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E-MINDFUL PROJECT

Policy Brief

Key takeaways and guidelines about strategic communication on migration



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1. Introduction

Concerns about the management of migrants and asylum seekers' movement have featured prominently in public and political debates at international, national, and local levels. Migration is a complex issue because its dimensions are multifaceted – social, economic, political, legal, and cultural – and intertwined. In this respect, when discussed in public, much like climate change, it is likely to be a controversial topic both at the receiving and sending ends of the process.

In this context, public opinions, the media, civil society organizations, political leaders and parties have often taken opposing stances. This primarily represents a structural and positive trait of democratic societies. However, when positions become excessively extreme and entrenched, when individuals and societal actors develop increasingly divergent views on political issues, the risk is that people's beliefs, attitudes, and values become polarized. Polarization leads to heightened ideological differences and reduced willingness to find common ground. Ultimately, it hinders effective policy-making and has significant implications for governance and society.

Migration features in the news and public debates with stories about migrants that are often sensationalized and framed negatively. The risk of amplifying fears and misconceptions remains high, leading to greater controversy and divisions. This calls for efforts to understand what influences public perception and attitudes towards migration. Overall, the controversy surrounding migration underscores the need for thoughtful, evidence-based policies that address the various concerns while recognizing the potential benefits of well-managed migration.

Against this background, the E-Mindful project contributed to investigating the key factors that shape public perceptions about migration and migrants, and aimed to provide guidance on how to build effective communication strategies that can reduce polarization. To achieve this objective, the project steered a comprehensive process through which infotainment formats were developed, tested and assessed on audiences in six countries: Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, Italy, North Macedonia and Serbia.

The project was funded by the European Union under the 2017 Asylum Migration Integration Fund (AMIF) Work programme, priority no. 1 on "Raising awareness on migrants' contribution to societies" and received additional financial support from the German Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, the Central European Initiative, the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The project was coordinated and implemented by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe – the Office of the Coordinator of Economic and Environmental Activities (OSCE-OCEEA), in partnership with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Migration Policy Centre of the European University Institute (MPC-EUI).

This policy brief capitalises on the main findings, activities and practices of the project, to offer a series of key takeaways and guidelines concerning strategic communication on migration, in the context of the surveyed countries. It takes stock of insights and recommendations from a multi-stakeholder community that engaged with the project throughout its cycle: academics from multiple disciplines, policy-makers, practitioners from Civil Society Organisations, content creators and media professionals.

In addition, it relies on two project's milestones. First, the line of work revolving around the [Impact Assessment Report](#)¹. The E-Mindful researchers administered nationally representative surveys in each country with questions on attitudes to migration and indicators measuring psychological, socio-economic, and political variance. Then, they experimentally evaluated the effect on attitudes toward migration of the six information campaigns. Second, the Multi-stakeholders - Policy Dialogue: How to change migration narratives in political debate and policy-making, which gathered EU policymakers, practitioners active in the field of international migration, experts of migrant labour rights, representatives of the private sector, academics to discuss key and pressing policy issues connecting labour market, demographic change, migration, and education, in occasion of the event *It's about work: Bringing back the interaction of migration, the labour market and economic development in the public discourse*².

¹ *E-Mindful Impact Assessment Report. What works and what does not when promoting a balanced narrative about migration? Experimental evidence from the E-Mindful project*, by L. Dražanová and J. Dennison, 2023 — International Labour Organization and Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe, https://e-mindful.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Impact-assessment-report_web.pdf

² The Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA) organised the event *It's about work: Bringing back the interaction of migration, the labour market and economic development in the public discourse* on 14 December 2023 at the Hofburg, Vienna to celebrate the 2023 International Migrants Day. The event was part of the OSCE-led project [E-mindful](#) and disseminated the final findings of the project engaging with the audience, including OSCE diplomats. <https://www.osce.org/oceea/560496>.

2. Key Takeaways



A campaign is effective when it defines accurately objectives and goals and keeps them as guiding principles throughout the design, creative and implementation process. The campaign's contents and emotional components must align with the objectives.



It is imperative, for the development of a successful campaign on migration, to perform a detailed analysis of the country-specific context; as well as to identify, research and understand the target audience, including its values, demographics and concerns. A holistic approach that includes a broad network of stakeholders in designing a campaign is vital.



Campaigns should refrain from the goal of changing attitudes. They should acknowledge the substance of people's anxieties. It is crucial to develop communication strategies that convey balanced facts and data, addressing the real concerns or even fears of the target audiences without dismissing, undervaluing, or ignoring them.



Campaigns should not teach or educate, but explain. Evidence proves that salience is what makes people more negative towards migration. However, avoiding talking about migration is also not an option. When the policy community is able to communicate good policy management on migration, if done coherently and consistently, this has potentially positive outcomes.



