Motorcycle Road Safety – A 'Topline' Semiotic Analysis for DfT & AMV

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Background

AMV BBDO are developing a new Motorcycle Road Safety Campaign for the Department for Transport, designed to enhance awareness of and provide advice for both motorcyclists and drivers about appropriate behaviour.

It is felt that a topline semiotic analysis would offer valuable insight for the creative development process.

A topline analysis is a wide-ranging investigation of signs, codes and cultural meanings in the category and beyond. It is purposefully unrefined, and designed to stimulate thought rather than provide definitive strategic direction.

This document represents the findings of that study.

Objectives

1. Topline semiotic analysis identifying signs, symbols, codes, narratives, myths, language & discourses of motorcycle road safety campaigns from UK & other anglophone cultures (US, Canada, Australia) - where are the similarities and where are the differences.

2. Topline semiotic analysis of the broader cultural context of motorcyclists, motorbikes and the identity of the motorcyclist in the UK - what signs, symbols, narratives, myths are employed to connote both the wider culture of motorcycling. This to be achieved through consideration of representations and narratives in media, tv, film, social discourse, press, entertainment & popular culture, sport, music industry etc.

3. To identify and offer topline recommendations on which codes from the broader cultural context of motorcycling and motorcyclists can be leveraged and imported for the DfT

campaign, to enable it to communicate a meaningful, relevant and highly appropriate narrative and visualisation of motorcycle safety to ensure that the campaign achieves recognition & memorable standout and is able to articulate a specific coding for the motorcycle road safety campaign.

Executive Summary

1. Motorcycle safety adverts are aimed at either drivers or riders, usually not both at the same time.
2. The two kinds of ads employ different imagery and themes: Adverts for drivers focus on learning to see what is often missed, while for riders it is about being more careful to avoid personal injury.
3. One of the biggest issues is that drivers tend to 'demonize' riders. This is based not only on riders' bad road manners, but also on the symbolism of their distinctive protective head and body gear (i.e. they look sinister, untrustworthy) and the perception that bike riders are at one with their machine (i.e. they are like 'cyborgs' – who are usually malevolent).
4. Another problem is that riders can be seen as irresponsible outsiders, associated with countercultural immaturity.
5. In turn, riders can see drivers as uncool or as killjoys and thus not worthy of much respect on the road.
6. Ways of countering both images are suggested as a means of promoting a more thoughtful and careful attitude by each kind of road user towards the other.

1. Analysis of motorcycle safety adverts

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It is worth considering category codes from two separate perspectives, since most adverts are aimed at either drivers or motorcyclists.

Adverts aimed at drivers

Driver-centric adverts often aim to challenge the lack of attention given by drivers to motorcyclists, a perceptual failure operating at two slightly different levels.

1. Failure to see

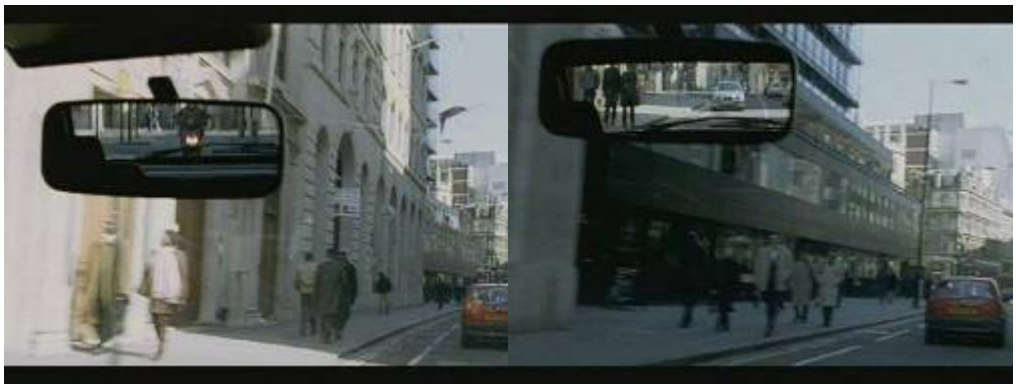
Drivers, through no fault of their own, sometimes simply do not see motorcyclists in their mirrors because of the blind spot phenomenon or because riders move position on the road rapidly. In reminding drivers about this, the message in many ads is simply "take more time and be more careful because such an innocent mistake is easy to make."

