

Driving is Boring... and other highlights from ethnographic research with young risk-taking drivers

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Abstract

Although progress is being made, young drivers still continue to be overrepresented in fatal and serious injury crashes in Victoria. In order to continue to reduce the numbers of young people who die or are seriously injured on our roads, we need to further our understanding of why young drivers engage in risky driving behaviours.

In 2003, the TAC commissioned Charlie Cochrane Research and Planning to conduct ethnographic research with risky young drivers. The aim of this ethnographic research was to try to enter as far as possible into the worlds of young risk-taking drivers, gain their trust and examine risk-taking driving within the contexts of their lives. This kind of approach was quite different to conventional qualitative research.

The findings from the 2003 research project were very insightful and have influenced the TAC's youth programs for many years. Having been a decade since the original research, the TAC wanted to repeat this research to see what, if anything, is different for young drivers now. Of particular interest was the influence of new media, in terms of distractions while driving, but also potential to communicate with young people via this channel.

This paper outlines the highlights from the new research with a particular focus on distractions, and the motivational and cultural reasons for risky driving behaviour within our sample of young risky drivers.

Introduction

Although progress is being made, young drivers still continue to be overrepresented in fatal and serious injury crashes in Victoria. Research shows that inexperience and risk taking are the key reasons that young drivers are at greater risk of a crash.

Research demonstrates that most young drivers do the right thing, most of time, however there is a small percentage of the young driver population who regularly take risks on the roads. These young drivers are also particularly hard to influence with road safety programs and initiatives. Many of these young people have what could be referred to as a risky lifestyle – a lifestyle where they take risks in many aspects of their lives (drug use or abuse, vandalism, theft, extreme sports etc) – not just on the road. This group of young people (particularly those at the more extreme end of the risk taking spectrum) are also very difficult to recruit for research purposes.

Crash data shows that novice driver crashes are most likely to occur in the first six months of solo driving. Crash risk reduces quickly in the first year of licensure and then continues to decrease gradually. Inexperience is the most significant factor contributing to young driver crashes.

Driving experience reduces the mental effort needed to drive, improves judgement and anticipation and reduces driving errors. The Victorian Graduated Licensing System (GLS) now requires learners to hold their Learner Permit for at least 12 months and to get at least 120 hours of supervised driving practice that must be logged in a log book. An interim evaluation of the GLS (Healy,

Catchpole, & Harrison, 2012) has demonstrated positive outcomes for young drivers (27% reduction in casualty crashes of first year drivers).

Risky driving behaviour can be intentional or unintentional. Unintentional risk taking is probably related to inexperience and/or lack of recognition that their driving behaviour is risky. However, knowing that driving behaviour is risky, doesn't necessarily mean that a young driver will stop engaging in that behaviour. Young drivers tend to underestimate the likelihood that they will crash, and at the same time overestimate their driving ability.

Australian Institute of Family Studies research (Vasallo et al., 2007), that studied a cohort of over 1000 young people in Victoria from birth, indicates that of the population of young people surveyed, around 7% were high risk drivers, 29% were moderately risky and 64% were low risk.

To discourage risk taking behaviour, such as speeding, drink driving or mobile phone use probationary drivers can only accumulate 5 demerit points before having their licence suspended. They must also have a good driving record to move from one phase to the next. There are also several specific restrictions for P Platers. In order to continue to reduce the numbers of young people who die or are seriously injured on our roads, we need to further our understanding of why young drivers engage in risky driving behaviours.

Risk Taking Behaviour

Existing research (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006) demonstrates that there are a number of factors that underlie the intentionally risky driving behaviour of young people:

Biological Factors

Neurobiology research has shown that the specific wiring of each individual's brain is causal to behaviour output. Brain development research has found that beyond the age of 18, the human brain is still developing, especially those areas in the frontal lobe that deal with "executive functions" like planning, impulse control, reasoning and the integration of information. More recent research has also found that the parts of the brain thought to be responsible for social cues and reward recognition develop early in adolescence. It appears that there may be a maturational imbalance in the brain during late adolescence and early adulthood which may make young people more likely to take risks.

