AIDS awareness campaigns:

Scaring on the condom?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to expose various college-aged men and women (ages 17-25) to a series of international advertising campaigns advocating for HIV/AIDS awareness and protection in order to interpret their reactions and deduce which advertising tactics produce the most favorable results, particularly regarding the effects they have on the viewer and the degree to which each advertisement motivates the viewer to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS. Our survey consisted of eight separate advertising campaigns that employed various levels of shock, humor or unsettling material, and with each campaign the respondent was asked to gauge his or her reaction according to a series of listed. A total of 28 respondents took the survey, of which exactly half were male and half were female. Although it did not confirm the hypothesis, this study confirmed the findings of Manchanda et al. and Hill, showing that both shock- and anxiety-inducing advertisements prove to be more effective in regards to motivational influence, as the advertisements utilized in this survey that rated most shocking and/or surprising also tended to be most likely to motivate condom usage or safe sex.
Recent polling shows that concern over HIV or AIDS among the American population has diminished consistently over the past three decades, although with brief — and ultimately ineffective — upticks about once each decade. While the number of Americans who listed AIDS/HIV as "the most urgent health problem facing the nation/world today" charted 68 percent in 1987, that percentage shrank to 6 percent in 2009 and rose back to 10 percent in 2012, ranking below the cost of healthcare and health insurance (The Washington Post & The Kaiser Family Foundation, 2012). Despite the drastic decline of AIDS/HIV in the national sentiment over the past three decades, the city of Baton Rouge, La., now ranks No. 1 in the nation for newly contracted cases of AIDS/HIV, making the topic highly relevant for natives of Louisiana's capital city and the home of the state's flagship university: Louisiana State University (Stewart, 2012).

In consideration of the decline of AIDS/HIV in the public consciousness (the worldwide prioritization of AIDS/HIV dropped along with that of the population of the United States of America) many advertising agencies — particularly those advertising condoms — and AIDS/HIV awareness campaigns have grown more creative in their efforts to reach out to an increasingly apathetic public, and often this creativity denotes brazen analogies and sexually suggestive images to induce negative, shock-and-awe and emotional responses. In the Bible Belt of the United States, which includes South Louisiana, the very usage of condoms itself is a noted controversy — within this survey, each respondent who did not label himself or herself as sexually active also responded as not believing in condom usage as a means of preventing sexually transmitted diseases, which could suggest a lingering influence of abstinence-only education. Numerous studies have inquired as to the most effective means of penetrating the distracted consciousness of young adults, typically finding shock to be the most efficient means
of outreach, but questions remain in regards to what type of advertisement most consistently
elicits a positive outcome — albeit while typically generating negative emotions.

W shocking AIDS/HIV campaigns affect the sexual behavior of young adults is the research question behind this survey. We hypothesize that the effectiveness of the advertisement will vary directly with how shocking the advertisement is.

**Literature Review:**

According to the advertising study titled "Shocking ads! Do they work?" by Rajesh Manchanda, Darren Dahl and Kristina Frankenberger, shocking the message into the viewer works: Not only does it lead to better memory retention, but shock value also proves more motivational and effective in encouraging action, besting other methods, such as fear and informational appeals (Manchanda, Dahl * Frankenberger, 2002). Nevertheless, researchers are still working to isolate what the classification and experience of "shocking" material entails. The Manchanda study defines shocking material as content that is "unexpected and incongruent with expectations for social norms," but other studies have demonstrated the various facets of shock-and-awe advertising, such as shame by association, anxiety by graveness of material and even resolve by pairing shock with solution (Hill, 1988; Slavin, Batrouney & Murphy, 2007).

The study "Fear appeals and treatment side-effects: An effective combination for HIV prevention?" by Slavin, Batrouney and Murphy examines the transition of HIV prevention through advertising, beginning with the debut of Australia's first major anti-HIV advertisement in 1987. The advertising campaign, referred to as "The Grim Reaper," showed everyday Australians in a bowling alley being clubbed over the head with bowling balls by the Grim Reaper, utilizing Manchanda, Dahl and Frankenberger's "incongruency" with social norms to
elicit shock in viewers. And it worked, as even the team's 2007 showed that the campaign rested in Australians' collective memories (Slavin, Batrouney & Murphy, 2007). This is why, according to the study, more contemporary campaigns have considered returning to such methods.