This print advert makes the point in a straightforward way:

*"***Motorcycles and bicycles can be hidden in a blind spot***,"* says the voiceover in the above general road safety ad from Australia (image on right):

These ads signify the straightforward functional problem of not catching proper sight of a rider because of the rider's swiftness, small size in the field of vision, and so on.

In this advert, the biker is seen one second and not the next - *"Now you see him. Now you don't. Now you see him. Now you don't,"* says the voiceover. Because the rider may have shifted on the road, he is actually there but is 'easy to miss.'



The parallel here is of failing to spot rising damp in your house because it is behind your sofa and out of sight – but of course in the case of the motorcyclist this is not because he is hidden but because he is not seen – this is not a case of 'blaming the sofa' but of coding a need for the driver to become more perceptually aware – to make more of an effort to spot the cyclist – or to continue the analogy – to look behind the sofa more often knowing there is a always the constant threat of rising damp!

2. Failure to 'see' – Ideality

a slightly different set of signifiers encode the message that drivers are not wholly innocent but fail to spot motorbikes because they are guilty of negligence or carelessness. This is less to do with riders lacking visual conspicuity and more to do with them lacking 'cognitive conspicuity': motorcyclists are filtered out of the general buzz of information a driver sees on the road.

One of the chief ways of communicating this message is by presenting two conflicting images: one where the motorcyclist is there and one where he is not there. Here, a man glances nonchalantly and sees nothing:

Suddenly, a rider appears and slams into the side of the car. The initial moment is then 'replayed' at the end of the ad (after the carnage has ensued) with the real version showing a rider coming towards the car:

This double version idea recalls science fiction ‘split-lives’ narratives in which travel between alternative or parallel worlds enable a single person to experience two different outcomes from the same incident (e.g. Sliding doors film). In a similar way, the point of this film is to illustrate how there may be ‘two realities’ for any driver on the road: the cognitive reality of the driver, who ‘sees’ nothing the first time, and the actual reality where there is in fact a rider on his way. The first reality is revealed as a dangerous illusion.

The subtext of the ad is that you as a driver just don’t ‘look’ for bikes as closely as you should; if you did, you would *see* them. The voiceover says: *“How close does a biker have to be before you see them? Here? Here? Or here?”*

The brutality of the first ‘real reality’ is brought home by firstly the intense crash of the rider into the side of the car and secondly by his being splayed grotesquely on the road:

The parallel here is of failing to spot rising damp in your house because you had the place damp-proofed a year ago and so just assumed it couldn’t happen.

The same principle is at work in this American advert, where the complacency and carelessness of the driver is shown as the main cause of the crash. He is immersed in a playful conversation with his wife about whether a woman was flirting with him before:

Before turning into a side road, he again ‘sees what he wants to see’ – a clear road:

Each of these adverts signals that we are all capable of engaging in what could be called ‘ideality’.

Ideality means:

1. The state or quality of being ideal or perfect.
2. Existence in idea only.

Drivers have a default assumption about roads: that they are essentially safe. There is, in fact, no other way to drive, or else the experience would be one of unmitigated anxiety. The driver must assume the road is clear, free of danger, functioning normally, and that other drivers are driving in a predictable manner. This is how things normally function, and have to function.

But these adverts code this as an assumption which is in fact an ideality. *It is only a cosy illusion inside the mind of the driver* that can, in the blink of an eye, be shown to be not only wrong, but lethal. Ideality in this context connotes having a false sense of security, about negligently creating a false vision of a perfectly safe road when in fact a motorbike is on a collision course.

The wife is quite relaxed despite the impending doom of the oncoming motorbike:

Being educated about the lethal error of road ideality is at the heart of such adverts.

