

Driving While Talking on a Cell Phone: A Real-World Example of Illusory Control

Overview

Driver distraction is a contributing cause of approximately 1.2 million motor vehicle accidents, as many as 10,000 deaths each year, and approximately \$40 billion in damages (Sundeen, 2005). Cell phone use by drivers causes approximately 2,600 deaths, 330,000 moderate to critical injuries, and 1.5 million instances of property damage in America per year (Harvard Center for Risk Analysis [HCRA], 2002).

Despite the known risk of driving while talking on a cell phone, many people continue to perform this behavior. In fact, approximately 974,000 individuals talked on a hand-held phone while driving at any given moment during daylight hours in 2005 (Glassbrenner, 2005). This study explored some of the characteristics of people who engage in this practice.

Participants

Sixty undergraduate college students between 17 and 22 years old took part. Sixty-four percent were female, and 36% were male. Most (62.2%) were Caucasian, 16.7% were Asian, or Pacific Islander, and the rest were from an other or a multi-racial background.

This study consisted of two parts. In part 1, participants completed a survey in which they reported the extent to which they used a cell phone while driving in everyday life and answered questions designed to measure illusions of control, perceptions of being good at compensating for driving distractions, and their driving record. A few weeks later, participants completed part 2 of the study. In part 2, these same participants predicted how well they would drive when using or not using a cell phone. A driving simulation task (presented on a computer) was used to test the accuracy of their predictions. A measure of how much participants overestimated their driving performance while using a cell phone was created by comparing their predicted performance on the driving simulation with their actual performance.

Key Findings

Driving while talking on a phone impairs driving performance. The first goal of the study was to see whether talking on a phone while completing the driving simulation impaired participants' performance. Indeed, performance on the simulation task did decrease when participants simultaneously talked on a phone.

Those high in illusory control talk on a cell phone more frequently while driving. On their survey, participants were asked to report how often they talked on a cell phone while driving. They also completed a measure of illusory control and of belief in their ability to compensate for driving with a cell phone. During the simulation task, participants also reported their perceived ability to complete the driving simulation. The findings indicate that each of these three factors predicted the frequency with which participants reported talking on a cell phone while driving. Having higher illusions of control, believing that one could compensate for the distractions that driving with a cell phone posed, and overestimating one's performance on

the simulation task when simultaneously talking on the phone were all related to talking more on a cell phone while driving.

Talking with a cell phone while driving is related to having a worse driving record. In addition to reporting how often they talked on a cell phone while driving, participants were asked how frequently they drove over the speed limit, the number of accidents they have had since getting their driver's license, and the number of times they were pulled over or ticketed for a moving violation. These items were used to create a general measure of participants' driving record. As expected, those participants who reported talking on a cell phone more frequently while they drive had a poorer driving record.

Implications

Our findings have important implications. These findings suggest that there is an element of illusion or overly optimistic thinking involved in driving while talking on a cell phone. It may be that some people are just unaware of the dangers that driving while talking on a cell phone has. These findings suggest practical ways of reducing driver distractions caused by cell phone use. For instance, if participants' illusions of control over their ability to drive with a cell phone were undermined, people might be less likely to talk on a phone while driving.

We would be happy to answer any questions you may have about this report, the findings, or the study in general. We can be reached by phone at (909) 607-7734, or by email at mss14747@pomona.edu.