

Distracted Driving and How It Affects One's Safety behind the Wheel

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Over the years, technology has changed and developed, and in doing so, has altered the way our society interacts and communicates. In fact, new methods of communication such as sending emails and text messaging allow for interactions between people both on the go and at any time. Despite these benefits of modern technology, the drawbacks and risks that come from these digital innovations are often overlooked. In fact, text messaging behind the wheel of a car is a physical and mental distraction for the driver and, as a growing social norm, has contributed to the epidemic movement that is distracted driving.

From the earliest developmental ideas of SMS up to today, text messaging and mobile phone use have taken on a more influential role than initially imagined. In fact, cellphones were primarily designed to supersede pagers as digital aids in the work field, and industries “almost exclusively targeted...business users” (Goggin, 2006, pg. 73). Nevertheless, as text messaging became more prevalent in the workforce, “the messages [quickly] became communication for all and their contents came to deal with everyday life” (Goggin, 2006, pg. 73). What was most surprising for industries was the staggering rise in SMS usage among non-professional youth (Goggin, 2006). This transition sparked a social movement, and teenagers were the catalysts. No longer was texting a practice for adults in the office setting, but rather, extended to teens in social settings. As youth quickly adopted text messaging, it would later have a major impact on the new generation that would unfold.

Due to the rise in texting and the extension of cellphone use beyond the realm of industry, text messaging has not only grown into a habit and social norm for many but has also commenced a new generation of technologically-dependent youth. In fact, texting evoked a new culture, a “new social category” known as “Generation Txt” (Goggin, 2006, pg. 78). Due to a

“personalization” of mobile devices, many of today’s teens depend on their cellphones and see text messaging as a lifeline to the rest of their social circles (Goggin, 2006, pg. 78). For example, my personal experience going a day without sending or receiving text messages proved “daunting” and “a challenge” as I “[struggled] to keep myself busy” without the ability to communicate with my peers over the phone. Similar to my experience, other teens and young adults reported feelings of isolation and anxiety after twenty-four hours without media (Roberts and Koliska, 2014). Due to this increase in text messaging for recreational and social purposes, there has been a higher prevalence in cellphone-related distractions, and more specifically, distracted driving due to cellphone use behind the wheel of a vehicle (Nelson, Atchley, and Little, 2009). So despite the positive changes and cultural movement that resulted from the early ideas of SMS, there are still negative repercussions when mobile phones are abused.

In fact, cellphone abuse in the car presents a major upcoming issue for youth today because it exists as a physical distraction behind the wheel. Studies suggest that the physical distraction of cellphone use significantly compromises driving ability. Drivers who are found sending text messages behind the wheel “are less able to maintain their desired lane position...and must make larger corrections when the vehicle drifts off course” (Owens, 2010, pg. 7). The results of safety studies suggest that these slower reaction times and higher frequency of accidents correlate with drivers’ habits of multitasking, specifically on mobile devices (Owens, 2010). Drivers were also found to be more impulsive and more likely to speed or swerve off the road while texting (Owens, 2010). The fact of the matter is that texting, along with other driving distractions such as eating, requires the driver to compromise steering ability and, more often than not, steer with one hand. Although drivers at times successfully operate vehicles one-handed, they significantly decrease their ability to control the wheel and maneuver

the car. The fact that drivers already have wrecks without any manual distractions alludes to the fact that operating a motorized vehicle is a demanding activity that requires hand, eye, and foot coordination as well as free hands.

Along with being a physical distraction for drivers, making calls and sending text messages while operating a motorized vehicle proves to be a mental distraction for drivers. Not only does driving require physical coordination, but there is also a certain degree of “mental demand” and alertness that comes with driving a car (Owens, 2010, pg. 7). However, if the driver is focused on the content of a text message rather than on the road, the driver’s awareness and reaction time are significantly compromised. In fact, research suggests that cellphone use impairs driving ability to a greater degree than being legally intoxicated (Kass, Cole, and Stanny, 2006). During a simulation, Strayer, Drews, and Crouch (2006) proved that cellphone users were more mentally distracted than drivers with a blood-alcohol-content above 0.08. These results parallel with findings from the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration which claim that texting has the same effect on mental alertness as consuming four beers. Thus, these split-second increments during which the driver directs his or her attention away from the road to focus on texting are risky instances, small windows of opportunity for an accident to occur. Although it has been found that teens take their focus away from the road at shorter increments of time than adults, any amount of time, whether it is one second or a fraction of a second, increases the risk of an accident occurring (Owens, 2010). While often overlooked, the mental distractions caused by cellphone use are just as dangerous and life threatening as the physical.

Although teen drivers may be aware of these distractions, the fact of the matter is that being knowledgeable about the issue does not necessarily imply that drivers will act on the issue.

In fact, many are aware of the risks that result from driving while using handheld devices and fully acknowledge that talking on the phone and texting while driving increase accident potential. However, this knowledge neither affects their perceptions of distracted driving nor impacts their driving behavior. In fact, 91% of informed drivers have admitted to texting behind the wheel anyway (Harrison, 2011, pg. 1518). This is partially due to the fact that teens fail to realize their lack in driving experience. In fact, many teens feel as if they possess the capability to multitask. However, findings from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention prove otherwise and show that car accidents are "the leading cause of death for U.S. teens." Similarly, teen drivers have been found to have "higher crash rates" due to a "willingness to take risks" and a "sensitivity to peer influences in adopting inappropriate norms" (Lee, 2007, pg. 205). So despite being the least experienced among drivers on the road, teens loosely perceive the actual dangers of distracted driving and in doing so, have become the most susceptible to its risks.

