Victimization Experience and Perceived Benefits of Institutional and Commercial Advertising Campaigns in the Fight against Domestic Violence

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Abstract: Advertising has played an increasingly relevant role in raising awareness of social problems via institutional campaigns. In the phenomenon of domestic violence, most institutional advertising campaigns are directed at victims, who are often represented as vulnerable people. The general objective of this explorative study was to ascertain, from the point of view of victims of domestic violence, what the contributions of advertising campaigns are in combating this phenomenon. Stemming from a previous study on institutional advertising campaigns on domestic violence, which included a survey with about 500 participants residing in Portugal, a focus group was carried out with 4 participants who declared that they had been victims of domestic violence. The data were subjected to thematic analysis, and two major themes were identified: A: the effectiveness of advertising campaigns on the prevention of domestic violence and B: domestic violence and the fight against it via advertising strategies. The results suggest that advertising is a useful tool for social transformation, which has contributed to the social awareness of the problem of domestic violence. There is no consensus that the shock strategy of certain advertisements has the desired effects nor that campaigns should only focus on victims. It was suggested that the campaigns should be extended to the aggressors and that the theme should also be introduced in schools. The discussion made it possible to question the characteristics of advertising campaigns and to propose new directions in this field for the prevention of the phenomenon.

Keywords: advertising campaigns; domestic violence; victimization; focus group; thematic analysis

1. Introduction

1.1. Advertising Campaigns with Social Concerns

When we think of advertising, campaigns that are specifically aimed at providing information or raising awareness about social problems are not usually the first to spring to mind. However, these campaigns are increasingly more present, drawing our attention to matters that threaten the very cornerstones of our lives in society (Balonas 2011; Lendrevie et al. 2010; Thorson and Rodgers 2012). Even though their purposes are different (commercial advertising pushes us into buying something, whereas institutional campaigns try to make us avoid pernicious behaviours or make us engage in positive ones), they both need to alter the status quo (Simões 2023). This means that in order to be successful, ads have to make an impression on us by impacting our feelings. In order to do that, both commercial and institutional advertising (for the purposes of this article, understood as “advertising with social concerns”) will resort to the same kind of appeals and strategies. In
fact, the strategies used in institutional advertising of the type that will be discussed by our focus group can be even more extreme than what we are used to seeing in commercial ads since we are willing to accept that, nowadays, audiences have to be shocked into paying attention, when the seriousness of the matter demands it (Cook 2001; Simões and Tuna 2013). Even with high levels of consumerism, we are increasingly more sensitive to social issues, such as children’s rights or social and gender equality (Balonas 2011; Rojas 1994). Rojas (1994) pointed out that the social order of the 1990s favoured the emergence of what he called the “Light Man”, who is defined as apathetic towards life, with little display of enthusiasm. The author makes this diagnosis based on the prevalence of materialism and consumerism, arguing that Man needs to rely on human and scientific progress and to develop a moral stance. Therefore, in order to achieve personal fulfilment, it is necessary for Man to stop surrendering to a hedonistic culture (based on the pursuit of easy and transient pleasures) and to develop moral standards, using a concern for social justice and taking an interest in human rights. In this perspective, we can find an incentive to think about the Other, with an emphasis on positive citizenship. Advertising can contribute to this via institutional advertising campaigns. Embracing social causes is a part of the hierarchy of needs described by Maslow, and it becomes an objective after the basic human needs have been addressed (Balonas 2011; Belch and Belch 2018; Kotler and Lee 2008). The existence of more public service campaigns may also have led professionals to fully understand the power of persuasion they can have via advertising, using ads as a form of personal achievement, either for the satisfaction of inspiring other people or for moral satisfaction, in order to feel closer to social causes: “Advertising for social causes acts as a sounding board for feelings of injustice and disrespect for human rights” (Balonas 2011, p. 30).

The content in advertising messages is painstakingly aimed at specific groups of people. For instance, there are humorous expressions and puns that will only make sense in the language they were produced. Likewise, the beliefs and attitudes of a given target audience will influence the way a message is understood. Different cultural groups can be reached differently with the same advertising message. Therefore, it is paramount to define the target audience during the preparation stage of the public service campaign and to study the behaviour that the campaign intends to influence. In that way, it can be channelled towards changing attitudes and beliefs related to the problem at stake (Atkin and Rice 2012; Ferle and Lee 2012). Thus, it is essential for this kind of campaign to be able to resort to a team of people who possess the appropriate theoretical knowledge about the social problem they plan to highlight. Public service campaigns related to problems such as domestic violence should be designed by a creative team that is knowledgeable about the phenomenon and fully aware that the problem is deeply rooted in cultural practices and narratives that must be deconstructed (Berns 2004; Gallagher 2014; Goodman and Epstein 2008; Lisboa et al. 2009; Montiel 2014; Saffioti and Almeida 1995).