In order to overcome existing negative narratives, alternative narratives should avoid reinforcing the crisis frame. Campaigns should suggest solutions that can show – not tell – how migration is manageable and beneficial. The goal of normalising migration remains challenging, but focusing on its economic and labour-related dimensions, involving the private sector as messenger, has proved more effective than invoking compassion.



A team of professionals from different, key sectors (i.e. academia, marketing, content creation) is beneficial, insofar as each contributes according to their competencies, serving the campaign's purpose, and without infringing on other professionals' areas of expertise.



Additional research is needed in understudied regions. For overstudied regions, such as the EU or North America, a better uptake of existing knowledge would suffice.



The use of experimental methods represents the most valuable tool for understanding the processes that underlie opinion formation, and for making inferences about causal relationships. Experimental findings are particularly important in contexts where the purpose is to evaluate the efficacy of campaigns funded with taxpayers' money.

3. Main findings of the E-Mindful project: learning from the experts, learning from the process

Throughout its implementing cycle (2021-2023), in the context of its activities and reach-out, networking meetings with sister projects, the added value of the E-Mindful project has been twofold. The opportunity, by design, to engage with and gather insights from a multi-stakeholder community, leading experts and professionals of different backgrounds working on communication, including on migration; and the process related to the development of six information campaigns, their experimental testing with audiences according to gold-standard social scientific surveys, and consequent critical assessment of their effects. Several outputs, all published in open access on the [E-Mindful website](#), provide a detailed account of such wealth of information. Here follows a brief outline of the most salient findings.

The centrality of salience and values

The project confirmed the findings in the literature that the high salience of migration in public debates makes people already holding negative attitudes towards migration become more vocal. High issue salience activates a vicious cycle where the media identify and publicise problems that attract attention from public opinion, governments and international organizations; high salience is more likely to trigger reactions from individuals holding negative views rather than positive; the hostility of certain sectors of the population grows in intensity and receives visibility with media that over-represent their actual weight in the overall population, thus ultimately shaping the terms and tone of the public debate.

However, the strategy of not engaging is not an effective solution. It does not curb issue salience. It simply leaves a void, or more space for anti-migrant and fearmongering narratives. It just prevents counterarguments from being included in the debate. The challenge is therefore to join the debate when it is not too late, with agency and credibility. In this respect, research suggests a series of fundamental considerations.

The one about migration is a debate where facts and information are shaped by values and worldviews. In the public sphere, migration has both an institutional-political side, and a very personal one as well. Values-based communication that is able to interact with the target audience's values and worldviews is much more likely to resonate. In addition, individuals hold many different attitudes toward migration. They are not just pro- or anti-migration. Limiting the discussion to binary, categorical terms – such as good vs. bad, us vs. them – does not help to promote alternative narratives. Focusing exclusively on culturalist stances to raise awareness on the contribution of migration to society reaps little and short-lived impact at best.

There is evidence that when the policy community is able to communicate good policy management on migration, this can procure very positive effects, providing the alternative message that migration is manageable and under control. It conveys a sense of balance between security and responsibility. It also contributes to moving away from the dominant crisis frame and “normalising” migration. Alternative narratives centred on economic considerations – e.g., contribution to the labour market needs, entrepreneurial spirit, essential workers, etc. – have proved to achieve promising results. In this context, businesses and the private sector can be powerful allies as messengers for positive narratives.

Finally, in strategic terms, efforts need to shift from de-bunking to “pre-bunking”. De-bunking is mostly ineffective. It increases salience, and often leads to reiterating negative narratives or even disinformation. The strategic shift implies monitoring societal discomforts to foresee the surfacing of narratives with high potential to capture the public opinion’s attention. In short, the focus should not be on changing the mainstream narrative, but on taking ownership and developing alternative narratives that appeal credibly to people’s attitudes and values as they are, targeting specific audiences.

Essential elements of communication campaigns on migration

The experimental studies and the expert discussions provided insights into structural elements that need to be taken always into account.

It is essential for a campaign to identify and define accurately three basic elements during its preparatory phase: message, messenger, and target audience. Before developing a campaign, time and resources must be invested into understanding the country-specific migration-related context, the existing narratives, the values, perceptions and concerns of the target group. Especially at this stage, the active contribution of a multi-stakeholder community constitutes an added value (i.e., policymakers, practitioners, academics, media and marketing professionals, representatives of migrant communities, civil society organisations, and private sectors). However, the design, creative and implementing process must align coherently with the identified elements and, crucially, with the campaign’s purpose, translating the inputs of each “bubble” into a message that resonates effectively with the target audience.

