



Policy Brief: Public messaging for Generation Z

Lessons for government communications with young people from the Covid-19 pandemic

Key Recommendations

University of Nottingham research into young people's responses to UK Government campaigns aimed at them during the Covid-19 reveals some key principles for more effective messaging in the future.

Use neutral language. Avoid using language, such as slang, that may be associated with a particular demographic or cultural group. This is likely to be based on stereotypes which are both patronising to young people and likely to exclude some groups.

Adopt a serious, professional tone to convey a simple message. Using humour and playful language/imagery is likely to trivialise the message. Communications should be informative and clear.

Ensure that imagery is relevant to the message. Images should be simple and their direct relevance to the message clear. Do not use images or emojis just to signal that the material is intended for young people as this is likely to detract from the message.

Include contact details and emergency advice. These should be included on the face of all materials. Ideally a phone number should be included, but certainly a web or email address. Hashtags should be short and unique, without punctuation.

Embed inclusivity. Ensure that colour schemes and language are gender and age neutral. Explicitly mark that campaign materials are speaking to all young people and signpost a range of community-specific support resources where appropriate e.g., to organisations supporting LGBTQ+ young people, young people with disabilities and young people from diverse ethnic groups. Translate materials into languages relevant to local communities. Ensure they are widely accessible in public and community spaces, not just on social media.

Context

This Policy Brief aims to help government and other organisations working with young people to avoid the communication pitfalls of previous campaigns. It

advocates for the development of a more inclusive approach for all young people in society. A new approach to communications can help ensure that every member of Generation Z gets the help and support they need rapidly and effectively, so that unnecessary suffering, violence and abuse can be addressed.

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Concerns have been raised that Generation Z (age 11-23) is at risk of becoming a 'lost generation' because of disruption to their education, health and wellbeing caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.ⁱ For some young people, lockdowns and restrictions have resulted in increased domestic abuse, violence, and prejudice.ⁱⁱ Social isolation has also harmed their mental health.ⁱⁱⁱ This includes lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth and young girls at greater risk from female genital mutilation (FGM).

Our project examined the effectiveness of two UK Government anti-abuse campaigns launched during 2020-2021:

1. The **Something's Not Right** campaign targeting young people aged 13+, encouraging them to 'recognise different forms of abuse, report it and 'get help'.



Figure 1: Something's Not Right logo

- The **You Are Not Alone** campaign targeting all ages, supporting people experiencing domestic abuse and informing them that refuges and services remained open during lockdowns.



Figure 2: You Are Not Alone logo

Our research focused on investigating the reach of these campaigns, and how effectively they communicated critical messages to young people.

We surveyed Generation Z young people to gain their perspectives, conducted linguistic analysis of both campaigns and interviewed professionals working in young people’s services. This Policy Brief details our findings and recommendations to government and policy makers.

Key Findings

Summary of findings

- The use of ‘teen slang’ in campaign language was seen by young people as **cringeworthy, unrelatable and patronising**, damaging the overall effectiveness of the message.
- The campaign style was **not authoritative or serious enough** to reflect the subject matter of violence and abuse
- Campaign **imagery was not always relevant** to the overall campaign message, which caused confusion. Emojis were used out-of-context and thus did not make sense where they appeared. This undermined the clarity of messaging and campaign effectiveness.
- Key pieces of further information** were not always easy to find on campaign materials, especially information about **where to get help** and who to approach for help. Campaign hashtags were ineffective.
- Concerns were raised by young people about the **exclusion** of people who do not have regular or unrestricted access to the internet, particularly from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Awareness and expectations

Survey participants’ awareness of the two campaigns was very low. Less than 5% of young people recalled the Something’s Not Right campaign, and just 9% recalled the You Are Not Alone campaign. Young people expected communications targeting them to include:

- advice about who to talk to (78%)
- language that is easy to understand (76%)
- information on where to look for help (75%)

97% of participants agreed social media is a good place to advertise campaigns. However, 21% were concerned that unless campaigns had a broader presence in public and community spaces and schools, young people with limited access to technology would be excluded.

Language

The Something’s Not Right Campaign was emblazoned with stereotypical ‘teen’ slang words used out-of-context, including evaluative terms such as, ‘boujee’, ‘bae’ and ‘on fleek’ (see e.g., Figure 3). 79% of participants evaluated this language negatively.

“Words are used in the wrong context and do not relate at all to the messaging of the advert... Used in this context it is more off-putting than formal language as it comes across very obviously as an older person attempting to use slang they are not familiar with (trying too hard).”

