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Strategic communication for youth awareness during a Covid-19 outbreak: when the target becomes the creator

Hernâni Zão Oliveira¹³, Helena Lima²³

¹ University of Évora, School of Social Sciences, Management Department, Portugal,

² University of Porto, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Portugal, ³CITCEM – Transdisciplinary Research Center for Culture, Space and Memory, Porto, Portugal

holiveira@uevora.pt, hllima@letras.up.pt

Abstract. During Covid-19 pandemic, a communication campaign promoted by a municipality in Portugal was unable to modify the risk behaviour of teenagers in schools. With the increase in safety rules, the exhaustion of teenagers gave way to revolt and disrespect - students started to remain at the school gates without masks and sharing cigarettes among themselves. The “Every Day Counts” campaign was developed to fix the extremely top-down orientation of the first campaign and to increase the impact of target-oriented communication via local government. Based on a Manifesto to other schools, the students with deviant behaviours were invited to co-create this new initiative. Three complementary products were developed: an animated film; a set of physical billboards distributed throughout the city; and a collection of bracelets that the participants used to promote the campaign. The materials were shared by 80 schools and 7 of them asked for help to replicate the same participatory methodology with their students. Furthermore, reports of deviant behaviour at the municipal school became residual.

Keywords. covid-19; health campaign; schools; adolescents; co-creation; storytelling

Introduction

In Portugal, the management of public schools has been delegated to municipalities since 2019, in a logic of greater proximity and greater effectiveness (Portugal, 2019). Within the transferred competencies, the municipalities are responsible for designing health promotion campaigns for schools (DGS, 2020). Facing the unprecedented situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, several obstacles such as lack of validated information, initial mishaps in public communication and the spreading of misinformation were crucial for delays and misunderstandings in the acceptance of “good messages” by the public (Bin & Boulos, 2021; Bunker, 2020). Health authorities had to work with the media to convey the acceptance of preventive behaviour and the need to implement sanitary measures. News outlets had an important role in advertising the policies that were central for containing the pandemics. It is also known that this kind of communication was better accepted, at least at initial stages of the disease, because people trusted information delivered by mainstream media because it was validated by official health sources (Berg et al., 2021). Accordingly, news, press conferences and other segments were the main source for information because it was reliable and portrayed

with transparency (Chong, 2020).

Literature review

With the advance of the epidemic and the aggravation of the infodemics, defined by WHO (2020) as “too much information, including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak, causing confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health”, the scientific evidence turned out to be limited to guide the local government. In this situation, decision-making became a controversial process. Public officials at the municipality-level had no clear benchmarks or tested policies. This has required the involvement and assistance of other entities, such higher education institutions, to respond to high levels of uncertainty (Ito & Pongeluppe, 2020). This article reports the struggle of a Portuguese municipality during the Covid19 pandemic. With around 30,000 inhabitants, the entity began to work in parallel with researchers in the field of communication to produce a campaign for schools. The "The virus doesn't take a vacation" campaign was closely related to the messages disseminated by the Portuguese General Directorate of Health. The metaphor was used to convey that young people should comply with the rules of distancing, hand disinfection and wearing a protective mask during school hours and beyond. A set of posters with a design adapted for a younger audience was developed and displayed in all schools within the municipality. This information was accompanied by explanatory videos and infographics focused on the national call to action "Be a Public Health Agent", in order to hold each individual responsible for their actions and the context that surrounds them. This call invited micro influencers to talk about prevention measures and was then used as a reference by the World Health Organization (DGS, 2021). Nevertheless, the municipality received reports of risk behaviours in schools after the suspension of a new lockdown, especially among teenagers. Students began to disrespect the new rules imposed back at school, such as not being allowed to share objects and food. Other cases were reported by teachers and educational assistants, who increasingly met students at the school gate without masks and sharing cigarettes with each other. Indeed, the number of infected people began to increase at the municipal school. According to Sadock & Sadock (2007) and Eisenstein (2005), adolescence is characterized by the presence of difficulties and conflicts. As a transition period between childhood and adulthood, physical, cognitive, and psychosocial changes interfere with the definition of identity and the efforts of the individual to achieve the cultural expectations of the society in which they live. Steinberg & Scott (2003) points out that self-control and reflection on future consequences are not yet fully developed, which can partly explain the emotional drive and engagement in deviant behaviours. Mood swings, engaging in risky behaviours, and intense conflicts in family relationships are characteristics of this phase (Pessalacia et al., 2010; Cicchetti & Rogosh, 2002). With the need to produce a strategy that involved these adolescents, the municipality had to design a new campaign. There were two main goals with this: a societal achievement, by developing new awareness strategies to decrease the amount of people gathering at the school gates with risky behaviours; and a scientific goal, to fix the extremely top-down orientation of the first campaign, and increase the impact of target oriented communication via local government. Dubé et al. (2022) highlights that, during a crisis, the need for credibility and public trust increases the amount of unified messages and an exaggeration in “top-down approaches, paternalism, and lack of tailoring to communities”. According to the authors, these can produce a “negative impact on individuals’ adoption of protective behaviours”.

