



Preventing sexual harassment through a prosocial bystander campaign: It's #SafeToSay

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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment is pervasive and often hidden, occurring on a continuum of violence against women, domestic abuse, and sexual violence (VAWDASV), and often underpinned by problematic attitudes and beliefs. Bystander interventions have been shown to illicit positive outcomes in VAWDASV prevention. Therefore, the Wales Violence Prevention Unit created the #SafeToSay campaign, to encourage prosocial bystander responses against sexual harassment. The campaign was delivered in two phases. Phase One was delivered in Cardiff and Swansea, calling everyone to action. Phase Two was delivered in Swansea and specifically engaged men. Both phases received a process and outcomes evaluation using social media and website analytics, and a public perception survey. The surveys showed that members of the public felt that #SafeToSay had drawn people's attention to an important issue and had provided them with some of the information and skills needed to take prosocial bystander action against sexual harassment. However, men had particularly negative responses to some of the social media advertisements in Phase Two. Possible explanations for this have been explored. When considering future iterations of #SafeToSay, more work is needed to understand what works in engaging men and boys in violence prevention campaigns through research, focused engagement, consultation and coproduction with this group. Similarly, refining the target audience, including exploring options for targeting other socio-demographics, should be considered. This could be achieved through behavioural insights work, such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups. This would support the development of messaging to make the campaign more relatable to the desired target audience.

Key Words Violence prevention; sexual harassment; bystanders; campaigns; night-time economy; sexual violence.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is a pervasive and often hidden social problem (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018). The UK Government Equalities Office's 2020 *Sexual Harassment Survey* found that 72% of the adult population had experienced sexual harassment at some point in their lives. Sexual harassment is particularly prevalent amongst 18- to 24-year-old women, with 97% reporting that they experienced some form of sexual harassment in their lifetime (UN Women, 2021). Most commonly, the perpetrators of sexual harassment are men, and the victims are women (Adams et al., 2020).

Women most commonly experience sexual harassment in the street, pub, club or bar (UN Women, 2021). Whilst the night-time economy does not cause sexual harassment, there

are many factors associated with it that can promote the conditions for it to occur. This includes intoxication, drug use, overcrowding, and anonymity (Janssen et al., 2020; Quigg et al., 2020; Philpot et al., 2019). These factors, coupled with problematic attitudes and beliefs relating to gender (for example, misogyny), can result in sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment occurs on a continuum of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) behaviours. This continuum ranges from unwanted sexual attention or harassment through to rape and homicide. Evidence suggests that problematic attitudes and beliefs relating to gender inequality, including sexism, racism, misogyny, and homophobia, can underpin violent behaviours that can escalate when left unchallenged (see Figure 1). This can lead to social and cultural norms in which sexual

