

How do homeless young people view 'hard-hitting' ads depicting them?

Stereotypes are unhelpful, but young homeless people appreciate that maximising donations is crucial

Beth Breeze



Charity images that don't focus on specific individuals may be more attractive to donors. Photograph: DBURKE/Alamy

Charity adverts stand accused of causing public offence by using "hard-hitting" imagery that makes many people feel uncomfortable, according to recent research published

by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). It goes on to warn that charities that persist in using such "shock tactics" risk alienating the public.

The ASA's survey of a narrowly defined public (primarily parents and children) is the latest round in the "poverty porn" debate. Powerful voices opine on the morality of using visually striking but potentially exploitative images in fundraising literature, without reference to the views of those being depicted.

On Wednesday the Centre for Charitable Giving and Philanthropy is launching a report that presents the perspectives of 38 young people who use homeless hostels in five cities across England. We wanted to explore what beneficiaries think about the imagery, language and presentation of people like themselves used in appeals for donations.

Homelessness is a complex social issue that is prone to simplified representations – either "old men in duffel coats", or "a young kid looking sad", according to our participants. Yet, while the young people we spoke to expressed frustration with charitable imagery that reinforces stereotypes, on the whole they felt maximising donations had to be the priority. As part of a visually sophisticated generation, they appreciated fundraisers had to balance accurate depiction of social problems with the need to generate enough donations to provide a roof over their heads. As Amjal said: "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?"

But the young people hoped for more complex fundraising imagery that elicits empathy and "tells stories", rather than simply depicting beneficiaries at their lowest ebb. Some preferred text-heavy adverts that explain how the depicted person became homeless, "not just a picture of me that's gross", said Anita. Stereotypes allow people to dissociate from the issue, pointed out Martin. "Focusing on how it happens will make everyone think: 'Oh God, it could happen to me', instead of: 'It's all right, I haven't got a beard and I don't drink that much'," he said.

The degree of pathos present in many "sad pictures" of bedraggled homeless individuals was a cause of widespread irritation, but campaigns using pictures of groomed and cheerful people also came in for criticism for being "staged".

The most widely acclaimed advert was one produced by Crisis, which simply comprises a bed-length piece of cardboard lying on snowy ground with the text: "Loving the snow? Try sleeping in it." The absence of a specific person was felt to make it more inclusive, less likely to encourage stereotyping and more appealing to donors who might "change the channel straight over" if they didn't like the look of the potential beneficiary, respondents said.

Future comments on charity adverts by the ASA should take account of a wider set of views, including those of people benefiting from the donations such adverts inspire.

- Beth Breeze is a researcher at the ESRC centre for giving and philanthropy, University of Kent. User Views of Fundraising, by Beth Breeze and Jon Dean, is at cgap.org.uk

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