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Lisbon Street Campaign Against Ageism: A Promising Multi-Stakeholder Initiative

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Introduction

Portugal is currently the fifth country in the world with the highest percentage of older people: twenty seven percent of the population is aged 60 years or older and this proportion is expected to reach forty one percent by 2050 (United Nations, 2015). Paradoxically, data from the European Social Survey (2008-2009) shows that ageism is the most prevalent form of discrimination in the country, with thirty nine percent of older people experiencing some sort of age discriminatory practices in their daily lives (Lima, Marques, Batista, & Ribeiro, 2010).

Ageism refers to generalized negative attitudes and practices towards individuals based only on their age (Nelson, 2002). Research suggests that this widespread phenomenon has broad implications for older people in several fundamental outcomes, such as memory performance, stress levels, will-to-live, and even morbidity and mortality (Levy, 2003, 2009; Marques, Lima, Abrams & Swift, 2014). Deconstructing negative stereotypes of ageing is thus a fundamental step to promote a more positive society for all ages.

A possible path to achieve this goal is to create public campaigns raising awareness about ageing and ageism. Display prints, including posters and billboards, can be very effective in drawing attention to such issues (Bartholomew, Parcel, Kok, Gottlieb, & Fernández, 2011). Noteworthy examples of poster-based campaigns come from the former Age Concern and current Age UK charity in the United Kingdom (e.g., the “Best before March 73” campaign; “Poster campaign to fight ageism”, 2001) and the “Say No to Ageism Week” annual initiative in Ireland (e.g., the “Age is a label that doesn’t always fit” campaign; “Week long anti-ageism campaign”, 2005).

Despite these valuable efforts to counter ageism, such initiatives are rarely reported in the scientific literature and little is known about their development and implementation. Documenting the good practices in this domain is fundamental to promote and facilitate the

replication of successful campaigns. This is particularly relevant given that some of these initiatives have raised substantial public controversy and considered inappropriate or offensive, such as the “Say No to Ageism Week” campaign “What’s your attitude to ageism?” (“Anti-ageism campaign posters offensive”, 2008) and the Age Concern campaign “The first thing some people notice is her age” (Treneman, 1998). In this article, the authors describe the development of an awareness campaign aiming to improve the perceptions about ageing and older people in Lisbon, the largest city and capital of Portugal. This involved the presentation of positive images of ageing through the use of street posters and social networks (e.g., Facebook). An important feature of the present campaign was the collaboration of various stakeholders from different fields and with different societal roles, with the aim to avoid the undesired controversies that existed in similar initiatives. This diversity of contributions and perspectives on ageing allowed the creation of an awareness campaign that gathered consensus among several social agents. In our view, this represents a very important and innovative practice in the fight against ageism.

The authors played the role of “advisers” in this campaign, as the Lisbon University Institute (ISCTE-IUL) is one of the partners of the international project SIforAGE – Social Innovation for an Active and Healthy Ageing, which aims to develop a new and positive vision of ageing for longer and better lives. The SIforAGE consortium comprises many partners from all over Europe, Turkey, and Brazil, including universities, research centres, public administrations, civil society organizations, and companies, who work together to promote an inclusive society. The campaign described below is based on this multidisciplinary approach, bringing together researchers, students, politicians, and social organizations in the pursuit of the same goal: the development of a society for all ages.

Activities and Participants

The awareness campaign under the theme “increasing the positive images of older people” resulted from the collaboration of multiple stakeholders with different roles. It was originally proposed by the Lisbon Social Network, a local partnership created to promote the cooperation between public and private entities that work to prevent and solve social issues in the city of Lisbon. The main partners involved in the project were the Lisbon City Council, the Social Security Institute, and Santa Casa da Misericórdia (Holy House of Mercy), a charity responsible for coordinating the Lisbon Social Network platform for the ageing area. Santa Casa da Misericórdia suggested the creation of an awareness campaign to improve the public perceptions about older people and the Lisbon City Council agreed to participate by financing its execution and providing the necessary resources, including the city information panels where the campaign posters would be placed. Since the Lisbon City Council was already planning to create and fund similar initiatives to counter age discrimination, it was possible to channel some of these funds to the campaign.

As the coordinator of the project, Santa Casa da Misericórdia invited the Higher School of Communication and Media Studies to design the campaign. A group of professors presented their advertising students the possibility of developing this campaign as part of their senior year final project. Organized in groups, the students were free to create the campaign posters under the supervision of their professors. As an important part of the development process, the students did preliminary research to understand how older people are viewed and treated by society. This involved searching for scientific studies, informally discussing this topic with older family members, such as their parents and grandparents, and conducting interviews with professionals working with older people, such as psychologists and social workers. Professors and students also had regular meetings with the Lisbon Social Network partners throughout the development process to discuss the campaign.

