



Volume 43, issue 3  
May 2011  
ISSN 0001-4575

# ACCIDENT ANALYSIS & PREVENTION

Editors: Rune Elvik & Karl Kim

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# **Age and gender differences in risky driving: The roles of positive affect and risk perception**

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*Accident Analysis and Prevention* 43 (2011) 923–931

Abstract from the article:

“A phone survey of 504 teen (age 16–20) and 409 adult (age 25–45) drivers in the US state of Alabama was conducted to examine the relationships among risk perception, positive affect and risky driving. Male drivers reported engaging in risky driving behaviors more frequently than female drivers and teen drivers reported engaging in risky driving behaviors more frequently than adult drivers. Positive affect (liking for risky driving behaviors) and perceived risk mediated the relationships of age and gender with risky driving. Affect and risk perception were independent predictors of risky driving behavior. Interactions of positive affect and perceived risk with gender and age showed that positive affect more strongly predicted risky driving for teen and male drivers than for adult and female drivers. These findings are interpreted in the context of dual process models of behavioral decision making. Future research into interventions designed to moderate the positive affect surrounding driving may have promise for reducing risky driving behavior.”

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## **Comments by Dr. David B. Brown**

The term “positive affect” in the article referenced above was defined within the paper to be the personal sense of satisfaction that an individual gets from a given driving experience. Those who are thrill-seekers would get a positive affect from being involved in what they perceive as a risky adventure. The word “positive” conveys the sense of what the experience is perceived to be by the individual, and it is not used in the sense of crash prevention. Thus while some thrill-seekers would consider barely escaping a crash to be a positive affect, others would not consider this to be a rewarding experience in the least. The research clearly reinforced the premise that older and female drivers generally are not motivated by the positive affect of risky behavior, while younger male drivers tend to be.

This research demonstrated that there are at least two factors involved in a driver engaging in risky behavior: (1) *risk perception*, i.e., do they even realize that they are engaging in behavior that could injure themselves and others?, and (2) *positive affect* – yes, they realize it and are getting an adrenaline kick from it. Typically the traffic safety community has concentrated on risk perception in trying to convince young people that certain behaviors (such as speeding, reckless driving, failure to use restraints, and cell phone use) are risky. This has had some effect, but the disproportionate of young people causing crashes due to risky driving behavior shows that it is, for the most part, not getting through to the younger male drivers in general.

How do we modify positive affect? The answer to this question is one key to solving the youth driving problem. It must be recognized that we are dealing with an emotional aspect of the young person, and any logical approach may well strengthen positive effect. If you tell someone who wants to take risks that behavior X is risky, what do you expect them to do? This certainly presents a dilemma to those who are working with young people trying to modify their behaviors to be safer drivers.

We will not pretend to have a solution, but will posit the following for your consideration:

- Guilt too is an emotion, perhaps one that our society has given up on using to modify anyone's behavior; it should at least be considered.
- Appeals to positive emotions such as that provided by [Jacey Good](#) should certainly be considered ... perhaps we are reaping the reward of avoiding such approaches. While these will not affect the hard core risk takers, they will have a positive effect on many, at least for the short term.
- Appeals to negative emotions should be re-considered. The traffic safety community declared "blood and guts" presentations to be counterproductive and off limits a couple decades ago. However, many old times tell us that it helped them recognize just what could happen to them and their friends. Again, perhaps only a short term effect, but short term is better than nothing.
- Peer example in young people is one of the most effective motivators. Finding the champion among those that are the informal leaders and convincing these few to take the lead – this could have some real possibility.
- Putting the onus back on the parents for taking responsibility for their children's actions – the car keys are the last vestige of control that parents have over their older teen-aged children – it need to be used effectively. Perhaps more educational programs need to be aimed at parents, since they are of an age where they can understand the consequences of risk.

We solicit your comments and will augment this article appropriately: [brown@cs.ua.edu](mailto:brown@cs.ua.edu)