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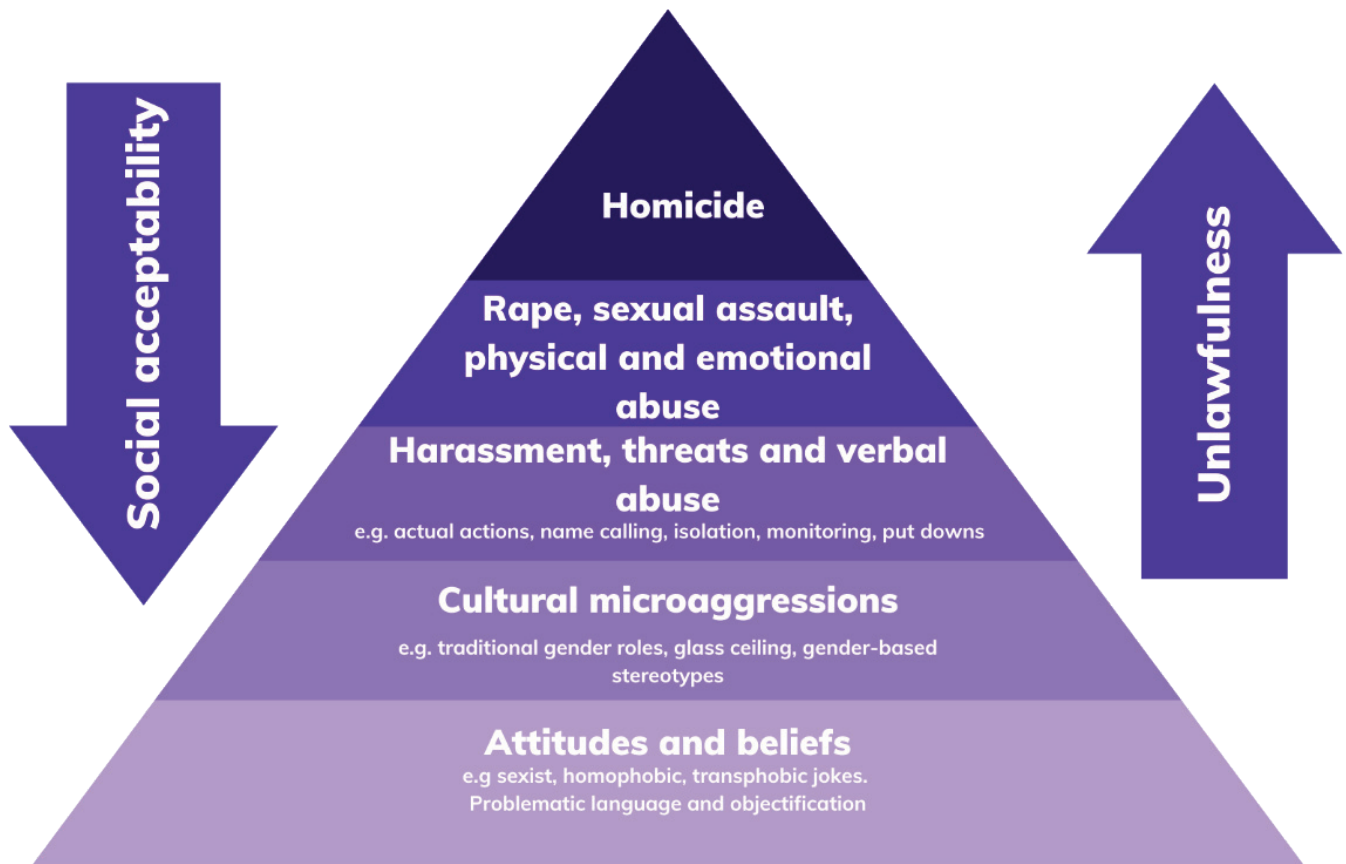


FIGURE 1 Pyramid of sexual violence.

harassment is highly prevalent and acceptable (McMahon & Banyard, 2012).

Bystanders

The 2020 *Sexual Harassment Survey* found that 38% of 12,131 people surveyed had witnessed sexual harassment, yet only 16% had intervened (Adams et al., 2020). Those who intervene positively are called “prosocial bystanders”. Prosocial bystander responses include interrupting the situation to prevent it escalating, being a supportive ally to victims, and speaking out against the social norms that perpetuate sexual harassment within the night-time economy, including addressing problematic attitudes and beliefs relating to gender (Pederson et al., 2017; Cares et al., 2015).

Evidence suggests that bystanders need to follow four steps before they will take prosocial action in response to VAWDASV. These four steps are termed the “bystander theory of change”, and are as follows:

1. Becoming aware of the behaviour
2. Recognizing that behaviour as problematic
3. Feeling responsible to take action
4. Feeling they possess the right skills to take action (Berkowitz, 2009).

A systematic literature review to explore what works to prevent VAWDASV found promising evidence to support

the use of bystander training programs, as well as campaigns and programs that transform harmful gender norms (Addis & Snowdon, 2021). Whilst there is strong evidence to support bystander interventions against VAWDASV, evidence on the impact bystanders can have on sexual harassment within the night-time economy is an emerging area of research (Quigg et al., 2020).

