



Gender Digital Violence - Study, Design and Communication of an Awareness-Raising Campaign from University to University

Mauro Ferraresi^(✉)

IULM International University of Languages and Media, 20141 Milan, Italy
mauro.ferraresi@iulm.it

Abstract. This article aims to be a reflection, an analysis and a return to the reader of the path of conception and implementation of a communication campaign against gender violence. The project has been developed at the Inter-University Research Centre “Gender Cultures” in Milan, and wants to contribute and to give substance to the Istanbul Convention, which in its article 13 states that “to promote or implement awareness campaigns or programs (...) to increase awareness and understanding by the general public of the various manifestations of all forms of violence (...) as well as the need to prevent them”.

To this end, three Italian and Milanese universities have been involved and a specific methodology has been used that has highlighted, from a communicative point of view, some important innovations. A group of university students, previously trained, carried out the creative work for the awareness campaigns by dividing themselves into subgroups and structuring a campaign in which the language was completely internal to the subculture of reference. Not only because the social segment to which the communication producers belonged was in fact homogeneous in terms of lifestyles, beliefs and/or worldview to the social and cultural segment of the campaign’s target, but also because they were inspired by tales of violence experienced by other students at the Milanese universities. Another element of solid novelty concerns the field research carried out with neuromarketing techniques on a representative and very small sample of the reference universe.

Keywords: Gender studies · Communication · Sociological research

1 Foreword

1.1 The Interuniversity Research Centre ‘Gender Cultures’

On 26 November 2013 the first inter-university Centre for the study and dissemination of gender cultures was born in Milan, Italy, with a Statute signed by the Rectors, the Scientific Council, the President and the relevant members.

As stated in the Statute, “The Centre aims to give permanent impetus to studies, research and positive action relating to the theme of gender cultures and thus contribute to the growth and spread of respect for the dignity and skills of women” (art. 2, 1). In particular, the Centre promotes and coordinates research programs on the subject, in

collaboration with other academic, governmental and international institutes. The varied scientific background of the members of the Scientific Council and its members is a guarantee of transdisciplinary approach to gender issues in all social and cultural aspects.

The Interuniversity Research Centre ‘Gender Cultures’ involves six Universities in Milan (University of Milan-Bicocca, University of Milan, Politecnico di Milano, Università Commerciale Luigi Bocconi, Università IULM, Università Vita - Salute San Raffaele), and assumes in the premises of its Statute the intention of the affiliated Universities to give impetus, with the instruments of their competence, to studies, research and positive action on the theme of gender cultures, in the spirit of the European Resolution of 8 March 2011, European Directive 113 of 2004 and Cedaw (Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women) adopted by the UN and ratified by 185 States.

2 The Plan of the Research

As part of the tasks of the inter-university Centre, in the spring of 2019, the nominees of the respective Rectors as members of the Scientific Council: Valeria Bucchetti for the Politecnico di Milano, Mauro Ferraresi for IULM, International University for Languages and Media IULM, plus Sveva Magaraggia for the University of Milan-Bicocca, started a three-step research.

The three-step research plan included participant observation and focus groups; design the system of communication artifacts and, finally, conduct sociological research implemented with neuromarketing techniques on the final four chosen advertising creative solutions.

2.1 Participant Observation and Focus Groups

Before starting the research, Sveva Magaraggia [5] made a list of suggestions on how to build social campaigns against gender-based violence. She reported that the literature suggests that gender violence should be represented as a process and not as an act [10], and to do this it is useful both to tell the cycle of violence present in the report and to give a precise image of the social context in which the violence occurred [4, 6].

The second knot concerns the familiarity of the campaigns that will have to be created. The images and texts of the advertisements must be familiar to the chosen target group, i.e. the students of the six universities involved [19]. This meant the need to know at least part of the students’ language to represent a setting that was immediately recognizable to them. The underlying hypothesis was that familiarity with the language and images of the campaign would lead to an identification and a predisposition to implement those behaviors suggested to prevent male violence. In addition, the suggested behavior that advertising campaigns should induce should be presented as conduct that everyone could adopt, and not as a heroic or dangerous act [1, 19].

The third knot concerns the repertoire of possible discursive registers that males may exhibit in the reproduction of sexist discourse. Speeches can in fact also vary on the registers of irony and sarcasm, but it was felt that maintaining these registers even

within the awareness campaign, in order to maintain that familiarity of language mentioned above, would have meant somehow diminishing their importance [13, 16].

The last aspect concerned the importance of intervening on men, and how strategic it is to call them into question both as authors and as allies. Including men in campaigns for the prevention of gender violence is not only a change in communication strategy, but it corresponds to a theoretical paradigm shift, to a recent transformation of perspective in the study of gender violence:

Sveva Magaraggia explains: “With this knowledge we started the first phase of the project, which aimed to know the moments in which students from different universities in Milan lived, witnessed or came to know about episodes of violence and know the language they use to talk about these issues. The methods adopted were two: a participatory observation in the places of sociality of students and five focus groups with 6–8 students and female students from different universities in Milan. Students talked mainly about verbal violence and both benevolent and hostile sexism [1, 4, 16] identified places in universities where they witnessed violence or sexism, most of the discussions were about online violence. The focus groups ended with discussions about their reactions and strategies to respond to violence” [5].

