

Post-Campaign Focus Group Report

SELF-EMPLOYED PERSONS

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Introduction

This report presents findings of the qualitative analysis carried out on the data retrieved from the focus group (FG) held with a sample of self-employed persons in Malta on the 29th of May 2020, further to dissemination of media campaign content targeted towards this group. Notably, this focus group was held online via Zoom due to the partial lockdown in Malta that at the time was ongoing as a preventive measure against the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The analysis was carried out on the basis of the indicators identified as relevant through the literature review exercise carried out for the purposes of this research study, namely:

1. Household and lifestyle, with special attention to income and consumption;
2. Financial literacy and capability, with attention to financial education;
3. Retirement capability, with attention to an analysis pension schemes; and
4. End-user engagement with the targeted financial literacy and retirement capability campaign.

Moreover, the review of literature also enabled identifying mechanisms that transversally affect all these four main indicators, namely:

- a. Trends (identified within the self-employed persons' cohort);
- b. Assets and resources (that the self-employed persons' cohort possesses or practices);
- c. Limitations (that limit the financial literacy and/or retirement capability of the self-employed persons' cohort);
- d. Communication trends and vehicles (within the self-employed persons' cohort when engaging with financial literacy and retirement capability).

These indicators and mechanisms will also be used to organize the structure of this report.

Household and lifestyle

Trends

At the time of the focus group, the vast majority of participating self-employed persons had breadwinning, family and household responsibilities. Consequently, they felt financially responsible in their professional capacity, particularly to be capable of paying their businesses' employees' wages; as well as in their private capacity, to provide for their families. Often this resulted in neglect to personal needs:

Aħna hafna drabi bħala self-employed ninsew lilna nfusna għall-ewwel darba, għat-tieni darba u t-tielet għax l-ewwel jiġi n-negozju. Pereżempju jiena karożza ġdida qatt ma xtrajt u jekk ikolli xi ħaġa tal-flus żejda nippreferi ninvesti fil-business.

Mill-lat personali l-ewwel tiġi l-familja. Jekk kont ħa nagħmel kapriċċ niċċaħhad minnu.

Fl-aħħar tax-xahar l-ikbar sodisfazzjon hu li toħroġ il-pagi u li inti tara li wliedek qegħdin stabbli mbaġhad il-kumplament naraw.

More or less tkun taf x'inhuma l-ispejjeż tiegħek ta' kuljum u tgħix bihom imma din li kulhadd jaħseb li għax self-employed nagħmlu hafna kapriċċi mhux minnu.

There is also evidence that consumption of privatised services trended among the participants, despite the availability of a state-funded equivalent, e.g. healthcare:

Flus bi flus, jiena nippreferi ma nħallasx is-social security u jekk ikolli bżonn ta' sptar immur privat għax ninqeda iktar malajr.

Notwithstanding, such data corroborate preference for consumption of needs (e.g. health) rather than wants (e.g. having a new car).

Assets and resources

The focus group yielded limited data on assets and resources the participating self-employed persons benefit from. It transpired that by and large they rely on their personal and professional capacities to maintain a sustainable household and lifestyle:

Trid tkun kapaçi tagħmel tibdiliet ta' malajr bħal hinijet tax-xogħol u trid taddatta ruhek. Ahna addattajna għas-sitwazzjoni...

Imn'Alla kont bil-għaqal.

... li trid tagħmel hu li ddaħħal idejk fil-but u jekk issib tinvesti u jekk ma ssibx ma tinvestix.

Limitations

Regular business expenses and overheads – such as utility bills, rent and wages - transpired as culling self-employed persons' household and lifestyle comfort and peace of mind:

Jien għandi ħanut tal-grocer u għandi l-ispejjeż bħall-kont tad-dawl li xorta jaslu kull xahar.

Indeed, most participants were vociferous against the arguable commonly held assumption that self-employed persons' household and lifestyles are financially comfortable or prosperous (“tat-tajjeb”):

Ma jfissirx li self-employed għandhom il-flus.

Kulhadd jahseb li s-‘self-employed’ għandhom ħafna flus u li għandhom xi jqassmu. Din hija l-mentalità li qed intellgħu biha lil uliedna. L-iskola jgħallmuhom li ‘business is profit’ imma mhux hekk l-affarijiet. ‘Business isn’t profit’.

