Research paper

Creating visual differences: Methamphetamine users perceptions of anti-meth campaigns

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A B S T R A C T

Background: Because of increased law enforcement and subsequent media attention, methamphetamine users appear in the public's imagination as diseased, zombie-like White trash. We explore methamphetamine users' perceptions about whether the images, people, and situations in anti-methamphetamine campaigns reflect their own lives and experiences using meth.
Methods: To explore these perceptions, we used photo-elicitation interviews with 47 people who used methamphetamine (30 former and 17 active). Specifically, we presented participants with images from the *Faces of Meth* and the *Montana Meth Project* campaigns to stimulate discussion.
Results: We found that participants believed these ads did not reflect their personal experiences and consequently were ineffective at curtailing their own methamphetamine use. They believed that the ads represented a certain type of methamphetamine user, particularly those they defined as dysfunctional users. They created symbolic boundaries between themselves and those portrayed in the ads to show how they differed, which allowed them to believe that the ads were not relevant to their experiences.
Conclusions: Findings suggest that there are unintended consequences to inauthentic/dramatic imagery. Participants did not believe they were like those in the ads—thus saw no reason to quit or seek help. Consequently, overly stigmatizing portraits of users may act as barriers to desistence. The findings have implications for designing anti-methamphetamine campaigns.

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Introduction

The Reagan administration ushered in a new era in the war on drugs in the United States reflected in policing and punishment as well as in ideological projects meant to deter drug use. Perhaps most notable among the ideological efforts were the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E) program initiated by LAPD Chief Daryl Gates in 1983 and a collection of programs championed by Nancy Reagan, gathered under the inescapable mantra "Just Say No." Despite little to no evidence as to their efficacy (Ennett, Tobler, Ringwalt, & Flewelling, 1994; Hornik, Jacobsohn, Orwin, Piesse, & Kalton, 2008) anti-drug campaigns such as these expanded beyond schools and included commercials, billboards, and celebrity-endorsed public service announcements. In addition to general anti-drug media, the 1980s focused first and foremost on the *epidemic* of crack cocaine, erroneously punctuated by the spectre of drug addicted children—crack babies (Reinarman & Levine, 1997).

While crack cocaine and marijuana were the focus of much of the 1980s and early 1990s war on drugs, attention has since turned to other drugs, including methamphetamine.

Following the "crack epidemic" and its attendant violence, state agents have reframed methamphetamine as the "new crack," thereby forecasting a distinctly rural and racialized, White drug epidemic (Linnemann & Wall, 2013). Since the increase of domestic production of methamphetamine via unsophisticated clandestine labs in the early 1990s, disrupting these markets has been a priority for local, state, and federal police particularly those in rural parts of the United States (Garriott, 2011; Jenkins, 1994; National Drug Intelligence Center, 2010). Long-standing New York Senator Charles Schumer went on record about how methamphetamine was poised to make it "1984 all over again" (referencing crack), while Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating alleged methamphetamine is a "White trash drug, just as crack is a Black trash drug" and urged his constituents to shame both. Despite the fact that nearly one-third of people who use methamphetamine in the United States are non-Whites (SAMHSA, 2014), and that it has become the second most commonly used drug in the world (Shukla, 2016), methamphetamine users today often appear in the public's

imagination as diseased, zombie-like *White trash* (Linnemann & Wall, 2013). These depictions are drawn from pre-existing understandings of the rural poor as uneducated, degenerate, atavistic throwbacks (Rafter, 1988).

Anti-drug campaigns have historically relied on fear and moralistic principles to deter drug use rather than pharmacological realities (Boyd, 2004; Coomber, 2011; Musto, 1999). Launched in the early 2000s the anti-methamphetamine media campaigns *Faces of Meth* (FOM) and *The Meth Project* (TMP) fgfg drew on these images to invoke fear, shock, and disgust in hopes of deterring methamphetamine use. Lauded by police and politicians for their successes, these and similar campaigns have been instrumental in inscribing the image of the *meth head* in the social imaginary (Linnemann, Hanson, & Williams, 2013). FOM and TMP have marked a particularly grotesque visual turn in the war on drugs by focussing on worst-case scenarios about the physical, emotional, and behavioural changes associated with methamphetamine use (Mitchell, 1995).