Essentially, risk taking is a normal part of human development; however, there are individual differences in the level of risk taking and this may be where the opportunities for intervention lie.

Gender

It is clear that young male drivers' risk levels are much higher than those of young females, even when exposure is taken into account. Men tend to drive more than women, and women are more likely to be more safety-oriented than men. Men also tend to drive more for leisure.

Personality

The personality traits of extraversion, low conscientiousness and low agreeableness have been found to be related to high crash involvement. Sensation seeking is another trait that has been found to be related to crash risk. Several other traits have also been linked to risky driving: mild social deviance, hostility, aggression, impulsiveness, emotional liability, locus of control, antisocial motivation and low altruism.

Overall there is a relatively weak, but consistent, relationship between personality traits and crash involvement, but a relatively strong relationship between personality traits and the propensity to commit driving violations.

Social Norms

Important influences on behaviour are “subjective norms”, which refer to norms that are believed to exist in the social environment, among people who are closely associated. These may also be reinforced by popular culture. Peers and parents are a key influence on social norms. Norms may be injunctive or descriptive. Injunctive norms are people’s perceptions of what behaviours are approved or disapproved of by others, and descriptive norms are people’s perceptions of how people actually behave.

Ethnographic Research 2003

In 2003 the TAC commissioned Charlie Cochrane Research and Planning (CCRP) (Charlie Cochrane Research and Planning, 2003) to conduct exploratory research with young risk-taking drivers.

The aim of this ethnographic research was to try to enter as far as possible into the worlds of young risk-taking drivers, gain their trust and examine risk-taking driving within the contexts of their lives. This kind of approach was quite different to conventional research. Where data analytics, quantitative surveys and even traditional qualitative research debriefs provide flattened snapshots, ethnography seeks to generate a more empathic understanding of consumers – their lives, their values and how they live, work and play. Clifford Geertz coined the term ‘thick descriptions’ to describe the way ethnography tries to paint a vivid picture, to tell stories, that help clients and communicators make the empathetic leap to see how their consumers see the world, to understand their needs, drivers and behaviours.

The potency of storytelling in the social marketing context is based around the idea that stories are baked into the way we humans think and make sense of the world. Our brains don't handle statistics well, but they do like real stories, stories about people. Daniel Kahneman in his bestseller *Thinking Fast and Slow* demonstrates that humans often believe individual stories in favour of statistics to the contrary. Government and business environments are often dominated by the analytic and the intellectual: PowerPoint charts, tables of data and even academic papers like this. Stories engage people in a different way: surprising them, making them think, challenging their pre-conceptions and importantly giving people a new shared language for talking about their customers and users. This is particularly powerful when we are trying to engage with a target group (young risk-taking drivers) who see the world quite differently from how we do.

CCRP conducted 8 in depth video interviews with 18-20 year old male drivers, 4 mini-peer-groups with 16-20 year old L and P-plates and 2 groups with passengers. All had been involved with risk-taking driving and were considered mid-range risk takers (not just a one off, but not habitual/lifestyle choice). Participants were from inner Melbourne, outer Melbourne and Shepparton (regional area) and surrounds. All participants were male except one of the passenger groups.

This research demonstrated that:

1. For young people, risk taking is a normal part of driving (and life in general). Demonising risk-taking is unhelpful
2. There is no magic bullet
3. Authoritative “finger wagging” approaches are rejected
4. Shock messages are often rejected

5. Risky driving for its own sake is motivated by factors such as adrenaline, fun, boredom, bravado and competitiveness
6. Exacerbating factors include peer pressure, the excitement of the moment, a sense of invincibility and a tendency to dismiss serious consequences.
7. Of the communication routes explored the area of “mates” and “taking responsibility for your mates” was the most fertile.
8. Communications need to be real/authentic
9. There is a need to hear the message in a fresh way, to provoke reassessment; need to leverage several different angles.