#SafeToSay Campaign

The Wales Violence Prevention Unit’s #SafeToSay campaign aimed to encourage prosocial bystander responses to sexual harassment in the night-time economy. More specifically, the campaign sought to address problematic attitudes and beliefs that may escalate into sexual harassment if left unchallenged (Figure 1). The campaigns followed the bystander theory of change, aiming to provide bystanders with awareness of problematic behaviour and the skills to challenge or divert from potential perpetrator behaviour in a non-violent way.

The campaigns depicted scenarios a bystander may encounter whilst in the night-time economy and offered examples of prosocial bystander responses that they could use to address the problematic behaviour (examples of the scenarios can be found in Appendices A and B). All scenarios were tested with members of the target audience prior to the campaigns going live. The campaign did not aim to alter the behaviour of victims or potential victims but did offer contact information for support services should the

victim, bystander or potential perpetrator want to contact someone for support.

#SafeToSay was delivered in two phases. Phase One was delivered in 2021, in response to concerns from police and local partnerships that sexual violence may increase as COVID-19 restrictions lifted in Wales. This phase of the campaign targeted 16- to 45-year-olds, and sought to equip people with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to speak up about sexual harassment within the night-time economy, to reduce the risk of it escalating to sexual violence. Campaign materials were delivered both online (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat) and offline, through posters, digivans, parking meter adverts, and buses, in Cardiff and Swansea. The campaign linked to a website, which contained a bystander toolkit and information on support services and bystander training programs. Phase One ran for 4 weeks. See Appendix A for images of Phase One.

Phase Two of #SafeToSay was delivered in 2022 and ran for 7 weeks. Similar to Phase One, it sought to prevent sexual harassment by encouraging prosocial bystander responses towards individuals who display sexually inappropriate behaviour and problematic attitudes and beliefs in the night-time economy. More specifically, Phase Two encouraged male bystanders to challenge problematic behaviour, attitudes, and beliefs of their friends, in a non-confrontational way. Advertisements were targeted at men aged 18 to 35 who took part in nightlife in Swansea, South Wales. As the majority of sexual harassment is perpetrated by men, it is imperative that men be engaged as active bystanders in the prevention of sexual harassment, and that they be empowered to speak out against harassment behaviours as a way to encourage other men to do so, disrupting pluralistic ignorance. Campaign materials were delivered across Swansea, online (Facebook, Instagram, and Audience Network) and offline, through beer mats and digital screens in pubs and clubs, at bus stops, and in train stations. Again, the campaign included a website with a bystander toolkit and signposting to support services and training. See Appendix B for images of Phase Two.

The key differences between Phase One and Phase Two of #SafeToSay can be found in Table I.

METHODS

Objectives

Both phases of #SafeToSay underwent process and outcomes evaluations shortly after the campaigns finished. For both evaluations, the objectives were to:

1. Measure public engagement with the campaign across social media platforms
2. Measure public engagement with the campaign website and associated information and resources
3. Assess public awareness of the campaign, including visibility and recognition of the campaign among the target population
4. Explore public perceptions of the content and delivery of the campaign
5. Explore the impact of the campaign on public awareness of, and attitudes towards, sexual harassment in the night-time economy
6. Explore the impact of the campaign on bystanders' confidence and willingness to safely challenge harmful sexual behaviour within the night-time economy
7. Consider future delivery and up-scale of the campaign across different sectors.

For both evaluations, social media and website analytics were reviewed. Further, a public perception survey was delivered to people residing in the areas targeted by each phase of the campaign. Survey responses were analyzed with SPSS and Atlas.ti.

Ethics

Public Health Wales' Research and Evaluation department deemed these evaluations exempt from needing ethical permissions.

Public Perception Surveys: Participant Demographics

After both phases of #SafeToSay, a public perception survey was delivered to residents within Cardiff and Swansea to gauge whether they had seen the campaign while it was live, and to gather their opinions on the design of the campaign materials and messaging. For both phases, the survey was emailed to a database of people who have consented to be registered in a research participation database.

