

“Driving” vs. Road Safety: A Grass Roots Exploration of the Salience of Road Safety

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Abstract

Road user behaviour and communications research typically interrogates micro-elements of road user attitudes and behaviour, often limited to a specific behavioural issue. Transport for NSW recently undertook research with a more “macro” perspective: a people-centric qualitative study to explore motorists’ relationship with driving and how it fits into their lives. Automatic behaviours, mood and other everyday factors were found to influence the salience of road safety on a given journey, while situational factors acted as triggers for more conscious driving behaviours. Ultimately, road safety was not regarded as a “top-of-mind” concern in the complexity of modern life.

Background

Trauma on NSW roads continued to increase in 2017, with 392 lives* lost. Transport for NSW (TfNSW) launched Towards Zero as a goal, strategy and communications campaign in the prior year. While many communications initiatives were undertaken in response to the rising road toll, understanding of the salience and social importance of road safety in the community remained limited.

Previous qualitative research from mid-2016 suggested that there was a level of disengagement with the concept of road trauma and therein the broader, routine task of driving safely. This remained a key challenge in relation to growing community understanding of, and support for, the Towards Zero vision.

Aims and Methodology

TfNSW engaged Ipsos to undertake an exploratory research study to examine the underlying attitudes held by NSW drivers, seeking to identify the broad level of community engagement on road safety. Specific aims included:

- To explore the broader social context surrounding NSW.
- To understand external influences and pressures on driving behaviours in the context of weekly routines.
- To explore awareness, consideration and salience of road safety in daily life:
 - how and when road safety becomes relevant;
 - barriers which limit its prioritization; and
 - perceptions of normative road behaviours.

Ipsos proposed a methodological approach centred on in-depth interviews (n=24) but also incorporated driving journals and elements of observation. Fieldwork was conducted in July–August 2017 in metropolitan and regional NSW. Drivers of all major vehicle types, including motorcycles, were included in the research sample.

Findings and Implications

The study identified a number of key factors affecting the salience of road safety during a given journey. These include automatic behaviours facilitated by “System 1” thinking (see Figure 1), mood and emotional temperature prior to driving, driver multi-tasking, self-adaptation of road rules and previous driving experience.

<i>Most driving situations</i>	<i>Some driving situations</i>
“System 1” Thinking	“System 2” Thinking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fast Processing • Unconscious • Automatic • Simple decisions • Prone to error 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow processing • Conscious • Effortful • More complex decisions • More reliable

Figure 1. Characteristics of “System 1” and “System 2” thinking

Triggers to induce more conscious driving behaviours (facilitated by “System 2” thinking) include immediate situational factors such as unfamiliar roads, inclement weather conditions, visible enforcement, roadworks and erratic behaviour by other drivers.

In addition, the relationship between motorists and their vehicles was divergent and often an extension of their personality. For some drivers, their vehicle represented a “retreat” from everyday pressures, while others perceived them to be a space over which they asserted full control.

This research study questions the current social weight and importance around road safety as a community issue – a reality that is overlooked and under-reported in many attitudinal studies. Road safety ends up competing with everyday concerns (e.g. busy routines) and broader social issues (e.g. health and employment) for attention, even when people are undertaking the task of driving. The study provides a realistic understanding of the societal context in which road safety communications must operate – and the critical need to encourage “System 2” thinking every time a driver enters their vehicle.

*Provisional data.

References

Transport for NSW, 2017. *Deep Diving NSW Drivers’ Road Safety Attitudes and Behaviours*. Unpublished report prepared by Ipsos Public Affairs for Transport for NSW.