

End-user evaluation of five national HIV health promotion interventions for Gay men and Bisexual men

1. Introduction & Methods

This report considers two CHAPS mass media interventions and their corresponding small media and knick-knacks. It assesses their acceptability to the target audience, and their reactions to the perceived aims of the materials as well as their format and design. The interventions under consideration here are: *Clever Dick / Smart Arse* and *Biology of Transmission (BoT)*. To investigate these mass media interventions we showed men three executions of each intervention (BoT had a fourth with contact information which we did not use, and *Clever Dick* had a fourth media advert which was not made into a poster and so could not be used). We also showed them the corresponding small media - Issue Three and Issue Four of *Exposed!* - and accompanying knick-knacks.

The data comes from five focus groups undertaken with a total of forty-six men in February 2003. Following a brief overview of the demographic characteristics of the sample in section two, sections three to five present an analysis of respondents' reactions to the two CHAPS interventions.

1.1 METHODS

Five focus groups (averaging nine participants in each) were conducted with forty-six men in four CHAPS partner towns and cities. One London partner (HGLC) recruited men from a range of youth groups in London, ultimately comprising two of our focus groups. As a result, we were able to achieve a good age distribution in the overall sample.

The remaining three partner agencies recruited respondents in scene venues and among agency users and were not required to control for age. Participants were paid £20, and the groups lasted on average one and a half hours. All groups were audio tape recorded and the tapes were subsequently annotated, and analysed in combination with observation notes.

2. Demographic description

2.1 ETHNICITY

Thirty-three participants identified themselves as White British. Of the remaining participants, four were Black Caribbean, four were non-British White, and two were of mixed descent. There is missing ethnicity data for three participants.

2.2 GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

Men were resident in the following areas: Greater London (13), Brighton and Hove (10), Cardiff and local area (13), and Leeds / Bradford (10).

2.3 AGE AND HIGHEST EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION

	Group 1 Leeds (n=10)	Group 2 Brighton (n=10)	Group 3 London (n=5)	Group 4 London (n=8)	Group 5 Cardiff ♦ (n=13)	Overall (n=46)
Mean Age	31	33	16	20	33	28
Median Age	33	34	17	19	32	26
Age Range	21-39	21-47	14-17	18-23	22-50	14-50
No qualification	1	1	3	1	0	13%
O-levels/GCSE *	3	0	1	2	3	20%
A-levels *	5	2	1	4	1	28%
Diploma *	1	2	0	1	3	15%
Degree *	0	5	0	0	4	20%
Missing	0	0	0	0	2	4%

* or equivalent

♦ two participants did not complete questionnaires

Groups three and four were recruited from youth groups (see 1.1). In terms of educational qualifications, one third had O-levels/ GCSEs or less and almost half (45%) had A-levels or a diploma. Only in-in-five (20%) had a degree.

2.4 SEXUALITY AND GENDER OF SEXUAL PARTNERS

Out of the forty-six men, forty identified as Gay, three as Bisexual and one as homosexual. Twenty-two participants said they did not have a regular sexual partner. Of those in current relationships, twelve men had been with their current partner for less than one year, and ten had been in their relationship for more than a year. This data was not available for two participants.

2.5 USE OF SETTINGS

Men were asked whether, in the last month, they had used a variety of Gay community and health service settings. Overall, thirty-nine men (88%) had gone to a Gay pub or club; thirty-five (80%) had read or seen the Gay press; nineteen (43%) had been to see their GP; seventeen (39%) had participated in a Gay social group; thirteen (30%) had been to a GUM or HIV clinic; ten (23%) had been to a sauna; four (9%) had been to a cottage or cruising ground; and four (9%) had used a telephone help-line. When asked if they had ever participated in any kind of paid or voluntary HIV prevention and community work, eleven men (26%) said they had.

2.6 MOST RECENT HIV TEST

The following results are based on the responses of forty-one participants. Thirteen men had never had an HIV test. Of the twenty four men whose last test was negative, fifteen had their results within the past year. Of the four respondents with diagnosed HIV, three had known their status for more than a year. As with the 2001 end user data, none of the youth group participants reported having diagnosed HIV.

3. Clever Dick/Smart Arse

Three posters from this mass media intervention and the accompanying knick-knacks were shown to participants in all groups. This section is an analysis of their reactions. In all groups except one, approximately one third of the participants remembered seeing at least one execution of this intervention. In the youngest of the two London groups, only one participant had seen this intervention.

