Discouraging Distracted Driving: The Power of Encouraging Change Online

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Dorothea Starr LeBeau

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

Dorothea LeBeau

Sociotechnical advisor: Peter Norton, Department of Engineering and Society

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In 2019, 38,800 Americans lost their lives to car crashes, and 4.4 million were injured seriously enough to require medical attention (NSC, n.d.). These crashes can be caused by any number of things, but a report on 2018 distracted driving data found that eight percent of fatal crashes, 15 percent of injury crashes, and 14 percent of all police-reported motor vehicle traffic crashes were reported as "distraction-affected crashes" (NHTSA, 2020). There are many different attempts by multiple groups to curb distracted driving and the accidents caused by it: some groups focus on educating teenagers about the dangers of distracted driving in school, placing warnings against it into driver education curricula, and encouraging students to take pledges not to drive distracted. (Accredited Schools Online, 2020). Car manufacturers have also begun to participate, introducing features meant to help drivers keep their eyes on the road while doing things like talking on the phone or changing their music (DriversEd.com, 2019), and in some cases promising that technology will deliver "zero crashes" (GM, 2017). However, in this day and age the quickest and easiest way to spread information and influence change is through the internet, which many groups have pivoted to in order to discourage distracted driving. The question is, how do they do it?

There are a few major groups that focus on online methods, specifically posting on social media, in order to discourage distracted driving. They can be divided roughly into two categories: unorganized individuals and organized groups. These categories can then be broken down further into specific subgenres. Among the unorganized individuals, some have engaged in distracted driving; others have witnessed it. The organized groups include police departments and nonprofit advocacies. While all of these groups want to discourage others from driving

distracted, they often have different perspectives on how best to do that, sometimes based on their own personal relationship to distracted driving, and sometimes in tandem with the requests of their parent organization. Unorganized participants tend to discourage distracted driving by posting about their experiences with it in response to other posts, and are more open about their experiences on sites that encourage anonymity, such as Reddit. Organized participants, on the other hand, tend to discourage distracted driving through coordinated campaigns and professionally infographics; they also want their name to be associated with whatever material they put out, so they tend to post on social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter.

Overall, the predominant techniques among social media users in America, both unorganized and organized, for discouraging distracted driving include shaming, citing safety data, appeals to personal experience, and direct requests to the audience.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Although distracted driving has existed for as long as cars have been in use, the relatively recent introductions of interactive systems like music players and smartphones to the car environment have led to greatly decreased driver performance and increased risk of getting into car crashes (Choudhary et al., 2020). And while many adults and the majority of professional research focus on teenager's relation to distracted driving, there is actually evidence to suggest that limited executive function is a better predictor of distracted driving than age (Bell et al., 2017). Teenagers are likely to support laws that ban dangerous practices such as texting or emailing while driving, and to understand that distracted driving is a direct threat to safety (Mirman et al., 2019). However, Rupp et al. (2016) found that even when people know distracted behaviors are risky and rate them as such, they typically continue to engage in these activities while driving,

calling into question studies that assume high associated risk with an activity would prevent engagement.

Much like how there is no research done on how people discourage, or even discuss, distracted driving on social media, there is also surprisingly little research on the impacts of anti-distracted driving campaigns. The effects of the actual campaigns currently in use are not well documented, although there is some evidence that general anti-distracted driving campaigns may be effective (Zangbar et al., 2014); frustratingly, although the majority of current campaigns are aimed at teenagers, this study was conducted on adults. There are other types of campaigns aimed at children and teenagers whose outcomes have been studied, most notably DARE, which was meant to discourage drug use. However, it has been concluded that DARE is actually highly ineffective (O'Neal & West, 2004), calling into question whether Zangbar et al.'s results can be interpolated for teenagers.

UNORGANIZED INDIVIDUALS

Distracted Drivers

People who have driven distracted and post about it online almost exclusively use appeals to personal experience and shaming in order to discourage others from doing the same things, either implicitly or explicitly. The person posting will include an example of a consequence or close call that occurred due to their aforementioned distracted driving, such as an accident or a ticket. One YouTube commenter said that they used to drive distracted frequently, but after almost crashing into a bridge railing while reading an ebook they cut the habit entirely; the comment ends by encouraging others to not follow in their footsteps and "Be safe out there y'all" (Creole Nebulas, 2019). Despite the fact that it is a common discouragement tactic in other groups, the

direct request to the audience used by Creole Nebulas here is rare; the majority of internet users who admit to distracted driving do not explicitly tell others not to do it, but instead rely on subtext to get the same point across. For example, Reddit user Jethro_Cull says “My first and only major accident was due to fumbling for CDs on a long drive back from college. I just drifted off the road.” before saying that people who drive distracted are “Not prioritizing the ‘driving’ aspect of driving” (2018).

