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Larkin, Ingrid K. and Previte, Josephine A. and Luck, Edwina M. (2008) Get off our roads Magoo: Are elderly drivers entitled to drive on our roads?. In *Proceedings Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academic Conference (ANZMAC) 2008*, Sydney, Australia.

Get off our roads Magoo: Are elderly drivers entitled to drive on our roads?

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Abstract

What is the 'magic age' at which drivers transform into being hazardous drivers? It appears that many media commentators and Australian citizens believe it is when you become a 'senior citizen'. This paper presents a media analysis that explores the stereotyping of older drivers as 'bad', 'hazardous' and 'dangerous'. Framing the discussion using media effects theories the paper questions whether the portrayal of older road users by the media is ethical or sound. Specifically, the paper focuses on the perspective of heavy media coverage and influence of media on public perceptions and the reinforcement of aged stereotypes. Based on media analysis the discussion concludes that ethical guidelines are required which sensitise marketers and policymakers to flawed portrayals of the elderly as a strategy to eliminating negative stereotypes of older road users.

Introduction and Background

Road safety continues to be one of the nation's most serious public health issues (Queensland Department of Transport, 2006). The majority of community concern and government interest however focuses on younger drivers. Only limited research has addressed the road safety issue from an older road user's perspective. This is in spite of documented statistics that state "while older car occupants are at relatively lower risk of crash involvement and injury risk than younger car occupants, crash rates adjusted for population and licence distribution show high rates of fatalities for older male drivers and high rates of serious injury crashes for older female drivers" (Oxley, Charlton, Fildes et. al. 2005, p. iii). The media research conducted in this study reveals that when dealing with older road users' safety concerns, the focus is on an increase in punitive measures, rather than adopting empowerment strategies that provide older road users with more effective choices or alternatives (e.g. training programs, self-monitoring education). A typical media headline that illustrates this point was published in The Herald Sun on 26 November 2006 claiming: "Age is a driving hazard – outraged Australians called for tougher regulations on older drivers". The claim made in this headline indicates the underlying motivation for the research conducted and framed the inquiry question: Are older road users predominately portrayed as 'problem drivers'? In responding to this question we turned to electronic media archives, as an independent, credible source of information about relevant and important issues of interest to Australian citizens.

This paper presents preliminary findings drawn from a content analysis and discusses a Lexamincer conceptual map of the main concepts and thematic groups which describe how the Australian media has represented older road users. The Sophie Delezio media story was used as critical incident to guide the search strategy (2003-2006). Sophie Delezio was relevant to this study, because the two road incidents that threatened her life involved elderly car drivers. In 2003 Sophie was two-years old when she was seriously injured along with two other children, when a 68-year old male driver had a seizure and his vehicle crashed into a childcare centre in Sydney. In 2006 she was involved in a further accident involving a

different older driver. The media coverage around Sophie and her recovery was significant. And through the media, attention to the issue of older drivers and road safety was ignited. Sophie's plight and her welfare appear to be of great interest to the wider Australian public. Following Sophie's second accident for example the following news item reported: "Sydney watched in horror a week ago as news of Sophie Delezio's second horrific accident filtered out, there was another shocking element to the deja vu: an elderly man was behind the wheel of the car that ploughed into the luckless girl" (Robotham, 13 May 2006). The significant media coverage around both Sophie Delezio events prompted the researchers to consider how an issue is presented in the media and whether stereotypes are reinforced through media coverage focusing on a particular group, in this case older drivers.

Why focus on media portrayals? Media Effect Theory

The mass media is an important stakeholder in the road safety issue, because it influences the representation of older drivers to decision-makers and the wider community. Arguably the mass media is being used to sustain a normative view of older drivers, which reinforces a stereotype that older drivers are problematic, or even potentially a road hazard, rather than being responsible drivers. The pervading stereotype that older drivers are a problem on our roads is illustrated in the following extract from a letter to the editor of the Gold Coast Bulletin (18 October 2006): "I'm sick and tired of putting up with elderly drivers with slow reflexes and delayed thinking. All drivers from the age of 65 should have compulsory driving tests annually". This pervading stereotype is sustained in spite of established research that has identified that although older drivers attempt to continue driving as long as possible, in comparison to other driving cohorts, older drivers self-regulate their driving (e.g. tend not to drive at night, during rush hour, in bad weather, etc.) (Lerner, 1990).

Newspaper columnists and editorial page writers regularly take positions and call on legislators or the public to rise up and take action about something they believe to be important. Wallack et al (1993) points out that the media engages social problems by "framing the issue". During the both Sophie Delezio events the media heavily participated in framing older road users as a problem. Furthermore, statements drawn from media interviews with Sophie's father have also been used to set the agenda on policies regulating older drivers. For example, OANA (Organisation of Asia-Pacific News Agencies) reported that Ron Delezio "says older drivers should undergo more stringent testing". The statement was released in an article that also reported that the NSW government was establishing a taskforce to review whether older drivers should be forced to undergo medical tests from an earlier age. In the same article, seniors' groups were cited as criticising the potential change, because it would bring forward the age of annual testing from 80 to 75. Are older road-users a risk to the community? There is little evidence to indicate that older road-users are a significant risk to other road-users. Rather, many Australian and international studies show that older road-users are themselves at greater risk of injury or fatality (COTA, 2006).

