APPEALS IN ROAD SAFETY ADVERTISING:
What do young adults respond to in the mass media?

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a proposal for research into the type of creative elements that young adults are most likely to respond to and thus be persuaded by in the mass media. Young adults are considered a high risk segment for road safety incidents in New Zealand, thus a further understanding of how they engage with messages in the mass media is important to determine the effectiveness of road safety campaigns. A wide range of research on advertising, mass communication and cognitive processing has explored different approaches to determine the effects of advertising on the individual, yet results are inconclusive. A two stage, exploratory design will be used to draw conclusions of which creative elements young adults are most likely to respond to, and engage with in the mass media. Road-safety advertising in New Zealand will also be addressed to determine teenagers’ perceptions and overall effectiveness of existing advertising. The implications of this will provide a framework of media creative elements and styles that may assist in the development of more successful road-safety advertising campaigns in New Zealand. This understanding may contribute to greater attitudinal and behavioural change within young adult segments.

INTRODUCTION

Advertising has become an important tool in road safety and drink driving campaigns in an attempt to influence and change attitudes and behaviours of high risk segments. In New Zealand, Land Transport New Zealand (LTNZ) implements television advertising campaigns which predominately use fear appeals. Often graphic imagery and threats; both physical and social are used to create a fear reaction within target groups. The use of fear appeals in the context of road safety advertising, aims to shock viewers into changing their attitudes and unsafe behaviours such as drink driving and speeding. Research on advertising effectiveness has produced varying results in the field of road safety. ‘Fear appeals’ in the mass media have shown to be effective with some target groups. However, the majority of young adult segments often disregard the messages as the advertisements are too graphic and gruesome. In addition, third person effects are often produced, where the person exposed to a persuasive communication views it as having a greater effect on others than on him or herself.

Road safety is still a significant issue in New Zealand as nearly 2000 people are killed or injured each year in drink-driving crashes (LTNZ Statistics 2006). Drink-driving is the second largest cause of death and injuries on New Zealand roads. LTNZ defines young adults between the ages of 15-24 years of age as being a ‘high risk’ age group. In 2006, 16% of fatal crashers were caused by 15-19 year old drivers and over 40% of all alcohol-related crashes each year involve drink-drivers aged 15–24 years. These young ‘drink-driver’ crashes injure or kill over 900 people each year (LTNZ statistics, 2005). These figures indicate that young adults are a relevant target audience for road safety communications such as speeding and drink driving.

Young adults are very susceptible to other influences which affect how they may respond to road safety messages, such as risk taking, peer pressure and the type of coping responses when exposed to such advertising. Therefore it is important to determine how young adults respond to mass media messages and to find the most optimal way to reach them. Although there has been widespread research on the topic of road safety advertising, little qualitative research has identified the creative elements that appeal most to young adult segments. Here the possible attitudinal and behavioural effects, as a consequence may be limited at producing change in desirable drink-driving and speeding behaviours amongst high-risk segments. In addition, little research in New Zealand has investigated the effectiveness of positive emotive advertising styles and the possibilities of this in the area of road safety advertising. Appeals that incorporate positive emotions is an area which has yet to be extensively explored, however the inclusion of creative elements such as enjoyment may help to renew interest in public health messages (Bureau NDM, 2001, Lewis, Watson & Tay, 2007, Monahan, 1995, Pechmann, 2001, Schoales, Mintz, & Hazel,1999 ).
LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Background

