

Pictures of Me: User views on the representation of need in homelessness fundraising appeals

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Abstract

Drawing on data from five focus groups, conducted in cities across England, this paper explores the views of young homeless people regarding the images of homelessness that appear in charity advertising. Participants were invited to comment on images used in eighteen different campaigns aimed at raising money to fund homelessness services. The young people displayed a high level of reflexivity demonstrating that they understood the issues involved with homelessness and the perceptions of people like themselves, which exist in the public sphere and in the consciousness of potential donors. Whilst participants expressed a desire for more nuanced campaigns that tell the dynamic stories of how people become homeless, they also expressed the view that maximising revenues through the use of simple, eye-catching images is a necessary element of fundraising by homelessness charities.

Introduction

The ethical questions raised by using images of beneficiaries in fundraising materials have been a matter of debate for some time. This debate has largely focused on images of suffering children in countries affected by disasters such as famine and floods, and was reignited recently in 2010 after the Haiti earthquake. The chief executive of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), which co-ordinates fundraising for the main UK disaster-relief charities, referred to the use of images of suffering Haitians as 'poverty porn'. Reflecting on this concept, John Humphreys introduced a news segment on Radio 4's flagship news programme, by saying:

"Disaster pornography. It's a powerful and disturbing phrase, coined by Brendan Gormley, the man who runs the Disasters and Emergencies Committee, to describe what so often emerges after a terrible tragedy like Haiti. You know exactly what he means – the pictures of victims that show in shocking detail what's happened to them, stripped of life and often stripped of dignity"

Despite the debate raised regarding the methods and images used to attract donors, the DEC's Haiti fundraising appeal raised over £100m, the second highest sum in the

fundraising organisation's history¹. This tension between discomfort at the use of potentially exploitative images and the resulting fundraising success lies at the heart of this debate, which has thus far excluded the voice of beneficiaries and been the preserve of charity professionals, media commentators and moral philosophers. The purpose of this piece of research is therefore two-fold: to explore this issue in a domestic context and to expand the participants in the debate by inviting the beneficiaries of English homelessness charities to express their opinion on the use of 'pictures of them' within fundraising materials.

Policy and Research context

The generation of voluntary income is clearly the driving impetus behind fundraising campaigns. In 2001, a major UK-based overseas aid charity produced a 'good news' television broadcast, highlighting their successes and encouraging potential donors to give so that the charity could continue its work. The charity considered the campaign a colossal flop, as it resulted in no increased exposure for its work and negligible new donations (Ramrayka, 2001), which appeared to confirm the unfortunate idea that,

'[a] poor starving Black child is so central to the idiom of charity appeals that aid campaigns depart from this convention only at the risk of prejudicing their income' (Burman, 1994).

Indeed, research shows that the public are more likely to donate in response to seeing advertisements that demean sufferers, and less likely to donate if advertisements show charitable beneficiaries in a more positive light, with the same rights and capabilities as everyone else (Eayrs and Ellis, 1990). Referring to images used by disability charities Mencap and the Spastic's Society, Pointon (1999: 223) writes:

The imagery of disability used in their advertising to win donations, represented disabled people as pathetic and dependant individuals. These images were dominant at a time when disabled people were less visible in the media than they are today, and they have improved following trenchant criticisms from disabled people.

These campaigns depicted people with learning difficulties as abnormal, inferior, and slaves to their instincts in the minds of donors (Doddington, Jones, Miller, 1994: 209), and promulgated an image of people with learning difficulties as less capable and less valuable (Eayrs and Ellis, 1990). Pointon continues that as a result of ensuing controversy, both charities altered their public image significantly in the mid-1990s as a response to criticism, with Mencap changing its logo from the emotive image of a tearful little boy, and the Spastic's Society being renamed and rebranded as Scope.