It seems unusual for this group of people to use shame in their posts, since they would inevitably be shaming their own actions as well. However, it is not uncommon to see people who describe feeling bad about their actions, either directly or indirectly, and this is used as a form of shaming. They are generally not shaming their audience or other people, however, but instead choosing to shame themselves. Sometimes it is subtle, such as @Football_Foley on Twitter who says “I'm stuck in traffic, so technically not texting and driving” (2021). In context, the tweet reads as sarcastic, letting the audience know that @Football_Foley is ashamed of the described behavior. At other times it is quite blatant, such as when @Darkskin_Lvrd tweeted out “Got a ticket for texting and driving while dropping Kali off to school 🤦🏾‍♂️ I’m an idiot lol” (2021), which illustrates a consequence from distracted driving that they can use to shame themself and discourage the practice. For many posters, shame doubles as a discouragement to others and an accountability system for themselves, such as the Twitter users who tweeted “i just realize[sic] im driving and texting k im putting down the phone” (@CanadaNotAHoser, 2021) or “Reeaallllyy needa stop texting and driving in traffic😶” (@Azur_Buljic, 2016).

Finally, some people will try to have it both ways by shaming people who text and drive, but also admitting to driving while distracted and treating their distraction as less harmful. One YouTube commenter wrote “I don’t text while driving but I still feel guilty because I use my

phone as my gps or when I want to skip to the next song" (moofeyy, 2021). On Tumblr, a blogging website, one user starts off a post by saying that they would never text and drive because it is "so dangerous," but then admits to playing a mobile game while driving because there is a time based conversation they don't want to miss (@anxious-artnerd15, 2017). Interestingly, much like moofeyy, anxious-artnerd15 also seems to recognize that this is dangerous behavior, tagging the post with "#whoops" (2017).

Witnesses to Distracted Driving

People who post about witnessing distracted driving are also trying to discourage the practice, but tend to go about it in different ways. Their posts often utilize shaming in addition to appeals to personal experience, including serious accidents that include people they know personally. Witnesses will also include direct requests to the audience of people seeing their posts, often in the form of moralizing, and are much harsher than people who post about their own distracted driving.

One example of the vitriolic and direct shaming employed by this group is shown in a Reddit post by user BashfulTurtle, who says they often sees people on their morning commute who are on their phones, and then speaks directly to the reader, saying "Sure, you get home fine 80% of the time. 10%, you fuck your car up and the other 10%, you kill other people and probably yourself" (2018). One Twitter user says texting and driving "is a moronic thing to do" (@chamfy, 2021), while another says they are in "hell" and then posts a picture of their driver texting, utilizing extremely direct shaming techniques (@kelellopearl, 2021).

There are also plenty of examples of people detailing accidents that happened to them or someone they know. One Reddit user details how their friend used to drive while on his phone

frequently, but one day “He slammed into a car in front of him, totaling his car… He is being sued for a ridiculous amount, and they will most likely win” (DontToewsMeBro2, 2018). Twitter user @jmikeyfraser says they lost their brother “in a car accident involving texting and driving” and then makes a direct request to the audience, asking them to “Be present. Be mindful” (2021). Tumblr user @breakingjen made a post about her personal near-accident, when she was riding her bike and was “0.001 seconds… away from being hit by a car on a crossroad with traffic lights because the driver of the vehicle was too busy texting on her phone to notice the red light” (2017). A Twitter user made a similar post, saying “I love how my coworker almost hit me head on as I was pulling into work because they were texting and driving” (@sydnkyd, 2021). Another Tumblr user was rear-ended while at a stop sign by a man who was texting, and ends the post with an aggressive direct request to the audience: “Just please, PSA: Don’t FUCKING text while driving??? Thanks???” (@thesarucat, 2018).

A unique subgroup in the witness category are people who comment about how distracted drivers are normally adults instead of teenagers. They often remark about how a lot of anti-texting while driving advertisements are marketed at teenagers, but then use appeals to personal experience in order to push back against that narrative, saying things like “The demographic my wife and [sic] see doing it most often? The one we're squarely in the middle of -- 40 - 60 years old” (redneckrockuhtree, 2018). A large majority of people who post these kinds of comments are talking about the driving habits of their parents, saying things like “Here's me (a millennial) constantly yelling at my mother (a baby boomer) to get off her phone while driving” (Cassandra Breit, 2020), “when I tell y’all my momma done LOST ha mind. WHYYYY IS SHE TEXTING AND DRIVING W/ THIS BIG ASS IPAD!!!” (@yaedabrat, 2021), and “NONE of my friends have gotten into accidents because of their phones, yet all of our parents have. My

mum (50's) checks her Facebook and texts her friends and starts conversation and have [sic] almost gotten into an accident with me in the car multiple times" (Jordan, 2020).

