

E-scooter companies should consider safety on social media, study finds

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Instagram posts rarely show Bird e-scooter users with helmets or other protective gear, USC researchers say. Credit: Photo/USC News staff

Are electric scooters promoted on social media with safety in mind? A USC study of one company's Instagram feed suggests not.

Posts to the Instagram account of Bird, a leader in the e-scooter market, rarely show e-scooter users with helmets or other protective gear, potentially normalizing unsafe behavior, according to new research in *Preventive Medicine Reports*.

"E-scooter companies like Bird should consider the importance of road safety," said study author Jon-Patrick Allem, an assistant professor of research in the Department of *Preventive Medicine* at the Keck School of Medicine of USC. "Communicating safety on forums like Instagram should be part of the process."

Instead, Allem noted, Bird sponsored a bill recently passed by the California Legislature that allows adults to ride e-scooters without helmets.

The USC study represents a growing body of research at the intersection of [social media](#) and science. Similar to other research, the paper examines how new [media](#) affects behaviors with potential health outcomes. A USC-led study this spring found that people are more likely to endorse violence via Twitter when an issue is cast as a moral issue on social networks. Another study led by Allem found automated social media accounts promote [e-cigarettes](#) as a way to stop smoking, a conclusion not definitively supported by research.

For the [electric scooter](#) study, Allem and Anuja Majmundar, a doctoral student at USC, analyzed the 324 posts on Bird's Instagram account published between Sept. 22, 2017 and Nov. 9, 2018. Bird has about 69,000 Instagram followers.

Among all posts, 6 percent featured people wearing protective gear.

E-scooter injuries are rising

The user agreements for Lime and Bird, as well as decals on the scooters, mention the use of helmets, but that emphasis is mostly absent on social media.

"Modeling safe riding practices through social media is a win-win for all stakeholders, including e-scooter companies," Majmundar said.

Reports of e-scooter injuries are beginning to increase. A class-action lawsuit filed in October in Los Angeles County Superior Court accuses Bird, Lime and other e-scooter companies of "gross negligence" and "aiding and abetting assault" stemming from scooters crashing into pedestrians.

Allem cautioned that the study is limited to one social media account from a single e-scooter company, and this study does not address the effectiveness of protective gear to prevent injuries.

More information: Jon-Patrick Allem et al. Are electric scooters promoted on social media with safety in mind? A case study on Bird's Instagram, *Preventive Medicine Reports* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.pmedr.2018.11.013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2018.11.013)

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