When they were finished, the students presented their campaign posters to the Lisbon Social Network partners. The Lisbon University Institute (ISCTE-IUL) played the role of an external adviser in the selection process based on the authors' expertise in prejudice reduction interventions. The chosen campaign consisted of three posters depicting the same individuals in different moments of their lives: young age and old age. By adopting a positive life-course perspective, it shows that ageing is the continuation of lives well-lived. One of the posters showed two couples dancing, both back when they were younger (black and white picture) and now that they are older (coloured picture), along with the slogan "Age changes. Not the fun." (figure 1). Following the same format, other posters showed a woman playing the piano (figure 2, "Age changes. Not the talent.") and a woman interacting with children (figure 3, "Age changes. Not the affection.").

Figures 1, 2 and 3

The awareness campaign was launched on 1st October 2015, as part of the International Day of Older Persons celebrations. The posters were placed in three busy areas of the city and remained in the city network of information panels until 18th October 2015. The campaign and its posters were also publicized in local newspapers, institutional websites and social networks.

Benefits and Lessons Learned

To understand the development process of the awareness campaign, the authors conducted in-depth interviews with the main stakeholders involved in this project: the Councillor for the social rights department of the Lisbon City Council, two Professors of the Higher School of Communication and Media Studies, and the spokesperson for the students group who designed the chosen campaign posters.

In an attempt to assess the public impact of the campaign, the authors interviewed a representative from the Portuguese Pensioners and Retirees Association and analysed the reactions to the campaign posters shared in social networks, namely Facebook.

Lessons Learned from the Campaign Development

The Lisbon City Council welcomed this initiative, since the social rights department was already planning similar actions as part of its program for active ageing. According to the social rights Councillor, this was an opportunity to meet their goals of promoting campaigns against discrimination of older people, as well as intergenerational activities. Despite being a first step, the Councillor believes it was an important initiative to raise public awareness to the issues of ageing and ageism: “If each person passing by the poster looks at it and reads it, it has enough information to think about the issue. It is a small contribution to change the mentality of the person who passed by.” Besides this successful experience, the Lisbon City Council intends to promote additional policies and interventions aiming to counter ageist stereotypes and discrimination and to promote an active and healthy ageing: “It is an effort that will continue in the coming years. The city is ageing greatly. Lisbon is the European capital with the oldest population. We either change this way of thinking, or we will have a serious social problem.”

In turn, for the advertising students and their professors, the campaign development was both challenging and constructive. The Professors noticed that most students adhered to this initiative with interest, though mainly because it came from an actual client, not necessarily because of its theme. In fact, some of them initially verbalized that the subject was boring and that they had never thought of it. However, by designing an awareness campaign to change public perceptions about older people, the students ended up changing their own views: “I even heard a student say she wanted to die at the age of 50, because she did not want to reach old age. But she changed completely. She realized that it does not have

to be something bad.” Though students chose different communication approaches for the campaign, the Professors found a common theme: “I think that the main message was somewhat transversal to all: labels like old, senior or elder end up hiding the person behind them. They do not stop being who they are when they turn 65. They are fundamentally people, regardless of their age.”

Besides sharing some of these views, the advertising students’ spokesperson believes the research process helped them achieve a better understanding of the causes and consequences of ageism: “We reached the conclusion that it starts early. From an early age, we are afraid of ageing. We think that young is good and old is bad. That is why there is such marginalization.” For this reason, her group chose to avoid the negative affect usually associated with ageing: “In the ads, seniors are always used to make us feel pity. But pity does not make us take action. And also those shocking ads... We tried to avoid that in our campaign, the negative impact.” Instead, they adopted a positive approach when conceiving their communication strategy: “We wanted to show that everyone is going to reach old age and we do not have to fear that. From an early age, we should start thinking that ageing is something normal and part of our lives. Age changes, but we keep being ourselves. Age does not change who we are.”

Public Impact of the Awareness Campaign

The Pensioners and Retirees Association representative, an older person herself, greatly valued this campaign, especially because it represents older people as productive individuals: “It is very difficult to find images of older people who are active and working.” In her opinion, these initiatives should be multiplied and given greater visibility and continuity: “It cannot stop here. These campaigns must have continuity in order to produce the desired effect.”

The campaign also received generally positive comments and reactions in the social networks. Congratulatory and other favourable messages came from individuals with different ages and occupations, from researchers to professional caregivers: “That is my motto every day. I work so that the older people under my care live every moment of their lives to the fullest.”

Conclusions

The awareness campaign “increasing the positive images of older people” in Lisbon represented an initial but very meaningful step in the fight against ageism. It was a very positive and enriching project for the multiple stakeholders involved, promoting the participation of different types of audiences and age groups. Given the expected ageing of the population and the wide dissemination of ageism across multiple countries, it would be extremely beneficial if this type of initiative could be further developed. We hope that the example portrayed in this work may inspire this important movement of needed social change.

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Figures 1-3. The three posters designed for the awareness campaign “increasing the positive images of older people”.



Figure 1. “Age changes. Not the fun. 1st October. International Day of Older Persons.”



Figure 2. “Age changes. Not the talent. 1st October. International Day of Older Persons.”



Figure 3. “Age changes. Not the affection. 1st October. International Day of Older Persons.”