

Lack of attention, self-control predict dangerous texting behaviors

April 21 2015, by Jared Wadley



Texting while driving or walking can be dangerous, but people still engage in the behavior without thinking.

A new study suggests that individuals can resist the lure of dangerous texting if they become mindful of their surroundings, have the self-control to focus on one task and not have it as an automatic behavior.

This behavior, described as "automaticity," is the limited conscious attention or awareness of one's behavior, the researchers said.

"Our study underlines the importance of considering the automaticity of a specific technology behavior in combination with self-regulating personality traits," said Elliot Panek, the study's lead author and former University of Michigan researcher who now works at the University of Alabama.

Texting presents a high risk to drivers and pedestrians because cell phones—especially multi-use smartphones—offer users many options to occupy their time and many cognitive triggers that cue their use automatically, oftentimes with little awareness of what they are doing.

"The attention required by text messaging is intermittent, focused and visual, and at the same time requires individuals to divide attention between the immediate physical space and an imagined social space," Panek said. "It is easily embedded in daily activities that fail to fully engage individuals' attention with novel stimuli, such as driving or walking, while drawing attention away from important aspects of those activities."

The data included responses from 925 college students and adults who were asked about the extent they text "without thinking" and other dimensions of habit automaticity, the psychological term for behaviors occurring with limited conscious [attention](#) or awareness.

To assess mindfulness and self-control, respondents evaluated their everyday thoughts and behaviors by rating statements with "not at all like

me" to "just like me." The questions also tracked the frequency the individuals engaged in dangerous texting behaviors while walking down the sidewalk, while crossing the street, while driving a car and while driving a car stopped at an intersection.

Respondents also indicated that they frequently texted while walking with limited awareness. In fact, habit automaticity was an even larger predictor of texting while crossing the street than texting while driving.

"Perhaps [walking](#) is more commonly performed along familiar routes with familiar obstacles, allowing greater [texting](#) automaticity to develop," said co-author Joseph Bayer, a doctoral candidate in the U-M Department of Communication Studies.

The best predictor of the frequency with [individuals](#) who texted while [driving](#) involved "acting with awareness," a component of mindfulness, the research showed.

The findings appear in the April issue of *Mobile Media & Communication*.

More information: "Automaticity, mindfulness, and self-control as predictors of dangerous texting behavior" *Mobile Media & Communication* 2050157915576046, first published on April 1, 2015
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