

# Dangerous safety: Extreme articulations in car advertising and implications for safety campaigns

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## Abstract

The paper presents focus group discussions of two popular SUV television advertisements which emphasised fun and extreme sports, through off-road scenes. Safety was a perceived message of the ads and varying degrees of consideration were given by participants to the implications for on-road driving of the association with extreme sports. There was little awareness or discussion of the possible impact of particular driving styles shown in the ads on safety in complex traffic situations, even though the ads had clear implications for on-road driving. The responses to the ads represent social and cultural rather than purely individual views of driving practices and resonate with the intention of the advertisers showing the diversity of identifications with cars. Campaigns need to address these themes through a holistic perspective emphasising the good of society as opposed to manufacturers' desires to increase sales by appealing to and reinforcing expectations of greater speed, power and performance.

## Introduction

The social and cultural context within which young people learn to drive is an important influence on how driving is taken up and practised [1]. The media is a significant formative agent in western societies and as part of the promotion of consumer discourse and desires and wants, helps to shape the expectations and needs related to cars. The media helps to 'frame' our experiences of driving, gender, age and so on [2, 3]. The desire for increased speed is constantly cultivated by manufacturers through advertising [4, 5].

The approach taken in this paper is that driving is a socially mediated practice and the framing of cars and driving is largely a social activity. The system of automobility is possible through extensive social involvement in the production of motor vehicles, roads and traffic regulation [6]. Cars are not meaningless objects but are articulated in that they have specific meanings inscribed in them often specifically related to the type of vehicle [7, 8]. In addition, it has been argued that there are dominant articulations that determine the meanings attached to cars in general [9]. Sports cars are often associated with young males and popularly signify virility. Sports cars are also strongly associated with particular styles of driving and have been found to be more involved in crashes than other types of vehicles [10].

Some of the norms impacting on young drivers in particular are not primarily related to safety but are concerned with promoting image, lifestyle and mobility [1]. Norms derived from their own

social context and cultural demands connect with the messages and meanings conveyed in media portrayals of driving practices and are brought together in young people's approaches to cars and the driving styles they adopt. The meanings inscribed in cars need to be part of the analysis of driver behaviour. A study of vehicle types and driver risk taking found that the 'higher aggressivity' of truck based Sports Utility Vehicles (SUVs) and pickups makes their combined risk higher than that of almost all other cars with the exception of sports cars [10]. Therefore media portrayals that make such vehicles more attractive to consumers may have a negative impact on-road safety.

The relationship between risk-glorifying media exposure and risk-taking thoughts, feelings and behaviours has been studied quite extensively as demonstrated in a meta-analysis by Fischer et al. [11]. They found a positive connection across different research methodologies (correlational, longitudinal and experimental) between exposure to 'risk-glorifying media content and subsequent risk-taking inclinations and behaviors' (p.382). Risk taking behaviours are a major cause of childhood and adolescent injuries so that media glorification of risk taking will most likely have most impact on this group. Participation in extreme sports (which is relevant to the research reported below) has been considered as a major public concern and is increasingly the subject of scientific research along with other risk-taking behaviours such as binge drinking, smoking, unprotected sex and reckless driving [11, 12].

Power and safety appeals in automobile advertising were investigated as long ago as 1981 [13]. It was popularly believed that safety did not sell and similar views appear to hold today. Although there are more complex ways in which the safety aspect can be appropriated in advertising, power appeals are clearly still evident. Cossé and Swan investigated the impact of public policy on auto advertising and concluded that safety did receive some additional attention that coincided with public policy. The association of driving with sports in car advertising has also been around for some time [14].

In one of the first analyses of meaningful themes in car advertising, Bristow [15], in a study in the UK of television advertising for cars, found that the most important themes were quality, and drive and handling - that is, 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 is selling more than a mode of transport. It emphasises image, appeals to aspirations for the best, boasts improved quality of life, and being envied by others. The

wording in some advertisements was noted for its suggestion of speed and power as exciting. Other content analyses of car advertising have since shown that themes antagonistic to safety are prevalent in advertising [16-18].

