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Social influence from the back-seat: factors related to adolescent passengers' willingness to address unsafe drivers

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper was to examine factors that may affect the likelihood of adolescent passengers asking a driver to drive more carefully when they feel unsafe as a car passenger. The paper is based on a questionnaire survey carried out among 4397 Norwegian adolescents. The results showed that the factors influencing adolescents' willingness to address unsafe driving were several. Female passengers were most likely to report that they spoke out to the driver when feeling unsafe in the car. This could to some extent be explained by gender differences in certain beliefs. That is, males seemed to perceive more negative consequences of addressing unsafe drives, to be less confident in their ability to influence an unsafe driver, to be more likely to accept risk taking from other drivers, and perceive less risk than females. In turn, these beliefs affected the likelihood of confronting an unsafe driver. Passengers disposed to experience anxiety felt most unsafe in their friend's car, an experience that increased the tendency of addressing unsafe driving. The results also demonstrated that a relatively large proportion of the adolescents thought that it was acceptable to ride with an unsafe driver. This kind of belief lessened the likelihood of passengers addressing unsafe driving, as well as being most prominent among those who rode with friends who displayed the most risky driving style.

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1. Introduction

It is well known that young drivers are more frequently involved in traffic accidents compared to drivers more of age (Bjørnskau, 2000; Laapotti, Keskinen, Hatakka, & Katila, 2001). The

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pattern typical for adolescent traffic accidents is also different from that of other age groups. One characteristic is that the crash risk tends to increase when young drivers are accompanied by passengers their own age, especially during night-time driving in weekends (Drummond & Triggs, 1991; Williams & Wells, 1995). Studies have estimated the accident risk to be doubled with one passenger present, and further augmented as the passenger number is increased (Chen, Baker, Braver, & Li, 2000; Doherty, Andrey, & MacGregor, 1998; Preusser, Ferguson, & Williams, 1998). This negative effect of driving with passengers has not been found for other age groups (Preusser et al., 1998; Reiß & Krüger, 1995).

The question is thus why this finding is particular for this young age group. It may be claimed that as young drivers are inexperienced, the presence of passengers as such causes a distraction of the driver, and hence, driver errors. However, studies indicate that young drivers are affected differently pertaining to the passengers' age and sex. Arnett, Offer, and Fine (1997) found that young drivers tended to drive faster and take more risk in traffic when they were accompanied by peers than when their parents were present. Baxter et al. (1990) observed that drivers carrying older passengers, especially female passengers, drove more slowly than driver travelling alone or with younger passengers of either sex. Especially, young drivers carrying a young male passenger were found to drive at excessive speed. Similar findings had been reported in another observational study conducted by McKenna, Waylen, and Burkes (1998). Such interactive effects of gender and age have been further studied by Regan and Mistopoulos (2002). On the basis of a telephone survey, the authors found that young drivers, especially male drivers, reported that the mere presence of a 16–24 year old passenger was likely to stimulate them to engage in risk taking while driving. This was particularly prominent for when the driver was carrying male passengers. Passengers aged 16–24 years, predominantly males, were in general more likely to tell a driver to take risks while driving than passengers more of age. These effects of passenger's age and gender seem to be reflected in accident statistics; Chen et al. (2000) concluded that drivers aged 16–17 were more likely to die in traffic accidents when accompanied by passengers aged 16–29 years than when carrying passengers 30 years of age or older. The risk of being killed was further doubled when the young passenger was male.

However, the social influence of peers can also motivate safe driving practices. Studies have found that drivers believing that their friends would disapprove of drinking and driving, were less likely to drive under the influence of alcohol (Åberg, 1993; Brown, 1998). Furthermore, Parker, Manstead, Stradling, Reason, and Baxter (1992) found that drivers who believed that significant others would disapprove of them committing violations, and at the same time, felt motivated to comply to these referents, reported less intentions to commit violations while driving. This was especially true for young drivers.

Some traffic safety campaigns, like the "Peer Intervention Program" (McKnight & McPerson, 1985) and the Norwegian "Speak Out!" campaign, have focused on this type of positive peer pressure through empowering peers and passengers to intervene against unsafe driving. An evaluation of the "Speak Out!" campaign concluded that it had resulted in a 30% reduction of adolescent passengers injured or killed in car accidents (Elvik, 2000). However, the number of young car drivers injured or killed was not reduced. A possible explanation is that the campaign had not helped the teenage passengers to prevent unsafe driving by voicing their opinion in a driving situation, but rather to choose other means of transportation. From this, one may conclude that future campaigns need knowledge of factors influencing adolescent passengers will-

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