3. Death and destruction

Each of the adverts aimed at drivers makes a point of explicitly signifying the damage caused by (innocent) failure to see or (guilty) ideality. Dented cars surfaces and broken glass are common…

In the US ad (below right), the side of the car is rudely smashed into by the hitherto unseen motorbike:

There is some attempt to code the human consequences of failure to see/'see' by showing the riders either apparently dead or unconscious. In the ad where the rider appears and disappears from the mirrors, the voiceover continues: **"Now you see him. Now you see him. Now you see him."**

The zoom in on his face humanizes him to a certain extent – but probably not enough, (more on which later).

In summary, motorcycle safety adverts aimed at drivers code the serious dangers of visual and cognitive failure to see motorbikes and seek to make drivers be more vigilant vis-à-vis bikes.

Adverts aimed at motorcyclists

Rider-centric adverts focus less on being negligent – whether understandable or not – and more on the inevitable dangers of everyday road use for the motorcyclist. Cars and other vehicles are merely one of the many perils to be reckoned with. The message is usually not so much for riders to look out for any one kind of hazard in particular but rather to maintain a generally more vigilant, cautious attitude when riding. Two points tend to be made.

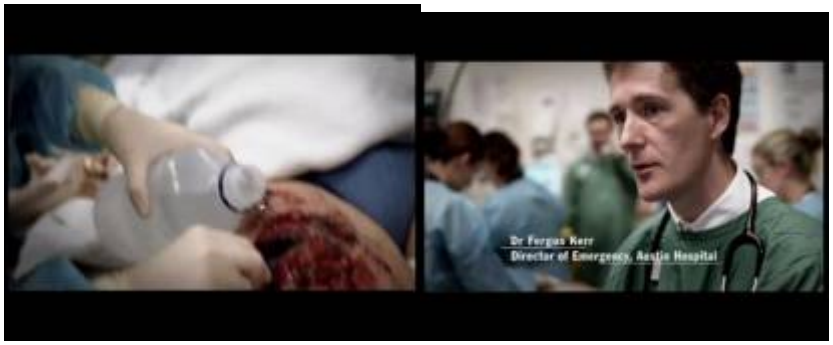
1. Inevitable dangers

The following advert signifies the inevitable dangers for a rider (as apposed to a driver) that pop up sporadically in the course of a ride. Entitled ‘Perfect Day,’ the film wittily shows the fantasy of there being signs of dangers of various kinds in the course of a rural journey – the kinds riders are familiar with. The ad speaks in the language of the rider, using a colloquial term like ‘revs’ and giving information in a casual form you would never find in real road signs.

2. Personal injury

The physical and emotional suffering of the rider is coded far more explicitly than in the driver-centric ads – obviously in order to hammer home the point that the rider is likely to suffer worst in an accident. This Australian ad shows a man's face expressing agony after his accident:

Gruesome leg injuries are depicted, described by a solemn physician who is there to reinforce the medical seriousness of careless or reckless riding.



This German ad uses dark comedy to illustrate the same point. A funeral scene is shown, although no coffin or body is in evidence. The body soon arrives, however, flying through the air and into the grave after the sound of a nearby crash:

The strapline at the end of the ad translates as: *"Drive slowly. Otherwise an accident is foreseeable."* Again, the point is to remind riders of the dangers of riding in general rather than any particular reference to drivers of other vehicles.

In both forms of ad the driver (of the car or the motorcycle) is coded as being at fault both visually, but also cognitively – a failure to imagine that anything could go wrong, a failure of 'ideality' – of assuming that everything on the road is functioning safely and normally. In this way the campaigns code more than merely the need to be visually alert, but also the need to alter consciousness when driving/riding.

These campaigns code a poverty of imagination (on the part of the driver and motorcyclist) to believe that they are more vulnerable than they appear or feel.

2. Wider cultural symbolism of motorcyclists

There are two ways to look at the motorcyclist: from an outsider's or insider's point of view.

