

Aggressive Driving in Advertising

Sarah Redshaw

The paper will explore the issue of aggressive driving and how advertising can be classified as suggesting aggressive driving. Approaches to aggression in road safety have generally confined aggressive behaviour to extreme acts of aggression involving intentional harm to others. It is argued that in taking into account clinical views on aggression, speeding and tailgating should be included as instrumental aggression, which is characterised by controlled skill and handling and thus contrasted with reactive or impulsive aggression. Focus group discussions are presented in which a television advertisement associates a four-wheel drive with extreme sports. These discussions indicate that while there is some recognition and criticism of the suggestion of risk-taking in the ad, most were not critical of the theme of the ad. Recognition of aggressive themes in advertisements does not necessarily mean critique or reflection on those themes. Females are more likely to be critical and to consider the consequences of particular driving persuasions whereas the males are more likely to consider the technicalities of handling particular types of vehicles.

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One important contribution that humanities research can make to an area like road safety is in bringing alternative theoretical approaches to the study of media and car advertising, which do not rely on proving direct effects. An example is aggressiveness as portrayed in car advertising. There is some debate as to what counts as aggressive driving within the road safety literature itself and very little attention given to the kinds of messages promoted by car advertisers on the suggested need for aggressiveness in cars and styles of driving. In drawing attention to these issues it is possible to offer a perspective that can illustrate new and constructive directions for analysing car advertising and also in contributing to road safety advertising, which attempts to counter the suggested meanings of car advertisers.

It is argued here that car advertising is an unquestioned part of the background of daily life that is not necessarily reflected upon, but which nevertheless leaves an impression.

A media culture has emerged in which images, sounds and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities. (Kellner 1995: 1)

The media, Kellner argues, provide models of “what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless”.

In a mass mediated culture, it is representations that help constitute an individual’s view of the world, sense of personal identity and gender, playing out of style and lifestyle, and socio-political thought and action. (Kellner: 60)

The “immersion” theory of media at least allows for some acknowledgement that advertising has a part to play in the meanings that are applied to cars and the practice of driving. There is a further sense in which media influence needs to be acknowledged however:

... in a society of almost universal television consumption, and largely shared patterns of programme availability, the simple fact that television is ‘by definition ... common to all’ itself grounds its function as a frame for the social. (Couldry 2000: 14)

The media are able to frame the practice of driving in particular ways through car advertising, helping to shape people’s expectations about cars and how they should be approached. It is relations between cars and drivers on the roads as they are depicted in car advertising that is one of the most concerning aspects of advertising.

Aggressive expressions of masculinity in the media have been noted in Herschman (2003), who explores the associations between “rugged individualism” and men, dogs, guns and cars, in advertising in hunting magazines. Ferguson et al. (2003) analysed the content of 850 car advertisements from the United States, Europe and Asia, and listed the primary themes according to frequency of appearance. Performance and sales incentive were found to be the dominant themes in 1998 and the previous decade and a half.

Bristow (2001) found in her UK study that the most important themes were quality, and drive and handling (performance and power). Performance relates to the speed

and handling of the car, and is expressed in advertising in a range of creative ways, many of which emphasise an aggressive competitiveness. Bristow notes that advertising in selling more than a mode of transport, emphasises image, appeals to aspirations for the best, boasts improved quality of life, and jealousy of others. The wording in some advertisements was noted for its suggestion of speed and power as exciting. A Toyota Celica advertisement in *What Car? Magazine* (May 2000), for example, states; “Beneath its predatory shell lurks the VVTi engine ... the only thing that can hinder its responses are yours.” The use of the word “predatory” also suggests aggressiveness.

There has been some argument amongst researchers as to what constitutes aggressive driving. Shinar and Compton (2004) define aggressive driving for their purposes as “any behaviour that interferes with the movement of other drivers or pedestrians”(429), a definition that considers freedom as freedom from interference. The problem with this definition is that it does not distinguish between situations where a driver is considered to be interfering with the movement of others, in reasonable and unreasonable ways. For example, the common practice of tailgating and/or flashing lights when a driver is not considered to be moving fast enough, for which there may be a variety of reasons including merely travelling at the speed limit, when the common practice is to travel at least 10kms/h over the speed limit.

