

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

1. Introduction & methods

This report considers three CHAPS mass media interventions and their corresponding small media. It assesses their acceptability to the target audience and their reactions to them. The adverts are: *Facts for life* (9 executions); *In two minds* (8 executions); and *Just as unbelievable* (3 executions). The corresponding small media are *All the f***ing facts* (a postcard shaped-booklet); and the second *Exposed* (a magazine-style compilation). The data comes from five focus groups undertaken with a total of thirty-seven men in December 2001.

Following a brief overview of the demographic characteristics of the sample in section two, sections three to six present an analysis of respondents' reactions to the three CHAPS mass media interventions and their corresponding small media.

1.1 METHODS

Five focus groups (averaging seven participants in each) were conducted with thirty-seven men in four CHAPS partner cities. Our recruitment strategy aimed at convening groups of different age bands. A professional recruiter was used for groups 1 and 2 in London. Group 1 consisted of men aged forty or above. Group 2 ranged between twenty and forty years of age. The remaining three groups were recruited by CHAPS partner agencies in scene venues in Brighton, Birmingham and Leicester. The Leicester group (group 5) was predominantly made up of regular participants in a youth group and therefore had the youngest average age. Recruitment into groups 3 and 4 was not controlled for age. Focus group participants were paid £20 (or £30 in the professionally recruited groups). Groups lasted an average of one and a half hours and were audio tape recorded. Tapes were subsequently annotated and a thematic content analysis carried out.

Men were shown a range of different adverts and corresponding small media. The three mass media interventions were split between groups. Two groups (n=17) were shown *Facts for life*, *In two minds* and the related small media (*All the f***ing facts* and *Exposed*). Three groups (n=20) were shown *Facts for life*, *Just as unbelievable* and the same small media. The large number of different executions in each mass media intervention prohibited comprehensive discussion of all individual executions. Therefore, groups were asked to elect their four 'top' executions from *Facts for life* and *In two minds* around which subsequent discussion was based. Certain executions were disproportionately selected across all five groups. We will therefore base our reporting around a detailed analysis of participant reactions to the most commonly selected executions.

2. Demographic description

2.1 ETHNICITY

Thirty-five participants identified themselves as White British. The remaining two were White Irish and Asian/British of Indian descent.

2.2 GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

Men were resident in the following regions: London (14), South West (7), West Midlands (9), Trent (7).

2.3 AGE AND HIGHEST EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION

	Group 1 London (n=5)	Group 2 London (n=8)	Group 3 Brighton (n=8)	Group 4 B'ham (n=9)	Group 5 Leicester (n=7)	Overall (n=37)
Average Age	42	30	37	33	21	32
Median Age	40	29.5	38	33	21	29
Age Range	38-51	25-35	20-55	20-62	18-25	18-62
No qualifications	1		3			11%
'O' levels / CSE/ GCSE			1	4	3	22%
'A' levels		1	1	4	1	19%
Diploma	2	2	2		1	19%
Degree	2	5	1	1	2	29%

Age ranges in groups reflected our recruitment strategy (see 1.1). In terms of educational qualifications, one third each had: 'O' levels/ GCSEs or less; A-levels or a diploma; degree or higher.

2.4 SEXUALITY & GENDER OF SEXUAL PARTNERS

Thirty-four participants identified as Gay. Of the remaining three, two identified as Bisexual and one as homosexual. In the previous year, thirty had sex with men only; three had sex with both men and women; and one had not had sex at all. The remaining three men did not respond to that question. Twenty participants said they did not have a current sexual partner. Ten had a male partner whom they had been with for less than a year and seven men had been with their current partner for more than a year.

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, twenty-nine men (78%) had read or

looked at the Gay press, thirty-one (84%) had gone to a Gay pub or club, ten (27%) had participated in a Gay social group, six (16%) had been to a cottage or cruising ground, eight (22%) had been to a Gay sauna, three (8%) had phoned a telephone information or help line, fourteen (38%) had seen their GP and thirteen (35%) had been to a sexual health, GUM or HIV clinic.