Research method

Using participatory design tools, students were invited to develop a transmedia campaign in the form of a Manifesto for other municipalities. With this, the intention was to combat the paternalistic tone of the usual health education campaigns. Participatory sessions were organized in online meetings called "Ideas Labs", with brainstorming and consensus techniques. A group of 63 students was recruited from 3 different high school classes (n=63). These classes were identified as having a high proportion of students with deviant behaviour. Two face-to-face co-creation sessions were implemented. In addition to the researchers of this study, the sessions were accompanied by a schoolteacher, a health communication specialist and a public health medical doctor. In each of the sessions, a set of topics to be discussed was presented. Following the principles of brainstorming (Wilson, 2013), for each of the topics, three moments were promoted: exposition of ideas; open discussion; and decision making using digital voting software. Decisions were made when an absolute majority vote was reached (> 50%). In the first session, discussion items were organized according to the following: i. Identification of key messages that are relevant to behaviour change; ii. The communication materials that must be produced for the key messages to be delivered to the target group; iii. And the tone of the communication that can be used to better promote a behaviour change (Fowler & Ridout, 2011). The second session was focused on the development of the narrative of the main product of the campaign, using a storytelling approach (Reason & Heinemeyer, 2016). This session was also important to decide on the persuasion triggers of the campaign (Cialdini, 2006) and to discuss other potential dissemination materials to be delivered with the Manifesto.

Results

At the request of the municipality, the new campaign was programmed to launch four key messages for students in schools: "Avoid staying at the school gate and forming crowds"; "Keep the distance from colleagues during breaks"; "Do not share objects or food with colleagues"; and "Waving to greet should replace kisses and hugs". During the participatory sessions, students agreed with these, but suggested adding three more key messages. "Maintain safety measures during extracurricular activities" was one of the pieces of information recognized as being important to reinforce. According to participants, there was a noticeable relaxation in the rules when students left school to go to other activities. Some students mentioned that there was also always some confusion when leaving and entering school buses, and therefore suggested including "On public transport, give priority to those getting off" as a key message as well. "Use the protective mask correctly" was a controversial topic because many felt that it was information that was circulated quite regularly at school. However, others mentioned that it was very common to see incorrect use of masks, not only by students who deliberately disregarded the rules, but also by others, including teachers and assistants. After reaching the final 7 key messages, and to establish a priority criterion, each student was given the power to vote on the 3 most important messages to be communicated. As Table 1 shows, "Avoid staying at the school gate and forming crowds" and "Maintain safety measures during extracurricular activities" were voted as the most important messages to be given.

Table 1. Priority ranking of key messages of the new campaign

Key messages	Number of votes
“Avoid staying at the school gate and forming crowds.”	57
“Maintain safety measures during extracurricular activities.”	42
“Keep the distance from colleagues during breaks.”	26
“Do not share objects or food with colleagues.”	25
“Use the protective mask correctly.”	22
“Waving to greet should replace kisses and hugs.”	13
“On public transport, give priority to those getting off.”	4