Ir-realtà tas-self-employed hi li rridu naqtgħu bi snienna u meta niġu għas-Si u n-No tibqa’ lura l-familja, dik hi.

Figure 1
Word cloud – Self-employed persons household and lifestyle
Twenty (20) most frequent words



Figure 1 graphically presents the twenty (20) most frequent words found in the self-employed persons' focus group data coded as related to household and lifestyle. The same analysis results are presented in table format in Table 1.

These results inform on the vocabulary terms preferred by the sample of self-employed persons to refer to items, concepts and practices related to the financial aspects of household and lifestyle in the post-campaign phase.

Moreover, they shed light on the quantitative relevance that each word had when the focus group discussion focused on household and lifestyle matters. In other words, on the frequency of the specific words tabulated above during the fieldwork with the sample of the cohort of self-employed persons.

Table 1

List – Self-employed persons household and lifestyle
Twenty (20) most frequent words

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage	Similar Words
flus	4	6	5.00%	flus
ispejjež	8	2	1.67%	ispejjež
malajr	6	2	1.67%	malajr
tax	3	2	1.67%	tax
xahar	5	2	1.67%	xahar
addattajna	10	1	0.83%	addattajna
business	8	1	0.83%	business
bžonn	5	1	0.83%	bžonn
dawl	4	1	0.83%	dawl
ddaħħal	7	1	0.83%	ddaħħal
familja	7	1	0.83%	familja
grocer	6	1	0.83%	grocer
għaqal	6	1	0.83%	għaqal
għaqlija	8	1	0.83%	għaqlija
issib	5	1	0.83%	issib
jiddependi	10	1	0.83%	jiddependi
kapači	6	1	0.83%	kapači
kapriċċ	7	1	0.83%	kapriċċ
kapriċċi	8	1	0.83%	kapriċċi
karozza	7	1	0.83%	karozza

Financial literacy and capability

Trends

Focus group participants expressed conscientious and conservative trends when it comes to financial literacy and capability:

At the back of your mind l-ewwel dejjem jibqa' il-business, it takes over everything.

Ma nimxix mal-pariri tal-gvern u lanqas mal-ghajnuna provduta, li trid tagħmel hu li ddahhal idejk fil-but u jekk issib tinvesti u jekk ma ssibx ma tinvestix.

Many expressed severe limitations to financial capability, exacerbated by the COVID-19 collaterals on the economy and by what they considered to be ineffective and inappropriate government address to the collaterals experienced by self-employed persons:

Is-sitwazzjoni mhux ser tiġi għall-aħjar malajr u l-ispejjeż minhabba l-COVID żdiedu.

Assets and resources

Among assets and resources to financial capability, self-employed persons mentioned personal savings, life skills and literacy in financial matters:

Trid tkun kapaċi tagħmel tibdiliet ta' malajr bħal hinijet tax-xogħol u trid taddatta ruħek.

Jiddependi mill-persuna kemm tkun għaqlija u gġemma' l-flus.

Imn'alla kont bil-għaqal.

Participants also mentioned mortgaging facilities and bank loans as ways of enhancing one's financial capability, albeit with a broadly sceptic or conservative stance, particularly when this implies risking family (not just business) assets:

Jien mill-esperjenza tiegħi mhux tant tbigh l-assi imma torbot l-assi meta tirrikorri l-bank bħala self-employed. Xi kultant anke jkollok titlob il-firma tal-mara tiegħek għax qed torbot id-dar privata tiegħek għax il-bank iġieghlek tagħmilha.

Among the very limited number of external assets and resources to financial literacy, the participants mentioned family members and trade associations, such as the Malta Employers Association (MEA):

Fil-fehma tiegħi għajjnuna kif tista' topera il-business ma ssib kważi mkien jekk ma jkollokx lil xi hadd tal-familja li jtik parir.

Hemm organizzazjonijiet li jimxu b'mod etiku. Il- MEA kienet qed tagħti diversi updates permezz ta' emails u permezz ta' telefonati lilna speċjalment f'dawn iż-żminijiet li għen hafna.

Notably, one participant acknowledged support from state healthcare:

Jiena m'għandix x'ingerger fuq is-servizzi tal-isptar għax allahares ma kinux huma meta kellna bżonnhom.