Media coverage during the Sophie Delezio events illustrates framing theory (Goffman, 1974) as it clearly shows how media coverage of events influences interpretation of an issue or social problem. More recent media effects research by Stanton (2007) has developed a useful definition specific to the Australian and New Zealand context, outlining framing theory as "the agenda-setting policies and source selection processes employed by the media" (p. 18) and suggests the media investigate and present information around an issue or event from within existing frames of reference. Critically, the social problem in relation to older drivers' safety is that the frame of reference is informed by a broad, negative stereotype of older

people. The marketing and advertising professions have been complicit in creating this aged stereotype as they typically portray older people as stupid, feeble, amusing and in other stereotypically negative ways (Bradley & Longino 2001; Carrigan & Szmigin 2000; Leinweber 2001; Mumel & Prodnik 2005; Szmigin & Carrigan 2001). We argue that this ageism intervenes in society's assessment of older peoples' driving capacity. To support this claim the following section presents preliminary findings, from a Leximancer analysis, to reveal the media's negative stereotyping of older drivers.

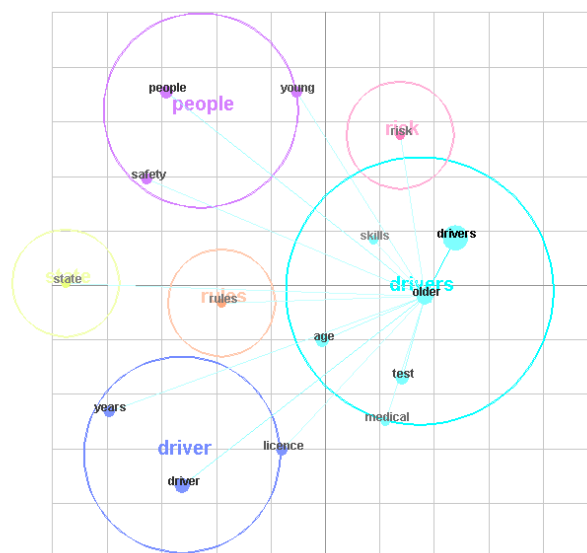## Methodology: Content Analysis and Leximancer Analysis

The results reported in this paper illustrate the use of automated content analysis software in the study of an event (the injury of Sophie Delezio from two separate road incidents involving elderly drivers). The discussion also illustrates the use of content analysis to examine media portrayal and negative stereotyping of older road users. The researchers adopted a content analysis technique because it is both a systematic and replicable technique that is widely used by social scientists to reduce extensively worded texts into fewer content categories (Krippendorf, 2004). Using content analysis in this researcher thus enabled the researchers to engage a large volume of textual data with relative ease, and in a systematic fashion. The Leximancer results presented illustrates both conceptual analysis and relational analysis. The conceptual analysis documented the presence and frequency of concepts (i.e. words and phrases). Whereas the relational analysis measured and identified how the concepts related to each other in the documents analysed. A major strength of using Leximancer software in this research is that it deals with both forms of content analysis (Smith, 2005). This means that Leximancer systematically alternates between semantic and relational extraction from the co-occurrence of words within any textual corpus even though these functions are never independent of each other. In addition, Leximancer statistically analyses text knowing it contains both indirect (semantic) similarity of context and a direct (relational) similarity, the latter being extracted from the episodic segments of (defaulting to) three sentences (Waddell and McKenna, 2005, p. 5).

Media Search Strategy and Leximancer Interpretation

Extensive news media has reported the mediated response of the public, politicians and industry spokespeople about older drivers. These responses were gathered as data for analysis and formed an approximate 323,000 word corpus derived from media coverage about Sophie's accident as disseminated by major electronic and press news outlet throughout Australia. The electronic resource, Factiva (Reuters & Dow Jones Interactive, 2006), was used to gather text of newspaper articles. This database covers all newspapers in Australia including major dailies such as the Courier Mail, Age, Heard Sun and the regional dailies such as the Gold Coast Bulletin. Articles were obtained by performing 20 keyword searches using terms such as: "older driver*", "elderly driver*", "senior motorist", etc. The time range for data searching was defined by the Sophie Delezio events (January 2003-December 2006). In selecting stories for analysis, the researchers were careful not to use text from news events that effectively repeated the same words. In addition, details considered peripheral to our analysis in these news reports were also removed from the text (e.g. repeated descriptions of Sophie's injuries and the location of the accident). Additional scoping included steps to remove extraneous texts such as car reviews, sports reports about senior drivers and vox pops type articles which were considered irrelevant to the focus of the study about older drivers.