The tone of a campaign is very important to establish how the content is prepared to reach the target audience. There was a great discussion to go beyond the formal nature of the rules that were being imposed within the scope of the pandemic. The use of humour was one of the most voted solutions, but it was left aside by some participants because it was a risk when talking about something so serious and with so many associated deaths. For this reason, the majority opted for a more sentimental or nostalgic tone that could demonstrate the seriousness and relevance of preventive actions (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of the votes on the most relevant campaign tone (%)

Tone of communication	Distribution of votes
Humorous	41,2%
Regretful	4,8%
Sentimental / Nostalgic	50,8%
Pessimistic 3,2%	3,2%

In order to create a Manifesto that could be widely disseminated, participants thought of a short film or a play. Both contents had already been developed in a school context with the help of the municipality and had been well received by the school community. As shown in Table 3, the short film ended up receiving the majority of votes (57,1%) and being selected as the central communication product of this campaign. A campaign based on social media posts was also considered, but some comments raised the difficulty of maintaining a loyal audience

for content that is released in phases. On the other hand, awareness sessions in a classroom context carried out by experts ended up being the least voted solution (1.6%). Some participants mentioned that the impact of these sessions largely depended on the type of expert delivering the session. Some showed empathy and managed to capture interest, but others ended up having complex language or speaking in a less than empathetic way of communicating.

Table 3. Distribution of the vote on the most relevant communication material for the campaign (%)

Communication materials	Distribution of votes (%)
Theatre play	23,8%
Short film	57,1%
Posters and other printed materials	4,8%
Awareness sessions during classes	1,6%
Social media posts	12,7%

In the second co-creation session, participants were divided into 6 different groups. Each group aimed to present a narrative proposal for the short film as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Distribution of the vote among the narratives developed by the working groups in the second co-creation session (%)

Stories developed by the 6 groups of students	Distribution of votes (%)
Story 1. It's 2030 and three former schoolmates plan a dinner and remember the difficulties of overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic and complying with the rules at school. 30,1%	30,1%
Story 2. A mother talks to her teenage daughter about her time in high school. The difficulties of the pandemic mark the conversation, with the mother showing how she encouraged her colleagues to follow the rules.	3,2%
Story 3. A class representative is called by the school principal, who tells him	

that the class is behaving inappropriately. The film tells the story of how the class delegate convinced his colleagues to change their behaviour.	7,9%
Story 4. The national news reports that the number of people infected with Covid-19 is increasing in schools. The film is presented by a journalist, who shows the most pressing problems in a report format.	17,5%
Story 5. A teenager lost his mother a few years ago. Every day this teenager remembers his mother and how much he misses her. This film shows that the difficulty of following the rules is outweighed by the fear that the pandemic could take someone else away from him.	39,7%
Story 6. The messages are recorded in a prevention campaign format in different locations around the school. Several representatives of the school community look directly at the camera to communicate these topics.	1,6%

As an absolute majority was not achieved for one of the stories, the two stories with the most votes went to a second round of voting. Table 5 shows that story 5 was the most voted. Participants who supported this story revealed that the seriousness of the pandemic could be conveyed in a less obvious way and that it could release deeper emotions and greater identification with the public.

Table 5. Distribution of the vote on the stories that made it to the second round of voting (%)

Stories developed during the co-creation session	Distribution of votes (%)
Story 1. It's 2030 and three former schoolmates plan a dinner and remember the difficulties of overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic and complying with the rules at school.	33,3%

<p>Story 5. A teenager lost his mother a few years ago. Every day this teenager remembers his mother and how much he misses her. This film shows that the difficulty of following the rules is outweighed by the fear that the pandemic could take someone else away from him. 66,7%</p>	<p>66,7%</p>
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In a brainstorming format, some possible triggers that could increase the motivation of the target of the Manifesto were discussed. The teenagers revealed that it would be interesting to have an influencer who could appear in the film and be the narrator of its content. Participants reported that they get excited when personalities come to their school to talk about relevant topics. Some names of public figures were mentioned during the discussion, with relevance to three professional profiles: singers; athletes; and media professionals. Contact was made with one of the singers most mentioned in the discussion, who was willing to support the campaign and record the narration. However, due to scheduling conflicts, the singer was unable to guarantee this participation. The second personality contacted was the host of the morning program of one of the biggest broadcasters in Portugal. During the brainstorming exercise, one of the students mentioned that it would be interesting to choose a person who could identify with the teenagers' daily lives. In the car or on the bus, teenagers often listen to this personality's program and thought it would be a great way to increase the film's visibility. The host agreed to be part of the project. In addition, the students agreed that it would be pertinent to develop a film that could show a vision aligned with the reality of teenagers, who spend a large part of their day communicating on social media. In this sense, they suggested that key messages could be given to the main character through these channels.

