



Self-regulation of motor vehicle advertising: Is it working in Australia?

Robert J. Donovan^{a,b,*}, Lynda J. Fielder^a, Robyn Ouschan^a, Michael Ewing^c

^a Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer Control, Curtin University of Technology, GPO Box U1987, Perth, Western Australia 6845, Australia

^b School of Marketing, Curtin University of Technology, GPO Box U1987, Perth, Western Australia 6845, Australia

^c Department of Marketing/Faculty of Business and Economics, Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria 3800, Australia

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ABSTRACT

There is growing concern that certain content within motor vehicle advertising may have a negative influence on driving attitudes and behaviours of viewers, particularly young people, and hence a negative impact on road safety. In response, many developed countries have adopted a self-regulatory approach to motor vehicle advertising. However, it appears that many motor vehicle advertisements in Australia and elsewhere are not compliant with self-regulatory codes. Using standard commercial advertising methods, we exposed three motor vehicle ads that had been the subject of complaints to the Australian Advertising Standards Board (ASB) to, $N = 463$, 14–55 year olds to assess the extent to which their perceptions of the content of the ads communicated themes that were contrary to the Australian self-regulatory code. All three ads were found to communicate messages contrary to the code (such as the vehicle's speed and acceleration capabilities). However, the ASB had upheld complaints about only one of the ads. Where motor vehicle advertising regulatory frameworks exist to guide motor vehicle advertisers as to what is and what is not acceptable in their advertising, greater efforts are needed to ensure compliance with these codes. One way may be to make it mandatory for advertisers to report consumer pre-testing of their advertising to ensure that undesirable messages are not being communicated to viewers.

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1. Introduction

Road traffic accidents are a leading cause of death and injury worldwide. In 2002, almost 1.2 million deaths were recorded and road traffic injuries ranked as the ninth leading cause of disability adjusted life years (DALYs), accounting for over 38 million DALYs lost. This is predicted to rise to the third leading cause of DALYs lost by 2020 (World Health Organization, 2004; United Nations, 2003). Young people are disproportionately affected by road traffic injuries, representing 50% of overall global mortality and 60% of global morbidity among 15–44 year olds (World Health Organization, 2004; United Nations, 2003).

Behavioural risk factors include risk-taking propensity, driver confidence, lack of driver experience and skill, with speed a main contributing factor (Macaulay et al., 2004). There are growing concerns that some content of motor vehicle advertising might encourage negative driving behaviours, particularly speeding and risk taking (Shin et al., 2005; Skaar and Williams, 2005; Ferguson

et al., 2003; Sofoulis et al., 2005). Worldwide, motor vehicle manufacturers spend billions of dollars annually on advertising that intentionally targets specific demographics using persuasive techniques such as lifestyle and user positioning (McCann, 2005; Macleod, 2006; Endicott, 2005; Sofoulis et al., 2005; Schonfeld et al., 2005).

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests that behaviours portrayed in advertising can become normalised or aspired to (Rhen et al., 2001), and hence can have potentially negative effects where risky or unhealthy behaviours are shown being reinforced and without any negative effects (Ferguson et al., 2003). There is therefore a justifiable concern that executions that show unsafe road behaviours in a favourable context will promote more favourable attitudes towards and perhaps encourage such behaviours among people in general and young people in particular (Jones, 2007).

2. Motor vehicle advertising and marketing

The promotional mix for motor vehicle marketing in developed countries relies heavily on television advertising, supported by radio and print advertising, direct mail and sponsorships (Clow and Baack, 2004; Duncan, 2005), and of course the Web (1.0 and 2.0). Motor vehicle manufacturers develop products or product lines targeting specific demographic or lifestyle groups, and most motor vehicle advertising reflects these target segments,

* Corresponding author at: School of Marketing, Curtin University of Technology, GPO Box U1987, Perth, Western Australia 6845, Australia. Tel.: +61 8 9266 4598; fax: +61 8 9266 1642.

E-mail addresses: R.Donovan@curtin.edu.au (R.J. Donovan), L.Fielder@curtin.edu.au (L.J. Fielder), Robyn.Ouschan@cbs.curtin.edu.au (R. Ouschan), Michael.Ewing@BusEco.monash.edu.au (M. Ewing).

with many lower-priced 'entry' models clearly targeted at young people.

Much motor vehicle advertising promotes vehicular functional attributes such as fuel economy, comfort, ease of handling, safety features, passenger comfort, internal spaciousness, electronic components, engineering design and so on (Wheels Magazine, 2006; Consumer Guide Automotive Access, 2006). However, these are often support benefits to an overall 'user' positioning, whereby the (potential) owner is depicted in terms of personality or lifestyle, such as young and cool, sexy, progressive, an adventurer, cosmopolitan, sophisticated, and so on. It is also common for ads targeting young people (and those who think they still are) to show an additional benefit of the owner being admired by a member of the opposite sex. These appeals are embedded in a variety of execution styles, which often include unsafe driving practices (Shin et al., 2005; Tamburro et al., 2004; Ferguson et al., 2003).

