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“Because it shows us the consequences”: Why the Australian public believe the ends justifies the means in road safety advertising

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Statistics for fatalities on Australia’s roads are alarming with over 1,400 people losing their life between May 2006 and April 2007. In an effort to reduce the road toll, road safety campaigns have appeared on all advertising mediums in Australia and are noted for their use of shock tactics, supported by industry and the Advertising Standards Board. This research demonstrates that in relation to graphic social marketing campaigns for road safety, the general community believe that the value of the message overrides any other unacceptable consequences of the advertisement, such as the effect graphic campaigns may have on children. Understanding the reasons why the public feel that the messages and graphic content of these campaigns is acceptable can assist in ensuring that future social marketing advertisements for road safety are relevant and acceptable to all members of the public.

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Abstract

Statistics for fatalities on Australia’s roads are alarming with over 1,400 people losing their life between May 2006 and April 2007. In an effort to reduce the road toll, road safety campaigns have appeared on all advertising mediums in Australia and are noted for their use of shock tactics, supported by industry and the Advertising Standards Board. This research demonstrates that in relation to graphic social marketing campaigns for road safety, the general community believe that the value of the message overrides any other unacceptable consequences of the advertisement, such as the effect graphic campaigns may have on children. Understanding the reasons why the public feel that the messages and graphic content of these campaigns is acceptable can assist in ensuring that future social marketing advertisements for road safety are relevant and acceptable to all members of the public.

Introduction

The need for ongoing efforts to reduce road accidents in Australia, including effective road safety advertising, is clear. From May 2006 to April 2007, there were 1,482 deaths on Australian roads, a non-significant change from the 1,478 deaths in the previous 12 months (Australian Transport Safety Bureau 2007). However, the social and economic costs of motor vehicle accidents go beyond the number of fatalities. For example, New South Wales recorded a total of 26,235 casualties due to accidents on the road from April 2006 to March 2007, and 26,137 in the previous year (RTA 2007), with each of these crashes resulting in significant social and financial costs to the individuals, their families and the community.

A community attitude survey conducted by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau found that the public is aware that speed, alcohol and fatigue are contributing factors to motor vehicle accidents, mentioned by 58%, 52%, and 30% of respondents respectively (Australian Transport Safety Bureau 2006). Despite this apparent level of knowledge in the community, there appears to be a gap between driver knowledge and driver behaviour. This can be seen through RTA statistics which demonstrate that between 2004 and 2006, excessive speed was a known factor in 36.5% of fatal crashes, alcohol in 17% of fatal crashes and fatigue in 16.7% of fatal crashes (RTA 2007).

Road safety campaigns are of great importance to traffic education (Becker 1996) and many governments around the world, including Australia, continue to employ fear-based social marketing campaigns in an effort to reduce the trauma on the roads, with inconclusive results on their effectiveness in reducing the actual rates of accidents and traffic offences (Tay 2002). The opinions on the use of fear campaigns in health communications is varied with views both for and against argued within the literature (Donovan and Henley 2000). The EPPM (extended parallel process model), is the most utilised model to explain responses to fear appeals, states that it is threat that motivates action, however it is efficacy that determines the nature of that action. When threat levels are low, there is no response to the message, however when threat levels and efficacy are high an individual will take the recommended action to control that danger. Finally the EPPM states if the threat is high but efficacy is low, an individual will take action to control their fear and avoid the message (Jones 2005). In order for fear appeals to be successful, it is imperative to take into

consideration the impact it may have not only on the target audience, but also the effects it may have on unintended audiences (Hastings and Stead 2004).

Although there has been a pattern of shock tactics and fear based campaigns used in road safety advertising in Australia, as with all advertising in Australia, social marketing campaigns are expected to comply with the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) Code of Ethics. Over the three year period from April 2004 to March 2007, a total of 16 complaints were made on community service advertisements related to road safety. The clauses of Section 2 of the Code that received complaints were: 2.1: discrimination/vilification (2), 2.2: violence (7), 2.3: sex/sexuality and nudity (0), 2.4: causes alarm/distress to children (3), 2.5 language (1), 2.6: health and safety (5) and 2.7: other-causes alarm and distress (5). There were three advertisements that received complaints under multiple clauses. All but one of these complaints made about these advertisements were dismissed by the Advertising Standards Board (ASB). The overriding view of the of the ASB in their determinations for the advertisements where the complaints were dismissed was that, despite the shock tactics used, the overall message of the advertisement was important and therefore there was no breach of the advertising Code of Ethics and the advertisements were therefore consistent with community standards (ASB 2007).

