

Men, driving culture and speed

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Differences in attitude between young men and women in responses to a safety ad will be explored as aspects of the culture of driving young people are immersed in as they enter the driving community. The safety advertisement discussed here was shown in seven focus groups with 47 young people aged 18-25 years, 24 male and 23 female, held in various locations in New South Wales, including Western Sydney, the inner Sydney city area and the Bathurst region, a rural area west of Sydney. Young men in the study showed less concern with speeding and more concern with distraction while the young women considered speed an issue in itself. Young men also showed an apparent confidence in their own ability to the extent that they did not tend to think their driving could harm others whereas the women expressed more awareness that their driving could be harmful and they needed to be cautious. The implications of these views will be discussed. Attitudes can produce habits of practice but are also often about something controversial and unsettled or ambiguous. The extent to which attitudes can be considered as cultural in the context of a cultural practice such as driving and the impact this has on how a social issue such as vehicle speed is dealt with, are considered.

The paper proposes to explore what can be considered cultural and not just individual attitudes informing the ways in which young people approach driving. Driving here is regarded as a social and cultural practice (Redshaw 2006). The social and cultural factors contributing to the overrepresentation of young men in crashes through notions such as gender can make important contributions to understanding how to increase young driver safety. While much research in the field focuses on psychological characteristics of individuals, social and cultural research is able to offer conceptual alternatives for a richer understanding and engagement with the community of drivers.

Previously I have outlined driving as a cultural practice through three primary (though not exhaustive) dimensions that serve to routinise driving (Redshaw 2006). Firstly, driving becomes routinised in relation to particular cars and the different ways in which they are experienced and articulated, secondly, through experiences of time and place and how these are articulated, and thirdly, through various demographic characteristics of the driver, such as age and gender. Attitudes will be seen in the following as reinforcing and expressing the routinisation of driving through these dimensions, particularly gender.

Cars and the individualism promoted through them, are central to consumer cultures. Driving cultures, related to particular kinds of cars and drivers and the driving styles that go with them, express broader social and cultural embodiments, attitudes, expectations and beliefs. Attitudes can be seen as informing and encompassing cultures. They can produce and express habits of practice but are also often about something controversial and unsettled or ambiguous (Bilig, 1987). They are not so much 'below the surface' as part of the surface that is everyday and unseen and yet also defended and justified. In the broader social and cultural context within which young people begin to engage with motor vehicles, it is considered desirable for young males to feel at risk in order to make the most of their experiences, leaving little margin for error (Harré 2000). The challenge this presents can overwhelm fear of risk or desire to be cautious and subsequently with the dominance of male attitudes, risk is emphasised over caution and caution is not highly valued.

Harré et al (1996) reviewed research which indicated that young men are more attached to driving, use the car to enhance self-efficacy, are more confident about driving skills, rate dangerous driving as less serious, and are less anxious about crashes. Driving skill is not primarily about safety for them, though the willingness to drive fast and overtake, is generally perceived as 'skilful' (Harré et al 1996; De Joy 1992). For young men, trying out manoeuvres to hone their skill helps to create their gender identities (Papadakis and Moore 1991). Seeking risk is part of the construction of manliness (Hopkins and Emler 1990).

An exaggerated sense of driving skill, seeking risk in order to develop and express that skill as part of manliness, as well as an exaggerated emphasis on the role of driving skill in crashes as opposed to cognitive judgement, in the broader social and cultural context could be major contributors to the over-representation of young men in crashes. These are more than individual attitudes and beliefs and it is important to begin to find ways to explore the fabric of cultural influence on an activity such as driving.

Harré et al (1996) note that gender roles are changing and risk seeking is becoming more attractive to women, though their study found that women are taking more risks in being passengers in cars with men who are driving dangerously than in their own driving. An increasing willingness of women and an ongoing willingness of men to speed could be linked to the prevalence of messages in which speeding is considered exciting and rewarding and safety is associated with skilful handling of the vehicle rather than a tendency to be cautious.