One of these content analyses was conducted in Australia in 2005 [16]. As it was focused on content analysis after the introduction of the voluntary code of practice in 2002, it did not include impact on driver perceptions. The study reported in this paper was a qualitative study aimed at identifying the way that these ads framed car use in relation to risk taking using more recent ads.

## Method

This paper reports on a study of young people's associations and responses to television car advertising. Nine focus groups were held with 60 young people aged 18-25 years in various locations in New South Wales, including inner Sydney, Western Sydney and the Bathurst region. Young people were drawn from youth groups and through Road Safety Officers who worked for local councils in the regions. There were even numbers of male and female participants. One focus group (group F) was all male and one was all female (group B), both in Western Sydney. The remainder were mixed gender groups. These will be known in what follows as the R1 and R2 groups (inner city), the B1 and B2 groups (country), the Mu group (urban), the M group (country) and the U group (urban).

Ads were shown in the focus groups on a laptop computer and then questions were used as prompts to encourage discussion, such as 'what did you think of that ad?', 'who do you think the ad is aimed at?' and 'what sort of driving does it suggest?' 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 way, rather than in showrooms or offering special sales incentives. This paper reports results for two of the ads, specifically selected because of their use of associations with extreme sports.

Focus groups were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following discourse analysis [19] transcripts were read through and major themes identified. Using NVivo software transcripts were systematically coded and further themes identified. The themes were discussed and finalised by three researchers. Text from transcripts was captured within different themes and subthemes. One of the major themes was 'driving style' and subthemes were identified within it. The subthemes relating to the two ads to be discussed in this paper will be presented.

The focus group methodology was used to encourage discussion amongst participants where agreement and disagreement about the identified themes in the ads was possible so that varied responses could be expressed. There was diversity in the responses and discussion here is intended to reflect that diversity. 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 others' responses.

Advertising is often largely unquestioned, a part of the background of daily life that is not reflected upon even though it plays a significant part in cultivating and reinforcing particular meanings in our society:

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 behaviour, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities. [3, p.1]

The meanings the ads are intending to connect with can be strongly suggestive of themes that are not conducive to road safety. The extent to which young people picked up on these meanings and were able to reflect on them was a central interest of the project. Young people in the focus groups would see the beginning of an ad and exclaim, 'I love this ad' and would raise other similar ads they liked. As viewers they are not passive recipients of the meanings in the ads but often engaged with them though not necessarily reflectively or critically. Advertising serves to create meanings and will often connect meanings by association. The ads to be discussed are good examples of such associations.

The two ads discussed in this paper are both for compact four wheel drive vehicles, or SUVs, that were advertised in a way that represented young people and associated the vehicle with extreme sports. Both were shown on Australian television in 2004. SUVs, generally referred to as 4WDs (four wheel drives), are a popular vehicle in Australia and appeal to a range of age groups. The focus group responses were varied and so as well as indicating that they could identify meanings that were problematic for road safety, the responses of young people to these ads indicated that the meanings transferred from extreme sports and related to off-road driving were being transferred to on-road driving.

The ad for the Ford Escape shows five of the vehicles in different colours engaged in a game of soccer on the beach. The ball appears to bounce off the cars as they slide around in the sand. Both males and females are shown driving the cars and there appear to be a range of ages represented. The ad includes sporty, fast moving, fun, carefree, competitive, rough manoeuvres accompanied by road handling sounds, braking noises, male voices whistling, energised music and speeded up film. At the end of the ad a car 'hits' the ball out to sea in an illustration of tremendous power.

The ad emphasised Ford's tagline at the time, 'no boundaries', often illustrated with a supernova explosion at the end of the ad suggestive of tremendous power. In this ad the voiceover states: 'With the power of the V6 Escape there are no boundaries'. The tagline 'We have ignition. No Boundaries' suggests anything is possible and draws on the power of a space rocket from which the well known line comes. The themes shown in Table 1 indicate that the central message of the ad relating tremendous power and fun with freedom was getting through.

