

Running head: Route familiarity and visual attention

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Familiarity breeds contempt for the road ahead:

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The real-world effects of route repetition on visual attention in an expert driver

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Abstract

The majority of journeys by car take place on familiar roads, with many routes being driven time and time again. This familiarity has been linked to mind wandering and reduced attention to specific elements of the visual scene (e.g. speed signs). The current study presents on-road eye tracking data from a driving instructor who drove the same route 28 times, incorporating two types of suburban roads, dual and multi-lane carriageways, and a country road. Data reveal a significant positive correlation between the number of times the same route is navigated and off-road dwell time across all five road sections. In addition, route familiarity was associated with decreasing dwell time on safety-relevant aspects of the road ahead in four out of the five sections. These data suggest that route familiarity can lead to undesirable changes in visual attention on real roads, even for expert drivers under observation.

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1. Introduction

While most tests of driving skill or hazard perception involve drivers encountering a novel environment in videos, simulation or the real-world, the majority of the drives we complete are on routes with which we are familiar. In the UK, 15.3 million people report that they usually drive to work (ONS, 2013), many of whom presumably drive the same route twice a day, five days a week, potentially for many years. Repetition of a task leads to the automatization of its subroutines, with a reduction in conscious attention to the task (Schneider and Shiffrin, 1977). In many cases, this automatization is helpful. Novice drivers will eventually benefit from the freeing up of cognitive resources, as activities such as changing gear become automated and these resources can be allocated to other aspects of the driving task (e.g. Shinar et al., 1998). However, researchers have argued that the development of such open-loop behaviour can render drivers insensitive to changes in the driving environment (e.g. Charlton and Starkey, 2013; Harms and Brookhuis, 2016), potentially leaving them vulnerable to hazards.

A deciding factor in whether automation of certain driving sub-routines is beneficial may lie in what the driver chooses to devote their spare attention to. In demanding conditions, as capacity is freed from operational, and perhaps even tactical demands, a driver can pay more attention to strategic problems ahead (e.g. mitigating potential hazards in the road ahead; Pradhan and Crundall, 2017). However, in undemanding conditions, this spare capacity may be redirected to less relevant aspects of the external world in an effort to maintain arousal (e.g. Wilde, 1982), or may even be directed inwards to task-unrelated images and thoughts (TUITs; Chapman, Ismail and Underwood, 1999), often called mind-wandering (Burdett, Charlton & Starkey, 2016), day dreaming (e.g. Berthié et al., 2015) or driving without awareness mode (DWAM; Kerr, 1991). Crucially for the current study, instances of driving without awareness are reported more often in relation to highly familiar

64 roads, as well as under conditions of fatigue (Burdett et al., 2016), as if navigation of whole
65 routes become automated. While this extreme argument for automation is unlikely (Groeger,
66 2000), the evidence that route familiarity reduces awareness is compelling. Given the
67 importance of driving on familiar routes, experimental investigations of repeated-route
68 driving are relatively limited, due to the resources required to familiarise participants with a
69 route. However, simulator studies, in which participants drive parts of the same route on a
70 number of occasions, have begun to indicate that there are measurable changes in driving
71 performance as a route becomes well-practiced. Speed and lane variability have been seen to
72 decrease across a number of free-drives (Charlton and Starkey, 2011). These changes might
73 be indicative of better prediction of the physical road layout, meaning that fewer corrections
74 are required, but this could also suggest that the drivers are less sensitive to the vagaries of
75 on-road hazard levels., perhaps suggesting that drivers are less sensitive to the vagaries of on-
76 road hazard levels. In a follow-up simulator study Charlton and Starkey (2013) had drivers
77 undertake 20 sessions on the same simulated route and assessed their ability to detect changes
78 across the number of sessions (and compared to a control group). They found that drivers'
79 attention for changes in the driving scene (the removal and additional of buildings, the
80 changing of road signs, etc.) diminished with increased route familiarity, suggesting that they
81 were driving without awareness. Certain changes were still detected with high accuracy
82 however, such as the removal of lane markings. Road markings are typically viewed
83 peripherally in order to maintain lane position, and are thus used perhaps more implicitly. The
84 removal of these cues may have thus degraded the otherwise automated task of steering,
85 drawing attention to the absence of lane markings.

86 The decrease of attention to road-signs with increased route familiarity has been noted
87 by other researchers (e.g. Harms and Brookhuis, 2016), but is this a problem? It is
88 understandable that drivers should pay less attention to a sign that explains a dip in the road

89 ahead, if they are already expecting the dip and therefore have no need to be warned
90 (Charlton and Starkey, 2013). Problems arise however when changes to road layout result in
91 the addition or modification of road signs that may be missed.