Duna and Geller (2003) regard Shinar and Compton’s definition as too broad and seek to restrict aggressive driving to behaviours where the intent is to harm others. They maintain that under a category of dangerous driving there are three major classes: 1) intentional acts that can physically or psychologically harm others 2) negative emotions felt by drivers 3) risk-taking without intent to harm (564).

Intentional acts that can physically or psychologically harm others would be reserved for explicit acts where the car is used as a weapon such as when a driver deliberately runs over another person. Bullying tactics such as tailgating and flashing lights with the implication that the driver being targeted should move out of the way, are more likely to be placed under the third category, risk-taking without intent to harm. While there may be no explicit intention to harm or kill, however, there is an explicit intention to influence the behaviour of another driver through the threat of aggression. Such behaviours involve the threat of possible harm through intimidation and should be treated as aggressive. Using the term aggressive driving exclusively for the more extreme forms of behaviour allows behaviours that are aggressive in intent to be regarded in a softer way. Given the destructive potential of the car, any threatening behaviour involving the use of a motor vehicle is aggressive.

Clinical classifications of aggression distinguish reactive or impulsive aggression from instrumental aggression. Where reactive or impulsive aggression is characterised by uncontrolled and emotionally charged behaviour, instrumental aggression is controlled, purposeful and lacking in emotion. Instrumental aggression is predominantly used to achieve a desired goal and can include the domination and control of others (Liu, 2004). The instrumental form of aggression is important for road safety in that it recognises aggression that is calculated to impact on others through threatening, but not necessarily violent behaviour, using a motor vehicle. It is also expressed through the use of control and skill in handling a car, reducing safety margins and thus having a significant negative impact on the roads.

For the purposes of this paper aggressive driving is considered to be driving which encourages or expresses risk taking, including promoting the sensation of speed,

where there is increased danger of harm and little regard for the consequences of driving cars in such a way on public roads. A car travelling at speed is threatening to the well being of others. Prescribed speed limits enable some recognition and ability to adapt to the speed of vehicles. Travelling above prescribed speeds is an offence and involves an increase in risk to the driver themselves and to others. It will thus be regarded as aggressive behaviour along with tailgating, and flashing lights at drivers in front signalling that they move out of the way. All of these behaviours are intended to or have the consequence of intimidation and thus imply the use of a motor vehicle to threaten others and involve controlled skill and handling of a motor vehicle.

A recent campaign by Toyota for the V6 Hilux ute is worthy of note here. The tagline for the ad was “get in or get out of the way” and the ad showed scenes of people, cars and objects being repelled or moved involuntarily away from the Hilux. Toyota in a letter to me did not regard the ad as aggressive as it was “clearly an imaginary scenario” and intended to be “tongue in cheek in its tone”. The company also claims that they took care to show any people who appear in the ads as “intrigued, rather than frightened or intimidated”. The rigorous standards by which the company claims to determine the appropriateness of its advertising clearly need to include more than complying with road rules since advertisers can certainly film a car at a speed within the speed limit and then speed up the background to make it appear to be moving faster, among other tactics. They can also rely on the ambiguous status of media as both believable and illusory and the unquestioned “permission” to present driving in particular ways. There is a reliance on media as representing something “natural”, as if driving were naturally the way advertising is able to present it, in this case naturally requiring aggression in the form of removing all possible obstacles. The ad draws on the common practice of bullying to get others out of the way through intimidation.



Another campaign that is worthy of note is a Ford billboard campaign displayed on a motorway in Sydney. The campaign showed the front ends of two Falcons such that the car appears to be almost driving over the top of the viewer. The implication is that if you are not in the car you might suffer the consequences and only get to see it from the angle of being run over. The front of the car is intended to suggest aggression and further adding to the aggressiveness of the ad is the number plate on one of the cars – Typhoon. Performance in the ad is clearly related to aggressiveness.