ORGANIZED GROUPS

Police Departments

Police departments make social media posts that are matter of fact and straightforward, and will most often cite safety data (or laws), appeal to personal experience, and make direct requests to the audience. Many posts follow the basic structure of this tweet from the Salt Lake City police department: It has a graphic describing Utah's driving laws, a second graphic that lists crash and injury statistics related to distracted driving, and body text that directly asks the audience to "Help us end distracted driving" (@slcpd, 2020). Another post says "In 2016, 9.2% of fatal crashes were reported as distraction-affected. Always remember: If you're texting, you're not driving" (Milan Police Department, 2019). A slight variation on this style of post is when distracted driving is defined legally, and then followed by the direct audience request: "Anytime you divert your attention from driving, you're distracted… #DistractedDriving [image attached]" (@jccpolice, 2021) and "#DistractedDriving is the practice of driving a motor vehicle while engaged in another activity… #DropItAndDrive" (@ArlHtsPOLICE, 2021).

Unsurprisingly, many of the posts police put out are phone orientated, such as the Facebook post by the Redlands Police Department which reminds people that in California "It is illegal to hold and use a cell phone while texting, calling or using the apps while driving" (2019). Other examples can include direct requests to the audience and/or citing safety data or other laws, such as "Put down your phone, wear your seatbelt and drive safely" (@ProvoPolice, 2020), "Texting while driving is illegal, not to mention that it is dangerous and can be deadly for the

driver, passengers, and others on the road" (Westland Police Community Partnership, 2019), or "TEXTING DRIVERS BEWARE: U DRIVE – U TEXT – YOU PAY… During calendar year 2017 there were 3,166 people killed in motor vehicle crashes involving distracted drivers" (Arkansas State Police, 2019). Some police departments even try to get fun with it by incorporating "phone lingo" as an appeal to personal experience, like "Distracted driving has become a deadly epidemic on America's roadways. Don't let an emoji wreck your life" (Wilmington, MA Police Department, 2021) or "One "LOL" or "SMH" could change your life forever" (Milan Police Department, 2019).

It is comparably rarer for police departments to utilize shaming as compared to the other methods of discouragement, but it does happen, and it is normally done by including a crash photo and a description of the driver who is meant to embody the shame. In one tweet, the Menomonee Falls Police Department posted three photographs of a car that had run into a guardrail, which had broken both the front and back windshields and had gone through the length of the car; the caption explained that the driver had been checking their phone, and while they only had minor injuries, "Distracted driving can end lives. Please focus on the road and drive safely" (@ProtectTheFalls, 2020). The Twitter account of the Ohio State Patrol has posted multiple pictures of different totaled cars for distracted driving awareness month; in one, the caption says the driver "Drifted out of their lane, over-corrected and hit a cable barrier. Keep your eyes and focus on the road" (2021). In another, the picture is of a rear end collision, and the caption reads "This driver admitted to dropping his drink and attempting to retrieve it from the floor when he rear ended the vehicle stopped in front of him" and like the other variations of this type of post ends with a direct request to the audience, "Keep your eyes and focus on the road" (2021).

Nonprofit Advocacies

Nonprofits that attempt to discourage distracted driving fall into two main categories: the first is the "in memoriam" type, which includes nonprofits that were founded in memory of people who have died due to distracted driving either by themselves or others. These are normally run by family members of the deceased, and as a result they tend to post a lot of direct requests to individual drivers, appeals to personal experience, and shame people who do drive distracted. The second type of nonprofit is the "services" type, which were founded to provide educational content and/or services, and which spend more time citing safety data, as well as shaming people. While individual nonprofits may share traits with both categories, it is helpful to differentiate them when analyzing their methods of discouraging distracted driving.

People Against Distracted Driving (PADD) is a relatively large nonprofit of the "in memoriam" type, and is run by the parents of a child who had been killed in an accident caused by distracted driving. They post about their daughter's death frequently, creating emotional appeals to personal experience, and oftentimes shaming people who do drive distracted, saying things like "No one has a right to decide someone's fate except God" (PADD, 2019). They also post memorials for victims of distracted driving, as well as direct requests to not engage with the practice, saying things like "This month, do PADD and Mary Kay a favor and try to take one trip without looking at your phone. You may save a life, possibly your own" (PADD, 2019). Another similar organization is the Conor Lynch Foundation (CLF), which again leans into shaming and emotional appeals to personal experience, posting things like "Unbelievable that people can be so stupid and heartless!" (CLF, 2021). Sometimes they sprinkle in some safety data as well, such as this post which reads "Every day 100 Americans like my beautiful 16-year-old son Conor

Lynch are killed on our roadways… Together, we can save 40,000 lives a year and prevent millions of life-altering injuries" (CLF, 2021).