2.6 MOST RECENT HIV TEST

Twelve participants have never had an HIV test; fourteen tested negative at their last test and eight men had tested positive. Three participants did not answer that question. Groups one to four contained at least one man who was HIV positive (men chose differentially whether to disclose their status within the group). No man in the younger group (five) revealed he had been diagnosed positive.

3. Facts for life

All executions in this mass media intervention were shown to participants in all groups. This section is an analysis of their reactions.

3.1 MAIN MESSAGE AND IMPACT

Overall the mass media intervention received a positive response, particularly amongst younger men. Two major areas of contention emerged. First, the use of the word *fuck*. Second, the non-directive approach to condom use. Disagreement emerged within groups and attitudes differed markedly between groups. Most expressed surprise at the use of 'strong' language. For some this encouraged them to read further, while others felt offended. There was a unanimous sense that the use of words like *fuck* and *fucking* would increase the appeal to younger Gay men. Therefore, although most groups agreed that it was directed at all Gay men, the use of strong language was often used to explain why young men would be more attracted to the message:

'It is probably what people on the scene, young people on the scene, it is the kind of language they use anyway.' (Group 5)

'I just thought, that's a bit strong. I wasn't offended by them, but I thought, wow, you know. And if it is aimed at young people it is fantastic.' (Group 1)

Some of the groups took a long time to recognise the intervention's sub-text concerning not using condoms. When this issue was explored, there was disagreement about whether or not it was appropriate for a national mass media intervention to address non-condom risk reduction strategies. A minority felt strongly that any intervention which did not advocate 100% condom use was 'dangerous'

'I think it's kind of bad, because in a way it's kind of advocating having sex without a condom...I think the message should be don't do it at all.' (Group 5)

Others appreciated the realistic portrayal of Gay men's risk practices.

'These make you think about it, because they are not defined, are they? We are all, we've had to look at them, we've had to question them, we've had to think about what message is being put across.'
(Group 1).

The impression of the mass media intervention as realistic and non-directive encouraged some to engage with it whilst others felt that the realism portrayed in the messages would discourage men from using condoms.

'These seem to be more interested in being informative than dictatorial, that's fine, I think that's more realistic but I would be careful of taking it that extra step that says no, we're not bothered.'
(Group 2)

3.2 ACCEPTABILITY

Many perceived the intervention to be targeted at younger Gay men who were just coming out, or at men with higher numbers of sexual partners. A smaller number argued that the intervention applied to all Gay men. The impression that the intervention was targeted at younger Gay men was related to two concepts. First, that younger men were more likely to take 'foolhardy' risks than their older counterparts and second that older Gay men knew 'the facts' regarding HIV prevention already:

'I've been living with this message since 1984 ... as an older Gay man ... I look in a magazine, I see the ads and I go past it, because I know what the message is going to be anyway.' (Group 3)

However, there was some resistance to the discourse of the foolishness of youth and the wisdom of age in regard to risk management strategies. The following comment was made in the over 40's group:

'You're being pretty derisory about twenty year-olds, really ... I've made some pretty stupid decisions in my life recently and I'm sure some twenty year-olds can make some better decisions.' (Group 1)

Questions were raised about the feasibility of the advice. Some felt that checking a condom during AI was unrealistic. Others questioned the feasibility of strategies based on knowledge of a partner's HIV status. Disclosure of HIV was seen as unlikely to occur. Moreover, a partner who says he is negative may simply not be telling the truth or may have undiagnosed infection. Moreover, many felt that such complex messages were not appropriate for pub or club settings where readers would have been drinking. A few disagreed saying that key messages can come into your mind at critical times during and leading up to sex. There was therefore disagreement about whether the messages were complex and challenging or simple and direct.

3.3 STYLE AND DESIGN

There were mixed responses about the structure and format of the intervention. Some felt that the colours and layout were striking, modern and youthful, while others felt they were conservative and overpowered with text. The 'headline' aspect was valued with many saying that it grabbed their attention and encouraged them to read further.

However, there was general agreement that such adverts have been available for so long that they are no longer attended to.