Research on advertising, mass communication, and cognitive processing has explored different approaches to determine the effects of advertising on the individual. While mass communication techniques are found to have a general effect on raising awareness and influencing cognitive processes, unless advertising is effectively targeted, attitudinal and behavioural results will be limited (Aitken, 2004). Conventional advertising effectiveness research focuses on systematic and linear responses to communication in advertising and attitude formation. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) distinguishes a central and peripheral route through which advertising may persuade target audiences to change their attitudes and behaviours. Similarly, the hierarchy of effects model assumes the individual deliberately searches for information to achieve a cognitive response to it. Here, three stages of response to advertising include; cognitive, affective and behaviour stages, in which the individual who is exposed to advertising stimuli moves through in a sequential process (Agnostinelli & Grube, 2002). Criticisms of the hierarchy of effects and the ELM include that individuals may engage in advertising messages for other reasons such as entertainment, levels of involvement with the product, likeability and attitude towards the advertising style (Aitken, 2004). Thus many contextual, affiliated factors may contribute to the levels of response and appeal of a particular television advertisement; thus the hierarchical nature of a linear information processing model may not be adequate.

The level of involvement the consumer has with the advertisement is related to the individual’s value system and the amount of linkages between the subject of the advertisement and the consumer is found to have an effect on ones’ motivations and interest (Krugmas, 1967, cited in Aitken, 2004). The topic of involvement in the communication process has more recently been examined from a more ‘consumer centric’ view, where the impact of the message is determined by personal constructs and the interactive relationship between the viewer and the advertisement (O’Donohoe, 1994). From this concept, the Uses and Gratification model and Reader-Response theory suggests that selective perception, individual processes and social processes combined produce a meaning or interpretation of an advertisement. It is also noted that the consumer has an important role in dynamically engaging with the media, therefore determining the experience of the advertisement (O’Donohoe, 1994). This research has been supported through the notion that individuals will infer meaning based on subjective views, which may be entirely different to that intended by the creator. This emphasises that advertising effectiveness should explore the context as well as the content of such attitudes to gain insight into the dimensions of the message that are most effective.

The uses and gratifications model explores the consumer’s information processing in contrast to traditional hierarchical sequence. This model challenges the prior frameworks that evaluate what the advertising message does to the people and now focuses on what consumers do to the communication. The multidimensionality of consumer responses to advertising is the result of different ways that attitudes are formed. Executional elements, providing cues to desirable behaviours have also shown to determine the likeability and recall of advertisements, thus influencing the overall effectiveness and memorability of the message (Stone, Besser and Lewis, 2000 cited in Aitken, 2004).

Although these theories in communication interpretation are based around achieving objectives, either for the message creator, or that of the individual’s through fulfillment of satisfaction, distinct effects of advertising can also influence reactions of non-target audiences.

The limitations of mass media campaigns involves the unintended effect of advertising, as this has a role in shaping consumer attitudes, behaviours towards certain products, and the way in which individuals encode messages (Tay, 2002). As mass communication is essentially viewed by all, marketers cannot control which target groups actively engage and respond to the advertisement. The unintended effects can provoke premature behaviours and attitude formations which are unfavorable, leading to undesirable consequences (Agnostinelli, et al, 2002). In addition to determining the effectiveness of advertising; different contexts and groups are more likely to respond to advertisements differently as advertising is not experienced in isolation from cultural and social societal factors (O’Donohoe, 1994).

In a wider sense, the advertising and communications which are integrated as part of a wider social marketing cause face competition with other behaviour influencing products (Rothschild, Mastin & Willer, 2006). Road safety advertising from a social marketing perspective aims to sell ideas, and to influence
positive behaviours, as opposed to commercial products and services which offer something tangible in return.

The issue of self-interest has been discovered as an important determinant in the choices that people make. Message strategies can convince some people to change, but evidence shows that more people will change when they see that it is in their self-interest to do so (Rothschild et al, 2006). As findings also suggest; the persuasion and motivation to change attitudes and subsequently behaviours, may not be sufficient as the opportunity and ability to facilitate change may not exist (Rothschild et al, 2006). Advertising styles which demonstrate model appropriate behaviour, thus providing an alternative solution to behavioural barriers may increase the responsiveness and likelihood of attitude change amongst target groups (Elder, Sleet, Nichols, Thompson & Rajab, 2004).