2.2 Design the System of Communication Artifacts

As for the second step, Valeria Bucchetti states: “The communication campaign took its own concrete form during a workshop dedicated to the design of communicative artifacts, which would allow to implement the communicative action useful to respond to the intentions of the issuer” [5].

The design role was assigned to six groups of students in the third year of the Communication Design degree course at the Politecnico di Milano. The students, assisted by Bucchetti, chose the poster format for the campaigns and tried to obtain, as a result of the communication process, to highlight the problem of male verbal violence against women within our universities and to counter the phenomenon, first of all by raising awareness.

“Specifically, it was decided to articulate the project brief taking into account the different university contexts, encouraging a reflection on the behaviours in formal areas such as classrooms, archives, libraries and informal university contexts, on what is experienced in areas of refreshment or leisure, in areas of passage (corridors, courtyards,...), until referring to the virtual contexts of social - Instagram, Facebook, Whatsapp etc., dwelling on the forms of verbal violence acted both in the presence and in the absence of the person to whom it is addressed, and on the forms of indirect verbal violence to which we are witnesses” [5].

The elements and directives of research that emerged in the first step (participant observation and focus groups) have constituted an essential data base to start reflections and have suggested interpretative keys around which to grasp and develop a creative thread. In this sense, particularly relevant was the frequency of the stories witnessed by the students, in which messages received from young people unknown to them, which were transformed into sexual advances, emerged.

There are more widespread forms of communication to deal with the issue of violence. Bucchetti in particular tried to avoid those negative implications that Semprini

[17] defines as “good distance”; that is, the tendency to adopt narrative strategies that make the object of discourse perceived as far away in space and time from the spectator. In other words, those messages that propose a stylized vision of male violence against women should be avoided because they risk transmitting an unrealistic account of the phenomenon, which therefore becomes difficult to identify in everyday reality. In the same way, the choice to omit points of reference that relate the episodes of violence told with the daily life of the public gives rise to a decontextualized narrative distant from the physical and cultural reality experienced by the individual recipient who thus risks not being involved and not being questioned by the campaign and its detached language. For all these reasons, the six groups have created as many creative ideas that have tried to use an immediate and direct language, using reference points drawn directly from the students’ lived reality [2, 3]. The six proposals were then judged and selected and reduced to four.

2.3 Four Advertising Creative Solutions

Following the production of the communication artifacts and the implementation of six creative solutions, an *ex ante* analysis of the proposed communication was necessary [11]. An evaluation group was initially set up, composed of the research directors, which took into consideration the six creative proposals in order to reduce them to four on which it was necessary to carry out research before their dissemination.

Sociological research can be exploratory, descriptive or causal and is divided into quantitative or qualitative [9], but in the particular sub-sector of advertising research we are faced with a further complex panorama.

In advertising, researches are mainly divided into pre-test and post-test depending on whether they are carried out before or after the advertising campaign. These are qualitative researches that have to identify and select which of the different creative solutions can best meet the objectives of the campaign [8].

Recent guidelines of qualitative research have led to the use of sensory marketing or neuromarketing, a technique that can break down the bias of normal qualitative and non-qualitative market research, according to which respondents often produce answers in line with the self ideal and not necessarily sincere answers [14]; the answers are often decontextualized and suffer from the post hoc rationalisation according to which in retrospect the respondent tends to explain and justify what he has done and his choices, even the most inexplicable or unjustifiable [15, 20].

2.4 The Methodology of the Third Step

For these reasons it was decided to carry out research in the neuromarketing laboratories of IULM University during September 2019 to explore the impact of creative proposals against gender discrimination.

The project was structured following three distinct objectives. 1) Analysis of the emotional and cognitive impact of subjects in relation to the stimuli of the awareness campaign against gender-based violence. 2) Analysis of exploratory patterns and visual behaviour in relation to the stimuli. 3) Comparative evaluation of the rational analysis.

The stimuli concerned the vision, for about thirty seconds, of the four proposals selected for this last phase. The four proposals were: “Even no” (“Anche no”), “Auto Correct” (“Auto Correct”), “Deviations” (“Deviazioni”), “Out of place” (“Fuori Luogo”) (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The final four ad campaigns chosen

The sample consisted of eight people, 50% men and 50% women, university students. The research method of the Brain Lab at IULM University involves the use of different tools such as electroencephalographic analysis to assess which prefrontal areas are activated, physiological activation analysis that analyzes the microevaluations of sweating to assess the level of emotional activation of the sample, eye tracker system analysis that monitors the visual attention of the sample, and cognitive-rational analysis. To carry out the latter, at the end of the experiment the participants filled in a questionnaire on the aspects of liking and disliking, providing any suggestions and rationally explaining which was their favorite campaign. Furthermore, the questionnaire asked for an evaluation of the contents, the clarity of the message and, finally, whether the focus of the campaign had been centered.