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93 Even more concerning however is the possibility that route familiarity may influence
94 the way we behave on the road. In a car following task, Yanko and Spalek (2013) found that
95 on the fifth occasion of driving the same route participants followed the lead car more
96 closely, braked more slowly in response to the lead cars' brake lights, and were slower to
97 respond to pedestrians crossing the road, compared to a control group who had driven five
98 different routes.

99 The above studies discuss results that have been obtained through simulated driving.
100 This poses one clear possible confound: Drivers may be more willing to allow their minds to
101 wander in a situation where the threat to their safety is only virtual. While it appears easy to
102 accept that reduced attention to road signs should transfer from simulators to the real world
103 (see Martens and Fox, 2007), are drivers really likely to pay less attention to safety-critical
104 aspects of highly familiar roads when they risk injury or even death?

105 While such on-road studies of familiarity are extremely rare, there is some evidence
106 that speed increases with route-repetition (Colonna, Intini, Berloco and Ranieri, 2016).
107 Without a direct measure of how dangerously the participants were driving however, one
108 could argue that this is a result of the driver better calibrating the demands of the road to their
109 self-perceived skill level (though their participants' choice of speed often exceeded the posted
110 limit). A harder finding to argue against is that of Rosenbloom et al., (2007) who observed
111 drivers on both familiar and unfamiliar routes, noting that dangerous behaviours and driving
112 violations increased on the most familiar of roads. It is unclear however what mechanism lies
113 behind such increases in risk-taking with familiarity.

138 The driver drove in her own vehicle, so that route practice was not confounded with
 139 practice with the vehicle, as she was already familiar with it.

140 **2.3. Driving route**

141 A loop was driven that took around 25 minutes to complete and was a total of 11.6
 142 miles in length. On each drive the loop was driven in the same direction, from the same
 143 starting point. Although eye tracking data was recorded throughout, the targeted sections for
 144 analysis were five different sections of the route. These are described in Table 1.

145

146 Table 1. The Five Road Sections Analysed

No.	Name	Length (metres)	Speed Limit (mph)	Description
1	Multi-lane Carriageway	1450	50	Varying between two and four lanes of traffic in the direction of travel. Includes 3 off-ramps and 3 slip-roads.
2	Dual Carriageway	1040	50	Two lanes in the direction of travel, with a central reservation separating oncoming traffic from the instructor's vehicle.
3	Country Road	1250	60	Two way traffic. Hedges and fields to the side of the road.
4	Open Suburban	850	30	Two way traffic. Houses set well back from the pavement, allowing good visibility. No parked vehicles on the road.
5	Closed Suburban	640	20	Two way traffic. Houses set close to pavement. Parked vehicles on the road mean the driver must frequently decide whether to proceed or give-way to oncoming traffic.

147

148 **2.4. Procedure**

149 Each experimental session began in a car park on Nottingham Trent University,
 150 Clifton campus in Nottingham, UK. As part of a separate experiment, each drive included a

151 different passenger, who also wore eye tracking glasses while occupying the passenger seat
152 throughout the drive. At several points during each drive a simple conversation would be
153 undertaken between the driver and passenger, but the parts of the drive included in this paper
154 included no conversation or interaction with the passenger or experimenter. The
155 experimenter sat in the rear seat of the vehicle and conducted eye tracking calibrations before
156 each drive began. The earliest drive started at 10:00 and the latest drive ended at 16:30,
157 meaning that morning and evening rush hours were avoided and all drives took place in full
158 daylight. The driver was asked to drive as normal.

159

160 **2.5. Data Cleaning**

161 In the first two drives the driver was given on-road directional instructions, whilst she
162 learnt the route. These two drives were excluded from the analysis, as the verbal interaction
163 and need to follow instructions may impact the observed eye movements. In the following
164 drives, the instructor was able to drive the route from memory, without the need for verbal
165 directions. Data from drive 11 had to be discarded due to poor calibration throughout the
166 drive.

167 The length of time taken to drive a road section was calculated in milliseconds, as was
168 the sum of duration of all fixations made within the section. The eye tracking glasses'
169 algorithm does not classify saccades, so 10% of section time was deducted to account for
170 saccades. Percent missing data was then calculated as the percentage of the section time,
171 after 10% deduction for saccades. Any section with more than 40% missing data was
172 removed from the analysis. This meant the removal of two drives from the multilane
173 carriageway section and two drives for the dual carriageway section. Included number of
174 drives (n) for each section is shown in table 3.