The outsider's point of view is rather negative in the UK generally and especially for drivers. (In the US there are some more positive elements.) The insider's point of view is largely positive. Both perspectives account for some accidents and explain the problems encountered by road safety agencies in trying to educate the public.

Let's address the outsider's perspective first.

Two negative images of riders

1. The gang model

America has produced two related, iconic images of motorcyclists: Hells Angels and Easy Rider. Hells Angels and other motorcycle gangs, as depicted in the Brando classic movie *The Wild One*, stress motorbikes as a way of life rather than as a means of getting from A to B fast.

This signfication is less powerful in the British mind, but do inform some of the way certain bikers are seen, and it is probably true that if people in the UK think of bikers in this sense,

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they would characterise them in rather negative ways, ways that are distinct from the mainstream of the British public. For example:

Drivers/average people	**Bikers**
Responsible	Irresponsible
Mature	Immature/'never grow up'
Grounded	Idealistic
Moral	Immoral
Law abiding	Criminal tendencies
Modern/mainstream	Ageing hippies/rockers
Drinkers	Cannabis smokers
Smart	Stupid

These kinds of riders are what the Young & Christmas behavioural study calls 'passionate low-performance' riders – 'man-and-bike disciples' and 'clubbable hobbyists.' The term *gang rider* could be seen as a pejorative version of these identities.

In the gang model (which is an outsider's model, remember), there is an association with heavy drinking or drug taking, tattoos, long hair and rock music – signifiers of 60s counterculture perhaps.

This kind of rider may be viewed as a person who enjoys the trappings of a scene in the same way a teenager does. They love their rocker look and flash their helmet as some kind of peacock's tail.

Actual bike gangs are not unknown in Britain too, and a recent case of murder between members of rival biking gangs, which became headline news, did nothing for the image of the more general (in this model) gang type rider.

It is, however, the second model of bikers that is the most relevant for the UK motoring world and the one which needs to be scrutinised most closely.

The speed demon model

The speed demon model fits with Young & Christmas's 'passionate high-performance' riders ('lone hobbyists' and 'performance disciples') – again as a negative version of those concepts. These kinds of riders put an emphasis on the mechanical power of their bikes and tend to use sports machines rather than the Harley-Davidson style vehicle of the gang/passionate low-performance rider.

It is the speed demon who is of most concern to the average driver as they pose the greatest threat to road safety: they are more likely to be seen overtaking at high speed, going over the speed limit in residential areas, jumping traffic lights and violating road laws generally.

Speed demons are symbolically dissociated in culture from the rest of the world and the driving world. Most people might see a set of oppositions in this way:

Drivers	**Motorbike riders**
Social	Individual
Part of society	Separate from society
Normal	Abnormal
Rational	Irrational
Safe	Reckless
Human	Inhuman

There is hostility, therefore, towards riders, which could retard attempts by road safety authorities to generate concern among drivers for seeing and avoiding riders. For most drivers, speed demons are a menace to be avoided, rather than human souls in a vulnerable position and in need of extra attention and care.

One of the problems identified by road safety experts is that motorcyclists are not 'humanized' adequately in the minds of drivers. All they see is the helmet, with the visor down, and the leather gear, with inadequate sense that there is a person beneath.

This in itself is bad enough, but a brief examination of wider cultural symbolism reveals a deeper problem**. Almost unequivocally in mainstream western culture, individuals with hidden faces and bodies, wearing cloaks and masks, are coded in negative terms, as 'the enemy,' or even as nightmarish or malevolent beings.**

Examples abound. At the climax of the iconic movie *Top Gun*, the US pilots come up against enemy MiGs in the Pacific. The image of Maverick and his cohorts has already been established: vibrant, full of life and personal idiosyncrasies.

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Maverick's persona in the cockpit is almost as colourful – showing a personalized helmet and close up shots of his eyes, conveying his very real emotions there and then:

The enemy MiG fighters, though, are depicted very differently. No facial information is given because of a black motorcycle-like helmet. They signify mindless or at least heartless soldiers bent on defeating the heroic Americans. Here, the evil pilot has his 'finger on the button.'

