Designing the Other: Australian HIV/AIDS Campaigns and Asian Gay Men

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Abstract: HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention campaigns are intended to influence behavioural change, and graphic design plays a significant role in this process. Homosexual or gay males and men who have sex with men (MSM) in Australia constitute the most vulnerable group for HIV/AIDS infection, and the majority of campaign graphics focus on the Caucasian male as the norm. Longitudinal analysis of Australian HIV/AIDS graphic designs over the period 1984-2008 identify a small number of campaigns which specifically address Asian homosexual men and MSM.

This paper concerns the graphic representation of the Asian homosexual male and MSM in HIV/AIDS campaign graphics as part of a larger project on the production and consumption of epidemic knowledge in Australia. Drawing upon object analysis, textual/document analysis and visual interpretation, this research examines campaign strategies and changes in the iconography and textual messages from four case studies between 1989-1999. The research also draws upon qualitative data collected from focus group discussions with Asian gay men and MSM, exploring the attitudes and practices of the communities which produce the representations, as well as the underlying patterns of beliefs and meanings in response to the graphics.

Preliminary findings indicate that Asian gay men and MSM consider community and family acceptance, self esteem, socio-cultural and sexual identity, discrimination, and homophobia as pertinent issues in the discourse on HIV/AIDS, and raise implications for designing campaign graphics and messages which will resonate with the relevant communities.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS campaigns, graphic design, Asian gay men, identity, iconography, design history
1. Introduction

HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention campaigns in Australia are characterised by loose cooperative alliances between state and federal governments, non-government organisations (NGO) and community-based organisations (CBO). Although not without friction or controversy, generally speaking Australian HIV/AIDS intervention measures have been recognised in the Asian-Pacific region as innovative and effective in efforts to contain the epidemic. On the whole, most Australian HIV/AIDS campaign messages tend to address the risk of infection in a manner which informs rather than invokes fear, shock or taboo. HIV infections in Australia occur mainly through sexual transmission, particularly among homosexual men and men who have sex with men (MSM), and injecting drug users. This locates government funded HIV/AIDS intervention programmes in a morally charged arena open to public criticism and scrutiny on promiscuity, sexuality, and substance abuse.

Print designs, mainly brochures and posters, constitute the majority of the material culture produced for HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention campaigns during the first decade of the epidemic in Australia. Since HIV/AIDS intervention concerns behavioural change, the campaign graphics relied on images and/or text to convey primarily a message with supplementary information. Graphics designed and produced by non-government organisations (NGO) or community-based organisations (CBO) for specific populations, e.g. gay men, are more likely to use images and language appropriate for the target group, and contrast sharply with generic images and messages used in national campaign materials for mainstream society produced by the health authorities [1]. Over the first twenty-five years of epidemic in Australia, the designs for HIV/AIDS campaigns reflect changes in graphic responses to socio-cultural issues and approaches to awareness and prevention programmes. The application of culturally specific images and language in the content of campaign materials forms the core aspect of graphic design in HIV/AIDS intervention for this research.

2. HIV/AIDS Intervention and Multiculturalism

Australia is a multicultural nation. New South Wales constitutes the most populous state with approximately one hundred and thirty different non-Anglo-Celtic language groups, communities and cultures [2]. At least half of the so-called ‘new’ Australians contributed to the fifty per cent increase in the Australian population between 1945 and the late 1980s [3]. According to the 1996 census, seventeen per cent of the population of New South Wales spoke a language other than English at home. It is estimated that between twenty and thirty per cent of those who live in New South Wales are from socio-cultural backgrounds which are other than Anglo-Celtic [2].

Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds are less aware of the immediate implications of HIV, and the longer-term consequences of AIDS and, in their attitudes, knowledge and sexual practices, they are ill-informed about or are likely to have partial and unreliable access to information about these issues [4]. In many respects this is not surprising, since those from non-English speaking backgrounds have only been occasionally and irregularly prioritised by government strategies or community-based public health campaigns. Since 1989, HIV/AIDS campaigns designed to address Asian Australian needs include one national campaign for people from non-English speaking backgrounds, and four community-based campaigns.

Print designs such as posters contribute to the overall design, plan and strategy of HIV/AIDS interventions, hence the graphics – images and text – concern meaning-making in the production and
consumption of epidemic knowledge [5]. In other words, the posters have become the visual representation of
the epidemic in our understanding and response to prevention historically, politically and socio-culturally.

3. Four Australian Case Studies

In this study, examples of graphics from four HIV/AIDS campaigns designed for people from non-
English speaking backgrounds (NESB) – particularly from Asia – are examined for the strategies to inform and
educate. The application of images and text for each graphic is analysed in the context of the campaign brief
and the cultural group(s) identified as the relevant community. The campaigns are: AIDS Prevention is
Everyone’s Responsibility (1989), Love Him Safely...Every Time (1991), Living with HIV/AIDS (1998), and Love
(1999).