Despite claims of success and substantial public and private funding, these programs have received limited empirical evaluations (Erceg-Hurn, 2008). The ineffectiveness of anti-drug programs such as these has been attributed to their emphasis on fear and disgust (Halkjelsvik & Rise, 2015). By emphasizing the extreme physical and mental harm of drug use these campaigns allow users to frame the ads as inauthentic. For example, youth surveyed about their perceptions of anti-methamphetamine campaigns suggest that while they held unfavourable attitudes towards methamphetamine as a result of the ads, they also believed the ads to be exaggerated and unreliable, thereby weakening their potential useful impacts (McKenna, 2013). This suggests that a lack of perceived authenticity can damage and neutralize a campaign's credibility. Similarly, the emphasis on worst-case scenarios allows for some drug users to construct symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) allowing them to distance themselves from the stigmatized identity depicted in media portrayals (Copes, Leban, Kerley, & Deitzer, 2016), which also weakens the potential positive affect of the ads.[1]

Our aim with this study is to understand how current and former methamphetamine manufacturers and users perceive the *Faces of Meth* and *The Meth Project* campaigns. Specifically, we explore participants' (1) perceptions about the effectiveness of the ads for curtailing their own use; (2) beliefs about whether the images, people, and situations in these campaigns reflect their own lives; and (3) strategies for using the ads as tools for constructing social identities. By examining how methamphetamine users perceive these ads and incorporate them in their identity projects, we shed light on how participants symbolically distance themselves from people portrayed in the images.

Shock, fear, disgust and the visual

The FOM program was born in 2004, when Multnomah County, Oregon, Sheriff Deputy Brian King, paired mug shots of suspected methamphetamine users in a simple before and after arrangement. King believed the visual evidence of methamphetamine's supposed effects were so shocking that they could deter school age children from using the drug. The project gained national prominence when it was featured as the centrepiece of the

award-winning multi-part series "Unnecessary Epidemic" published by *The Oregonian*. From its earliest days, FOM drew from existing understandings of poverty and inequality and emboldened the narrative of *White trash* criminality by linking it to the burgeoning epidemic. Demonstrating the project's popularity and wide distribution, the mug shot pairs have since been appropriated by local anti-drug projects and been remade into new products by individual users (see Image 1).

Like FOM, *The Montana Meth Project* (MMP) (and its later iteration *The Meth Project*) achieved notoriety because of the shocking images used to deter teen methamphetamine use. The brainchild of billionaire software engineer and real estate magnate Thomas Siebel, TMP characterizes itself as a "research-based marketing campaign that realistically and graphically communicates the risks of methamphetamine [use]." With warnings like, "*15 bucks for sex isn't normal. But on meth it is*" affixed to professionally crafted scenes of strung out teens engaged in all manner of predation and denigration, the project's Not Even Once campaign, like FOM, advances a simple "see what happens if you use meth" causality (Image 2).

Shortly after initiation, a *New York Times* editorial (Zernike, 2006) described how the project's radio, television, newspaper, and billboard advertisements had become the state's biggest advertiser. The article also announced the plans of Siebel and state officials, who in viewing the program as a "template for halting a problem that has cursed many largely poor, rural states" were already working to expand its reach to a national scope (Zernike, 2006). In addition to drawing from and reaffirming meth's "largely poor and rural" trope, the article punctuated the grotesque aesthetic that would soon make the project famous. These graphic images of meth-fuelled crime and victimization were no accident. From its inception, Siebel enlisted prominent directors and cinematographers to craft a dark and gritty aesthetic that was intended to "stigmatize use, making methamphetamine use socially unacceptable" (Siebel & Mange, 2009). To stigmatize use the project elevated the familiar fear appeal with deliberately grotesque and often sexually sadistic images of human suffering. Of course, the advertisements could advance any sort of aesthetic, but by advancing this one they fashioned a hegemony of the visual field – what Mirzoeff (2006) calls *visuality* – which structures how we are made to see the consequences of methamphetamine use. Admittedly, TMP hoped to improve its effectiveness with a distinct *visuality of disgust*, composed of images of bodily decay, violence, and sexual victimization (Linnemann et al., 2013). Believing fear and disgust *together* are a more powerful deterrent than fear *alone*, marketing researchers recently attempted to evaluate and perhaps legitimize the project's practices (Morales, Wu, & Fitzsimons, 2012). A TMP press release announced that the study:

> Found that ads that relied on fear alone to convey their message did not lead to immediate changes in attitudes or behavior. . . . However, according to the study, the Meth Project ads and others that incorporated an element of "disgust," such as rotting teeth, skin sores or infections, did compel viewers to "undertake distancing behaviors," such as deciding not to use illegal drugs.

Regardless of the favourability of these recent evaluations, from its beginning TMP has been lauded by tough-on-crime advocates. Former Drug Czar John Walters, who described it as an "extraordinary example of the results we can achieve when we combine the power of advertising with the dedication and expertise of the leaders of this community" (The Meth Project, 2007). However, like other scare and fear campaigns, independent empirical evaluations directly challenge the program's claims of effectiveness (Anderson, 2010). Erceg-Hurn (2008) found that support for the effectiveness of the TMP campaign to be weak due

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[1] We believe this presents an interesting case, as respondents themselves, engaged in the production and maintenance of symbolic boundaries, view those represented in the FOM and MMP images as somehow alien and apart from their own experiences. In a sense then, the production and maintenance of symbolic boundaries within drug using communities enables the same sort of unreflexive penal spectatorship (punitive voyeurism, distancing) observed in culture more broadly.