

EXPLORING REPRESENTATIONS OF
HOMELESS PEOPLE IN CHARITY
ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS IN THE
UNITED KINGDOM

LITERATURE REVIEW

KEY FINDINGS OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Homelessness is on the rise in the United Kingdom and the COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact

The experiences of homelessness are varied and there is no one, set definition of homelessness

- Rough sleeping
- Hidden homelessness
- Single homelessness

The media often perpetuates negative stereotypes about homeless people

- Individualised explanations of homelessness based on agency and individual characteristics

THE ROLE OF CHARITIES IN ADDRESSING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Third sector organisations bridge the gap where government policies fall short (England, 2023, p. 161)

- Thatcher's 'active citizenship' concept
- Blair's 'active communities' initiative
- Cameron's 'Big Society'
- The Coronavirus Homelessness Response Fund

Concerns have been raised about whether third sector organisations are appropriate for this role

- Potential self-censorship and weakened core beliefs (Hogg and Baines, 2011, p. 345; Kearn, 1992, p. 24)
- Inconsistent service provision across the United Kingdom (Partie and Johnston, 2011, p. 421; Power *et al.*, 2021, p. 88)

‘POVERTY PORN’

Defining ‘poverty porn’

- The use of exploitative images depicting impoverished individuals to generate sympathy for a desired end, such as driving newspaper sales, fundraising efforts, or support for a cause (Duncan, Levine and Small, 2024, p. 2; Dortonne, 2016)

This can have negative implications on the public’s perception of homelessness (Clough, Hardacre and Muggleton, 2024, p. 360)

‘Poverty porn’ can be an effective means of fundraising – reflecting an ethical dilemma (Andersson and Valentine, 2015, p. 71; Breeze and Dean, 2012, p. 12; Dean, 2015, pp. 15, 29-30; Makandar and Bandaiko, 2024, p. 1)

METHODOLOGY

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

- This method 'aims to examine how language is used to exercise power in society ... and how particular ideologies are embedded within particular discourses' (Clark *et al.*, 2021, p. 492).
- Critical discourse analysis relates discourse to existing social structures and practices (Bezar, Azhar and Akhter, 2018, pp. 59-61).

Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model was applied by examining the text and images used in each charity campaign, with the following questions being considered:

- Why were these words and images used?
- What is the intended message?
- How could these words and images be interpreted
- Do these words and images reflect certain ideologies or draw on stereotypes?
- How could these charity campaigns inform and shape the public's understandings of homelessness?

FINDINGS

'POVERTY PORN', STEREOTYPES, AND THE OVERSIMPLIFICATION OF HOMELESSNESS



'Wish I Wasn't Here' campaign by SIFA Fireside (One Black Bear, 2024)

Flippant language and irony is used

Arguably an example of homelessness being trivialised as a means of marketing

'Our donations dry up every summer, will you help us'

Possibly a reflection of charities being forced to resort to 'poverty porn' out of necessity?

Stereotypical depictions of homeless people are most recognisable to the public – to stray from this significantly could be risky (Breeze and Dean, 2012, pp. 12-14; Dean, 2015, pp. 29-30)

'POVERTY PORN', STEREOTYPES, AND THE OVERSIMPLIFICATION OF HOMELESSNESS



The Connection at St Martin's in the Field (Soul, 2014)

Use of morbid imagery of a deceased person to plead to the public to not 'contribute to a person's death by giving money to homeless people

Draws upon the longstanding stereotype that homeless people are drug addicts who will spend any money that they are given on drugs and alcohol (Parnell, 2023, p. 17)

Ignoring structural factors that cause homelessness (Devereux, 2015, p. 263)

Does little to improve the general public's understandings of homelessness

'POVERTY PORN', STEREOTYPES, AND THE OVERSIMPLIFICATION OF HOMELESSNESS



'Homeless Text' by Thames Reach (2011)

Charities are often presented as the natural way to address homelessness (Devereux, 2015, p. 263)

Simplified messages and images used to create an effective piece of advertising (Breeze and Dean, 2012, p. 14)

Homelessness presented in a depoliticised context to appeal to as many donors as possible

EXPLORING THE COMPLEXITY OF HOMELESSNESS



‘Most Homeless People Remain Hidden’ by SIFA Fireside (One Black Bear, 2024)

Highlights hidden homelessness (Reeve and Batty, 2011, p. 11)

‘They’re sleeping in cars, sofa-surfing or living in squats. Help us find and support those without a home’

Some sense of division between the housed and homeless populations? (Parnell, 2023, p. 18; Rea, 2021, p. 466)

EXPLORING THE COMPLEXITY OF HOMELESSNESS



‘No Fixed Address’ by HSBC and Shelter UK
(Talon Outdoor, 2021)

Highlights the cycle of financial exclusion faced by homeless people

Use of personal language – ‘you’ and ‘your’

Arguably challenges stereotypes about homeless people and their personal agency (Phillips, 2015, pp. 13-14)

USER-INFORMED DEPICTIONS OF HOMELESSNESS



‘We’re Here’ by St Mungo’s (Redstone, 2024)

Deliberate use of positive images of formerly homeless people – intended to avoid drawing on stereotypes

Breeze and Dean (2012, p. 27) noted in their study that many homeless people believe adverts that demonstrate the positive impact a charity can have on homeless people is important

CONCLUSION

- 'Poverty porn' is pervasive in homelessness charity advertising
- Appears to resonate well with the public
- Homelessness is often presented in a depoliticised context
- The language used in some campaigns draws upon stigmatising rhetoric surrounding homelessness
- 'Poverty porn' will likely remain as a tactic for charity advertising campaigns