The main character and the beginning of the narrative

The group that created the storytelling for the most voted option had chosen a 15-year old male as the main character. The other participants agreed on the character's gender, to reinforce the idea that boys can also feel fear and fear and should exacerbate their anxieties. This was supported by the Public Health expert, who said that many mental health and anxiety problems are diagnosed in young adult males, who have difficulty seeking help and talking about what is troubling them. The next step established the beginning of the narrative. One of the participants suggested that the mother's memory could be marked by a sentence written on paper that the protagonist read every day. This phrase could be something that served as a motto for the character's life, but could also serve as a warning for the pandemic period they were experiencing. The participants were again divided into the same groups to present a proposed message left by the character's mother. Table 6 presents the 6 sentence hypotheses and the votes that each sentence received.

Table 6. Distribution of the vote among the sentences that could set the tone of the film and the campaign (%)

Written sentences to begin the narrative	Distribution of votes (%)
Never forget your value. You are a hero!	6,3%
Despite your fear, you have what it takes to overcome all difficulties.	7,9%
Look at life as an opportunity. Every day counts!	44,5%
Enjoy life to the fullest. Everything will be fine!	4,8%
Even if it seems difficult, you have all the courage to succeed.	7,9%
Life is made of challenges. They are the ones who will show you your true value.	28,6%

Following the same methodology, the two most voted phrases went to a second round of voting. As shown in table 7, the phrase "Look at life as an opportunity. Every day counts!" was the most voted, with 70% of the votes. During discussion, participants considered that this would be a good alternative to the slogan "The virus doesn't take a vacation!", praising a deeper, more serious and hopeful side to this new campaign.

Table 7. Distribution of the vote on the sentences that made it to the second round (%)

Written sentences to begin the narrative	Distribution of votes (%)
Look at life as an opportunity. Every day counts!	73,0%
Life is made of challenges. They are the ones who will show you your true value.	27,0%

Storyboard Development

Taking into consideration that the radio host agreed to be the face of this new campaign and that the group was interested in telling the story of a teenager's daily life through social media, after the co-creation sessions a storyboard was created that could meet suggestions from

participating students. This storyboard was sent to participants and validated in the classroom. Feedback from each of the classes was used to develop a film with decisions to incorporate key messages at various points in the narrative. A Portuguese version of the short movie with subtitles in English is available at <http://bit.ly/46MpA2x>

