

# Conversation-provoking HIV/AIDS campaigns may be counter-productive

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Mass media campaigns aimed to make adolescents in South Africa talk about issues related to HIV/AIDS may be counter-productive.

Research by Elizabeth Lubinga (PhD candidate Tilburg University/ University of Groningen, the Netherlands) shows that billboard campaigns that present deliberately puzzling messages about (un)safe sex, intended to spark conversations between people, lead to a lower rather than a higher understanding of the message which could possibly be dangerous.

Over the last two decades the majority of South Africans have been

exposed to billboard or poster advertisements produced by the national or provincial governments and/or NGOs with visibility along road networks, in hospitals and clinics, at schools, transport hubs and many other strategic places. Still, with over 6 million people infected and living with HIV (17.9 percent), South Africa has one of the largest shares of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The Department of Health in South-Africa reports 1,000 new infections daily. Moreover, despite a lot of HIV research and campaigns, the South African Human Sciences Research Council reports problems such as a decline in HIV/AIDS knowledge, a low rate of condom use in monogamous relationships and HIV-related risk behavior.

## **Puzzling health campaigns**

In this dire context, Elizabeth Lubinga set out to study the strategies used in mass media campaigns to make adolescents in South Africa talk about issues related to HIV/AIDS. Lubinga: "A variety of communicative strategies have been devised by organizations in an attempt to come up with the most effective communication tool in the fight against HIV/AIDS." One of the biggest South African health promotion organizations, loveLife, for years has used a campaign strategy aimed at provoking discussions by using posters with deliberately puzzling messages, both in images and/or verbal metaphors. Lubinga wanted to test whether it is correct to assume that such campaigns will automatically trigger interpersonal discussions, especially since it is a taboo in most South African cultures to talk about sexually related matters.

## **No discussion**

Drawing on earlier empirical studies into the effects of 'puzzling' promotional material on conversations and campaign outcomes, Lubinga

designed HIV and AIDS prevention posters in which she manipulated puzzling text and/or pictures, and she used these posters to interview participants from the target group. One of the posters was also used to study the conversation behavior of the participants. Lubinga: "Using rhetorical figures proved not to automatically result in adolescents talking about health campaign messages with friends or family. In addition, the results show that when young South Africans do talk about puzzling messages, this led to a lower rather than a higher understanding of the message and resulted in more misunderstandings about HIV/AIDS."

Campaigners should reconsider their strategiesLubinga's findings have implications for health campaign designers who advocate for the use of puzzling messages to provoke conversations with the intention of positively influencing (determinants of) health behavior. "Given the fact that these messages may even create more misunderstanding about the topics they address, using puzzling messages "may even be dangerous", says Lubinga. "With the current infection rates and the great vulnerability of adolescents, I urge campaign organizations who use these puzzling tactics in South Africa to reconsider their strategies. More research is definitely needed in this field to help designers of mass media health campaigns to create messages that their audience finds interesting enough to discuss, but which do not lead to misunderstanding and undesirable beliefs."

Provided by Tilburg University

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