Limitations

Focus group participants thoroughly emphasised the various facets and dynamics characterising their limitations to financial capability as self-employed persons. Among the limitations of self-employed-persons' financial capability participants identified trading in influence, lack of a long-term strategy (of the businesses / self-employed persons and government), limited opportunities, incentives (including tax incentives) and bank facilities for local businesses to invest in growth:

Intuh wisq bis-sieq lis-self-employed iż-żgħir jew li jhaddem f'tit wisq.

In-negozju mostru li trid titimghu (il-flus) u l-gurnata li tieqaf titimghu jibla' lilek.

Għandna bżonn ta' strategija serja.

Is-settur tiegħi kien hemm min sfortunatament tkessaħ...

Dawk il-businesses li qed jinvestu biex ikabbru l-operat tagħhom mhux se jkollhom biżżejjed flus bħala safety net.

Il-flus jagħmilhom min hu pampalun mal-ministri jew min qaleb il-kulur tal-bandiera.

Aħna is-self-employed inħallsu t-taxxa fuq il-profitt, għaliex kumpaniji oħra ihallsu taxxa inqas minna? Għax huma kumpaniji barranin?

It-taxxa tal-5% kienet tajba meta dahlet għall-ewwel għax bdew ġejjin kumpaniji barranin, bħal tal-gaming, u jinvestu Malta. Pero' mbagħad tagħmel sens li kumpanija bħal LIDL thallas 5% meta għandek il-Maltin li kapaċi jagħmlu l-istess xogħol? It's not fair, qed tiddiskrimina kontra l-Maltin gewwa pajjiżna.

...il-faċilitajiet tal-kreditu, persuna self-employed bħalissa (mhux fil-COVID biss) x'faċilitajiet tista' tuża? Itertqulek l-istonku tiegħek.

Related data testify to significant correlation with the hardships brought about by the impacts on the economy of the pandemic that include uncertainty and labour shortage since many immigrants left the country:

...biss is-sitwazzjoni preżenti bħalissa hija ħazina, aħna nithallsu sa sentejn wara li nkunu tajna servizz.

Sakemm jerggħu jifthi ċ-childcare centres, aħna se nkunu limitati ħafna għax il-magħġoranza tal-ħaddiema tiegħi huma nisa li kellhom jibqgħu d-dar ma' wliedhom.

Biex tagħmel id-deliveries ġod-djar trid thaddem impjegat ieħor. Safrattant jekk ma nħallsux it-taxxi aħna s-self-employed, l-impjegati tal-gvern ma jehdux paga.

Is-self-employed l-aġar li marru u għandna bżonn ta' strateġija long term.

Jien ġej mis-settur tal-kostruzzjoni u f'dak li jirrigwarda l-COVID aħna bqajna għaddejnin biss hemm element kbir ta' incertezza.

Barra minn hekk hafna haddiema barranin kellhom jitolqu minhabba l-COVID.

Data analysis also illuminated participants' negative reviews of government intervention in response to the pandemic's collaterals and how this was ineffective for self-employed persons, or neglected the hardships experienced by this cohort - particularly the smaller and medium enterprises or those of specific economic activities, such as real estate agencies:

Fis-sitwazzjoni prezenti l-gvern lilna s-self-employed u speċjalment ir-real estate agencies insiena totalment, irrelevanti kemm għandna haddiema għax skontu ahna 'naqilgħuha tajjeb' u allura m'għandniex bżonn ta' għajnuniet.

Ir-real estate agencies hallewhom barra.

L-għajjnuna finanzjarja li qassam il-gvern minhabba l-effett tal-COVID jiena ma hadtux għax self-employed.

Ahna addattajna għas-sitwazzjoni imma l-gvern mhux jgħinna. Il-gvern lilna loan għal żmien sentejn offrilna, irrelevanti x'tip ta' business. Saru żbalji kbar mill-gvern mas-self-employed fil-COVID.

Kien hemm għajta shiha biex ahna ninvestu u biex ingibu l-haddiema minn barra. Issa għax investejna kif qalulna l-gvern bghatna niehdu loan minhabba l-COVID. L-għajjnuna li tana l-gvern mhux biżżejjed, issa qed johorġu r-realtajiet tagħha l-affari.

