

## **Reducing Social Advertising Offensiveness: A Study of STD Prevention in China**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The issue of sexually transmitted diseases is a socially sensitive one in Asian communities, with governments being criticised for not doing enough to reduce AIDS transmission and the advertising of such issues potentially causing offence to people. This exploratory paper surveys 630 people in China to determine their level of offence towards the advertising of condoms and STD prevention, and analyses the qualitative responses to how they would reduce the offensiveness of such advertising. The results present some interesting ideas for public policy makers wanting to advertise socially sensitive issues in Asia.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) is a disease that is having a devastating effect on countries around the world. It is currently estimated that between 36.7 and 45.3 million people currently live with HIV (Wikipedia 2006). While Africa is the worst-affected region, with more than 60% of all people with HIV are living in sub-Saharan Africa, South and South East Asia is the second worst affected with 15% (Wikipedia 2006). In 2006, the Chinese government with the World Health Organisation (WHO) and UNAIDS jointly estimated that 650,000 people were living with HIV in China, with 75,000 having full-blown AIDS (Ministry of Health, UNAIDS and WHO 2006). However, it has been suggested that this figure is lower than the previous estimates due to massive under reporting in China, especially in the rural areas. This is for a variety of reasons which include a shortage of testing equipment and trained health staff, as well as the continuing stigma (UNAIDS 2002). According to Qi Xiaoqiu, director of China's Department of Disease Control:

*"Exact figures are difficult to arrive at because government at local levels are very reticent to report on actual cases, a situation compounded by individuals who are reluctant to come forward because of discrimination."* (Human Rights Watch 2003).

Future estimations indicate that the infection rate will increase and could reach up to 20 million in ten years. Therefore, it is important for the China government to inform the people about ways of STD prevention.

However, the issue of sexually transmitted diseases is a socially sensitive one in Asian communities. Advertisements about the issue of Sexual Diseases, such as AIDS and STD prevention, or condoms, has a strong potential of offending both male and female members of the communities (Waller and Fam 2002). Advertising messages for such an issue would also conflict with the traditional Chinese values of keeping oneself disinterested and pure, and having a sense of shame (Chinese Culture Connection 1987), and reflects a degree of embarrassment when talking about sexual behaviour in public. Yet it is important for the Chinese government to communicate vital health information to help reduce AIDS transmission. This exploratory paper will use both quantitative and qualitative techniques analyse the results of a survey of 630 people in three cities of China (Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou) to determine their level of offence towards the advertising of condoms and STD prevention, and analyses the qualitative responses to how they would reduce the offensiveness of such advertising. The results present some interesting ideas for public policy makers wanting to advertise socially sensitive issues in Asia.

## **BACKGROUND**

While it is important for public health messages to be communicated by governments, advertising issues like STD prevention and the use of condoms can be controversial and may cause offence. Controversial advertising can be defined as: "*advertising that, by the type of product or execution, can elicit reactions of embarrassment, distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage from a segment of the population when presented*" (Waller 2004). There have been a number of studies that have classified condoms and STD prevention as being controversial when advertised. Wilson and West (1981) in their study of "unmentionables", included a "products" of birth control, and later in Wilson and West (1995) included AIDS as an "unmentionable". Rehman and Brooks' (1987) study included alcohol, pregnancy tests, contraceptives, feminine hygiene products, undergarments, medications, and *VD services*, as examples of controversial products. Barnes and Dotson (1990) discussed offensive television advertising and the products which were in their list included *condoms*, female hygiene products, and female/male underwear. Shao (1993) and Shao and Hill (1994) in their look at advertising agencies, presented controversial products/services including alcohol, *condoms*, cigarettes, feminine hygiene products, female undergarments, male undergarments, *sexual diseases* (eg *STD's, AIDS*), and pharmaceutical goods. While Fahy, Smart, Pride and Ferrell (1995) grouped products into three main categories: alcoholic beverages, products directed at children and *health/sex-related products*, Waller (1999) presented a large list of 15 potentially controversial products (Alcohol, Cigarettes, *Condoms*, Female Contraceptives, Female Hygiene Products, Female Underwear, Funeral Services, Gambling, Male Underwear, Pharmaceuticals, Political Parties, Racially Extremist Groups, Religious Denominations, *Sexual Diseases (AIDS, STD Prevention)*, and Weight Loss Programs). This study was later replicated in Waller and Fam 2003; Fam, Waller and Erdogan (2004); and Waller, Fam and Erdogan (2005).

