

Audience Reactions to Motor Vehicle Advertisements: A Test of Compliance with Self-Regulatory Codes

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Abstract

Massive automobile advertising budgets suggest that consumers worldwide are exposed to a large number of motor vehicle advertising messages. This is of concern considering some motor vehicle advertisements may encourage unsafe driving practices. In fact, motor vehicle advertising contributes a significant proportion of all complaints received by the Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB). Further, it appears that many advertisements that may be non-compliant appear to fall through the regulatory gaps. This paper presents a test of the Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries (FCAI) Voluntary Code of Practice for Motor Vehicle Advertising. It entailed assessing audience perceptions of the messages communicated in three advertisements which were the subject of complaint to the ASB, two of which (Ford, Jeep) were dismissed and the third (Mazda) upheld. Audience perceptions of the ads showed that the ASB were correct in upholding the Mazda complaint that the ad promoted speed and performance aspects of the vehicle. However, our results showed that the Ford and Jeep ads also communicated these messages to the same extent or greater. Our results also showed that the sort of driver behaviour portrayed in these ads is perceived by a majority of viewers as aggressive and risk-taking across all three ads. These results bring into question the approach the Australian Standards Bureau uses to determine whether an advertisement breaches the FCAI Voluntary Code of Practice for Motor Vehicle Advertising.

Introduction

Fatal and non-fatal road accidents are costing Australia \$17 billion each year (Connelly and Supangan 2006). "Speeding" and "drink driving" are seen to be key risk factors for motor vehicle accidents (Chapman and Blows 2006). Extensive public health campaigns have helped to make drink driving intolerable to Australian society (Sheehan et al 2006, Danton et al 2003). However social marketing campaigners addressing "speeding" face an uphill battle against well resourced motor vehicle advertisers who depict unsafe driving practices in their advertisements (Jones 2007, Chapman and Blows 2006, Sheenan et al 2006). Global automotive advertising expenditures in 2005 (\$22.7 billion) topped the product category list (McCann 2005). In Australia automobile advertising has experienced 8% growth on 2006 and holds the second position (11%) of all advertising spending for 2007 (B&T March 2008). Concerns about socially irresponsible messages in automobile advertisements have prompted several countries to adopt self-regulatory automobile advertising codes (Jones 2007, Sheehan et al 2006). In Australia the Voluntary Code of Practice for Motor Vehicle Advertising was introduced by The Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries in 2002 (updated in 2004 and further revised from December 2006).

The primary purpose of this voluntary Code of Practice is to provide guidance to advertisers in relation to appropriate standards of advertising relating to motor vehicles. The system of self-regulation is reactive and therefore only advertisements that attract complaint from the general public are heard by the Australian Standards Board. This board receives and considers complaints about motor vehicle advertisements under the FCAI Code of Practice

and the Code of Ethics. The board determines whether or not an advertisement that has attracted complaint has breached these codes or not. If an advertisement fails to be upheld by the board, it is dismissed and the complainant advised. Conversely, if the advertisement is found to have breached the codes, the advertiser is instructed to respond by modifying or discontinuing the advertisement. A written response to the determination indicating resulting action is also required from the Advertiser.

Evidence is emerging that motor vehicle advertisements appear to fall through the regulatory gaps within the voluntary code. The findings of a comprehensive content analysis of Australian motor vehicle advertisements (Schoenfeld et al 2005) and a study measuring Sydney drivers' perceptions of motor vehicle advertisements (Chapman and Blows 2006) show "speeding" themes contravening the Advertising for Motor Vehicle Voluntary Code of Practice being used in Australian automobile advertisements. Thus, it is not surprising that vehicle advertisements consistently attract the second or third greatest number of complaints lodged with the Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB) since 2004 (ASB 2007). However, only a limited number of complaints are upheld by the ASB. More specifically, a recent study which reviewed Australian industry responses (including the Australian Standards Bureau) to ethical dilemmas facing advertisers for cars, fast food and pharmaceuticals found for the car category the ASB upheld only 4.2 % of 165 complaints considered during the 2002-2004 period (Jones 2007).