The purpose of the current study was to develop an understanding of why the apparent 'value' of a social marketing advertisement for road safety leads it to be socially acceptable despite the content which would in other circumstances potentially be socially unacceptable.

Methods

To gain an understanding of community attitudes towards social marketing advertising and the reasons behind these attitudes, a series of focus groups were conducted resulting in both qualitative and quantitative data. A total of 10 focus groups (n=80, F=40, M=40) were conducted with residents of a large regional NSW city aged 18 years and over. Each focus group attended two sessions. The first session involved focus groups discussing attitudes towards advertising which included both commercial and social marketing advertisements; and the second involved focus group participants watching a total of six different advertisements of which two were related to road safety. The television advertisements shown were chosen as they were identified by participants in the first series of focus groups as problematic. Immediately after watching each advertisement, participants were asked to complete a 13 question survey based on the AANA Code of Ethics and some additional questions addressing the appeal itself. Participants were asked to rate the advertisements on a number of variables against a 5 point Likert scale. However, as this paper is based on major themes from the focus group discussions, only data collected from six questions were analysed.

The qualitative data taken from the transcripts of the focus groups included opinions and beliefs regarding all the advertisements in question. Transcripts were entered into NVivo 7, a qualitative data analysis program, where a thematic analysis was undertaken. Significant themes relating to road safety advertising were extracted from the transcripts and analysed. The quantitative data taken from the survey were entered into a database where descriptive statistics were undertaken to enable a general overview of the data, including frequencies and percentages. The addition of this quantitative data supports the evidence taken from the focus groups and is removed from the potential influence of focus group dynamics.

Results

Qualitative Data

When the issue of road safety and social marketing emerged within the focus groups, the most prominent theme to emerge was that of consequences. The majority of participants felt that the graphic nature of road safety advertisements are necessary to show the public the consequences of speeding, drink driving or driving while fatigued. Although there was the acknowledgement that the content of many of these advertisements is graphic, it was agreed that the apparent social benefit for all members of the community gained by showing these consequences far outweighs any negative consequences of these campaigns:

“I don’t object to it at all. I found it extremely confronting in the first place and I’ve found myself quite shocked, but I overcame that because I realised the value of the message.”
Female 41-60 years

“I think it gets the point across very quickly. If people want to speed that’s what is going to happen to them.” Male 18-30 years

The effect these graphic images would have on children was an issue discussed at length by all focus group members and there were two points of view that appeared throughout the data. The first was that of participants who believed that threat and fear based advertisements should not be shown at a time when young children were watching television:

“I would not want my child watching that, how would you explain to a 5 year old the complexity of the situation, you can not.” Female 18-30 years

“I do think that it would cause distress to children and I would hope that it wouldn’t be shown earlier in the evening when there are children around.” Female 46-60 years

The second, contradictory, view was expressed by participants who regarded these advertisements as a chance for informal opportunistic education for children on the dangers of drink driving, speeding or any other safety message the campaign was trying to promote:

“..it’s an educational thing. They have to learn that cars are a dangerous weapon and not to be treated lightly for driving for fun and driving fast.” Female 46-60 years

“If children can encourage parents to slow down, the same way children were encouraged to put a seat belt on, what is wrong with that?” Male 18-30 years

Throughout the discussions of the graphic nature of road safety advertisements and the effect they may or may not have on children, the issue of violence was not raised as a concern despite it being the most common of all the complaints against road safety advertising to the ABS over the last three years. The graphic depiction of accidents and injuries were not described at any time during focus group discussions as ‘violent’ nor were there comments that these campaigns contained violent images. The topic of violence was raised within discussions during the second focus group; however that was only due to the prompt of the survey question asking their opinion of the level of violence present in the case study advertisements. This suggests that the participants do not make the connection of violence with the fear appeals used which show high impact motor vehicle accidents, bloody injuries and the depiction of a dead body.