Method - Focus Groups

This paper draws on a study that sought to consider the driving styles expressed in car and safety television advertising, and to explore the styles young people most associate with particular car advertising. One of the aims of the study was to examine the responses of men and women to safety campaign advertising¹. The aim of the research was not to prove direct effects

of advertising but to explore the meanings young people saw in the advertisements they were shown and the ways they related to them. Media is regarded as an aspect of everyday life in a culture like Australia and therefore a major factor in how meanings relating to particular activities and products, such as cars, are constructed (Couldry 2004).

The safety advertisement discussed here was shown in seven focus groups with 47 young people aged 18-25 years held in various locations in New South Wales, including Western Sydney, the inner Sydney city area and the Bathurst region, a rural area west of Sydney. Young people were drawn from youth contacts and through Road Safety Officers in the regions. There were 24 male and 23 female participants. There was one all female focus group, referred to here as the Bankstown group, and one all male group, referred to as the Fairfield group. The remainder were mixed gender groups. These will be known in what follows as the Bathurst group, the Redfern groups 1 and 2, the Mudgee group and the Mountains group.

All participants had driving licences, except one who was disqualified. Twelve were learners and the remainder had either a full licence (10) or a provisional licence (21). One had a truck licence (HR). Participants were from a range of educational backgrounds with 26 currently employed and 18 being engaged in tertiary education. A number of the students stated that they were also working. Three participants stated that they were unemployed.

Researchers took a laptop computer to each focus group and chose a select number of advertisements to be shown on the laptop, ensuring participants were able to see each 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 asked to comment on various aspects of the ads, including the driving style expressed in each.

Discussion related to a safety advertisement to be presented in this paper was separated from discussion of other advertisements, and analysed according to whether responses focused on the effect of speed, harm to others, factors other than speed (skill, boredom, fatigue and road conditions) and the driver's perspective (not including concern for others). The discussions show not only distinct 'attitudes' to driving and speed in particular, but also a clear difference in male and female responses and the ultimate failure of the advertisement to challenge underlying discourses about speed and its consequences. The focus group discussions can help to offer a deeper understanding of the way young people think about speed and the consequences of speeding, and how they relate to safety campaign messages.

Speed Campaign Television Commercial

The Police 'Reverse' advertisement was a speed campaign ad in which a family is shown in a car in the process of crashing. The crash is shown in some detail and in reverse. As the car comes back to driving along the road it

is shown being pulled over by a policeman. The message is that it is better to be fined for speeding than to crash. The driver is male, late twenties to early thirties, and his wife, also late twenties to early thirties, is sitting in the passenger seat and there are two children in the back seat. The parents could be considered to be middle income paid professional/s (teacher or other government employee). The slow crash scene starts with the wife being shown hanging in her seatbelt apparently dead. The male driver is gasping at the sight of his wife as the car swirls back into the roll across the road with glimpses of the frightened children in the back seat. The car rolls in reverse back to being upright only this time it is stopped next to the road. There is a police officer standing beside the car and the driver is being booked. While he is being booked the driver says to his wife, 'Sorry, it's the car, it just wants to ... [go]'. He gestures with his hand indicating a forward momentum.

Results - Speed Concerns

A range of views were expressed in the focus group discussions about this advertisement, however there are both commonalities and strong contrasts in the responses of men and women. Many of the female participants in the focus groups identified with the woman in the passenger seat in the car, and commented on the male driver who suggests that he 'couldn't help speeding, it was just the car'. The women were more likely to relate to and express a concern for the welfare of others. Men were more likely to regard the issue of speed as over emphasised and to trivialise it by broadening the message to 'don't crash', or to regard the problem as boredom, distraction or tiredness, and not speed.

The men were generally incredulous that anyone could crash the car on a straight stretch of road. In the Bathurst 1 group some males decided that the driver must have been speeding at an extreme level and considered the message of the ad to be 'don't crash'. They then decided that the problem was inattention, not speeding:

M2 How could this guy ... rolling his car on a straight country road with a good surface on it, so you just think, like, if people ... You'd have to be not just speeding but, like, strapping on the afterburners to lose control of the car. So, I'm not entirely sure what the ad tells you what not to do! Don't drive like a moron?

Here the 'moron' is someone who cannot control the car at speed. The subtext is that men who know how to drive would not lose control even if they were speeding. Another man then took this argument further by suggesting that inattention was the issue:

M3: Don't crash your car! Doesn't that sort of show that it's inattention, not speeding, that's causing the accidents?