1.2. Institutional Advertising and Domestic Violence

The institutional bodies that try to fight domestic violence and work towards the development of research in this area emphasize the importance of producing campaigns aimed at the entire population (EIGE 2020; GREVIO 2019; Secretaria de Estado para a Cidadania e Igualdade 2019). However, studies on the production of institutional advertising campaigns in the fight against domestic violence in Portugal show that most campaigns produced in Portugal are aimed at the victim (Nogueira et al. 2020, 2022). In addition, the authors point out contradictions or ambiguities in the messages and the definition of the target audience, such as campaigns that contain messages aimed at the aggressor but, in the same message, also present appeals to people to denounce the situation, making it unclear who they are really addressing, in fact (Nogueira et al. 2020, 2022).

An exploratory study on the production of advertising campaigns to combat domestic violence in Portugal showed that, although many non-governmental entities broadcast advertising campaigns on the phenomenon, most campaigns are produced by two govern-
ment bodies, CIG—Comissão para a Cidadania e Igualdade de Género and GNR—Guarda Nacional Republicana (police body), as well as a non-governmental body, APAV—Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima (Nogueira et al. 2020, 2021). In this study, 53 sets of institutional advertising campaigns produced by these entities and 6 campaigns produced by other commercial companies, such as Vodafone, Avon, Meo and Fox Portugal (the latter currently owned by Disney) were found. Among the 53 institutional campaigns that were found, 30 were targeted at victims, and among the 6 produced by commercial companies, 4 were aimed at victims. Another study, which was carried out based on this exploratory study, focused on analysing seven institutional campaigns. These specific entities were chosen due to the representativeness of the strategies found in the universe of institutional advertising campaigns to combat domestic violence in Portugal (Nogueira et al. 2022). Of the seven campaigns analysed, only one had an appeal to raise awareness among the entire population, with a deconstruction of popular sayings on the issue of marital relationships. Two of the campaigns, which contained appeals clearly aimed at victims, displayed striking photos representing women who had suffered serious physical violence. This shock approach was considered by the authors as a strategy to obtain emotional effects. Another campaign, also aimed at the victims, used a metaphor as a strategy, and although it did not display a graphic depiction of bruises, it also aimed to produce emotional effects on the audience. However, although there is evidence that emotional narratives can influence and affect the intention to change behaviour, the emotion aroused in the audience may not exactly match the emotion presented in the message, as emotions have many possible nuances and are affected by different variables (Hamby and Jones 2022). Additionally, social problem awareness campaigns may have unintended effects such as guilt, shame or even isolation (Keller et al. 2010; Keller and Honea 2016). Stimuli presented in an advertising campaign can also trigger emotional responses, regardless of conscious reflection on the topic, and emotional involvement with a topic such as domestic violence can trigger an acceptance or rejection of advertising messages (Petty and Cacioppo 1979). Therefore, the authors questioned whether these campaigns could have triggered feelings of guilt or shame in people who had already experienced victimization for not having reported the situation (Nogueira et al. 2022). The phenomenon of domestic violence has already been extensively studied, focusing on the personal and psychological characteristics of victims and aggressors (Berns 2004; Burgess 2019; Goodman and Epstein 2008; Lloyd 2021). In these studies, in general, women who are victims of violence are described with an emphasis on their psychological processes (Albanesi et al. 2021; Brandt and Rudden 2020; Mahruliana et al. 2020). Sometimes, the victim is characterized as someone who surrenders to a violent situation or as a person with a negative perception of her abilities (Aragão et al. 2017; Molina and Moreno 2015). Many aspects can contribute to the decision to stay in an abusive relationship or, alternatively, leave it, including factors that are extrinsic to the relationship (such as issues related to their offspring, their aggressor or social context), which favour the construction of myths that can prevent the interruption of the violence cycle (Sani and Pereira 2020). It is the consideration of all these factors that must support any mobilization to combat domestic violence.

However, the perspective of characterizing the victim of domestic violence as belonging to a class of vulnerable subjects and the post-incident “victim” status has been questioned by feminist scholars (Igreja 2018; Lamb 1999; Mulla and Hlavka 2011). The permanent characterization of this person as a “victim” is pointed out as a paternalistic form of diminishing the subject (Lamb 1999); an alternative stance is that of giving voice to these “moral agents” (Mulla and Hlavka 2011), who can speak with authority about the theme of domestic violence (Igreja 2018; Mulla and Hlavka 2011). Nogueira et al. (2021) also refute this deterministic idea, which does nothing to empower victims or reinforce the social response to the problem of domestic violence. The authors concluded that people who identified themselves as victims had fewer beliefs that legitimize domestic violence than people who did not declare themselves as victims, thus considering the possibility that the victimization experience had potentiated the deconstruction of beliefs. From this
assumption, the importance of the voices of “experiential experts” can be highlighted: this would mean that victims of domestic violence could be heard by society (other victims included) via campaigns or any other means. In that way, they would be able to encourage the denouncement and/or the request for help (EIGE 2020; Goodman and Epstein 2008; GREVIO 2019; Secretaria de Estado para a Cidadania e Igualdade 2019).