Figure 1. Description of Ford Escape ad

The Nissan X-Trail ‘extreme’ advertisement showed various ‘daggy’ examples of sport such as ping pong and badminton, all conducted by people with unattractive haircuts, shown at unflattering angles, and accompanied by slow music. The music then became faster and up-tempo with images of snowboarding, dirt bike riding and white water kayaking, clearly identifying the car as fast, colourful and exciting. The male driver of the vehicle and a male passenger are visible at times as the car is pounded through creeks and over rocky terrain and dirt roads, throwing up dust and water in its wake. Speed is indicated in the fast-moving backgrounds and the potential for losing control shown in the sliding of the back of the vehicle as it turns, spraying dirt and sand. The voiceover running throughout the ad claims:

There are sports [croquet, badminton, elastic tennis] and there are extreme sports. Just like there are compact 4 wheel drives... and there’s the Nissan Xtreme. An extreme all-mode 4WD system. An extreme interior and extreme power. The X-Trail. Only Nissan takes the compact 4WD to the extreme. Song: Just wait til you drive it! (Voiceover of ad for Nissan X-trail V6)

**Figure 2. Description of Nissan X-Trail ad**

The statements and discussion segments presented here are intended to convey the expressions and meanings presented by focus group participants. While quotes are selective they are shown in the context in which they were presented. Themes are presented as they were raised by participants so they may be contradictory or similar as they are not exclusive or systematic in their relationship to the ad.

## Findings and Discussion

In the following, responses to the two ads are presented and discussed. The ads considered are television ads for the Ford Escape shown in six focus groups and the Nissan X-Trail shown in three focus groups. In both cases the vehicles being advertised were V6 models and both vehicles were shown in off-road situations, one on a beach and the other in various locations. Evaluation of the focus group discussions in this paper is focused on the identification of driving styles in the ads, and the implications of the ads for on-road driving.

### Ford Escape

The ad is described in Figure 1 and themes from discussion of the Ford Escape ad are shown in Table 1. The all-male group F suggested the ad was recommending fun and playfulness and that the excitement of driving in a daring and risky, extreme way is carried over into everyday driving. One participant talked about driving home as ‘driving hard’, showing a clear connection to on-road driving and the kind of person who drives ‘hard’ as someone who takes risks and pushes the limits through fast cornering. At the same time, the vehicle is considered as being able to take the rough treatment.

**Table 1. Identified themes - Ford Escape**

<b>Fun/Reckless</b>	Buy this, you're going to have fun! You're going to play soccer, pick up chicks ... (M2, Group F) And you won't flip it if you take corners too quick! (M3, Group F) It's fun to drive around recklessly! (F1, Group M) Go fast and do doughnuts! (M1, Group Mu) The idea of playing a game of soccer in the car sounds good. Being able to slide around. (M2, Group Mu)
<b>Exciting driving</b>	Exciting. Exciting driving. You feel that person, they drive hard even when they drive home. (M1, Group F)
<b>Crazy driving</b>	It's showing you can dodge through traffic, because it was going ... (F1, Group R1) Crazy driving. (M1, Group R1) Yeah, I think it's crazy, yeah. Going in and out. I reckon the way it's doing that, I reckon it's in and out of traffic, like, you know? You can dodge traffic. (F2 Group R1)
<b>No boundaries</b>	And it's got no boundaries, so that means ... (M1, Group M) Just do what you want. (M2, Group M) Try something different, you can go anywhere. And, once again, I've picked up on the slogan, ‘We have ignition’. So, it means it can go fast. Powerful. (M1, Group M) A lot of freedom, kind of thing. Freedom and power seems to be a pretty big theme, for these ads. (F1, Group M)
<b>Safety</b>	F1: No, that one actually appealed to me because it shows the skill of the actual car, and it shows that the car is safe doing all these things. (Group Mu)
<b>Escapism</b>	It's definitely escapism. (F2, Group M)
<b>Irresponsible</b>	Irresponsible. (M1, Group Mu)
<b>Dominance</b>	F1: Fast F2: Off-road, 4WD, rough terrain, power. F1: Dominance. F2: Yeah, its dominant. That whole idea goes with the 4WD, like, they can do anything. F2: ‘You can do anything!’ Yeah. F1: ‘It's fun.’ ‘Buy this car and you'll have fun in a 4WD!’ F2: But it's safe, because none of them crashed! (laughter) All: Yeah! (Group U)

The R1 group immediately related the driving style to driving on the road and considered the ad as showing ‘crazy’ driving such as dodging in and out of traffic. The M group talked about the ad as portraying recklessness and unpacked its meaning, relating it to speed and power which one male connected directly to the tagline ‘we have ignition’. Speed and power were then related to freedom and ‘doing what you want’ by one female though others in the group did not pick up on the connection.

