

Youth, Media & Driving Messages



Summary

July 2005

INTRODUCTION

Transforming Drivers is a joint research project between NRMA Motoring & Services, the University of Western Sydney's Centre for Cultural Research, and the Australian Research Council. The project's overall goal is to contribute to the development of education and safety campaigns for young drivers.

The first part of the project examined the kinds of messages derived by young people from media representations of cars and driving and road safety campaigns. Nine focus groups involving sixty young people were conducted in Sydney and Western NSW. A range of television car advertisements and road safety promotions were screened to focus groups and their reactions to these sought.

A media use questionnaire was also completed by 80 young people. The questionnaire aimed to quantify television consumption compared to other media and test recall of car and safety ads from various media.

A detailed report on the project has been produced by Zoë Sofoulis, Greg Noble and Sarah Redshaw from the University of Western Sydney's Centre for Cultural Research. This report is available from NRMA Motoring & Services and the following websites:

<http://www.uws.edu.au/research/researchcentres/ccr/drivingcultures/transformingdrivers>

<http://www.mynrma.com.au>

FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

The Cultural and Social Dimensions of Driving

Focus group discussions showed how young people are immersed in a broad driving culture that includes many images, messages, genres and media forms. Many participants had extensive knowledge of cars, driving, road safety campaigns and car advertisements. Participants demonstrated familiarity with the language and techniques of driving and with the social values attached to cars such as notions of individuality, freedom and power.

Focus group participants demonstrated a well developed understanding of advertising within the broader media and driving culture. Participants were aware that ads were often targeted at one gender or age group or particular socio-economic groups. Gender differences emerged as a central issue in relation to distinctions between types of cars, styles of driving and safety messages, with young women more alert to gendered messages in advertising. Participants found representations of youth in advertising stereotyped and noticed that many apparently youth-oriented ads appealed to nostalgia for 'youthfulness' rather than to actual young drivers.

Consciousness of socio-economic and regional differences was a significant factor in how young drivers distinguished between different driving behaviour and attitudes. Participants' comments suggest that they are conscious, to varying degrees of insight, of many nuances in the social contexts of driving culture, including the 'fit' between different kinds of drivers, driving styles and vehicles.

Responses to Car Advertising

Many focus group participants had a well developed awareness of advertising culture and a capacity for decoding its meanings and purposes, including the intentions of various selling techniques, such as targeting different audiences and appealing to aspirations.

The focus groups demonstrated how an already established set of values and meanings about vehicles selectively influences the quality of attention given to advertisements. Young people tuned in to those messages that had salience to their own lives, while tending to ignore the rest.

In evaluating advertisements, participants frequently compared fiction and reality, comparing for example, driving as presented in ads and real driving conditions; representations of cars and their actual performance features; and the idealised world of ads with their own circumstances. In general, young people recognised ads as fantasies but there were varying views about the consequences of these fantasies on driving, in particular, whether it promoted careless or reckless driving.

The focus groups demonstrated that while young people had a sophisticated understanding of the techniques of advertising, they are not impervious to its messages such as pleasure and relaxation, but particularly those associated with speed, which was associated with fun and a 'buzz'. Young people appear to be vulnerable to the techniques advertising uses to evoke the sensations, emotions, desires and experiences afforded by cars and speeding.



FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

Responses to Road Safety Messages

Participants had good recall of safety campaign ads but ads about speed cameras and penalties were commonly seen by focus group participants as boring or provoked scepticism, often being seen as focusing on revenue rather than safety.

Ads portraying shocking crash scenarios were often regarded negatively because they provoked strong traumatic reactions and provoked feelings of responsibility for others, particularly amongst females. While crash scenario ads appeared to have a profound immediate effect, their impact on participants appeared to diminish over time, particularly after repeated viewings.

Respondents had a strong sense of good and bad driving, but identified bad driving in terms of lack of control rather than speed. While some participants admitted to risky driving, they usually saw others as being the dangerous drivers.