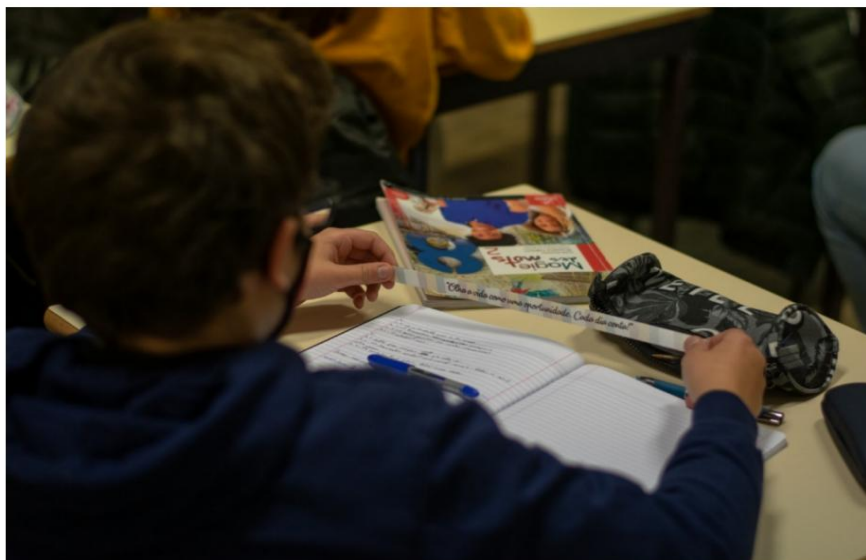
Dissemination and Impact

Once developed, the film was sent to 80 different schools at a national level. The research group received requests from 7 schools to be able to replicate the methodology of the co-creation sessions. Furthermore, the students participating in the co-creation sessions revealed a lot of enthusiasm for this activity and proposed holding presentation sessions for the classes at their school. During these sessions, the students were identified with a bracelet identical to Gustavo's and with the same phrase inscribed on it. Figure 1 shows the bracelet model and figure 2 shows one of the participants with a bracelet.

Figure 1. Printable fabric bracelet mock-up



Figure 2. One of the participants receives the bracelet during the preparation of the short film presentation



These students presented the film to around 650 colleagues, explaining their contribution to the final multimedia product, and reinforcing the need to comply with prevention rules. During the first 6 months, 64 news covered the film's release and the campaign. On social media, the film was shared from the institutional accounts of the schools and the City Hall. According to what was found, 392 shares and 838,531 views were recorded from posts linked to the organization of the campaign. It is believed that this number is lower than the real one because other accounts and institutions shared the film independently. The Municipality responsible for the campaign realized that the Manifesto could go beyond the school context, and used Gustavo's character to create billboards and distribute them throughout the city (Figure 3). In addition to being used as a communication tool for the community, the billboards promoted recognition of student co-creators and increased their involvement in activities. Teachers and educational assistants reported that there was a noticeable decrease in cases of disobedience to rules to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

Figure 4. Billboard with Gustavo's character and the three colours of the character's bracelet. Each of the colours is associated with preventive care that the population must take



Discussion and conclusions

The transfer of competences in the area of Education is a very important opportunity for municipalities in Portugal. It is also a responsibility that requires qualified human resources that can work in a coordinated manner and with entities that can provide the greatest and best evidence possible. At a time of great uncertainty such as the Covid-19 pandemic, excessive dependence on national authorities led to difficulty in targeting the message about Covid-19 for schools. When comparing the “The virus doesn’t take a vacation” campaign with the “Every Day Counts” campaign, it is clear how this lack of segmentation may have led to the alienation of some groups, such as teenagers. In the first campaign, the narrative used was appropriate for school-age children, but not fully adapted for adolescents; although modified for younger audiences, the design followed the lines of a general target; and the slogan was superficial and had little room for reflection. Furthermore, the campaign was not able to adapt to the safety

standards that were becoming increasingly strict, nor did it take into account the exhaustion of students and the propensity for taking risks. The failure was born from the poor flexibility and adaptation of the campaign, and, most importantly, from not listening to this specific target. Born from a participatory methodology, the new campaign managed to create more empathy with teenagers, identifying situations in which the risk was more imminent; having key messages more appropriate to adolescents' day-to-day life that neither begins nor ends at school; producing narratives that can generate more identification; and creating fictional characters that can promote greater critical thinking. This participatory methodology also gave space to realize that not all digital channels are relevant. As an example, an interesting detail is told during the feedback to the storyboard: several participants commented that the protagonist's use of Facebook somewhat distorted the reality of a 15-year-old boy. "We don't use Facebook anymore," many of them mentioned. In addition to making the campaign more robust, the participatory methodology placed the target teenager in the role of creator. This responsibility would have been of great importance in changing the behaviour of adolescents. The reduction of paternalism by purposefully shifting the focus to teenagers from other schools placed the participant in the co-creation sessions in a prominent place and as a representative of the message to be conveyed. Despite this, it is important to reflect on the ethical issues that are implicit in this methodology. Does the participatory methodology have a nudging effect (Thaler & Sunstein, 2021) that, when it disappears, does not cause the desired change? There is, in fact, growing evidence on the impact of participatory methodologies on health, but more efforts are needed to understand the mechanisms that lead to behaviour change and measure the results of these changes. Still, it is considered that, even in an uncertain environment, it is important to invest in the participation of targets for the creation and validation of communication tools. There are many campaigns that continue to be produced with residual effects because identification with the end user is not being generated.

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