Improving the Engagement of Teenagers and Young Adults with Rail Safety and Risk Education

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Introduction: Fatalities among teenagers and young people occur across the UK rail network each year, with trespass and risk taking behaviours particularly high among 16-25 year olds (RSSB, 2013). Alarmingly almost 40% of the total trespass fatalities in Great Britain involve young people aged 16-25, with a staggering ~35% involving young men of that age (RSSB, 2013). Our research therefore aimed to develop a new set of principles and guidelines to enhance the engagement of teenagers and young adults with rail safety education.

Method: The research used a human factors systems approach consisting of stakeholder interviews (n=44) with safety experts; and focus groups (n=10) with teenagers and young adults drawn from a range of age, gender, socio-economic backgrounds and UK locations. Participants were recruited on a structured convenience basis, sampling participants from the chosen sample groups most likely to be able to provide useful insights into the problem under investigation. Data were analysed iteratively using hybrid thematic analysis, with data driven codes developed, and emergent overarching themes identified (Bryman, 2004).

Results: Our interim findings point to a range of motivations for trespass and vandalism on the railways including: the attractiveness of risk and thrill seeking behaviours; peer pressure; and, lack of understanding of the dangers involved in trespassing (i.e. electrocution). Findings from the focus groups highlighted that males aged 14-17 were more likely to consider advertisements to be ‘pointless’, believing the problem is ‘exaggerated’ in safety campaigns. Safety posters and videos designed by young people themselves (i.e. participatory design) were found to be most effective in enhancing the uptake of information, and capturing the attention of young people. Findings also indicate that safety campaigns involving a narrative, based on real life experiences and scenarios appear to be most effective in engaging teenagers in rail safety. Additionally, more hard hitting messages and emotionally loaded materials seem most effective with young adults.

Discussion: In line with previous research gender differences suggested males were less susceptible to video interventions than females (Hoekstra & Wegman, 2011). Hoekstra & Wegman (2011) suggest that it might be sufficient for interventions to work on the peers of likely trespassers, in order to influence the behaviour of young males. Motivations for trespass featured ‘taking a shortcut’ as a key motivator, consistent with existing research (Silla and Luoma, 2012; Lobb, 2006). Vandalism was considered to be a thrill-seeking activity, possibly influenced by peer pressure, something that is reflected in UK fatality statistics, of which a percentage (8%) are those engaging in deliberately risky behaviours (RSSB Annual Safety Performance Report, 2013). This research is currently ongoing, and aims to redesign guidance and principles to inform future safety campaigns with the aim of enhancing the engagement of young people in rail safety information.

References:

Hoekstra, T., Wegman, F. 2011. Improving the effectiveness of road safety campaigns: Current and new practices. IATSS research. 34, 80-86.