The psychological processes of aggressors were also studied, described and classified based on the aggressions committed. If the aggressions described are basically verbal or psychological and there are no other complaints of violence, the classification used is “typical aggressor”. However, if physical aggression or serious psychological aggression is committed, the aggressors are described as psychopaths or sociopaths (Burgess 2019; Gondolf 1988). The psychological processes involved in the phenomenon of domestic violence are important for understanding the experience of the people involved in a given situation. However, if we understand the phenomenon as being deeply rooted in cultural practices, we come to realize that victims and aggressors are people involved in a society bearing a narrative that normalizes domestic violence within the context of interpersonal relationships. From this perspective, we have subjects involved in a social system that needs to be problematized (Beiras and Nascimento 2017; Beiras et al. 2020; Faro and Sani 2014; Goodman and Epstein 2008; Lloyd 2021; Sani and Pereira 2020).

Thinking about the social transformation related to the phenomenon of domestic violence involves listening to victims who had their “voices” silenced, either because they never denounced the situation or because their denunciation had no major consequences (Goodman and Epstein 2008). Additionally, as pointed out by Beiras and Nascimento (2017) and Beiras et al. (2020), it involves listening to aggressors as well. The personal and individual experience of those involved needs to be analysed from the standpoint of their social realities, which contribute to the formation of the sociocultural system. This discussion emphasizes the fact that social transformation can contribute to individual change (Goodman and Epstein 2008).

In the area of advertising and consumer behaviour, qualitative research is carried out with target groups of campaigns for the development of new products, new forms of advertising messages, consumer habits and service expectations (David 2007). Studies were found using the focal method with 12–19-year-olds on advertisements for electronic cigarettes (Chen et al. 2020), with pre-adolescents aged 11–12 years old on sexism present in commercial campaigns (Falcón et al. 2016) and with members of a community about a health campaign in a waiting room (Sharma et al. 2021).

Chen et al. (2020) conducted a study on the interpretation of electronic cigarette advertising campaigns and their engagement with information from these campaigns. For this, they carried out five focus groups with 39 adolescents with an average age of 14 years. The results indicate that the teenagers highlighted the techniques and emotional appeals of advertising as a reason to use the product, including non-smokers. The results pointed to the need for more media strategies for health promotion and regulation in relation to advertising.

Falcón et al. (2016) carried out a study with focus groups among pre-adolescents aged 11 and 12 about the sexism present in advertising campaigns. The authors highlight the scepticism among the participants about advertising strategies while at the same time having the sensitivity to detect the sexism present in the campaigns. The authors emphasize the importance of carrying out focus groups as procedures for evaluating advertising campaigns in addition to suggesting education about advertising.

Sharma et al. (2021) used the focus group method with 19 members of a community to assess the community’s response to a public health campaign available in the waiting rooms of health centres about the danger of indiscriminate use of imaging diagnoses for back pain problems. The results showed that the posters raised awareness about the dangers to health, although negative emotional reactions to the campaigns were also found due to the lack of more information about other methods that can be used to diagnose the problem.
In this perspective, we tried to find out what people who self-identified as victims of domestic violence think about the contributions of advertising in the fight against the problem of domestic violence. Studies have already been carried out on people’s reactions to domestic violence campaigns, with the aim of investigating which domestic violence campaigns increased the likelihood of denouncing behaviour, with experimental and quasi-experimental designs (Ferle et al. 2019; Keller et al. 2010; Keller and Honea 2016; Kim and Muralidharan 2019; Muralidharan and Kim 2019). The narrative appeal of domestic violence situations was found to increase the likelihood of reporting the situation (Muralidharan and Kim 2019; Kim and Muralidharan 2019). In addition, narrative appeals that contain feelings of guilt or shame may also have a greater effect on the reporting attitude (Ferle et al. 2019). Keller et al. (2010) carried out a study with questionnaires on denouncement attitudes before and after exposure to institutional advertising campaigns. The results showed that the exposed group of men did not alter their answers to the questionnaires, which was discussed as an unintentional effect since most of the campaigns represent men as aggressors. A qualitative study of interviews and focus groups stemming from this investigation pointed to reports of injustice in the majority representation of men as perpetrators of domestic violence (Keller and Honea 2016).

