



# Social advertising and its influence on the perception of social campaigns for the prevention of traffic accidents in Ecuador

## Publicidad social y su influencia en la percepción de las campañas sociales de prevención de accidentes de tránsito en Ecuador

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### Abstract

*The present article analyzes the perceptions that the adult public of Cuenca city in Ecuador has about the social campaigns of traffic accident prevention. The theoretical framework is constituted by the theories associated with social marketing and social advertising, analyzing the relationship that exists between change agents and target adopters. The methodology consisted of a mixed research, allowing the administration of interviews and 400 surveys to citizens, between 18 and 49 years of Cuenca city. The fundamental objectives were aimed at knowing the perception of the citizenship regarding the social campaigns of accident prevention, discovering the level of citizen awareness towards the problem of traffic accidents in Ecuador, and investigating people's opinion about the co-responsibility for road safety in the city. The results showed that there is a general lack of knowledge about road prevention campaigns, and that, in addition, the messages issued by agents of change are not clear enough. In conclusion, the target adopter remembers the messages in a very dispersed way, and does not get empowered either with the campaigns despite understanding the information of the messages issued. Finally, both change agents and target adopters agree that social advertising campaigns are necessary to change public behavior, reduce accidents and improve citizens' quality of life.*

### Resumen

El presente artículo analiza las percepciones que el público adulto de la ciudad de Cuenca en Ecuador tiene sobre las campañas sociales de prevención de accidentes de tránsito. El marco teórico lo constituyen las teorías asociadas al mercadeo social y a la publicidad social, analizando la relación que existe entre los agentes de cambio y los adoptantes objetivo. La metodología se apropia de una investigación mixta, la cual permitió la aplicación de entrevistas y 400 encuestas a ciudadanos, entre los 18 y 49 años de la ciudad de Cuenca. Los objetivos fundamentales estaban dirigidos a conocer la percepción de la ciudadanía respecto a las campañas sociales de prevención de accidentes, identificar el nivel de conciencia ciudadana respecto a la problemática de los accidentes de tránsito en Ecuador, e investigar la opinión de los ciudadanos respecto a la corresponsabilidad de la seguridad vial en la ciudad. Los resultados evidencian que hay un desconocimiento generalizado sobre las campañas de prevención vial, y que, además, los mensajes emitidos por los agentes de cambio no son claros. Se concluye que el adoptante objetivo recuerda los mensajes de manera muy dispersa, no se empodera de las campañas a pesar de comprender la información de los mensajes emitidos. Finalmente, tanto agentes de cambio como adoptantes objetivo están de acuerdo que las campañas de publicidad social son necesarias para cambiar la conducta pública, disminuir la accidentalidad y mejorar la calidad de vida de los ciudadanos.

### Keywords | palabras clave

*Social advertising, social marketing, social campaigns, traffic accidents, Ecuador.*

Publicidad social, mercadeo social, campañas sociales, accidentes de tránsito, Ecuador.

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## 1. Introduction

Social advertising (SA) has become increasingly important in the field of communication by multiple circumstances, being the most relevant the ones related to the large number of social problems affecting society, and by the need to improve the quality of life of citizens.

One of the difficulties that SA has had in Latin America is that theories and conceptual advances have been lagging behind, because the practice of campaigns has had more importance compared to a conceptualization that allows to create a theory with strong epistemological bases. However, in recent years SA has become the subject of research by important theorists such as Kotler and Roberto (1992), Muñoz (2001), Benet and Nos-Aldás (2003), Barranco (2005), Eguizábal (2009), Alvarado (2012), Kotler et al. (2013), Rodrigo and Rodrigo (2013), Rosario-Ubiera (2014), among others.

One of the biggest problems of Latin America is the high rate of car accidents, which affects negatively the quality of life of people. In Ecuador, infant mortality and morbidity from road traffic accidents reaches alarming figures, even though legal and coercive measures have had a positive effect on reducing mortality from car accidents (Ministerio del Interior, 2014).

