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A qualitative analysis of young drivers' perceptions of driver distraction social marketing interventions

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A qualitative analysis of young drivers’ perceptions of driver distraction social marketing interventions

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Abstract

This study gives insight into why current driver distraction social marketing interventions are not motivating the high-risk target audience of young drivers to cease using their mobile phones when driving. Three focus groups (n=30) were conducted with drivers aged 18-25 years old to explore current attitudes and behaviours in regard to mobile phone use when driving. Additionally four emergent themes were identified from the target audience’s reactions to six social marketing interventions specifically targeting mobile phone cessation. These themes are analysed through the lens of the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) comprising perceived severity, perceived susceptibility, response efficacy and self-efficacy.

Introduction/Background

Human factors continue to feature prominently as a major contributor to road trauma; with drivers’ engagement in high risk behaviours, such as mobile phone use while driving, increasing crash risk significantly (Patten et al. 2004; McCartt et al. 2006; Nemme & White 2010). Extensive evidence suggests that drivers who use their mobile phones are approximately four times more likely to be involved in a road crash than when they are not using their phones (Redelmeier & Tibshirani 1997; McEvoy et al. 2005; Cismaru 2014). Despite research suggesting mobile phone distractions are just as dangerous as drink driving and speeding – studies indicate that many Australian drivers continue to use their mobile phone while driving (Petroulias 2011; Pennay 2006; Walsh et al. 2008; Campbell 2012). Many researchers suggest that the broad-scale approaches that have been adopted by road safety advertisers fail to address the range of personal and motivational factors which influence driver behaviour (Watson et al. 1996; White et al. 2010; Riquelme et al. 2010).

The types of downstream strategies used by road safety advertisers to address dangerous driving behaviours have consisted largely of emotional (predominantly fear based) advertising campaigns and testimonials. Emotional advertising is a technique that involves using intense, sensational themes to elicit strong positive or negative emotions from a viewer (Moore & Harris 1996; Lewis et al. 2007; Panda & Mishra 2013). The other increasingly popular advertising style in social marketing is the use of testimonials and real stories in advertisements. According to Dillard and Main (2013), people often gain confidence in their ability to adopt a new behaviour when they observe another individual perform the behaviour successfully. This is evident in many preventative health issues as it aims to engage further with an individual through the use of identification. Identification is an important element of testimonials as it relies on an individual to connect emotionally on a deeper level with a ‘character’, with suggestions that positively leads to behavioural intention (Hinyard & Kreuter 2007; Dillard & Main 2013). In addition, research suggests that testimonials are effective in gaining audiences’ attention through thought provoking messages and being emotionally interesting (Nisbett & Ross 1980; Dillard & Main 2013).

It is important that further research is conducted to determine how social marketing can be used more effectively to encourage drivers to cease mobile phone use while driving. An
initial stage in this process is to gauge how drivers view current driver distraction interventions and why young drivers have not been inspired to change their behaviour.

This research will employ the commonly used theory of Witte’s (1992) The Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) to explore the effectiveness of existing downstream strategies. The EPPM posits that fear appeals are successful in yielding behavioural change when they achieve four key elements: perceived severity, perceived susceptibility, response efficacy, and self-efficacy.

Overall, this study seeks to address the research question: Are current intervention strategies effective in engaging with young drivers (18-25 years old) to deter them from using their mobile phones while driving? This investigation will provide valuable insight into whether or not current strategies, particularly advertisements and financial penalties, are indeed influencing behaviours and how young drivers perceive the issue.

**Method**

Three focus groups (n=10/group) were conducted with students undertaking tertiary education. The focus group component of the research followed an anti-positivist approach in order to further understand the varying influences and social constructs associated with the behaviour. Focus groups were selected because they offer in-depth insight into the target audience and are a way for respondents to discuss ideas that may have been overlooked prior to the research (Krueger et al. 2001).

The focus groups began with a discussion of the participants’ general perceptions of mobile phone use when driving, followed by a more specific discussion of participants’ reactions to, and opinions of, six road safety interventions. The videos ranged from 0:30-2:30 minutes in length and each employed different advertising appeals including fear, guilt, sadness, and humour. After each video (refer to Table 1) the facilitator would guide a discussion on the video shown, following the same sequence of open ended questions and using appropriate prompts to enhance discussion between focus group participants. A section of the focus group questions were formulated to directly address each element of Witte’s (1992) EPPM.

