

Researchers say fear of death may curb youthful texting and driving

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While drivers tend to believe it is dangerous to text and drive, many say they can still do it safely. Now Washington State University researchers say drivers can be discouraged from the practice with public service announcements that evoke their fear of death in graphic terms.

Looking to curb what former U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood called "a national epidemic," WSU marketing professors Ioannis Kareklas and Darrel Muehling recently explored driver attitudes toward texting. They examined various ways to discourage texting while [driving](#) through public service announcements, or PSAs. They report their findings in the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*.

The study comes as distracted driving is implicated in thousands of fatalities and hundreds of thousands of injuries each year. The researchers cite a National Safety Council estimate that distracted cell phone use accounts for more than one-fourth of all traffic accidents, with as many as 200,000 stemming specifically from texting while driving.

There is also evidence suggesting that texting while driving may be addictive, said Kareklas.

"This presents additional difficulties for social marketers attempting to move the needle on this issue," he said, and creates an even greater need for PSAs to dissuade drivers from the behavior.

Kareklas and Muehling focused on young drivers, who have been singled out as more likely to text and drive than older drivers. In an exploratory study using a nationally representative sample of 357 drivers between 18 and 49 years old, they found the respondents generally held a negative attitude toward texting while driving. Still, one-fourth of them said they would probably do it in the following month, as they tended to rationalize their behavior.

"I only glance long enough to read a word or two, look at the road, glance again, and so on," said one respondent. "This isn't that dangerous."

"I use one hand to text and one hand to drive," said another, "so I maintain control of the car."

More than 40 states have banned texting and driving or enacted other restrictions. But research by the Highway Data Loss Institute found this may increase the danger of texting as drivers move their phones down and out of sight to avoid being caught.

Kareklas and Muehling reviewed previous research on the effect of promotional campaigns against texting and driving and saw that few measured their effectiveness in changing driver attitudes and intentions. Based on the findings of their initial investigation, they focused on emotional appeals as opposed to appeals based simply on information, which are more prone to make people defensive.

Previous studies suggested emotional appeals reach people on a personal level, get more attention and are more memorable. But if they are too emotional, they may be dismissed as manipulative.

The researchers wanted ads to evoke an awareness of one's inevitable death in the hope that drivers would connect texting and driving with

their mortality and be persuaded to stop. In a second study, they first had undergraduate students identify five symbols of death and found that the skull-and-crossbones symbol was much more common than crosses, coffins and tombstones, among others. A second group of students overwhelmingly said the image reminded them of death.

The researchers then had a new national sample of online participants view four different PSAs. All had a picture of a texting driver, the headline, "Texting While Driving: A Dangerous Combination" and ad copy saying, "Please don't text and drive." One added text saying [texting](#) and driving kills 3,000 people a year, one added a skull and crossbones, and a third ad had both the extra text and image.

Kareklas and Muehling found that young people exposed to the PSAs with the skull and crossbones imagery "reported significantly lower attitudes and intentions to text and drive."

The findings, they said, "suggest that the use of promotional campaigns featuring relatively strong emotional references to death/dying may be an effective persuasive technique."

Provided by Washington State University

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