Study: Tesla Autopilot misleading, overestimated more than similar technology

June 27 2019, by Levi Sumagaysay

More than any other driver-assist system out there today, people overestimate what Tesla's Autopilot can do, according to a new study.

"The name 'Autopilot' was associated with the highest likelihood that drivers believed a behavior was safe while in operation, for every

behavior measured, compared with other system names," said the study released recently by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

The IIHS, a nonprofit funded by auto insurance companies, surveyed 2,005 drivers from October to November 2018. Survey participants were asked questions including whether they thought it was safe to take their hands off the [steering wheel](#), not have their feet near the pedals, look at scenery, talk on a mobile phone and more.

Of the drivers surveyed, 48% thought it would be safe to take their hands off the wheel while using Autopilot. As for the four other systems the survey's participants were asked about, 33% felt that way about ProPilot Assist (Nissan), 27% about both Driving Assistant Plus (BMW) and Super Cruise (Cadillac), and 21% about Traffic Jam Assist (Audi, Acura).

"Tesla provides owners with clear guidance on how to properly use Autopilot, as well as in-car instructions before they use the system and while the feature is in use," a Tesla spokeswoman said recently. "If a Tesla vehicle detects that a driver is not engaged while Autopilot is in use, the driver is prohibited from using it for that drive."

Tesla also pointed out: "This survey is not representative of the perceptions of Tesla owners or people who have experience using Autopilot, and it would be inaccurate to suggest as much. If IIHS is opposed to the name 'Autopilot,' presumably they are equally opposed to the name 'Automobile.' "

The study acknowledged that only 9% to 20% of survey respondents said they had at least one crash-avoidance technology, and "fewer of these reported driving a vehicle in which Level 2 systems were available." (Level 2 automation, according to the Society of Automotive Engineers, can assist drivers with multiple driving tasks but still require them to be

actively engaged. All systems the survey addressed were Level 2. Only Level 1 and 2 systems are available on vehicles that people can buy now.)

"The purpose of the study was to learn how the general public perceives the connotations of the system names," an IIHS spokesman said Friday.

The IIHS also cited studies in 2016 and 2018 that found similar results: "The current study adds to the growing body of evidence ... that 'Autopilot' is a misleading name for a Level 2 driving automation system." While the study pointed out that perception doesn't predict drivers' behavior, it said "it is important that names be developed so as not to mislead drivers about the systems' correct use."

Tesla has long faced pushback about the Autopilot name. It has seen at least three fatal accidents in which the technology was engaged. After the first fatality in 2016—in which federal agencies eventually cleared the company—Consumer Reports called on Tesla to rename Autopilot, saying the name gave drivers a false sense of security. (The family of the driver who died later released a statement saying he was aware that his Model S was not autonomous.) The other two fatalities are still under federal investigation.

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Citation: Study: Tesla Autopilot misleading, overestimated more than similar technology (2019, June 27) retrieved 17 July 2024 from
https://phys.org/news/2019-06-tesla-autopilot-overestimated-similar-technology.html