The findings from this research helped to inform several of the TAC’s youth public education campaigns and initiatives. In particular, the Make a Film. Make a Difference. (MAFMAD) short film competition had the key message “Your mates life is in your hands” and allowed young people to create communications for other young people. The research also informed our Vanessa program which is well accepted and used by young Victorians at major events, such as music festivals. Vanessa is a large truck, fitted out with interactive activities and lots of free merchandise. However, the main purpose is to provide free breath testing for event patrons. The Vanessa staff are young, and are trained to interact with patrons to spread road safety messages in a non-authoritative way. Vanessa program has also expanded to include two other vehicles, a Van that can attend smaller events and a Ute which attends more regional and light commercial appropriate events. These two vehicles are also 5 star safety rated and help to spread vehicle safety messages.

Ethnographic Research 2013

In 2013 it was time to review our youth risk taking public education, particularly MAFMAD, and given the value obtained from the previous in-depth research, it was identified that conducting similar research again would be useful. It was also identified that a new area of interest, that didn’t even exist when the original research was conducted, was the role of mobile phones and other new media, especially smart phones. Of interest was the role that smart phones may play as a distraction while driving but also the potential to communicate with young people via digital, social and new media.

CCRP (Charlie Cochrane Research and Planning, 2013) was commissioned to conduct the updated ethnographic research.

Method

Qualitative research typically sources subjects from a list of people who have signed up as willing to participate in focus groups. These subjects are typically mainstream and there may also be some self-selection bias; for this ethnographic research it was important to source non-traditional participants and a variety of non-traditional recruitment methods were used to reach suitable subjects. CCRP found a pool of possible subjects through snowballing – friends of friends of friends, through contacts at youth clubs, via lawyers acting for clients, through sporting clubs and networks of non-traditional sports, through contacts in the music and club scene etc. as well as through names of repeat offenders sourced from the TAC. Initial contact was typically made through Facebook by a researcher who was in the same age-group as our target. To maximise the chance of positive engagement, to build trust and understanding it was vital that this initial contact felt natural and matched participants’ normal modes of communication. Through this initial contact and via phone conversations CCRP explored the lifestyles, risk taking and driving behaviours of these subjects and matched those to the demographic and regional framework of who we needed to cover. Because ethnography is so concerned with telling stories we looked for different stories, different kinds of risk-taking and a spectrum of attitudes and behaviours across our sample. Over a

period of weeks CCRP built trust with these participants, explaining to them the process and what the research would be used for and reassuring them that they would not be pursued or to get into trouble for admitting to illegal activities or driving behaviours.

See Table 1 for sample spread.

Table 1. Research Participants by Age, Location and Sex

	Non-metro	Outer-suburbs	Inner-subbs
Male 18-21	Rhys 21, Ballarat	Hugh 19, Newport Alex 19, Mont Albert & friends Callum and Martin	Alex 19, Footscray
Male 22-25	Mick 25, Kilmore	Andrew 24, Wyndham Vale	Tom 24, Kensington & Bill
Female 22-25	Shelley 22, Wallan	Tory 19, Pakenham	Maddy 19 Williamstown & friends Victoria and Ellen
Mixed Affinity Group 18-21	Mariko 21, Warburton & fiends Shane and Bronnie		
Mixed Affinity Group 22-25	Byron 24, Ballarat & friends Teesh and Rhys		Ellen 24, Albert Park & friends Emily and Will.

The primary data collection method was filmed, immersion interviews/observations in the homes of participants plus filmed drives and observation of out of home leisure activities. These immersions were supplemented with online driving diaries over two weeks and self-recording of driving using smartphones or mini video cameras which were provided. Follow up observations were conducted which included a review of the self-recorded driving footage.

Discussion

Overall, the findings listed earlier from the 2003 research were confirmed to still hold true for young people. However, the 2013 research also broadened and contemporised our learnings. In 2013 the research participants also included female risk taking drivers. CCRP spent longer with the participants, with more warm up and follow up allowing a deeper understanding of their lives and perspectives. The participants in 2003 tended to be stereotypical “hoons”, whereas the 2013 participants provided a more diverse group of risk-takers with a greater variety of risks. The 2013 research also allowed exploration of new media. See below an outline of some of the new findings from the current research.