3.1 MAIN MESSAGE AND IMPACT

It is difficult to discuss the way that participants interpreted and understood this intervention without referring to its design and format. The vast majority of respondents found the cottage setting for the photo-shoot to be 'shocking', 'perverse' and 'filthy'. As a result of this strong response, it was very difficult to elicit any substantial discussion about the written content and purpose of the intervention.

In light of this difficulty, it is perhaps not surprising that many men expressed understandings of this intervention that diverged from those that have been intended. For example, many thought it was about having sex in cottages. In terms of the different informational messages printed in orange writing, respondents did gather that it encouraged condom use; and with guidance from the facilitators they attended to the newer aspects of messages about use of lubricant, not stretching condoms and not necessarily needing to use extra-strength condoms. Most men who were able to grasp the 'messages' could not relate these ideas to the sex that they had themselves - because the cottaging imagery prevented them from making this personal link.

Of the three executions, the one that caused the most confusion and provocation was the one headed: *Greedy hole seeks good strong fuck*. Participants in four of the groups understood this to be encouraging them to actually use extra strength condoms more often. Others expressed confusion about the intention of the message. They understood that it was encouraging them to use other condoms if extra strong were not available or not preferred, yet they were unsure why this information was being given. Some wondered if this 'safer sex' message was a response to increased reports of 'bare-backing'; meaning that not having an extra strong condom was no excuse for not using a condom at all. Others thought that if there was new research demonstrating that extra strength condoms were not necessarily 'safer', they would have appreciated an intervention which pointed to such evidence. One participant said:

"I felt a bit betrayed by it when I first saw it [...] when I think I have been indoctrinated to think that the extra-safe (sic) are the ones that are less likely to break". (Group 5)

Some men understood the basic messages of the three executions in this intervention and appreciated their bluntness. These men understood the simple messages that: 'any condom is better than no condom' (Group 3); 'be careful not to rip them' (Group 1); and 'use lube on the condom and inside the arse' (Group 2). However, all men were much more animated about the ways in which these messages were confounded by the poster imagery than about the actual content of the messages.

3.2 ACCEPTABILITY

As already reported, the majority of participants said that this intervention did not make them think about the kind of sex they had because they disassociated themselves from cottaging. As a result, most could only imagine that the posters were aimed either at younger men (Groups 1, 2 and 5), or those who cottage. Many felt that having an intervention set in a filthy toilet was derogatory to Gay men because it supported stereotypes of them as cottagers. Some added that if these images were to be seen by a heterosexual audience that existing prejudices may be confirmed. The majority also said that because the pictures and headline text made them feel so 'disgusted' and 'embarrassed' that they had little interest in reading further.

"It's making our sex [seem] sleazy, perverse and underground". (Group 2)

"Makes sex look filthy and dirty and that is not what sex means to me!"
(Group 3)

There were only two men across all five groups who responded positively to the intervention as a whole. Any others who expressed affirmative views made it clear that their comments related only to the basic messages, adding that the beneficial aspects of the information about condoms were impeded by the 'disturbing' aspects of being placed in a cottage setting surrounded by explicit and 'farcical' text.

3.3 STYLE AND DESIGN

Nearly all participants responded negatively to the concept of locating health promotion messages within cottage graffiti. In addition, they had a number of specific points to make about the layout of particular executions.

Some commented that the execution with a hand-drier in the background made them feel less confined than those situated in the 'bog' or the 'lock-up'. A few men pointed out that the key message was most clear on *Stretch my tight arse* because it had the least amount of other text cluttering it. On the other hand, many men drew attention to the smear of shit on this poster - something that they found off-putting and unnecessary. They found this kind of representation to be incongruous with health promotion.

This brings up an important point that underlies much of the commentary given by men on this intervention. Although it was articulated in a variety of ways, many men expressed a desire for more transparently evidence-driven interventions on these same topics (condom strength and breakage). They did not dispute the content of the intervention nearly as much as the conceptual presentation of it. As a result, there was an implication being made that they would expect a reputed health promotion organisation to produce interventions that were infused with respectability and professionalism. Perhaps this is why the depictions contained within this intervention affronted so many of the participants. It was simply not the kind of thing that they would expect to see, and certainly not something from which they would take important or serious advice and information.

"I would rather read the helpful bits of advice than the 'Greedy Hole bit!"
(Group 3)

Some participants commented that the graffiti itself looked unrealistic and dated - and very unlike the kind of 'tagging' that younger people could relate to. Many also said that the orange colour and small font used for the condom messages made them the most difficult parts to read. There were relatively few respondents who spontaneously noticed the connections in text between words in the graffiti and those in the health promotion message (stretch, extra, break/ split). When they did notice, men found that this repetition led to confusion rather than clarity because of the very different contexts in which the words were used. Within several groups there were discussions about whether or not this intervention had been designed to shock in an attempt to encourage higher readership. In each of these conversations the majority opinion of the group was that if this had been the aim, it had not worked.