FINDINGS FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The key findings from the media use questionnaire were:

- Television was the most used medium, watched by 78% of respondents (mainly between 6 pm and midnight) followed by radio at 68% (where usage peaked at morning drive time, and again in the late afternoon.)
- Forty-one percent of respondents consumed magazines, almost two thirds of which were car magazines, while billboards and the internet were noted by over 30% of respondents.
- There was high recall of messages about cars and driving from a wide range of sources, though film examples cited were mainly those featuring car culture, chases and racing.
- There was also high recall of both television and radio messages about road safety.
- While 90% of respondents had played car racing video, computer or arcade games in younger years, only 11% listed 'games' as part of their current media consumption.

CONCLUSIONS

While training and road safety programs often address young drivers as novices, the project findings suggest that they are knowledgeable and experienced participants in driving culture.

Young drivers are highly 'literate' in a variety of cultural forms and meanings associated with driving. They understand a range of media forms and are sensitive to the social values attached to cars. They have practical knowledge of cars and driving and embodied experiences and strong emotions involving driving.

Alongside this critical and often reflective stance towards advertising, safety campaigns and driving practices, young people are however, also immersed in the very kinds of social values of which they may be critical. For example, young drivers make strong associations between ads and their own feelings, experiences and social values associated with driving including speed, risk, and fun.

In relation to road safety messages, young drivers deploy a variety of tactics to avoid, resist or cynically debunk advertisements emphasising enforcement, penalties and consequences. A focus on speed, its prevention, and its consequences does not directly challenge young drivers' beliefs about their own abilities to control vehicles, nor their definition of 'safe' driving as 'predictable' driving by others.

Although young drivers themselves draw precise correlations between different types of cars, driving styles, and the gender, age and socio-economic status of drivers, these and other social dimensions of driving are often overlooked in safety campaign messages that address an abstract or 'generic' citizen driver.



STRATEGIES FOR ROAD SAFETY MESSAGES

Formulating the right messages

Promotion of road safety to young drivers needs to recognise and build on their knowledge and experience of driving culture. In particular, messages need to address the feelings, experiences and social values that young people associate with driving. Road safety campaigns addressed to young people also need to recognise the kinds of distinctions made by young people between different types of cars and driving styles, as well as the gender, age and socio-economic status of drivers.

Use of media forms

The project found that more use could potentially be made by media forms other than television in getting across road safety messages. Radio was used by a high proportion of questionnaire respondents, particularly during driving peak periods. Driving awareness messages on the radio during these times could well have significant value. The internet could also be better used than at present to disseminate road safety messages through sites young drivers might visit including for example, car sales sites.

Another significant source of knowledge for young people is motoring magazines, where opportunities for promoting specially targeted road safety messages are currently unexploited.

Promotion of peer responsibility

Despite widespread societal awareness of the importance of cars in young people's social lives, road safety messages tend to maintain a tight focus on the individual driver and the consequences of their driving. An alternative strategy suggested by the project is to promote the idea of passengers sharing responsibility for safety, or supporting young passengers in being assertive when their peers are driving dangerously.

As young people appear to have high resistance to enforcement messages from authorities, they may respond better to peer-based campaigns with specific tips and illustrations of what to do in particular situations rather than general anti-speeding or enforcement messages. For example, instead of shocking crash scenarios, road safety messages could show young people helping each other tone down their driving or demonstrate how to negotiate difficult issues such as passenger numbers or drunk passengers.

STRATEGIES FOR ROAD SAFETY MESSAGES

Enhancements to driver training

Irrespective of exactly how much direct influence car advertising has on young people's feelings and practices around driving, the focus group discussion method did demonstrate that for most young people, showing car and road safety ads was a good way to open up discussion about a wide range of driving experiences, meanings, judgements and emotions.

Opportunities that allow young people to discuss their own and their friends' driving experiences in the context of broader social and cultural themes around driving and safety could be a valuable component of driver training programs, aspects that are currently neglected by the emphasis on technical and legal knowledge.





TRANS- FORMING DRIVERS:

*Innovative research investigating
the social, cultural and gender
influences on young people's
driving behaviour*

TRANSFORMING DRIVERS PROJECT

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