Quantitative Data

The two advertisements shown to participants in the second series of focus groups were both road safety campaigns produced by the NSW RTA. The first advertisement was called “Drinking Kills Driving Skills” targeting drink driving and did not receive any complaints to the ASB. This campaign depicts a group of men drinking at the pub after work. One of the men crashes into a tree

as he drives home from the pub. The final shot depicts him leaning out the window having lost his life. The second advertisement entitled “Heaven and Hell” targets speeding on country roads and did receive complaints to the ASB, which were dismissed. This campaign shows a young man speeding along a country road and loses control when attempting to overtake a truck. He then crashes into an oncoming car. It finishes with him in shock at the results of his actions.

The survey results from each of the two case study advertisements show that the majority of participants not only believed the campaigns successfully market the product (safe driving), but that the advertisements’ messages and appeals are socially acceptable (Table 1). Despite this strong positive opinion, there was also evidence of a belief that these two advertisements could have been distressing for children to witness. This was particularly the case for female respondents regarding the ‘Heaven and Hell’ campaign. There were also a number of people who agreed that the ‘Heaven and Hell’ campaign promoted unsafe behaviour. Consistent with the results of the qualitative data, only a minimal number of participants believed that either of these social marketing campaigns contained too much violence.

Table 1: Percentage of Participants who Agreed With the Statements about the Advertisements:

	Drinking Kills Driving Skills		Heaven and Hell	
	Males %	Females %	Males %	Females %
I believe this advertisement successfully markets the product	88.5	97.5	91.3	95
I believe the advertisement is socially acceptable	97.1	87.5	85.6	82.5
I believe the advertisement to be personally offensive	2.9	5	8.6	2.5
I believe the advertisement contained too much violence	0	5	11.5	10
I believe the advertisement would have caused distress to children	42.9	50	60	80
I believe this advertisement promoted unsafe behaviour	2.9	12.5	25.7	30

Discussion

Of the 16 road safety advertisements that received complaints adjudicated by the ASB from April 2004 to March 2007, only one complaint was upheld. These decisions demonstrate that, despite the condemnation of these campaigns by some members of the public, the Advertising Standards Board believe that the overall purpose and goal of the campaign justifies the means used to achieve them; a view supported by the focus group discussions during this research. Kotler (2003) states the purpose of all marketing communications, including social marketing, is to persuade people to adopt a new product, belief, or behaviour. The opinions expressed by focus group participants suggest they believe the road safety campaigns discussed achieve this purpose. Results of the survey showed that the majority of focus group members believe that the two advertisements in the case studies were not only successful in marketing their product, but they were also socially acceptable. There was the belief that the depiction of graphic road accidents and images of injuries and death simply reflect the reality of speeding, drink driving or driving while fatigued and the consequences these actions can have.

The research did find that the groups were somewhat divided on their opinion on the impact these graphic fear appeals may have on children. There were some who believed that these campaigns should be used as an educational tool for all, including children, whilst others thought that the campaigns were too distressing and it was imperative that they were only shown outside of

children's viewing times. This was the view commonly expressed by those who complained to the ASB under clause 2.4 (causes alarm and distress to children). However, despite the reservations from participants about the effect on children, there was the acknowledgment that the value and potential for positive effect and change is more important than the potential for any negative outcomes of the advertisements.

Although social marketing campaigns in Australia are required to comply with a Code of Ethics, public health practitioners – or social marketers – are rarely targeted in discussions regarding the ethics of advertising. It is important that health promotion and social marketing messages are developed and conveyed in an ethical fashion just as is the expectation of commercial advertisements. By examining the results of this research using a simple ethical framework, it can be seen that the general public regard the social marketing of road safety from a teleological perspective, that is, it is the goodness or badness of the outcome that is of most importance. In this case the community are willing to accept the use of shock and fear campaigns for road safety because the 'ends justifies the means' and the 'ends' are a valued message. The implications of this are that social marketers in Australia are able to continue to produce fear based appeals without major objection from the majority of the public or advertising regulators.

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated that the general public are accepting of the use of shock tactics in road safety advertising as they believe that the potential positive outcomes of the campaigns are more important than the potentially unacceptable or unethical means used. Although this research is able to conclude that currently the Australian public view these social marketing campaigns through this teleological perspective, it is not able to determine the effectiveness these campaigns have in reducing the number of people killed and injured on Australian roads each year. This is an area that needs further research as does the principal focus of this paper, that is why does the value of social marketing allows the use of techniques that would otherwise be unethical and unacceptable to the public and is there a point at which the public will perceive that these campaigns have gone too far?

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