"You wouldn't get as far as reading that, you would really just think it was graffiti in the toilet for men". (Group 5)

3.4 KNICK-KNACKS

Participants expressed mixed views on the efficacy of postcards and cruising cards in general. They appreciated that these particular examples related to the campaign, but the larger question was whether or not you would use this kind of medium at all. In general, it was the smaller numbers of participants who had past experience working and volunteering in health promotion, or those who regarded themselves as extroverts or peer educators who said that they would take these cards away and would pass them on to others. Some men wondered why they would be expected to hand on their name and number to a potential partner on a card that contained cottaging imagery - they thought it would be counterproductive.

The badges evoked more animated responses than the cards, because they were a novel medium. Young men were most likely to say that they would wear them. Those who said they would not use them said that they did not understand how the badges related to the campaign, and they would not want to draw attention to themselves in public by wearing these types of slogans.

3.5 ACHIEVEMENT OF AIMS

The aim of this intervention was to increase acceptability and effectiveness of condoms (and Femidoms). There were additional sub-aims:

- to provide facts about practical/physical issues which affect condom efficacy;
- critique the strategies used by men to improve the way condoms work for them in a range of contexts;
- provide referral for men who experience problems using condoms;
- provide referral for men who do not know how to access condoms.

Those men who understood the messages given in the posters understood that they aimed to help men use condoms in more effective ways, and that this was accomplished with the use of specific and detailed advice. Acceptability of condom use was not a theme that was discussed within the groups, except for those who felt that one poster advocated that any condoms can be used if extra-strength condoms 'were not available'. There was no mention of Femidoms or contextual critique within the final version of this

intervention. While the posters did include THT helpline number across the bottom, almost all men said that they never would have seen that text had it not been pointed out to them.

4. Biology of transmission

Three executions and accompanying knick-knacks from this mass media intervention were shown to men in all groups. This section is an analysis of their reactions. An average of about half of the men recalled having seen this intervention before. Five men in Group Five (Cardiff) revealed that they had participated in pre-testing research on this intervention and recalled it from that experience. For this reason, we have not included input from Group Five in this section of the analysis.

4.1 MAIN MESSAGE AND IMPACT

The majority of men in all of the groups felt that this mass media intervention gave a clear message about the role that arse care and maintenance played in transmission of HIV and other STIs. They also almost unanimously agreed that this was the first time that they had seen a health promotion intervention on this topic, and as a result most found that it was new information for them personally.

“It’s telling us that we need to know more about the arse, most other ads focus on the penis”. (Group 3)

In almost every group there were a number of participants who felt that this intervention re-affirmed the need to use condoms when fucking. Therefore a connection was being made by respondents between the need to prevent transmission both through condom use *and* care of the arse. The different text and imagery used in each execution meant that participants had a very clear idea of the main message in every instance. They knew that the egg poster was about ‘fragility’, the sponge poster was about ‘absorbency’ and the peach poster was about ‘infection’. Others also reflected that this intervention made them reflect on the fact that what you do to your arse could have implications for transmission; something that not all of them had thought about before.

4.2 ACCEPTABILITY

Participants responded very positively to all three executions, especially because of the clear links between the text and the images. They also felt that the ideas were clear and straightforward, and they made sense in relation to their own personal experiences. For this reason, one man pointed out that this intervention was for ‘arse owners’ (Group 1). Some of the indeterminacy in this comment was evident across the groups. While on the one hand, this information was for everyone because everyone has an arse, on the other hand some felt that it was for HIV negative men who are receptive in anal intercourse. Yet several of those who expressed this latter view also felt it was useful information for men who are only insertive. These were interesting conversations which encouraged participants to reflect on the combined roles of anal health and modality during anal intercourse in relation to HIV transmission.

None of the participants expressed concern about these mass media being seen by heterosexual audiences, nor was there anyone who felt that this intervention was

damaging to Gay and Bisexual men. A small number in two of the groups wondered whether language like 'fucking' and 'fisting' in the egg poster could cause offence, but others countered that they liked this type of wording.

Many participants said that this intervention made them think about the type of sex they had. They felt that the information related directly to them, and that the presentation gave clear information so that they could make more informed decisions about the sex that they had. Most agreed that the advice given was feasible and useful, although there were some who said they did not know anyone who went for regular STI checks. Some added that they would have preferred to see stronger messages about the importance of condom use.