The following preliminary analysis presents grounded research. Acknowledging that 'fully' grounded research is not possible, is somewhat minimized by using the content analysis tool Leximancer (Smith & Humphreys, 2006), because its concept mapping enhances grounded analysis by mathematically limiting the human element in interpretation. The initial Leximancer analysis revealed 70 concepts. However, some concepts were unrelated to the paper's search for media portrayals dealing with older road users and were therefore deleted. For example, an "injury" and "police" concept was deleted because they were only journalistic news reportage of the accident and resulting injuries and police presence at the accident site. Similarly, the concepts "Sophie" and "accident" were deleted because they were specific to the incident spoken about as a news event. After this stage of hand-seeding, a sequence of iteration of the corpus was formulated and mapped using Leximancer extraction (see Figure 1). The concept map displays six themes (identified as circles): drivers, risk, people, state, rules, and driver. These six themes organised 15 concepts viewed in a 100 percent Leximancer exposure.

Iterations = 2000

people
people
young
risk
safety
skills
drivers
state
drivers
older
rules
age
test
years
medical
driver
licence
driver

Discussion: Interpretation of the Media Analysis

Given the limitations on paper length the following analysis will focus on describing the concept map to interpret the different issues, which the media has used to describe and frame older road users. Where appropriate, limited exerts from the media text has been used to clarify the meaning of concepts. Many of the 15 concepts (e.g., the most prominent, drivers, older, driver and people) obviously emerge because they are central to news reportage, or statements of media "fact". However, they draw together the important focus of the study, that is the examination of how the media frames the "older drivers" and the issues the media draws upon to critique driving behaviour and set the agenda on how society can/should respond. Firstly however it is important to clarify the meaning behind the concepts "drivers" and "driver" as they could easily be interpreted as duplicating meaning about the issue of problem drivers; this is far from the case. Reviewing the document summaries that informed each concept reveals that "drivers" draws from the text words that describe a spectrum of "driving behaviour" (e.g. inexperienced, impatient, at-risk, and cautious); whereas the concept "driver" draws meaning from the text to describe the "context to driving" (e.g. years of driving, roadworthiness, safety-related). The theme "drivers", specifically older drivers illustrates the point that the 'safety of older drives' sparks calls in the media for tougher

assessment of aged drivers and increased testing: both of skills and medical monitoring. The following media text from the document summaries revealed the relationship between the concepts (older, age, skills, test and medical) which were revealed in the document analysis. It states: "… the vast majority of older drivers are perfectly safe to continue driving … as long as we put everybody in the population over a certain age through assessment … what we need is a much more … comprehensive assessment approach". In a different media excerpt a comment from Ron Delezio, Sophie's farther, further clarifies the meaning of the drivers theme in this media analysis. He was quoted as calling for a lowering in the age of annual medical checks, because he "imagined the reflexes [of an older man] are a lot slower than a younger man". The concept "risk" is closely related to the central, older driver theme. This concept presents an interesting counter point in media views, for example a media quote states: "All the research shows older drivers are nowhere near as risky as people commonly believe". Countering the strong call for testing, the 'risk' theme also reveals the counter-view that "mandatory testing of older drivers doesn't really pick out the people who are likely to be at risk". The theme "people" reveals further contextualising of the media's framing of older drivers in the media. This theme reveals that many of the arguments made about older drivers' negative behaviours are compared to the risky driving behaviours of young people. This theme reveals the media's stereotyping of the older road users as being irresponsible, or child-like, which typically results in calls for greater paternalist measures (i.e. doctor's being called upon to report older drivers with medical problems). A separate, but closely situated concept in the map reveal that "solutions" from the media involve either state-based policy changes (i.e. theme: state) and more punitive and legislative interventions (i.e. theme: rules). These themes are further elaborated in more detail by the theme "driver", as discussed earlier. This brief Leximancer description, combined with the visual concept map, have illustrated how the use of content analysis can be used to explain media portrayal and negative stereotyping of older road users.

Conclusion: Recognising Ssterotypes and Moving to Ethical Decision-Making

This research provides an analysis of media coverage following two linked critical incidents and identifies the common themes and reinforcement of negative stereotypes presented in print media, specifically newspapers. This research presents a sound basis for further research examining the portrayal of older drivers in a variety of media sources. For example, do media specifically targeting an older demographic portray older drivers differently? Do electronic media (television, radio, online) present a different or more diverse portrayal of the older driver? How are the stereotypes, often fueled by the media, which label older adults as senile, stubborn, childlike, depressed, detached and warehoused into nursing homes by their children (Field & Gueldner, 2001) sustained? The media are affected by their unconscious bias: developed from their experiences; culture: which in turn creates bias for their audiences as the media generally reflect a society's values (Day, 2006). Furthermore, older consumers are seen as 'hard to pinpoint', elusive and difficult to understand, which makes a stereotype an easy option to capture and identify the group.

Using this study as a starting point, more research is planned to develop a framework of ethical decision making for media, marketers and policymakers to move away from stereotypes to a productive ageing perspective focused on "the promotion and organisation of a lifestyle which enables seniors to participate actively in the economic and social advancement of the nation in a manner that will ensure they are contributors rather than dependants, while having the added benefit of enhancing their own health and wellbeing" (Donatti, Moorfoot & Deans, 2005).

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