

## The Role of Advertising in Addressing Online Sexual Harassment: Pilsen's Male-Focused **Campaign During COVID-19**

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**Abstract.** During the pandemic, brands have rethought their advertising communication around the global crisis, while people immerse themselves even more in the virtual world. It is important to study these changes because the increase in internet usage has led to a deepening of negative behaviors by men, such as online sexual harassment towards women which is a globally harmful problem. Therefore, it is essential to pay attention to this behavior and understand men's perception of this problem that harms their own gender. In this context, the social marketing strategy is analyzed as a tool to change the behavior or thoughts of an audience towards a social problem. In particular, the "Banners Against Online Sexual Harassment' campaign by the beer brand Pilsen Callao, launched on different digital platforms to denounce and expose online sexual harassment that has increased during the pandemic. The study was conducted through a qualitative methodology, with 15 semi-structured interviews with Peruvian university students, aimed at identifying their perception of the campaign. The results show a lack of empathy by men towards online sexual harassment of women, which is mainly done on Instagram, one of the most widely used social media platforms in cyberspace. This study highlights the importance of continuing to work on raising awareness and preventing online harassment towards women, involving men in the fight against this globally harmful problem.

**Keywords:** Social Marketing · Online Sexual Harassment · Femvertising

#### Introduction 1

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, a disease that originated in Wuhan, China. Initially, there was a lack of interest and concern among the population, leading to an unstoppable spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus [1]. The virus entered Peru on March 6, with the confirmation of the first case in Lima [2]. The challenges brought by this pandemic resulted in a serious social, health and economic crisis, leading to its declaration as a global pandemic [3].

During this epidemic, people began to use technology very actively, leading to an increase in cyberbullying, with a significant impact on society [4]. Last year, 88% of Peruvian women were victims of online harassment, with Facebook, WhatsApp, and

Instagram being the most used digital communication channels for harassing the victim. Additionally, it was reported that the male gender is responsible for 65% of online harassment cases [19].

In March 2021, the beer brand Pilsen launched its digital campaign called "Banners Against Online Sexual Harassment" on various social channels [5]. The campaign started anonymously the week before International Women's Day with the publication of banners on various platforms that gave the impression of being cyberbullied. The purpose was not to diminish the importance of women on their day, but rather to bring attention to the fact that most cases of cyberbullying are against them. On March 7, it was revealed that the Pilsen brand was behind the action, launching the corresponding ad [6].

Advertising for alcoholic beverages rarely addresses gender roles, which leads to confusion among some people who think that by including women in the advertising strategy, men remain dominant. However, the aim is to promote social change that encourages gender equality [7]. The emergence of the femvertising strategy trend has generated significant interest in the advertising industry [8]. Before, beer brands in Peru used to present young, seductive women as objects of desire in their ads, while men were portrayed as victorious, independent, and masculine [9].

The Peruvian beer industry has little social advertising related to real issues such as cyberbullying and promoting social change towards equal treatment of people, making women more involved in advertising. Therefore, the "Banners Against Online Sexual Harassment" campaign by the Pilsen Callao beer brand has little current research, and there is very little information about what men think about cyberbullying, as social issues usually focus on women as victims. Thus, to gain a better understanding of the impressions of male undergraduate students aged 18 to 25 from the B socioeconomic level regarding this campaign, the following research question will be defined:

RQ: What is the perception of male undergraduate students aged 18 to 25 from the B socioeconomic level regarding the Pilsen Beer digital campaign against online sexual harassment women on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic?

This research aims to achieve the following objectives: i) Recognize the impression or reaction of men to the online sexual harassment towards women, ii) Interpret the thoughts produced by the target audience regarding the campaign, and iii) Identify the communication message of the digital campaign spot and its link with social marketing. Additionally, a qualitative methodology will be employed with the support of semi-structured interviews with the target audience for the research.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

## 2.1 Social Marketing

To [10], the implementation of social marketing strategies focuses on executing social campaigns to promote educational, health, environmental, and economic reforms. Furthermore, a social campaign is determined by the one that aims to convince a group of individuals to change certain behaviors, conduct, attitudes, or ideas. It targets an emotional audience when advertising is accompanied by images and music, and a rational audience if the case is to carry out advertising where quantitative data and text are shown

[11]. Moreover, according to Cardenas [12] social advertising campaigns are precise in changing behavior and improving people's lives.

