Cracked skulls and social liability: relating helmet safety messages to motorcycle riders

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Abstract:
Grounded theory analysis, informed by a socio-cultural lens, was applied to the narratives of eighteen motorcycle riders in order to understand, from the rider's perspective, receptivity to warning messages regarding motorcycle helmet use. This study relied upon narrative analysis to identify patterns in communication that surround motorcycle riders' experiences. Socio-cultural cues identified importance in the process of interest development in motorcycle riding, search for information regarding motorcycle riding, response to danger within the motorcycle riding experience, and attitude toward protection messages. Narratives specific to danger, or experiences of motorcycle accidents were analyzed for comparison with fear appeal theory. Special focus was applied to Terror Management Theory (TMT) and applied to the communication surrounding the real experiences of motorcycle accident and the perceived threat of danger while motorcycle riding. Communication evidencing relational influence was examined for examples of socially constructed interpretation of social identity and an individual rider's perspective of their lifeworld. The analysis revealed evidence of the TMT concept of burying or denying thoughts of danger. The TMT concept of lifeworld influence on behavior was evidenced in riders who did not accept warning messages involving helmet use. Examples of attitude and behavior change were present in two study participants' narratives that described experience of severe injury and also the death of a friend. The riders cited these occurrences as experiences that inhibited their previous behavior of placing thoughts of motorcycle injury and death in the back of mind. Although small in number, this participant group offered multiple categorizations of rider descriptions. The narratives offered distinct in time of life when riding interest developed. As well, motorcycle training facilities were often noted as a source of communication from which riders obtained influence on their future behaviors. From this information insight was gained to offer suggestions for future research on time of message delivery. Riders who develop interest in riding as adults represent a category on which to focus preliminary educational messages. Individuals who have not yet developed an interest in motorcycle riding may benefit from societal cues that demonstrate safe riding behavior. Future research in mass media appeals focused on motorcycle riders are suggested, as is development of educational programs for delivery to high school audiences.

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