The survey was completed by 265 respondents for Phase One, 56% of whom were women; 85% identified as White British, and ages ranging from 18 to 65. These respondents lived in Cardiff and the Vale and Swansea.

For Phase Two, 231 responses were collected. All respondents lived in the Swansea area, 61% were women, and 83% identified as White British. Similar to Phase One, the ages of respondents ranged from 18 to 65. While Phase Two targeted men specifically, the team wanted to understand the gender differences in responses to the campaign, therefore women were also included in the survey.

RESULTS

Social Media and Website Engagement

Phase One of #SafeToSay reached 392,001 people through social media channels across Cardiff and Swansea; this is noticeably more than Phase Two, which reached 84,208 people across Swansea.

Phase Two generated considerably more traffic to the campaign website. Phase One generated 1,938 click-throughs from the campaign advertisements to the campaign website, with a unique click-through rate of 0.49%; whereas Phase Two generated 4,514 clicks, and a unique click-through rate of 5.36%.

TABLE I Key differences between Phase One and Phase Two of #SafeToSay

Phase One	Phase Two
Ran for 4 weeks June to July 2021	Ran for 7 weeks February to March 2022
Ran in Cardiff and Swansea	Ran in Swansea
Called everyone to action	Called men to action
Targeted 16- to 45-year-olds	Targeted 18- to 35-year-olds
Scenarios were not gender specific	Scenarios were targeted at men and male behaviours

More people reacted to the Phase One social media advertisements (like, love, haha), with 147 reactions compared with 124 for Phase Two. However, Phase Two elicited more comments on social media, with the adverts receiving 74 comments, compared with Phase One's five comments. Unfortunately, many of the comments posted on Phase Two's advertisements were severely negative and had to be reported to Facebook as "hate speech." These hate speech comments contained direct verbal attacks of the campaign creators' protected characteristics, including their sexual orientation, sex, and gender identity. Facebook removed these comments. Similarly, there were many comments in Phase Two highlighting the rate of sexual harassment by women towards men, including some disclosures of harassment. It is important to note that anyone who made a disclosure was signposted to appropriate support services. While the social media comments were primarily negative, a few sparked discussion, with some men supporting the messaging within the campaign and challenging the perceptions of the men who had posted negative comments (Figure 2).

Public Awareness of the Campaign

Phase One was seen by 19% of survey respondents ($n=50$ respondents) during the time the campaign was live. Just over half of those respondents had seen the campaign advertisements in Cardiff (58%).

Phase Two was seen by 28% of survey respondents ($n=64$ respondents) during the time the campaign was live. The advertisements were seen equally online and physically in Swansea.

Impact of the Campaign

For both phases, the survey respondents who had seen the campaign advertisements while they were live were asked about the impact of that campaign. This impact was mapped

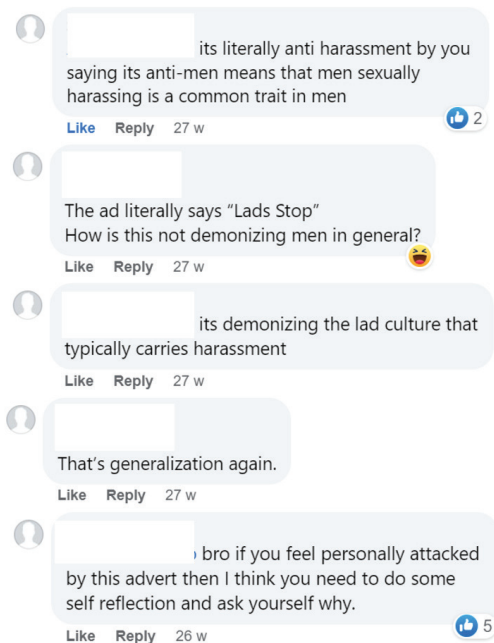


FIGURE 2 Bystander intervention on Facebook post

against the bystander theory of change, asking specifically about whether the campaign had provided awareness of sexual harassment behaviours and provided the skills needed and confidence to take action.