For this reason, this article aims to know some of the fundamental theoretical elements of SA and the society's perception of car accident prevention campaigns in the city of Cuenca (Ecuador).

### 1.1. Social advertising

SA originated from the conceptual development of social marketing (SM), especially from the postulates of Kotler and Roberto (1992), who in their book "Social Marketing: Strategies to Change Public Behavior" reveal the differences with commercial marketing. Some of the fundamental elements of SM can be synthesized in the following postulates: (a) the focus is on seeking behavioral changes by citizens (Moliner, 1998; Pinilla, 2011); b) those who issue social messages are called "agents of change" because they seek changes in behavior (Orozco-Toro & Ferré-Pavia, 2015); (c) target audiences are known as "objective adopters", as they are called to adopt new behaviors and represent "individuals, groups, entire populations, which are the target of calls to change by the social marketing agent" (Kotler & Roberto, 1992, p. 20); d) we do not work with products but with problems to face, so the institutions must offer the solutions (Alvarado, 2005).

In addition, one of the most important changes is the focus in marketing since the product is considered intangible in the SM because it turns into ideas, beliefs, values or attitudes assumed by the adopting objectives. Price is conceived as the effort or time that the adopter assumes for social change. The promotion responds to the use of the integrated marketing communication actions used to disseminate the campaign. Finally, the location refers to the place where the benefits of social actions or distribution media to supply the social product are presented (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971; Gómez & Quintanilla, 1988; French et al., 2011).

While it is true that SM has been the fundamental basis for the generation of SA-related theories, the theories and functions of social campaigns led by agents of change with a view to generating new behaviors in target adopters are more important nowadays.

## 1.2. Social advertising

The concept of SA can be understood as “an organized effort led by a group (the agent of change), which seeks to persuade others (objective adopters) to accept, modify or abandon certain ideas, attitudes, practices and behaviors” (Kotler & Roberto, 1992, p. 7). Under these conditions, SA can be considered relatively new, because although this 1992 definition appears in the academic world, its origins are conceived in 1942 “when advertising tactics are put at the service of public utility issues away from any commercial interest” (Baños & Rodríguez, 2009, p. 218). From another perspective, Gumucio-Dagron (2011) assumes that the further development of SA is presented from 1997, when the Rockefeller Foundation discussed the role of communication in social changes.

In this context, SA has been gaining an important space in communication, especially in Latin American countries (Pérez, 2006; Taricco, 2009; Vergara & Rodríguez, 2010; Orozco-Toro & Muñoz-Sánchez, 2019). This type of more informative and educational advertising that looks for participation, is absolutely necessary for the solution of social problems that affect developing countries, and despite important social campaigns in Latin America: “the bulk of the industry has continued to work mostly for commercial causes, with social advertising being scarce and delegated to less dissemination in large mass media due to the scarcity of budgets” (Alvarado, 2012, p. 199).

SA campaigns must meet a number of conditions to make their communication more efficient (Orozco, 2010; Dueñas et al., 2015; López-Medina, 2019). In this regard, some of the most relevant condition are presented:

*Persuasion and deterrence.* SA campaigns must implement both deterrence (seek for citizens to abandon harmful behaviors such as drug use or driving when liquor has been ingested), as well as persuasive communication (incentivize blood donation or the use of seat belt when driving).

*Preventive communication.* The best possible strategy of SA is to try to prevent situations about a communication that appeals to contingency (prevention in drug use or warn about the danger of consuming liquor when driving).

*Education and information.* Communication should be sought to inform and educate adoptees (perform technical and mechanical reviews on cars to prevent accidents).

*Intangibility.* SA faces the difficult task of selling the idea of altruism, solidarity or volunteering; more complex tasks as they involve the mobility and effort of the target adopters.