Other examples show evil beings that look less specifically like motorbike riders but share the basic pattern. Ku Klux Klan members are known for their ultra right-wing politics and racist white supremacism. The classic image of the Klan member is of ghostly looking men in white cloaks and head coverings. They conduct esoteric ritualistic meetings, burn crosses and have spooky names like Grand Wizard for the head of the 'order.'

The image of the reveller at a masquerade ball signifies decadence and also can have something of a sinister flavour. This was coded in the Kubrick film, *Eyes Wide Shut*, in

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which Tom Cruise's character finds himself stumbling uninvited into an eerie and ritualistic secret party:

Another popular image of an evil masked person is Jason in the film Friday the 13th. The iconic image of this frenzied murderer was later used by Eminem to buttress his own theatrically wicked onstage persona:

It is images such as these that create negative associations with people who 'deny' the 'human information' that they are naturally equipped with by wearing masks. How do we know a person is human? Through their face. How do know we can trust someone? Through transparency of motive, which we can ascertain through reading their facial expressions and body language.

Moreover, many criminals have a highly functional reason for hiding their faces and bodies – so as to not give away their identities to the authorities. From sex attackers and bank robbers to hoodies and paramilitaries, the number of negative connotations generated by masked, hidden and cloaked men is legion.

In *Star Wars* Storm Troopers and the Emperor's Royal Guard (from *Return of the Jedi*) are further examples of a covered body and face being associated with evil:

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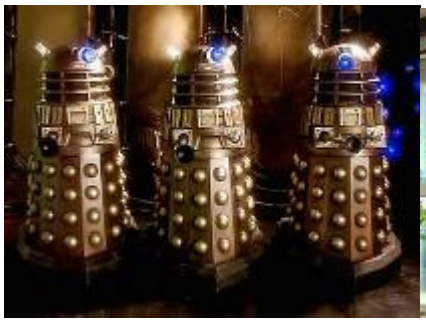
Where the evil and masked man is combined with technology, another dimension is introduced: the idea of the *cyborg*. A cyborg is an organism with both natural and artificial systems fused into one.

While there is of course no belief on the part of drivers that motorcyclists 'are' cyborgs, the point is that particularly when it comes to speed demons, there is a strong unconscious association made in the average person's mind (and no doubt the speed demon's mind too) between man and machine. The rider is not divorced from his vehicle in the way a driver is. A driver sits as if in a moving room, whereas a rider, though 'on' the bike, shapes his body to hug it tightly and create an aerodynamic shape. Speed demons also wear clothes that resemble their bike – shiny and smooth with bright or bold colours.

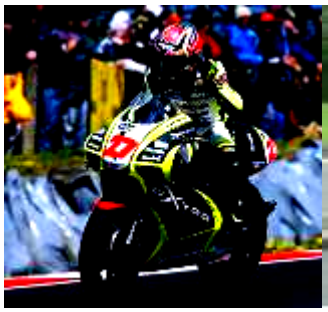
It is noteworthy that cyborgs tend to be malevolent beings, signifying an abominable connection between the organic and the technological. A further classic example of the cyborg is the imposing figure of Darth Vader:

Many other cyborgs occupy a place in the popular imagination, including Daleks and Cybermen from Doctor Who, the Borg from Star Trek and Robocop:



One other well known cyborg uses a motorcycle:

A comparison with all of these images that of the (speed demon) motorcyclist reveals similarities that the driver cannot fail to make:








The Darth Vader similarity is especially striking:


The highly functional uniform of the motorcyclist, with his leathers and crash helmet, closely resembles and therefore signifies such nightmarish figures from myth, fiction and the world at large whose attire is the way it is for nefarious functional reasons (e.g. bank robber), for ceremonial, symbolic purposes (e.g. Ku Klux Klan member), or very specifically because it has been designed by the storyteller to cast a sinister spell on the observer (e.g. Jason/Eminem).