Due to these misperceptions, teen drivers have come to justify texting behind the wheel and have adopted dangerous habits. Some of these inappropriate norms include only texting at stoplights, when the car appears to be in no danger of hitting another car (Madden, 2009). Others hold their cellphone "up to keep their eyes simultaneously on the road and the phone" (Madden, 2009, pg. 6). Some more-cautious teen drivers have passengers read and type text messages for them (Madden, 2009). Whatever the case may be, teens seem to possess a sense of overconfidence when it comes to their mastery of driving. They understand the risks they are taking by deliberately using their cellphones while driving; however, they are sufficiently confident in their driving ability to multitask. The most alarming aspect of the study is that teens justify their texting behind the wheel, arguing that that one instance was not dangerous and convincing themselves with "illusions that can lead to tragic results" (Crothers, 2014, para. 9).

The concerning perception that teens uphold is a skewed view of their driving ability, a facade that they are “good drivers” (Madden, 2009, pg. 7). Ultimately, the fact of the matter is that teens and young adults are unaware of how inexperienced they are as drivers, and as a result, are prone to having accidents related to cellphone use.

Another reason why teens tend to text while driving is due to the fact that cellphone use behind the wheel has grown into a “social norm,” (Madden, 2009, pg. 7). In fact, one teen driver suggested that “everybody texts while they drive” (Madden, 2009, pg. 6). Even another said, “I don’t really get worried because everyone does it” (Madden, 2009, pg. 7). Whether or not this assumption is true, it must be acknowledged that many teens believe that their peers are taking part in this practice. Most teens want to fit in, be like their peers, and do what everyone else appears to be doing, despite the fact that it may threaten their safety. For new drivers, “their perceived danger of distracted driving is outweighed [not only] by the importance of the incoming call or text message” but also by the influence of peers (Nelson, Atchley, and Little, 2009, pg. 442). Thus, even though many teens understand the risks of cellphone use in the car, this sense of risk is undermined by the perception that everyone else is doing it, so it must be safe (Madden, 2009).

As distracted driving becomes more of an impending issue, nationwide and statewide policies are being passed to reduce the number of drivers who use their cellphones behind the wheel of a car. With government regulations and legislation passed in thirty-nine out of the fifty states throughout the nation, extensive measures are being made to combat the issue not only by spreading awareness but also by proactively addressing the social dilemma (Stuhlberg, 2014). In fact, President Obama recently passed legislation that “forbids federal workers from texting while driving...on the job” (Madden, 2009, pg. 3). States are also beginning to implement their

own legislation to regulate the impending distracted driving epidemic. While some states permit only more experienced adults the right to text and drive, others designate specific areas where cellphone use is not allowed, such as in school zones (Jacobson, 2010). Whether it is federal legislation or statewide legislation, the U.S. government acknowledges the dangers of cellphone use behind the wheel and is taking major strides to see that the safety of the American public is maintained.

In addition to the legislative methods of reducing distracted driving, federal and non-profit campaigns are on the rise as constructive methods of not only dissuading drivers from texting behind the wheel but also of actively encouraging safety on the road. Campaigns such as AT&T's It Can Wait public service announcement and Oprah Winfrey's No-Phone Zone Campaign are two forums that not only spread the awareness of media-distracted driving but also adopt a more positive approach in comparison to the legal system's method of regulation and penalty. Both these campaigns encourage drivers to actively participate in the movement, encouraging them to "take the pledge" and make their cars "no phone [zones]" (Oprah.com; It Can Wait). In fact, AT&T launched the Drive Mode App, a mobile application that silences a driver's notifications and responds for the driver to let others know the response will be delayed (Greenfield, 2014). Even the U.S. Department of Transportation has launched an official government website for the cause, stating that "the best way to end distracted driving is to educate all Americans" (Distracted Driving). In spite of some doubt as to how effective these campaigns may be, these initial steps are active and constructive steps nonetheless which contribute to the fight against distracted driving.

Although measures have been taken to combat distracted driving and have improved road safety, there are still more effective actions that can be taken to ensure the safety of all drivers

and passengers on the road. In fact, insurance companies have acknowledged that poor driving habits such as texting are “bound to have an effect on [a driver’s] premiums” (Hazlik, 2012, para. 7). If this is the case, insurance companies should collaborate with non-profit campaigns and create a policy that reduces the rates of drivers who take the pledge. This is a more constructive and positive approach that uses insurance rates as an incentive rather than as a mechanism for punishment. In fact, studies have found that punishment “carries the risk of retaliation by those who have been punished,” whereas rewards lead to “repeated cooperation” from the public (David, 2009, para. 5). In this case, drivers will be more inclined to take the pledge and actually uphold it. So along with the measures that are currently being taken to combat distracted driving, more effective actions should be taken to ensure comprehensive and long-lasting road safety.

As a result of the influence of text messaging, distracted driving has emerged as an impending danger and a life-threatening societal issue. Sending and receiving text messages while operating a motorized vehicle compromises one’s physical ability to drive as well as one’s mental alertness behind the wheel. With society’s growing dependency on forms of digital technology such as text messaging, legislation is being passed and campaigns are being launched in order to take a proactive stand in the fight to end distracted driving. The fact that texting behind the wheel is considered a major threat to young drivers alludes to the degree of influence that digital technology and social media have on youth today.

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