There were males in the R2 group for whom the ad did not really show performance as it did not show speed. They did not consider the soccer game on the beach to be a very convincing indication of performance. This view reinforces the connection between power and speed often fundamental to car advertising [16].

The Mu group described the ad as showing irresponsible driving but one female saw it as strongly suggesting safety and another male identified with the appeal of ‘sliding around’. The car appears to facilitate safe driving in situations that might demand quick turning, and this is connected to power. While the type of driving the ad suggested to them was considered ‘irresponsible’, there was not a lot of criticism of the theme.

The theme of ‘dominance’ is related to having fun in a four wheel drive with speed and power clearly part of the equation. ‘You can do anything’, like ‘no boundaries’, also mentioned in another group, has the implication of being outside the rules, careless and irresponsible, allowing the expression of a range of styles, even reckless driving, but it appears as an innocent expression of the freedom everyone has a right to and which is ultimately safe.

The ad suggested to these young people that the car was capable of quick turns and slides, and this was important to normal driving for some. Others considered the ad to be suggesting reckless, crazy driving. The association between being reckless, and fun and excitement was clear though there was not criticism of it.

### Nissan X-Trail

The ad as described in Figure 2 draws on the tradition of rally driving associations [4] though the vehicle has no rally performance record. The emphasis is thus on extreme thrill and excitement attractive to young males who talked about trying out manoeuvres such as slides to hone their car handling skills. The ad involved the implication that the rally style of driving demonstrated in the ad in off-road, ‘fun’ situations could be transferred to the context of on-road driving. The vehicle was intended to be seen as a fun vehicle that could take the rough play, and the driver by implication as a cool, fun kind of person, prepared to take risks and push the vehicle and their driving to extremes. Themes are shown in Table 2.

Picking up on the tag line of the ad, the women in the B group regarded it as ‘extreme’ rather than reckless as if this did not imply anything dangerous. The extreme sport theme of pushing boundaries was recognised but it was considered harmless.

When asked to say what sort of on-road driving was being suggested in the ad some in the group referred to an aggressive, ‘pushy’ style of driving. The off-road extreme style was not a problem but when the theme of pushing the boundaries was transferred to on-road driving, some were a bit more inclined to see it as a ‘pushy’ style.

The extreme theme of the ad is a play not only on the name of the vehicle, ‘X-Trail’, it is also an appeal to pushing the boundaries and to being a certain kind of person who likes to push things to the extreme. The first response of the M group was to relate the extreme idea to being crazy and classing people as nerds or extremists. There was an immediate connection to on-road driving as extreme, involving fast and crazy driving to be cool. One of the males went on to consider the implications of the extreme sport idea as it related to the car. He highlighted the appeal to the risk-taking element evident in the identification with extreme sport, and one of the women agreed with him.

The risk of crashing as exciting was identified as referring to those who are really prepared to go to extremes by putting themselves in a life and death situation, a theme that is being promoted in this advertisement. 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 over-ridden by the potential for being out of control and for getting hurt [20].

There was some discussion in the R1 group as in the B1 group about four wheel drives, how ineffective they were in the city and their impact on pedestrians. The males then moved on to discuss the advantages as they saw them, and the technicalities of handling in four wheel drives, relating the rally driving emphasis of the advertisement to cornering:

It's the handling of the 4WDs 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. (M1, R2)

**Table 2. Identified themes - Nissan X-Trail**

<b>Extreme</b>	Not reckless. More, like, extreme. (F1, B) Yeah. Like, off-road, sand dunes. That sort of stuff. (F2, B) For that sort of car, it wasn't ... (F1, B) They didn't show it in the city doing naughty stuff, it was ... (F2, B) Where it's supposed to be done. Like, it's not ... (F1, B) Off-road. (F3, B) Pushing boundaries. (F4, B) 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.’ (F1, B) 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
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otherwise you're in this class with the people who are playing ... (F1, M)

Ping-pong! (laughter) (M1, M)

Yeah! You're a nerd! (F1, M)

