



Discussion

Are electric scooters promoted on social media with safety in mind? A case study on Bird's Instagram

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ABSTRACT

Electric scooter (e-scooter) companies are growing in popularity across the United States looking to take advantage of the rideshare economy by providing an independent alternative to cars and bicycles. While e-scooter transportation could reduce emissions, and automobile congestion in local areas, powered two-wheeler drivers are extremely vulnerable to road risks. News reports of e-scooter crashes and fatalities have started to accumulate. Earlier research has demonstrated that the ways in which companies promote and demonstrate use of their product or service through social media influences consumer behavior. In the U.S. in 2018, this study examined the official Instagram account of Bird, the e-scooter market share leader with over 66,000 followers, to determine how much it emphasized safety in its posts. All posts to Bird's official Instagram account were collected from 22 September 2017 to 9 November 2018 ($n = 324$) and rules for coding content were developed. Among all posts, 69.14% contained a person visible with a Bird e-scooter, 6.17% contained persons wearing protective gear, 6.79% had protective gear somewhere in the post, and 1.54% of posts mentioned protective gear in the comment box. About 69.44% of the posts were reposts, and among reposts, 7.11% had persons wearing protective gear. Posts to Bird's official Instagram rarely showed e-scooters being used with protective gear. Photos of customers' experiences with Bird, via reposts, rarely featured protective gear potentially normalizing these behaviors among customers. Public health practitioners may need to establish interventions to promote use of protective gear while operating e-scooters.

1. Introduction

Electric scooter (e-scooter) companies are growing in popularity across the United States looking to take advantage of the rideshare economy by providing an independent alternative to cars and bicycles (Irfan, 2018). E-scooters can reach speeds of up to 15 miles per hour and provide a feasible solution to the “last mile” problem or the distance that feels strenuous to walk but too short to drive.

E-scooter services are dockless, ride-sharing alternatives for last-mile connectivity. Customers are able to use e-scooters by downloading mobile applications to their smartphones. The mobile applications then direct customers to the nearest available e-scooter via global positioning system. After completing their ride, customers can leave their e-scooter anywhere outside restricted zones, as indicated in the mobile application. While e-scooter transportation could reduce emissions, and automobile congestion in local areas, powered two-wheeler drivers are extremely vulnerable to road risks (Hooten and Murag, 2014). News reports of e-scooter crashes and fatalities have started to accumulate over the past year (Notopoulos, 2018; Carville, 2018).

Research has demonstrated that the ways in which companies promote and demonstrate use of their product or service through social media influences consumer behavior (Kumar et al., 2016). Instagram, in particular, has become an important platform for companies to communicate with their customers (Chu et al., 2016; Allem et al., 2017a; Allem et al., 2017b). This study examined the official Instagram account of Bird, the e-scooter market share leader (Huddleston, 2018), with over 66,000 Instagram followers, to determine how much it emphasized safety in its posts.

2. Methods

All posts to Bird's official Instagram account (<https://www.instagram.com/bird/>) were collected from 22 September 2017 to 9 November 2018 ($n = 324$). Each post was reviewed by one investigator and characterized as to whether 1) person(s) was/were visible in the post with an e-scooter, 2) person(s) in the post was/were wearing any protective gear (e.g., if any of the following were present on the person (s): helmet, wrist guards, elbow pads, or knee pads, then protective

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giver was coded as present), 3) protective gear was visible anywhere in the post, 4) protective gear or safety was mentioned in the comment box corresponding to the post, and 5) the post was a “repost” or the photo credited to a customer that Bird adopted for their own account. To establish interreliability, a second investigator coded a subsample of posts ($n = 169$). Interreliability ranged from $\kappa = 0.96$ to $\kappa = 0.81$. All analyses relied on publicly available data (e.g., anyone with internet access could view the post at the time it was collected) and adhered to the terms and conditions, terms of use, and privacy policy of Instagram.

3. Results

Among all posts, 69.14% contained a person visible with a Bird e-scooter, 6.17% contained persons wearing protective gear, 6.79% had protective gear somewhere in the post, and 1.54% of posts mentioned protective gear in the comment box. About 69.44% of the posts were reposts, and among reposts, 7.11% had persons wearing protective gear.

4. Discussion

Posts to Bird's official Instagram rarely showed e-scooters being used with protective gear. Photos of customers' experiences with Bird, via reposts, rarely featured protective gear potentially normalizing these less safe behaviors among customers (Schaefer et al., 2016). While Bird offers free helmets (<https://www.bird.co/safety>) to all active riders (as long as they cover shipping), reposting its customers' photos without wearing protective gear signals that Bird approves of customers riding without a helmet.

While e-scooter companies, like Bird, should consider the importance of road safety, they have instead sponsored a bill that was recently passed by the California Legislature that allows adults to ride e-scooters without helmets (the prior law required helmets regardless of age) (AB-2989, 2018). Public health officials may need to establish interventions to promote use of protective gear while operating e-scooters.

Our findings are limited to one social media account from a single e-scooter company, do not pertain to other forms of Bird's communications, and traditional survey-based research is needed to document the use of protective gear among e-scooter customers. This study did not address the effectiveness in protective gear to deter injury from riding e-scooters and did not determine if protective gear would lead users to ride less safely (e.g., risk compensation). These are all areas of future research.

Regardless of these limitations, this study determined the extent to which Bird emphasized safety on Instagram—an important platform for companies to communicate with their customers. It is in the interest of

all e-scooter companies to promote their services with safety in mind and social media platforms like Instagram may be an excellent venue to do so.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors volunteered their time for this study. The data collected was free and publicly available.

Financial disclosure

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