Social marketing utilizes social media to reach a large audience and solve problems through digital solutions [13]. Digital marketing, which is the result of experience in marketing, advertising, and technological innovation, focuses on branding across various digital channels, including social media [14, 15]. To carry out digital marketing, several tools must be applied, such as establishing a presence on multiple digital channels, understanding the target audience, conducting frequent page analysis, using SEO and SEM strategies to position the page, using Google Search Console to evaluate search results, and leveraging Social Media Poster for effective use on social media [16].

Martín points out that in the era of marketing 4.0, the distinctive characteristic of digital marketing is identifying trends and using Big Data to analyze audience behavior and preferences. Additionally, he highlights the importance of dialogue between the brand and the consumer to generate trust and offer new scenarios through social media. On the other hand, [17] emphasize the relevance of communication with the consumer to obtain feedback and improve in specific areas.

### 2.2 Online Sexual Harassment in Pandemic

There are organizations, institutions, or brands that have become aware of the increasing virtual harassment in the country, a problem that emerged during the total confinement where people spent most of their time in a digital environment, resorting to their needs to stay connected on social media, becoming heavy users of them. Due to this, the social behavior of young people, especially males, began to shift towards harmful social behavior, bringing certain consequences [18].

According to the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations [19], there is an increased presence of online sexual harassment in this pandemic stage, especially in the lima region, with the highest number of victim registrations being females. There is a notion that this type of public health problem is intentional, towards oneself, a third party, or the community, causing many psychological harms, and even leading to death. The current context accelerates the digitalization era as people spend a lot of time on social media, detecting a 70% increase in online harassment due to the misinformation that exists [20]. This increase in free time during the pandemic, where a large part of leisure activities takes place online, makes many of these people, mostly young people, who are on social media, potential virtual harassers and victims (MIMP, 2020).

Clemente [21] highlights that online harassment, which affects women more, manifests through messages with a high level of aggression and derogatory tone, seeking to silence or subordinate women and reinforce gender differences. This type of cyberbullying was accentuated during the pandemic due to the abandonment of everyday activities such as work or school [22] and can generate psychosocial problems such as anxiety, depression, and even suicide (Cedillo, 2020), as well as a sense of paranoia and mistrust towards others [23]. For its part, [24] argues that online harassment is a recurring problem in latin america, especially among young women, and is related to the attempt to exercise power and intimidation and establish control over the female gender. In addition, this type of online violence is usually perpetrated by people close to the victim, such as acquaintances, partners, or family members, and manifests in behaviors

such as insults, harassment, grooming, online bullying, stalking, and threats. According to [25], the virtual space has seen a high level of digital connectivity activity from the male gender during the pandemic, where harassment is surrounded by elements that are part of people's socio-cultural level. That's why pilsen, as a brand, decided to address this issue to demonstrate a social problem where women are exposed to cyberbullying, specifically harassment.

## 2.3 Femvertising

According to [26], the term "femvertising" comes from the combination of "female" and "advertising" and refers to advertising that targets women. For a long time, the advertising industry has projected a stereotypical representation of women and their role in society [27]. According to SheMedia [28], femvertising is a form of advertising that aims to empower women and combat gender stereotypes.

This advertising approach can be applied to any brand or industry. Some of the most representative femvertising campaigns include "Like a Girl" by Always, "Real Beauty" by Dove, "Voices" by Nike, and "I Will What I Want" by Under Armour, among others. In this type of advertising, the main message is women's empowerment, while the brand is presented in a secondary way and direct product promotion is avoided [29]. Therefore, according to [30], femvertising plays an important role in the advertising industry, as it can have a significant impact on the target audience and contribute to long-term positive social change.

