

Cell Phoning and Texting While Driving: Multitasking Ourselves to Death

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Abstract

A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted on the consequences of cell phone use while operating a vehicle. We discussed why talking and texting on cell phones are so popular through the analysis of our interviews with police officers, driving instructors, and parents of teens and young adults. The participants came from central, northeastern, northwestern, and southeastern Connecticut. All had exposure with respect to the effects of cell phone usage problem. The study reached a point of theoretical saturation or redundancy by which the analysis no longer resulted in new themes. We concluded that the discoveries revealed the necessity for education, expansion of technology, and additional driver education preparation, which may provide a path for leadership to help solve the problem.

Keywords

human communication, communication studies, social sciences, culture, technology, communication technologies, mass communication, education, educational research

Introduction

Cellular phone usage while driving is on the increase in the United States and globally. Distracted driving caused by cellular phone operation includes talking and texting (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration [NHTSA], 2010). Studies by Cramer, Mayer, and Ryan (2007); Farmer, Braitman, and Lund (2010); and Wilson and Stimpson (2010) found that conversing and texting on a mobile communication device while driving have resulted in major injuries and fatalities. The studies addressed the educational, social, and cultural aspects of cellular phone usage while driving, and explored what strategies can be implemented to address the issue. The educational concepts promoted effective solutions to overcome the problem.

Driving in this age of technological advancement presents certain challenges. Awareness and education are necessary components to achieving the goals of driver safety and the safety of others. Cellular phone communication while driving is a global issue that draws the attention of traffic authorities, media, legislators, corporations, and cell phone providers. Understanding and addressing this issue, especially through police authorities, driver's education programs, and parents of young drivers contributed to the ongoing debates on ways to minimize the danger and consequences of driving while cell phoning.

Background

Modern technology has many challenges and provides a means of social and economic development. Results from the research of Wilson and Stimpson (2010) suggested that the causes of distracted driving that have caused many individuals dramatic injuries and fatal vehicle collisions are due to talking and texting on mobile phones while driving. The consequences of communication by cellular phone while operating a motor vehicle have led to the creation of new laws to ban the behavior. Because young drivers frequently engage in distracted driving, the risks of automobile accidents are greater among college students than they are among older drivers (Hosking, Young, & Regan, 2009). Adult drivers participate in the behavior, but every year, society loses a significant number of young people to fatal motor vehicle accidents caused by cell phone use while driving. This trend is affecting the population of the world.

We explored the lived experiences of police officers, parents, and driving instructors with regard to talking and texting on cellular phones while driving. The perceptions,

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reactions, and contributions of the participants in response to communicating on mobile phones while driving were important for the investigation of the topic. We hope that our study will lead to increased public awareness. The result showed the need for increased social networking and driver's education programs to address the problem of excessive cellular phone use while driving.

Method

The qualitative phenomenological study included interviews with police officers, driving instructors, and parents of teens and young adults. The study included interviewing a sample of 20 participants experienced with cell phone use while driving. The participants of the study were police officers, including state troopers, lieutenants, and sergeants, driving instructors, and parents of teens and young adults. The study targeted individuals from different regions of Connecticut, but the participants are not significantly different in terms of socioeconomic values or educational background. The sample for the study consisted of eight police officers, eight parents of teens and young adults, and four driving instructors. The demographic characteristics of the participants were based on gender, education, age, years of experience for the police officers and driving instructors, and the number of teen drivers and young adults the parents had. There were 9 females and 11 males in the study. Thirty-five percent of them had only high school education and training, and sixty-five percent of them were college-educated. The age group of the participants for the main study ranged from 25 to 65 years. The police officers had experience that ranged from 5 years to 52 years. The driving instructors had experience that began at 1 year to 25 years, and the parents of teens and young adults had 1 to 3 children who are teen drivers. The participants were expected to give voluntary consent to participate in the study and answer questions about their lived experiences and perceptions on cellular phone use while driving by responding to the following interview questions:

1. Based on your experiences and perceptions, what influences people to use their cellular phones while driving?
2. What situations involving usage of cellular phones while operating a motor vehicle have had a lasting impact on you and influenced your opinion on this topic?
3. Have you observed an increase in cellular phone usage since the implementation of the cell phone law in 2008?
4. With regard to behavior relative to cellular phone usage, what do you see as the difference between teenage drivers and older experienced drivers?
5. What improvement do you feel would improve driver education to help reduce the problem?
6. How do you feel society at large can contribute to the work of driving instructors/educators and police forces to significantly reduce the usage of cellular devices while driving and increase safety of drivers, passengers, and pedestrians?
7. How do you think the inventors and makers of cellular phone technology can help reduce and/or avoid the problem?
8. What role should local, state, and/or federal government assume in an effort to help ameliorate the problem?
9. What impact do you think education will have in reducing the rate of car accidents caused by distracted driving?
10. In spite of warnings and impending risks, why do you think some drivers ignore these warnings and continue to talk and text on cell phones while driving?