Today’s model of a [Holden] Astra achieves a road performance which, 25 years ago, only a Porsche could manage, and there is little doubt that many drivers take advantage of it. Above all, the car industry collaborates in the psychological denial of this by justifying such performance in advertising campaigns as ‘sporty’ and ‘sensational’. (Holzapfel, 1995)

Aim

The focus group study this paper draws on sought to consider the driving styles expressed in television advertising and to explore those driving styles young people most associate with particular car advertising. The study was part of the Transforming Drivers project in partnership with NRMA Motoring and Services¹. One of the aims of the study was to see the extent to which aggressive driving might be identified by young people in the advertisements they were shown, and how critical they would be of these themes. The paper will present discussion of one of the advertisements shown. The responses were varied with some seeing the ad as clearly aggressive while others did not.

Method

Nine focus groups were held with 60 young people aged 18-25 years in the inner city (2), Western Sydney (4), and the Bathurst region in New South Wales (3). Young people were drawn from youth groups and through road safety officers in the regions. There were even numbers of male and female participants. There was one all male focus group, the Fairfield group, and one all female focus group, the Bankstown group, both in Western Sydney. The remainder were mixed gender groups. All participants had driving licences, except one who was disqualified. Eleven were learners and the remainder had either a full licence (16) or a provisional licence (31). One had a truck licence (HR).

Researchers took a laptop computer to each focus group and chose a select number of television advertisements to be shown on the laptop, ensuring participants were able to see the ad. Ads were shown a number of times if requested by participants and could be scrolled through slowly to look at features of the ads in more detail. Focus groups were shown a core selection of twelve of car and safety television advertisements, and in each case asked to comment on various aspects of the ads, including the driving style expressed in each. The comments presented in this paper relate specifically to responses to this question.

Not all focus groups saw the same ads. The number and type of ads shown in each group depended on level of discussion, interest in particular ads, and location (country or city). One of the Redfern groups, for example, spent a considerable amount of time discussing themes in car advertising and thus only discussed five ads. The ads selected were intended to cover a range of vehicle types and advertising styles and to appeal to different age groups. They were all graphic depictions, in that they showed the vehicles performing in some manner, rather than “sale” ads.

The focus group methodology was used to encourage discussion amongst participants, to induce argument about the identified themes in the ads and to provide a variety of responses. The focus groups gave participants an opportunity to think about the ads in ways they may not do in daily life, and to build and comment on each other’s responses. In a focus group in Bathurst two participants noted the contrast between the focus group discussion and their usual treatment of advertising:

¹ Chief Investigators on the project are Dr Zoë Sofoulis and Dr Greg Noble, Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney and Alan Finlay and Anne Morphett, NRMA Motoring and Services.

Male: Yeah. But the amount we're thinking about it now doesn't go through your head when you watch the ad. It just doesn't click. You just don't think. You don't care.

Female: We're on to the next ad in two seconds, anyway!

Male: I'm off making a feed or something. I'm not looking at the TV.

Responses to one advertisement shown in four focus groups, one of the Redfern groups, the Mountains group, the Bankstown all female group and the Fairfield all male group, will be discussed here. There is not enough space to discuss responses to more than one ad in this paper, though other ads shown were identified by participants as suggesting aggressive driving. This ad was not shown in the country groups in the Bathurst region as these groups spent more time discussing other ads which they considered more appropriate to the country, such as those for “work” vehicles. The mean age of the 26 participants in the groups in which the ad was shown was 21 years. The youngest was 16 years of age, and the oldest 25 years. Five were aged 18 years, and five 23 years. There were equal numbers of male and female participants in these groups and between six and eight participants in each group.