## 3 Methodology

## 3.1 Study Design

The research followed a phenomenological study using a qualitative approach, which seeks realistic experiences of an audience that has lived a particular phenomenon or subjective experience [31]. Therefore, the phenomenon is constructed from a direct perception of the person [32]. The development of phenomenological research focuses on understanding and describing the features of lived experiences and how meaning is produced through a persuasive mechanism of the person, with the aim of contributing to the construction of social reality [33]. Additionally, the interviewees selected were of the same gender as those who commit cyberbullying against women. According to [34], the phenomenon is studied by recognizing the subjective experience of the individual based on the perception, knowledge, and opinions of the participants.

## 3.2 Sample

According to [35], qualitative research aims to recognize people's experiences and perceptions, considering the contextual factors they may be immersed in. Campbell et al. (2020) argue that intentional sampling enhances research by deliberately selecting interviewees who are more likely to provide effective and useful information for the study.

For this research, the participants were young male students between the ages of 18 to 25 years old, undergraduate students from different professional careers in Lima city. This audience was chosen to understand from a qualitative perspective their perception and conceptual thinking about a seriously harmful behavior from their own gender. Additionally, since the majority of online harassers are young adult males, it would be interesting to learn how they would react to a campaign that exposes and involves them as the main virtual harassers.

The classification of participants was done through intentional sampling, with the opportunity to extract information based on personal judgment and knowledge for indepth study [36]. To identify participants who would provide relevant information, certain inclusion criteria were defined to reinforce the methodological quality of the research. The inclusion criteria were: (i) male undergraduate students, (ii) aged between 18 and 25 years old, (iii) actively using social media, and (iv) belonging to a middle or upper socioeconomic level.

For this research, an intentional sample size was established to cover specific characteristics of the study, sufficient to achieve data saturation [37]. According to [38], saturation can be identified when repetitive data are found among a group of interviewees or when it is determined that additional data is no longer essential for the research. In this study, data saturation was identified in the 15th interview, as it was found that no new information was being obtained from the interviewees.

#### 3.3 Data Collection and Procedures

To obtain these data, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviews as a research method are an important tool for gathering diverse information such as knowledge, experiences, ideas, and even individual impressions [39]. Understanding these subjective experiences, emotions, and thoughts makes in-depth interviews significantly noteworthy for obtaining desired information [40].

The data collection technique was based on organized questions that could be managed among the group of participants, as otherwise it would not be possible to achieve data saturation (Cisneros et al., 2022). To address the research question, the guide consisted of three topics: knowledge of the social problem, digital harassment during the pandemic, and awareness campaigns. Each topic encompassed open-ended, semi-structured questions. Table 1 presents the topics and guiding questions used for the interviews, which were formulated according to the target audience. The interviews were conducted virtually, in quiet environments, and individually with each participant. There was no prior interaction, and coordination for the interviews was done through social media. Each interview lasted between 40 and 50 min and was digitally recorded and transcribed.

Regarding ethical considerations, student participation was voluntary, and transparency was maintained in obtaining the results of the in-depth interviews. Likewise, anonymity was preserved to protect their identity. Prior to the interviews, consent was obtained from each interviewee, and their responses were implemented for the analysis of the study results.

**Table 1.** Topics and guiding questions for in-depth interview

Theme	Semi-structured questions
Knowledge about online sexual harassment	<ul> <li>What is online sexual harassment to you?</li> <li>What is your opinion about it?</li> <li>Do you think online sexual harassment is a problem in Peru? Why?</li> </ul>
Digital harassment during the pandemic	<ul> <li>◆ What do you understand about harassment?</li> <li>◆ What is your opinion on the cyberbullying that women receive from men associated with harassment?</li> <li>◆ In your opinion, what are the characteristics that define a situation of cyberbullying related to harassment?</li> <li>◆ Do you believe that this type of cyberbullying (harassment) has increased during the pandemic?</li> <li>◆ Why do you think so?</li> <li>◆ Which social network do you think is the most used by harassers to target women during this pandemic?</li> <li>◆ What do you think the harasser intends to achieve with this type of cyberbullying that is harassment?</li> </ul>
Awareness campaign	<ul> <li>Have you seen awareness campaigns related to online sexual harassment?</li> <li>Have you seen the Pilsen beer brand campaign about online harassment?</li> </ul>

Source: Own elaboration

## 3.4 Analysis of the Information

In order to carry out the qualitative analysis, a descriptive method was used, which seeks to study phenomenological situations or events to evaluate certain characteristics of a specific population group (Ramos, 2020). As part of this data analysis, coding identifies the phenomenon expressed by the participant to interpret narrative situations, behaviors, opinions, among others (Vives & Hamui, 2021).