An anthropological study was also found on the reactions of people at train and bus stations to domestic violence campaigns (Igreja 2018). Igreja (2018) carried out a study using the tool of ethnography within the field of anthropological studies, in which there was interaction with people in train stations, buses and public bathrooms, where two domestic violence posters were displayed. In one of them, there was a representation of a woman looking sad and confused with her hands on her head and the blurred image of a man hovering behind her. The other contained a split female face with bruises on one of the halves. Some of the interlocutors stated that they thought the first poster was about depressive states. Some participants stated that they disagreed with these campaigns because they focused on men as perpetrators of domestic violence; however, men could also be victims. Some women who claimed to have been victims of domestic violence stated that domestic violence, as a cultural phenomenon by nature, was also the responsibility of women, who advise against reporting it out of shame.

This article understands domestic violence as a phenomenon that is supported by cultural narratives and its victims as “experiential experts” (Nogueira et al. 2021). Specifically, our objectives were:

i. To understand what people with victimization experience think about the contributions of advertising to the fight against domestic violence;

ii. To find out more about the perceptions of people with experience of domestic violence regarding the characteristics and strategies of institutional campaigns on domestic violence;

iii. To obtain suggestions from victims about what can be done to prevent domestic violence.

2. Method and Materials

The method used for this present study was to carry out a focus group. Focus groups are discussions in groups formed by 4 to 12 people and mediated by a moderator who addresses questions that must be answered by the participants but also discussed among themselves (Tong et al. 2007). This qualitative research method was developed from the concept that group interaction encourages the participation of others (Millward 2012; Silva et al. 2014; Tong et al. 2007).

The use of this method in discussions of complex problems has the advantage of the interaction generated by memory stimuli from other situations or opinions shared by the participants. The use of a focus group is not recommended in situations that may trigger feelings of shame or stigmatization (Millward 2012; Silva et al. 2014; Tong et al. 2007). However, the fact that the participants identified themselves as victims of domestic violence is important for the study of domestic violence.
violence was not revealed in any situation. In this way, the focus group was considered the best option, as we were dealing with a sensitive topic.

2.1. Participants

The sample for this study stemmed from a convenience sampling process among the group of individuals who, having previously participated in a survey via questionnaire (Nogueira 2022) and having identified themselves as victims, agreed to contact the researcher to participate in a focus group. In this study, as indicated above, the authors undertook an exploratory study and analysis of institutional campaigns to combat domestic violence, as well as a study on the relationship between beliefs about domestic violence and the experience of the phenomenon, in addition to the analysis the impact of institutional campaigns on participants. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were also explained that this study would have a second stage, with a focus group and, should the participants be interested in participating, they were asked to provide an email or telephone number for contact. The average response time varied between 15 and 20 min.

Therefore, participants who identified as victims of domestic violence and agreed to be contacted for the second stage of this study were invited to participate in this focus group. However, among the more than sixty people contacted, only ten responded, only six were able to participate at the chosen time, and only four actually attended. The authors of this study believe this might be attributed to the COVID pandemic and the six-month period that elapsed between the survey and the focus group. Therefore, this focus group was carried out with four people (cf. Table 1) who declared that they had been victims of domestic violence in a survey following the above study previously carried out with a sample population residing in Portugal (Nogueira et al. 2021); additionally, as previously stated, they had already expressed in this study an interest in participating in subsequent research. The participants were between 32 and 49 years old, and three of them were female. The four participants had at least a bachelor’s degree. One of the participants had academic training in computation sciences, one had studied psychology, and the other two had training in the area of communication sciences.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characterization of the sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Academic Qualifications</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Brazilian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Brazilian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Portuguese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Brazilian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2. Instruments

The focus group was conducted by Elayne Nogueira, who used a script that included guiding questions. The script was designed by taking into account the results obtained in the previous survey (Nogueira et al. 2020, 2021, 2022). This script comprehended four topics, approximately, which dealt with (1) the contribution of advertising in preventing the problem of domestic violence, (2) the characteristics that advertising campaigns should possess in order to guarantee effectiveness and (3) to which target audience they should be aimed at, in addition to (4) any suggestions they cared to offer on the use of advertising to prevent domestic violence. After these topics had been discussed, it was possible to open the discussion to any other topic the participants deemed relevant.