*Message type.* SA may assume that messages do not frighten target adopters who are based on achievable ideas, that reality is not oversized, and especially may show problems but also possible solutions.

It is clear that SA has conditions that make it different from its commercial counterpart, even in the way the latest research on its performance has been addressed (Leal, 2000). From this area, the greatest efforts are made around the behaviors of citizens in the face of advertising action (Saghi & Lotfabadi, 2016), or changes in the behaviors and attitudes of target adopters (Aydin & Koc, 2016). In the Ibero-American context, the greatest efforts have been presented in Spain, with some specific contributions in Latin America. The studies are varied and focused on the effectiveness of SA on television (Rosario-Ubiera, 2014), advertising messages of social causes in times of crisis (Rodrigo & Rodrigo, 2013), SA in universities (Arroyo, 2014), rhetoric in the SA (Cano, 2015), or the incidence of SA in the image of a brand (Orozco-Toro & Ferré-Pavia, 2015), the abuse of the social aspect in advertising (Alvarado, 2009), and communication for social change (Dagron, 2011). The biggest difficulty of research in

SA is that its effects cannot be glimpsed, in most cases, in the short term. Since SA mainly seeks changes in behavior, these changes occur more slowly than those sought by commercial advertising (Martínez, 1998). Even SA will not be able to contribute to social transformation if it does not attack the true roots of social problems (Arely & Martín, 2017).

This is how road safety-related behavior transforms in any social group, and will also involve great efforts for the agent of change and for target adopters. From the perspective of car accidents, social advertising campaigns have shown to reduce the incidence of people driving when they have drunk alcohol (Sar & Anghelce, 2015).

Social advertising campaigns have a positive influence when are developed based on a previous strategy with a responsible intention (Saiz et al., 2018). Likewise, the impact of a campaign for social purposes should be measured not only by the number of people who have donated blood, by the amount of money raised for a charity, or by the decrease in accidents, but also by researching through surveys and studies of attitudes to the various adopter objectives.

## 2. Materials and method

The main objective of this research was to understand the perception of target adopters regarding social campaigns for the prevention of car accidents in the city of Cuenca (Ecuador).

The research methodology was mixed. In qualitative research, in-depth interviews were conducted (instrument of 27 questions), in order to know the perception of citizens about social campaigns carried out in the city of Cuenca, regarding the prevention of car accidents and the interest of people with regard to the subject.

400 surveys (8-question instrument) were applied to people from 18 and 49 years old for the quantitative research. The sampling method was carried out in high-traffic locations, where people of various socio-economic and cultural levels were surveyed. According to the estimate of the National Institute of Statistics and Census of Ecuador, the approximate population of Cuenca is 580,706 inhabitants in 2015, for this reason 400 surveys were applied, representing a margin of error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%; therefore, the sample is statistically representative.

The specific objectives of the investigation were aimed at highlighting the perception of citizens regarding social accident prevention campaigns; identify the level of citizen awareness of the problem of car accidents in Ecuador; investigate citizens' views on the co-responsibility of road safety in the city of Cuenca; and finally, investigate which factor they consider more important to improve road safety.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Quantitative research results

