

## Exploring the effectiveness of different types of humour in road safety advertising campaigns

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### Abstract

Recently, in Australia, road safety advertising campaigns reflect an increased reliance upon messages that incorporate positive emotions including humour. Evidence, however, is lacking regarding the extent to which different types of humour are associated with persuasive (or dissuasive) effects. This study, based on an in-depth qualitative investigation with  $N = 18$  licensed drivers, addressed this gap by exploring the effectiveness of different types of humour. The findings revealed that humour that was clever, incorporated something unexpected and contrasting with the everyday, was a preferred and relevant approach, thus aligning with humour types, such as comic wit and satire.

### Background

Recently, in Australia, humorous messaging has been used increasingly in road safety advertising campaigns. This increased use aligns with evidence which has shown that high risk road user groups, such as young males, may be more likely to adopt the recommendations of a humorous message relative to more traditional approaches based on threat and fear (Lewis, Watson, & White, 2008; Lewis, White, Ho, Elliott, & Watson, 2017). Somewhat surprisingly, however, evidence is lacking regarding the extent to which different types of humour are associated with persuasive effects. This gap in knowledge is problematic given that classifications of humour refer to there being different types of humour (Speck, 1991) and that the use of an inappropriate type of humour may be associated with dissuasive effects (Lewis, Watson, White, & Tay, 2007). Similar to threat-based approaches and evidence which suggests that not all messages classified as ‘fear appeals’ evoke fear in individuals (Dillard et al., 1996), it could be expected that not all messages classified as ‘humorous’ may elicit amusement. Of the studies which have explored the persuasiveness of humorous messages, often the type of humour being investigated is not defined, thus, rendering conclusions ambiguous regarding the role and effectiveness of different types of humorous messages. This study addressed this gap in knowledge by exploring the effectiveness of different types of humour in accordance with Speck’s (1991) classification of humour types in regards to road safety advertising.

### Method

A qualitative study was conducted that involved discussions with licensed drivers from Queensland ( $N = 18$ ;  $n = 10$  males) aged 17 years and over. Participants were offered \$AUD40 to thank them for their time.

The discussions were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule which explored individuals’ responses about humorous road safety messages in general as well in response to a selection of five pre-existing road safety advertisements which were chosen by the researchers as some examples of different types of humour. All discussions were audio-recorded, professionally transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic analysis.

## ***Results and Discussion***

Overall, the findings support the need to recognise that there are different types of humour and, thus, that there is value in adopting a conceptualisation of humour, such as Speck's (1991) typology. The findings revealed that, irrespective of an individual's age and gender, humour that was clever and incorporated something unexpected and contrasting with the everyday was a preferred and relevant approach, thus aligning with incongruity-based theories of humour generation and humour types, such as comic wit and satire. Participants reported that humorous messages may influence a message's persuasiveness because such messages may be talked about and relatively more so than traditional fear-based approaches. Participants also believed that humour would need to be used cautiously as humour that was considered inappropriate and/or associated with serious occurrences, such as a crash, would be unlikely to persuade.

## ***Conclusions***

To the extent that humour is being increasingly used in road safety advertising campaigns, it is essential that more is understood about the role and effectiveness of different types of humour.

## **References**

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