175 In order to establish where the driver was looking in a dynamic visual environment, it
176 was necessary to manually code each fixation as belonging to a particular category. Each
177 fixation was initially coded by the specific sub-category to which it corresponded. These
178 were then grouped into larger categories for analysis, as shown in Table 2.

179

180 Table 2. Fixation Coding Categories and Descriptions

Category	Description & Subordinate Categories
In-Car	Any in-car fixation that was not on the rear view mirror (passenger, speedometer, any other in-car location excluding the rear view mirror)
Mirrors	All mirrors in the driver's car (left wing mirror, right wing mirror, rear view mirror)
Road ahead - near	The road in front of our driver, in the bottom two-thirds of the visible roadway ahead (near tarmac, near oncoming vehicles, near vehicles heading in the direction of travel)
Road ahead - far	The road in front of our driver, in the top one-third of the visible roadway ahead (far tarmac, far oncoming vehicles, far vehicles heading in direction of travel)
Side roads	Any fixations on a side road or vehicle in a side road, regardless of direction of travel (vehicles with and without priority in side roads moving towards or away from our driver, tarmac on any side road)
Adjacent lanes	Any lanes that could contain traffic going in the same direction of the driver (adjoining slip roads, other lanes)
Potential hazards at road side	Important locations that were either not on the road, or were on the road but were not other vehicles (parked vehicles at least partially on the road, any pedestrians)
Signage	Any signs (warning or speed sign, direction or location sign)
Off road	Any fixation that could not be attributed to any other category, but was shown in the video (off-road left, off-road centre, off-road right)
Unclassifiable	The eye tracking range of the glasses was somewhat wider than that of the video camera, meaning fixations could sometimes be recorded outside of the visible area. These fixations were recorded as unclassifiable and excluded from later analyses.

182 Dwell times were calculated as the sum of all fixation durations in a given category.
183 For example, if two 200ms fixations were made on the mirrors in the country road section of
184 a drive, then the dwell time on mirrors in the country road section would be 400ms for that
185 drive. The total dwell time for a section was then calculated as the sum of the durations of all
186 fixations made while the driver completed that section of the drive. Finally, dwell times in
187 each category were then converted to a percent of the total dwell time for a road section, in
188 order to account for variation in time taken to complete a given section across different
189 drives.

190 Any fixation that fell outside of the area that could be recorded by the video camera
191 built into the goggles could not be allocated to a location and were not included in the
192 analyses. These fixations accounted for 0.9% of the total dwell time across all road sections.

193

194

3. Results

195 Table 3 shows mean dwell time in each location type as a percentage of total dwell
196 time across the drive section, giving an indication of where the driver typically looked
197 overall. In the open suburban road the driver generally spent most time looking off-road
198 (34%), followed by the distant road ahead (31%) and the close road ahead (11%). A similar
199 pattern was observed in the closed suburban road with 34% of dwell falling off-road, but with
200 a much more even split between road near and far ahead (both accumulating 16% of dwell).
201 The closed suburban route was also the only route to result in a substantial amount of dwell
202 given to potential road-side hazards. In the dual and multi-lane carriageways, most time was
203 spent looking at the road far ahead (37% and 43%, respectively), yet our driver still devoted a
204 considerable amount of dwell off-road (28% and 26%, respectively). Finally, on the country
205 road most dwell time was again devoted off-road (40%) though the far road location also
206 commanded a substantial amount of dwell (39%).

207

208 Table 3. Mean (SD) percentage of dwell time in each road section spent fixating each of the
 209 possible fixation location categories.