End Distracted Driving (EDD) is one of the largest nonprofits of the "in memoriam" type. Like PADD and the CLF, it was founded by the parents of a victim of distracted driving. They appeal to personal experience by posting memorials for people like John Gordon, who died after being hit head on by a man driving and talking on a cellphone (EDD, 2021), but they also utilize shame by posting things like "Speaking up is all it takes to bring someone's bad choice to their attention… Ending #DistractedDriving starts with both drivers and passengers" (EDD, 2021). EDD will also cite safety data frequently, a rare choice for an "in memoriam" nonprofit. One post includes a graphic with statistics about teenagers whose parents drive distracted and the caption "Your kids are likely to drive like you do - are you happy with the example you're setting?" (EDD, 2021).

The other type of nonprofit is the "services" type, and for some of them discouraging distracted driving online is just a byproduct of the way their services are advertised, as is the case for the group Impact Teen Drivers (ITD). They cite safety data, as well as shame people, saying things like "There's no replay while driving. Keep your eyes on the road" (ITD, 2021) or "Speeding killed 9,378 people in 2018" (ITD, 2021). However, they advertise their services frequently, and put calls to action or direct requests even in seemingly unrelated posts: "Reckless and distracted driving is the #1 killer of young people in America. We can change this" (ITD, 2021) and "Did you know that parents are the number one influencer of their teen's driving behaviors? Join us for our Parent-Teen webinar" (ITD, 2020).

Another similar "services" group is the Safe Roads Alliance, or SRA. Much like the ITD, they tend to focus on citing safety data and shaming people, but also advertise their services

along the way. Typical posts for them include “9% of drivers 15 to 19 years old involved in 2019 fatal crashes were reported as distracted. Check out our program to get your teen road ready (SRA, 2021), “Ask yourself- are you driving without distractions-each and every time?” (SRA, 2021), and “The fatality rate for April-Sept was the highest it's been been [sic] since before 2008. We have to do better than this” (SRA, 2021). Both ITD and SRA rarely if ever engage in heartfelt appeals to personal experience, because they are run by people who have no personal experiences with distracted driving victims.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, different groups of people in America, both unorganized and organized, post on social media in various ways in order to discourage distracted driving. These ways include shaming, citing safety data, appeals to personal experience, and direct requests to the audience. While all of the groups mentioned have used all of the discouragement methods at least once, unorganized groups of people tend to employ shaming frequently, as well as appeals to personal experience, and are generally more confrontational in their efforts to discourage distracted driving. Organized groups, on the other hand, vary more widely in their methods across categories, but as a rule they tend to be more professional, and lean towards citing safety data and making direct requests to the audience.

While it is clear from the research that different groups prefer different methods of discouraging distracted driving, it would be interesting for a future researcher to look into whether one method or one particular online group is more effective at discouraging distracted driving than another. Perhaps this could be done by quantifying engagement with the post, or by doing a study. It may also be possible to apply the discouragement techniques described here to

analyze the online response to other harmful activities. For example, perhaps this framework mimics how people tend to discourage cigarette or vape use online; both unorganized people and organized groups shaming, citing health data, making appeals to personal experience, and making direct requests. The methods could also be extrapolated away from social media and into the real world, where there are organized groups who discourage harmful activities (anti-drug speakers, drivers ed services), but there are also unorganized individuals who attempt to stop their friends from harmful activities like smoking by shaming them or telling them lung cancer statistics. Overall, this analytical framework could be used for a wide range of different situations where people attempt to discourage someone else from participating in a dangerous activity.

Something important to note is that while researching this paper it became increasingly clear that many of the organized groups do not post about discouraging distracted driving as frequently as they once did, with a lot of nonprofits and company-organized campaigns being started in 2013/14 and being abandoned as recently as February 17th, 2021, when AT&T locked their It Can Wait Twitter page, which encouraged users to not drive distracted (@ItCanWait, 2021). In the future, another researcher may want to look into why the anti-distracted driving movement seemed to peak around 2014 and then sputter out more recently, and the similarly-timed rise and fall of corporate campaigns meant to discourage distracted driving, such as It Can Wait.

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