*It remains unclear whether fear appeals necessarily lead to protective action and, if so, how. Some researchers have argued that fear leads to changed behaviour by commanding attention and benefitting memory. Other research cautions that, while this may be the case up to a certain point, negative outcomes can result if the fear is too severe. (Slavin, Batrouney & Murphy, 2007)*

The study conducted by this group used three posters featuring fear appeals through depictions of the side effects of retroviral drugs — such as lipoatrophy, diarrhea and lipodystrophy — and two posters using death as the scare tactic. These posters were shown to a selection of 27 men recruited through advertisements in gay community press; most were HIV-negative, and some were HIV-positive. Members of these focus groups were asked to recall the most recent anti-HIV campaign they could remember, and then they were shown the newer "shocking" advertisements and asked to describe their immediate reactions. To the first question, most listed "The Grim Reaper," but as for their reactions, two important trends were notice: One, which the authors refer to as "othering," consisted of participants distancing themselves from the people in the advertisements on the grounds of not being the target audience, i.e. neither being immediately threatened nor effected by AIDS/HIV, and another was the anxiety produced by shaming the audience, or those who are afflicted by HIV and the side effects of retroviral treatment (Slavin, Batrouney & Murphy, 2007).
A 1988 study conducted by Ronald Paul Hill, "An exploration of the relationship between AIDS-related anxiety and the evaluation of condom advertisements," more specifically targeted the effects of anxiety inflicted by advertisements onto their viewers. Hill hypothesizes that the atmosphere of AIDS/HIV advertising is wrought with anxiety, both among the advertisers themselves and the misconceptions anxiety tends to produce through misinformation, but "regardless of the cause(s), the onset of state anxiety triggers an evaluation of potential threats and coping alternatives, and a reappraisal based upon the flow of events and reflection" (Hill, 1988). This means that anxiety, if it is precisely potent enough, will inherently trigger in the subject a desire for solutions.

Hill's study, which subjected 74 sexually active university student (men and women) to various high- and low-anxiety packets of anti-AIDS material, then a series of condom advertisements. The results depicted a sweet-spot in anxiety-inducing advertising: Moderate anxiety appeals proved more effective than both low- and high-anxiety material. These degrees of anxiety were described as low-anxiety advertisements focusing on the pleasure side of sex, high-anxiety focusing purely on the morbid outcome of contracting AIDS — death, namely — and moderate-anxiety referring to sex as "risky business" (Hill, 1988). Thus, there is an issue with being too threatening while advertising against AIDS/HIV and for condom-usage.

Both of these studies ride on the assumption that shock and anxiety will consistently outperform other means of advertising, and studies conducted in 2002 attest to this assumption. "Shocking ads! Do they work?" concluded that "the shock appeal outperformed the fear and information appeals on attention, recall and recognition," explaining further that "subjects felt the shock ad violated social norms and this interpretation was identified as the cause of heightened awareness" (Manchanda, Dahl & Frankenberger, 2002). One of the group's tests sought to
demonstrate shock and fear's ability to inspire action in the subjects. The dependent variable in this test was whether or not each subject picked up AIDS-related material after viewing the advertisements. Once again, subjects in the shock and fear conditions displayed more "relevant behavior" to the advertisements after viewing them than the information group.

Method

Participants

Respondents were alerted of the survey through circulation of the survey via Facebook.com. The survey begins with demographic information, asking the respondents to select their gender, age range and sexual activity, in that order — sexual activity was denoted by a yes-or-no question, with no varying degrees of activity or specification of definition of the term. After these three initial questions, respondents were asked whether they agreed with the use of condoms as a means of protection from sexually transmitted diseases.

Of the 28 respondents, precisely 14 were male and 14 were female. Two of the respondents fell into the 17-19 age group, 22 in the 20-22 age group and 4 in the 23-25 group. Approximately 86 percent (24) responded "Yes" when asked if they were sexually active, with the remaining 14 percent (4) answering "No," and when asked whether they believed in the use of condoms to protect from sexually transmitted diseases, the same figure applies: 86 percent responded "Yes," and 14 percent responded "No."
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**Instrument**

This survey was conducted through Qualtrics Survey Software, which allows users to construct and conduct surveys featuring many media formats, such as photographs or figures, and various forms of respondent input.