3.4 TOP RANKED FACTS FOR LIFE

Through the selection process described in Section 1.1, three adverts provoked the greatest personal responses. Here we discuss participants' reactions to each.

3.4.1 "Fuck or get fucked - the more men the more risks"

All five groups selected this advert for discussion. Although some mis-read the headline as being about modality, the headline was seen to be so arresting in its simplicity as to make them read further and reflect on their own sexual behaviour.

'Of the catch lines that I have read so far, that is the one that would make me read further... because it is the most obvious...' (Group 4)

Many perceived the message to be aimed at "slappers" or "slags" (men with higher numbers of sexual partners),

'If is being aimed at these people who are slappers basically, and let's face it, there's a lot of them around, yeah, I think it's just saying, just think about what you are doing.' (Group 2)

However, the messages' realism encouraged men to take it on at a more personal level. Although the message was seen to encourage self reflection, there was confusion about what the imperative behind the message might be. Some felt that it encouraged monogamy or a reduction in numbers of partners as an HIV prevention strategy.

'If you're a slag, you'll get AIDS.' (Group 1)

Many raised concerns about text discussing UAI with sero-concordant partners. Such concerns revolved around the possibility of re-infection between two positive partners and lack of certainty regarding a partners' HIV status. Others felt that the text was too complex. Overall however, this advert sparked off the most animated discussions, provoking participants to think about their past partners; the impracticalities of disclosure; and the risks involved with having multiple partners.

3.4.2 "Condoms are not 100% safe"

Among the four groups who selected this advert, there was widespread agreement that it was relevant to all Gay men. However, men tended to react to this ad in one of two ways. Certain men were concerned that the text conflicted with information given in the other adverts which say that 'condoms, used properly stop HIV'. The disparity between this message and the message contained in this ad raised concerns that some readers may be confused. This was allied to further concerns that raising doubts about the efficacy of condoms could lead to a decrease in their use. There was therefore ambivalence within groups about whether or not this message would lead to increased or decreased condom use.

'If I'm going to catch something, I'm going to catch it, so why bother using one, I ain't going to bother. It's got that message in it as well.'
(Group 4)

Others had a different reaction seeing this as by far the most effective advert. The text was seen to remind men both to use condoms properly (through emphasis on condom use and water-based lube) and that condoms, even when used properly, do not always work. Therefore, it was seen to increase effectiveness whilst reducing men's sense of invulnerability. Therefore the message would not have an impact on rates of condom use, but would change the way that men perceive risk when they are using condoms. Such messages were seen to be especially important for younger Gay men, or those coming out.

'I think that is very important ... because people seem to think, oh good, I am wearing one, I've got my magic wand, I'm safe!'
(Group 1)

3.4.3 "It's safer to fuck than get fucked"

The three groups who selected this advert saw it as the most problematic of all the executions for two main reasons. Those who objected to it most strongly understood that the advert was about modality, but attended little to this and were more concerned about the fact that the advert seemed to be advocating UAI generally.

'It might be true, but I mean, without a condom, it's not good.' (Group 2)

For others, the fact that the advert was about modality raised the greatest concerns. Although, there was general agreement that the 'facts' being presented made sense, a range of positions emerged. Some said that they had never considered modality before reading this. Others perceived the advert as advising them to be insertive (top) and were concerned that it appeared to give tops *carte blanche* to practice UAI. Thus, one HIV positive man said that this could be seen to encourage positive partners to be only receptive. Another positive participant disclosed that he had contracted the virus while being the insertive partner, so his experience directly challenged this advice. The overall question was, if insertive UAI was being encouraged and reinforced, where did this leave men who preferred to be receptive.