One reason for this focus on the images that make an impact on the donor, and negligible interest on the impact they make on beneficiaries, is that economic theories of philanthropy tend to be exclusively concerned with the philanthropist, leaving the recipient 'absent' from the formulation (Ostrander, 1989: 229). Philanthropy is understood to be a supply-driven

¹ The Haiti appeal is second to the appeal run in late 2004/early 2005 in which the DEC raised £390m for those affected by the Tsunami that hit many parts of Asia on Boxing Day 2004
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10571665>

market, in which 'success' is a result of the reactions and moral sensibilities of donors instigated by the claims and promotions of charities working for those in need. This renders philanthropy as a social relation, based not just on a moral claim, but the communication and effectiveness of that claim (Schervish: 1992). If publicity is the 'lifeblood' of charities (Deacon, 1999: 51), which can help or hinder the capacity of fundraisers to do their job, then one conclusion is that the media must be given what they want – i.e. images of charitable beneficiaries that fit comfortably with widely held stereotypes about 'victims' and which prompt the largest amount of donations. According to Deacon's analysis, the media generally only report the 'deeds' of charities (what they do), rather than airing their opinions (what they think). Therefore, charity advertisers have to stick to the simple issues that are most likely to result in coverage, and avoid too much complication or detail as shall be discussed further on in this paper. Adding extra information into appeals, which might encourage potential donors to deliberate and consider more deeply the issues involved in an issue (such as the reasons that people become homeless, as opposed to the simple fact of their lacking a place to sleep), has been shown to lessen the impact and sympathy generated by appeals (Small and Verrochi, 2009: 785-6). It is therefore argued that steps need to be taken to improve the representation of disadvantaged groups, through changing cultural imagery, and that more research needs to be undertaken to explore how such representations are differentially accepted (Barnett and Hammond, 1999). This study is one attempt to rise to that challenge, by asking homeless people - the service users of homelessness charities and the people meant to be represented in the appeals - what they think of the imagery, language and presentation used in appeals to solicit donations.

A charity's reputation is known to be an important factor in affecting the likelihood of an individual donating (Kelman, 1961; Bendapudi et al, 1996; Hibbert et al, 2007; Cheung and Chan, 2000), but advertisements do not have space or scope to build up a full picture of all the services they provide to beneficiaries, nor to depict fully the situations which have prompted users to make use of those services. Therefore, the prior knowledge and attitudes held by potential donors, regarding both the 'typical' charitable beneficiary and the 'typical' charitable organisation, become an important element in the giving decision. The constraints involved in creating simplified images and messages mean it is unsurprising that a large amount of charity literature focuses on the broad outlines of an issue and its most recognisable 'face', rather than offering detailed explanation of beneficiaries' circumstances or every facet of the charities' activities (Hibbert et al, 2004). For as Bendapudi et al (1996) note, the perceptions of the cause are just as important to donors as the efficacy of the charitable organisation. This would appear to be one origin for the reductive nature of charitable advertising, where the 'short sharp shock' has a greater impact on donors than the carefully constructed message (Small and Verrochi, 2009). However, some evidence suggest that this may only be true for new donors, rather than existing donors, as response to an appeal has been found to have greater salience for newly recruited donors (Diamond, Gooding-Williams, 2002).

The importance of the issue of the 'deserving' in charity advertisements and donor reactions is vital, and discussed at length by Rosenthal (2000). If donors perceive the recipient of their donation as 'deserving' of their charity, then they are much more inclined to give. However, if they feel they are 'undeserving', often because the recipient's current circumstance is perceived by the donor to be 'their own fault', this has major impacts on likelihood to donate. How donors make this determination can be complex. Burman (1994) emphasises how

companies use children in product advertisements when they want to present products which are part of a wholesome, natural, and positive life. Therefore many charity advertisements feature children in order to prompt the biggest response in viewers, because '[a]s the symbol of common humanity, a child may be the bearer of suffering with no responsibility for its causes' (Holland, 1992: 157). Therefore children are always 'deserving' and register as 'the quintessential recipient of aid' (Burman, 1994: 30). This has also been recognised in advertisements for British children's charities where children were shown to be passive agents in their development (O'Dell, 2007), and international aid campaigns where 'appeals to pity tend to focus almost exclusively on children or on children and their mothers' (Payton, 1989: 256), implying perhaps that men and father can fend for themselves. Theoretically, this focus has developed because giving is emotional, rather than rational or logical (Panas, 1984), so consequently, if children provide the most emotional pull, charity campaigns featuring them will be most successful. This was a constant source of debate in our focus groups and we will come back to it later.