**Types of appeals used in Road Safety Advertising**

Emotion is regarded as an essential component of effective public health campaigns, as it influences the degree to which the message is initially attended to, and subsequently remembered. Evidence suggests that a more emotive message may maintain the viewers’ interest and attention than rational or informational-type messages (Elliot, 1993, Flora & Maibach, 1990, Lewis, Waston, White & Tay 2007). Research on enjoyment as an attitude also has implications for mass media effectiveness. Findings suggest that enjoyment as an experience may illuminate which behaviours displayed in the media are more or less likely to be modelled based on attentional, retentional and motivational processes (Nabi & Krcmar, 2004).

Advertising strategies have shown different effects in eliciting change in attitude and behaviour. ‘Fear appeals’ in advertising have been widely researched (Donovan & Henely, 2003, Keller, 1999, Schoenbachler & Whittler, 1996, Reid & King, 1990, and Lewis et al, 2007) however, there is controversy over the affects of such threat based strategies. In particular teenage and high risk behaviour markets have shown to be unresponsive to these scare tactics, choosing not to engage in the advertisements. Road safety is particularly renowned for its use of physical threats in which drivers and passengers are injured or face death as a result of unsafe and illegal behaviour (Donovan et al, 2003).

Shore (1997) discovered that ‘fear appeals’ in advertising for drink-driving campaigns in New Zealand teens were ineffective, as teenagers were unable to relate to the story behind the message. Although the ads were not aimed at the teenage market, the physical threat style of their execution was found unappealing. Results from this study also confirmed that avoidance effects were shown from teenage segments, as they chose not to respond to the graphic details (Shore, 1997). This evidence suggests fear reduction strategies may lead to maladaptive behaviours that could result in the discounting or rejection of the intended message. Tay (2002) suggests that punch lines in the context of drink-driving campaigns such as ‘If you drink then drive, you’re a bloody idiot’; lack cognitive involvement of teenagers in the information process. Here, young males are not encouraged to look for solutions to the presented threat, therefore more informational and coping strategies in the advertising message may deliver more influential results.

In contrast to the widely popular ‘fear appeal’ style of advertising for Road Safety issues, positive emotional appeals have been explored. Results have found that in some target segments, a more positive emotional approach in the style of advertisements may have more persuasive effects in the context of road safety (Lewis et al, 2007). The use of positive emotions, including humour and joy, are effective in gaining attention, in particular the attention of individuals who might have considered themselves as being overly familiar with a campaign (Monahan, 1995). In addition, positive emotions, including empathy and compassion, might help individuals to reframe and reconsider issues that they may feel are not particularly relevant to their lives. This perspective suggests an alternative approach as generally individuals may be deterred from the fear appeal itself, as the graphic physical threats are often ignored as individuals may deny that such horrific outcomes would ever happen to them. Often in these situations, individuals perceive the communication as being of greater influence on others (third persons) than on themselves (Lewis, Watson & Tay, 2003).

The concept of ‘Third Person Effect’ in communication literature has been identified as a confounding variable and may create a bias and influence on the effectiveness of particular public health campaigns (Tay, 2005, Henley & Donovan, 1999). In addition to possible third person effects, limitations of advertising effectiveness research, must consider the impacts of regulatory and intervention activities that are implemented as part of a wider social marketing campaign. These subsequent activities may alter the effects

The literature above has provided a review into the conceptual and theoretical models which describe the way in which television advertising may be interpreted and the different contextual elements that may influence an individual’s attitude formation and possible behaviour change. A brief overview of fear appeals suggest current strategies employed in road safety advertising in New Zealand may have limited effects. A gap in social marketing advertising exists to clearly define what style of advertisements teenagers respond to in the mass media. An investigation of the content and delivery of mass media campaigns could reveal the best possible combination in a strategy to successfully target road safety messages at the young adult market. Through understanding the way in which different advertisements appeal to this market, advertisements that are more suitably targeted may help to further reduce the social impacts of drink driving within New Zealand.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

**Research Problem**

Given the extant body of literature on Road safety advertising and the effectiveness of this in terms of achieving attitudinal and behavioural change, the results have been largely inconclusive. In particular little research has identified what type of media elements teenagers are most likely to respond to in the mass media.

