

should we ban car advertising?



Many cities are planning how they might increase levels of walking and cycling, in response to the physical-distancing requirements of COVID-19, and are considering how public transport can recover usage over the longer term as the travel restrictions become less stringent. There is a short window of opportunity to provide more space for walking and cycling, to increase the use of the active modes and avoid growth in car usage. There is much positive debate, and if we can build on this to implement some widened footways and segregated cycle lanes, then we will have made great progress during difficult times.

However, there is a problem beyond the implementation of new infrastructure. Changing travel behaviours is more complex than simply building physical infrastructure. We may build improved footways and provide cycle routes, but not everyone will use them, owing to a range of factors. These include societal factors that help shape attitudes and behaviours, such as the political context, social and cultural norms; as well as the shape of the built environment and the location of facilities. Many of these factors are currently not supportive in helping people to walk or cycle more – think of the attitudes of many people who are not too willing to walk or cycle more. How people develop their attitudes is also affected by many factors, embedded in the cultural context within which we live.

To achieve greater levels of walking and cycling, indeed greater use of public transport, we will need to influence individual attitudes and social and cultural norms, as well as build the improved infrastructure. And this is where governments, particularly those of neo-liberal persuasions, like to say they are not responsible. The debate is limited to a simplistic understanding of 'free choice'. Their argument is that they will build the infrastructure, if pushed, and that you are free to make your choice to use it or not. But, as we all know, the choice is not a free

choice; it is a constrained choice within the structures of society.

One of these influencing factors is car advertising. Alongside representation in the media, films and print, advertising is an important feature in shaping our attitudes and beliefs, and ultimately our travel behaviours. Yet, as transport planners, we rarely consider what impact this may have. Car advertising is ubiquitous – almost every day of our lives we see an advertisement for a car, whether in a newspaper or magazine, on film, TV or the internet, or on billboards plastered around the city. We take these adverts for granted because they are so pervasive¹ – but they gradually permeate our attitudes and beliefs. Before we know it, we are flicking through the car sales brochures, considering whether to buy a Ford, VW, or BMW. We examined the shape and content of car advertising in a recent paper² – and I give you a brief taster here.

The advertising and selling of the car has been hugely successful, using sign exchange value to position the car as a sought-after product, seemingly giving freedom, convenience, and status. In 2015, over \$44 billion was spent by the motor industry on advertising worldwide.³ Much of this is from the large motor manufacturers, such as General Motors, Ford, Fiat Chrysler, and Toyota – each spending around \$2 billion-\$3 billion per year.

In its simplest sense, advertising means drawing attention to a product. But, as the advertising has become more sophisticated over the years, this has expanded into associating products with a range of emotions. The performance, appearance and other factors related (and not related) to the car have been used to sell the car. Many argue that consumer goods bring pleasure and comfort. For example, that the private car is useful in getting from A to B – and even that, for some, a higher performance may be attractive to drive. But the adverts go further, suggesting that the acquisition is associated with wider positive features such as convenience, comfort, status, success, and happiness. The information we need to make a choice between specifications or different modes is probably very different to what we are provided through advertising.

Let us consider just two adverts. They give examples of classic storylines used by the advertisers: those of gender and power.

Photos: Advertising Archives



Left-hand side: Nissan, UK, magazine advertisement, 2000s
Right-hand side: Toyota, UK, magazine advertisement, 2010

There are many gratuitously sexist and misogynist car adverts from the 1970s. The female form is objectified and used to suggest that buying the car is equated to ‘getting the girl’. Sexist imagery is still used to sell cars today. The advert shown above left is from the 2000s; the message is more subtle, delivered by the imagery. The Nissan Leaf is suggested as the ‘the new electric toy’, conflating meanings to different prospective buyers, but still objectifying the female form in the pursuit of selling a car.

The advert above right uses another common theme, power, to sell the car, in this case human power over the environment. It exploits concerns about the environment and climate change, but does so from an interesting perspective. Environmental problems are seen as the stimulus for new technology and vehicle development: ‘today’s environmental thinking can inspire tomorrow’s technology’. It suggests that buying a Toyota Prius will help resolve climate change issues, and prove you to be a ‘forward-thinking driver’.

Although it has lower emissions, the Prius still emits carbon dioxide (89 grammes per kilometre), much more so than walking, cycling, or public transport. The premise of car usage is not challenged, and is simply reshaped to be viewed as less problematic with this model of car. The visuals allude to sporting themes, using ripples and landscape reflection in water to convey the Prius’ speedy movement.

These are only two common themes used in car advertising – there are many more. In all, it is remarkable how the advertising so rarely focuses on the actual specification of the car, either in terms of performance, reliability, or other factors. Indeed, specification actually varies only marginally between vehicles – hence the need to differentiate. The association with other themes purposely gives value to wider factors and overlooks the major adverse impacts.

As Seth Godin told us: ‘Facts are irrelevant. What matters is what the consumer believes.’ This is the basis of advertising – the creation of images in our imaginations, from which develops an association

and desire to purchase a product. Car advertising is incredibly successful here: using associations with rich, luxurious lifestyles, successful relationships and love, careers and jobs, happy families, beautiful people (particularly women), celebrity and fame, glamorous places and travel, and even the resolution of climate change. There are grand themes of status, gender, and power. This, of course, is nonsense. The messages in the advertisements that surround us are not arbitrary and they exert a significant influence on society – they influence many people, they are often discriminatory and objectionable, and they overlook the adverse impacts of motorisation. As we recover from the problems of COVID-19 – and if we wish to ‘build back better’ – then we should take a much more critical look at many features in our lifestyles and behaviours.

As an example, car advertising could be regulated to not allow this type of coverage. Adverts could be limited to function, quality, durability, and cost of the product, and the impacts that only have a real basis. For sure, there should be no association with false wants, or with sexist, abusive power, or other similar themes – these all should be banned. Perhaps, then, we can divert our attention and money to more socially useful investments.

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Notes

- 1 G Dyer: *Advertising as Communication*. Methuen, 1982
- 2 R Hickman, K Moubrey and C Hannigan: ‘“Make her yours”: the shape and use of car advertising’. In review, 2020
- 3 K Maddox: ‘Global ad spending will be up an average 4.2% next year’. *AdAge*, 11 Jun. 2015. <http://adage.com/article/btob/global-ad-spending-average-4-2-year/298980/>