

Chapter 6

Aid Adverts that Juxtapose Rich and Poor: A Preliminary Test of their Efficacy in North Australia

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Every year, hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent on various campaigns to try and assist those living in poverty (Cassen, 1994). One of the most common methods uses television advertising to promote the sponsorship of children in Third World countries. Despite this evident commitment to social marketing however, it seems that very little research has been published on the *psychosocial* aspects of such adverts (Carr, Mc Auliffe, & MacLachlan, 1998). One poignant example concerns what has been operationally defined as “juxta-positioning” (Carr, 1999). Merriam-Webster’s (1993) dictionary describes this as “placing side-by-side,” and in aid advertisements we have witnessed a recent increase in the use of this tactic, both in Australia (World Vision, 1999) and worldwide (Marsella, 1998). Such advertising tends to contain scenes of children living in abject poverty (e.g., scavenging on a rubbish tip) interposed with scenes of similar children living in relative luxury (e.g., playing in a clean sand-pit). The “common sense,” lay hypothesis behind such tactics is that juxtapositioning will maximise feelings of social injustice and guilt, which will be followed by augmented donations and donation behaviour (Godwin, 1994).

This study sets out to test that hypothesis in the light of an argument put forward by MacLachlan (1993). He discusses the difficulty of holding extreme contrasts in mind, when conducting refugee work. There, emergency relief workers are confronted daily with contrasting images of the camps where they work and the hotels where they stay. MacLachlan believes that such juxtapositioning can precipitate an ego-defensive splitting of consciousness, or dissociation, between the two worlds. Since only one of these worlds can be grasped at the same time, aid workers are unlikely to perform any activity connected with one world in the context of the other. Thus for example, they are unlikely to learn about the refugees’ language and culture in their spare time, which ultimately detracts from their ability to do their job most effectively.

Overall, we might say that juxtapositioning renders the relative deprivation of *others too difficult to bear in mind when one is performing other, more pleasurable activities*. Watching television falls under that precise category, giving the present study its key purpose: To assess the effects of juxtapositioning, in aid adverts, on a viewer’s intention to donate personal resources towards the sponsorship of children in Third World countries.

Method

Participants

These were 64 under- and postgraduate students enrolled in the Faculty of Education at the Northern Territory University (NTU). Our participants were a convenience, classroom sample of 55 females and nine males, which participated under conditions of informed consent and confidentiality. At NTU, three out of four enrolments are mature-age. Darwin is also one of Australia’s most multicultural communities, and our sample reflected this diversity (Ho, Niles, Penney, & Thomas, 1994).

Materials

Six slides contained stills taken from an actual aid advertisement, with permission from the non-government organisation that had commissioned it. The original advertisement contained three juxtapositions: Rubbish tip to sandpit; blacksmith’s anvil to toy glockenspiel; and oily machine top to

toy building-block. Normally, a different child appeared in each of the two frames of each juxtaposition, but in order to control person variables across conditions, our materials placed the same child in each frame. Thus, we juxtaposed contextual “ground,” while controlling for human “figure.”

A slide projector was used to present the slides to the participants and a cassette player was used to play a standardised mock voiceover message to all participants, as they viewed the slides (transcript available on request).

An orally administered questionnaire contained the following scenario and associated items.

Scenario

- “You are sitting at home watching television, and a commercial comes on advertising for people to sponsor children in Third World countries. A few minutes later someone comes to your door asking for donations for a similar charity organisation.”

Questions

1. How likely would you be to give them money, on a scale from 1 to 10?
2. If you were likely to give them any money at all, how much would you give them out of \$10?
3. On a scale from 1-10, how important do you rate religion in your everyday life? (after, Sorrentino & Hardy, 1974). [Written format only]

Item 3 was included because Sorrentino and Hardy (1974) found that religiosity significantly differentiated advocates from non-advocates of helping behaviour towards those in need of assistance.

Procedure.

Each group viewed one of the three combinations of slides (poor only [$n = 14$], wealthy only [$n = 12$], or juxtaposed [$n = 30$]). As they viewed the slides, the standardised voiceover was played. After viewing the slides, participants heard the scenario, and responded to our pencil-and-paper questions. They were then debriefed, and thanked for their time.

Results

A correlational analysis across the two donation intention items revealed a statistically significant degree of association between them ($r = .592$, $p < .001$, one-tailed). These two measures were therefore combined into a single index of donation intention. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) then computed donation intention as the dependent variable, and poor/wealthy/juxtaposed group as the independent variable. Group condition exerted a significant influence on intention to donate ($F = 4.22$, $df = 2$, $p = .02$, two-tailed). Post hoc Tukey tests revealed that juxta-positioning produced lower donation intentions ($M = 8.6/20$) than the “poor only” imagery condition ($M = 13.1$). Mean donation intention in the “wealthy only” imagery condition ($M = 11.9$) fell between the means for the other two conditions. Statistically, it did not differ significantly from either of its two counterparts.

The juxtaposed group was also the only condition in which *any* participants (5 out of 30) reported that they would not donate any dollars at all. There was a significant correlation between dollar donation and degree of religiosity ($r = +.281$, $p = .036$, two-tailed). This relationship was present within the juxta-posed condition ($r = .332$, $p = .037$, one-tailed), but not within either the poor condition ($p = .403$, one-tailed) or within the wealthy condition ($p = .246$, one-tailed). Thus, among those exposed to juxta-positioning, dollar donations tended to be higher from the more rather than less religious.

Discussion

While juxta-positioning may have worked relatively well for the more religious who were exposed to it, this finding is far from vindicating the tactic as a social marketing technique. By comparison with more conventional, “poor only” imagery, juxta-positioning tended to work significantly *less* well. Participants in the juxtaposed condition reported donation intentions that were significantly lower than some prominent aid agencies might have hoped for. This is our central finding, and it begins to

suggest that juxta-positioning can bring deprivation of the poor “too close for comfort” (Carr, MacLachlan, & Campbell, 1997).

Our study clearly has its limitations. The sample is small and student-based, although many of the participants were mature-aged. The data is intentional rather than behavioural, although the scenario format, being indirect, tends to reduce social desirability effects. We used only three particular pairs of images, whereas there are an infinite variety of possible combinations that aid agencies might choose. We also controlled the central figure in the imagery, but future studies may vary the attractiveness of the child. They might, too, change the image from that of a child (the most common form of image in real adverts), to adolescents or adults (children are relatively hard to defensively blame for their own poverty).

Despite these and other limitations, this study should nonetheless alert those involved in the making of aid commercials, to the dangers of juxta-positioning. Despite the best of intentions, some major agencies may be wielding a double-edged sword. While such advertisements may motivate the more religious to make donations, they might also disaffect the remainder of the viewing public, who may constitute the majority of *potential* donors. Current social marketing strategies, intended to persuade the general public to give money to aid community development, may be neglecting important *psychosocial* factors that negatively influence charitable behaviour.

Summary

Aid commercials are increasingly advertising for the sponsorship of children in “Third World” countries through juxtaposing images of them alongside children enjoying wealthier, “First World” lifestyles. Sixty-four Bachelor of Education students from Darwin’s Northern Territory University viewed images of the same child surrounded by First World, Third World, or a juxtaposed First/Third World environment; responded to an aid donation scenario; and reported their religiosity. Except for those participants who placed a higher value on religion, and compared to conventional “poor only” imagery, the juxtaposed images de-motivated viewers to help children living in Third World countries. Thus, while appealing to a minority of the donor public, juxta-positioning might be leaving the majority of potential donors untouched and unmotivated to help.

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