Proven effective communication strategies adopt a values-based approach and storytelling techniques. Soliciting positive emotions and empathy, mixing facts and figures with personalised stories, is fruitful. It can lead to identification and a sense of connection with the messenger. If the audience can relate to the messenger, the conveyed message is more likely to remain. Furthermore, evidence supports appealing to common interest rather than self-interest, to conformity (with culture and rules) rather than diversity, and to common ground. Obstructive elements that can undermine a campaign comprise incoherent and confusing messages, selecting inadequate messengers, as well using or triggering negative emotions³.

³ The analysis of 301 migration communication campaigns conducted in Europe between 2012 and 2022 found that the most common emotional appeal was “sadness”, thus disregarding the most accepted recommendations of the specialised literature. *Migration Communication Campaigns: The state of the practice and an open database*, J. Dennison, L. Piccoli, M. Carmo Duarte, ICMPD Regional Office for the Mediterranean, 2024.

Designing an effective communication campaign is a complex endeavour. It is imperative to rely on a team of professionals from key sectors (i.e. academia, marketing, content creation). However, each must contribute according to their competencies, serving the campaign's purpose. In addition, the field of studies looking at key factors that shape public perceptions and at ways to communicate about migration is quite mature, as far as the Global North is concerned, and ready for better uptake of already existing knowledge. However, existing research is essentially "Global North-centric" and does not cover other understudied countries and regions. This calls for careful consideration of the possibility of applying the same interpretive lenses in contexts other than the Global North.

Changing attitudes is not the goal

A communication campaign to raise awareness of the contribution of migration to society should not be approached as a battle of narratives. Changing completely someone's attitude is an unrealistic goal. However, appealing to specific values to "smoothen" views on migration is not.

Communication strategies are effective when they address the real concerns of the target audiences, without dismissing, undervaluing, or ignoring them. It is key to take the public seriously, since their anxieties shape their attitudes and behaviours, and are real to them – even when based on faulty perceptions and information. Campaigns need to address the roots of concerns and fears, acknowledging that people who are more negative, uncertain, or worried do not need re-education to hold "more correct" views.

In particular, top-down communications from institutional actors risk being met with scepticism. In this vein, examples of campaigns that addressed issues and contextually proposed solutions proved to be working. Showing, not just telling, that migration is manageable and brings advantages to all parties involved can go a long way. In parallel, the institutional actors should concurrently build trust and confidence in their capacity, admit mistakes and be candid about their limits, demonstrate accountability, and show consistency between the narratives they advance, the policies they implement, and the objectives they aim to achieve.

A key finding that the use of experimental methods reveals is that, even when campaigns can obtain measurable effects, they are of temporal nature, often short-lasting. This raises important cost-benefit considerations, especially when taxpayers' money is involved. Research suggests a range of different actions alternative to campaigns or integrating them, such as investing in media literacy education, both for adults and children, to enable individuals to assess the information they are exposed to, to identify reliable sources, and to make informed decisions.

4. The Dos and Don'ts of effective communication on migration from the E-Mindful project

CAMPAIGN DESIGN

INSTITUTIONAL ACTORS	
✓	✗
Choose one clear message	Overload with information
Identify target audience	Underestimate timing
Select the right messenger	Neglect post-campaign analysis
Define clear objectives	
Measure Performance	
Consistency is key	

CSOS/NGOS	
✓	✗
Choose one clear message	Overload with information
Identify target audience	
Select the right messenger	
Define clear objectives	
Measure Performance	
Consistency is key	

CONTENT EXPERTS/ACADEMIA	
✓	✗
Provide relevant knowledge	Step out of your area of expertise
Help identify real-world examples	Re-educate
Be critical	Be normative
Unveil intersectionality	

MEDIA/CONTENT CREATORS	
✓	✗
Bring technical knowledge	Step out of your area of expertise
Create engaging content	Neglect research
Choose the right channels/medium	Aim to sensationalism
	Exploit migrant stories
	Put creativity before accuracy

GROUND WORK

INSTITUTIONAL ACTORS	
✓	✗
Understand your audience	Remain in your bubble
Research and understand the context	
Collaborate with stakeholders	
Include the migrant community	
Involve the private sector	

CSOS/NGOS	
✓	✗
Understand your audience	Remain in your bubble
Include the migrant community	
Involve the private sector	

CONTENT EXPERTS/ACADEMIA	
✓	✗
Provide accurate information	Remain in your bubble
Monitor contents' accuracy	Rely on Global North-centric research assumptions
Understand campaign's objectives	