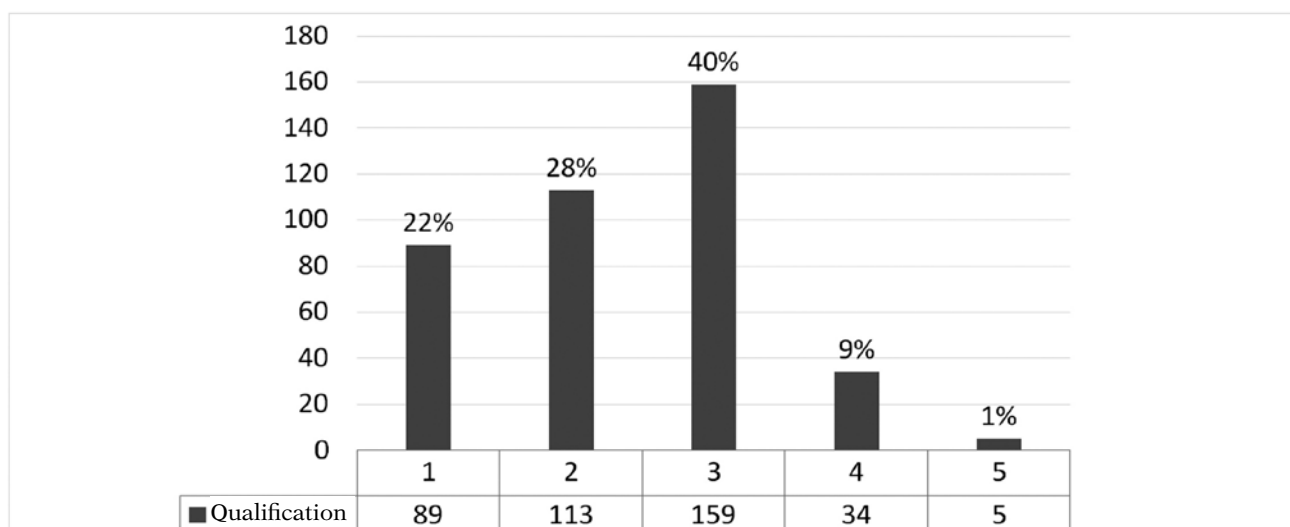
The survey was conducted by a face-to-face questionnaire to 400 individuals, men and women in the age range of the proposed target adopter; in this way, a representative sample was obtained. Some elements of the empirical study are described below (Table 1).

**Table 1. Fieldwork specifications**

Methodological procedure	Face-to-face survey	
Geographical area	Cuenca-Ecuador	
Total of questionnaires	400	
Gender	51% Women 49% Men	
Distribution of sample ages	32%	18 to 25 years
	29%	26 to 33 years
	25%	34 to 41 years
	14%	42 to 49 years
Distribution of the level of education	4%	Elementary
	47%	High School
	35%	University
	14%	Graduate

Source: Own Elaboration.

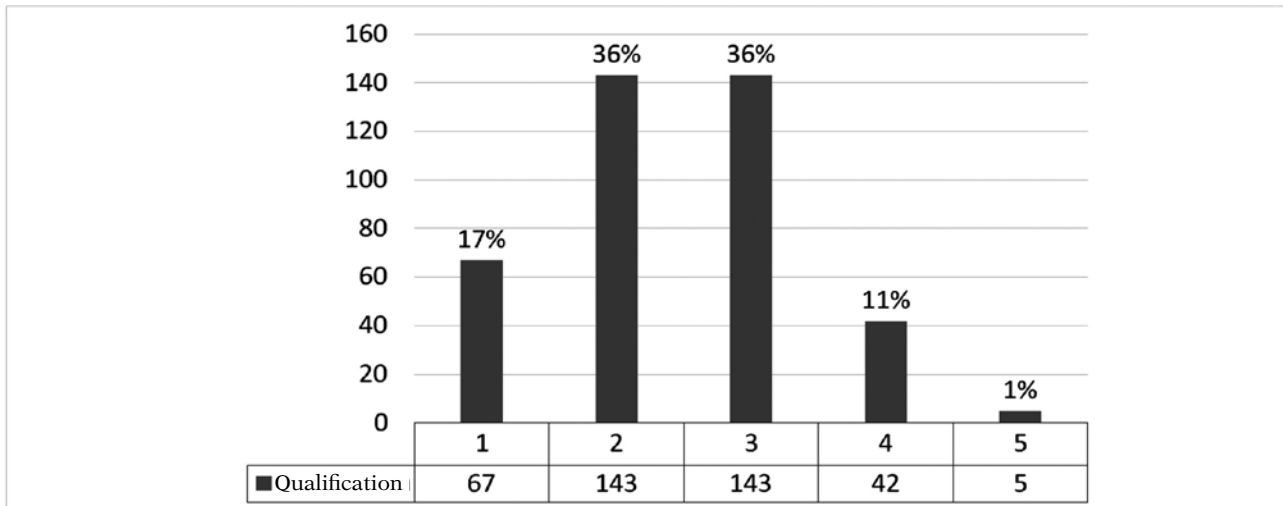
When answering the questions in the questionnaire when consulting respondents, how do you consider the behavior of most drivers in the city? On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 terrible and 5 excellent), the results determine that 50% of respondents answered 1 and 2 (no or little respect for pedestrians), at least 10% consider that there is respect from the driver to the pedestrian (sum of options 4 and 5). The average value of this rating is 2.38.