Extreme Styles

The Nissan Xtrail “extreme”² ad suggests more aggressive styles of driving, particularly if the rough, carefree off-road style of driving is applied to driving on the roads. It also shows social competition in comparing people who are less cool with those who are more cool, in the kinds of sports they are likely to participate in. The advertisement shows various “daggy” examples of sport such as ping pong and badminton, all conducted by people with unattractive hair cuts, shown at unflattering angles, and then shows snow boarding, dirt bike riding and white water kayaking, clearly identifying the car with the latter which are shown as fast, colourful and exciting. The male driver of the vehicle and a male passenger are visible at times, and the way the vehicle is being driven is what could be considered a male style of driving in that it is rough, off-road, identified with sports that males are more likely to participate in, and shows only males. The appeal of extreme sports is the play of risk against skill (Lyng 1990), and the reckless off-road style of driving shown in the ad is not only dangerous in off-road situations, it is an example of what I am arguing should be considered aggressive driving, when transferred to the context of public roads where the vehicle will more likely be driven. Risk taking is aggressive in its effects when carried out in motor vehicles on public roads. The ad not only promotes and encourages risk-taking, it makes it look exciting and draws on the potential social kudos to be gained from identifying with a particular style of driving that is related to extreme sports.

The focus group responses to this ad show the extent to which the ad is read as showing or suggesting risk-taking and relating it to driving. Responses were varied and took different directions in each focus group reflecting both different relationships to the media and to cars, as well as to the particular vehicle and the way it is depicted in the ad. Some of the participants related to the personal appeal of the ad, some were critical of it and some disliked the way in which “cool” was being defined in the ad.

² The ad has been shown on Australian television for the past 3 years.

Some of the women in the Bankstown all female group initially considered the style of driving in this ad as not really reckless. Rather, they regarded it as “extreme” as if this did not imply anything dangerous:

Cassie: Not reckless. More, like, extreme.

Rachel: Yeah. Like, off-road, sand dunes. That sort of stuff. They didn't show it in the city doing naughty stuff, it was ...

Cassie: Where it's supposed to be done. Like, it's not ...

Sophie: Off-road.

Jill: Pushing boundaries.

Cassie: It's not like you would attempt that in the city. Even if you did have that car, you'd go, "Oh, it'd be funner to do that in the dirt."

When asked to say what sort of on-road driving it suggested some in the group saw it as suggesting an aggressive, “pushy” style of driving:

Rachel: There's a type of person that comes right at the back of you and is really aggressive. Is in a hurry and, like, all this energy and can't wait at the petrol station for you to hurry up and fill up, or someone sort of aggressive, energetic, doesn't want to wait, instead of, you know, "I'll go around instead of waiting for the person to turn right." You know? Someone like that sort of, I don't like 4WD's, people who drive them.

Sophie: They're pushy.

The off-road extreme style was not a problem for them but when considered in terms of on-road driving, some were a bit more inclined to see the style as “pushy”. Being pushy in a car and “going around instead of waiting for someone to turn right” is considered aggressive driving. While the advertisement itself suggests that extreme sports are innocent fun, and the women in the group accept this to a point, on examination it appears to condone behaving in threatening and daring ways in cars.

The first response of the Mountains group was to relate the extreme idea to “being crazy” and classing people as nerds or extremists:

Emma: It's showing that you have to be doing, you have to be on the extreme, you have to be going that fast that, you know, being crazy like that, because otherwise you're in this class with the people who are playing ...

Luke: Ping-pong! (laughter)

Emma: Yeah! You're a nerd!

Luke: If you drive like that, you're cool. If you don't, you're a nerd.

Sam: It's sort of like, if you're a nerd, you can't have that car, as well, because you're not extreme.

Tara: You're out playing croquet.