They were talking millions, f'dan il-pajjiz min hu hbieb mal-ministri sar miljunarju u min hu soċjalist fil-qalb dejjem ibati taht saqajn min imexxi. Issa bis-sahha tal-COVID kulhadd dahal go qoxortu u qed jindunaw x'hawn hazin imma hadd mill-politici mhu qed joffri soluzzjonijiet ta' kif ser insolvu l-problemi.

Jien infqajt nidhak x'hin semma il-pakkett tal-għajjnuna ta' 1.8 million għax naf li l-banek m'huma qed isellfu xejn iktar minn qatt qabel għax qed joqogħdu attenti, u mhuma flessibli xejn. Il-banek la jgħinu lill-business u lanqas lin-nies.

Ghandi kważi 60 sena u wasalt biex nibda nnaqqas mix-xogħol, waslet il-COVID u applikajt għall-wage supplement u l-gvern ma tanix. L-iskuża li

gabu hija li jiena m'iniex irregistrata la mal- 'VAT Dept.' u lanqas ma' tat-taxxi.

Data analysis also illuminated limitations to the extent of which self-employed persons can enhance their financial literacy and capability through involvement in professional associations. Among the reasons for this, data analysis identified limitations to membership based on the specific economic activity of the self-employed person and political and business lobbies:

Jien l-MDA talbuni biex inkun parti minnhom imma jien ma nista' nkun qatt parti mill-MDA ghax fil-qasam tieghi jien persuna intermedjarja.

Jien ghandi esperjenza mal-MEA li huwa mostru bla snien, jidhlu f'negozjati.

Kif tista' jkollok fiducja fihom meta jkollok individwi qed imexxu assoċjazzjoni u huma stess ghandhom kumpanija li qieghda kompetitur mieghek?

Jien mas-snin dejjem rajt li l-good practice dejjem sejra lura f'kull settur. Hemm min ghandu hafna flus jew hafna power u qeghdin jixtru lil dawki li suppost qeghdin jaqbzu ghalina. Din qed narawha fil-unions tal-lum.

Sfortunatament il-politika hija kollox f'dan il-pajjiż, qed nirreferi għaż-żewġ naħat. Il-mentalità li rabbejna f'dawn l-aħħar snin hija hażina hafna u se nispiċċaw inbatu kollha.

Ċertu kumpaniji bdew bħala self-employed imbagħad għal raġunijiet li semmejna tant kibru li issa iktar tista' ssejthom kartel milli self-employed. Irid ikun hemm distinzjoni.

Figure 2
Word cloud – Self-employed persons
financial literacy and capability
Twenty (20) most frequent words

