Graphic PSAs Increase Texting While Driving

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Graphic accident videos cause young adults to text and talk while driving more often.

Young adults are more likely to text and talk on the phone while driving after watching graphic fear appeal videos showing the dangers of doing so, according to a study recently co-published by Dr. Ron Lennon, assistant professor of Marketing in the College of Business at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee.

The study, entitled "Social Marketing and Distracted Driving Behaviors among Young Adults: The Effectiveness of Fear Appeals," recently received a Distinguished Research Award by the Academy of Marketing Studies. It gave 840 students from Florida universities the opportunity to watch two graphic public service announcements showing the dangers of distracted driving and asked them if they would be more or less likely to commit those offenses after viewing.

The group was asked to indicate on a scale from one to seven how likely they were to text/talk and drive before and after watching the videos. Before the videos were shown, the average for texting and driving was 3.44 and for talking and driving was 4.31. After watching the videos, the average for texting went up to 3.54, a 3 percent increase, while the average for talking went up to 5.15, a statistically significant increase of 11 percent.

This phenomenon, known as the "boomerang effect," is the same

phenomenon seen with smoking warnings, according to Dr. Lennon. "People see smoking warnings and it causes them to smoke more often," he said.

Research indicates that many well-intentioned campaigns to get us to modify our poor behavior are having the opposite effect, and that attempts to restrict a person's freedom often cause them to respond with an equally strong counter response.

While the people studied indicated that they were more likely to drive distractedly, they also believe that offenders should be arrested, fined, or ticketed for the behaviors.

The surprising results of the survey concern Dr. Lennon, who believes that law enforcement and PSAs that are even more graphic are going to be key in decreasing the number of deaths per year due to distracted driving. Currently, 19 states have laws in place regarding cell phone use and driving, with many more considering legislation.

Governor Charlie Christ has agreed to sign a text messaging ban once it makes it through the legislature, but Allie's Law, named for a 17-year-old who was killed in a head-on crash, and several other texting-while-driving bills failed to make it through the legislature in April of 2010.

"The lack of such a law," said Dr. Lennon, "is a disappointment for the state of Florida."

According to the World Health Organization, more than 1.2 million people die in road crashes worldwide each year and another 20 to 50 million are injured annually. Crash injuries are the leading cause of death for 15-29 year-olds.

In fact, the WHO projects that by 2030 crash fatalities will become the

5th leading cause of all deaths worldwide, surpassing HIV/AIDS, all forms of cancer, violence, and diabetes. Between 80-90% of traffic accidents are caused by driver behaviors, dangerous and avoidable behaviors like distracted driving.

"Being distracted while driving, and especially the use of cell phones, has been shown to be worse than driving drunk," said Dr. Lennon. "The scary thing is that most people don't realize that, and even if they do, it doesn't change their behavior."

The comparison of using a cell phone while driving to drunk driving has been studied extensively. Researchers have found that the drivers on cell phones drive more slowly, brake more slowly and are more likely to crash than drunk drivers. In fact, out of forty participants in one study, the three who crashed into the car ahead of them were chatting away. None of the drunken drivers crashed.

Studies also suggest that drivers who send or receive a text message tend to take their eyes off the road for about five seconds, and are eight times more likely to crash.

While mainstream fear appeals may not work to deter distracted driving behaviors, the response to much more extreme graphic appeals in other countries suggests that horrific scenes may have a stronger positive effect. The PSAs in Dr. Lennon's study showed cars that had been totaled by accidents due to texting and talking on the phone while driving. Some studies have shown that even more graphic appeals, such as graphic videos of death or injuries from the behaviors, may make a difference. Dr. Lennon's respondents confirmed that they may be more affected by a much more graphic video.

"People believe that things won't happen to them until they are shocked into changing their behavior," said Dr. Lennon. "The problem is that

there is often a public outcry in the United States when the most extreme graphic appeals are made. However, web sites like YouTube are great to get those out because they reach the age group that is the most likely to drive distractedly, and hopefully people see that and change their behavior."

The most effective deterrent to distracted driving though, according to Dr. Lennon, is stronger state laws.

"Hopefully we'll see more legislation pass in the future," said Dr. Lennon. "If one person lived, it would be worth it. Whatever it takes to get people to put down the phone."

Provided by University of South Florida