There is an immediate connection to on-road driving as extreme, involving fast and crazy driving to be cool. One of the males goes on to consider the implications of the extreme sport idea as it related to the car. He highlights the appeal to the risk-taking element evident in the identification with extreme sport and one of the women agrees with him:

Sam: I know that's promoting like it's “push it to the limit”, but wouldn't that, in a way, promote unsafe, like: “If you have this car, you could kill yourself!” in other words? That's kind of the interpretation I get with the guy stacking it

on the bike. He's driving the car, he's pushing it to the limit, so you push it to the limit in a car, there's a greater chance of you smashing.

Tara: But the ad is more appealing to people who are like that, so they'd be like, "Yeah, you get hurt."

What is also being highlighted here is the male identification with the risk of crashing as exciting. If you go to real extremes you put yourself in a life and death situation and this is being highlighted in this advertisement. Tara picks up on this and draws attention to a type of person who regards getting hurt as part of the fun. Safety is not the primary or even perhaps an underlying implication in this advertisement. Rather, the safety idea is avoided and the emphasis is placed on being reckless and facilitating recklessness. In the association with extreme sport, any safety implication has to be overridden by the potential for being out of control and for getting hurt (Lyng 1990) and this appears to be the emphasis of the advertisement.

There is some discussion in the Redfern group about the ineffectiveness of four wheel drives in the city and their impact on pedestrians. The males then move on to discuss the advantages as they see them and the technicalities of handling in four wheel drives relating the rally driving emphasis of the advertisement to cornering:

Chris: No, I'm off the pedestrian idea now. I'm off the, you know, driving that car, your centre of balance is a lot higher which means that your handling will be shifted.

Tony: It's not that, it's the handling of the 4WD's and sometimes with rear wheel drive, when I say "handling" I mean, like, doing corners and stuff. Whereas a rear wheel drive, you have very poor handling.

Chris: I'm a big fan of front wheel drives and four-wheel drive cars.

Tony: Yeah, most 4WD's, you get a lot of handling. The sports cars, like Integra's, they have front wheel drive because they're good handling. They can take corners really well.

Taking corners better means faster, and the terminology of handling is similar to rally driving talk even though the participants are not discussing the use of the vehicle in off-road situations, but as a street vehicle. The males particularly, are not concerned about the risk-taking emphasis of the ad and in fact regard it as being about "handling".

Most in the Fairfield all male group did not relate to the extreme sport idea of the ad. When asked what age group they thought was being targeted they said older people with kids but one male disagrees and says it is meant to be appealing to guys like them:

Tony: Thirties.

Carlos: No, twenties

Frank: People that have kids, like, people that need the room for ...

Mario: No, not really, because that shows extreme sports. Like, me and you, we might go motorbike riding, you know what I mean? Chuck the bikes in the back, in the trailer, and then you take off in the bike, he doesn't ride a bike, he takes off in the 4WD.

Though there is an identification with the extreme sport idea as "like us", the male in the advertisement is differentiated in that he "takes off" in a four-wheel drive instead of on a bike. Some of the males remain unimpressed by the whole idea of four-wheel driving, being more into smart street driving. They do not identify with

the vehicle in the ad. They were more outside the consumer culture than other groups in that they did not buy standard car packages but made up their own through modifications of older vehicles. They were more interested in a street driving style. One ad they said was boring: "Because there's no burn-outs!" Their sense of being cool was derived from their modified street cars and their ability to handle them.

None of them questions the representation of risk-taking in the ad, rather Mario is trying to show the others that the type of risk-taking is cool. Mario who is slightly older than the others and has a business in car modification, mostly for drag cars, which they do consider cool, continues to try to convince them that four-wheel driving is also cool:

Mario: Like, we go to Stockton Beach up in Newcastle. We've got motorbikes, trail bikes. We go up there riding. The guys who don't have bikes have four-wheel drives. Just cheap, diesel four-wheel drives, so they can come and have fun as well. And we just go for hours on the sand dunes, and have a ball.

