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Car Advertisements – Symbolisms and mediation of driving habits and culture in the media: how are these understood and assimilated by the public?

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The aim of the study was to try and establish whether or not there is a link in the manner in which drivers behave on the road and the manner in which vehicles and drivers are mediated in advertisements.

Since the study is currently still in progress, this presentation will only deal with the outcome of focus groups held in Durban and Cape Town with vehicle owners.

Tony Humphreys (Who's Life Are You Living: 2003), an internationally acclaimed author and clinical psychologist said:

"today's world worships at the altar of success"

We are led to believe that success is visual - if you cannot see success then you apparently have not yet attained it. In these terms success seems to be embodied in the great job, the big house, brilliant children and the cool car. Reflect back to a recent television advertisement of the BMW 3 series speeding along tight cornered s-bends.

Yes, the cool car the doctor prescribed, speeding across our flat screen television every night. Now did that good doctor mean we should get our own bodies in motion to elevate our heart rates, or did he feel speeding in a cool car was by far a better way of achieving the same level of heart rate elevation. According to participants from focus groups in Cape Town and Durban, if we want to be successful and cool then the good doctor prescribed that "cool fast car."

Popular talk show host Opera said:

"success is an obsession. We're bombarded with the notion of it everywhere we turn: Advertisements, [the Top Who's Who lists depicting] the coolest, the hottest, the richest and the boldest. (The Opera Magazine: March 2004:8)

At this point I would like to remind you of the advertisement depicting a BMW Z4 racing along Chapman's Peak pass with such precision that the driver, despite not having any protection from the rain, was bone dry and looking very cool after passing through a cloud burst.

"I want to be that guy," said an impressionable 20-something year old man. *"I want to be with that guy in that car,"* was another young woman's response to the advertisement. And so the comments of youthful attraction and glamour rolled out until a wealthy youth indicated that he felt the advertisement was a challenge to all Mercedes Benz owners..... So what was the challenge.... we were all eagerly waiting. *"To take on that BMW Z4 driver and drive even faster along Chapman's Peak in my CLK Mercedes."*

"Will you do it" I asked him with a level of disbelief....." *Yes I will,*" he told me very firmly and with a lot of conviction.

These were not idle words as countless other challenges were taken on by this focus group participant - just to see if it was possible. Sometimes he knew that under normal circumstances 360 degree skids and breathtaking speeding along narrow mountain passes were not possible, but these images jumped out at him as challenges that needed to be conquered.

A little bit too extreme for you. Perhaps – so let us examine how less daring focus group participants assimilated messages flung at them on a daily basis.

Let us reflect back to the first BMW 3 series advertisement you saw. All focus group participants, regardless of age, sex or income felt that the image oozed success, something nearly all participants admitted they were striving for. According to a successful businessman it was important to outwardly extend one's economic and social position. For him, as with most other participants one's vehicle was perhaps the most important extension in light of the fact that it was visible to everyone. Beyond the image was the need for power and performance, which as the focus group proceedings unfolded, was embodied in the ability to speed.

For youth participants the element of excitement and need for adrenalin was extremely important. There appeared to be an uncontrollable need for speed amongst most of the participants in this group, which they indicated was an inherent part of the competitive nature of human beings. Simply put, one participant could drive to Johannesburg in four hours, which was immediately contested by another participant who said he could do it in three. I am sure we can all do our own arithmetic, but reach the same outcome – speed.

At this point we can raise two issues: one is image built on success and the other is an inherent need for competition. There is synergy between these two issues, since competition needs an outcome – who is winning the race. Having said this we need to take ourselves out of this picture and try to establish how we arrived here, that is beyond apparent inborn competition.

"RECOMMENDED BY THE DOCTOR." From the onset these words legitimise any image or words that are to follow. In essence it is an exploitation of the patients' 'submissive' acceptance on their condition of health. The advert therefore becomes the doctor prescribing the conduct of driving fast in a BMW 3 series with the reassurance of good health. It further suggests the ability of the vehicle to be the driver's guardian of safety. As such, the authoritative doctor's recommendation alludes to reassurance of safety.

After witnessing extremely risky and reckless driving at the Pavilion and Spine Road intersection I was in the fortunate position to speak to the young driver about his behaviour. His response was simple and to the point as he informed me that he could take such risks because "my BMW is fast and safe."

The image of speed and safety was repeatedly played out in all the focus groups. Older participants were more cautious at times, albeit the message was clear, all BMW owners said the same thing, their vehicles were powerful, fast and safe. Moreover, speed was necessary for the various hills and rushes in ones upwardly mobile social road.

Before BMW hounds me for focusing on their brand of vehicle, I must qualify that speed was not confined to BMW only, as numerous other vehicle brands have bought into the adrenalin rush scene. I'm referring to the Fiat Stilo advertisement that plays out on a racing track, centred on Formula 1 driver - Schumacher.

The Fiat Stilo advertisement also factored in the adrenalin, but combined this with the perceived skill of Schumacher. The youth participants from Durban found the Formula 1 association exciting, with all the related images of overtaking, speed and crashes. Although the vehicle itself was not appealing to most participants, the message on the screen certainly was. Then came the startling revelation, speeding was to many participants from the youth focus group in Durban, a safer and therefore a more acceptable alternative adrenalin rush to drugs.