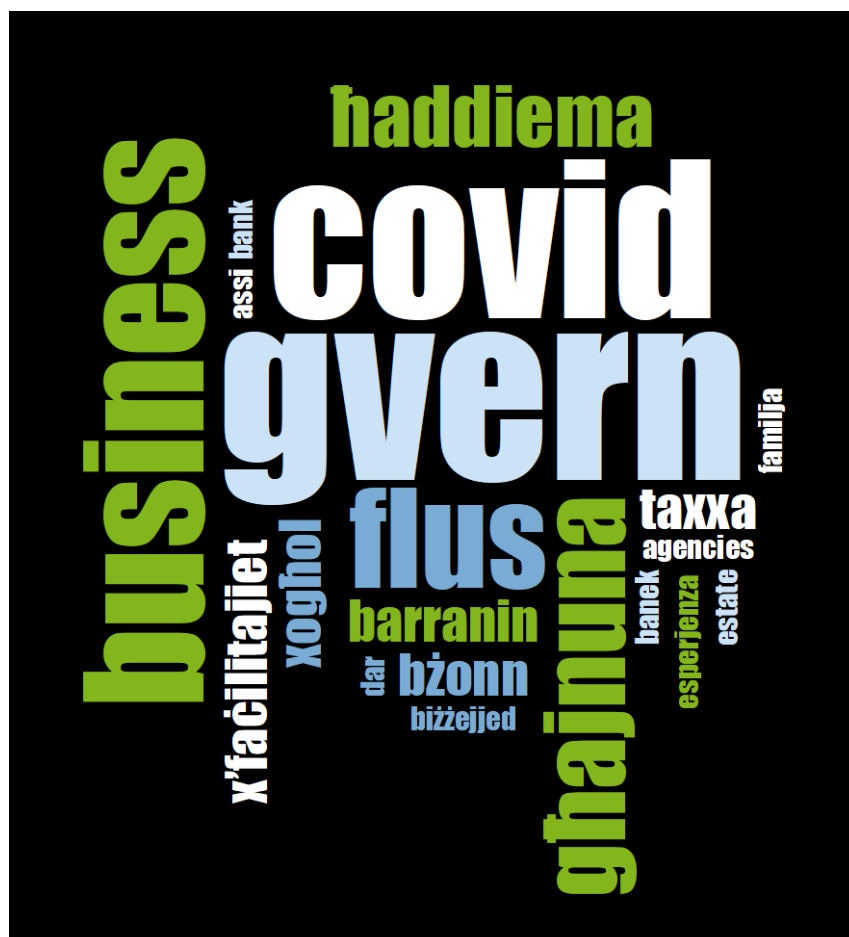


Figure 2 graphically presents the twenty (20) most frequent words found in the self-employed persons' focus group data set that was coded as related to financial literacy and financial capability. The same analysis results are presented in table format in Table 2.

These results inform on the vocabulary terms preferred by the sample of self-employed persons to refer to items, concepts and practices related to the financial literacy and capability.

Moreover, they shed light on the quantitative relevance that each word had when the focus group discussion focused on financial literacy and capability. In other words, on the frequency of the specific words tabulated above during the fieldwork with the sample of persons in self-employment in the post-campaign phase.

Table 2
List – Self-employed persons financial literacy and capability
Twenty (20) most frequent words

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage	Similar Words
gvern	5	10	1.70%	gvern
covid	5	9	1.53%	covid
business	8	7	1.19%	business, businesses
flus	4	6	1.02%	flus
għajnuna	8	5	0.85%	għajnuna
ħaddiema	8	4	0.68%	ħaddiema
barranin	8	3	0.51%	barranin
bżonn	5	3	0.51%	bżonn
taxxa	5	3	0.51%	taxxa
xogħol	6	3	0.51%	xogħol
x'faċilitajiet	14	3	0.51%	x'faċilitajiet
agencies	8	2	0.34%	agencies
assi	4	2	0.34%	assi
banek	5	2	0.34%	banek
bank	4	2	0.34%	bank
bizżejjed	9	2	0.34%	bizżejjed
dar	3	2	0.34%	dar
esperjenza	10	2	0.34%	esperjenza
estate	6	2	0.34%	estate
familja	7	2	0.34%	familja

Retirement capability

Trends

Participating self-employed persons were very brief when discussing their personal retirement capability. This may be owed to a reluctance to portray themselves as retiring from a business they inherited from family or built from scratch. Notwithstanding, there was some evidence of reflections on and planning for retirement and paying a private retirement premium or national insurance contributions to this end, albeit not always willingly:

Jien fuq penzjonijiet u private insurances niċċekkja.

Jien real estate negotiator ukoll... xorta nhallas it-taxxa u l-bolol.

Kif nara FS3 qatgħa nieħu għax diġà qed nikkontribwixxu ħafna żżejjed.

Assets and resources

The above data also inform how self-employed persons' assets and resources for retirement capability primarily involved national insurance contributions and private retirement schemes.

Limitations

Participants were relatively far more vociferous when discussing limitations to financial capability. Significant distrust was expressed towards relying on the state or the government to support self-employed persons during the retirement years, notwithstanding these would have paid national insurance contributions:

...nistaqsi: min qed jissalvagwardjana meta jien inhallas il-private insurance kull xahar ma' kumpanija privata u xorta rrid inhallas il-bolla in full lill-gvern?

Il-private insurance li nhallas bħalissa ser ittini parti mis-somma meta nagħlaq 65 u l-bqija neħodhom 120 ewro fix-xahar sakemm nagħlaq 85. Ghidli inti x'tagħmel b'120 ewro fix-xahar? Ċuċata mal-pensjoni.

Għat-toroq qed inhallas il-liċenzja tal-karozza, mill-business inhallas l-income tax u m'għandix għalfejn inhallas l-N.I. għax mhux ninqeda. Kif nara FS3 qatgħa nieħu għax diġà qed nikkontribwixxu ħafna żżejjed.

