

It can wait: Apps aim to stop deadly phone use

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Is the temptation to use your phone and drive simply too much for most people?

A new QUT study has examined 29 apps that aim to stop [drivers](#) picking up their mobiles and reading and answering texts or engaging in [phone calls](#) behind the wheel.

Many of these road safety apps simply 'hide' incoming texts and calls – they silence notifications so that the driver doesn't know someone is trying to reach them, with the app sending an auto-reply to say the driver can't answer. Some also automatically turn on once the vehicle starts moving at a certain speed.

As an added back up, apps like the USA's [AT&T Drive Mode](#) (which has had 50 million downloads) even have controls that notify parents if their [young drivers](#) turn off the safety app to let messages flood back in.

"Many of these apps work on the presumption that drivers just can't resist the temptation to answer a ringing phone or read a [text message](#), even though it's illegal in many countries," study leader Dr. Oscar Oviedo-Trespalacios said.

"There has been a lot of research that backs that up and shows drivers lack the willpower to ignore their phones. But there hasn't been any research to analyse the variety of apps that are now available and how they try to combat the problem.

"We found most of the apps on the market focus on blocking specific phone functions such as texting or calling, while still letting drivers access music apps or GPS functions.

"Unfortunately, simply blocking phone functions may not be attractive to drivers who view their phone as a necessity and are unlikely to use a voluntary app while driving.

"We believe a better approach could be to focus on simplifying specific phone tasks to be more compatible with driving. This could involve using voice controls instead of requiring drivers to look away from the road, which is the main cause of risk while driving.

"The apps available can help if drivers are willing and able to use them, but we need more research on the potential of safety apps to one day play a role in car system technologies that prevent drivers being distracted by their phones.

"For example, it may be that phone manufacturers in the future are required to install an app on all their phones that 'talks' to car systems and automatically shuts off some functions while the car is in motion.

"Pokemon Go is an example of the contribution that app developers and phone manufacturers can make to the fight against distraction. Pokemon Go developers realised after the game's release that users were using the game while driving so they released an update to the game while driving. This is an issue of social responsibility and we, as users, can exert pressure."

Previous QUT research released by Dr. Oviedo-Trespalacios last year found half the 443 Australian drivers surveyed admitted to breaking the law by handheld talking or texting or browsing on a daily basis.

He said it was difficult to know exactly how many road fatalities in Australia were caused by people using mobile phones while driving.

But he said a 2014 [American study](#) of police crash reports found that [mobile phone](#) distraction resulted in 18 per cent of fatal crashes. A 2013 study reported the odds of an at-fault crash increased by 70 per cent when a driver was using a mobile phone.

In Australia, two of the biggest safety apps are the pre-installed Apple Do Not Disturb While Driving and Android Auto (which can work on a mobile phone alone or be linked with an in-car system).

The paper, "Can our phones keep us safe? A content analysis of smartphone applications to prevent mobile [phone](#) distracted driving," is published in the January edition of *Transportation Research Part F: Traffic Psychology and Behaviour*.

More information: Oscar Oviedo-Trespalacios et al. Can our phones keep us safe? A content analysis of smartphone applications to prevent mobile phone distracted driving, *Transportation Research Part F: Traffic Psychology and Behaviour* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.trf.2018.11.017](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trf.2018.11.017)

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