All the studies from Eayrs and Ellis (1990) and Doddington, Jones, Miller (1994) and others (for example, Miller, Jones, Ellis, 1993; Small and Verrochi, 2009; O'Dell, 2008; Hibbert et al, 2007; Richards, 2004; Hung and Wyer Jr., 2009; Barnett and Hammond, 1999; Diamond and Gooding-Williams, 2002; Schlegelmilch et al, 1997) explore the donor-beneficiary relationship from the donors perspective.² The authors are unable to locate any research in which the beneficiary has been asked to comment on the charity appeals from which they were intended to benefit. For Ostrander and Schervish's desired fluid relationship to function, there must be some input from the recipient into how they are portrayed and their need is represented in charity appeals, a conclusion put forward, but not acted upon, by Doddington, Jones, Miller (1994: 220). That assertion will be acted upon in this article, which focuses on the beneficiaries' perspective of images used in fundraising materials.

The use of images in homelessness appeals

Haltunnen assesses the growth of 'sentimental' art in the eighteenth century as a ploy 'aimed at arousing readers' spectatorial sympathy, and thus enhancing (and demonstrating) their virtue' (Haltunnen, 1995: 307). She stresses however that this sympathy, whilst claiming to be based on closeness and an understanding of suffering, actually emerged because of 'social distance', the disconnect between spectator and sufferer, where modern technology could fulfil the popular desire to be shocked whilst remaining safe from the realities of suffering (Haltunnen, 1995: 309-12). One charity worker, quoted in Rosenthal (2000: 121) said, '[o]ur own marketing helps create the stereotypes that keep "the homeless" separate,' providing the simple 'deserving' and 'undeserving' stereotypes which dominate media discussions of need (Platt, 1999: 113). Simplification of the issues of homelessness by charities and the media is probably best categorised by the issue of 'rooflessness'.

The archetypal image of a homeless person is that of someone alone, on the street, sleeping amongst cardboard boxes. However, the real issues involved in homelessness are clearly far more wide ranging, and involve a more complicated set of problems that are harder to

² The one exception to this rule is the study from Miller et al (1993) which explores group responses to charity appeals featuring children with Down syndrome. One of the five groups researched consists of parents of children with Down syndrome, who are asked their response to the poster, and provide insightful comment.

define (Liddiard and Hutson, 1998). The term 'homeless' is used to include those people who are sleeping in temporary accommodation, those in shelters, and those sleeping on the floors of friends. But charitable advertising and the media are unlikely to represent these more nuanced and heterogeneous details (Kemp, 1997). Liddiard and Hutson (1998: 61) report one advice centre worker, who said,

'It's when they become roofless... that they become an image that can be understood by most people, because the image of a young person living in a squalid bedsit would be difficult to film ...but with these young people (the street homeless), you just send the cameras down'.

To the general public, the 'roofless' person is the most accessible representation of need, therefore it is not surprising that this image is the one most utilised in charitable literature and campaigns, because it is the image that is most central in the minds of potential donors. To rephrase Burman, the dishevelled man in a duffel coat on the street is so central to the idiom of charity appeals that homelessness campaigns depart from this convention only at the risk of prejudicing their income.

Methodology

The research was conducted between August 2010 and September 2011. Five focus groups were held with groups of young homeless people, almost all of whom were resident in hostels run by homelessness charities. The focus groups took place in hostels in Sheffield, Tonbridge and Canterbury and two groups took place in a London hostel. Participants were recruited through posters displayed within the hostel, advertising the time and date of the research, and through conversations with their key workers. In line with good ethical research practice, it was emphasised at all stages that participation was entirely voluntary and no one was compelled to participate or to say anything unless they choose to do so. Those who chose to take part were given a £10 voucher for a local shop, as a token of thanks for giving up their time. The focus groups were recorded, transcribed and analysed by two researchers to promote inter-coding reliability, which was enhanced by the contribution of a third researcher at the analysis stage. In the discussion of findings below, all names of participants have been changed to protect their identities.

Findings

This section discusses two key findings that emerge from the research: the belief that charity advertising must maximise income rather than accuracy, and the importance of 'telling stories' where possible, in order to explain how people become homeless.