Less than half of survey respondents for both phases felt that the campaigns had helped them recognize sexual harassment. Similarly, less than half felt that the campaigns had provided them with the information needed to take action, and the campaigns had not increased their confidence to take action. However, Phase One was slightly better at providing survey respondents with the information and resources they needed, while Phase Two was slightly better at helping people recognize sexual harassment and increasing their confidence to take action. A full breakdown of results is presented in Table II.

There were noticeable gender differences in the survey responses when exploring the effects of Phase Two. This phase specifically targeted men, yet more men (43%) than women (23%) indicated that the campaign had no effect on them. Markedly more women felt that the campaign had increased their confidence to take action and felt that the campaign helped them recognize sexual violence in the night-time economy. Thirty-five percent of men felt that the campaign had provided them with the information and resources they needed to take action, slightly less than women respondents (37%) (see Figure 3).

Public perceptions of the campaign

Survey respondents for Phase One were generally in agreement that the campaign had drawn people's attention to an important topic (81%), that it had highlighted an important issue (sexual harassment within the night-time economy) (79%), and that the messaging within the campaign advertisements was clear (83%). Further, 71% of respondents also felt that the campaign helped people know how to intervene safely when they witness sexual harassment, yet only 45% of respondents said that the scenarios used within the campaign had resonated with their own experiences.

Feedback from Phase Two showed survey respondents were in general agreement that the campaign had drawn people's attention to an important topic (81%), that it had highlighted an important issue (81%), and that the campaign messaging was clear (80%). The scenarios presented within the campaign advertisements resonated with the experiences of 44% of respondents.

TABLE II Impact of Phase One and Phase Two on public perception survey respondents

Impact statements	Phase One (50 respondents)	Phase Two (64 respondents)
The campaign helped them recognize sexual harassment within the night-time economy.	32%	38%
The campaign provided them with the information and resources needed to help them take action.	42%	36%
The campaign increased their confidence to take action when they witness sexual harassment within the night-time economy.	36%	38%

Gender differences in the effects of the campaign

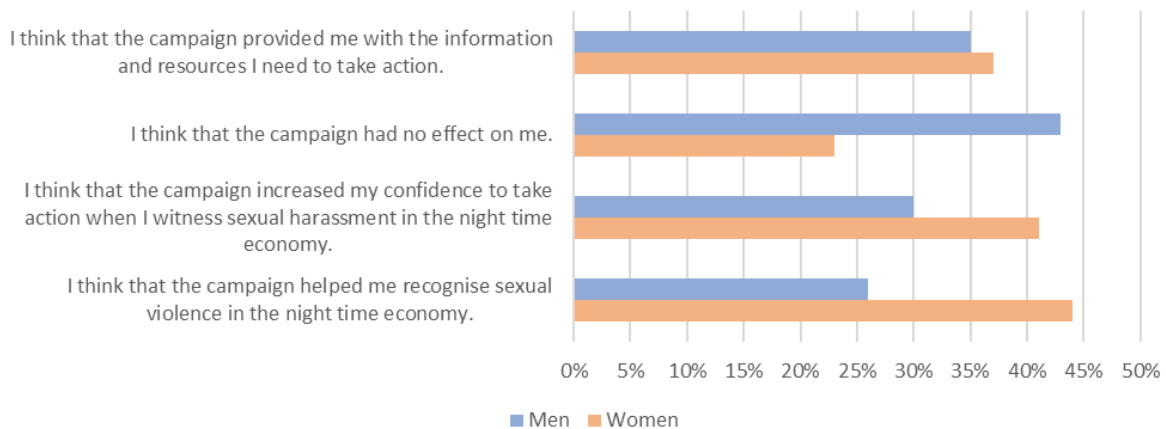


FIGURE 3 Gender differences in the effects of the campaign

DISCUSSION

Sexual harassment has become an acceptable and almost inevitable experience within the night-time economy for women and girls. It is generally perpetrated by men and boys, and regularly occurs in the presence of a bystander. Yet rarely do these bystanders feel able to do something about it (Adams et al., 2020).

