

NEW YORK CITY ALLIANCE
AGAINST SEXUAL ASSAULT:
MESSAGE TESTING - 2nd ROUND
a topline summary of findings

Presented to:

NYC Alliance Against Sexual Assault

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I. Introduction/Objectives

In the interest of creating anti-sexual assault messages aimed at boys age 11-15, the New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault contracted The Michael Cohen Group to conduct a multi-phase research project.

- Phase one of the project examined the context within which boys understand the concept of sexual assault, as well as investigating the types of public service/behavioral messages that resonate with them.
- Phase two of the research was enacted in two parts.
 - The first tested a series of sample poster concepts and messages in order to determine which of these resonated most effectively with boys in the target age range.
 - The second examined boys' responses to a various iterations of the single most favored of these concepts.

What follows is a summary of findings from the second part of phase two.

II. Methodology

In order to meet these objectives, a series of small focus group interviews were conducted with boys in grades 6-9. These groups were conducted at two locations: New Windsor—a de-industrialized village in upstate New York—and New York City.

38 respondents between the ages of 11 and 15 participated in this portion of the research. Each focus group interview consisted of 5-7 respondents. Each group was moderated by a youth research specialist from the Michael Cohen Group.

III. **Findings:**

General Reactions

- Boys liked the way in which all of these iterations used video game imagery in the service of delivering their content. They felt this was an appropriate visual motif for their age group/demographic.

“It’s cool that it’s a video game. It’s like, we know you play.” –boy, 8th grade

- The oldest boys (older 9th graders) felt that the use of a robot/super-hero video game character read as a bit young for them, as the games they are more attracted to tend involve human/humanoid characters.

“We like games like Vice City. We’re more into destroying the world now than saving it.” –boy, 9th grade

- Boys liked the font used in the posters. They felt it was consistent with the visual style, and appropriately quoted from video games.
 - Yet they had a difficult time reading the words. They felt that the font blended in with the background imagery, and desired greater contrast.

“It looks like a video game font, but they need to make it stand out more. They should use dark green or black to outline the letters.” –boy, 9th grade

- The name of the sponsoring organization was almost completely invisible to the boys. Thus the intent of the poster was somewhat obscured. The boys suggested a few solutions to help remedy this situation:
 - Add in a tag line such as *Sponsored By* in order to clearly indicate this.
 - Distinctly set the sponsorship information off from the imagery and text of the message either physically (i.e. in the border of the poster), and/or visually (through the use of a different, darker, and more severe font).
 - Give the name added gravity or organizational relevance by making it clear that it is affiliated with a locale or agency (ie. New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault, New York State Department of Health).

- Boys understood—and liked—the fact that the white lines radiating out from the center of the poster represented action, but found them to be distracting and too prominent. They felt they were too sharply drawn and visually busy.

“All those lines hurt my eyes. It’s like an optical illusion.” –boy, 9th grade

- Boys felt the controller represented was awkwardly drawn and off-scale. In particular, they felt that the buttons at the top of the controller were too far away relative to the handgrips and the buttons at the bottom. They were insistent that the controller needed to be condensed.

“You’d have to have monster hands. How you going to hold it?” –boy, 9th grade

Individual Iterations

“Know When to Use Your Pause Button” (without a tag line)

This was by far the least popular and least comprehended of the three iterations tested.

- Most boys had difficulty interpreting the subject, general intent, and specific message of this poster. Their interpretations ranged from an admonishment to quit playing video games to encouraging abstinence.

“It could be about anything.” –boy, 7th grade

“It means, don’t have sex.” –boy, 8th grade

- Some (especially older) boys did understand that the message related to sexual assault.

“It means, men shouldn’t rape.” –boy, 9th grade

- As noted above, the Alliance Against Sexual Assault marker at the bottom of the poster did little to help the majority of boys comprehend the intent of the message. For most boys, this marker was not salient and was not commented on.

- This marker did not seem to impact on boys’ understanding of who was responsible for producing or disseminating this message or poster.

- When asked directly about what they thought “The Alliance” was, most boys expressed a belief that it was an informal group of women or rape victims, rather than a public service organization.

“Maybe some women made it. Someone who’s been through something like that [sexual assault]” –boy, 9th grade

“Maybe they’re nurses?” –boy, 7th grade

- Boys had a difficult time correlating the image and text here with the intended message. For them, the excitement and action of the imagery didn’t correspond with the text.

- Without the contrast of a tag line, the message was like a joke with no punch line.

- For many boys, this version looked like a video game ad, albeit one with incomprehensible text.

“The words don’t match the picture at all.” –boy, 8th grade

“I don’t get what it’s advertising. I give it a 2 [on a scale of 1-10]” –boy, 7th grade

“Know When to Use Your Pause Button: Sexual Assault is not a Game”

This iteration was generally well liked and relatively appealing to boys throughout the age range tested. In addition, it was very clear in the delivery of its message.

- This version of the poster was immediately and readily understood by all boys as containing an anti-sexual assault message.

It means don't harass a girl if she wants you to stop.” –boy, 7th grade
“You hit pause. You stop doing what you're doing.” –boy, 9th grade

- Boys appreciated the clarity of the message in this version, especially in contrast to the version without the tag line.

“Now I get what it's about.” –boy, 8th grade

- Boys felt that the message and imagery were consistent in this version, and they liked the way that the video game imagery was used to underline the idea of what is, and is not, a game.

“They show the robot character, but just to say that it's not a game. You get points in playing games, but you don't get points for rape.” –boy, 9th grade

- Based on the nature and content of the text, boys felt that the robot image in this version had a menacing quality, as if based on a police officer, soldier, or other representative of enforcement.

“He [the robot] looks angry in this one. I know he's the same [as in the other iterations], but the words make him look angry.” –boy, 8th grade
“He's like, if you get caught, it's not a game. You could go to jail.”
–boy, 7th grade

- Boys felt a punitive undercurrent within this message, which decreased its appeal. Tonally, this version felt less respectful or thought provoking than that used in the third iteration (see below).
 - As mentioned in previous rounds of this research, boys told us that they feel inundated with messages that tell them what NOT to do, and while the content of these types of message may be clear or memorable, boys feel less inclined to abide them.
 - Didactic messages are also often seen by boys as patronizing or redundant, telling them things that they feel are self-evident.

“It's not a bad message. But it's not said in the best way.” –boy, 8th grade
“Don't rape? We know that. It's common sense.” –boy, 9th grade

“Know When to Use Your Pause Button: Make Sure She Wants to Play”

This iteration was well received and readily understood by boys throughout the tested age range. It was the most appealing of the iterations tested in terms of tone, though some issues of ambiguity played against this version’s cohesion

- Boys clearly understood this message as informing them of how decisions should properly be made in sexual situations.

“It says, it’s not just up to you. It’s fifty-fifty.” –boy, 7th grade

“It takes two to decide.” –boy, 8th grade

- Boys felt that this version was funnier—and thus more appealing—than the other two presented. They were compelled by the way it employed humor to get them to think about a serious subject.

“This one [iteration] is funnier. It’s serious, but in a funny way.” –boy, 9th grade

- Boys appreciated the fact that this message invited—or expected—them to use their minds in making (sexual) decisions. They felt this respected their capabilities, and endowed them with (deserved) respect.

“It says, stop and think. It gives us some credit.” –boy, 8th grade

- Boys also liked that this version of the message contained within it the possibility that consensual sexual activity could exist in an appropriate fashion if both parties agreed that it was the right time, place, and way for it to occur.

“It says, if she wants to play, then go ahead.” –boy, 9th grade

- Boys felt that the message in this version lent the robot a gentler, more compelling, and more game-like quality than in other iterations.

“The robot looks nicer in this one, like he’s paused, or thinking.” –boy, 9th grade

- Yet, after reflection, some boys felt that the message here had a tendency to undermine itself, that references to “play” and “sexual assault” were dissonant and possibly suggestive of a message contrary to what was intended.

- Despite the general appeal of the message and its cohesiveness as a metaphor, the use of the word “play” and the correlation of sex and/or sexual assault with the idea of a “game” was internally inconsistent.

- For these boys, this ambiguity undermined the messages’ effectiveness.

“It says the idea that sex is a game and I don’t think that’s good.” –boy, 8th grade

IV. Summary/Recommendations

- As was the case in the previous round of research, the core visual elements of this message were highly appealing for boys in the target age range.
 - Boys felt that the use of video games indicated clearly that this message was intended for them.
 - They felt certain that if they came across an ad like this, no matter the location, they would stop and check it out.

“Know When to Use Your Pause Button” (no tag line)

- This iteration of the poster—the only one without a tag line—completely lacked clarity for the boys in terms of its subject matter. They had no clear idea what this poster was intended to be about.
- The sponsorship message on this version—as in all the versions tested—showed itself to be an ineffective means of communicating content information.
- As mentioned above, boys liked the visual imagery used here. But because of their confusion regarding the intended message, they felt that this iteration lacked appeal.
 - This version of the poster clearly did not work with boys in this age range.
 - Greater transparency of message and subject is strongly recommended for boys in this age range.

“Know When to Use Your Pause Button: Sexual Assault is Not a Game”

- This version was overwhelmingly clear to boys in terms of its message, and read transparently to them.
- Boys appreciated the consistent nature of the message, as well as the interplay between the visual and textual elements. These elements were seen as slightly menacing, but in the service of the overall message.
- This message was interpreted as stern and didactic to the target audience, a factor which heavily limited overall appeal.
 - While extremely clear in its message, the scolding tone of this message worked against its effectiveness.
 - Message clarity is needed for boys in this age range, but respect for their mental capacities/decision-making abilities is of paramount importance.

“Know When to Use Your Pause Button: Make Sure She Wants to Play”

- Boys generally found the message here consistent and clear in terms of its content. Yet there were some boys who, on further consideration, felt that this message undermined itself by linking the concepts of sexual assault and play.
- As with the previous version, the interplay between the text and graphics read as consistent. Yet in this version, the visual elements felt more inviting and playful.
- Boys found this iteration to be clever, funny, and—perhaps most importantly—thought provoking, all of which combined to make it the most appealing version of the three tested.
 - This message was most effective in both appealing to boys in the target age range, and to causing them to consider their own decision making processes with regard to sexual situations.
 - Yet an ambiguity was created in combining the seriousness of the subject at hand with the notion of “play”—a resonance that felt counterproductive to some of the boys.

Implications:

- Both of the tag-line based messages tested have the potential to appeal to target age boys and communicate the intended ideals and ideas of the campaign. Both are clear in their intent. Yet they differ markedly in tone, clarity and appeal.
 - The *“Sexual Assault is Not a Game”* version offers an authoritative and unmistakable message that sexual assault is not to be tolerated. Yet the fact that the tone is serious and emphatic limits its appeal and potential effectiveness with boys in the target age range.
 - *“Make Sure She Wants to Play”* invites thought about the subject, and the video gaming metaphor used is considered clever and humorous, and thus tonally on key for boys in this age range, heightening appeal. Yet for many boys, the analogy of play seems ambiguous in the context of the message, and contradictory to the intent of the campaign. In this, there is a certain dissonance between “play” and “sexual assault.”

- In sum, there are three key considerations that should inform the final choice:
 - Appeal
 - Clarity of message
 - Tone of message

These considerations would be best informed by a decision as to the precise message desired and intended. The choice of “tone” should then underscore that message. Complicating this decision is the fact that appeal is greatly affected by tone, with didacticism greatly reducing appeal and humor and playfulness greatly enhancing it. These messages may require greater refinement in all of these categories of consideration in order to maximize their potential for effectiveness with target age boys.