The neurophysiological indices investigated and provided by the instrumentation that, one after the other, the sample under analysis wore are able to provide feedback on the value of the stimulus, i.e. the degree of interest or disinterest depending on the prefrontal areas of the brain involved.

In this way it is possible to calculate the attention index and the memorization index whose higher values indicate, respectively, a higher probability of attention to the stimulus and a higher probability of mnemonic processing [7].

2.5 The Final Results of the Sociological Research Implemented with Neuromarketing Techniques

All four campaigns have shown, through heatmap and scanpaths, that every element of creativity is explored in depth. This indicates that in the thirty seconds available the simulated space and the planar topology of the print ad are perfectly clicked and clearly legible. The invitation to decode is clear and the eye runs fast throughout the flatness of the print advertising [18].

On the whole, therefore, none of the campaigns presents any criticality in terms of visual exploration, and this is a valid consideration for both women and men, i.e. for both sub-samples. From the point of view of graphic construction, images and figures, each campaign therefore achieves a high degree of readability.

While in general the visual exploration tends to be slightly more in-depth in males, the opposite is true for the “Auto Correct” campaign: the exploration of females is more in-depth.

For all four campaigns the mode of exploration is similar: it starts from the top and moves downwards to deepen the areas where the aims of the campaign are explained.

In addition, the prefrontal asymmetry index reveals that all four campaigns’ creativity has been appreciated, but in particular the “Auto Correct” creativity reaches a liking value of 0.75 (compared to 1 as maximum), while the other liking indexes do not exceed 0.34 which is only reached by the “Out of Place” campaign.

The attention rating is also higher for “Auto Correct”, as expected due to the high text component.

Similarly, the memorization index of “Auto Correct” is twice as high as those campaigns that end in the second post ex aequo: “Also No” and “Out of Place”.

Finally, the good results obtained through the neurophysiological indicators are also supported by a more than appreciable level of emotional activation: 0.90 for “Auto Correct”; 0.57 for “Also No”; 0.22 for “Deviations” and 0.59 for “Out of Place”.

“Auto Correct” achieves excellent results in terms of valence, ability to elicit a state of attention, ability to activate mnemonic processes and ability to elicit emotional activation. Finally, the degree of concordance between males and females is positive.

In general, the performance of all four proposed campaigns is good, although some receive lower results in an absolute sense and in some cases there are more marked differences between males and females. The female sample prefers “Auto Correct” as much as the male sample, but the attention index and the memorization and emotional activation index are also very good for the “Out of place” campaign.

Finally, rational evaluation was required. At the end of the experiment, in fact, everyone was asked to answer a short questionnaire to compare the results of neuromarketing with the results of rationalization. Some surprises here happen because “No” and “Deviations” are the ones perceived as more effective in dealing with the topic, and “deviations” is defined as the clearest and most explanatory.

“Out of Place” is the only one on which critical issues are highlighted, since it requires, for a complete understanding, to be put really out of place (and therefore can generate the pun with “inappropriate”). The campaigns were designed to be distributed within the Milanese universities, as in fact happened in winter 2019\2020, but certainly “Fuori Luogo” should have been posted in places that are not their own, not on the

notice boards but on the door of the rectorate, in front of a window, on the library, etc. In this way the text of the message would have been strengthened thanks to the context in which the message should have been placed. The context would play the role that Genette defined as paratext [12].

Males and females basically agree in these rational assessments.

As far as the exclusively creative side is concerned, always in the rationalization phase, a preferred campaign does not emerge. Each one receives in equal measure appreciations with the obvious criticalities, again, expressed for “Fuori Luogo”.

We report some male verbatim referring to the campaign that, in general, was the best, or “Auto Correct”.

“It’s the one that most impressed me, aroused empathy towards the victims and disgust towards the authors. so it had a double action: not only is it wrong towards the victims (if a friend of mine was the victim it would bother me a lot) but it’s also disgusting a guy who behaves like that (already I wouldn’t do what the author did but with this advertisement I make myself count how disgusting I would be to do it)”.

“He takes a theme often seen ironically but sees it critically.”

And feminine.

“I personally feel her closer to my experience, which is why it touches me in a special way. The fact that it is reported involves those who observe it because it is something that is part of our everyday life”.

3 Conclusions

In general terms, males are more critical of creativity than females. They mainly criticize aspects such as the graphic design and the lack of incisiveness of the message. Males are also the ones who provide the most suggestions.

The rational evaluation does not show a real “winning” creativity, although a slight preference goes to “Deviations”. One can only deduce a lack of appreciation for “Out-of-Place” creativity.

When the subjects are asked to choose between the various versions, Deviations seems to agree almost completely with the female sample, receiving no preference from the males; creativity is also not chosen, instead, only by male subjects.

“Auto Correct” creativity gets good rational evaluations and discriminates less between males and females.

If from the rational evaluation only a “losing” creativity emerges, i.e. “Out of Place”, it is the neurophysiological indicators and eye tracking outputs that help us to identify the “winning” campaign.

On “Auto Correct” creativity converge excellent neurophysiological data, excellent performance in terms of visual exploration and a good rational preference level for males and females.

In general terms, however, the creativity is well constructed, easily explorable and able to arouse a positive value in both males and females.

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