UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies

Research Report

Who's to Blame for E-scooter Collisions?

An Analysis of the Language Used in E-scooter Collision Reporting

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16. Abstract

The growing popularity of electric scooters (e-scooters) in urban environments has led to increased media coverage on their perceived danger both to the rider and to other users of the roadway. Media surrounding traffic collisions has long been criticized by safety researchers and activists for implicitly assigning blame to more vulnerable road users through the passive voice, and through framing roadway deaths as tragic accidents, rather than a systemic public health issue. In this paper, I analyzed recent news articles on e-scooter collisions in the United States to determine how e-scooters, a relatively new form of mobility, are described in collision narratives. Most articles discussing e-scooter collisions with vehicle drivers used the passive voice to remove explicit blame, but used the active voice when describing a collision between an e-scooter and a pedestrian. This pattern indicates a continued motor vehicle bias in social conceptions of traffic collisions and a potential new bias towards e-scooter riders.

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Introduction

As electric scooters (e-scooters) emerged as a popular form of micromobility, there has been an accompanying rise in media attention on the safety of e-scooter riders and their surroundings. Most collision reporting agencies do not have a specific flag for e-scooters, instead categorizing them as bicycles or pedestrians. The specific collision patterns of e-scooters are therefore relatively unknown, though e-scooter collisions generally have the same causal factors as bicycle and pedestrian collisions. There has been extensive research on the media's framing of collisions. Some analyses have observed that articles will often place blame on pedestrians or cyclists for their own deaths in collisions with cars, while others note a "tragic accident" framing of collision fatalities. Recent extensive safety advocacy efforts have demonstrated that motor vehicle drivers are often portrayed neutrally in collisions with pedestrians or cyclists through passive or neutral language. This project seeks to understand how e-scooters, a relatively new form of transportation, are constructed in these narratives.

Literature Review

E-scooters have rapidly grown in popularity over the past decade as an efficient form of micromobility in urban areas. Though many city residents enjoy the convenience of e-scooters, many also desire more supportive infrastructure and better parking management to best accommodate their usage in shared transportation spaces (Reinhardt and Deakin, 2020). There have also been larger media controversies around the "reckless driving" of e-scooter riders (Gössling, 2020). In general, e-scooter collision injury patterns are similar to bicycle injury patterns. Children and elders are most likely to be killed or suffer a serious injury in an e-scooter collision (Yang et al., 2020). Most serious injuries involve an e-scooter rider not wearing a helmet, which is a common practice as many e-scooters are part of shared mobility programs (Badeau et al., 2019 and Kobayashi et al., 2019). Analyzing the environmental causes of e-scooter collisions, however, is more difficult. Most police departments in the U.S. do not use a specific e-scooter flag when reporting collisions, categorizing them as either bicycle or pedestrian collisions (Das et al., 2024). This lack of clear data inhibits the ability to understand aggregate collision patterns.

Traditional media reporting on collisions has long been criticized by safety activists for misrepresenting traffic safety issues. Articles often portray collisions between vehicles and active transportation users as a "victim/villain" framework, rather than a systemic issue, while others cast blame on cyclists or pedestrians for failing to protect their own safety (Connor and Wesolowski, 2004 and Magusin, 2017). Ralph et al. (2019) quantitatively analyzed the state of current media coverage of collisions to see how narratives demonstrate fault. Most articles implicitly take blame away from the driver by referring to the event as an "accident" and assigning blame to the object—i.e. the car—rather than the driver. In this paper, I apply a similar approach to a new form of active transportation, e-scooters, to investigate how the popular news media frames and contextualizes collisions involving e-scooters.

Methodology

I used the Access World News database and Google News to collect articles on e-scooter collisions, using key search terms such as "e-scooter," "crash," and "struck." I restricted my search to articles in the United States from October 2023 to October 2024, and removed any repeating articles. This resulted in 161 total articles. I then recorded the basic information, descriptive language, and contextualization (if any) of each collision report. Sentences describing the collision were categorized first by grammatical voice (passive or active) and which actor

is the focus of the sentence. For example, an "active, focus on the driver" sentence might be "a Sedan struck an e-scooter rider" while a "passive, focus on the scooter" sentence might be "a teenager on an e-scooter was killed by a car." I also recorded whether each actor was referred to as a rider or driver, or by their vehicle. This methodology is adapted from Ralph et al. (2019).

Results

The majority of articles that describe collisions between e-scooters and vehicle drivers in this sample use a passive voice with a focus on the e-scooter to describe the event (See **Table 1**). This framing places the e-scooter at the center of the narrative while implicitly removing blame from a driver. The least common framing was an active voice with a focus on the driver, which reflects previous research findings on implicit bias in vehicle collision reporting. Additionally, most articles refer to drivers by their vehicle, while 97 percent of articles referred to e-scooter riders as "riders" or directly by name. However, for collisions involving an e-scooter and a pedestrian, most articles use an active voice in their description centering the e-scooter.

Table 1. Number of Articles with each Collision Narrative Framing

Framing	Number of Articles
Passive, focus on the scooter	86
Passive, focus on both	30
Active, focus on the scooter	25
Active, focus on the driver	20

While the obstruction of blame from drivers may be troubling, many articles did display a strong knowledge of traffic safety as a public health issue rather than a singular tragic event. Though several articles did add more narrative elements such as details about the victim's life or family, many framed the single collision within a larger social issue of traffic violence. The most common contextual additions in these stories were the rising nationwide trend in traffic fatalities, and many articles would end with a call to action for better transportation infrastructure and behavior.

Conclusion

As with previous research on bicycle and pedestrian collisions, most popular media articles will utilize passive voice to implicitly shift blame away from motor vehicles in collisions with e-scooters. At the same time, news articles are appearing to take a wider, public health crisis level description when providing additional context to these collisions, rather than portraying them as individual accidents. This duality first suggests that safety advocates may have been successful in reframing traffic safety as a systemic issue, given the first research showing a lack of understanding of collisions as a public health issue was published over 20 years ago (Connor and Wesolowski, 2004). Second, it demonstrates that even if traffic collisions are better understood to no longer be "tragic accidents," more educational and advocacy work is needed to unlearn engrained biases towards motor vehicles in societal conceptualizations of traffic safety.

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