**Figure 1. Perception of the respect that drivers have for the pedestrian**

Source: own elaboration

The following question asks about the perception of a driver's respect for other drivers. 53% of respondents (answers 1 and 2) observe low respect among drivers, just 12% (answers 4 and 5). The average obtained from all respondents is 2.44.

**Figure 2. Perception of the respect that drivers have for other drivers**

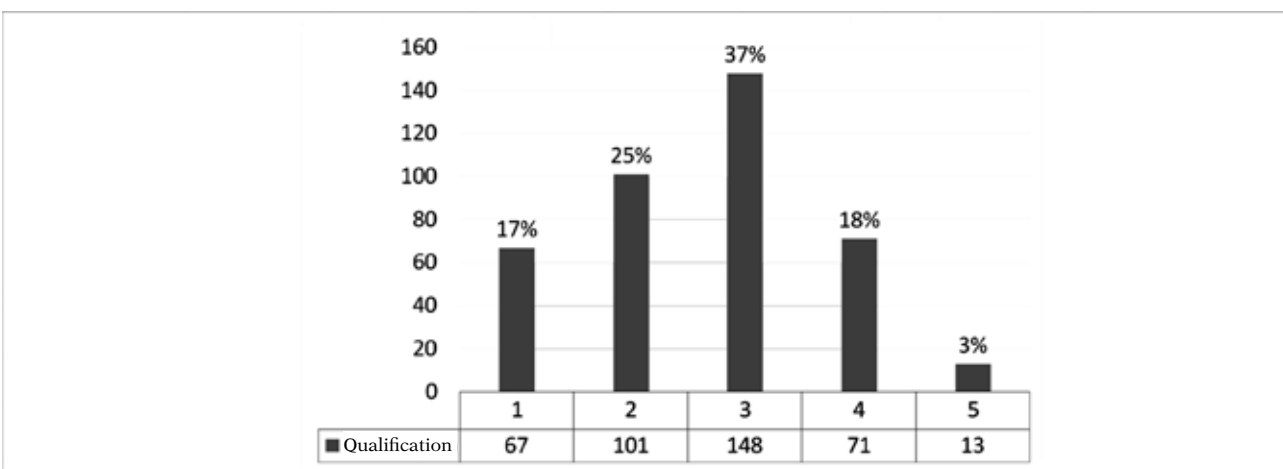


Source: own elaboration

The respondents were asked about the respect of the drivers at the pedestrian crossing. From the point of view of respondents, it is perceived that only 1% of drivers respect it, and on the other hand, almost 70% have low or no respect for this sign (answers 1 and 2). The overall average for this question is the lowest of all points evaluated with 2.06.

Similarly, when consulting on the perception of the respect that drivers have for traffic signs, it is observed that only 21% (responses 4 and 5) of the population perceive that drivers adequately respect traffic signals. 42% say drivers respect these signal very little or nothing. The average value for this review is 2.66.