When man and machine are combined in the mind of the driver – as riders are with their bikes in a way that drivers and their cars are not – the further negative aspect of the concept of the cyborg is added. The major issue in that case is that the fusion of human

and machine is almost always portrayed as evil, malevolent, powerful in a way that could cause harm and this fundamentally affects the way a driver perceives a motorbike rider.

Thus, it is quite possibly the case that drivers unconsciously wish to avoid crashes with bikers largely because this means avoiding coming to any harm themselves rather than any significant wish to avoid hurting the rider. While no normal driver would consciously accept they would want anything other than for all people to avoid coming to grief on the road, it may well be the case that drivers are more vigilant for, say, children crossing roads, other drivers or even bicyclists – who are more vulnerable to injury and less likely to cause much damage to other vehicles in the event of an accident – partly because of the demonization of motorbike riders.

Scooters and mopeds

The situation for other kinds of motorcycle is different. Many if not most of the riders of mopeds, scooters and other smallish motorbikes are what Young & Christmas call ‘pragmatists,’ a category that includes ‘car aspirants’ and ‘car rejectors.’ The former see a motorbike as a first step to eventually getting a car. These are usually young riders without any particular attachment to motorbikes in the way gang riders and speed demons are; their vehicle is a new symbol of adulthood and a great means of getting around and giving mates lifts.

The latter eschew the car usually because of environmental concerns or because a moped is a cheaper and easier way to get around town. These riders may have more of an attachment to their bike but not because of its performance or the social or lifestyle trappings of motorbikes. Rather, they see it as a way of being green or more efficient.

Riders of mopeds and scooters are in general not seen as cyborgs or as particularly inhuman. The image of the scooter or moped rider is a less macho and intimidating one. Often we see such riders in an office outfit like a suit. Often the rider is a woman or girl. The helmet is regularly open-faced, and many of us will have seen riders of such vehicles on holiday riding with no helmet at all.

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Added to the fact that they don't go all that fast, it is probably the case that mopeds and scooters are categorized unconsciously by drivers in a similar way as bicycles. Thus, moped and scooter riders do not suffer from the same problem as other motorbike riders in that they are probably code 'humanity' and thus worthy of avoidance for their (the rider's) sake.

The biker's viewpoint

It comes as no surprise that the biker's point of view is a very different one from the negative idea of the gang rider or speed demon. While passionate low-performance riders and passionate high-performance riders share much in common in terms of attitudes, there are different emphases.

The Easy Rider movie shows riding motorbikes as a means of embarking on a spiritual journey accompanied by like-minded souls, and this is the kind of idea that chimes with passionate low-performance riders. Here, bikes are a symbol of personal freedom, individuality and expression that flies in the face of the soulless, mechanized, workaday world. For them, bikes are also, to put it simply, cool. This positive view of riding can be condensed into the following oppositions:

Motorcyclists	Drivers/average people
Radical	Conservative
Free	Restrained
Open-minded	Closed-minded
Gregarious	Reserved
Fluid/mobile	Fixed
Experimental	Set in their ways
Cool	Uncool

There are also oppositions relating to their moral decency and social identity:

Motorcyclists	Drivers/average people
Solidarity	Self-interest
Unity	Disparateness
Integrity	Opportunism
Loyalty	Self-preservation

This positive vision of biking is less prevalent in the UK in the general population but it certainly chimes with how many passionate low-performance motorcyclists see things.

When it comes to passionate high-performance riders, a similar set of oppositions could be made. But another kind of aspect is brought to the fore to do with risk and excitement:

Motorcyclists	Drivers/average people
Risk-taking	Safe
Daring	Cautious
Live life to the full	Live a half life
Fun	Boring
Thrills	Apathy
Play	Work
Energy consumption	Energy efficiency

Passionate high-performance riders can view drivers as symbols of the nanny state, political correctness, bureaucracy, all things in fact which inhibit red-blooded action and fist-pumping excitement. They are Jeremy Clarkson to Ken Livingston. This has an important bearing on the way safety adverts could be tailored to affect this kind of rider.