The aim of this study is to identify which elements in mass media television advertisements are most appealing to teenage markets. This framework could be used to more effectively target Road Safety advertisements at the high risk teenage segment (18-20 year olds). As road safety in New Zealand is a major concern and hazard amongst highly influential young adult segments, the findings from this research may assist in the development of future television campaigns to actively engage and thus motivate teenagers to develop more responsible drink driving and speeding attitudes/behaviours.

From a social perspective, a more targeted and successful marketing strategy will lead to less road hazards and causalities. Drink-driving is a main contributing factor to road fatalities in New Zealand, and teenagers are high-risk target segments as they are most susceptible to peer-group influences and are relatively experimental in terms of alcohol consumption and driving responsibilities. This further reinforces the importance of the LTNZ having appropriate information which to base its marketing strategies.

**Relevance of Problem**

Road safety television advertising in New Zealand has yet to successfully influence teenage behaviour, as the results of prior research vary and are inconclusive. Consequently, the possible effects of attitudinal and behavioural change may be limited in reducing teenage drink driving accidents and causalities.

The message format in the majority of Road Safety advertising uses threat and fear appeals with the objective to persuade target audiences to modify their behaviour. Results from these studies are inconclusive, as differing levels of anxiety arousal can affect the audiences’ susceptibility to comply with the recommended behaviour. A common implication from previous studies suggests that further research is needed to determine what the target audiences’ appropriate motivators are to assess which themes and concepts are most relevant, thus most influencing at encouraging attitudinal and or behavioural change.

Recent literature indicates that; message content, message delivery and specific targeting from pre-testing and market research are essential to developing effective mass media advertising campaigns (Elder et al, 2004).

The proposed research problem aims to give understanding to the contextual processing and imagery which teenagers choose to actively engage in. The findings may provide a framework that can be used to more effectively target teenagers in future road safety messages.
**Research Questions**

This investigation has a view towards developing the existing literature on road safety campaigns in New Zealand, with a focus on the teenage segments and the elements in the mass media that appeal the most. Through exploring the elements in television advertising that teenagers are most likely to respond and that have an increased chance of encouraging attitudinal ad behavioural change, public health practitioners gain a better understanding of the way teenagers think. Therefore more effective communication strategies can be designed to reach them in the mass media. With this in mind, the research questions can be broadly stated as:

► What type of advertising styles appeal to teenagers?
► And what are the implications for road safety advertising?

**Research Objectives**

From the above research questions, the following objectives have been formulated to further guide the results of this exploratory research:

► To investigate the creative elements in mass media television advertisements that young adults find attractive and are most likely to respond to
► To examine the effectiveness of road safety advertising in New Zealand and determine which elements of advertisements are effective at engaging young adults.
► To create a framework from these findings that can be used for future Road Safety advertisements in New Zealand.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Research Method**

In order to achieve the research questions, a predominately exploratory, qualitative research method will be implemented in order to gain an insight into what types of media styles and elements that teenagers find attractive in mass media television advertising. Through gaining an understanding of teenagers’ responses and attitudes towards a range of television advertisements, these ideas can then be discussed to illuminate implications and possible areas for improvement in the current drink-driving advertisements aimed at young adult segments.

A two-stage research methodology was chosen to enhance the reliability and predictive validity of the research. However, a third stage will also be outlined in this research design to provide a more generalisable view of what young adults perceive to be likable and effective communication styles in television advertising. This third stage involves recruiting a larger number of participants and testing the findings of the previous two research stages in order to identify the types of media elements that appeal most to young adults. The self-administered questionnaire will be operationalised through the use of scales adapted from empirical studies that measured perceived effectiveness of various message qualities such as realism and production quality (Andsager et al, 2001).