While we found no research on the direct influence of motor vehicle advertising on viewers' attitudes and intentions with respect to unsafe driving practices, a review of the literature suggests that themes used in motor vehicle advertising may promote and encourage speed and unsafe, risk taking behaviours among viewers, and particularly among those already vulnerable to engaging in impulsive, risk taking behaviours (Gardner and Steinberg, 2005; Pechmann et al., 2005; Chapman and Blows, 2003; Shin et al., 2005; Ferguson et al., 2003; Sofoulis et al., 2005; World Health Organization, 2004). For example, in relation to road safety, Sofoulis et al. (2005) found that young people associated fast driving with fun and a 'buzz', and perceived that lack of vehicle control was due to bad driving rather than speed. These perceptions may reflect or be reinforced by the normalisation and glamorisation of speed in motor vehicle advertisements.

3. Codes for motor vehicle advertising

Many developed countries have adopted a self-regulatory approach to motor vehicle advertising, with considerable overlap in the areas covered by the codes. In Europe, the European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA) represents the collaboration between advertising industry organisations and national advertising self-regulatory organisations (SROs) (European Advertising Standards Alliance, 2004). Their Code principles are based on a socially responsible approach to motor vehicle advertising and are supported by six detailed rules referring to unacceptable motor vehicle advertising practices: avoiding the portrayal or encouragement of unsafe, inconsiderate or aggressive driving practices; avoiding messages based on speed, performance and acceleration; avoiding encouraging a false sense of security leading to dangerous or irresponsible driving due to advertised technical advances and safety features; showing respect for the environment; making it clear where appropriate that demonstration sequences do not take place on the public highway; and adherence to relevant laws, good safety practice and highway codes (European Advertising Standards Alliance, 2004). The United Kingdom (UK) supplements these principles with more specific standards regulated by the Office of Communications (Ofcom) such that the portrayal in television advertising of any theme considered to encourage or condone irresponsible driving is tightly and specifically restricted (Independent Television Commission, 2003; Office of Communications, 2006). In the United States the US Federal Trade Commission protects public interest by monitoring responsible advertising. However, there is no regulatory body specific to motor vehicle advertising.

In Australia, the content of motor vehicle advertising is self-regulated by the Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries' Code of Practice (FCAICP) (The Advertising for Motor Vehicles Volun-

tary Code of Practice) which was introduced in Australia in 2002 (Australian Transport Safety Bureau, 2004). Under the Code, advertisers are required to adopt a responsible approach to advertising, for example in ensuring advertisements do not depict, encourage or condone dangerous, illegal, or reckless driving, and are expected to ensure that road safety messages are not undermined or contradicted (Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries, 2004). In particular, advertisers are not to promote a vehicle's speed or acceleration capabilities and to take into account implicit as well as explicit messages. Relevant key elements of the Code appear in Table 1. (The Code can be found at www.fcai.com.au) However it appears that many advertisements remain non-compliant, with unsafe driving practices continuing to be portrayed in car advertisements, particularly speed (Schonfeld et al., 2005).

4. Research into the content and impact of motor vehicle advertising

4.1. Content analysis of motor vehicle advertisements

Content analysis refers to analysing the major themes in the advertising copy and visuals. The identified themes can then be mapped against regulatory code articles to indicate whether or not the ad breaches the code.

Ferguson et al. (2003) analysed 561 US motor vehicle television ads aired in 1998. Trained coders identified 22 themes using various cues to identify these themes; for example 'performance' was identified by rapid acceleration, vehicle moving at speed, vehicle cornering at speed and claims of turning radius. Performance was depicted in 50% of all advertisements and was the dominant theme in 17% of the advertisements. Ferguson et al. (2003) imply that such ads would contravene a code that disallowed the use of speed in motor vehicle advertising.

Shin et al. (2005) content analysed 250 automobile and truck advertisements containing a driving sequence greater than 3 s that aired in the United States and Canada over a 4-year period (1998–2002). Using over 20 cues of unsafe driving behaviour (such as excess speed, racing, tailgating, no seat belt, various distractions, and miscellaneous traffic violations), they found that 45% of the ads contained a sequence of unsafe driving. Similarly, in an analysis of 191 motor vehicle ads and 41 auto accessories ads screened in the 50 top rating sporting events televised in the USA in 2001/2002, Tamburro et al. (2004) found that 21% of the vehicle ads and 27% of the accessories ads depicted unsafe driving behaviour.

Following a 2004 review of the Australian Motor Vehicle Advertising Code, Schonfeld et al. (2005) applied Ferguson et al.'s framework to 97 ads aired after the revised code came into effect and 115 ads aired under the original Code. They found a reduction in the occurrence of 'performance' and 'fun to drive' themes in Australian advertisements. However, within the performance theme, the sub-themes of acceleration and power showed no change, and speed showed a non-significant decline.

The major weaknesses in the above sorts of studies are that the identified themes are not based on any systematic mapping against the regulatory code articles, and the conclusions with respect to breaches are simply speculative. None of the identified studies systematically content analysed motor vehicle advertising using self-regulatory codes as the specific theme framework or used expert judges to determine code breaches—although the Shin et al. (2005) coding frame for unsafe driving practices was developed in conjunction with traffic police and critical care physicians who were able to provide expert opinion on behaviours considered likely to increase the risk of a crash and increase the severity of the consequences of a crash.

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