**Figure 3. Perception of drivers' respect for traffic signs**



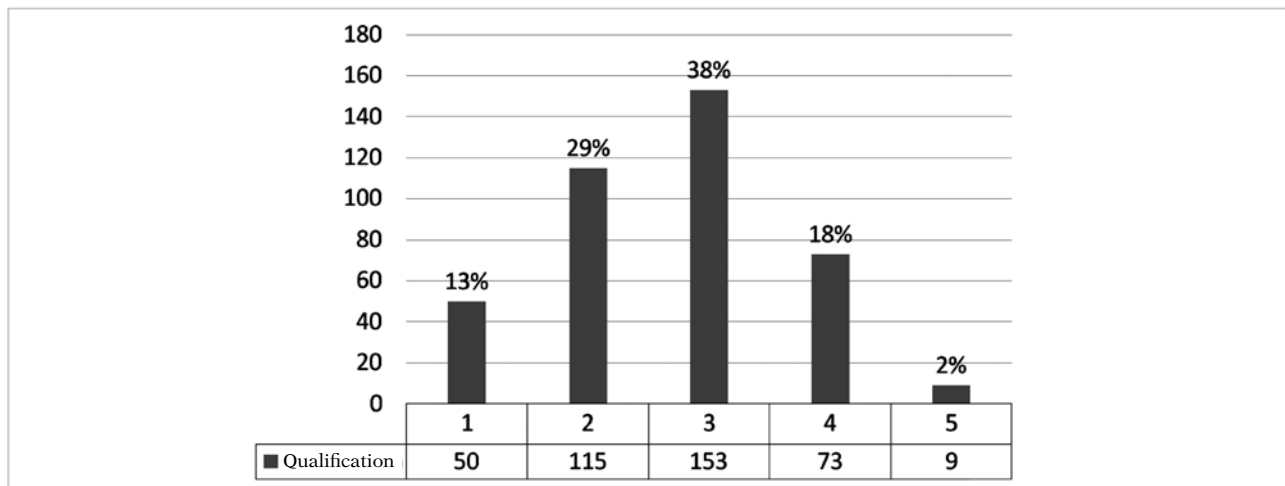
Source: own elaboration



In the question “how do you think pedestrians behave when walking the city?” the results indicate that approximately 31% (answers 1 and 2) consider this aspect as deficient, 29% (answers 4 and 5) rate it as appropriate. The average rate of all respondents is 2.94.

When requesting to assess pedestrian respect for drivers, 42% (answers 1 and 2) of the population think it is very low, while 20% think that there is adequate respect. The average rate obtained is 2.69.