The analysis of this research proceeded to carry out a phenomenological design, taking into account the change in social behavior of men. Likewise, information was collected from the interviewees on a real problem that mainly affects women. Therefore, describing the cognitive manifestations of the target audience to be studied will be fundamental to obtain the expected results.

## 4 Results

After conducting a qualitative process, an analysis based on four categories was developed, which were grounded in interviews conducted with the target audience regarding the views of male undergraduate college students between 18 and 25 years old regarding the "Banners Against Online Sexual Harassment" campaign.

# Category 1: Instagram, the social network as an instrument of online sexual harassment

This category addresses how male students are aware that Instagram has become an important indicator of virtual harassers. This platform is particularly relevant among the millennial generation, who mainly interact with other young people. Apparently, many of these young people have opted to migrate from Facebook to Instagram in order to escape scrutiny from their families, especially their parents and close relatives. In fact, an analyst from Global Equities Research suggested that this shift was related to psychological reasons. Instagram has thus become their favorite application, as it allows them to create their own personalized space and establish links with new friends.

On the other hand, due to the constant exposure of photographs and content in stories that many women post on this platform, the likelihood of a virtual bully being able to contact or learn about them has increased. One interviewee acknowledged that: "I don't rule out Instagram, which may be reaching that way of extracting information from a woman because this network has more public activity than Facebook".

Furthermore, although Instagram is currently the platform that most frequently connects virtual bullies with their victims, participants do not rule out the possibility that this type of harassment could migrate to TikTok in the future. One participant stated that: "(On TikTok) it is much easier to obtain information because the person posts more content." This entertainment social network has gained popularity among millions of young people, and although it is relatively new, it has already caught the attention of some virtual harassers.

It should be noted that for most of the interviewees, Instagram has become an important virtual space that, in addition to being the most used network by many young people, they also considered it as the main means where there are more harassers, as one of them mentioned: "I consider it a potential focus of online sexual harassers."

## Category 2: Intensification of harassment through social media due to confinement

This category refers to how harassment has become more prevalent since the early months of the pandemic, when there was total confinement and no contact or interaction with friends or family. Confinement increased digital consumption, with the majority of Peruvians becoming frequent users of various social media platforms, thus belonging to an active digital universe [41]. This digital development has led harassers to spend more time behind a screen, intensifying their harassment of victims.

For most young people, being connected is almost obligatory, generating greater digital traffic and increasing exposure to cyber harassers on the different platforms most commonly used by the millennial generation. The interviewees emphasized that avoiding physical contact in social gatherings was the main reason why virtual harassment towards women intensified.

Therefore, being able to get to know a woman and/or seduce her directly through comments or messages during the confinement period led to an increase in harassment. One interviewee stated: "The use of social media increased hand in hand with harassment. And so, mainly due to these measures, it intensified even more."

Another interviewee believed that social media has become a means by which virtual harassers can easily obtain information about a woman, as several women allow their profiles to be exposed publicly, disregarding the importance of their personal or work privacy, and becoming potential victims of harassers. As one interviewee mentioned: "(...) for a person, it is much easier to have access to other people's profiles, where most of them have had to evolve in one way or another in social media".

## Category 3: Harassment stems from recurrent behavior by virtual harasser

This category describes the views of young students on the motives of virtual harassers towards women on social media. During the pandemic, mental health has become a major concern, with high levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and other disorders affecting people's way of life due to prolonged confinement.

