

## Visual Literacy: Critical Lenses

**Introduction:** Images surround us as arts, advertisements, instructions, propaganda, and more, all of which communicate information and ideas. Visual literacy applied to image analysis allows you to examine an image critically in the context of its creator, audience, purpose, time period, etc. It enables you to decode underlying historical and social influences that have shaped both explicit and implicit messages contained in the image.

There are some approaches with which you can analyze images and develop your visual literacy skills. Here are four such approaches—i.e., critical lenses—class, gender/feminism, race/ethnicity, and history. They offer different perspectives you can use to reveal how the image and its ideas have been affected by various factors—when, who, what, where, how, why.

**Instruction:** Read the descriptions about four different critical lenses on this page. Afterwards, review several guiding questions for nursing postcards listed on page 2. Note your comments and questions on the margin, and be prepared to share them during the class discussion.

### Types of Critical Lenses

**Class:** Here class refers to people with the same social, economic, or educational status. The class lens examines the differing representations and contextualization of people based on socio-economic classes. It explores the power relationships among the classes, and who benefits the most from them in society. Visual media carries images that are informed by and shape those class and power structures in a society at any given time and place.

**Gender/Feminism:** A gender lens explores how societies define ideas about masculinity and femininity, while a feminism lens sees society as supporting male power and restricting female power. The gender and feminism lenses can work together and examine female and male representations in the media that depict how defying societal expectations of gender and sexuality impacts people's lives; and gender imbalances in society where men have more societal power and their interests and preferences dictate women's opportunities, treatment, and social status.

**Race/Ethnicity:** This lens probes into the social perceptions about one's race/ethnicity. The critical lens reveals the hierarchy of societal power and how imbalances of opportunity and power among races and ethnicities color all aspects of their lives. The racial/ethnic lens can also be used to look at how the dominant culture perceives different races and ethnicities, how those perceptions are presented in the media, and how those factors affect the way society treats people and their opportunities in life.

**History:** A historical lens places information in the context of the time period in which it was created. This lens analyzes the information in visual media through examination of the circumstances that produced the media, such as cultural movements, political ideologies, and intellectual trends of the time. The history lens also explores the legacy history has left in the present, and may encompass the other three lenses when looking at the ways in which historical occurrences impacted society as a whole, and how they colored the experiences of people in various social groups.

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### Guiding Questions for the Nursing Postcards

1. What is the image's main message? Who is its creator/producer? What is its purpose? Who is the audience?
2. What time period is the postcard image from? At that time, what historical events happened, and what were the mainstream cultural and social trends? How does the image reflect them?
3. What are the symbols in the image? What do they convey and to whom?
4. Who and how are people depicted? What is their identity—gender, class, race/ethnicity?
5. From whose perspective are the people illustrated? What power relationships does the image show? How does the image foster or change the norm and the existing power structure?
6. What information or image is missing? How does that absence further support the message of the image?
7. What ideas about nurses or nursing does the image communicate? What can you conclude about social rules, norms, power, and power structure that shaped this image?