A few kilometres over the limit is not regarded as significant. Distraction is seen as the problem and speeding is not considered as contributing to the crash. The point that distraction is always possible, while speed can be controlled to reduce the chances of distraction having such drastic consequences was not discussed.

The young women in the Mountains group also considered the implications of the male attitude to speed while the males accepted and agreed with the parody, appearing to include themselves as being able to 'drive good':

F1: Those guys go, 'I'm invincible, I can drive good, I'm not going to crash just because I'm going fast.'

M2: [It's saying] slow down on open roads. Country roads.

F1: There's nothing that you can see that's actually caused it, so it's obviously just the speed that's made it happen. So, it's kind of: safe driving, do the speed limit.

This young woman had no problem accepting that speed was the cause of the crash even while the men were commenting that it was the type of car that was a problem and agreeing that they can 'drive good'. The men made no comment on the statements of the women and brought up fatigue and boredom as the issue saying 'it's open road', 'he doesn't have to think or anything' so that the driver is not concentrating. They concluded that the message was, 'A car can crash anywhere'.

The idea of slowing down on open roads was replaced with open roads not requiring you to 'think or anything', to reinforce the argument that fatigue was the issue, and lack of concentration. The message was reduced to the idea that a car can crash anywhere, a very broad and particularly benign message, especially since this was not related back to the potential for speeding to add to the possibility of a crash.

In the Fairfield Group the males also maintained that the issue was not speed but tiredness or boredom. While it was accepted that you could crash on a straight stretch of road if a kangaroo suddenly appeared on the road ahead, the discussion came back to the idea of boredom. According to one man there is nothing to look at and you are 'scattered', 'just driving'. Speed was considered as a way of dealing with boredom rather than an additional risk factor.

In the second Bathurst group one male initially made light of the dramatisation saying 'She looks pretty good for someone who's been in an accident...', while another stated the message of the ad:

You've got two choices when you speed. You end up with a fine, or you end up dead. That's the impression.

The women meanwhile found the message 'kind of scary when you actually think about it and think that it could happen to you'. They noted that 'the guy just wants to, "it's just the car"'. The men related to having a 'foot full of lead' suggesting both that the car influences the driver and that the driver has a propensity for speed which he is unable to control. A woman immediately picked up on the men's comments in the ad saying 'It's so typical of males' as with the women in the all female Bankstown group who said it was 'so typical that males drive faster' and one of the men defended the driver's position:

M1: But on that sort of road, you wouldn't do something like that. It looked like a big, open road.

F1: Like, it's just males! They blame the car. They won't take the blame for it! (laughter)

M1: Yeah, you get tempted. If it's a big, long, straight road out in the middle of nowhere, I would probably be going faster than the speed limit. That's just the way I drive, I suppose.

F2: I do ten percent over the speed limit because I don't think I'll get caught (laughter) and then I add a few more! (laughter)

Boredom and being 'tempted' was again identified by the males as the problem, rather than speed. The women's comments did not appear to make any impact on the views of the men. The men suggested that a long straight stretch of road was precisely where it makes sense to speed and you would be unlikely to crash. The long straight stretches of road made the speed feel trivial, it feels like 'you are not getting anywhere' and 'you are still seeing the same thing'. The women eventually agreed with the sentiment of the males.

Speed for these young people, who do a lot of driving in the country, was part of dealing with long drives. The consequences of speed were not easily drawn out. They all admitted to speeding, although the women noted the view of the men that they were not responsible for their speeding. This suggests that the women were more likely to see the consequences of speeding and the effect on other people than the men, who continued to maintain that it was necessary to speed in order to relieve boredom and that it was not a safety issue.

It was clear to the women that the male driver was putting the responsibility on to the car, and that most men would suggest that they would not lose control in such a situation, even if they were speeding. Women in all groups expressed a similar view regarding the comments of the male in the ad.