Hoons

Although the behaviour of the 2013 participants was quite risky, they didn’t tend to see themselves as “hoons”. They tended to see their motivations as playful, rather than rebellious or aggressive. They also seemed to distance themselves from typical “hoons” and saw that kind of behaviour as belonging to someone else. “Hoon” is seen as a pejorative applied to other people who are disapproved of and distancing themselves from the term and the behaviour may help in some way to justify their risk-taking.

Speeding

Participants reported feeling as though speed limits are too slow; they know the limits and they like to push them. There was a sense of impatience, especially with other slow/bad drivers that were in

their way as well as with congestion. Low level speeding was not seen by the young people as bad or wrong behaviour; everyone else is doing it. In line with other research, the participants felt as though they were better than older drivers; they are at the peak of their physical abilities, more physically capable and have faster reactions. They naturally think they can do everything better/faster, including driving.

Additionally, impatience may be a product of today's society and our expectation that everything happens quickly. A quote from Genevieve Bell, an anthropologist for Intel, sums it up nicely:

“I think we all have a very different sense of time from what we did, say 10 years ago. There has been a collapsing of time in terms of people's expectations for how long things should take. You know, how long is too long. How long before you think ‘why haven't they got back to me’. How long before you're tapping your feet thinking ‘why hasn't this downloaded’, why hasn't that updated’.”

For young people, who have grown up with technology and may adapt to it quicker than older generations, this collapsing of time may be even more exacerbated. The young people in our sample appeared very unwilling to wait and were easily frustrated by waiting, the time it takes to get there or not being able to go as fast as they want. Consistent with other research, the participants did not always plan ahead and allow enough time to get to their destination; some even reported that they planned their departure time based on a journey time that included speeding.

These insights highlight that there may be some benefit in communicating to young people the lack of benefit of rushing, or the idea of chilling out and enjoying the ride.

Impaired Driving

Attitudes to drink driving were consistently negative; drink driving was seen as socially unacceptable. However, several of the participants reported having driven after drinking, getting into a car with someone who had been drinking or even being caught drink driving. Likelihood of being caught was the most motivating factor to not drink driving; the perception of likelihood of being caught seemed to be quite low or very predictable. Some parents even condoned the behaviour (low-level drink driving) or were observed by their children drink driving.

There was a sense that drug driving was not as bad as drink driving. Attitudes did tend to be polarised depending on attitudes to drug use in general; those who don't use drugs were very negative towards drug driving. Of those who did use drugs, those who use less often consider them more dangerous but those who use regularly are habituated to operate while on drugs and tend to think it is less dangerous. There was a perception that “fast drugs” typically make you more alert. The perception of likelihood of being caught was low.

There seems to be some potential to communicate the effects of lower levels of alcohol, and the less severe but more likely consequences e.g., loss of license, loss of job etc. Peer influence also appeared to be powerful; peers condone or discourage impaired driving.

Distractions

Phone use in our sample was very prevalent; participants reported using text messaging, Facebook, maps, Youtube and Instagram while driving. The participants didn't necessarily realise exactly how much they used their phone while driving, or how much they took their eyes off the road. The participants felt that they weren't looking away much, they do it safely, only at red lights, short texts and quick glances.

Some of the participants noted that they find driving incredibly boring and a waste of time. For young people, phone use is a very automatic behaviour, not just while driving but in all aspects of life. Phones are automatically accessed when bored, or even while engaged in other activities, such as watching TV, eating, doing homework etc. Multi-tasking is common for young people, doing one task at a time is rare, and they are constantly stimulated by activities and/or their phone. It is therefore easy to see why they automatically reach for their phone while driving, not just when someone is calling or texting but also when they are bored by the drive.

The participants recognise phone use while driving as a real risk and many of the participants had had near misses while using their phones. Interestingly, the young people reported feeling unsafe when they were in a car with a driver who was using their phone, or when they saw a driver in a car near them using their phone; they had a distrust of others but seem to trust themselves. This cognitive dissonance could provide potential for communication.

Communicating with young people

New media

Young people are on social media all the time. Social media is often a displacement activity; it requires low attention, low intellectual engagement, it provides entertainment and helps relieve boredom. Involvement with brands or causes tends to be quite specific to the young person's personal interests. If they aren't interested, they won't "like" it, or "share" it. Social media is often used on their smart phone where advertising tends to be less prominent.

