



Peer passenger intentions to speak up to a risky driver: A theoretically-guided investigation of the effects of a high school road safety education program



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ABSTRACT

Young drivers aged 17–25 years are over-represented in road crashes, with young males being nearly three times more likely to be involved in a road crash than females. In Australia, young drivers are also more likely to use their mobile phone while driving, with distraction from such use representing a major contributing factor to crashes. This study examined high school students' responses to a school-based road safety program, namely, the Royal Automobile Club of Queensland's (RACQ) Docudrama Program. Two theoretical frameworks underpinned the investigation, the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) and an extended Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). These frameworks assisted in the identification of key constructs that may help to explain how the program influences young people's intentions to speak up to a driver engaging in a risky behaviour; specifically, talking on their mobile phone while driving. A between-groups design compared responses from students exposed to the program (i.e., the Intervention group) with those of students yet to be exposed (i.e., the Control group). Overall, the findings indicated that students who experienced the program reported greater intentions to speak up, as a passenger, to a friend who was using their mobile phone while driving. The EPPM-based results highlighted that gender influences the program's effects and that a focus on the social threat of receiving social disapproval for risky driving may be important for increasing the persuasiveness of the program for young males. The results in relation to the key TPB constructs identified anticipated regret and perceived behavioural control as important predictors of passenger intentions to speak up. Although the results provided support for the beneficial effects of program exposure, the implications of the research are discussed in terms of some potential modifications which may enhance the program's persuasive effects.

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1. Introduction

In Australia, the safety of young drivers and their passengers is of major concern, with 17–25 year olds comprising 13% of the driving population yet accounting for 22% of all road deaths (Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics [BITRE], 2013). Young drivers' over-representation in crash statistics is consistent with many developed countries (Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development [DIRD], 2013; Elvik, 2010). Increasing the concern is a tendency for young drivers travelling with peers to partake in risky driving behaviour, a tendency that is especially likely of young male drivers travelling with a male peer (Simons-Morton, Lerner, & Singer, 2005). Promisingly, research suggests that peer passengers who are willing to speak up and encourage safer driving practices can have a positive influence in promoting safe on-road behaviours of young drivers (Ulleberg, 2004). Thus, there is a need for interventions that can effectively encourage young adults, as peer passengers, to speak up when they find themselves in a potentially dangerous on-road situation. Consistent with this need, this paper explores the extent to which an Australian high school road safety education program, the Royal Automobile Club of Queensland's (RACQ) "Docudrama Program", may influence young people's intentions to speak up when travelling in a car being driven by a driver engaging in risky behaviours. Although the program addresses all of the "Fatal 5" risky behaviours (Queensland Police Service., 2014; i.e., distraction, speeding, drink/drug driving, fatigue, failure to wear seat belts), the research reported herein focuses specifically upon the extent to which the program may influence young peer passengers to speak up to a driver who is using their mobile phone while driving. Lewis, Fleiter, and Smith (2015) provides additional findings from the larger program of research as they relate to a speeding driver while the full program of research was prepared in a report for the RACQ (Lewis et al., 2014).

1.1. Mobile phone use while driving

Using a mobile phone while driving involves high levels of cognitive distraction (reading texts), physical distraction (interacting with the phone) and visual distractions (relocation of visual attention to the phone; Mayhew, Robertson, Brown, & Vanlaar, 2013). Research has suggested that using a mobile phone while driving may be associated with up to a fourfold increase in crash risk (McEvoy, Stevenson, & Woodward, 2006). In Australia, young drivers have the greatest prevalence of mobile phone ownership and an increasing propensity to use a mobile phone while driving (Petroulias, 2011, 2014). Recent data from the general Australian population found that 98% of provisional licence holders report owning a mobile phone, of those, 70% acknowledge answering calls while driving, 62% report making calls while driving, 69% admit to reading text messages while driving, and 47% report sending text messages while driving (Petroulias, 2014). Such usage is reported despite the fact that, in Australia, mobile phone use while driving is illegal for all young drivers holding learners permits, Provisional 1 and Provisional 2 probationary licences and only hands free (as opposed to hand-held) is legal for those with open licences (Department of Transport and Main Roads, 2014). Given the potential risks of using a mobile phone while driving and the increased propensity for young Australian drivers to do so, there is a need to devise interventions that discourage young drivers from engaging in this risky behaviour.

1.2. The RACQ Docudrama Program

The RACQ Docudrama Program is a high school road safety education program that focuses on improving the decision making processes and behaviour of individuals if and when they may find themselves in a risky on-road situation (RACQ, 2014). The program is delivered by RACQ staff, who are qualified teachers, to year 11 and 12 high school students (i.e., 16 and 17 year olds) from schools throughout the Australian state of Queensland. The RACQ Docudrama Program is delivered to classes in schools as a one-off, three hour long program, comprising three distinct parts.

In Part 1 of the program, students are exposed to a dramatisation incorporating a mock car crash scene where a female passenger is depicted as having been fatally injured. This crash scene is held outdoors on the school campus. The dramatisation involves three classmates, from the particular school hosting the program, acting out the roles of the driver (young male driver) and passengers (a male and female passenger) of the crashed vehicle. The dramatisation also incorporates currently serving police and ambulance officers acting as they would if on the scene of a road crash. Funeral service personnel also arrive on scene to remove the 'deceased' passenger. Part 2 of the program, incorporates an in-class debriefing session facilitated by the RACQ staff. In this part, the students are shown a 'prequel' video which depicts the 12 h preceding the crash. Students are asked to identify the risk factors that would have likely contributed to the crash. In the third and final part of the program, the RACQ staff engage in another classroom discussion session with the students where the students explore potential strategies that they could use to avoid finding themselves in a similar risky on-road situation. The RACQ maintains that the overarching objectives of the Docudrama Program are to empower young adults to take control of their own and others' well being, make safety-conscious decisions about on-road situations, to trust their "gut instinct" if an on-road situation does not feel right, and to speak up (J. Smith, personal communication, June 25, 2014). Given the important objectives that the program is attempting to achieve, an investigation of the potential effects of the program is needed.

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