In the first Redfern group speed was clearly related by the women to recklessness and lack of regard for the safety of others, which was seen as typical of men, 'It wasn't me, it was the car! It's nothing to do with me!' They do see the ad as suggesting that there could be implications of speeding for others. 'It's just showing that you could be that driver one day. You could put your own life as well as others at risk for you to speed and be reckless'. They thought that it was about more than 'getting caught by the police', that it also encouraged you to 'look at the big picture', that there might be other consequences.

The young women in this discussion focused on the welfare of others and connected it to the idea that any driver could be in that position. They then went on to discuss how they would feel if they killed someone in the car with them, and the experiences of friends. The young women related stories of friends who had been in crashes and were no longer able to go in a car, and a friend who was killed. They stressed the point that speed may not only have an effect on the speeding driver, it may also effect others. The male responded that he also considered others and the effect he could have on them.

M1: That's what I do when I drive. I'm confident I'm a very good driver. It's the other people I worry about. I worry about other people's driving. Because when I drive, I look, you know? Because some people, like, they don't really look and stuff. So I always take steps.

He seemed nonetheless to be expressing the prevalent male attitude that the women are referring to; in stating that it is the driving of others he worried

about he was shifting the 'problem' to other drivers. He suggested that he did take responsibility for the speed he was doing and did consider others but this was by way of considering his own confidence. He was aware of what other drivers were doing. He was watching out for his own safety by being aware of what others were doing. In this he was considering others as a threat that he has to watch out for while he did not appear to regard his own driving as likely to be a threat to others. A woman agreed saying 'you have to drive for others' in case they do something unpredictable and another woman then extended that to the idea that she was especially careful not to be reckless with others in the car. This woman then pointed out that 'driving for others' should also include concern for people in other cars, that your own driving may have consequences for others.

One man from the second Redfern group showed some reflection on his own thinking, noting that he was likely to think it would not happen to him, even though he recognised the speed as the driver's responsibility. A young woman was then encouraged to share her husband's attitude:

M1: I suppose I just don't think it will happen to me. I mean the car only goes as fast as you let it.

F2: Oh, I can relate to that in terms of my husband, he's like that. It's like, 'Well, you've got to go with the flow of the traffic!' And it's like, 'No, you go with the speed limit!' So it's kind of like, 'The car just wants to go faster!' Oh, right. Yeah. OK! The car's got a personality! (laughs)

The Uni group thought the ad worked for women but not men and also related to the view that males would regard the ad as not applying to them: 'Guys get all of that, "I'm invincible, it will never happen to me," but girls ...'. One participant expounded the message as related to the welfare of others and 'speed, slow down, take into consideration the people in your car, not just yourself'. She also noted the fact that it was the driver who was still alive but the other person in the car was dead, stating that it was 'kind of trying to work on your emotions by saying, "Hey, it's not you that you're hurting, it's your partner" or whoever'. For another participant the shock impact of the advertisement was striking and reminded her of a death in the family and the impact that had on other members of the family.

The discussion went on to consider speeding and the differences between drivers and cars:

F1: Some people can go faster and still be in control of their car, and some people start losing control at, like, 80. It depends on the car as well. ... the newer cars, you can drive faster and not really notice.

In this comment there is agreement with the idea that the car can easily reach higher speeds without this being noticeable, and that some drivers are more capable of handling higher speed. The same speaker then went on to compare the speed of male and female drivers. She said that men were more likely to go faster, particularly around corners, and that this scared her:

F1: Yeah, well, when I'm with my girlfriends, if we're in their cars, they generally don't go as fast as guys. They'll go over the speed limit, which isn't really that good. But, when I'm with my guy friends, you can tell when you're going fast, because there's the corners, and everything, and it's just like, "Well, I don't want to die."

With the driving style of the male friends and their tendency to go faster around corners, the speed is more evident. This obviously concerned her and she was not prepared to accept that the males were good drivers and knew what they were doing.

Women in the Mudgee group also regarded speed as having an effect on safety and considered the police as having a role in reinforcing that message. They noted the tendency of males to regard themselves as good drivers and therefore exempt from concerns about speed, and were critical of it:

F2: And I think that one (the ad) was also good because sometimes people just think, people are more afraid of the police than dying, because they think they're good drivers and nothing will happen to them and they're not going to have an accident, so that one's good. OK, you've got two options: the police, and you're going to get booked and you're going to lose your licence, or you die. So, just don't ...