*Jien illum inhallas l-inqas li nista' għax ma jien se niggwadanja xejn.
Igawdu dawk li għandhom il-konsulenti.*

*Jien li nista ma nagħtihulux lill-gvern ma nagħtihulux għax meta kelli
bżonnu l-gvern ma sibtux.*

Communication

Figure 3
Word cloud – Self-employed persons retirement capability
Twenty (20) most frequent words

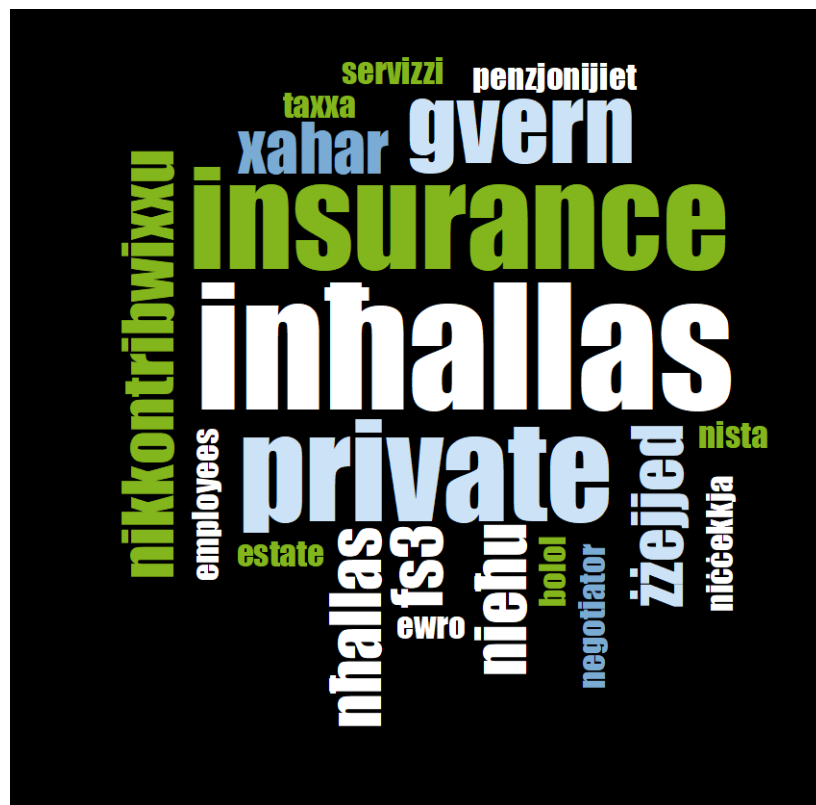


Figure 3 graphically presents the twenty (20) most frequent words found in the self-employed persons' focus group data coded as related to retirement capability. The same analysis results are presented in table format in Table 3.

These results inform on the vocabulary terms preferred by the sample of participants in the post-campaign phase to refer to items, concepts and practices related to retirement capability.

Moreover, they shed light on the quantitative relevance that each word had when the focus group discussion focused on retirement capability. In other words, on the frequency of the specific words tabulated above during the fieldwork with the sample of self-employed persons in the post-campaign phase.

Table 3
List – Self-employed persons retirement capability
Twenty (20) most frequent words

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage	Similar Words
inħallas	8	6	4.03%	inħallas
insurance	9	5	3.36%	insurance, insurances
private	7	5	3.36%	private
gvern	5	4	2.68%	gvern
fs3	3	3	2.01%	fs3
nieħu	5	3	2.01%	nieħu
nikkontribwixxu	15	3	2.01%	nikkontribwixxu
nħallas	7	3	2.01%	nħallas
xahar	5	3	2.01%	xahar
żzejjed	7	3	2.01%	żzejjed
bolol	5	2	1.34%	bolol
employees	9	2	1.34%	employees
estate	6	2	1.34%	estate
ewro	4	2	1.34%	ewro
negotiator	10	2	1.34%	negotiator
niċċekkja	9	2	1.34%	niċċekkja
nista'	5	2	1.34%	nista'
penzjonijiet	12	2	1.34%	penzjonijiet
servizzi	8	2	1.34%	servizzi
taxxa	5	2	1.34%	taxxa

Engagement with the targeted financial literacy and retirement capability campaign

Trends

When exposed to the targeted campaign content the participating self-employed persons manifested some familiarity with the adverts. Negative criticism of presentational aspects of content and discourse was prevalent.

