No identifying data was collected, thus ensuring confidentiality and respect for privacy.

Consent for publication
Not applicable.

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests

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