

Digital distractions increasingly risky on the road

This festive season South African road users need to be more cautious to avoid fatalities. According to the transport department, a total of 1,755 people lost their lives between 1 December 2015 and 11 January 2016 alone. Until recently, driving under the influence of alcohol was deemed the highest cause of accidents. However, texting while driving and not wearing a seatbelt were noted as major concerns in the previous season.



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In the modern world of technology, distractions due to cellphones and navigation systems have to be considered more dangerous. This is based on Allianz Center for Technology (AZT) study, which surveyed 1,600 car-drivers from Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The study shows that the risk of an accident increases significantly when drivers focus more on technical devices and less on the road.

For the first time, the study establishes a statistical correlation between many of today's information, communication and entertainment functions in the car and higher accident rates. As such, 60 percent of drivers who had accidents in past three years report using their cell phones manually while driving.

Furthermore, 3500 road users died on German roads last year. Over seven percent (256) of those who died were involved in an accident with someone under the influence of alcohol. However, a considerably larger number of people (approximately 350) died in accidents caused by distractions.

"This result does not come as a surprise to us," says Delphine Maïdou, Allianz Global Corporate & Specialty (AGCS) Africa CEO and president of the Insurance Institute of South Africa (IISA). "The more varied the technology and the more complicated its operation, the greater the distraction from road traffic and the more dangerous the driver is."

Half of all drivers are on the phone while driving

According to the Allianz study, every second driver commits cellphone violations (46 percent), and approximately three quarters of the respondents report being regularly distracted by the use of built-in technical devices in the vehicle (74 percent). 39 percent of respondents operate the navigation system while driving, and 58 percent use the radio function via the dashboard menu.

Fifteen percent of all drivers type text messages and almost every fourth (24 percent) read them using their smartphone. Amongst the participants up to 24 years of age, this proportion is significantly higher as 23 percent of the respondents in this age group type text messages while driving and 27 percent read them. 29 percent (of all ages) report checking their

cellphones to see who has contacted them. Notably 52 percent of drivers are distracted by passengers that make telephonic calls.

Distractions are as challenging as alcohol

Historically, in South Africa, the major cause for road accidents was driving under alcohol influence, and the government focused most of their efforts on drinking and driving. This is still a major concern as statistics show that in 2014/2015 approximately 13,273 people died on the roads, and 58 percent of these deaths are alcohol related. However, alcohol is amongst three of the biggest causes of road accidents including speeding and distracted driving.

Although South Africa has made strides in reducing road fatalities, it still has one of the highest car accidents in the world which 25 percent of those accidents are caused by the use of mobile phones. The country is amongst the worst for texting while driving which contributes to distracted driving being an epidemic sweeping the roads. And although the use of mobile devices while driving is prohibited and against the law, local authorities are still taking distracted driving less seriously while it is receiving much attention internationally.

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