Discussion

This research explored the role of involvement in persuasiveness of different message appeals in military motorcycle safety PSAs. Based on previous research into the dual processing concepts of central and peripheral routes found in ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981) and the heuristic and systematic routes of HSM (Chaiken, 1987), along with abundant research into fear appeals (Witte, 1998; Clarke, 1998; Morman, 2000) and advertising use of humor appeals (Hume, 1988), the prediction of this study was that involvement would play a major factor in determining the effectiveness of different message types. However, the research revealed that there are variables other than involvement impacting the communication of the persuasive messages. Particularly striking was the interaction of gender and experimental condition, which impacted processing of the fear appeal and humor appeal messages and moderated message effectiveness.

Some of the major findings of the interaction between experimental condition and gender dealt with the fear appeal group and the humor group, and was particularly evident in the manipulation check using the affect scale. Results comparing men and women in the study showed women viewing the fear appeals felt more fear and anger, perceived the messages to be more effective, and had more positive behavior attitude change. Conversely, the results showed that men viewing the humor appeals felt more humor and perceived the messages to be more effective than did their female counterparts. Strangely, the women viewing the humor appeals, though they reported that they didn’t find them funny or perceive them to be effective, were more likely to have positive behavior attitude change than did the men in the humor appeal study. This finding is disturbing, because young males are much more at risk from fatal motorcycle accidents than females. This means that the target audience for the messages, young
males, are not receiving the logical or fear appeal messages that were shown to increase motorcycle safety knowledge, and their behavior attitudes don’t change even in the humor PSAs they report to be more effective. Without attitude change, it is unlikely that behavior will change, and the messages are thus ineffective in combating motorcycle fatalities in the military.

One reason the women might not have found the commercials funny is because the protagonists in the humor ads were mostly male and unattractive. This may have led to their inability to relate to the characters, which may have led to source credibility issues explained in HSM heuristic and ELM peripheral routes discussed earlier (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981; Kassing, 2002). Similarly, men may have found it hard to relate to the characters in the fear appeal ads. Fear appeal studies in self-efficacy have shown that when people don’t feel that the fear-inducing message can ever apply to them, they will not feel the threat, and thus they won’t feel fear and be motivated to change their behaviors (Morman, 2000).

In regard to the manipulation check for affect caused by exposure to the fear appeals, the control group scored significantly higher than did the three treatment groups, with fear a distant second. One possible explanation is the sample procedures for the control group. Because of time constraints, the investigators employed convenience samples, and the control group was comprised of trainees awaiting transfer to their permanent duty assignments. Because they had been in training for approximately six months, their test anxiety was probably higher than the other groups. This may have predisposed them to higher levels of fear and anger regardless of the test manipulations. For the humor manipulation test, the humor appeal group had the highest levels of experienced humor, but the scores on the logical group were close enough that no significant difference could be determined in a within-group analysis. Several of the participants in this group commented to the researchers after the post-survey that the embedding of the
Motorcycle Safety PSAs 3

commercials in a non-military program with only product commercials surrounding it was obvious. These participants mentioned that they found the idea of military PSAs embedded into a commercial program to be humorous, which may have led to the higher levels of humor reported in this group. With the logical message group removed, the humor group score on the affect scale would have proven to be significant of the three remaining group scores.

One of the limitations of this study was the inability to do a random-sample survey across all services and age ranges. The study used convenience samples, and thus the findings are not as generalizable to the entire military and family member population most at risk to fatal motorcycle accidents. Additionally, the survey items used to measure behavior attitude and humor had low coefficient alphas (.64 and .60 respectively), though they had been used successfully in past research. In addition, several participants in each of the groups said they did not watch commercials, and asked if they could be skipped during the test. This shows that many participants in a natural environment would be even less likely to receive the messages. Others complained that they would not usually watch the Real World show, especially for the older participants. This may have caused some of the participants to tune out the entire treatment process. Possibly a less controversial or less youth-based show would have changed the findings.

In this study, the ultimate goal of a safety campaign is to influence risky behavior change. Young men are more likely to be involved in fatal motorcycle accidents and the findings do not show that behavior attitude changes occur among men. Considering that the target audience for motorcycle safety messages is men between the ages of 18 and 32, the results seem to indicate that women are impacted rather than the intended audience of men suggests that message and audience targeting strategies should be reevaluated. Future research is necessary in this area to determine what kinds of PSA messages are most effective to change behavior attitudes of men.