Clearly there is a need to scrutinise the Advertising Standards Bureau's administration of the FCAI Voluntary Code of Practice. The purpose of this study is to assess the effectiveness of the self-regulatory motor vehicle advertising system in Australia. More specifically the study tests the Australian Standards Bureau's compliance with the voluntary codes. The content guidelines of the 2004 revised Motor Vehicle Voluntary Code of Practice (can be downloaded from the FCAI website) were used to determine audiences/drivers perceptions of violations of the code with respect to three recently screened advertisements that were subject of complaint to the ASB, two of which were dismissed and one upheld.

Research Method

A national research company's on-line panel database was used to collect the data from a national sample. Each respondent was exposed to two of the three advertisements (presented in a varied order) which resulted in 300 respondents for each advertisement. Quotas were assigned to achieve the following sub-samples, each of which was gender balanced: 14-18 year old (not licensed) N=150; 17-25 year (licensed) N=150; 26-55 year old (licensed) N=150. Emphasis was placed on younger age groups in this survey as young people are disproportionately affected by road traffic injuries. Furthermore, research suggests the social values of young drivers compared to others are more strongly aligned to speed, risk and fun themes (Sofoulis et al 2005) and that neurobiological changes occurring in adolescents may stimulate attraction to impulsive, risk taking behaviours depicted in motor vehicle advertisements (Gardener and Steinberg 2005, Pechman, et al 2005).

Respondents viewed the first ad twice and then completed a short questionnaire. They then viewed the second ad twice and again completed the brief questionnaire. The post exposure questionnaire included various standard copy testing items as well as items constructed from the content guidelines delineated in the Voluntary Code of Practice for Motor Vehicle (FCAI 2007). The scales and format of questions are described in the results tables of this study.

The suitability of using content guidelines of self-regulatory codes to monitor audience perceptions of advertising content and violations of self-regulation codes (i.e., not just industry or legal experts) has been demonstrated in the alcohol advertising context (Babor, et al 2007; Donovan et al 2007). All three TV advertisements examined in this study were screened after the introduction of the revised 2004 code: i) TVC1 Ford Territory Turbo (dismissed August 2006), ii) TVC 2 Mazda 3 MPS (upheld May 2007) and TVC 3 Daimler Chrysler Jeep Compass (dismissed May 2007).

Results and Comment

Table 1 shows audience perceptions of the performance attributes: i) *power*, ii) *speed*, and iii) *acceleration*, and associated driving experience attributes: i) *good to go fast*, ii) *fun to race cars*, iii) *cool to drive a powerful car*, and iii) *car makes other drivers move out of the way* that are communicated by the three advertisements.

Table 1: Perceived Ad Messages Relating To Performance & Experiential Attributes

	Ford Territory Turbo Ad		Mazda 3MPS Ad		DC Jeep Compass Ad	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Ad messages breaching code guidelines relating to performance attributes						
i) Ad suggests the car is more powerful than other cars						
Yes	259	83	201	64	204	64
No	28	9	66	21	74	23
Do not know/not sure	26	8	47	15	39	12
ii) Ad suggests the car goes faster than other cars						
Yes	220	70	200	64	195	62
No	58	19	69	22	85	27
Do not know/not sure	35	11	45	14	37	12
iii) Ad suggests the car accelerates quickly						
Yes	224	72	254	81	213	67
No	47	15	29	9	61	19
Do not know/not sure	42	13	31	10	43	14
Ad messages breaching code guidelines relating to driving experience attributes						
i) Ad implies it is a good feeling to go fast						
Yes	189	60	235	75	206	65
No	96	31	57	18	81	26
Do not know/not sure	28	9	22	7	30	10
ii) Ad implies it is fun to race cars						
Yes	124	40	109	35	105	33
No	153	49	165	53	173	55
Do not know/not sure	36	12	40	13	39	12
iii) Ad implies it is cool to drive a powerful car						
Yes	247	79	242	77	213	67
No	48	15	49	16	75	24
Do not know/not sure	18	6	23	7	29	9
iv) Ad implies the car can make other drivers move aside						
Yes	176	56	100	32	132	42
No	111	36	174	55	150	47
Do not know/not sure	26	8	40	13	35	11

Note: Due to rounding some of the results do not add up to 100%.