Il-filmat rajtu xi mkien jien naħseb fuq it-TVM.

Jien għaliġa dak insult meta naraha nirrabja.

Imbagħad ġej jagħmel kampanja u jgħidli ġemma, il-gvern missu jgħidlina “ttini xejn, tużax is-servizzi tiegħi għamlu private insurance u imxi fuqha jew a small contribution.”

B’dak it-tip ta’ advert mhux se tikkonvinċi lil xi hadd self-employed. Irid ikun iktar imlaħħam. Dak it-tip ta’ advert lill-mara minn ġol-kċina u mhux lil self-employed jikkonvinċi. Il-messaġġ irid ikun niche.

Jista’ jkun li dak it-tip ta’ advertising mhuwiex tajjeb għas-self-employed biss forsi tista’ tolqtu iktar face to face, billi tkellmu u tiggwidah fuq livell iktar personali. Billboard hekk is-self-employed ma jarahx.

Assets and resources

The feedback that participating self-employed persons put forward on the campaign content proves they endorse educational and campaign initiatives on financial literacy and retirement capability, albeit not if these transfer the blame on the self-employed persons’ lack of financial and business literacy and skills:

...testimonials ta’ persuna self-employed li diġà għamilha. Jikkonvinċini iktar.

Iktar jimpresjonani dak li ppruvaw jagħmlu il-Malta Enterprise fejn inti għandek helpline fejn tista’ ċċempel ikellmuk.

Therefore it transpired that role-models and one-to-one services such as helplines would be assets and resources to an outreach campaign with this particular cohort.

Limitations

Besides limitations to campaign content and discourse mentioned till here, data analysis revealed evidence of significant distrust in national institutions, government and media included. Such distrust obviously culled the effectiveness of the Gemma campaign and the methods and resources it used with this cohort:

Jien daqshekk emmint fil-politiċi u fil-media.

Il-midja teżalta lill-heroes tal-business li huma l-ikbar briganti.

Jien dejjem rajtha li jinċentivaw biss il-ħazin.

Jien nahdem fil-qasam tal-midja. Nemmen illi fil-midja hawn ħafna nies irresponsabbli u mhux kulhadd ikun ġust lejn ir-realtà. Sfortunatament il-politika tidhol f'kollox.

Comparative Analysis: Pre-campaign and post-campaign

This section of the post-campaign report identifies any differences between the findings of the pre-campaign and the post-campaign analysis that can be substantiated when analytically comparing the two respective data sets.

The discussion in this section, as much as possible, also considers if any identified changes can be associated with exposure to the campaign and related GEMMA initiatives, participation in the pre-campaign focus group (when relevant) or other driver of change.

Changes since participation in the pre-campaign focus group include the overwhelming impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the self-employed cohort. Notably, the financial literacy levels, skills and resources identified by means of the pre-campaign focus group proved to be assets to resisting the negative economic impacts of the pandemic.

The negative reviews of the campaign content and the data analysis show no evidence of attitude and lifestyle changes as a result of exposure to the campaign content or of participation in the pre-campaign focus group (for those who participated in this as well).

Nevertheless, the post-campaign focus group data analysis validated the following findings of the pre-campaign focus group data analysis with the self-employed:

Campaigns that package retirement planning as an investment scheme are likely to be successful with this cohort.

Given busy schedules of some members of this cohort and their high digital literacy, the communication of the targeted awareness campaign is more likely to be successful if online platforms are used.

Other communication spaces that self-employed persons are likely to engage with include employers' associations and business support entities such as Business First, the VAT Department and Malta Enterprise.

Main conclusions

Similar to the pre-campaign phase, in the post-campaign phase self-employed persons generally emerged as sensitized to planning ahead and spending with care, despite the limited financial assets or state support. The general thrust was that the sustainability of retirement years relies on investment in private retirement schemes.

The effectiveness of the campaign emerged as negligible and the participants were highly critical of the campaign content, albeit these outcomes cannot discount the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the everyday life of self-employed persons and on participants' perceptions and attitudes in particular.