

Getting the message across: Can active symbols on road signs save lives?

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If you're traveling at 60 miles per hour, just a few milliseconds can mean the difference between life and death when you need to come to a quick stop. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, drivers react more quickly to road signs with symbols depicting motion.

"Warning signs are static visuals, yet they can vary in their ability to evoke a sense of movement. For example, the children depicted in a school crossing sign can be drawn as if they were running or walking. We discovered that more dynamic [warning signs](#) lead to quicker responses and changes in behavior," write authors Luca Cian (University of Virginia), Aradhna Krishna (University of Michigan), and Ryan S. Elder (Brigham Young University).

Five studies examined how perceived movement on road signs impacts drivers' reaction time. The authors used eye tracking technology, surveys, and driving simulations to understand how drivers react to more active symbols. Simulated scenarios ranged from driving by 'children crossing' signs near schools and stopping for crosswalks near malls to walking past wet floor and caution signs in stores. In each study, drivers reacted more quickly and stopped sooner when signs had more dynamic symbols.

The importance of symbols depicting movement on traffic signs is not yet fully understood and many signs use symbols with little perceived movement. These findings could help public policy makers reduce accident-related injuries and even mortality rates from traffic accidents

at very little cost by redesigning signs for highways, crosswalks, schools, and construction zones.

"While we have chosen to focus on traffic icons, our findings extend well beyond this domain. Since more dynamic [symbols](#) can impact behavior, increasing dynamism in recycling icons, packaging for health foods, and other contexts where behavioral changes are desirable should prove valuable for public policy and consumer welfare," the authors conclude.

More information: Luca Cian, Aradhna Krishna, and Ryan S. Elder. "A Sign of Things to Come: Behavioral Change through Dynamic Iconography." *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2015.

Provided by University of Chicago

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