2.3. Procedure

Authorization to carry out this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of University Fernando Pessoa. Participants were selected from the list of people who responded to the survey in a previous study, among those who claimed to have had experience of
victimization and were willing to proceed to the second stage of this study by providing their e-mail contact (Nogueira et al. 2021). Thus, in order to start the second stage of this study, the participants were contacted via email. They were thanked for their availability to take part in the first stage of the research by responding to the survey entitled “Institutional advertising and its media repercussion: the influence of advertising campaigns in the fight against domestic violence”, followed by an invitation to participate in the second stage. They were informed that the second stage would consist of their participation in a focus group and that, due to the pandemic situation, this would be carried out remotely. The invitation was sent to 70 people using the “blind copy” tool so that the e-mail addresses of the other guests were not exposed. Two dates were made available for the focus group to take place, and it was made clear that individual participation would only be necessary in one of the time slots. Participants were also informed that if they were available to join the focus group, they would receive a link to access the meeting ten minutes before the set time and that an assent form would be sent to them via the Google Forms tool. A contact e-mail was provided to clarify any doubts regarding this study. Six positive responses were obtained for one of the time slots. However, only four participants accessed the link. The focus group started with the presentation of this study. Participants were thanked for their availability and collaboration with the research, clarifying that participation was voluntary and that, therefore, they could leave at any time, as well as participate in the discussion with the camera turned off. Authorization for recording the focus group was also requested, making it clear that only the researcher would have access to the audio recording for transcription and subsequent data analysis. Then, the participants were asked to introduce themselves, and soon afterwards, the first guiding question was asked. No time limit was set for the ensuing discussion. It took place with the participation of all four participants and did not require the intervention of the researcher, except for the introduction of subsequent questions. In the end, the researcher, who is a registered psychologist with the Order of Portuguese Psychologists, offered assistance to the participants using individual sessions, should they feel it was necessary, on a voluntary basis and not in a way related to this specific research, in case they felt mobilized regarding the theme at stake.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data found with the focus group were evaluated using the thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012; Vaismoradi et al. 2013), which is a method used for identifying and analysing themes that can emerge in qualitative research. Thematic analysis can be characterized as a possibility of understanding day-to-day reality without the need for an implicit theoretical commitment to the analysis, as this method is not previously linked to a pre-existing theoretical framework and can be used with different theoretical frameworks (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012; Vaismoradi et al. 2013).

The theme, a thematic analysis study tool, can be defined as the content related to the research question that emerges in the participants’ interventions as a pattern or as a systematic point. It is noteworthy that the definition of what the theme is relates to the importance of the content expressed in relation to the research questions and not to the number of times the theme is mentioned by the participants. Thus, it is not a matter of quantitative prevalence. The researcher’s judgment assumes greater importance in relation to the relevance of the topic (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012).

Therefore, to carry out the data analysis in this present study, the discussion between the participants was transcribed in order to be read and listened to at a later stage. In this way, reading accompanied by listening was carried out in order to code and identify the themes based on the participants’ comments. The participants’ sentences were the units of analysis, which were categorized according to semantic registers. This activity was carried out in order to guarantee the anonymity of the participants. Data were classified into two themes, which were further divided into sub-themes (cf. Table 2).
Table 2. Themes and sub-themes identified from thematic analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>A. Effectiveness of advertising campaigns on domestic violence as to the prevention of the phenomenon</th>
<th>B. Domestic violence and the fight against it using advertising strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A1. Power of advertising campaigns of this type in individual and societal transformation</td>
<td>B1. Self-identification (or lack of it) on the part of former and present victims with graphic depictions of violence in advertising campaigns and ensuing reactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A2. Discussion in society prompted by advertising campaigns on domestic violence</td>
<td>B2. Replication in advertising campaigns of the genderization process detected in real-life domestic violence situations</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>B3. Advertising campaigns as an educational tool on the issue of domestic violence</td>
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</table>

3. Results

The focus group members were active participants discussing the questions that the authors proposed to them and adding other comments and points of view. The results will be presented according to the aforementioned themes, previously organized in a matrix of responses.

Theme A. Effectiveness of advertising campaigns on domestic violence as to the prevention of the phenomenon

A1. Power of advertising campaigns of this type in individual and societal transformation. The theme related to the power of advertising was highlighted among the participants as a justification for the use of advertising in the fight against social problems, including domestic violence. Regarding this theme, they reflected on the fact that commercial advertising can successfully contribute to an increase in sales, so it could also be useful as a tool for raising awareness:

“...I think there are several surveys about the number of sales that grow because of advertising, so why not encourage another, another attitude, another behaviour, in addition to buying a given product, a given thing?” (P1)

“...using advertising, which is a tool that reaches people. We are dealing with this all the time, with media that vehiculate communication, so we can use it in a way that can contribute, in short, even to save lives” (P2)

A2. Discussion in society prompted by advertising campaigns on domestic violence. The main contribution of advertising in the fight against domestic violence pointed out by the participants was to promote discussion in society. They stressed that the issue should no longer be debated only through mere awareness of the statistics concerning the number of cases and that it should also stop being considered a private matter.

“...I think it is important to do so, first to spread the message, but also to make the topic more normalized, that is, not merely a situation that is talked about just because a case is publicly known (...). If it has a lot of impact because it happens in so many places, even if it does not have an immediate effect, it will have the effect of normalizing the situation, maybe it can help it to become less of a taboo.” (P3)

“...some changes often need to be legitimized by the media to be accepted in society. What we see today as domestic violence was seen as something normal in relationships because it was socially accepted, so when you start to see it, whether in a soap opera, or in a movie, or in advertising which, in my point of view, is even more accessible, because we even receive it without looking for it, it’s at the bus stop, on the bus, on television, it’s there all the time” (P1)

Theme B. Domestic violence and the fight against it using advertising strategies

B1. Self-identification (or lack of it) on the part of former and present victims with graphic depictions of violence in advertising campaigns and ensuing reactions. The issue
of empathy towards the campaigns was highlighted based on the memory of one of the participants regarding one of the campaigns presented in the survey, where we could see an image of a severely bruised woman dressed as a bride. There was disagreement among the participants on this point. Two of them stated that they had reservations about the shock strategy used in advertisements with a sensitive theme, and two others stated that a strong visual appeal was necessary.

“I keep thinking ‘who is this advertisement meant for?’; whether this advertisement is meant for, for the woman who is a victim, I wonder how this strong appeal thing is interpreted (…) Because we know that women who are victims of violence have been in abusive relationships for a long time and cannot get out of it due to countless issues, and they themselves often feel guilty for being in this situation. So, the first thing I think of is this, ads can provide a support framework for this suffering.” (P2)

“I agree with the idea that there has to be something, some appealing visual factor, because at least it draws attention, otherwise, people are so bombarded, so hyper stimulated by a thousand and one ads about things that we do not even know what they are, that this will be just one more, if the quality is not very high. The bride’s poster was very well designed. I think that makes all the difference, at least for disseminating the message.” (P3)

B2. Replication in advertising campaigns of the genderization process detected in real-life domestic violence situations. Based on the discussion about identification with the campaigns and the use of strong images that represent women who are victims of domestic violence, the question was asked about why campaigns, in general, are produced for the victims and only represent them. Approaches to understanding the behaviour of the aggressor were also discussed.

“Why is the victim always exposed, whereas the aggressor is not? Why does the woman have to have a bruised face, you know? (…) I remembered a documentary that was made in Brazil about toxic masculinity, I think it’s a man’s talk, which talks about the place that this man occupies, the oppression he lives too, yeah, and then I stop to think about it all and I wonder if we should have talked more about it, from the beginning.” (P4)

“Why are we only discussing the victims? (…) men need to speak up too, men too, many of them come from a context of domestic violence, and they just replicate this in their lives as if it were the normal social order, so there really are different audiences that need to be addressed.” (P1)

B3. Advertising campaigns as an educational tool on the issue of domestic violence. One of the suggestions made by participants in the fight against domestic violence was that the issue be addressed in schools, via campaigns to fight the problem or even as a curricular subject.

“It is very important, and what is missing a lot is the field of education, whether at school or out of school, because people need this type of knowledge, or at least, there should already have campaigns on the issue of domestic violence, but with an educational or preventive logic.” (P3)

“Advertising can reach people by other means, you know, advertising can be displayed at that health centre where the poor population normally go to and there is a poster… that is also a form of advertising. I fully agree with campaigns in schools, in terms of education, because it is no longer just advertising, it really is education, this is fundamental, because we are talking about changing a reality now, how about combining this with changing reality right from the beginning?” (P1)
4. Discussion

This study aims to understand the perception of people who identified themselves as victims of domestic violence regarding institutional campaigns to fight the problem. We emphasize the importance of listening to victims of domestic violence regarding the tools to combat the problem (Goodman and Epstein 2008; Secretaria de Estado para a Cidadania e Igualdade 2019). In order to do so, as previously stated, we have obtained a sample group for this present study from a previous exploratory study on institutional advertising campaigns on domestic violence. Four individuals from this previous study who had suffered domestic violence manifested their willingness to participate in a focus group. In this way, for the purposes of this present article, we endeavoured to ascertain what the four “experiential experts” think about the contributions of advertising in the fight against domestic violence and their perceptions about the characteristics and strategies of institutional campaigns related to this problem. Even though the sample constitutes only four people of different nationalities and genders, the specific characteristics of this sample do not bias its representativity but rather ensure experiential variability as to the phenomenon at stake.

Participants stated that advertising can contribute to the fight against social problems such as domestic violence. The argument used by the participants was that if advertising manages to increase the likelihood of consumption of a given product, it can also change behaviour. One of the functions of advertising is to promote a change in attitudes and behaviour and to ameliorate social problems. As pointed out earlier, advertising, in fact, has been increasingly used for these purposes, either through institutional campaigns (Atkin and Rice 2012; Coffman 2002; Thorson and Rodgers 2012) or marketing (Balonas 2011; Belch and Belch 2018; Hastings and Domegan 2017; Kotler and Lee 2008) or in campaigns with hybrid characteristics (Balasubramanian 1994; Balonas 2011; Simões and Tuna 2010, 2013).

One of the contributions of advertising highlighted by the participants is that institutional campaigns can and should promote the discussion of the topic of domestic violence, that is, encouraging people to start talking more about the phenomenon and not just when there is a case that is being addressed by the media. According to the Guide to Good Practices for the Media in Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Secretaria de Estado para a Cidadania e Igualdade 2019) and reports from research institutes (GREVIO 2019; EIGE 2020), the role of the media in combating domestic violence is to make the crime visible, since, despite being considered a public crime in Portugal (Duarte 2011), the problem is still avoided and considered as an event belonging to one’s private life.

Regarding the phenomenon of domestic violence and ways of fighting it, the participants questioned the way sentences in ads are constructed and the general appeal directed at victims (which are mostly women), in addition to the lack of advertising campaigns aimed at aggressors (mostly men), emphasizing genderization in this depiction of the phenomenon.

Participants disagreed with one another regarding the way in which institutional campaigns are presented and strategies are used, namely that of evoking shock or strong emotions in their target audience. One of the Portuguese advertising campaigns, where the bride is depicted with facial injuries and the phrase “till death do us part” is shown, was mentioned as having an approach that makes the audience think and question themselves on the issue of violence. That mention sparked a discussion about that same strategy. Participants mentioned that, on the one hand, it could be a way to draw people’s attention in a society which is already excessively stimulated by the sheer number of advertising campaigns. However, they wondered whether the impact produced on a victim of domestic violence (who is, in fact, the target of that particular campaign) would not cause an even greater distancing from support institutions since most victims do not see themselves as such. In fact, some domestic violence campaigns may go unnoticed or might even be mistaken for something else due to the absence of more intense stimuli (Igreja 2018).

As we have seen, strong feelings in an advertisement affect its neutrality and start to
influence us (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy 2004), even though the emotions evoked may not correspond to the emotions that its producers intended to depict in the message (Hamby and Jones 2022). However, it is important to reflect on the way this influence will be exerted and on which target audience. The attitudes and beliefs of people who have experienced victimization may be different from those of people who have not experienced it (Nogueira et al. 2021). Therefore, they may be affected by the same advertising messages in different ways (Atkin and Rice 2012; Ferle and Lee 2012). Thus, defining one’s target audience when preparing the campaign and studying the behaviours it intends to influence is paramount (Atkin and Rice 2012; Ferle and Lee 2012). Additionally, one must be aware of the unintended effects of institutional communication campaigns, such as shame or guilt felt by the victim for being unable to adopt the behaviours these campaigns suggest (Keller et al. 2010; Keller and Honea 2016). High involvement with a particular subject can affect the way the message is processed, which may trigger acceptance or rejection of advertising messages. There are victims of domestic violence who might feel guilty for not having reported the situation or even feel ashamed and isolated for not feeling adapted to the behaviours recommended by the campaigns (Petty and Cacioppo 1979; Nogueira et al. 2022). From the reflection that these campaigns (1) are based on the assumption of interpersonal empathy of people who manage to put themselves in the place without having gone through the situation or even feel ashamed and isolated for not feeling adapted to the behaviours recommended by the campaigns (Petty and Cacioppo 1979; Nogueira et al. 2022). From the reflection that these campaigns (1) are based on the assumption of interpersonal empathy of people who manage to put themselves in the place without having gone through the situation and (2) on the possible unintentional effects of guilt and shame in people who may have gone through the experience of victimization, we also questioned whether the strategy of using shocking elements could not be put to better use by highlighting a taboo (discussion of the phenomenon of domestic violence) in public mobilization campaigns, that is, with appeals aimed at population in general, and not to victims of domestic violence (Nogueira et al. 2022). Participants also wondered why advertising campaigns are mostly focused on victims and not on aggressors, arguing that there should also be campaigns about aggressors and campaigns that are targeted specifically at them. In addition, they further emphasized that, as domestic violence perpetrators are mostly male (CIG 2019), we should try to ascertain whether we are really trying to convene listening groups with male perpetrators of domestic violence and whether we are effectively concerned about the way masculinity is construed and constructed in our society. The emphasis on the victimization process by the media may suggest that the victims are, in fact, responsible for maintaining the situation (Berns 2004; Correia et al. 2017). In addition, the focus on the woman victim and the man aggressor can evoke default behaviours, as it does not represent the phenomenon in a comprehensive manner (Igreja 2018; Keller et al. 2010; Keller and Honea 2016). Understanding domestic violence as a cultural problem rooted in gender inequality (Goodman and Epstein 2008; Lisboa et al. 2009; Saffioti and Almeida 1995) is to discuss the power imbalance between males and females in our society. The alteration in gender relations involves listening to those involved while taking into account their respective social realities, including those of the aggressors (Beiras et al. 2020; Beiras and Nascimento 2017; Goodman and Epstein 2008). This is a task that should be undertaken at an early stage, as the participants clearly highlighted: they emphasize the importance of discussing the topic of domestic violence in schools as a way of promoting dialogue and education on the subject among the younger generations. Regarding this issue, an education guide entitled Knowledge, Gender and Citizenship in Secondary Education was designed as support material for teachers with proposals for content approaches in schools (Vieira et al. 2017). This guide was prepared in order to encompass the discussion on gender inequality, in addition to themes and problems on subjects related to the various areas of knowledge that are already addressed at school on a regular basis, such as Portuguese, English, Philosophy, Physical Education, History, Biology, Economics, History of Culture and Arts.

One of the limitations of this present study lies in the size of the sample, which does not allow for generalization. In this way, we suggest that other studies can further this awareness with larger samples. The variability of the sample may also ensure better targeting of campaigns to strategic audiences, which is why we suggest that focus groups
that meet social markers such as gender, race, class or sexual orientation, for example, may also be the object of analysis on the expected reach of the campaigns. However, the biggest constraints of this research may arise, for instance, with underage participants; we consider that, as domestic violence extends to several age groups, future studies may consider the possibility of constituting samples with children and teenagers, given the scarcity of campaigns also aimed at these specific audiences. Since the phenomenon of victimization and aggression are necessarily present and the importance of this social problem, we emphasize the importance of samples involving aggressors, first-line social response entities and the general public. We believe that this present study, although it does not allow generalization, can contribute to the deconstruction of traditionalist orientations in the way of producing advertising campaigns for the prevention of domestic violence, thus enabling the development of new directions in this field of research. Although our sample was composed of participants of two nationalities (Portuguese and Brazilian), such a study could easily be replicated with a larger sample including other nationalities. Limited though they are (since we have undertaken a qualitative approach, which does not allow statistical evidence), we believe the results obtained are of transversal interest to international audiences. The issues here involved, namely the effect of institutional advertising campaigns, the fight against domestic violence and the reframing of traditional gender roles in the media, are not limited to matters of nationality or language, and testimonials on these issues are certainly worthy of our attention and our academic endeavours. International advertising agencies (and not just national ones) would also benefit from the contributions put forward in this study when trying to effectively reach target audiences, avoiding the risk of antagonizing the very people they are trying to impact when they portray them in cross-cultural advertising campaigns according to the traditional genderized approach.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to find out how victims of domestic violence perceive the characteristics of campaigns on the phenomenon and the effects caused by the strategies used in order to assess, according to the victims’ perspectives, the contributions of advertising in fighting the problem.

Four people who identified with the experience of victimization were heard using a focus group. During the discussion, participants affirmed that advertising is present in our society in a relevant way, and, therefore, it can be an important tool not only for informing people and raising their awareness but also as a means of making the discussion of the phenomenon more present in our daily lives. The discussion also made it possible to question aspects and characteristics of these advertising campaigns, such as the target audience to whom they are directed and their usual focus on victims. There is a marked tendency to reproduce in these campaigns the genderization process that routinely occurs when women are normally assumed as victims and men are, by default, aggressors. One of the outcomes of the discussion was the suggestion that aggressors should also be featured in campaigns such as these and that the theme of domestic violence is addressed in schools as well, as a part of educational endeavours to further promote social discussion. Therefore, campaigns such as these could play a major role in reversing the default perspectives, thus contributing to an alteration in gender representations in the media and, therefore, in society.

In this way, the main contribution of this study was to increase our knowledge of the perceptions of people with experience of victimization in domestic violence on how advertising has contributed to the fight against domestic violence and their suggestions on how institutional campaigns can promote debate about this social phenomenon. This information can be translated, on a practical note, to valuable improvements in the way public service campaigns on this issue are planned and designed by the advertising industry: (1) the need to assign a team of people to this task who can bear in mind the specific nature of this issue, namely the fact that it is a long-standing and deep-seated cultural problem, as well as the fact that it is (2) advisable to avoid mixed messages as to who exactly the target
audience is in the campaign at stake, (3) emphasizing a wider public appeal rather than focusing it on the victim could also prove valuable, and (4) lastly, beginning this kind of awareness-raising process using public service advertising at a much earlier age could also be relevant for the overall ideation of such campaigns.

**Author Contributions:** E.N. was involved in the conceptualization and manuscript writing; E.S. and A.I.S. were responsible for parts of the manuscript writing, critical review of this article, final approval, and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This work was partially financed by national funds through the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) within the framework of the CIEC (Research Center for Child Studies of the University of Minho) projects under the references UIDB/00317/2020 and UIDP/00317/2020.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of University Fernando Pessoa.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data are not publicly available due to the nature of this study.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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