'If you like getting fucked it just sort of puts a nail in your coffin, doesn't it?' (Group 2)

3.5 ACHIEVEMENT OF AIMS

The aim for this intervention was to: provide baseline information / facts about HIV transmission (and exposure). Of all of the adverts one stood out to participants as offering the clearest and most useful information: *Condoms are not 100% safe*. A few participants also felt that information on modality in anal intercourse, the presence of STIs and their role in transmission was new and useful. However, discussion in all focus groups dwelled much more on participants' concerns about the impact rather than the usefulness of the information itself. Included among these concerns were: the notion that such information may decrease the use of condoms; that receptive partners are placed at greater risk and served less by these adverts and that advice to

find out a partner's status before AI, or checking that a condom is still on were not feasible. Participants were therefore concerned that useful information might be undermined by its perceived unacceptability or unfeasibility. In addition, many said that they would not read the lengthy and complex text below the headlines and therefore questioned the informative role of the adverts. What this tells us is the more complex the information the greater the tendency for men to read adverts with increasing ambiguity.

4. In Two Minds

This mass media intervention included eight adverts which were shown to participants in Group 2 and Group 4.

4.1 MAIN MESSAGE AND IMPACT

The intention of the advert was immediately clear to and appreciated by the vast majority of participants. That is, the adverts played on the dichotomy between rational and irrational thoughts and behaviours and that the latter were often mediated by sexual desire, alcohol or drugs. They appreciated that this advert subverted the idea that there is a simple division between those who always use condoms, and those who do not. It was therefore seen as a novel approach rather than containing any new information.

'There's a hell of a lot of people that, the majority of time will probably use condoms, and then at least once they will have slipped up - they thought about it the next morning going ... oh bollocks, that was a stupid thing to do.' (Group 4)

In discussions about the adverts, however, participants felt that the 'cock' comments made little sense. There was particular disdain in one group about the second comment in the 'We don't need to fuck without a condom to show we love each other' advert. Participants felt that no one would have these types of thoughts about love and condoms, no matter what the circumstance. There was widespread feeling that the simplicity of the message was lost in the adverts that attempted to add complexities, and this will be discussed in greater detail below. Many people also felt that the message across the bottom of most adverts was too banal to remember, and those blocks of text certainly did not generate much interest in any of the discussions. A few people said that once they had read the first advert in the series, they may not bother with the rest. Others felt that they were encouraged to keep reading, to see if any new versions would produce a surprise.

4.2 ACCEPTABILITY

Both groups felt that this intervention applied to all Gay men, as everyone would be able to identify with the basic dilemma. Most appreciated that the intervention was not directive but encouraged Gay men to think for themselves.

'When I read them, I do from my experience think, that 90% of the people that I have slept with, I have been led by my dick in one sense or another, like, I dunno where you draw the line ... but it does make you think of the connection.' (Group 4)

4.3 STYLE AND DESIGN

Most found the adverts appealing because they could identify with the types of men portrayed. The 'real', 'regular' aspect of the models was appreciated. One respondent had seen an advert from this intervention at a tube station and commented that it was refreshing to see an image of a 'regular' Gay man in public. One exception was skinhead in the string vest, who was seen as ridiculous and stereotypical. There was clear agreement that the size of text was problematic. Text within bubbles was difficult to read in most settings and that the text along the bottom was far too small to have any impact.

4.4 TOP RANKED - *IN TWO MINDS*

Two adverts were selected by both groups.

4.4.1 "A quick thrill isn't worth HIV"

This treatment was most acceptable because the rational/irrational dichotomy was expressed in its simplest form. This impression was backed up by the image of the model as a universal type ('Mr. Average'). The ad was therefore seen to encompass all Gay mens' experience.

'This is the sort of conflict that I would have thought pretty much every Gay man has been through. It is the most realistic.' (Group 2)

4.4.2 "I'll get a hard time"

Conversely, this treatment elicited the strongest negative responses. Universally, it was seen to cast HIV positive men in a bad light. First, some interpreted it as saying that positive men would rather risk passing on the virus rather than risking a "hard time".

'It is saying you can't trust people ... he is harbouring selfish thoughts where he doesn't really give a toss about the person he is going to be sleeping with.' (Group 4)

Second, the imperative of disclosure for positive men emerged. Those who were open about their HIV positive status felt that it promoted this imperative. Once such opinions were expressed however, all participants agreed that such expectations are unrealistic.

