
Understanding the Public Attitudes of Road User Safety

The Centre for Transport & Society in collaboration with British Market Research Bureau (BMRB) was commissioned by the Department for Transport (DfT) to examine the public's attitudes to road user safety. This research provided the DfT with an in-depth understanding of how the public engage with the issue of road user safety, to help inform development of the Government's Post-2010 Road Safety Strategy.

The primary aims of this research were:

- i. To review and synthesise existing research on public attitudes to road safety to inform subsequent research components.
- ii. To explore public understanding, attitudes, experiences, towards road safety, getting beneath "top of mind" responses, in the wider context of attitudes, identity, motivations, values, lifestyles, life-stages and behaviour to develop a framework to improve understanding.
- iii. To explore how attitudes change in response to the provision of information about road safety issues and policies.
- iv. To consider the relationship between attitudes and behaviour and to identify and explore the barriers and incentives to behavioural change which could result in improved roads safety;
- v. To inform post-2010 and wider road safety policy development; and,
- vi. To make recommendations for how the findings from this research could inform a future quantitative study.

Background

There are a number of different factors affecting the way in which the public engage with the issue of road safety. A wider definition of attitudes was incorporated to include a variety of

psychosocial variables such as social norms, risk, identity and impression management, prosocial behaviour, habit, thrill-seeking behaviour and personality. In addition, there are a variety of different groups that were considered as they were likely to have significantly strong attitudes with regards to road user safety including young (especially male) and novice drivers, those who drive for work, motorcyclists, children, older people, black and minority ethnic groups, those living in deprived areas. All aspects of road user safety were considered including driving, walking, cycling and engineering, education and enforcement interventions.

Methodology

Stage 1 involved an in-depth critical review of the literature on the public's attitudes to road user safety. The review was primarily of UK-based literature published after the year 2000. In total 72 articles were reviewed.

Stage 2 involved in-depth deliberative research with six reconvened groups in four areas (London, Bradford, rural north Wales and Glasgow) with groups meeting three times over a five month period. Each group had 10 participants, making a total of 240 participants across all groups. Recruitment was based on targeting individuals at different lifestages as previous research suggested perceptions of road user safety may vary through the lifecourse:

Group 1: Young male drivers

Group 2: Those who drive for work aged 21-54.

Group 3: Those with children under the age of 16 (aged between 21 and 54)

Group 4: Older people (both drivers and non-drivers aged 55+).

Group 5: Younger working people with no children yet (aged 21-34).

Group 6; Individuals with different attitudes to risk. These were:

Continuous high risk takers (Bradford); Low risk takers (North-West Wales); Reactive risk takers (London); Calculated risk takers (Glasgow)

Within each group, participants were also recruited to comprise a mix of car drivers, motorcycle riders, cyclists and non drivers. Workshop 1 explored risk taking on the road in the context of wider risk taking and norm guiding behaviours. Workshop 2 explored the relationship between different road user groups, including car drivers, motorcyclists, cyclists and pedestrians. Workshop 3 explored participants' views on potential road safety interventions, in terms of perceived effectiveness and fairness.

Stage 1 Literature review findings

The literature review suggested the following areas were significant:

Self and others: A prevailing theme throughout this review has been the notion of a difference between the road user themselves and "other" road users. Overwhelmingly, there seems to be a consensus that drivers and pedestrians see themselves as competent and safe road users and others as more risky and dangerous. Hence, support for interventions is largely accepted as necessary for "other" road users rather than for themselves

Social norms: social norms influence road user safety behaviour through the exchanging of attitudes. In speeding, for instance, it is viewed that many drivers speed which offers a justification for such behaviour. In addition, the effect of passengers on driving behaviour and peers on pedestrian and cycling behaviour is crucial, showing that people deliberately alter their behaviour to suit or impress their passengers or friends.

Interpersonal differences: There are differences in road user safety attitudes amongst different segments of the population. Older and female road users have more safety orientated attitudes almost across all road user domains than younger and male road users.

Different contexts are important: Attitudes vary depending upon the context of the research and of the researched. Hence, findings are different when investigating attitudes towards road user safety between a pedestrian and a driver.

Stage 2: Deliberative group findings

Acceptance of proposed road user safety interventions on the whole was quite high. As with previous research, individuals tended to view themselves as good drivers and others as poor drivers. They often viewed messages, through campaigns, as being for other drivers and not being intended for themselves. Participants often described deliberately changing their own driving behaviour to display a deliberately managed performance of behaviour for others - a process known as identity and impression management.

Overall, this strong sense of personal control over the vehicle, perceived high skill and externalisation of threats that means that drivers manage risk by compensating to environmental cues through balancing behaviours

One of the most interesting findings from the workshops was the shift on views in relation to speeding interventions: specifically average speed cameras, 20mph zones and traffic calming. The deliberative nature of the study illustrated that although initially sceptical about these interventions, with reasoned debate in the group discussions people's views change and acceptability increases dramatically.

Contact Details

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