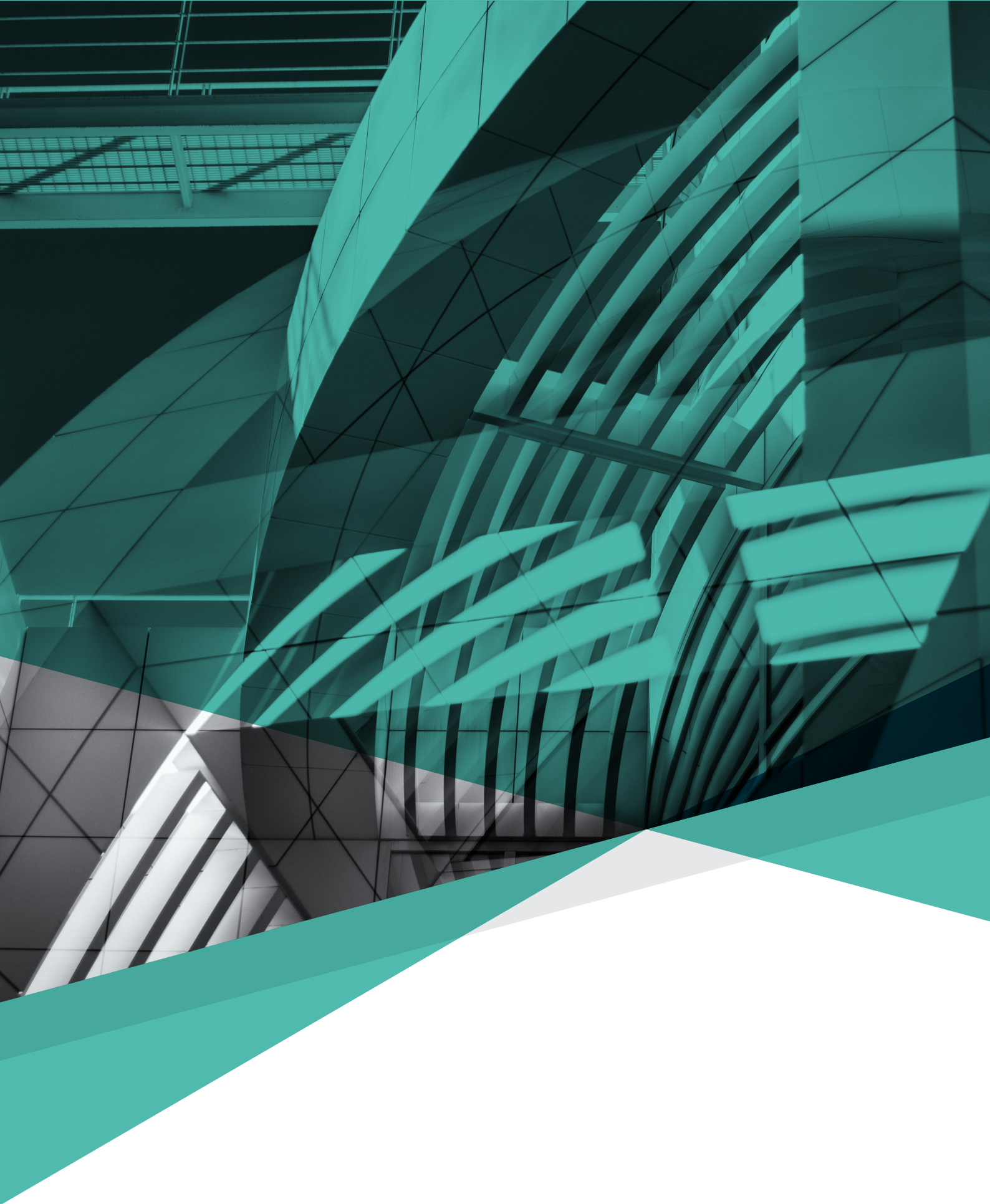
MEDIA/CONTENT CREATORS	
✓	✗
Understand your audience	Remain in your bubble
Research and understand the context	
Understand campaign's objectives	
Include the migrant community	

COMMUNICATION

INSTITUTIONAL ACTORS	
✓	✗
Respect your audience's concerns	Lose sight of objective
Adopt values-based messaging	Engage with controversy
Use storytelling	Trigger negative emotions
Show, don't tell	Re-educate
Include migrant voices	Portray migrants as heroes or victims
Be authentic and accountable	Underestimate production quality
Encourage interaction	
Tailor your content to audience	
Stay engaged with your audience	
Align emotions with objectives	
Normalise migration	
Consistency between communication and policy	

CSOS/NGOS	
✓	✗
Respect your audience's concerns	Lose sight of Objectives
Adopt values-based messaging	
Use storytelling	Trigger negative emotions
	Re-educate
Include migrant voices	Portray migrants as heroes or victims
	Underestimate production quality
Tailor your content to audience	

MEDIA/CONTENT CREATORS	
✓	✗
Be creative	Lose sight of objectives
Adopt values-based messaging	Re-educate
Use storytelling	Trigger negative emotions
Encourage Interaction	Re-educate
Include migrant voices	Portray migrants as heroes or victims
Utilize multiple formats	Over do it
Encourage interaction	
Tailor your content to audience	
Align emotions with objectives	
Acknowledge intersectionality	



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