The survey features eight shocking and different AIDS/HIV campaigns from around the world followed by seven potential emotional reactions or interpretations of the advertisement at hand, including: shocked, offended, angry, surprised, comical, interesting and boring. Each emotion was rated by the respondent on a 0-100 spectrum, with 0 signifying an absence of this emotion in reaction to the advertisement and a 100 signifying a strong presence. After gauging their emotional reactions, respondents were asked, again from 0-100, how much the advertisement motivated them to protect themselves, whether the sexually explicit material in the advertisement had any effect on their motivation (yes-or-no) and whether the respondent thought the advertisement supplied the viewer with a solution.

The campaigns chosen feature a variety of shocking material, including: headless men and women having sex, men and women engaging in sexual activity with insects, skeletons, gun violence, the side effects of retroviral treatments, dead bodies in a morgue, explicit depictions of sexual positions and women having sex with dictators.

After answering these questions upon viewing each campaign, respondents were asked to select the most effective campaign featured in the survey and the least effective, in that order.

**Results**

Beginning with the degree to which respondents felt "shocked" or "offended" after viewing each campaign, the final campaign, which was used in Germany and features nude...
women having sex with historical mass murderers — specifically Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin —, garnered the highest average rating of any of the other campaigns. For "shocked" and "offended," this German advertisement that described AIDS as a "mass-murderer" received average ratings of about 66.5 and 41.5, respectively. Ranking lowest in these two categories were advertisements displaying skeletons having sex, which rated least shocking, and advertisements showing superheroes suffering from retroviral treatment, which rated least offensive.

The highest average rating for "angry" was approximately 21.6, much lower than typical responses to "shocked," was received by an MTV campaign depicting a bullet in the shape of a penis and a gun pointed toward a woman's nude genitalia. The lowest average "angry" score, 1.1, was received by the skeletons campaign, which also received the lowest "surprising" score: 34.9. The most "surprising" was a French campaign that depicted men and women having sex with giant insects, such as spiders or scorpions, comparing unprotected sex to having sex "directly" with the virus. This campaign got an average "surprising" score of 62.1.

The most and least "comical" campaigns were the skeletons and an advertisement featuring dead bodies in a morgue, with ratings of 43.1 and 11.6, respectively. Between "interesting" and "boring," the mass-murderers campaign was rated the least interesting with an average score of 40.1, and the most "boring" campaign was the skeletons, with an average score of 38.1.

The campaign depicting sex with insects gained the highest 0-100 score for the degree to which it motivates the viewer to use protection, with an average of 57.8, and the lowest scorer on this scale was the skeletons campaign, which received an average score of 32.9. When respondents were asked which campaign was the most effective, the insects campaign received
the most votes, and when asked which was the least effective, the mass-murderers campaign received the most.

**Conclusion**

The results of this survey do not support our hypothesis that the effectiveness of an advertising campaign will increase with its shock value, but the results do support Hill in that some advertisements can be too shocking, thus putting off the viewer and diminishing its effectiveness in encouraging the use of protection.

The mass-murderer campaign, for instance, which featured nude women having sex with also-nude former dictators, received the highest ratings for "shocking" and "offensive," but it also received the most votes for "least effective." This would indicate that the shock value of the campaign exceeded the viewer's threshold for taking a campaign seriously — or for seriously considering its advice.

On the other side, however, was the skeletons advertisement, which rated the most "comical" and least "shocking" and was rated the least likely to motivate the viewer to change his or her sexual behavior.

The voted "most effective" and most likely to motivate the viewer to use protection was the French insects advertisement, which also rated most surprising. This would suggest that this advertisement was shocking to the viewers, just not so shocking as to be off-putting.

So shock-and-awe tactics did prove to hold the viewers' interest and even motivate relevant behavior, but a line would be drawn between what is shocking and what is too shocking. This could either be due to how much the viewer can relate to the advertisement or the offensiveness of the subject matter: One cannot sympathize with having a sexual encounter with
a giant insect, but one can imagine the feeling of having sex with an old man, which appears to be far more disturbing to the target audience. Giant insects are not real, but these men are — or were. Also, one advertisement compares AIDS/HIV to an insect while another compares it to two former world leaders guilty of genocide, which could be too far of a stretch to justify the graphic nature of the campaign.

Campaigns which received high "shocking" tended to also receive high "interesting" scores, which would suggest that viewers still find shocking advertisements to be entertaining and engaging, but the exception to this rule was the mass-murderer campaign.

There is such thing as too shocking, and there is such a thing as just shocking enough. Advertisers should be seeking the sweet-spot in between the two in order to maximize the audience's engagement and interest in the advertisement while avoiding the bad side of absurdity.
References