The explanatory notes of the Voluntary Code of Practise for Motor Vehicle Advertising clearly states that advertisers “should avoid explicitly or implicitly drawing attention to the acceleration or speed capabilities of a vehicle” (p.2 Voluntary Code of Practise for Motor Vehicle Advertising). The results in Table 1 show that almost two thirds or more of the respondents perceived that these three performance attributes were being promoted in each of the three ads. That is, these ads are promoting messages that are ‘banned’ by the Code. It is noted that the Ford ad (complaint dismissed), ‘outscores’ the Mazda ad (complaint upheld) on two of these three attributes (power and speed). With respect to the experiential aspects related to speed and power, substantial majorities believe that each of the three ads is promoting that it is ‘a good feeling to go fast’, ‘it is cool to drive a powerful car’.

While we do not have a comparison motor vehicle ad depicting staid or responsible driving, it appears that ads such as these three send fairly clear messages about what sorts of drivers drive as depicted (see results in Table 2): for each ad, a substantial majority believe that the drivers are more likely to be aggressive (than courteous), to try and beat other cars at lights, to take chances when overtaking, to exceed the speed limit when they can get away with it and to generally take risks when driving. We consider these data contribute substantially to the proposition that the behaviours depicted in these ads are unsafe driving practices. Of particular note is that the dismissed Ford and Jeep ads attract the same proportions as does the upheld Mazda ad.

Table 2: Perceptions of Unsafe Driving Behaviours Portrayed in the Ad

Ad messages breaching code guidelines regarding unsafe driving behaviour	Ford Territory Turbo Ad		Mazda 3MPS Ad		DC Jeep Compass Ad	
i) Ad suggests the drivers are likely to be						
a courteous driver	93	30	108	34	114	36
an aggressive driver	220	70	206	66	203	64
ii) Ad suggests the drivers are						
likely to try to beat other cars at lights	215	69	204	65	197	62
not likely to try to beat other cars at the lights	98	31	110	35	120	38
iii) Ad suggests the drivers are						
likely to take chances when overtaking	212	68	199	63	200	63
not likely to take chances when overtaking	101	32	115	37	117	37
iv) Ad suggests the drivers are likely to						
exceed the speed limit if they can get away with it	221	71	224	71	225	71
always stay at the speed limit	92	29	90	29	92	29
v) Ad suggests the drivers are likely to						
take risks when driving	222	71	228	73	228	72
be very careful when driving	91	29	86	27	89	28

Clearly the discrepancy between audience perceptions and the Australian Standards Bureau's (ABS) assessment of advertisements, and the apparent inconsistency in the ABS's determinations, bring into question the approach the ABS uses to determine whether an advertisement breaches the Code of Practice. A more systematic approach needs to be taken to monitor automobile advertising content. Expert content analysis using the voluntary codes as a research framework and audience impact of advertising studies could be used to refine and revise self-regulatory codes on an ongoing basis.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study examined a limited number of advertisements. A systematic sample of automobile advertising (electronic and print) could be drawn and further analyses conducted to explore how target audience characteristics (e.g., age, gender, driving record) impact on advertising perceptions. Most importantly, future studies should explore how automobile advertisements influence viewer's attitudes towards unsafe driving practices and actual unsafe driving behaviour. The rating scale used in this study could be used to monitor violations of the Voluntary Code of Practice for Motor Vehicle Advertising over time and perhaps for different types of cars (e.g., could focus on four wheel drives and/or sports cars, brands etc.).

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