The outcomes from the previous two stages will provide media elements and criteria that can be used to adapt a media likeability scale, to produce a larger quantitative survey, which will produce more affirmative results.

- **Sample and Size**

As the focus of this study is on young adults and their perceptions of favourable media elements in advertising, the sample will consist of 18-20 year old males and females. To control any confounding
difference amongst genders, the participants will be initially segregated determined by their gender for stage one of the research. However if results are consistent amongst genders, a mixed gender study will be used for stage two. A non-probability convenience sample will be used to determine participants including both students and non-students within this age segment. The screening questions will be stated to ensure all individuals that offer to participate have their drivers licence, are between the ages of 18-20 years and watch moderate amounts of television (min. 10 hours/week)

**Stage One**

The first stage is aimed at identifying the participants’ overall perceptions into which television advertisements appeal to them and why. And further; give insights into how participants respond in different ways and why.

In a focus group discussion participants will be asked to recall television advertisements that are appealing and relevant issues of likeability. This may include; message style, content and execution, responses to attitude change and preferences in the use of humour and joy. The unprompted, top-of-mind awareness initiated in this interactive discussion will be used to generate initial ideas about effective advertising strategies and related media elements in the general media that are popular amongst teenage segments’. The focus group will also include prompted questions involving specific reference to any road safety advertising that the participants can recall or can comment on. Participants will be asked if they can recall any road safety advertisements in New Zealand and to comment on their effectiveness and likeability in comparison to other commercials perceived to be aimed at young adult markets. Here the content and message context will be discussed to determine if the content of the advertisement i.e. a road safety message is a key determinant of the effectiveness and likeability of the advertisement.

A grounded theory approach will be taken to confirm a set of advertising criteria that is common amongst teenage segments.

Analysis of the findings from the discussion will result in one common likeable advertisement, one advertisement that was disliked, and one road safety advertisement that will be used for the second stage of research as a means of comparison.

One male and one female focus group discussion will be implemented to identify which creative elements, advertising styles and message content are most likeable within the 18-20 year old segment.

**Stage Two**

The second stage of the research will involve a further set of focus group discussions that will build on the findings of the initial focus group. Three television advertisements that were confirmed as effective and popular amongst the target group will be shown to 18-20 year olds.

The three advertisements will include one agreeable advertisement that was liked and one that was disliked and a road safety advertisement.

After viewing the advertisements, participants will be asked to discuss the messages, design, content and executional style as guided by the moderator. The issues raised in this discussion will hope to confirm the exploratory research in stage one and will further add to the depth of appealing elements in the mass media, while having advertising stimuli present to assist in the formation of perceptions.

Probes will be used to guide the discussion and gain perceptions on the criteria used in the ‘Attitudes towards advertising quality’ survey (including; realism, visual appeal, enjoyment, memorability, stereotyping, and ambiguity in the message). The findings and message features which seem most important to respondents will then be used to adapt an empirical survey to more effectively evaluate what young adults respond to most in television advertising. The comparison between the features in the advertisements that were screened prior to the discussion will help to further determine the creative features in advertising that are most influential to teenagers’ perceptions on advertising effectiveness. The findings from the discussion will help to re-evaluate and adapt the message criteria that are included in the ‘Attitudes towards advertising quality’ survey (Andsager et al, 2001).

In addition to the methodology outlined above, a review point will be included after the stage one research has been completed. If the results for the initial focus group are clear and project common perceptions
regarding advertising appeals, the second stage of the research may be altered to include a survey to test the generalisability of the findings in stage one.

FINDINGS AT PRESENT

After completion of stage one of my research, the results have indicated that there has been slight gender difference in the types of appeals for young adult segments. Males typically liked ads for alcohol, beer and those that had sex appeal, whereas girls preferred humor, memorability traits such as jingles and catchy music and advertisements that built a rapport with the viewer. Both humor, originality, short and to-the-point advertisements were preferred by both genders. Ambiguous, un-imaginative, confusing and advertisements with annoying jingles were disliked by both genders.