**Figure 4. Perception of the respect that pedestrians have to the drivers**

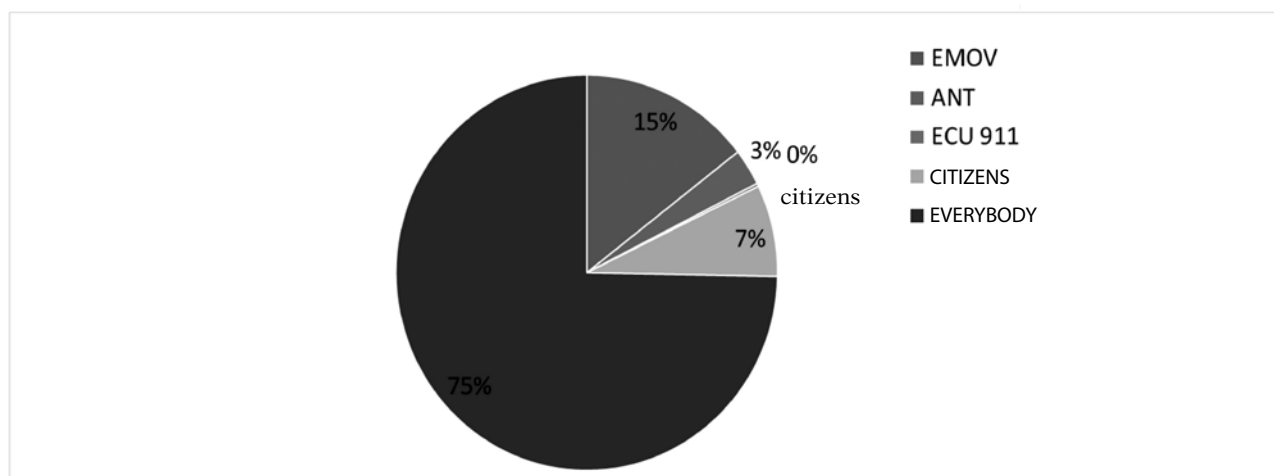


Source: own elaboration

The respect for traffic signs by pedestrians also has a very low rate on the part of respondents, since the perception of 51% of respondents (answers 1 and 2), is that there is very little or no respect for traffic signals. It should be noted that pedestrians may also be fined for disrespecting traffic signs. The overall average for this review is 2.5, the second lowest for pedestrians.

In relation to road safety responsibility, 75% of respondents consider it to be everyone's responsibility; however, 15% believe that government mobility entities are directly responsible.

When asking the adequacy of education for the prevention of car accidents, 89% of respondents stated that education is insufficient in relation to the prevention of car accidents. Finally, the question of the most important factor to achieve a change in behaviors, attitudes and behaviors to improve road safety, 59% of respondents consider that education is the factor with more impact to achieve a change of behavior in citizens, followed by 20% who request more information.

**Figure 5. Perception of the responsibility of road safety**

Source: own elaboration

### 3.2. Results of the qualitative research

There is a first approach to the perception and thinking of citizenship through the qualitative research. The results determine that the target adopters are willing to talking about road safety, making it easier to accept the messages to be communicated regarding road safety. However, when mentioning about social campaigns focused on road safety, there is no marked reminder about any. In this case, there is no social campaign with a strong positioning in the perception of the adoptive objective.

There is not any known agent of change for the road safety promoter in Cuenca. Although there is a presence in various media, there is no validation of the information issued by the agent of change by the target adopter.

Messages issued by agents of change are easy to understand by citizens. Most respondents recalled at least one message linked to the prevention of car accidents in current and previous campaigns. But, the receptivity to social prevention campaigns is limited, as an example, everyone understands messages of respect for speed limits, not to use the mobile phone while driving, among others, but the action requested in the messages issued by the agents of change is executed in a little effective way by the adopter objective.

When asking specific questions during the interviews, interviewees report certain basic conditions of road prevention campaigns. For example, when asking regarding campaigns related to accident prevention, most interviewees remember "some campaign," but with a zero level of recall for a specific campaign topic. Some relevant answers were:

Yes. I once saw in downtown young men disguised as mimes, who promoted respect for pedestrian crossing. (Man, 35 years old) Yes. Do not park in bus stops (Woman, 30 years old) Yes. But I don't remember well. (Woman, 32 years old)

Subsequently, when asking for the opinion on the messages issued in road prevention campaigns, the interviewees conclude that there is no proper generation of the messages. Some responses account for the situation:



Campaigns need to reach people. (Woman, 35 years old) Messages are interesting, but they should be more broadcasted (Woman, 30 years old) It is motivating, those messages are heard all the time on the radio with terms that are used here. (Woman, 32 years old)

In relation to the widespread ignorance of interviewees about road prevention campaigns, they were asked how they believe that messages should be issued by agents of change. The most important answers account for the following aspects:

With more colors and a catchy phrase that really motivates (Woman, 30 years old) With more road diffusion, on fences and with giant photographs. (Man, 27 years old) I would use characters as if it were a soap opera. (Woman, 26 years old) Campaigns must be included at schools, there are people who do not know the traffic signs and their meaning. (Man, 30 years old)

Generally speaking, responses are coincidental and are based on improving elements of communications, especially those related to images, colors, traffic signs, among others. In this way, the most relevant responses of qualitative research show that:

- Concepts in theory and information are clear about the importance of prevention and road safety.
- There is not a significant level of recall of any current campaign. Some interviewees still remember old campaigns.
- For most adoptive objective, there is no information from social campaigns concerning the prevention of car accidents.
- Citizens remember some messages and are willing to collaborating in the aspects they consider important.
- According to the criteria of the interviewees in relation to the perception of campaigns, a lot more needs to be done and campaigns have been insufficient to achieve results that last in the long term.