Fixation Locations	Mean Percent Dwell Time (SD)				
	Open Suburban n = 25	Closed Suburban n = 25	Dual Carriageway n = 23	Multilane Carriageway n = 23	Country Road n = 25
Road ahead - far	31.07 (11.68)	16.02 (7.49)	36.58 (16.75)	42.61 (16.64)	38.57 (15.81)
Road ahead - near	11.47 (6.79)	16.28 (5.94)	8.42 (9.00)	3.97 (4.41)	8.76 (12.20)
Side roads	1.64 (2.48)	3.48 (1.26)	3.20 (2.23)	<i>0.07 (0.27)</i>	<i>0.39 (1.04)</i>
Adjacent lanes	<i>0.00 (0.00)</i>	<i>0.00 (0.00)</i>	4.62 (3.55)	6.71 (3.24)	<i>0.04 (0.21)</i>
Potential hazards at road side	1.62 (1.93)	15.28 (5.02)	<i>0.42 (0.95)</i>	<i>0.00 (0.00)</i>	<i>0.41 (1.42)</i>
Mirrors	11.16 (2.96)	9.53 (2.17)	12.27 (2.97)	12.89 (3.65)	7.68 (2.42)
Signage	<i>0.89 (1.02)</i>	<i>0.00 (0.00)</i>	1.38 (1.14)	1.66 (1.67)	<i>0.00 (0.00)</i>
In-Car	7.32 (3.60)	4.18 (2.43)	3.60 (2.35)	5.29 (3.40)	3.28 (1.95)
Off road	34.25 (11.21)	34.17 (9.56)	28.05 (16.65)	25.58 (13.12)	40.22 (13.43)

210 Note: n refers to the number of drives included in the analysis, after removal of drive sections
 211 with poor eye tracking data. Italics denote cells where mean dwell time was below 1%, these
 212 were not analysed further.

213

214 Data were analysed separately for each of the five different types of road. In each
 215 case, correlations were conducted between the drive number and the percent of the dwell time

216 in the road section that was given to a particular scene category. Positive correlations show
 217 increasing overt visual attention to particular scene categories as familiarity with the route
 218 increases, while negative correlations show decreasing overt visual attention across drives.
 219 Any category within a drive section that received an average dwell time of less than 1% was
 220 not included in the correlations, as such a small proportion of attentional time typically meant
 221 that the location type was not present or very rarely present. For example, there were very
 222 few potential hazards at the road side (e.g. pedestrians/parked vehicles) on the dual
 223 carriageway, the multilane carriageway or the country road. Conversely, the category of
 224 ‘adjacent lanes’ was only relevant to dual and multi-lane carriageways. See Table 4 for all
 225 correlations between dwell percentage and drive number.

226

227 Table 4. Correlations between drive number and percent dwell time in each of the 10
 228 different fixation locations. Separate correlations are presented for each of the 5 different
 229 road types that the driver encountered.

Fixation Locations	Open Suburban	Closed Suburban	Dual Carriageway	Multilane Carriageway	Country Road
Road ahead - far	-.279	-.573**	-.588**	-.546**	-.450*
Road ahead - near	-.538**	-.369	-.274	-.241	-.090
Side roads	-.271	-.313	-.282	—	—
Adjacent lanes	—	—	.048	.062	—
Potential hazards at road side	-.115	.008	—	—	—
Mirrors	.219	.197	.131	-.105	.166
Signage	—	—	.127	-.078	—
In-Car	-.255	.156	.462*	.410	.033
Off road	.691***	.597**	.673**	.686***	.535**

230 Notes: A dash denotes that this fixation location was not included in the correlations due to
231 receiving less than 1% of average dwell time. Bold text highlights significant correlations.
232 * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

233

234 As shown in Table 4, significant positive correlations were observed for every road
235 type, with percentage dwell time on non-road relevant areas increasing across drives. On the
236 dual-carriageway section in-car fixations also increased across drives ($r(21) = .462, p = .026$).

237 Significant negative correlations between drive number and percentage dwell time on
238 far road ahead locations were observed on closed suburban ($r(23) = -.573, p = .003$), dual-
239 carriageway ($r(21) = -.588, p = .003$), multi-lane carriageway ($r(21) = -.561, p = .007$) and
240 country road ($r(23) = -.450, p = .024$) sections, while a significant negative correlation
241 between drive number and percentage dwell on near road ahead locations was observed for
242 open-suburban locations ($r(23) = -.538, p = .006$).

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244

4. Discussion

245 Evidence from previous research suggests that route familiarity may reduce attention
246 for important safety-relevant stimuli (e.g. Charlton and Starkey, 2013, Burdett et al., 2016),
247 though the majority of such research has been undertaken in simulators, or has involved self-
248 report of remembered instances. This study demonstrates that these effects translate to real
249 roads, even with a highly expert driver, which may partly explain why observation studies
250 have identified an increase in dangerous behaviour on familiar roads (e.g. Rosenbloom et al.,
251 2007).