For marketing on social media to be successful, it needs to be something people want to see, or look at. An important consideration is how people would find it, especially if young people are unlikely to share it. To be shareable it has to be funny, but it is hard to manufacture viral content. The participants noted that they were more likely to engage with content if their friend posted it, and that they are reluctant to sign up or pledge to causes. Facebook tends to be a place for fun, and entertainment and there was some disdain for sad or negative content. This was also confirmed in some focus group research the TAC recently conducted with late P2 probationary drivers.

Shock Tactics

Some participants had been influenced by shock tactic communications, and when viewing other types of approaches, tended to note that they wanted to be shocked. This may be due to familiarity and what they expect, however shock tactics are not the full answer. The participants seemed to be desensitised to shocking messages, and rejected the authoritarian tone because they don't like being told what to do. They tend to reject the shocking and less likely consequences i.e., "that won't happen to me" and "I'm a good driver".

Other approaches

The participants noted that communications needed to be authentic and real, and had a high awareness of inauthentic communications which appeared dramatic and fake. There is a need to be cautious not to patronise or to speak to young people as though they are children. Young people want to be spoken to as adults who make their own decisions. This was also confirmed in TAC research with P2 probationary drivers.

The participants noted playing close attention to their peers, and wanting peer to peer communications. It would appear that this is not as simple as young people communicating to other young people. Some rapport or admiration is probably required for influence to occur.

Young people are very receptive to the TAC's Vanessa program which is a large truck that attends events and provides free breath testing, merchandise and is manned by young people. Participants felt that "Vanessa" was there to help them get home safe but not to tell them what to do and they appreciated this. The Vanessa program was originally informed by the 2003 ethnographic research by CCRP.

Provocative stimulus for policy makers and communicators

Over and above the concrete findings that the research produced, there was great additional value in terms of the thinking, provocation and empathy produced amongst policy-makers and communicators exposed to the research. Contemporary psychological research suggests that narratives trigger a process known as 'transportation'. In this process, immersion in a story enables the audience to transcend their own worlds and be transported into the characters' world. This process generates empathy with the characters and can therefore help expand or transform their worldviews. The stories of our research participants convey an intuitive understanding and were powerful in their ability to provoke new thinking and engagement. So ethnographic research is a way for policy-makers to unpack their own values and helps them see the issues more from the point-of-view of their target audience. It's a very different way for policy-makers to engage with, discuss and understand some of the underlying issues involved.

Conclusion

Risk-taking is a normal part of driving (and in life in general) for young people. Whilst nearly all young drivers take some risks, there is a spectrum of involvement with risk-taking, which varies according to a range of factors including demographics, neurobiology, peer and parental influence etc. The participants in this research often played down or tried to justify the risks they take, when they find themselves thinking about their behaviour or needing to explain it, there is discomfort in that what they recognise themselves doing doesn't match their self-perception.

Our young participants felt that they are good drivers, they are better able to react, multitask etc. than other drivers. After a few years, or even months of driving, they feel experienced and competent to be able to deal with risky situations. They feel they can handle the risks or take calculated risks.

There were some key insights from this research which may help with the development of new initiatives or campaigns. Young risk taking drivers appear to be impatient and frustrated by perceived slow speed limits, congestion and other drivers and this can lead to speeding and aggressive behaviour. Young drivers are also easily bored by driving and the automatic response is to reach for their phone for entertainment. Although these are partly due to the context of young people's lifestyles, there may be potential for fresh communications encouraging them to chill out and enjoy the ride. There is also potential to highlight the cognitive dissonance between their distrust of other's phone use while driving and their trust in their own phone use.

Another key insight is that although social media use is widespread, this does not mean it necessarily provides an easy solution to road safety communications. Advertising through social media is often disliked or rejected. For social media advertising to be successful it needs to be entertaining and sharable – not an easy task with road safety messages! It is also important to remember that awareness does not necessarily lead to behaviour change; there is a fine line between engaging and effective.

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