The participants engaged in discussion and answered questions pertaining to the problem of talking and texting on cellular phones while driving. The approach involved data collection that was suitable for exploring the problem such as open-ended audio-recorded interviews. The time period involved for the data collection was approximately 4 weeks. The qualitative method also involved data analysis that included identifying and classifying the sections of data, which maintained consistency leading to the identification of themes.

Results

A qualitative phenomenological study on cell phone usage while driving was conducted through interviewing eight police officers, four driving instructors, and eight parents of teens and young adults to better understand why cell phones usage while driving is so popular. Six themes were discovered related to cell phone use while driving. The themes were (a) education, (b) distraction, (c) technology control, (d) cell phone law, (e) driver education, and (f) invincibility.

Theme 1: Education

The respondents envision that education will have a huge and successful impact for leadership in cellular phone use while driving. All participants cited reasons why education would be effective for leadership concerning the issue of talking and texting on cell phones while driving. The chief reason cited by the participants was that education would make a big difference and cause a serious reduction in the use of talking and texting on cell phones while driving. As one of the participants stated, "Education is power and the more people know, the better off we all are." Sixty-five percent of respondents indicated that education would have a huge impact and would make drivers more aware of the

dangers involved in the practice, which would produce positive results. Another participant commented,

I think education is key. I think between the parents and the school, everybody needs to work as a team. It can't just come from the school. It can't just come from law enforcement or just parents. I think when everybody is on the same page, that's when you start getting answers. I think if law enforcement is doing their part by enforcing the laws and schools are doing their part by educating, the parents are setting examples by having these talks with their kids, I think that's when you're going to have results. I think if one of those parts is floundering, that's when you're not going to have a buy-in.

Theme 2: Distraction

Among the police officers, driving instructors, and parents of teens and young adults who were participants in the study, 65% of the respondents reported that younger drivers are more distracted than older experienced drivers. Many of the respondents stated that the concept of multitasking appears to be easier done by older experienced drivers. The behaviors of constantly talking and especially texting on cell phones while driving cause distraction, and younger drivers are more apt to be susceptible to the distraction. A participant stated, "Teenage drivers, because of their inexperience with driving to begin with, when they have the cell phones, they're more apt to not be able to react as well as adults."

In general, participants cited measurements of inexperience and inability to focus more concretely for distraction, which appear to be found in younger drivers over the practice of multitasking for older drivers. As one of the police officer participants stated,

I think as a teenage driver you are still learning how to drive, so having more distractions makes it a lot more dangerous because you're still not, you haven't developed the skills you need to be a very safe driver now, for on top of that, some pretty distracting behaviors, you're making it much more risky. I think that kind of diminishes as someone gets more experienced; I think they're more apt to be able to multitask when they're driving.

Teenagers are more easily attracted to present fulfillment. The distraction is that teenagers as well as adults realize that they are living in a growing technological world, which facilitates communication, and they see the cell phone as accommodating a need for relationships or interdependence. The cell phone therefore becomes an important tool to meet that need.

Theme 3: Technology Control

Individuals experience satisfaction from cell phones from the different features involved. Some participants reported exploring different types of control that may possibly be utilized through technology due to the concern regarding the issue of cell phone use while driving. Respondents believed

that technology can highly contribute to the avoidance of cell phoning while driving.

Theme 4: Cell Phone Law

The respondents expressed different beliefs concerning the effect of the cell phone law that was implemented in 2008. In 2008, Connecticut passed a law restricting drivers 18 years or older to only use hands-free devices to legally operate cell phones or mobile devices (Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles, 2013). The law further restricted drivers 16 or 17 years of age from any type of cell phone or mobile device use even if hands-free accessories were present (Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles, 2013). Exceptions to this law only include drivers in emergency situations, ambulance drivers, firefighters, and peace officers (Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles, 2013).

Thirty percent of the respondents believed that there was an increase in the use of cell phones while driving since the law was enacted, and 20% believed that there was a decrease; however, 45% believed that there has been no change in the behavior of drivers since the law took effect, and 5% were unknown to whether there was increase, decrease, or no change. People ignore the law because the urge to use the cell phone is so strong and tempting that the law becomes secondary. A police officer participant stated,

I honestly don't know if there is an increase, but there is a vast use of the devices. People are continuing to use them no matter what the law is, and I have stopped people and given tickets to operators who have shown a first offense on their driving record and issued a ticket for the second offense.

In addition, a driving instructor participant stated,

Honestly, I think it starts with the parents. Teenagers and kids growing up have seen their parents talking on cell phones and using their cell phones while they've been passengers in the vehicle. They see their parents doing it while they get into the car. They're going to do it as well, even though their parents might say, "Don't do it." Their parents do it, and I think that's where it is going to start. Once the parents put the phones down and stop, that will go a long way in helping us curb texting among the teenagers.

Laws usually do not prevent people from doing things. Laws may inhibit people for a moment or brief period of time, but an effective educational system will help to reduce the problem. Education aims at a development of mental alertness and personal responsibility for the results of individual behavior.