It should also be noted that while STD prevention is important as a public health issue, particularly when diseases like AIDS have no cure, condoms are important as a way of protection from AIDS/STDs as well as unwanted pregnancies, which is significant in a country which enforces a "one child" policy. However, advertising condoms is also being perceived as promoting promiscuous relationships and is very much frowned upon in some Asian societies (Taylor and Raymond, 2000; Fam, Waller and Erdogan, 2004). The Confucian tradition is widely accepted and practised among the Chinese people. For instance, children are taught to respect the elders and upkeep tradition, have a sense of shame, have few desires and keeping oneself disinterested and pure (Chinese Cultural Connection, 1987). One would usually find it embarrassing to purchase condoms from retail outlets in China as possessing of condoms gives the impression that sex is about to take place, and sex before marriage is discouraged and frowned upon (Hse, 1983; Fam, Waller and Erdogan, 2004). Further, the open discussion of sexual matters is a taboo (Pan, 1990; Yen, 1990). Advertising condoms, despite its health benefits, is also perceived as an indirect way to encourage the consumers to engage in sexual activity. Therefore, the advertising of condoms and STD prevention, while seen as controversial, are important for public health and ways should be found to try to reduce their offensiveness. This study will observe the responses from a sample of Chinese to determine their level offensiveness to these types of advertisements, and discover ways to decrease their offensiveness.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The survey was conducted in three Chinese cities, namely Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, carried out by a China based professional research firm as only government sanctioned research agencies can carry out survey in China (State Education Commission, 1985). In

order to avoid any biases in relation to gender, age and location, it was decided to adopt a stratified sampling frame. The instructions to the research agency were to select 50% males and 50% females in each city, one third of the males/females must be between the ages of 15 and 18; one-third between 35 and 50; and one-third over 60 years old, so that there would be a wide spread of ages in the sample. Next, the interviewer must select every third person whom they came across to ask if they would like to be surveyed. The interview took 5-7 minutes to complete. In total 630 respondents participated in this study.

## RESULTS

The respondents were asked whether they perceive the advertising of condoms and sexual disease prevention as offensive (1= not at all offensive, 5 = extremely offensive). According to the results (Table 1), those sampled did find these types of advertising offensive, with mean scores higher than the midpoint of "3". Further, comparing gender by using ANOVAs, both males and females perceived these advertisements as offensive, although females were significantly more offended by advertisements for condoms ( $p=.002$ ).

**Table 1: Offensiveness towards Advertising**

	Total Mean (st Dev)	Male Mean (st Dev)	Female Mean (st Dev)	F (sig)
<b>Condoms</b>	3.34 (1.32)	3.17 (1.30)	3.50 (1.31)	9.673 (.002) *
<b>Sexual Disease Prevention (AIDS, STDs)</b>	3.39 (1.38)	3.37 (1.38)	3.41 (1.38)	.120 (.729)

\* $p<.05$

After the respondents indicated that they perceived these types of advertisements as offensive, they were asked in an open-ended question to write ways in which they would reduce the offensiveness of such advertising. The authors independently placed the items into groups and then agreement was made on the final categories, summarised in Table 2. For STD prevention there were a total of 105 responses with 12 main categories to reduce offensiveness of the advertisements, with the top 5 being media/location (posters, leaflets, in hospitals), highlight effects (showing the effects of AIDS), scientific message (lectures that give the facts), no ads or limit them (do not show any ads), and highlight prevention (linking condoms with prevention). For advertising condoms, there were a total of 87 responses with 10 main categories to reduce offensiveness of the advertisements, with the top 3 being implicit message (imply, more indirect), no ads or limit them (do not show any ads), and creative strategy (be more artistic, use cartoons or humour).

## CONCLUSION

While this has been an exploratory study of Chinese perceptions towards STD prevention advertising and how to reduce its offensiveness, so important issues have been raised by the sample. Clearly from the quantitative part of the study the respondents have indicated that they do perceive the advertising of condoms and STD prevention as offensive, especially condom advertisements to women. From the qualitative part of the study, the respondents expressed ways they felt these advertisements could reduce their offensiveness, which included targeting the right media, highlighting effects, a scientific message, and ways of prevention, as well as implying the message. Some of these ideas could be helpful to public policy makers to promote socially sensitive issues. Unfortunately, although not totally surprising, reasonable numbers in both samples indicated that they did not want to see such

advertisements. Further research should be undertaken in this area to improve ways to communicate important public health messages in China.

**Table 2: Summary of Comments for Reducing Offensiveness**

<b>Sexual Disease Prevention (AIDS, STDs)</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
MEDIA/LOCATION	15	14.3
HIGHLIGHT EFFECTS	15	14.3
SCIENTIFIC MESSAGE	13	12.3
NO ADS / LIMIT	12	11.4
HIGHLIGHT PREVENTION	11	10.5
EDUCATIONAL	10	9.5
CREATIVE STRATEGY	8	7.6
HIGHLIGHT POSITIVE	6	5.7
IMPLICIT MESSAGE	5	4.8
GIVE EXAMPLES	3	2.9
TARGET AUDIENCE	3	2.9
MORE ADS	2	1.9
OTHER	2	1.9
	105	
<b>(Condoms)</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
IMPLICIT MESSAGE	18	20.7
NO ADS / LIMIT	16	18.4
CREATIVE STRATEGY	13	14.9
EMPHASISE POSITIVE/BENEFITS	9	10.3
TIMING	6	6.9
TARGET AUDIENCE	6	6.9
EDUCATIONAL	5	5.7
FAMILY PLAN	4	4.6
MORE ADS	4	4.6
LOCATION	2	2.3
OTHER	4	4.6
	87	

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