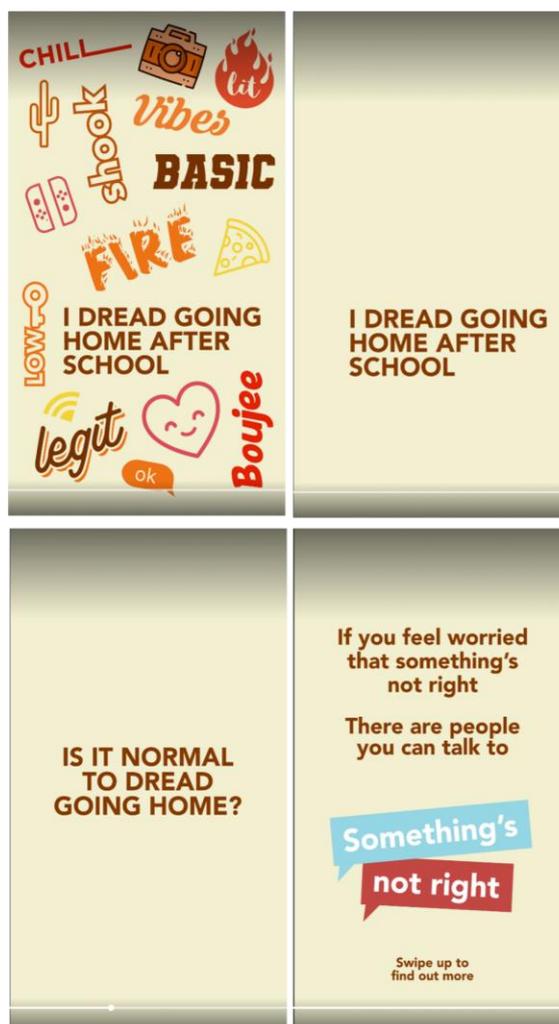


Figure 3: Frames from animation – ‘physical abuse’

The most common term used to evaluate this language was 'cringey'.

Participants felt that the slang language, based on a stereotype of 'teen speak', was inauthentic, patronising and detracted from the seriousness of the message.

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There were concerns that the slang was associated with a very young and 'mainstream' teen culture and would alienate those from other groups.

“Whilst this is aimed well at the cultural mainstream, those who eschew association with that mainstream will just tune it out.”

“This material seems quite tailored to a younger audience.”

When asked how they would improve the campaign material, 53% of participants said they would prefer a more formal, authoritative style of language, with a more serious and informative tone, without slang.



Figure 4: Frames from You Are Not Alone animation

The You Are Not Alone campaign material, which used more neutral, simpler language, was evaluated far more positively. 97% of participants felt the language was clear; 37% praised its clarity, 22% praised its simplicity of messaging and 11% praised its directness.

Images

Images were used in both campaigns. Emojis and icons used in Something's Not Right were considered to be irrelevant to the message by 53% of participants. Participants considered them to be at odds with the serious subject matter.

“Light-hearted emojis on an emotionally heavy campaign are not a good match.”

69% of participants felt that the hand logo used in You Are Not Alone helped to convey the message, with most interpreting it as a hand of support or a stop sign aimed at perpetrators. However, a small percentage of participants (3%) interpreted the hand logo as a slap or physical assault, or made negative associations between acts of abuse and love.

“It kind of makes me think that instead of getting physically abused/ smacked with the hand, you should be getting smacked with... love?”

This indicates that more clarity and context may be necessary to debunk any interpretation that abuse comes from a place of love or is a sign of love.

Getting help

Directing young people experiencing abuse to help and support was a key aim of both campaigns. However, only 35% of participants understood where to go for help after viewing the Something's Not Right campaign materials. They expressed frustrations that there were no contact details on the face of the material, relying on a 'swipe up' instruction or signposting in accompanying social media posts. Just 4% of people knew what to do if someone was in immediate danger. A youth worker told us: *“I think unless I had a very good reason to, I would maybe feel a bit careless sharing this information without really clear actionable points. I know for a fact any kind of domestic abuse information that we've shared has had, where possible, phone number or email or whatever webchat info in the image.”*

“Only 35% of participants understood where to go for help after viewing the Something's Not Right campaign materials.”

In contrast, 87% of participants knew where to go for help after viewing the You Are Not Alone campaign material which featured a government web address. Still only 38% felt confident they knew what to do if

someone was in immediate danger after viewing Figure 4.

The hashtags #somethingsnotright and #youarenotalone were far too generic to direct young people to online support on social media. Punctuation and contractions (you're and something's) were easily mis-remembered or mis-typed.

Methodology

We launched an online survey during Spring 2021 which was advertised on social media and sent directly to schools, colleges and universities in all four UK nations. The survey asked about young people's existing awareness of the campaigns and their views on campaign materials. 324 young people aged 16-23 participated.

We also investigated the language and images of the campaign using corpus linguistics, a computational method to statistically analyse text. This illuminated patterns of how the government was communicating with young people and the features they had chosen to use to convey meanings. We also conducted five in-depth interviews with youth workers to explore their awareness of the campaigns and their perspectives on the materials.

The findings reported in this Policy Brief focus primarily on the survey responses, with the linguistic analysis and interview data used to contextualise and supplement those findings. This approach ensures that the views and evaluations of young people themselves are prioritised, enabling their voices to directly inform our recommendations.

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ⁱ The Children's Commissioner (2020). '[Coronavirus crisis could see a lost generation of vulnerable teenagers falling through gaps in the school and social care systems](#)'.

ⁱⁱ Barnardo's (2020). 'How Coronavirus has affected the LGBTQ+ community'. Available at: <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/blog/how-coronavirus-has-affected-lgbt-community>. Accessed 5 October 2021.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Cowie, H. and Myers, C.-A. (2020). 'The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health and well-being of children and young people,' *Children and Society* 35(1): 62-74.