These young women pointed out that the ad proposed getting fined as an alternative to crashing and that the consequences may be killing your husband, wife or friend. The male broadened the message to the point that it became too general: 'don't do anything wrong'. The women continued their discussion without responding to him and went on to compare the ad to car advertising in which speed was shown in a way that suggested it is safe. They maintained that it is never safe and that the male driver in the advertisement had failed to notice his speed and absolved himself of responsibility by saying the car was the culprit.

Conclusion

While young women brought out the issue of the potential to harm others and related stories of the effects of car crashes on friends and family, none of the young men related to the advertisement in this way. They were more likely to suggest that speed was not the real problem, that their driving was good enough to avoid crashing if speeding, and it was other drivers that they needed to be wary of. They considered speed and the message of the advertisement in more general and abstract terms than the young women who were more inclined to consider it in very concrete interpersonal terms.

The young women were able to critique the view of the males that they were 'good drivers' and therefore unlikely to crash, even if speeding, though they were not able to confront the discrepancy in the argument of the males in the focus groups – that speed adds to the potential of a crash when you are tired, bored or distracted. Both males and females related a tendency to speed that remained unchallenged by the advertisement even when the message was recognised and they could relate to it.

Underlying ideas relating to driving ability and masculinity, the tendency of drivers to believe that they are safer than the average driver and that safety messages do not apply to them (Walton and McKeown, 2001), are perhaps counteracting the message of this advertisement. In these discourses males in particular, regarded themselves as good drivers, able to handle a bit of

extra speed and did not consider speed a real problem. Females recognised elements of this discourse that were being addressed in the advertisement when the driver said 'sorry it's the car'. However, they were not able to challenge the speed issue in relation to boredom and distraction and in this sense they were also restricted by the underlying view that speed is not a problem in itself, which thus remains unchallenged by the advertisement.

Discussion

Harré, Foster and O'Neill (2005) suggest that the self-enhancement bias of young males leads them to exempt themselves from the message of advertisements which show dangerous driving resulting in a crash. Young males take the message as not applying to them because they see themselves as good drivers. Many of the responses of young males to the advertisement examined in this paper illustrate that they consider crashing in the circumstances shown as an example of bad driving, boredom or tiredness and not a consequence of speed.

The evident tendency not to regard speed as an issue of concern for them is another element of this study which needs to be acknowledged. The males demonstrated a comfort and familiarity with speed and this is an aspect of driving culture more broadly that needs to be addressed. Male fascination and comfort with speed and the sense in which young men feel the need to demonstrate a mastery of speed could be connected to a focus on the driver thus excluding the surrounding context of others who could be harmed. Seeing their level of comfort with speed as the determinant of what speed is appropriate suggests a very ego and car-centred perspective that is unable to take into account the impact of speed in the environment or the context of speed.

Harré et al. (2005) propose that the self-enhancement bias may be more effectively mitigated by advertisements demonstrating cautious driving choices than those illustrating dangerous driving resulting in a crash. Future interventions, they state, need to challenge the construction that associates masculinity with driving skill and show the ideal male driver being concerned for the welfare of others rather than being able to handle a vehicle. This would help to tackle the problem as one that goes beyond the individual driver to a broader culture of driving amongst males and give some credence to caution and concern for others as part of driving skill.

The emphasis on being able to handle a car at speed as the main criteria for good, skilled driving needs to be challenged as it does not take into account the social environment in which the car is being driven. Rather it involves a view of 'everyman for themselves' according to skill level that encourages aggression towards those viewed as not skilful enough.

The range of responses to speed as a cause of a crash show that there are differing 'attitudes' to speed and that it is a controversial issue rather than a settled or unequivocal one. Driving practices are habituated on the basis of

these attitudes rather than established and accepted agreed rules of the road. These underlying attitudes are important in tackling deeply ingrained understandings of the standards by which driving is judged and are part of a broader culture and not just an individual perspective, and therefore should be confronted as such.

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ⁱ Further information on the study can be found in the report *Youth, Media and Driving Messages* available from Ms Anne Morphett, Policy Advisor, NRMA Motoring and Services, 74-76 King Street, Sydney NSW 2000 Australia.