Finding 1: Pragmatism over-rides principles

Participants differed in opinion on whether the archetypal image to maximise fundraising for homelessness was a 'little kid' (Simeon, John) or 'old men in duffel coats' (Graham, David), but generally agreed that raising money had to be foremost in charities' minds above ethical considerations. As Amjal put it,

If the money's not there, if the organisation's not there to give you a hand, or give you directions or support you, then you can't afford to be moralistic.

Overwhelmingly, participants felt that the homelessness advertising they were shown was too simple – either overly sympathetic images of vulnerable homeless people, many of which looked 'fake' or 'staged', or images which were too generic, and failed to contribute any understanding to the issues surrounding homelessness to potential donors. They felt strongly that the advertising would be improved by telling the 'stories' of homeless people and the varied paths that brought them to the point of needing assistance from a homelessness charity. Focus group participants wanted to make clear that becoming homeless is unpredictable and should be represented thus – it 'can happen to anybody' and it 'can look like anything'. However, they realised that they were in a weak bargaining position in terms of demanding more accurate advertising. Ultimately, the focus group participants viewed maximising donations as the main goal of the adverts, above education, accuracy, respect, or nuance. For example, a young man in a London hostel said:

Yeah, well when you're in the situation and you ain't got no money of your own your ain't got time to be judgemental, so if the organisations haven't got their money in the first place to help you then the whole system breaks down, really and truly, Just get the money, hook or crook, y'know? (Amjal)

Throughout the focus group, Amjal took a realist position, stating 'you can't have morals when you're homeless', recognising it would be difficult for him to disagree too strongly with the methods by which the charity's money was raised, when he had benefitted so much from its activities, and was now living in a charitably-funded hostel. As a beneficiary he has had to shift his ethical boundaries, making them subservient to the practices of charities and to the whims of donors, which is a sacrifice he appeared willing to make, considering he had been provided with shelter, food and assistance. It was this pragmatism, when asked about the balance between accuracy and effectiveness, which characterised participants' response to the current strategies of charities.

The focus group participants were asked how they would go about designing an advertisement for a homeless charity, and their response to this question reinforced the sense that pragmatism predominantly over-rode other considerations. One teenage service user named Simeon felt that the images used should try to invoke maximum sympathy and therefore maximum donations:

The images need to make as much money as possible, so I was thinking of a little kid giving money to someone older, would make people think 'well if that little kids doing it, why can't I?'

The primacy of the need to maximise money also led to situations which would no doubt trouble further the conscience of those who fear that much imagery used for fundraising purposes is harmful to beneficiaries. One of the focus group participants, a young mother named Tamara, said a photograph of her and her daughter had been used in publicity for a homelessness charity without her knowledge, of either the photograph being taken or its eventual inclusion in public advertising. Many organisations, including those working with

vulnerable people, have strict guidance on seeking permission from those included in publicly released photographs. This therefore can be seen as an example of 'by hook or crook', using images which may have not met ethical technicalities, in order to advertise and raise money. But Tamara was realistic about the issue, and saw it as part of the territory for receiving help from the charity.

It doesn't matter to me... I think if I'm coming here and I'm using the [homelessness charity], then they do great things for me, so I don't see it as a problem.

It is possible those working in the fundraising profession are committed to a culture of ethics and consent forms, often because of quite stringent and increasingly professionalised rules and practices. Participants in the focus groups generally claimed that they did not care about these issues, and were pleased to help the charities to which they felt they owed something. However, it is not possible to predict whether any current nonchalance about the unapproved use of their image in fundraising literature is a view that would continue to be held in the longer term, for example when a formerly-homeless individual was trying to enter the job market or when their children grew old enough to ask questions about the use of their image.

Finding 2: The importance of telling stories

Alongside this pragmatic approach and belief in maximising donations, focus group participants also held strong views regarding what would improve fundraising campaigns, both to raise more money and to more accurately represent the issues of homelessness. If advertising for homeless charities were to be changed and improved, participants were adamant that they should try and tell the stories behind homelessness. This would manifest itself in images with text which explain how the one specific featured person had become homeless, or images demonstrating the transition from a normal 'man on the street', to becoming homeless. This was important to the homeless charity users, because they believe that 'homelessness can happen to anyone, any time', a fact that they felt the wider general public did not grasp. They also felt that the use of storytelling techniques would succeed in presenting accounts of how individuals become homeless, rather than reinforcing the view of 'the homeless' as a homogenous group.