In terms of road safety advertising, both genders agreed that the shock tactics in the past had been too gruesome and discouraging to watch, but still effective to a point. It was also agreed that drink driving and speeding ads that are aimed at teenage/young adult segments needed to include actors of a similar age, doing typical activities such as partying, yet not over the top. Positive messages appealed more to both genders such as ‘If you don’t drink and drive you’re a bloody legend’, and it was agreed that ads needed to emphasise an alternative course of action, instead of just commanding ‘Don’t drink and drive’.

“Yea if you’re told what to do like that ‘Don’t drink and drive’ then people don’t listen. It just gets desensitized.”

“I think from like 15 or 16 you start not listening to anyone, or any type of authorative voice. Its like, we know what is best for me and we don’t need to be told what to do, even if it is against the law or not. You need to be shown not told, kind of like a respect thing.”

Suggested alternatives included; ordering a taxi earlier on in the night, crashing at a friend’s house, public transport such as a bus, or arranging a sober driver. Long term effects and possible social threats were thought to be more effective than just showing the impact of a crash scene. For example, things you could no longer do because you were injured or in a wheelchair, like sports, having a good time with friends and your wedding day. Girls seemed to think that physical appearance and injuries to the face would be effective, and both groups agreed that killing or injuring your friend/s would be more devastating than any harm caused to the self,

“The ultimate realization would be having to attend your mates funeral, and then having to face up to your friends at school etc.. that would be the worst.”

Both groups also agreed that the use of celebrity endorsers would be ineffective to get the message across. Other issues that were raised in discussion included driver fatigue and ‘boy racers’ were mentioned as there has been a lot of negative publicity speeding and teenagers at the moment. All three groups agreed that speeding and ‘boy racer’ incidents are issues that could be targeted more effectively to reach teen racers and educate them about being street-smart and making the roads a safer place.

“Teenagers think they are invincible and bulletproof and you need to show that we are actually not.”

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

The findings of this proposed research may contribute to understanding the way in which young adults form perceptions and how they respond to different elements in the mass media. The Uses and Gratifications theory suggests that multiple social and psychological factors influence media enjoyment. Attitudinal and behavioural change may reflect the extent to which media content reifies existing social norms for its
audience. Therefore an exploratory approach to discovering what advertising strategies are most effective amongst teenagers may uncover more insightful reasoning into message and executional styles.

In particular, the insights into how young adults respond to mass media messages may pose implications for more successful targeting of road safety campaigns to high risk segments. This proposed study will also evaluate previous and current road safety advertisements from a young adult perspective. Feedback on effective and discouraging aspects of the message style may highlight common elements and appeals that could be integrated into future advertising campaigns.

CONCLUSION

A gap in social marketing advertising exists to clearly define what style of advertisements young adults respond to in the mass media. An investigation of the content and delivery of mass media campaigns will attempt to reveal the best possible combination in a strategy to successfully target road safety messages at the teenage market. Through understanding the way in which different advertisements appeal to the young adult segments, advertisements can be designed to more suitably target and help to further reduce the social impacts of teenage drink driving within New Zealand. Overall the triangulation of research methods including; secondary research of current advertising effectiveness scales, the insights from the focus groups and the adaptation and use of a quantitative survey will provide multiple view points to confirm and elaborate on the creative elements that appeal most to teenagers. This mixed method study will aim to provide a rich understanding of creative elements in advertising and will reinforce the elements that most appeal to teenagers through the use of a more generalisable survey.

The findings from this research will aim to provide a framework to guide Land Transport New Zealand (LTNZ) advertising strategies to more effectively and successfully target young adult segments in the future. This may be used for more effective targeting in message appeals to motivate teenagers to change their attitudes and behaviours regarding issues of drink-driving and speeding.
REFERENCES


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