4.5 ACHIEVEMENT OF AIMS

The stated aim of this intervention is: to encourage contemplation regarding the relative risks and currency attached to sexual behaviour (and to increase ambivalence where risk is high). We presume the word 'currency' to relate to personal values attached to sex. Whilst participants recognised that the intervention was less about information than encouraging reflexivity and contemplation about risk, very few felt that such reflection would encourage them to change their attitudes and strategies. Thus, it did not appear to successfully 'increase ambivalence where risk is high'. When asked directly if these adverts would change their beliefs, the response was unanimously 'No'. There was a strong resistance to adverts which addressed the area of decision making based on the values men attached to sex and pleasure. That is, many did not relate to the representation of choices and values as clear cut or black

and white. The notion that there was always a 'right' choice (represented by the head) was interpreted by men as meaning that to do anything other than what the head suggests would be foolish. Although they could relate to and liked the concept of head/penis, this concept does not admit ambivalence in the sense that it only allows a right and a wrong decision or thought. Men already knew the 'right' decision and therefore deemed the 'wrong' decision foolish. This meant that their ability to relate to the dilemma of the models was extremely limited and a simple and acceptable message about internal conflicts regarding risk was undermined by implicit discourses on values and directiveness.

5. Just as unbelievable

All three adverts in this intervention were shown to three groups.

5.1 MAIN MESSAGE AND IMPACT

The fact that these adverts resembled advertisements for commercial products caught the interest of most participants with many only latterly realising that they were HIV prevention adverts as opposed to product promotions. Almost all of the 'older' men in Group 1 did not recognise the prevention aspect of the intervention and felt that the image overwhelmed their capacity to recognise any prevention in the text. Some had not taken in the text at all when they first saw it. The ironic imperative to 'get real' was therefore lost on this group.

A wide range of reactions emerged. Some experienced it as a negative message not to trust their sexual partners whilst others interpreted it more positively as a reminder that not everyone thinks as you do. However, one positive participant interpreted it as an encouragement not to disclose his HIV status to sexual partners:

'For me it tells me - yeah, keep my mouth shut.' (Group 1)

5.2 ACCEPTABILITY

Men in the (older) Group 1 felt that the advice given was common sense and therefore would not encourage them to reflect on their behaviour or expectations. Most felt that everyone should know to use condoms in cases where a partners' HIV status is unknown.

'Well, they're catering to idiots I think, really!' (Group 1)

In spite of this however, several participants also maintained that they **did** expect disclosure:

'I think everybody should be doing the telling, really.' (Group 1).

Men who liked the intervention and could relate to it did so because they felt that it targeted naive beliefs about disclosure without belittling readers. Participants in youngest group (Group 5) were the most likely to say that the advert would make them think about the sex they have.

'Even though you think you're not naive...then something as little and as silly as that could make you think, god, I am actually!' (Group 5)

There was an overall impression that because the adverts relied heavily on commercial advertising imagery, it was aimed at younger Gay men (with the exception of *Shaggy* - see below).

5.3 STYLE AND DESIGN

Shaggy: Older participants had the strongest initial interest in this treatment. Several who were balding said they momentarily thought it was a real product. Younger men were less interested and often misinterpreted the use of shag pile carpet in the image - mistaking it either for a towel; or in one case, maggots. As a result, many younger participants found this image ugly rather than retro.

'If this is aimed at Gay men the bottle is so unstylish that none of us would look at it.' (Group 5)

'It looks like pound shop gel.' (Group 5)

Fab Abs: Most participants agreed that this was the most effective image - due to contrasting colours and its distinctiveness. They also felt that this was most applicable to younger Gay men, and the positive reactions from Group 5 confirmed this.

Mr. Python: Most participants felt this was the weakest image of the three. They said it was difficult to differentiate the image from the background - or even make out what the product was meant to be:

'It looks like a glow in the dark dildo.' (Group 5)

However there was agreement that the concept of dick-lengthener was a humorous means of catching the attention of all Gay men.