#SafeToSay Phase One's evaluation found the campaign highlighted an important issue but had only helped a few people recognize sexual harassment within the night-time economy. Nevertheless, it had helped people know how to intervene safely when they witness sexual harassment. The scenarios used for Phase One had not necessarily resonated with the experiences of the public perception survey respondents.

Phase Two of #SafeToSay aimed to engage men as prosocial bystanders against sexual harassment. The scenarios depicted problematic attitudes traditionally shared by men and offered bystander responses that men could adopt, using Welsh male slang (for example, "mate," "lads," "boys"). Phase Two had drawn people's attention to an important topic, but only a few people felt that the campaign had provided them with the information and resources needed to take action. Additional information and resources could be found on the campaign website, which had a good click-through rate from the campaign materials. This increased click-through rate for Phase Two was likely achieved through a direct call to action on the advertisements; they specifically suggested visiting the website. A limitation of this evaluation is that it is unclear how useful people found the materials on the website.

All the website visits for Phase Two were generated by men; this is a positive finding as prior campaigns have struggled to engage men (Walker et al., 2022; Gunstone & Fowler, 2017). Engaging men in violence prevention campaigns, particularly conversations around violence against women, is essential to initiating a cultural shift in attitudes towards women (Walker et al., 2021).

Phase Two's social media engagement rates were higher than the average for similar campaigns, yet a lot of this engagement was negative. There is a need for further exploration on why a campaign targeting men to encourage them

to be prosocial bystanders against sexual harassment was not received as positively as Phase One, despite Phase One including men within the target audience. Phase One called everyone to action; therefore, men may not have felt that they were being targeted. Phase Two, on the other hand, used male-voiced audio, further reiterating that the campaign was solely aimed at men.

Men are not a homogeneous group. Treating them as such can be met with hostility and disengagement. This could have played a part in #SafeToSay not being positively received by some men. Some men may feel that they are being labelled as sexual violence perpetrators purely based on their sex (Hoxmeier & Casey, 2022). Therefore, future iterations of #SafeToSay need to break down the target audience further, to ensure it is not a blanket campaign for all men. The scenarios need to be specific to different groups of men, for example, football clubs. It is imperative that the scenarios resonate with the experiences of members of that targeted audience (Muralidharan & Kim, 2019); this could be achieved through more extensive engagement during the design phase of the campaign. However, caution should be taken when designing the messaging, as men will not respond positively if they are accused of being perpetrators (Nicolla & Lazard, 2023). Conversely, McCook (2022) suggests that violence prevention initiatives should be about humanity and being a better human being, rather than challenging men, male norms, and masculinity.

Research shows that bystander behaviours differ when faced with problematic situations online and offline, with those responding to online behaviours being less afraid of negative repercussions (Obermaier, 2022; Quirk & Campbell, 2014). This may offer some explanation for men feeling that it was acceptable to share their disagreement with the social media advertisements; it does not, however, explain why some men's disagreement consisted of hate speech—abuse directed at the campaign creators' protected characteristics. A possible explanation for the hate speech could be that the scenarios challenged the social norms for behaviours within the night-time economy, particularly the scenario that says "boys, let's all bring someone home tonight." Research suggests that men

who go against the social norm are often met with suspicion, homophobia, and questions about their masculinity (Crooks et al., 2007). By responding particularly aggressively to the advertisements, the men are securing their position within their peer group as supportive of the social norm and the behaviours of their peers.

