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Phone use and motives of professional drivers: a focus group approach

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Marie-Pierre Bruyas^{1*} & Myriam Evennou¹

¹ TS2-LESCOT, IFSTTAR, F-69500 Bron, France
(marie-pierre.bruyas@ifsttar.fr)
(myriam.evennou@ifsttar.fr)

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INTRODUCTION

Professional drivers differ from other drivers in many ways. In addition to their greater level of exposure (i.e. they drive many more kilometers than the average driver does), they are often required to plan or manage part of their professional activity while driving. A French national survey show that 69% of employees call or answer the phone during their business trips [1], while 38% of all French drivers use their phone while driving [2]. Although phone and GPS use is considered by French business leaders as the main cause of professional road accidents, before stress and fatigue [3], more than half of employees who use a professional vehicle believe that their professional needs include answering to the phone while driving [1]. Professionals are then distinguished from other drivers by a much more frequent use of the phone [2,4,5], which becomes a key media to reach colleagues, customers, suppliers or companies, while maintaining a link with the private sphere. In this context, it is likely that their attitude towards phone use also differentiates them from the rest of the population. Unfortunately, there is very little knowledge about professional phone practices according to their profiles, particularly because of the great diversity of professionals.

In this context, the TELPROF project funded by the DSR (French Ministry of the Interior - Delegation for Road Safety) aims at describing phone use while driving by professional drivers, in order to understand better the diversity of their needs and motives, in relation to their characteristics.

Two main groups of professionals have been investigated [6], commuters being excluded. The study therefore focuses on a) professionals of the road, whose main task and job is to transport goods or people, and on b) mobile professionals who move to pursue their occupation or activity.

METHOD

Two complementary approaches are used. First, a qualitative exploration of attitudes and behaviors is carried out through focus groups. Four groups are investigated: two groups of professionals of the road, and two groups of mobile professionals (27 participants: 20 men & 7 women, age 24 to 52). The first group brought together deliverymen/women who make frequent stops on moderate distance journeys. The second brought together professionals who spend the majority of their working time in their vehicles, including truck drivers (long journeys), and taxi or Uber-like drivers. One group of mobile professionals was long-haul salespeople and the other service employees and technicians who made shorter but more frequent journeys.

This first step served as a basis for designing a questionnaire that is administered as part of a large-scale online survey (930 respondents), which constitutes the second step of the study. Analyzes are in progress and not reported here. However, main results should be provided soon.

MAIN RESULTS

Oral phone conversations. If phone conversations are frequent while at the wheel, they take very different forms according to the groups, the type of journeys and the professional functions of the driver.

- When conversations are chosen by the drivers, they are usually long if not extremely long. They are sometimes considered as a critical need: to occupy a long and monotonous driving time (truck drivers or salespeople), to fight against falling asleep while at the wheel (truck drivers) or as a valve of freedom to withstand stress and loneliness (deliverymen). These conversations are usually uncomplicated, without much personal investment and tend to substitute radio listening. To that extent, they do not raise a high cognitive demand and their effect on the driving could be low.
- Imposed conversations (incoming or outgoing calls) are usually shorter, but complex. For some salespeople and technicians, these conversations are extremely numerous. They are experienced as painful, exhausting and incompatible with a safe driving. Some drivers even declare that they need to stop or reduce speed when they occur. Even when infrequent (deliverymen or truck drivers), they require responsiveness that generates stress because they are often related to destination, or planning.
- Group communications are also reported (truck drivers and salespeople). They are often described as opportunities to exchange with colleagues that sometimes considerably simplify their work.

Written phone exchanges and use of applications. The written is also present. While professionals of the road tend to practice more SMS and private exchanges, mobile professionals do much more professional exchanges and e-mails. A significant number of participants say that they read a lot of e-mails while driving and some of them also write.

Smartphones do not only allow the drivers to access their e-mails while driving, but to use lot of applications including social network application or instant messengers (eg WhatsApp). While some drivers use them mainly for recreational purposes, these new opportunities are largely invested for business purposes especially by mobile professionals. In that context, phone features are more or less known and used depending on the groups. The biggest users of complex functions are usually those who know their smartphone best. This knowledge sometimes allows them a safer use (use of voice commands for example).

Such types of exchanges confirm the status of a working tool to the phone, which makes the driver reachable and productive even while driving. The portability of the data, the fact the phone centralizes all information (contacts, diaries, documents, applications) give a greater responsiveness to the drivers and reduce the time considered as lost while driving. Moreover, it seems that such a responsiveness could be seen as the expected standard at work. It is worth mentioning that most drivers have complained about a dual constraint imposed by their enterprise, which ask them to avoid using the phone while driving but want them to give immediate reply if asked.

Phone pressure. In this context, the issue of the phone pressure while at the wheel is not experienced in a uniform way. It depends on the frequency and on the complexity of the exchanges, whether they are mandatory or not, and on the urgency of the expected reply.

- For some drivers, the link with the company and/or the customer is necessary to accomplish the daily tasks (deliverymen and truck drivers). However, this link is not

always oppressive; it becomes so when the drivers face a lack of information on the place to delivery or when a call generates a change in the destination.

- Pressure and urgency are especially important for resource professionals, or those at a decision-making node, such as some salespeople. Essential points of exchange, they are indispensable in maintaining the activity of their collaborators.
- Phone pressure is also present for those who perform technical functions, who may experience real harassment on the phone while driving. They are the ones who express the most negative experience with the phone while driving.
- Finally, taxi drivers and especially Uber-like drivers also face a dual constraint: having to answer calls to avoid losing a client, and to not disturb their customers likely to leave an assessment of the service.

CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

The analysis of these four focus groups reveals a great heterogeneity of the professionals regarding their phone use and their attitude towards phone while driving. The phone-related pressure takes specific forms depending on the activities carried out. Being at a decision-making node, having to give urgent reply to customers or suppliers are key factors. While it remains difficult to generalize from these results with 27 participants, there seem to be major discrepancies between groups that will be addressed in a quantitative manner by the large-scale survey administered in the second step of the study.

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