There was a general feeling that television advertisements reassured us of safety in the kind of reckless driving portrayed. This reassurance was not specific to the youth participants, but emerged in all focus groups. Older participants felt that reckless driving was normalised in advertisements, irrespective of vehicle brand. However, the degree of safety increased with more luxurious vehicle brands. Having said this, the degree and frequency of reckless driving also appeared to increase amongst luxurious vehicle brand owners.

Speed was not just chased by youthful adrenalin junkies, for many executives, speed was a necessary phenomenon. According to some participants in this position, they needed to accomplish as much as possible in a working day in order to stay ahead. Basically they did not have time to spend on the road, and therefore had to drive from one destination point to another as fast as possible. As one participant put it "the hours in a day were meant for making money, not wasted away in a vehicle driving from point A to point B."

Nearly a decade ago 4x4 vehicles were introduced as a necessary requirement for urban survival. A few years ago a new breed of 4x4 vehicle owners were nurtured, profiled by advertising houses as an outdoor adventure seeking individual, driving untamed sand dunes or uninhabitable swamp lands. One seemingly level headed focus group participant, who theoretically fell into this outdoor category, was extremely annoyed by this profile. He was of the opinion that since advertisements depicted 4x4 vehicles speeding over endless sand dunes or extreme rugged terrain, urban drivers who head out for their weekend thrill have developed a total disregard for sensitive eco-systems. On numerous occasions he witnessed such disregard.

Have we become so consumed with enriching ourselves and making it to the top, that we have lost perspective of our relationship with others and our environment? Even though we don't know the road user driving in front of us, walking along the pavement

or waiting to cross at an intersection, we are still connected. By the mere fact of our presence on the road makes us connected and therefore our behaviour accountable.

Why have we shifted this accountability?

The research still intends to consult with major publicity houses pertaining to this issue, however, we still need to finalise the data from the quantitative survey before any further in-depth discussion can take place.

Nonetheless, a few stakeholders in the publicity sector indicated that they simply gave the public what they wanted to see. Advertisements were fundamentally entertainment and not about portraying absolute reality. It appears that some stakeholders have likened advertisements with art - it was about creating something that was attractive and pleasing, sometimes shocking and thought provoking, and in light of this it was not an obligation to remain critical to reality.

According to a top Publicity house interviewed on Top Billing in March, *"Advertising has become an art form...it has poetic license....images becomes the poem."*

Participants generally acknowledged that they would not watch or look at something dry and unappealing. But at the same time indicated that their level of expectations was informed by what they see on a daily basis in advertisements.

Berger (1985:10) said:

"Seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world...The relationship between what we see and what we know is never quite settled. [Moreover] the way we see things are affected by what we know or what we believe....We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relationship between things and ourselves." (Berger:1985:7)

He goes on to explain that an image is a sight that has been recreated or replaced. It is an appearance, or set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it was first seen or played out. Our perception of an image depends on the way it has been reconstructed and upon individual ways of seeing – which is found in understanding.

Images played out in advertisements confront us more frequently than any other form of visual communication. One may remember or sometimes forget these messages, however, even for a moment they "stimulate the imagination by way of either memory or expectation."

As social research has found, images in publicity communicate choices, what we can have if we delve into the meaning and allow the message to unfold within us. However, images in publicity are often founded on what we lack. For example, an advertisement of a certain brand of fuel gave the impression that by using this fuel a simple car can change into or have the power and speed of a sports car. We know this is implausible -

we cannot all be racing drivers or own these vehicles - but the image is so strong and the desire great that the message can translate into action.

Berger (1985: 131) indicated that this is "*because advertising is not merely an assembly of competing messages: it is a language in itself, which is always being used to make the same general proposal.*" Within advertising, choices are offered between this car and that, but advertising as a system only makes one single proposal. Berger maintains that this proposal is that we (as consumers) "*transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more.*" By acquiring more we will become richer, even famous, stronger or an icon. It places us on a platform for others to admire and envy. The state of being envied constitutes status and glamour, and advertising is the process of manufacturing status and glamour.

Berger (1985:131) found that in Western society, being envied is a solitary form of reassurance. The power of the glamorous resides in their supposed happiness and freedom.

This reality is a creation and within this creation things are not what they seem. People driving fast cars irresponsibly are not infallible. They will have an accident and possibly die. Moreover, not only will this accident claim their lives, but the lives of innocent people. Money and social status cannot protect you from crushing metal, nor can it protect others from the impact.

South Africa faces the task of understanding why "*between 9,600 and 10,000 people die on our roads every year.*" Studies have revealed that a further 150,000 people are injured in the approximately 500,000 accidents that occur each year. This translates to R11,9 billion to the country's economy and untold traumatic emotional cost on the social fabric of our society (NDoT 2001).

This research, thus far, has clearly shown that there is a link between reckless driving and speeding and the images portrayed in advertisements. There has been a sense of normalisation, based on the authoritative nature of advertisements. Participants clearly understood that advertisements are not necessarily truthful, but the glamorous images were too appealing, and as such the irrational portrayal of safety was hastily accepted in order to justify personal behaviour that was reckless.

The portrayal of glamour, power and status went beyond the boundaries of vehicle brand advertising. People were sold lifestyles as a package, which included the way you dressed, the house you lived in, the food you ate, the cellular phone you used and finally the car you drive.

The question I would like to leave you with at this point is: Should publicity houses have carte blanche, when it is clear that society may not be in a position to assimilate and decode manufactured glamour for what it is – remembering that in the case of vehicle branding it can lead to death?

The above question will certainly be answered when UNIARC concludes this research project with clear objectives and the way forward.