The interaction between gender and bystander responses to sexual harassment is complex (Bennett et al., 2017). With regard to men in particular, and as touched upon previously, it is important to note the significance of “social categorization” when considering male bystander behaviour. According to social categorization, people are less likely to intervene when they belong to the same social category as the perpetrator (Urschler, 2015). In the context of #SafeToSay, it would result in significant challenges when asking men to address the attitudes of their friends, as they would belong to the same social category and will often have similar social norms.

If future iterations of #SafeToSay were to continue targeting men, there is a need to better understand what works to engage men and boys in violence prevention initiatives and acknowledge that men can also be victims of sexual harassment. This should include an exploration of the international literature but also consider what works when engaging men and boys within Wales, understanding their social norms and the barriers to engaging with them. In particular, this work should look to explore and overcome the challenges of asking bystanders to participate in peer group intervention.

Whilst #SafeToSay drew people’s attention to an important topic, in alignment with the bystander theory of change, survey respondents did not necessarily feel that the campaigns had provided them with the information, skills, and confidence they needed to take action. Therefore, future iterations of #SafeToSay should look to align with bystander training; this would allow people to further explore how to recognize VAWDASV and take action in response to the behaviours, and boost their confidence to actually take action. Research has shown that a multi-component intervention is more effective at initiating attitude and behavioural changes (Quigg et al., 2021).

Whilst the evaluations of #SafeToSay offer some enlightening results, the questions used within the evaluation surveys need to be refined. For example, in Phase One, 42% of survey respondents said the campaign provided them with the information and resources needed to take action, but 71% agreed that the campaign helped people to know how to take action. These fairly similar statements had significantly different levels of agreement; the majority believed the campaign helped people know how to take action, but fewer than half felt the campaign provided the right information and resources. Therefore, it would be worth exploring further what information and resources people need to take action.

CONCLUSION

While sexual harassment within the night-time economy is a pervasive problem, bystanders can play an important role in its prevention. #SafeToSay is an innovative campaign that sought to encourage prosocial bystander responses to sexual harassment, and the problematic attitudes and beliefs that underpin it. Centred on the bystander theory of change, #SafeToSay aimed to provide people with the awareness, skills

and confidence to take action. Engaging men proved particularly difficult for the #SafeToSay campaign, and this offers an opportunity to further explore effective methods of engaging men and boys in future sexual violence prevention initiatives.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

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APPENDICES

A: Images of Phase One

Artwork:

The artwork consists of six distinct pieces:

- Top Left (Orange):** A poster with two speech bubbles. The top one says "GIVE US A KISS, HOT STUFF!" and the bottom one says "EXCUSE ME, CAN YOU LEAVE OUR FRIEND ALONE PLEASE?"
- Top Middle (Yellow):** A poster with two speech bubbles. The top one says "WHO DARES ME TO SLAP HER BUM?!" and the bottom one says "NAH MATE, THAT'S NOT COOL..."
- Top Right (Yellow):** A poster with the text: "Every day, people sexually harass others in our city. We can all help end sexual harassment and violence. Let's take a stand safely and make a real difference. #SAFETOSAY Visit safetosay.wales for more information." It includes logos for the United Atal Trais Violence Prevention Unit and a lightbulb icon.
- Bottom Left (Blue):** A poster with two speech bubbles. The top one says "YOU'RE SO UGLY, NOBODY WANTS YOU." and the bottom one says "DON'T LISTEN TO HER, COME AND CHILL WITH US."
- Bottom Middle (Green):** A poster with two speech bubbles. The top one says "BETS ON ME PULLING HER TONIGHT?" and the bottom one says "THAT'S NOT FUNNY." It includes the same text and logos as the top right poster.
- Bottom Right (Blue):** A poster titled "ACTIVE BYSTANDER TOOLKIT" with the same text and logos as the other posters.

Labels at the bottom of the posters identify them as: "Bus & Billboard Advert", "Social Adverts", "Parking Metre Advert", and "Bystander Toolkit".

In-place:



B: Images of Phase Two

Artwork:



Beer mats

Poster at bus stops & railway stations

Motion graphics on socialite screens & social

In-place:

