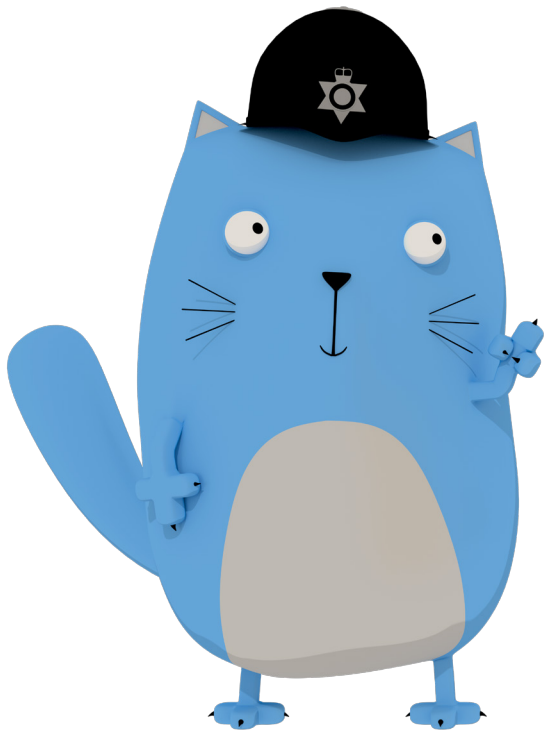


Nudges, Tugs and Teachable Moments: What can a Cartoon Cat teach us about changing people's crime prevention behaviour?



Crime prevention messages aimed at the public typically adopt a 'fear frame' – trying to scare people into changing their behaviour, and in doing so potentially fuelling the public's fear of crime. This study aimed to develop new evidence and insights about what works to persuade people to adopt new security behaviours that better protect them from crime risks.

What's the key idea?

Traditionally, situational crime prevention efforts have focused on limiting the opportunities of offenders to commit crime rather than fostering behaviour in potential victims that reduces their risk of victimisation. Crime prevention communications targeted at the general public commonly adopt a 'fear frame', using perceived risk and threat to evoke a fear reaction in its audience and trigger subsequent preventative behaviour.

Recently, an alternative approach to behavioural change founded in social psychology has come to the fore. Underpinned by Thaler and Sunstein's 'Nudge' (2008), focus is placed on modifying communications to bring about a desired behavioural response. Such modifications can be small and seemingly insignificant, but are shown to drive behavioural changes. Consequently, 'nudging' has rapidly gained traction within public policy, not least because its successful application precludes more forceful behavioural compliance seeking through rules, sanctions or law (so-called behavioural 'tugs'). However, to date, the application of nudging to public crime prevention communications has remained neglected. Although theoretically convincing, empirical evaluations of nudges in this area of public policy are lacking.

This study aims to address this research gap and empirically test, in a real-world setting, crime preventative messages that vary what is communicated, how, when and by whom. These are (1) The Social Experiment and (2) #Copcat Field Trial stages of the research.

PHASE 1

The Messenger, Mechanism & Message Experiment

A quasi-experimental study was carried out with a variety of public audiences between January and March 2016. Participants recorded their responses to nine short films based on real life crime victimisation scenarios. Each film manipulated different ways of presenting information altering the contents of the information conveyed (the Message); who was providing the advice (the Messenger); and, what behaviour change was being invoked (the Mechanism). The data were analysed to understand the effects the communications had on peoples' emotions, behavioural intentions and attitudes.

Three films generated the most impact.

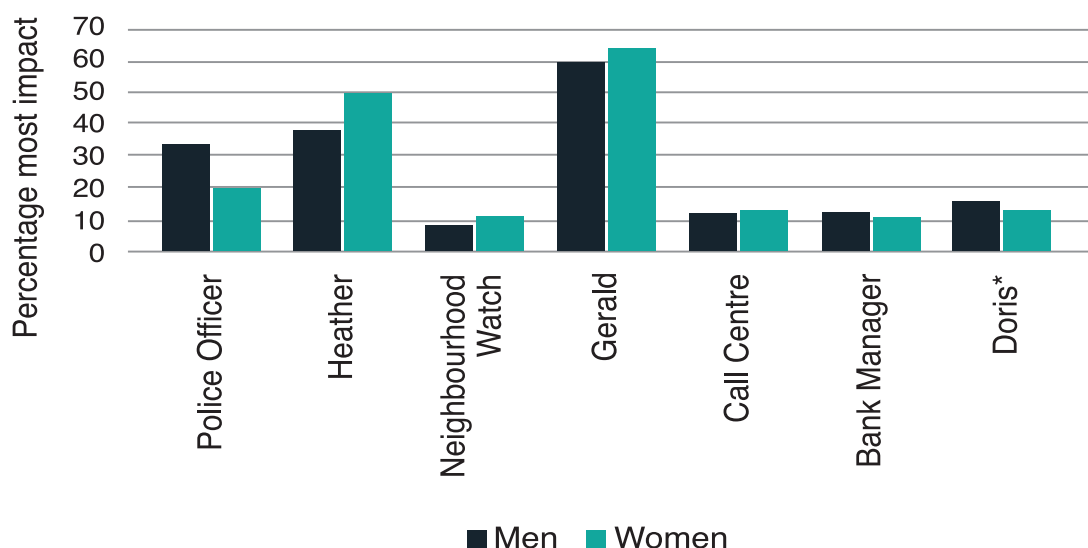
● The two most impactful films were based upon victims recounting their experiences of how the crime had happened to them, emphasising emotional impacts and loss. One was a young female victim of street theft ('Heather'), the other a middle-aged male victim of an online banking fraud ('Gerald'). Both of these empathy driven communications had a stronger effect with women than men, particularly for street theft, a crime that women felt more vulnerable to.

● A more traditional fear-framed message, featuring an authoritative police officer offering a stern warning to the public about a burglary threat, was more impactful for men (32 percent) than women (20 percent). However, this message induced feelings of worry or concern among over one-quarter of its viewers, and equally elicited anger or annoyance.





● Further analysis suggested that people who were angered by situations they saw in the films were less inclined to change their behaviour to protect themselves from crime. Feelings of anger in response to the police officer film increased the likelihood that people externalised the burglary threat as a 'police problem' rather than one that they should act on. By contrast, both victim-led films exceeded this fear-framed film on impact and did not trigger these negative side-effects.





● Other positive alternatives to a 'fear frame' included the use of humour and adopting a message enabling people to feel both competent and responsible for making a change in their behaviour. An unexpected finding from the films was the importance of 'showing, not telling' people what you want them to do. Lots of crime prevention advice issues instructions, but modelling the actual behaviour meant viewers were far more likely to take it on board.

Audience Impact of Films:



Film Series Structure

	Film Series 1			Additional
				
Messenger ➔	Authority Figure (Policing)	Female Victim	Community Volunteer	Male offending 'expert'
Message ➔	Warning Telling	Taking head narrative of events	Pro social showing and telling	Showing and telling opportunities to offend
Mechanism ➔	Fear Frame	Emotion Empathy and resonance	Modelling Humour	Fear Frame

	Film Series 2			Film Series 3
				
Messenger ➔	Male Victim	Salesperson	Authority Figure (banking)	'Vulnerable Victim'
Message ➔	Taking head narrative of events	Information overload and choice	Persuasive 'advert'	Police-Victim interaction with practical advice
Mechanism ➔	Emotion Empathy and Blame	Responsibility and Paradox of Choice	Social Proofing	Surprise Humour

The evidence-base derived from the experiment formed the basis of 10 principles of Behavioural Crime Prevention ('BCP'). These principles were used to develop an innovative crime prevention campaign in Phase 2 of the research.



PHASE 2

The #Copcat Field Trial

The Crime Problem

The Communications team at the Metropolitan Police Service were developing a crime prevention campaign in early 2016 to tackle the emergent problem of bike-enabled snatch theft (offenders using mopeds to snatch mobile phones on the street).

The Campaigns

The police #loveyourphone campaign drew on the traditional fear framing approach and warned people about the dangers, showed them real life incidents and told them what to do.

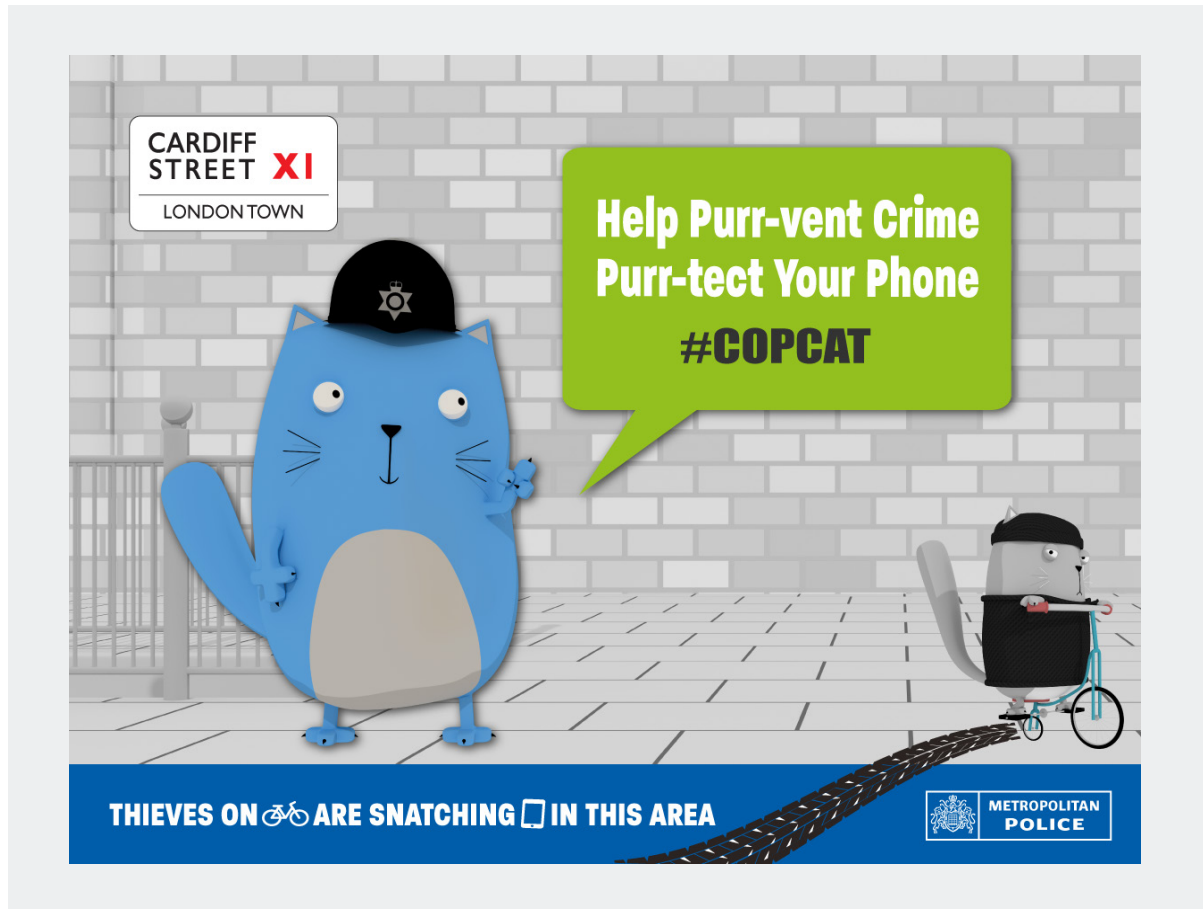
In partnership with the communications team, we developed an alternative 'mirror' campaign drawing on Behavioural Crime Prevention principles. #Copcat was an animated cartoon cat and a likeable and empathetic messenger. This campaign used humorous puns, offered simplified preventative advice and, importantly, showed people the desired behaviour change. Our earlier research suggested these features would increase the likelihood that the public would notice, remember and act on the campaign for its cartoon novelty, concise advice and use of humour, rather than fear, as a key communicative device.

The Intervention and Evaluation

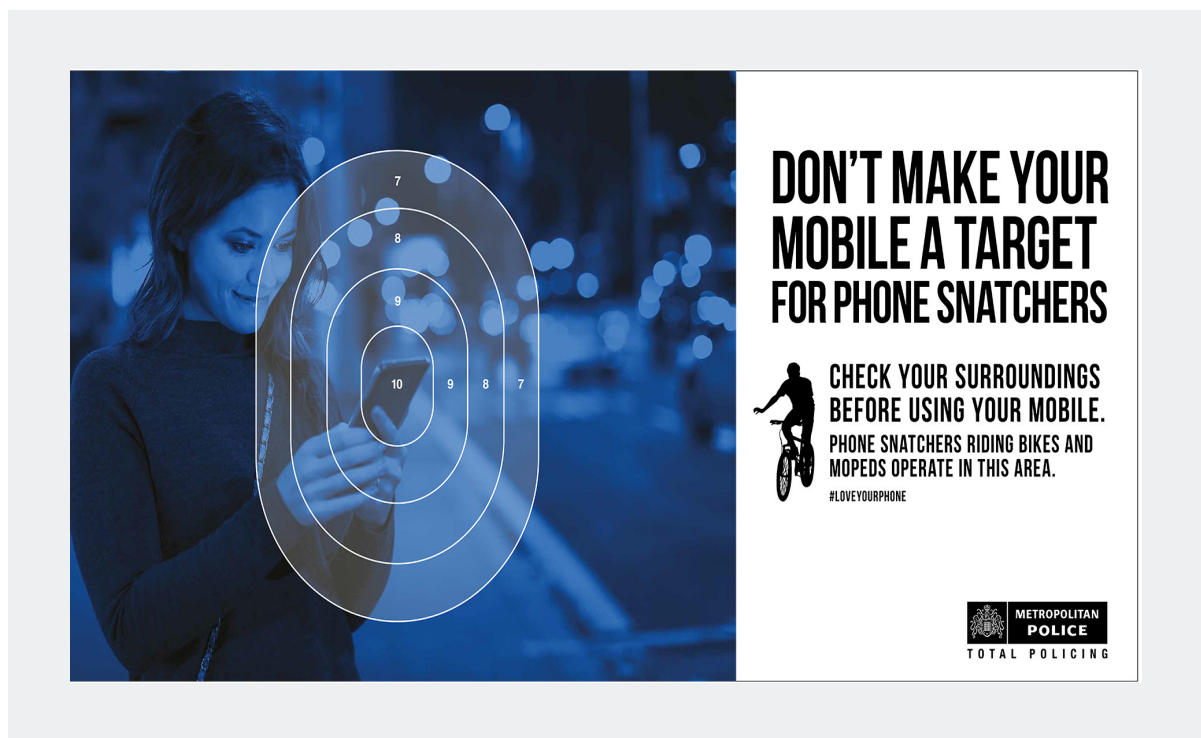
In June 2016, the two campaigns ran simultaneously in separate hotspot boroughs in a busy London commuter environment. Each included: posters placed at key London Underground transport stations; stair stencils for #Copcat and street graffiti for #loveyourphone; leaflets distributed by police officers in each site; and, short films and advice posts delivered by social media to the public moving within relevant geographical areas covered by each campaign.