Theme 5: Driver Education

Driver education is extremely important in this issue as it concerns what is taught in driving school. The respondents explained that driver education should include more visual

demonstrations of the different types of risks and dangers involved in talking and texting while driving. The demonstrations would provide a preview for alertness while driving. One of the participants stated, "I think there has to be a lot of stress on how quickly, when you're distracted, you can get into an accident." The participants commented that emphasizing more on the different consequences involved in talking and texting while driving will lessen the hazardous outcomes of cell phone use while driving. Demonstrations would be helpful because they would illustrate what happens while driving and emphasize the need to be observant and attentive to the everyday facts of driving. When drivers are not fully aware of the consequences due to a lack of attentiveness, alarming issues arise.

Theme 6: Invincibility

The feeling of invincibility was the response given predominantly by the participants as the reason why drivers continue to communicate on cell phones while driving. Most of them viewed invincibility as an obvious behavior in teens. These drivers do not deal with what actually happens; they believe it will never happen to them. Drivers become incapable of dealing with actual facts because they are unaware and inattentive to their surroundings. Many individuals think that the circumstances will always be in their favor. These drivers appear to be of the opinion that they are capable of escaping all forms of risks.

The respondents who participated in the study were geographically dispersed. The exploration of the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants by means of a qualitative phenomenological study provided a better understanding of drivers who communicate on mobile devices while driving. The themes that were gathered as a result of the study represent a collection of knowledge pertaining to the problem. Furthermore, the themes provide evidence that leaders are very aware of the issue and project insight into the problem. Police officers, driving instructors, and parents may have an effective influence on drivers to take more responsibility. The discoveries that emerged from the responses of these selected individuals also show that the problem is increasing and action could be taken.

Cell phones while driving lead to many serious dangers and fatal consequences. To achieve the goal of minimizing the distraction caused by cell phones while driving, leaders must educate wisely and choose the technology that can provide and ensure that appropriate processes are correctly aligned for the problem. The challenges to meet the needs essential for working on this problem include having drivers receive education from leaders such as police officers, driving instructors, parents, schools, the law, and the community in general.

Education will provide drivers with knowledge applicable to the use of cell phones while driving. People often make poor choices because they are ignorant of the consequences

of their actions; therefore, education becomes a necessity. The areas of concern such as distraction, invincibility, cell phone law, technology, and driver education are areas that can be informed and improved with education. The information from education can encourage change from one kind of behavior to another kind of behavior.

The problem can be overcome through a system of education. Educational leaders could be aware of the themes gathered to help provide an effective education for drivers. This awareness may address subject matter that is of concern to the whole nation. The problem can only be overcome through a system that is knowledgeable of the dangers of cell phone use while driving.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Educational leaders could be proactive to produce more positive result for drivers. This leadership will help to illustrate the dangerous consequences of the use of cell phones while driving. The leaders may increase the collaboration and focus of those responsible for imparting the new knowledge. Leadership should include effective communication and collaboration with the law, the schools, and parents. These actions may considerably enhance the necessary leadership. We recommend an ongoing communication between the educational/community leaders and drivers on this issue.

Recommendation 2

Driver education could strongly emphasize retraining and guidance for all drivers through recurring periodic seminars. Additional training that focuses directly on the dangers involved in cell phoning while driving may be helpful. The training could be integrated with questions and selections of everyday driving events, particularly with cell phones. This process is most invaluable as a recommendation of the study.

Recommendation 3

A third recommendation is to expand the use of technology to detect the use of cellular phones while driving. In some states, automatic photos are taken when drivers pass through a red light. This technique allows the law enforcement people to identify and penalize the driver. Decreasing cellular phone use while driving could be done in a similar manner.

Conclusion

Educating the drivers will be very beneficial to society. The scope of the study was a sample of eight police officers, eight parents of teens and young adults, and four driving instructors with lived experiences and perceptions of cell phone use while driving. The opinions of the participants provided suggestions

to enhance education such as better communication, improved collaboration, effective driver education, and parental involvement. For future studies, information developed from this research may enhance the findings of further study.

The participants in the study were from different regions of the state of Connecticut in the United States of America. Replication of the current study to wider areas that involve more states, countries, and populations may lead to the development of new additional themes. Organizations concerned with the well-being of people such as churches, universities, and other institutions of learning could become involved. Further studies could also involve interviewing additional authorities such as governors and other professionals. Significant studies could also occur by researchers forming groups and performing replications of the current study and comparing their simultaneous findings.

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Author Biographies

Judy Honoria Rosaire Telemaque was born in the Caribbean Island of Antigua of Caribbean Parents, Rev. Reuben B. A. Telemaque and Brenda R. Telemaque. She received her primary education in the Caribbean and continued her education in Connecticut, where she migrated with her family at the age of twelve. Her love for education led her to pursue the degree in Educational Leadership and focus upon areas of serious need such as the immediacy of the need for information concerning the consequences of texting and talking on cellular phones while driving.

Chizoba "Dr. Zee" Madueke is a profesor and practitioner of management, leadership, organizational dynamics, research methods, and public policy. He has lectured for Universities in Europe, Asia, and parts of the Middle East. Currently, he works as a leadership and management consultant in corporate training and conducts research, management, and leadership seminars.