If you drive like that, you're cool. If you don't, you're a nerd. (M1, M)

It's sort of like, if you're a nerd, you can't have that car, as well, because you're not extreme. (M2, M)

You're out playing croquet. (F2, M)

**Push it to the limit** 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. (M2, M)

But the ad is more appealing to people who are like that, so they'd be like, 'Yeah, you get hurt.' (F2, M)

**Pushy** 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 4WDs, people who drive them. (F2, B)

They're pushy. (F4, B)

I'm a big fan of front wheel drives and four wheel drive cars. (M2, R2)

Yeah, most 4WDs, you get a lot of handling. The sports cars, like Integras, they have front wheel drive because they're good handling. They can take corners really well. (M1, R2)

The terminology of handling amongst these young males was similar to the rally driving talk the ad draws on and cultivates. The transfer of the rally driving implications of the advertisement to on-road driving were clear to them. They did not consider or question the implications of faster cornering in the traffic environment of the road but saw this as an aspect of the fun and challenge of cars in any environment. These comments relate to expressions of masculinity the implications of which cannot be discussed in this paper. Suffice to say that gender is one of the ways in which cars and drivers are made socially meaningful or articulated [1].

The B1 group in a country area said they did not identify with four wheel drives but considered them more of a city car. Nor did they identify with the extreme sports shown in the ad. Both males and females in the group stated that dirt bike riding was a more common activity in their area. Similarly the all-male group F thought the advertisement was not extreme enough in that they appeared to identify four-wheel driving with older people. When asked what age group they thought was being

targeted they said older people with kids. One male disagreed and said it was meant to be appealing to guys like them:

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. (M1)

Though there was identification with the extreme sport idea as 'like us', most of the group remained unimpressed by the whole idea of four wheel driving, being more into smart street driving which for this group meant driving on the road in an aggressive and challenging way with characteristic vehicles that were beyond the ordinary street vehicle in their style and power, as well as their uniqueness. They related less to the rally driving style than to drag racing and demonstrating powerful modifications of their vehicles through a smart, aggressive, street driving style. They were offended by the implication of the advertisement that if they were not into the kinds of extreme sports illustrated, they were not cool. Their sense of being cool was derived from their modified street cars which required being driven in particular ways. This group discussed losing their licences by doing things on the roads that were shown in car ads and how unreasonable that was.

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.

The advertisement draws on the rally driving theme of pushing to the limits of both the vehicle and driving skill, and connects it to extreme sports where there is a clear life-threatening potential, and the difference between life and death relies on skill [20]. There is an aggressive potency to the association of extreme sports with the car driven largely on public roads recognised in various ways by the focus group participants though not in very critical or reflective ways. The ad relies on an implicit reference to the danger of the car while at the same time masking this danger in the emphasis on fun and excitement as relatively harmless expression.

## Conclusions

The young people's responses to these ads are ambiguous in that, to some extent they can see the representations of speed and power as potentially harmful, but they do not tend to be reflective or critical about the representations. The connection of fun and sport to driving cars is concerning in that it suggests that driving on the road be considered as a sport activity, and that cars can be driven on the roads in fun and sporty ways that are risky and dangerous but nevertheless safe. The suggestions of pushing the limits and the threat or potential of losing control appeal to young males in particular, as do the messages of these advertisements. The ads suggest the car can take this kind of treatment and the occupants will be safe nevertheless.

Competitiveness and fun, adrenalin-pumping activity are connected strongly with cars in these advertisements without necessarily any regard for the consequences of this attitude on the road. The racy appeal and crazy sand driving can be considered safe, and justify safe speeding and breakneck handling, reinforcing for many young males and some females that they are able to handle it and to manage speed without crashing. Because these practices are shown in off-road situations, advertisers avoid being seen as showing bad driving on the road for which they could be sanctioned [21] and yet the connection to on-road driving is evident to the young people in the focus groups. This could have particular implications for young people in country areas where off-road driving is common.