5.4 ACHIEVEMENT OF AIMS

The stated *Making it Count* aims of this intervention were:

4. Men are aware of the possible HIV related consequences of their sexual actions for themselves and their sexual partners.
- 4.5 Men are aware some men who do not know their HIV status will engage in UAI without revealing that they do not know their status.
- 4.6 Men are aware some men who know they are not infected with HIV will engage in UAI without revealing their negative status.
- 4.7 Men are aware some men who know they have HIV will engage in UAI without revealing their positive status.

Participants were clear that this intervention was less about 'sexual actions' than changing unrealistic expectations about HIV disclosure. On analysis of the text they felt that it was a warning to HIV negative men (or men who believe they are negative) that if they have a partner who is positive, he may not tell them. The moral implications of this message dominated the discussions, and a small minority felt strong resistance to the idea of changing their expectations of disclosure. Most

participants felt that the text provided a reminder that they may hold unrealistic expectations in regard to disclosure. There was a strong sense that the images in these adverts overwhelmed the text; and many participants said that they had seen these adverts already but had not derived any HIV health promotion message from them at all. Even among men who liked the intervention and felt it related to them, most felt that it would not have an impact on their attitudes or behaviours.

6. Small media

The two examples of small media corresponding to the above mass media interventions were distributed to participants in all five groups for their immediate reactions. As both formats are fairly text-intensive, it was not possible to discuss their content in great detail. After a few minutes of looking through them, the participants were asked which format they preferred and why. Responses tended to be similar across groups.

6.1 ALL THE F*ING FACTS**

The stated aim for this small media item was to: provide information / facts about HIV transmission (and exposure). Although most felt that the leaflet contained important backup information for the mass media intervention, they also felt that it would be of interest to men who were coming out, or who had recently been diagnosed. Such men were seen to be in need of detailed information. However, the majority felt that the leaflet had too much information to be of use to them personally. Some also found the layout confusing. Despite this, a small number of them said they had taken it home and read the information and plan to refer to it in future.

The informational format had another disadvantage in that many felt it would inhibit men from picking it up in scene venues. To be seen to be publicly in need of information was thought to be stigmatising. Thus, although men may want informative materials, they may feel stigmatised to be seen to be *personally* in need of them. Some suggested that this type of small media would be better suited to GUM clinics as that was a better setting for men seeking information.

6.2 EXPOSED

Participants' reactions to the *Exposed* small media (mimicking a magazine format) was much more positive on the whole. The majority of men in Groups 1, 2, 3 and 4 said that they felt that *Exposed* was much more likely to be read by all Gay men, particularly as people would not know that it was about health promotion when it was first picked up. There was a lot of positive reaction to the use of sexual images:

'It's got pictures of hot naked men in it.' (Group 5)

'It's what we will tend to sit and look at.' (Group 1)

However there was also a strong reaction among the younger participants in Group 5 who felt that the format was far too trashy which tended to alienate them.

'It's just something you would find in the toilet floor in a smutty horrible Gay pub - somewhere with old men.' (Group 5)

There were was also a strong feeling in other groups that perhaps the pictures were so enticing that no one would bother to read the text. In direct opposition to concerns expressed about *All the f***ing facts*, many participants said that there would be little stigma attached to sitting in a Gay pub and looking through *Exposed*. They thought it was a clever and socially acceptable way to get health promotion messages across to all Gay men. Of the men who had already seen *Exposed*, a few said they had kept their copy.

It is difficult to be specific about the achievement of the aims as time restraints limited the groups ability to engage with the large amounts of information contained in the leaflets.

The stated aims for this small media was aims 3 and 4 of MiC:

3. Men are knowledgeable about HIV, its exposure, transmission and prevention.
4. Men are aware of the possible HIV related consequences of their sexual actions for themselves and their partners.

Participants felt that by situating HIV health promotion in this format, many more men would potentially benefit from the message/s. Some men said that it may encourage them to think about and change the kind of sex they have. A few men said they had kept *Exposed* at home, and intended to refer to it for information in future. In relation to the problems of being seen to be seeking information described above, participants felt that this format overcame that barrier to accessing information about HIV.

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