#### 4. Conclusions and discussion

The adopting objectives are aware that there are social campaigns on car prevention, however, the messages issued by the agents of change do not have a good reception. The effort in communication by agents of change is important, but despite this, the adopting objective remembers messages in a very dispersed way, and does not empower thanks to the messages despite understanding the information of the messages issued, and the action proposed by the agents of change is not fulfilled.

Citizens are willing to comply with the laws and respect the rules, however, a change of attitude is required by conviction, which would lead to changing the behavior that would last over time, and take coercive action gradually as the social campaign process progresses.

There are very few campaigns aimed at adult audiences with the main objective of preventing car accidents. It is assumed that there were not specific actions at the city level and probably at the national level, or it was not possible to capture the attention of the adopting objective.

The unresponsiveness on the part of the adopter target towards social campaigns to prevent road traffic accidents in the city of Cuenca is confirmed.

Although there is an interest in road safety, the recall level of a specific campaign is very low. However, this element that relates to the scope of the campaign is not directly linked to the receptivity on the part of the adopter objective. But it can be

observed in the behavior of individuals and their actions within the social group, that even if there are certain changes in attitudes, much needs to be done to achieve a real change of behavior that demonstrates greater social development.

Qualitative research shows that the messages that citizens remember are very scarce in terms of the prevention of car accidents. With regard to messages related to child safety, they are scarce and have reached very little in the perception of citizens.

Citizens are willing to talk about the subject, making it easier to accept the messages to communicate regarding road safety. It could also be seen that there is a certain level of awareness about the consequences of a car accident.

Several social campaigns related to road safety are alluded to, however, there is no marked reminder about any. Although the scope of campaigns cannot be measured by the level of recall, it is an important parameter. According to the qualitative research, there is no social campaign with a strong positioning in the perception of the adoptive objective.

Messages issued by agents of change are easy for citizens to understand, most interviewees remembered at least one message related to prevention of car accidents in current and previous campaigns, but receptivity to social car accident prevention campaigns is limited. To mention one example, adopters understand messages of respect for speed limits, not to use the mobile phone while driving, not to consume alcohol when driving. In contrast, the requested action on messages issued by agents of change is executed in ineffectively.

There is a perception that there has been no good media management, and that images, stories and graphs do not impact citizenship. Every element must transmit, identify emotionally with individuals, speak for themselves, generate feelings, become part of what the adopter seeks and that he/she gets involved with the cause of the campaign.

Citizens are willing to comply with the laws and respect the rules, but a change of attitude is required by conviction, and it would lead to changing the behavior that lasts over time and to take coercive action as the social campaign progresses.

The perception that there are no adequate controls for the prevention of car accidents is quite high. This factor contributes to the concept that the solution is not in the hands of social advertising only. Enduring behavior changes are achieved by conviction and also probably by cultural factors that require the support of control entities.

The adopting objectives, despite understanding the messages issued by the agents of change, do not generate a change of attitude. In this sense it is important to note that citizens are not visualizing the problem, do not see its importance, and do not recognize it as its own.

It is not expected that only social advertising will solve all the problems that exist in the area of social campaign performance and existing social problems. However, social advertising can become a promoter of social change for the adoption of new behaviors, and thus, at some point, to create different realities in a society that everyone wants to be part and be proud of.

It is essential to give a twist to the agents of change by designing strategies with the aim of improving the perception of citizens about social campaigns carried out for the prevention of car accidents in Cuenca, and successfully executing these strategies.

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