The extreme sports association does not appeal to most of the males in the group and they found the implication of the advertisement, that if you were not into the kinds of extreme sports illustrated you were not cool, offensive. They did not question the link between risk-taking in extreme sports and driving cars on the road, and in fact could be said to have a high regard for their handling and skill demonstrated through risk-taking in cars. There were discussions on the technicalities of cars, their speed infringements and driving antics in this group. In a discussion on speed limits one male commented: "What matters is the law should change! (laughs) If people can't keep up with the driving, get off the road!" He says of his own driving style: "I drive like a maniac and I'm still alive today."

Responses to this advertisement showed an evident transfer of the driving style of extreme off-road, rally type driving to driving on the street or the road. Though the responses were varied they showed a similarity in their recognition of the style of driving as technically challenging and fun. What is of most concern is that most participants did not see or question the connection between risk-taking in extreme sports and driving a motor vehicle.

Responses by these young people to this advertisement show a range of views about the vehicle and the driving represented. The innocent but extreme fun of extreme sports is transferred somewhat unproblematically to driving cars on the road for some, while for others the social competitiveness and the implications in the advertisement for driving on the road of fast, crazy or reckless driving, are apparent. The young women were more likely to recognise and question the association between risk-taking in extreme sports and driving in the ad.

Conclusions

Aggressive implications were apparent in the advertisement for some of the young people, but only critically in one group, and the aggression recognised is usefully related to an instrumental aggression in that it is designed to achieve certain ends. The ends included looking cool, being cooler than others, as well as beating other drivers and demonstrating skill and handling through risk-taking. These ends, expressed in cars on the road, have aggressive implications simply because they involve deadly motor vehicles. While the ad "innocently" portrays off-road driving, it is clearly

intended that the suggestions for performance and handling be transferred to on-road driving. The style was regarded as reckless by participants in one group and aggressive when considered in the context of on-road driving in another. The males in the Redfern group resorted to a discussion of the technicalities of handling in general and avoided the question of the appropriateness of the style for on-road driving as depicted in the ad. The all male group on the whole did not like the implication that you had to drive a four-wheel drive vehicle such as the Xtrail in order to be cool, though they did not question the reckless style. The implication that it was not only the car that was needed in order to look cool, but also an “extreme” driving style, was also recognised, and disagreed with by some. Pushing the boundaries in motor vehicles, as in extreme sports, is dangerous. The aggressive pushing through shown in the ad – pushing through water, mud and sliding in the sand – is meant implicitly to be transferred to the everyday driving situations that most people are likely to confront, usually traffic on the roads. It is not just relying on the fantasy of off-road driving to sell the car.

Ads such as the Nissan Xtrail “extreme” ad depict driving behaviours that are risky and do not take into account the possible consequences of the driving style suggested. In much the same way the Toyota Hilux “get in or get out of the way” ad involves a suggestion of aggression and yet excuses this by appealing to the apparent distinction between what is real and what is imaginary. The distinction is not clear-cut and the media depend on an ambiguity relating to what is real (Couldry 2000). Advertising states certain facts that are meant to be believable as well as appealing to fantasy, but appeals to the latter are also meant to suggest a possible reality – to be ahead, to be better, to be able to go faster, to look cool – that people obviously relate to in various ways. Technical details relating to performance and handling blur into the implications for driving style – better handling to go faster around corners, more power to get ahead of everyone else and to go faster. These driving styles in turn have aggressive implications – expectations of consistent fast cornering demand that everyone drive in a particular style or get out of the way, and this is not in a manner that is particularly pedestrian friendly.

The media have the power to frame driving and our relationship to cars and other drivers in particular ways. A number of advertisements, particularly for larger male identified cars, employ strategies that involve suggestions of aggression, and this is instrumental aggression which, to some extent, is excused as not really problematic behaviour. Media power is not best defined by maintaining that advertising directly causes certain behaviours, which merely masks the ongoing ability of the media to continue to frame activities, practices and social relations in particular ways. It is more productive to look at the implications depicted in advertising and to hold advertisers to account for their framing of practices such as driving and the social implications of these framings.

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