3. Ways to increase the effectiveness of motorbike safety campaigns

The asymmetry of driving and motorcycling mean that already two distinct kinds of advert are made. Adverts aimed at drivers tend to focus on lack of visual conspicuity (failure to see) and cognitive conspicuity (failure to 'see'), and show how drivers can have a false sense of security and a problematic ability to engage in ideality – mistaken images of roads as perfectly harmless. The campaigns focus on dramatic images of death and damage to cars, drivers and riders.

Adverts aimed at motorbike riders tend to urge generalized caution because of generalized dangers. They dial up the physical damage done to riders themselves. *However, more effective ways of communicating to drivers and motorbike riders are possible.*

Ads for drivers

1. Humanize motorbike riders (i.e. to counter the speed demon model)

Since drivers tend to 'demonize' motorbike riders, unconsciously associating them with malevolent personages (because of their attire) and even cyborgs (because of their close association with their machine), it is important to humanize riders. This could have the benefit of making drivers more vigilant not only for their own sake but for the sake of any human life.

To counter these negative images, in safety films, riders should be depicted as just as good and benevolent as the next person and also dissociated from their bikes. This can be achieved in some of the following ways:

Code his facial expressions. Showing a biker experiencing sadness, joy, anger and so on, demonstrating the fact that he has a full inner life of thoughts and feelings.

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Code his skin and body language. The more bodily micro-movements that can be shown of a rider, the more normal and human he will seem. He could be seen with and without his gear on in the same advert, and when he is without it he could be shown as making very quirky, emotive or funny gestures with his body to indicate his humanity.

Code him in normal clothes. Whether before getting on his bike or during his ride, showing an apparent speed demon wearing normal clothes would serve to make him less of a sinister figure. The more intimate, perhaps, the better: showing (somehow) him wearing pants, a vest, socks or bedtime clothing and so on would signify just how normal – and vulnerable – he actually is.

Code him isolated from his bike. Disentangle the rider from his machine by showing him physically away from his vehicle, perhaps during a pit stop at a service station or even in less road-based contexts such as by a school.

Give him a voice. Speed demons are silent creatures. Giving them a vocal life makes them seem more like the rest of us.

This Australian ad actually does this quite successfully. We hear the rider's internal commentary on a busy road. *"Busy road. Truck behind. Just give him room… Is he gonna pull out? Shit!!!"* The authenticity of this voice, emphasized by his swearing as a real person might, is an effective way of humanizing the rider.

His visor is clear and we can see his face, which adds to his realness. And the ad's narrative is one of swapping perspectives, in which the driver changes places with the

rider to see things differently from the usual. “Put yourself in their shoes” is the line at the end.

Code him socializing. Speed demons are often thought of as lone wolves. In reality, all human individuals woven into the fabric of society, yet single, separated, atomized people in a sense begin to ‘lose their humanity.’ Condemning a prisoner to solitary confinement strips him of one of his basic human rights/needs/desires. Thus, depicting a motorbike rider as a social animal – though not as a Hells Angels members– should serve to make riders seem more human. He could be shown speaking to picnickers while taking a break on a country lane, or chatting on the phone to someone (again, not when riding), or otherwise doing something inherently social.

Code bikers as female. It is possible more care and attention could be paid to motorcyclists if it is thought possible the rider is a woman. A film showing an apparently male biker being hit then being revealed as female through a close up could have an impact on the view.

It should be pointed out that at present, there is not much humanizing of riders done in adverts and that any one of these ideas could have a meaningful and memorable effect in viewer’s minds.

2. Civilize motorbike riders (i.e. to counter the gang model)

The second solution aims to counter the prejudices against the gang rider, which essentially make the rider a less decent and therefore valuable member of society.

Code him as a family man. Rather than a juvenile person fixated on a supposedly 'cool' way of life, demonstrate that motorbike riders can be just as responsible, grown up and caring as any driver.

Code him as a moral man. Portraying his doing something noble, generous or considerate could reinforce the idea that such people are decent and kind.