The 'framing' role of the media is not directly causative and the impact of advertising though clear is not considered as proven [22]. Advertisers are not concerned with the good of society as a whole but rather with the effect on sales of unpopular images and publicity [22]. While the role of meaning formation through framing in the media is denied using the argument that there is a lack of research that is recognised as valid, advertisers will continue to cultivate unsafe practices and to frame safety itself in unsafe terms. Advertising is used because it works by reinforcing and promoting particular attitudes and practices that are in the interests of manufacturers but not society. Other 'safer' attitudes, more conducive to driving as a shared practice, are not cultivated though they are present in the evident cooperation practised on the roads.

Young people may be more vulnerable to the implicit meanings in advertising and in the process of finding out how to deal with those meanings in practice [23]. It is not merely adolescent development that should be the focus of research but also the social meanings about cars and driving that are being conveyed to young people [24]. Advertisements such as those considered in this paper reinforce the symbolism of the car for males particularly, as a means of aggressive expression and the demand for more speed, with no concern for the destructive consequences entailed. These associations require detailed examination so that they can be questioned and dismantled, and the connection between young males and driving cars in destructive ways can be challenged rather than reinforced. The enthusiasm of young males for cars needs to be managed in ways that clearly separate the sport of racing and risky, dangerous driving from everyday driving on the road.

Advertising is able to draw on meanings that are prevalent in the broader community. Some of the statements by young people show the evident connection between the advertising suggestions and the pre-existing meanings that go into them. Where young males have a desire for excitement and the opportunity to express a competitive and aggressive masculinity that requires constant adrenaline hits through cars, the advertisements considered here make the most of these meanings, and reinforce them. The more these styles of driving are employed in advertising to promote the performance and power of cars, the more it suggests that these are acceptable ways to use the car.

The young people are clearly able to identify the themes in the advertisements and to discuss them in a sophisticated manner though they are not always able to reflect on the implications of the driving styles suggested. It is clear from these discussions that particular styles of driving are promoted and even justified in advertising and this is what campaign advertising has to confront.

Campaign messages are concerned with the good of society as a whole in contrast to manufacturer advertising. Emphasis on social themes of cooperation and consideration that actually allow the roads to function in a relatively safe way could be used more creatively to present alternatives to the themes of advertising and to reinforce other meanings that are part of driving practice [25]. The relevance of speed limits to communities and not just drivers could be emphasised so that there is reflection on the impact of cars that goes beyond the desires of drivers alone. Realism about the potential for increased speed in motor vehicles needs to be cultivated in the community through constructive debate that campaign messages could contribute to. Manufacturers continue to push for, and promote, higher speeds reinforcing an expectation that speed will be ever increasing. Other ways of increasing quality of life could be cultivated that are not as costly to society as a whole and based on cooperation rather than aggressive, competitive driving.

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## Considering a new framework for designing public safety ‘filler’ messages on highway variable-message signs: Applying the behaviour change wheel

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### Abstract

This paper reviews literature regarding ‘filler’ (particularly safety) messages on variable message signs (VMS), then evaluates the applicability of Michie, van Stralen and West’s behaviour change wheel for message generation using examples from Queensland. Although designed for generating health care interventions, the wheel readily extends itself to road safety. The paper concludes with a brief list of techniques for writing persuasive safety messages. This research was conducted because limited research is available on VMS safety messages or models for their generation. The literature review indicated that although controversy exists regarding the use of VMS for safety messages, more drivers would rather have the messages than blank signs; however, certain messages are seen as more useful than others. Further, VMS safety messages should not be expected to change the behaviour of all drivers but rather help a small share. The key benefit of this paper is that it proposes a comprehensive framework for generating VMS safety messages and describes strategies for writing them. Further research should be conducted on driver reactions to these messages.

### Keywords

Behaviour change wheel, Filler messages, Road safety messages, Variable message signs

### Introduction

Limited research is available on the design, use and effectiveness of ‘filler’ messages on permanently-mounted, highway variable-message signs (VMS) [1-2]. There is even controversy regarding whether these messages should be displayed at all [1,3-4]. In the 2010 Queensland Government Transport and Main Roads (QGTMR) manual titled *Variable message signs use and operation* [5], filler messages include ‘road safety messages, community benefit messages and general transportation messages’ (p.10). In Queensland and many other places, filler messages are displayed on VMS when there are no crashes, roadwork, or important traffic information to report that could influence driving plans. Appendix 1 of this paper presents filler messages listed in the manual, which states that these messages