**Results**

The overwhelming consensus of opinion from the 30 participants was that mobile phone use while driving is something that nearly all young drivers engage in despite knowing that the behaviour is illegal and most participants noting the risks (physical, financial and potentially social) of driver distraction. The focus group setting did not deter participants from freely admitting that they have engaged in mobile phone use when driving [“I feel guilty [about doing it]… but I still do it” – Female].

A re-emerging issue that was highlighted in all focus groups was that many respondents felt they could ‘safely’ text or use their phone while driving. One male participant said that if no other cars were around them he could take his eyes off the road for up to 10 seconds because if he veered it was not a problem as he knew no one was around him. The perceived notion of safety was something that was discussed in all three focus groups. Many participants expressed that they viewed “older people” as not knowing how to text quickly and that they would need the phone right in front of them. Many participants considered themselves as
experts in using their phones (in comparison to their parents) and that they could text more safely than their parents.

Table 1 – Brief description of road safety intervention videos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertisement</th>
<th>Type of appeal</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Channel of communication &amp; youtube link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RMS’ ‘Get your hand off it’</td>
<td>Humour appeal – social threat</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Social Media, Television, Radio, Cinema – New South Wales <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L02WTTkZy_U">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L02WTTkZy_U</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘COW’ PSA</td>
<td>Short film – negative emotion: fear</td>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>Television – Wales <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYZn5OeKAHY">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYZn5OeKAHY</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRS’s ‘Mobile Phones and Driving’</td>
<td>Rational appeal</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Mainstream television – Ireland <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI3oW-nTRw">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI3oW-nTRw</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The *multi-use of mobile phones* was another topic which emerged. In all focus groups, participants indicated that young people do not just use their phone for texting or making phone calls, but also for entertainment purposes. One participant admitted to checking social media accounts while driving such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Shazam, and Snapchat. [“… at peak hour especially, cause that’s when there’s a lot of info on Facebook, not at 7am, but by 5pm there’s heaps to check out” – Male].

A perceived barrier to using their phones when driving was the potential financial consequences of the behaviour, with some participants suggesting this to be more concerning than physically bound risks [“I am more afraid about getting pulled over rather than crashing” – Female respondent]. However, (unprompted) the possibility of being detected immediately followed any mention of fines, with most participants expressing that detection was unlikely or easy to avoid [So there’s an app for highway patrol cars... You can see where the police are... Yeah, so I use that” – Male]. Another perceived barrier (only for a few participants) was the possibility of social judgement and disapproval [“I won’t do it when I’m with my friends cause I don’t want to be seen as a bad driver” – Female].

In response to the videos/advertisements, most participants expressed more negative opinions of the advertisements than positive opinions in regard to likely impact on their mobile phone use when driving (response efficacy [RE] and self-efficacy [SE]). Many of the videos/advertisements also failed to make the audience feel susceptible to danger and/or see the danger severe enough to warrant their attention. Participants across all three focus groups
agreed that the RMS ‘Get your hand off it’ (humour appeal) and the IRS ‘Don’t text and drive’ (rational appeal) campaigns were the least effective. Comparatively, participants agreed the two most effective advertisements were the TAC ‘Blind’ (standard threat appeal) and AT&T’s ‘It Can Wait’ (testimonial – guilt and fear appeal) campaigns. Some examples of participants’ responses to the videos and the EPPM analysis outcomes are shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertisement</th>
<th>Examples of participants’ reactions</th>
<th>EPPM lens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AT&amp;T ‘It Can Wait’</td>
<td>“True story was good... Visual of the little boy was emotional” “after watching the ad, the message ‘it can wait’ was good cause it was like ‘yeah this actually can wait’”</td>
<td>SEV: HIGH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SUS: LOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAC ‘Blind’</td>
<td>“I’ve been in that situation before, where I’ve used my phone and then looked up and realised I’ve travelled quite far in that process” – one respondent agreed “yeah that’s happened to me, and like I’ll look down and then notice that my speeds gone up”</td>
<td>SEV:HIG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SUS:HIGH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMS ‘Get your hand off it’</td>
<td>“It is funny but I don’t think it would stop me using my phone while driving” “[the advertisement] makes it [the issue] a joke, people won’t take it seriously”</td>
<td>SEV: LOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SUS: LOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Spectrum’s ‘Toll of Texting’</td>
<td>“Seeing into the lives and story behind it more in depth added to the impact on viewers” “It makes you feel like that could happen to you, like if you went for a walk that could happen to you just from someone being a bit irresponsible” “I found it really emotional... like it’s a really sad story and stuff, but it still felt like ‘yeah that was a story’ but not real life... like it wouldn’t happen to you”</td>
<td>SEV: HIGH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SUS: LOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘COW’ PSA</td>
<td>“like okay it wasn’t done very well but I thought it was real, like a real scenario. My friends and I talk like that... to me, it made me sad and I won’t forget it” “It was like a like a B-Grade horror film it was too contrived... that’s what I’d take away from it, that it’s a terrible ad”</td>
<td>SEV: LOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SUS: HIGH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRS’s ‘Mobile Phones and Driving’</td>
<td>“I’m a hard-core ‘texter while walking’, so it made me think about it if I was driving” “[the advertisement] is unrealistic as you can’t be that clumsy bumping into so many people” “I wasn’t sure if this was going to be a driving ad or like something about us using our phones too much”</td>
<td>SEV: LOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SUS: HIGH</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: Susceptibility [SUS] and Severity [SEV]; Response Efficacy [RE] & Self-Efficacy [SE]