A young female service user named Abigail spoke for many participants when she said:

Adverts are better when you see someone's story and you see where they've come from and you can relate to them with a picture.

This language of stories was very much tied up with the importance of relating to the person in the image, and to resist making judgements about how they became homeless. It was acknowledged that no matter which kind of face was used to represent homelessness, no one face can be expected to relate to every potential donor, or be able to demonstrate a side of homelessness which every donor can understand. Using any specific image was therefore viewed as a strategy that risks alienating some portion of the donor base. Therefore beneficiaries felt that advertisements had to involve much more than just an image of a face designed to attract attention and sympathy, as one participant explained:

If it raises money then I don't think it matters, because at the end of the day the need is there, but sometimes you look at one specific face, and people have to be able to relate to that face, if they can't relate to it then they might not give money to it. If it gets the money, then so be it. But it's like I say, if some people can't relate to that person, or pigeonhole them as that sort of person, they might not give money to it, y'know. (Amjal)

One participant recognised that 'these kind of images have been going on for decades and they're still up all around', reflecting a belief that little has changed in the field of advertising for homeless charities, perhaps due to risk aversion and wariness of innovation that might affect short-term income streams. There is also the possibility that the public would be turned off by a campaign based on the idea that they could one day become in need of homelessness services, and would not respond to a campaign based on a vision of their possible futures to which they could not relate at present. One young man stressed this point:

Homeless can happen to anyone at any time, so I think that by focusing on how it happens will make everyone think, 'Oh god, it could happen to me', instead of, 'It's alright, I haven't got a beard and I don't drink that much'. You need to get it across that it can happen to everybody. There's a lot of people that do walk past homeless like you said, and they think, 'Get a job, get a life, what are you doing?' a lot of people do think that, just because it's the stereotyped thing isn't it?

It was clear in the dominance of the 'homelessness can happen to anyone' message, that most of the service users we spoke to had not expected to be where they were. Some were quite strident in their insistence that becoming homeless can happen quickly and without warning, and felt that that if a campaign could be created which highlighted this issue, and continued to raise significant funds, charities would have a moral duty to follow this strategy. They felt that telling stories about homeless people would counteract the simplification regarding the problems and causes of homelessness, caused by a narrow focus in advertising and a lack of public education.

You can't judge somebody by the way they seem. Unless you talk to them and you get to know who they are. Their faults and their experiences, that's what I reckon.

This is a continuation of the 'rooflessness' issue as focused on by Liddiard and Hutson (1998). Whilst many of our participants had suffered from rooflessness and had slept on the streets, most were living in hostels run by the homeless charity in which we conducted our research. They had lived the many different facets of homelessness, but did not see it represented in most of the adverts they were shown.

Conclusion

In our study we found the service users of homelessness charities to be reflexive and pragmatic about their position in the public consciousness, which led them to accept

positions on issues which in their own terms did not achieve high moral standards. Most had trouble with overly sympathetic images, referred to by one young man as 'another little heartstring pull', but were willing to accept these images as the 'best' ones to use if they were proven to be the most effective at raising money. However, they doubted whether the most graphic images would maximise fundraising. Most participants said that their favourite image of the eighteen under discussion, was a photograph which simply featured a piece of cardboard lying on top of snow, with the text: 'Loving the Snow – Try Sleeping in it'. This fundraising advert has a hard-hitting message, did not include an image of a homeless person. This meant that no-one was playing 'the victim card', which Rosenthal (2000) proffers as the preferred way for homelessness charities to communicate with the public. This image was also appreciated by a young women who felt that no one was 'trying to dignify why they are there or why they shouldn't be there'. Our focus group participants, as a result of their experiences either on the streets or in shelters, were very wary of misrepresentation. They did not feel that one individual could accurately represent all the issues of homelessness, nor could one individual appeal to all potential donors. In sum, they would prefer that charities did not use 'pictures of me'. However homelessness campaigns continue to use single individuals in them, so we must assume this proves a successful approach. But our respondent's comments highlight the divergence of choice for those creating fundraising literature, and the continuing choice that may have to be made between accuracy and effectiveness.

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