Preventing Texting While Driving: Avoiding An Opportunity For Self-affirmation May Be Key

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Research Problem

- Why do people still text and drive even after a local tragedy?
  - For example, in 2011 a university student hit and killed a toddler (Press Democrat, November 16, 2012)
  - If students are reminded of this event, will they be more willing to change their behavior?
- To test this idea, we integrated two research traditions; self-categorization theory (Haslam, Reicher & Reynolds, 2010) and self-affirmation theory (Sherman, 2013)
- According to self-categorization theory, if we prime a shared connection, people will be more likely to see themselves as interchangeable, and therefore, will change their behavior.
- According to self-affirmation theory, if we remind people of important personal values, they will be more likely to do the right thing.
- Perhaps the opportunity to affirm one’s or one’s group important values could undermine people’s motivation to change.

Hypothesis

- We hypothesized that participants who do not affirm an important SSU student value, will be the most motivated to change their behavior.

Method

- 64 female and 13 male undergraduates
  - M(age)=19.6, SD=2.10
  - 32.5% reported minority ethnic background
- As part of a computer-based survey, participants completed a university identification scale (Haslam, 2001) and then read a story about a fatal accident caused by a student texting and driving.
- Next, they were randomly assigned to either affirm or not affirm an important personal or group value. (Smith & Citti, 2001)
- As part of the computer-based survey, participants completed a self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965), questions about the story, how similar they saw themselves to other students and whether they planned to change their future texting behavior. While they were waiting for the second part of the survey to “download”, they could complete a separate one page questionnaire about how best to spend Associated Student funds.

Preliminary Analysis

- Manipulation check: 91% of participants correctly answered three reading comprehension questions.
  - Identified with SSU, M=5.29 on 7 pt. scale, SD=90
  - No excuse for driver’s behavior, M=1.85, SD=1.37

Results

- Self-affirmation increased situational self-esteem
  - Those who affirmed, M=6.17, SD=0.55
  - Those who did not, M=5.82, SD=0.92
- Writing about group values increased felt similarity to other students
  - Group value, M=6.17, SD=0.55
  - Individual value, M=5.82, SD=0.92

Implications

- If you want people to change their behavior, (based on the observation of others) there are two routes.
  1) Give them an opportunity to affirm their unique individual values
  2) Or do not give them an opportunity to affirm their shared group values
- However, the first route comes at a cost because as Graph 1 shows that they are unlikely to help the group change its behavior.

Future Directions

- We assume that these patterns require a shared connection to the perpetrator, but we cannot know for sure without a comparison condition.
- Would the same patterns occur if the tragedy was less dire?
- Will behavioral intentions translate into long term behavioral change?

References


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