252 Detailed coding of our expert driver's eye movements across five different types of
253 road revealed a decrease in attention to the road ahead. In four out five road sections, this
254 decrease was noted for gaze on the far roadway. Where was the spare attention reallocated? It

255 might be plausible to expect gaze to retreat closer to the vehicle, as happens with novice
256 drivers who are presumably under greater processing demands (e.g. Mourant and Rockwell,
257 1972). This did not occur however. Indeed, the non-significant tendency was for attention to
258 the near roadway to also decrease with route familiarity.

259 Instead, the driver appeared to allocate spare attentional capacity to off-road, safety-
260 irrelevant aspects of the scene. This increase in off-road attention was observed in all five
261 road types, even on the rural route. This particular section contained very little off-road
262 stimuli of particular salience, with occasional houses separated by hedgerow and fields.
263 Nonetheless, our driver found elements within the roadside scenery of sufficient interest to
264 capture overt attention. As the naturalistic nature of the study precluded probe questions to
265 assess driver thoughts, we cannot be sure however that she was actively engaging with off-
266 road stimuli. It is possible that this increased off-road gaze reflected internal distractions.

267 The lack of relationships between mirror inspections and route familiarity is notable.
268 Often mirror-glances are reported to be one of safety checks that suffer from increased
269 roadway demands (Yang, McDonald and Zheng, 2010). In the current study, mirror glances
270 accrued approximately 10% of dwell across all road types. What little variation was found in
271 mirror dwell across the road types suggests that the least demanding road accrued the fewest
272 mirror fixations. The relative uniformity of mirror dwell across road types, along with the
273 insensitivity to route familiarity, suggests that the mirror-checking schema is entrenched. This
274 is understandable with our participant – a driving instructor who must instruct her students in
275 the importance of mirror awareness. Again however we do not know whether the efficacy of
276 these mirror checks was impacted by route familiarity, as eye tracking can only tell us what
277 people look at, rather than what they are thinking about.

278 On-road studies do not allow us to manipulate hazards, so we cannot empirically test
279 whether the change in attention with route familiarity is associated with poorer hazard

280 response and reduced safety on the road. Certainly, no events occurred that were classed as
281 hazardous by the experimenters, and the instructor was not involved in any collisions during
282 the experiment. One could argue, therefore, that the decrease in fixation time on the road
283 could be attributed to more efficient processing. However, even if processing is more
284 efficient, because the spare capacity was allocated off-road the driver ultimately spends less
285 time looking at the road. It seems reasonable to suggest that readiness to respond to the
286 development of hazards relies upon the driver looking at either the road itself, vehicles,
287 pedestrians, signage, or other safety-related features, and that an increase in time spent
288 attending to safety-irrelevant stimuli is likely to represent increased risk, as a hazard could
289 begin to develop while the driver is looking off-road.

290 It was interesting to note that dwell on signage was not particularly related to route
291 familiarity, as would be argued by other researchers (Harms and Brookhuis, 2016, Martens
292 and Fox, 2007). However, it appears that the removal of the first two practice drives of the
293 route may have removed almost all overt attention to road signs. Thus, the drop of dwell on
294 signage is so abrupt that the relationship with route familiarity does not feature in our more
295 longitudinal measure.

296

297 **4.1. Conclusions**

298 The current results demonstrate that roadway familiarity, developed through route
299 repetition over several weeks, appears to shift our driver's overt attention from the road itself
300 (particularly at far locations) to off-road areas of the scene that are irrelevant to driving
301 safety. This may reflect a decrease in arousal due to the repetitive nature of the task, with a
302 concomitant desire to seek out novel stimuli in order to redress the balance. Fixating discrete
303 off-road stimuli may reflect an attempt to maintain engagement with external stimuli and
304 prevent the mind wandering onto internal thoughts, though without probing the thoughts of

305 the driver, either during the drive (disrupting the natural flow of task), or retrospectively
306 (which depends on whether those fleeting thoughts were laid down in memory), we cannot be
307 sure of this. Whether drivers attempt to influence the choice of an external or internal focus of
308 their mind wandering, and its relationship with eye movements, offers an interesting avenue
309 for future research.

310 While the current results do not link familiarity-related off-road dwell with unsafe
311 driving behaviours, it is plausible to assume that the sudden appearance of a hazard is more
312 problematic if the driver is not looking at the road. It is important to note that these results
313 pertain to only one professional driving instructor, and as such, it is difficult to draw any
314 strong generalised conclusions. Since familiarity-induced degradation of attention to the
315 roadway may have much more dangerous implications for the average driver, there is a clear
316 need for further investigation of the effects of familiarity on visual search of the road scene in
317 expert, experienced and novice drivers alike.

318

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