Emerging themes from participants’ reactions to the driver distraction videos

The first theme (t1) is derived from participants views that are best classified as counter-arguing with risks posed in the ad. Participants would indicate that they would not text in a built up (busy) road areas that were depicted in the video/ads. This theme is related to the perceived notion of safety theme identified in the initial stage of the focus group research. Participants discussed places on the road where they felt was “safe” to use their phones when driving (for example at traffic lights). Also within this theme are the views of other participants who felt that they were more competent mobile phones users than the drivers shown in the ads/videos. This theme is largely why most of the six ads encountered difficulties in achieving an appropriate degree of severity and susceptibility. Disbelief of ad execution (for example the ad being seen as too sensational or having a poor execution), was another identified theme (t2) that impeded severity and susceptibility.
In relation to the EPPM model, self-efficacy was not achieved in any of the six ads. The theme (t3) labelled ingrained behaviour of mobile phone use when driving largely explains the low ratings of self-efficacy for each advertisement/video. Participants expressed that young people now feel the need to 'stay connected' everywhere, which influences routines in their daily lifestyle, including their driving behaviour. The habit of young drivers checking their phones is a major challenge for road safety authorities to overcome.

Response efficacy was also deemed to be ‘low’ in three of the ads, with these ads simply providing a “don’t do it” or “stop doing it” message, without any elaborated recommendations, such as making calls before travelling or turning the phone to silent (or turning the phone off!). The RMS – ‘Get your hand off it’ advertisement did contain response efficacy demonstrated by one male participant in this study indicating that he might use the phrase “get your hand off it” in a joking sense to a friend who was driving and using their phone – as a way of enabling him to comment on the unsafe behaviour. However, nearly all participants agreed that they would not say something to a friend if they were using their mobile phone when driving (even if they felt uncomfortable). This viewpoint is linked to a very large number of opinions expressed by participants in this research that mobile phone use when driving is acceptable and that everyone does it – making the behaviour a social norm (t4).

Discussion

Researchers have suggested that the lack of response to advertising efforts is due to the uniform approaches that have been adopted by road safety organisations which fail to address the broader personal and motivational factors that influence the behaviour (Watson et al. 1996; Walsh et al. 2008; Riquelme et al. 2010). Thus, suggesting that social marketing efforts must address social contexts and mores that influence individual’s perceptions about the behaviour (Mengel 2008; Riquelme et al. 2010). Previous campaigns which have been deemed effective in shaping young Australian’s attitudes and behaviours towards risky driving have been those which address the social context and social consequences (c.f. RMS’ ‘No one thinks big of you’ in 2007).

In addition, combining the findings from both stages of the focus group discussion could help better inform road safety authorities for future initiatives. A possibility for further exploration is making changes to the structural environment of drivers – using technology to fight technology! A mobile phone app that can be switched on, similar to flight mode, could be essential when obtaining or renewing a licence or automatically installed when signing up to a new phone contract. Police could be given powers to do ‘random phone checks’ to determine if drivers are disabling their phones when driving (in conjunction with random breath tests) – overcoming the problems with detection of phone use and potentially equating the anti-social behaviour of drink-driving with driver distraction. New cars could also be designed to automatically block incoming/outgoing calls (with the exception of emergency numbers), or sound an alarm (similar to the seatbelt warning device) if mobile phone use is detected.

Conclusion

Given the social norm status of this driving behaviour, other social marketing measures are required than simply videos/advertisements. This research has identified many problems with message acceptance caused by a lack of perceived severity, susceptibility and response efficacy - but mostly due to the current low self-efficacy of this young-driver target audience.
References