4.3 STYLE AND DESIGN

Almost all participants said that the best thing about this intervention was the clear connection between the image and the text. They felt that these two aspects complimented one another in a way that made the message effective and provocative. They also felt that the design concept was not sensationalist, as it delivered a serious message with the correct degree of interest, respect and relevance to all Gay and Bisexual men. Of the three images, the sponge had the most potential to confuse, as some said that it looked like mint ice-cream, or they felt that it was not associated with the human body in any way. There was clear agreement that the eggs and peaches images were more organic and also more dramatic because they demonstrated different forms of damage. Some commented that they felt that there was a certain degree of fear elicited by these two images, but that they felt this was an appropriate tactic to encourage men to think about their own bodies.

4.4 KNICK-KNACKS

Most respondents felt that the small cards accompanying this intervention would have little use. There was no space on them for writing a name and number, therefore they were not regarded as cruise-cards. Most also said that they would want to put their details on a card containing these types of images. A small number of men said they would serve as good reminders of the posters, and that they had educational value.

Respondents showed a great deal of interest in the sponges. They enjoyed the demonstrations of absorbency, and many made immediate links to the sponge poster and its message on this theme. However a large proportion of men wondered how these sponges would be used, as they were inappropriate for a pub or club setting. A large number also pointed out that there were no instructions in the packets, without which it would be unlikely that users would know to add liquid. Others felt that these might have a high degree of value in educational contexts, because they provide such a vivid reinforcement of the absorbency message. They said there was also a potential for these types of additional materials to stimulate discussion in ways that a poster never would.

4.5 ACHIEVEMENT OF AIMS

The aim of this intervention was to make Gay men aware of factors affecting HIV transmission during unprotected anal intercourse. The sub-aims stated that men should know:

- how different anal sexual activities affect likelihood of HIV transmission during exposure;
- how the physical state of the anus and penis affect likelihood of HIV transmission during exposure through anal intercourse;
- how to maintain anal health and how proper anal maintenance can decrease the of HIV being transmitted during exposure

Given the comments made by participants about the main messages in the intervention being about 'absorbency', 'fragility' and 'infection', it is clear that the sub-aims were met for a large number of men. The information-giving remit given as the main aim of this intervention was evident in the media executions. Participants responded very favourably to the informative tone of the intervention, and contrasted it to others which they interpreted as moralistic, or having promoted negative stereotypes. The second sub-aim regarding the physical state of the penis was not evident in the final product.

5. Small media - Issues Three and Four of *Exposed!*

On average, at least three-quarters of men in each group had already seen one of these two issues of *Exposed!*. They thought at first glance that *Exposed!* was simply another Gay men's magazine, perhaps one that sold pornography, because of the wording - DVD- on the cover. Some men felt that the cover of Issue Four was particularly 'sleazy' and 'disgusting', particularly those who were younger, or who identified as Bisexual. Men who expressed this view had concerns about the appropriate placement of this magazine in agency settings, and said it was unlikely that they would take a copy away because of worries about other people seeing the cover.

Participants felt that the covers of the two issues indicated that they were rather different from one another. Older participants commented that the cover of Issue Three had a younger man on it, and the colours looked like they were meant to attract younger readers. Across all groups, men said that the cover of this issue made it clear that the main topic was condoms. However, participants felt the colours and writing style made the cover difficult to read. In contrast, Issue Four made it clear that the main topic was about bottoms, both because of the picture of a man with his bottom exposed, as well as the headline.

Participants were given between five and ten minutes to read through the contents of both issues of *Exposed!* The most common discussion topic after this period centred around the two photo-stories contained in Issue Three. Participants felt that the subject matter was provocative, relevant and realistic. Some were quite upset by the lack of control exercised by the central character during his first sexual experience with another man, however other respondents felt that this was an accurate representation. Men felt this type of message would be useful to young Gay men before their first experience, with particular reference to the positive outcome for the central character in the second photo-story.

We asked respondents why they were so much more interested in discussing Issue Three rather than Issue Four, and several felt this was because the tone in the latter was less

serious and also less believable.

“It doesn’t look serious with the guy in the wig - doesn’t look right”.
(Group 3)

Participants in the youngest of the five groups were most ambivalent in their responses to *Exposed!*, with two commenting that they would rather read the Biology of Transmission adverts than the magazines. In contrast, the slightly older group of young men aged 17-23 had many positive things to say about the format and content of both issues. Generally, respondents in most groups felt that this was a novel and effective way to encourage Gay and Bisexual men to find out many more details about HIV prevention.

“They are trying to keep people’s attention really. Instead of being a quick poster ... to keep looking at it and reading it”. (Group 5)

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