Code him as a 'straight' business man. With the notion of the gang type rider being unemployed, into gigs, tattoos and drugs, it could be useful to show a rider as a more conventional and even successful member of society.

Code him as intelligent. The assumption by the driver is often that the driver is the sensible, logical and reasonable whereas the rider is erratic, overly laid back and a bit crazy. Portraying a gang rider being or sounding very reasonable and rational could counter the idea powerfully.

3. Dial up the pitfalls of ideality

There are various ways to signify the idea, one explored to some extent in existing adverts, that *things are not* **always what they seem**. Visual illusions, cases of mistaken identity and examples of wishful thinking could all be shown in conjunction somehow with dangerous scenarios involving motorcycles. If a viewer watches an advert and says "Oh yeah, I do that sometimes" or "Mm I did see one thing then another" in a non-driving context and are then shown a similar principle at work on the road, the impact could be striking.

Ads for motorbike riders

Two new strategies are possible which could more effectively communicate to riders. These must be based on the inside meanings of riding of the kind revealed in the Young & Christmas report.

1. Invert the negative imagery of drivers

The first strategy applies more to the passionate low-performance riders, what the average person thinks of as the gang rider. This approach is based on their philosophical outlook and how they feel they are different from, and in many senses superior to, the average person. One of the problems is that these riders may not **respect drivers** *as people* in the same way that they would respect members of their own biking fraternity. Remember:

Bikers are… whereas …	**Drivers are**
Radical	Conservative
Free	Restrained
Open-minded	Closed-minded
Daring	Cautious
Risk-taking	Safe
Gregarious	Reserved
Fluid/mobile	Fixed
Experimental	Set in their ways
Cool	Uncool

Perhaps if adverts depicted drivers as equally cool these riders would think twice (in a split second) about showing 'disrespect' towards drivers on the road – with all of the negative safety implications that flow from such an attitude. Co-opting the first set of terms as symbolic guidelines for depicting drivers could make bikers identify with them more and feel less a sense of 'us against them' or 'us against the world.'

The literal ways of showing drivers as 'cool' like bikers are relatively straightforward. For instance, drivers could be shown:

- Wearing biker style clothes
- Showing fraternity like a biking group
- Being funny
- Taking minor risks like driving in an unconventional manner
- Listening to rock and roll on the radio

The fact is that drivers in road safety ads are almost always shown as conservative so the change of imagery could be arresting in its own right.

2. Show harm to others from dangerous riding

The other solution is probably the more important one since it is geared to engender not only respect for other drivers in a general way but respect for life and avoidance of unnecessary risk. It is aimed more at the passionate high-performance riders (speed demons), who account for a significantly higher proportion of accidents than passionate high-performance riders (according to Young & Christmas). Successfully communicating to this former kind of rider would have an even greater benefit than doing so to the latter kind.

As suggested by the list of oppositions in the mind of the passionate high-performance rider, his attitude to towards risk is not the same as the average driver's. **While virtually all drivers want to be safe, it is well document that many bikers positively thrive on the risk involved in riding a motorcycle***.* This is particularly true, according to Young & Christmas, among passionate high-performance riders.

Here is the central problem: signalling to motorbike riders, especially passionate high-performance riders, that they need to be more safe is more likely to fall on deaf ears than telling drivers the same thing. The strategy adopted in several campaigns has been to appeal to biker's sensible side: drive fast and you can suffer severe physical damage.

What does not appear to have been attempted in any significant way is to convey the message that reckless riding is a profound danger to others.

While drink driving adverts now routinely show the terrible suffering caused to those hit by drunk drivers, and make a point of showing how guilty and sad you would feel in the event of causing such pain to another innocent person, adverts aimed at encouraging motorcyclists to be more cautious do not seem to code this idea.

So rather than simply appeal to this kind of rider's sense of self-preservation, which could after all be a waste of time, it might be fruitful to appeal to their humanity and spell out the kind of trauma they could easily visit upon innocent people's lives – whether drivers, pedestrians or even other motorbike riders.