Invisible to Invaluable - How Social Media is Helping Tackle Stigma and Discrimination Against Informal Waste Pickers of Bengaluru

Authors : Varinder Kaur Gambhir, Neema Gupta, Sonal Tickoo Chaudhuri

Abstract : Bengaluru, a rapidly growing metropolis in India, with a population of 12.5 million citizens, generates 5,757 metric tonnes of solid waste per day. Despite their invaluable contribution to waste management, society and the economy, waste pickers face significant stigma, suspicion and contempt and are left with a sense of shame about their work. In this context, BBC Media Action was funded by the H&M Foundation to develop a 3-year multi-phase social media campaign to shift perceptions of waste picking and informal waste pickers amongst the Bengaluru population. Research has been used to inform project strategy and adaptation, at all stages. Formative research to inform campaign strategy used mixed methods– 14 focused group discussions followed by 406 online surveys – to explore people's knowledge of, and attitudes towards waste pickers, and identify potential barriers and motivators to changing perceptions. Use of qualitative techniques like metaphor maps (using bank of pictures rather than direct questions to understand mindsets) helped establish the invisibility of informal waste pickers, and the quantitative research enabled audience segmentation based on attitudes towards informal waste pickers. To pretest the campaign idea, eight I-GDs (individual interaction followed by group discussions) were conducted to allow interviewees to first freely express their feelings individually, before discussing in a group. Robert Plucthik's 'wheel of emotions' was used to understand audience's emotional response to the content. A robust monitoring and evaluation is being conducted (baseline and first phase of monitoring already completed) using a rotating longitudinal panel of 1,800 social media users (exposed and unexposed to the campaign), recruited face to face and representative of the social media universe of Bengaluru city. In addition, qualitative in-depth interviews are being conducted after each phase to better understand change drivers. The research methodology and ethical protocols for impact evaluation have been independently reviewed by an Institutional Review Board. Formative research revealed that while waste on the streets is visible and is of concern to the public, informal waste pickers are virtually 'invisible', for most people in Bengaluru Pretesting research revealed that the creative outputs evoked emotions like acceptance and gratitude towards waste-pickers, suggesting that the content had the potential to encourage attitudinal change. After the first phase of campaign, social media analytics show that #Invaluables content reached at least 2.6 million unique people (21% of the Bengaluru population) through Facebook and Instagram. Further, impact monitoring results show significant improvements in spontaneous awareness of different segments of informal waste pickers (such as sorters at scrap shops or dry waste collection centres -from 10% at baseline to 16% amongst exposed and no change amongst unexposed), recognition that informal waste pickers help the environment (71% at baseline to 77% among exposed and no change among unexposed) and greater discussion about informal waste pickers among those exposed (60%) as against not exposed (49%). Using the insights from this research, the planned social media intervention is designed to increase the visibility of and appreciation for the work of waste pickers in Bengaluru, supporting a more inclusive society.

Keywords : awareness, discussion, discrimination, informal waste pickers, invisibility, social media campaign, waste management