Shock factor won battle of the divorce billboards

A billboard showing a woman with a black eye and another in shocking pink warning of marriage with an 'expiry date' were considered to be the most effective ones in the divorce referendum campaign, a poll among university students has revealed.

The study, conducted by a marketing university student, also found that 45 per cent of the students who responded to the online survey said the way they voted in the referendum had been influenced by billboards.

Marketing student Stephen Deguara spoke of the shock factor of billboards that proved effective: the bright pink background and the girl with a black eye were shocking enough for people to remember them.

He told a seminar on marketing research conducted by the university's Marketing Faculty that the objective of the study, carried out eight months after the divorce referendum, was to measure the effectiveness of billboards in the campaign and whether they had any effect on the outcome.

The study was part of the dissertation for his degree in marketing.

Mr Deguara now works as New Media Coordinator at the Archbishop's Curia.

His supervisor for the study was Social Marketing lecturer Marie Briguglio, who explained that it measured how people remembered the billboards, how much they spoke about them, whether the billboards made the rounds on social media such as Facebook and whether people actually voted the way they did because they felt influenced by them.

Mr Deguara said effectiveness was also directly linked to the clarity of the message, how easily it could be read by passers-by, the creativity aspect, the attention it drew or distraction it created.

As part of the study, he also interviewed the main campaigners in the referendum and compared their intentions with the reaction of respondents to the survey.

Of the 300 university students who responded, 84 per cent said they were Roman Catholic and most were floating voters in the general election.

Although the study was not representative of the country's population, because of the small sample size and the fact respondents were all university students, the voting trend was similar to that of the referendum, which the Yes camp won with 52.87 per cent.

The study showed while a majority of respondents remembered the billboard featuring a girl with a black eye and the one with an alarm clock, others also recalled the Kristu Iva, Divorzji Le billboard, featuring the face of Jesus Christ.

However, this anti-divorce billboard was not effective, according to the study, because as many were influenced by it to vote in favour of divorce as against.

Remembering the billboard did not automatically translate into persuasion, Mr Deguara said.


In fact, it was mostly remembered by those who declared they had no religious affiliations.

Dr Briguglio explained that this billboard brought about what is known as "reverse effectiveness", with the anti-divorce message having a counterproductive result.