A control site (no communication) was used to compare any effects from each campaign. A range of research methods were used to evaluate impact including, a survey of employees working in the trial areas, street questioning of pedestrians and detailed observation of how people use their phones in public and interacted with campaign materials in situ. Data analytics were carried out on social media concerning posts from each campaign and the amount of public response it prompted.

Cardiff University Campaign Asset:



Metropolitan Police Service Campaign Asset:





The Findings

Evaluation data estimated that approximately one-quarter of the public travelling and/or working in London noticed some form of crime prevention messaging from the campaigns over a two-week period. However,

- The practice of establishing and co-ordinating the trial in a busy urban environment proved challenging. There were implementation problems associated with the correct placement of the campaign materials in each site, and co-ordinating activity between police and researchers 'on the ground'.
- A 'noisy' and demanding environment coupled with a high degree of environmental inattention observed amongst commuters - who were typically on their phones - meant that the physical campaign materials struggled for attention at their given dosage.



These limitations notwithstanding, comparing the two campaigns we found:

01

Consistent with the social experiment evidence, the two campaigns produced different emotional responses in their audiences. #Copcat prompted feelings of amusement, whereas #Loveyourphone elicited more fear, anger and concern.

02

Both campaigns performed well on social media, although there was a higher engagement rate for #Loveyourphone.

03

The more innovative communications used by each campaign – stencilling on stairs for #Copcat and street graffiti for the Met - were particularly successful in raising public awareness and were a social media talking point.

04

Where uniformed police officers engaged and interacted with the public - handing out leaflets or posting on social media - the message was perceived as more credible and often prompted a conversation that amplified its impact.

05

The behaviour change goals of this trial met with some public resistance. Smartphone use is normal and widespread on the streets of London. The convenience that smartphones offer to the user often offset any perceived pay-off in terms of lowering the risk of street theft. For this reason, many people are reluctant, or even opposed to changing the way they use their phones.

This research helps us better understand the challenges of behavioural interventions to help prevent crime. For this crime problem, public resistance to taking preventative action was heightened because the behaviour in question was seen as 'normal', the victims 'unlucky' and there exist other preventative actions that potential victims can take to minimise harm in the event of it happening to them, such as taking out insurance.

Behavioural Crime Prevention: Why Does It Matter?

- At a time when budgets are under pressure, this research generated some valuable key insights about what communicative elements people are likely to respond to, and how. These insights can be used to guide future interventions across an increasing array of communicative platforms and help optimise audience responsiveness to crime prevention messages.

- Focusing on how to modify the behaviours of people at risk of being victims of crime is particularly important for some new types of crime. Victims of cyber-enabled crime, for example, are often to some degree complicit in their own victimisation because of their behaviour. Influencing the actions of both victim and offender in the virtual world are likely to be better suited to a behavioural rather than a situational approach to crime prevention.

Behavioural interventions to trigger preventative action among the public to reduce their risk of victimisation are most likely to be effective and long-lasting when they offer an appropriate blend of nudges, tugs and teachable moments.

One approach would be to segment the intended audience into those who are most likely to be receptive to behavioural techniques of persuasion (nudge) versus those most suited to a more coercive approach (tugging) or who can be identified as being at a teachable moment: an optimum time when receptivity to crime prevention advice is increased.

Another approach would be to surmise that the crime problem itself is complex and requires more than a single type of intervention to adequately address it among the populace. Contextual environmental factors are an important consideration in how best to implement any intervention in a 'noisy', cluttered information environment so that it achieves cut-through with its intended audience.

Where the goal is to change a normative behaviour, success may rest on first shifting societal attitudes and the social permissibility of 'mis-behaviour'. Both processes are likely to take time, although a behavioural intervention is likely to have 'early adopters' of change, 'social proofers' who take their cue from what others – such as family or prominent public figures – are doing and a core who remain indifferent or resistant to change.

Further research utilising BCP principles is needed to elucidate how transferable different behavioural models are across different crime problems, audiences and environments.

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Get in touch.

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