The mental state of a virtual harasser is heavily influenced by constant interaction with social media, with the aim of connecting with women for various reasons, ignoring their overall well-being. As a result, most interviewees identified that harassers have a goal, and they believe that they try to feed their mental state by wanting to generate some kind of situation with the victim, such as extracting information, sending sexually suggestive emojis, or simply seducing them. One participant put it this way: "To achieve their objective. I mean, to live with that mental morbidity to achieve or enjoy the situation."

Moreover, they do not send these messages to just any woman, but rather to a woman they know, have access to their social media, or are physically attracted to through their posts on social media. As one interviewee specifies, "I suppose it is to satisfy their morbid curiosity about having some kind of non-physical contact with a woman they like on social media."

The behavior of a virtual harasser is influenced by certain psychological-sociological profiles, where their levels of anxiety increase due to confinement. For this reason, they dedicate themselves to harassing women through the different means at their disposal. These profiles can be determined as narcissistic, delusional, or psychotic harassers, each different but with obsessive behavior that leads them to lose touch with the real world.

## Category 4: Lack of awareness of Pilsen's digital campaign

In the last category of the study, it was found that many of the interviewees consider that Pilsen's digital campaign has not had enough notoriety on different virtual platforms, making it go unnoticed for them, despite being very active on social media. Additionally, some men lack empathy towards the problem of harassment of women on social media. For them, the campaign's message could help raise awareness about the situation and help men better understand how women feel when they are harassed. In this sense, raising awareness among men about this problem could be an important step in building a more just and equal society. As one interviewee described it, "The intention is very good because it fights against a problem that we should all face and should not normalize in any way."

In summary, although some interviewees believe that Pilsen's campaign has not had enough notoriety on social media, they recognize the importance of the message it conveys and its potential to raise awareness in society about the problem of harassment of women on social media.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

This study is based on previous research suggesting that advertising is related to the creation of campaigns focused on social change, leading brands to prioritize this trend in order to create emotional connections with their consumers [42]. In this social approach, the importance of addressing issues such as gender equality and female empowerment on various virtual platforms is emphasized (Drake, 2016). It has also been determined that WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook are the most commonly used social media platforms for cyberbullying (MIMP, 2020).

The study participants are aware that Instagram is currently the most used application for personal entertainment, but they also recognize that it is a potential target for sexual harassment, as there is a lot of public content available and there is increased interaction between men and women, which can generate new relationships in a social environment different from the family.

During the pandemic, there has been an increase in constant cyberbullying through social media, which has led to changes in the psychosocial behavior of men (Dye et al., 2021). These behaviors may be related to the anxiety generated by the pandemic, which has led some men to engage in harassing women (Iqbari, Syukron, & Merkasari, 2020).

It was concluded that university students perceive anxiety as playing a decisive role in the disorder that leads to the harassment of women on social media. In addition, they consider that this practice causes emotional and mental harm to both the victim and the aggressor.

Overall, the online initiative called "Banners Against Online Harassment" had a positive impact on students by prompting them to reflect on the lack of empathy that many men have towards this problem. The students appreciated the personal teaching they received about the virtual harassment that men carry out to harass women and considered this experience as an opportunity to promote a change in the way this issue is addressed.

Although they admit that it is difficult to completely eliminate harassment, they believe that promoting better education and information targeted towards men can contribute to generating greater commitment towards this issue that primarily affects women. Therefore, they consider it crucial for brands to lead awareness efforts on this topic, so that men can learn and become aware of the seriousness of the matter.

It is important to note some of the limitations of this research. On the one hand, there was not much information or studies indicating the increase in online sexual harassment suffered by Peruvian women during the pandemic, which is understandable given that it is a problem that has only gained force since 2020. Additionally, some participants did not express their point of view on the purpose of a harasser to intimidate a woman in a comprehensive manner, limiting the ability to gain a greater understanding of this important issue for the study.

For future research, it is suggested to conduct a study on this social problem of virtual harassment during the pandemic, specifically regarding the harassment of women on social media. It is also important to update information related to alcoholic beverage companies that consider female empowerment in their advertising campaigns.

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