3.1 AIDS Prevention Is Everyone’s Responsibility, 1989

The AIDS Prevention Is Everybody’s Responsibility campaign was launched in early August 1989,
and is the only campaign the Commonwealth government has produced addressing ethnic communities. The
campaign provided HIV/AIDS information in English and in fifteen community languages, in pamphlets, posters,
announcement of public interest on national and commercial television networks, radio and the ethnic press. The
English language version of the pamphlet cautioned AIDS prevention for “your family, your community,
yourself”, and the generic message was translated into the community languages, albeit in each instance the
information panel which listed the AIDS hotlines and interpreter services were printed in English.

Figure 1. AIDS Prevention is Everyone’s Responsibility © Commonwealth of Australia,
Department of Community Services and Health, Canberra, 1989.

In the English narrative, the campaign tagline and accompanying text are replicated as an advertising
‘hook’, rather than a public health statement which acknowledged and addressed the concerns of non-Anglo-
Australians about the epidemic in their respective vernaculars. This reiteration is emphasised and exaggerated in
the campaign poster (Figure 1). The poster design features a typographical arrangement of the campaign tagline
in sixteen languages, above a photographic image of a group of a dozen naked figures facing the viewer. The figures are androgynous mannequins whose only indication of sexual difference is the variation in the moulding of the torsos. The inverted triangular arrangement of the monochromatic figures is dramatically lit from the side, partially obscuring the figures and thus emphasising the alienating effect of the representation. The photographic image in the accompanying pamphlets, likewise produced in sixteen languages, shows an arrangement of three mannequins looking directly at the viewer, but in this version the cropping of the image just below the breast heightens the ambiguous sexual identity of the figures [6].

The AIDS Prevention Is Everyone’s Responsibility campaign was designed to avoid offending non-Anglo-Australian cultural sensitivities perceived to be conservative and responsive to issues such as condoms and safer sex practices. An independent evaluation of the campaign, commissioned by the Commonwealth government, concluded that the campaign failed to address let alone reach the intended audiences it addressed. The authors of the report concluded: “...the campaign did little to affect any beliefs, attitudes, or behaviours of the target populations”, and “It would seem that much of the information designed to raise knowledge of AIDS did not reach its mark” [7, 8]. What is significant in evaluations of this kind is the bias towards an evidential reliance upon demographic variables, statistical correlations, and focus group discussions in adjudicating the strengths and weaknesses of various HIV/AIDS strategies. The criteria for assessment is, by and large, determined by those who commission the evaluations, yet by this stage the Commonwealth government’s NESB campaign had run its course and the money already spent. Even so, it is not certain that evaluations of previous campaigns are routinely taken into account in devising subsequent strategies. Moreover, in critical evaluations of this sort, there is a notable absence of attention to the interplay of images and texts. This is particularly surprising since, in the first instance, it is the juxtaposition of representations and health messages which are the mainstay of educational and preventative campaigns [9, 10].

3.2 Love Him Safely…Every Time, 1991-92

The AIDS Council of New South Wales (ACON) received a two-year funding in 1989 for a project which targeted Southeast Asian men, one of the largest and most marginalised minorities within the Sydney gay communities. The project, Ethnic Men Who Have Sex With Other Men (EMSOM) aimed to educate gay and bisexual Asian men about safe sex and safe needle use through the provision of information, networking and peer support groups [11, 12]. The 1991-1992 poster series, Love Him Safely...Every Time, was launched with an accompanying pamphlet which contained information on HIV testing, explicit safe sex information and safe needle use, published in English and five languages: Chinese, Filipino, Indonesian, Thai and Vietnamese.

The central focus of the two poster designs is the photograph of two semi-naked men, one Asian and the other Caucasian, looking at each other and away from the viewer (Figure 2). Images of naked males are not uncommon on HIV/AIDS campaign posters aimed at homosexual men and/or men who have sex with men (MSM). However the composition of the two naked males and the body language of both models in the photograph raises issues about stereotypical representations of Asian/Caucasian relationships in campaign graphics designed for Asian Australian gay men.

The Love Him Safely...Every Time poster exemplifies the problem of stereotyping Asian gay men and MSM in Australia based on limited cultural notions such as the dichotomy of Asian/Caucasian, feminine/masculine, passive/active, submissive/dominant, etc. Focus group discussions conducted by the AIDS
Council of New South Wales and the Victorian AIDS Council confirmed issues including racial discrimination, self-esteem and homophobia (external as well as within the individual’s family/community) as crucial factors which influence how Asian males view their sexuality and their responses to graphics in HIV/AIDS intervention [13, 14].

3.3 Living With HIV/AIDS, 1998

The Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO) represents the peak body for non-government and community-based organisations involved with HIV/AIDS intervention, and the provision of advocacy, care and support for the various constituents vulnerable to HIV infection. AFAO and the various AIDS councils represented by the states and territories in Australia collaborate in lobbying for Commonwealth government policy and national strategies in HIV prevention, as well as Commonwealth and state government funding for research and HIV intervention programmes at a national level.

In 1998 AFAO launched a series of three posters for the Living With HIV/AIDS campaign, aimed at raising awareness of HIV-positive gay men amongst the Asian gay communities, and the wider gay community. The campaign also served as a starting point for a larger project, in collaboration with the Victorian AIDS Council / Gay Men’s Health Centre, which aimed to develop interventions around cross-cultural sensitivity for use by state AIDS councils and community-based organisations.

The three posters address pertinent issues encountered by Asian HIV-positive gay men: discrimination (“You are not the only one...”), stigmatisation (“I heard he’s HIV positive. Yeah? So what? I am too...”), and homophobia (“I am still your son, no matter what...”). The central image of the poster, You are not the only one..., shows two muscular (and presumably) gay Asian-Australians wearing jeans but shirtless, one with his arm draped over his companion’s shoulder, both looking directly at the viewer (Figure 3). The text panel on the right of the poster reproduces the campaign tagline in nine Asian languages. This poster is directed at gay Asian-Australians who, presumably, would be familiar with inner-city Sydney gay clubs, bars and saunas, and/or non-Asian gay men to challenge stereotyped notions of the presumed passive Asian. Yet for many Asian-Australians who are not part of the mainstream gay culture or who, if they have sex with men on a regular or occasional
basis, do not self-identify as gay, this and similar campaign strategies, even if accessible to them, would be mostly irrelevant.

![Figure 3. You are not the only one... © Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO), Sydney, 1998.]

3.4 Love, 1999

The Multicultural HIV/AIDS Service (MHAS), Sydney, was established in recognition that people from non-English speaking backgrounds were being infected by HIV, and progressing to AIDS, at a rate at least equal to the general community. The raison d’être of the MHAS is that if communities from non-English speaking backgrounds are to have the opportunity to address and deal with the epidemic, they are in need of culturally appropriate information and specialised services. The working philosophy of the MHAS is that if people from non-English speaking backgrounds are to have equitable access to HIV/AIDS services, support and treatment, in addition to language skills, it is vital that interventions are informed by an understanding of the diversities and integrities non-Anglo-Australian cultures.

The Multicultural HIV/AIDS Service (MHAS) launched a campaign which targeted men from Chinese and Thai backgrounds in September 1999. Bilingual safer sex packs were distributed to saunas and other venues. The campaign aimed to raise awareness of safer sex practices amongst men who have sex with men [15]. The design of the condom packs feature a cropped photographic image of two men (Figure 4). The ‘Asian’ man in the background is slightly tilted and partly obscured by the figure in the foreground. Photographed at the moment of embrace, the ‘Asian’ features of the man in the background are just discernible. The Chinese character for ‘love’ appears at the top of the right hand corner of the design. The inside panels depict cartoon drawings of two males preparing for safer sex, and having anal sex, with instructions as to go about it in Chinese and English. Clarity and conciseness of the message, and a culturally identifiable but simultaneously confidential and anonymous image, are the hallmarks of the campaign material. The design of the condom pack takes into consideration Asian sensitivities in the use of imagery and text, which are explicit without being confronting.
As a result of strategies such as these, the MHAS acknowledges and seeks to resolve socio-cultural sensitive issues and taboos by employing imagery and language which are culturally appropriate and ethnospecific. As an independently commissioned Commonwealth government report put it: “This particular [MHAS] model is both centralised enough to provide a sufficient range of languages and functions and well enough connected to communities to ensure trust and credibility. It may be the ideal structure for organising HIV/AIDS education and access in a multicultural society, providing a structure loose enough to accommodate diversity and to encourage community development, and tight enough to ensure this is sustained” [4].

4. Implications

Criticisms on sanitised campaigns for HIV/AIDS intervention implemented by government and non-government agencies emphasise the need to address and respond to actual, concrete needs of particular constituents rather than create general announcements for an assumed public good. In principle HIV/AIDS intervention concerns (1) educating and informing the individual about behaviours which place him or her at risk of being infected with the virus, and (2) educating and motivating infected individuals to avoid transmitting HIV to non-infected individuals. To facilitate these principles HIV/AIDS campaigns should (1) provide clear, unambiguous information to help people make choices; (2) focus on specific groups or populations rather than the ‘general public’; (3) make the information widely accessible; (4) provide messages which support the emotional and sexual needs of target populations; and (5) address ignorance and prejudice which impede prevention and care [16].

4.1 Language and Meaning

There is a tacit assumption on the part of the architects of official public health strategies directed towards non-Anglo-Australians that an English narrative about HIV/AIDS and safe-sex practice will unproblematically translate into a diversity of community languages, and will be both accessible and comprehensible for those whose background and/or mother-tongue is other than English. This translation model, however, is fundamentally flawed. The translation model presumes that language and associated meanings are plastic and, therefore, culturally transferable from one vocabulary to another. The translation of information into
health messages about safer sex practices is mediated by a multiple of personal, cultural and social descriptors and indexes, each of which require unravelling and, subsequently, specific initiatives. In many respects language is not plastic; language is mostly intransigent. Thus, “Many concepts and behaviours do not translate easily into Asian languages. For example, the Chinese characters used to refer to AIDS literally translate as ‘love, disease, death’. Mixed and conflicting messages are given by these characters” [17]. Moreover, information in and of itself is insufficient. It is difficult enough for monocultural campaigns which target supposedly heterogeneous populations – adolescents, injecting drug users, sex workers – to get even straightforward health messages across in an unambiguous manner. When, in addition, multiple culturally specific layers need to be addressed – ethnicity, race and religion – the interplay of contexts and meanings become significantly more complicated [18-21].

4.2 Community/Communal Ownership

The Commonwealth government’s AIDS Prevention Is Everyone’s Responsibility campaign presumed that people from non-English speaking backgrounds are but a multiple of homogeneous populations. Translated as it was from English into fifteen community languages, the campaign was fundamentally flawed so far as it failed to consider the non-homogeneous facets of the populations it was (notionally) intended to address and engage. It failed to come to terms with the effective barriers and resistances to HIV/AIDS public health strategies, and glossed over issues such as cultural attitudes to the epidemic, the medico-political marginalisation of ethnic services, and recognition of the importance of ‘gate-keepers’ in the respective communities. That the contact details for available telephone counselling and interpreting services were, in each instance, printed only in English was a major blunder for a campaign which sought to reach out to non-Anglo Australians who are less than sure of their command of the dominant language.

The Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO), AIDS Council of New South Wales (ACON) and Multicultural HIV/AIDS Service (MHAS) recognise the need to implement design strategies founded on information derived from consultations and liaisons with various ethnic communities. The information sought to assist in addressing community attitudes to HIV/AIDS, which provide knowledge and information on the cultural needs of the respective ethnic communities. Different communities respond to the epidemic in different ways. Community resources need to be devised in response to the information gathered from the communities. One MHAS innovation is the employment of trained bi-cultural/bilingual co-workers – not translators – from the same ethnic communities who are knowledgeable of cultural nuances, and who are aware of the difficulties associated with taboo issues such as condoms, homosexuality, and injecting drug use. In a similar, albeit somewhat less systematic, fashion, AFAO and ACON liaise with focus groups from each ethnic community or group, so as to ascertain and reflect their socio-cultural values in the construction of HIV/AIDS campaigns. The focus groups evaluate the HIV/AIDS campaign messages as appropriate or otherwise to the language and values of the community/group. In this fashion they endorse the community/communal ownership of both the cultural and health issues. Moreover, so far as the campaigns have been authorised by ethnic communities/groups, the messages are phrased in vernaculars, represented in images, and written in texts which are culturally specific for the respective communities [22].
5. Conclusion

Generic health messages which are translated from the dominant vocabulary more often than not fail to resonate with audiences from different cultural backgrounds. Similarly, the use of imagery requires considerable understanding and sensitivity towards the cultural experience and expectations of the community [23, 24]. Public health messages are essentially intangible unless the purpose and function are made clear. To have any likelihood of success, they should address the apprehensions of the identified communities. In comparison to the Commonwealth government’s AIDS Prevention Is Everyone’s Responsibility campaign, the contrasting features of the campaigns by the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations, AIDS Council of New South Wales, and Multicultural HIV/AIDS Service recognise and involve the respective communities in devising and implementing the campaigns. Public health campaigns need to be appropriately designed and phrased as regards content, images and texts. The initial phase of this research identifies the significance of language, image and meaning, and collective ownership/partnership in the design of HIV/AIDS intervention resources. It has also highlighted further need to address pertinent and inter-related issues of community and family acceptance, self esteem, socio-cultural and sexual identity, discrimination, and homophobia in the understanding and designing of HIV/AIDS intervention measures for Asian Australian gay men and men who have sex with men.

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References


