



Exploring the lived experiences of young unlicensed drivers on road safety and traffic rules: a phenomenological study

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ABSTRACT

Unlicensed driving presents a multifaceted challenge for authorities, with increasing road accidents attributed to limited mobility and heightened anxiety among drivers, often stemming from a lack of road safety knowledge and difficulties in concentration, highlighting the need for understanding emotional responses towards law enforcement and the significance of acquiring a driver's license. Furthermore, this research explores potential interventions to mitigate the risks associated with unlicensed driving and enhance road safety awareness among drivers. The researcher used a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore student unlicensed drivers' experiences. Eight students participated in in-depth interviews, and the data collected were analyzed using Collazzi's method. The results revealed the following recurring themes: emotional and physical challenges, mixed emotions and the privileges of a driver's license. The research findings show that young individuals driving without licenses encounter emotional and physical obstacles, exhibit varied reactions when faced with authorities, appreciate the significance of acquiring a driver's license, and emphasize the importance of responsible driving and compliance with legal requirements.

Keywords: Young Unlicensed Drivers, Qualitative Research, Phenomenology, Philippines.

INTRODUCTION

Young unlicensed drivers experience a unique mix of independence, anxiety, and excitement when learning to drive without a license. This life-changing event symbolizes independence and self-reliance but also means navigating social and legal constraints and living in continual fear of being discovered. Young unlicensed drivers must weigh the excitement of adventure against the possible consequences of breaking the law. They are also impacted by peer pressure, parental supervision, and their risk assessment as they work toward obtaining the rights and obligations of a license to drive. Moreover, unlicensed drivers are more prone to practice unsafe driving habits and cause collisions. However, how common this practice is still being determined (Al, 2005). Unlicensed drivers were more likely than licensed drivers to partake in a variety of health risk behaviours when operating or riding in automobiles, such as consuming alcohol and smoking cigarettes. Studies on crashes have consistently revealed that reckless driving practices such as speeding, driving under the influence, committing traffic offenses, and disregarding seat belt usage are common factors among young unlicensed drivers involved in accidents (Hannah C et al., 2013).

Motorcycles serve as an informal means of transport in the Philippines. The research focused on road accidents on Boracay Island, involving underage individuals driving without licenses. Participant accounts revealed additional issues such as the underreporting of fatalities, driving below the legal age, and neglecting safety gear. Many of these individuals were students, predominantly males, who operate "habal-habal" during weekends and evenings, making them susceptible to risks. Being minors, these drivers are immune to arrest, fines, or penalties, except for possibly having their motorcycles confiscated (Hossain & Rahman, 2023).

The researchers focused on a localized perspective as no study has been conducted on unlicensed driving in Santa Cruz, Davao Del Sur. This study examined the behaviour of student drivers who operate vehicles without a license. Initial observations suggest a high prevalence of student drivers in Sta. Cruz. Moreover, it has been observed that most unlicensed student drivers engage in drag racing and excessive speeding, posing significant risks due to the absence of a driver's license. This behaviour increases the likelihood of accidents, including speeding violations, collisions, and erratic driving patterns.

One potential population gap for unlicensed student drivers might have been the need for more specific data on the prevalence and characteristics of unlicensed driving among different demographic groups within the student population, including age, gender, socioeconomic status, geographic location, and cultural background. Understanding how unlicensed driving varied across these different subgroups could have provided valuable insights into the underlying reasons for unlicensed driving and helped tailor interventions and policies to address specific needs within each population. Additionally, research was needed to focus on the experiences and perspectives of unlicensed student drivers from diverse backgrounds to understand this issue comprehensively.

This study allowed researchers to assess how unlicensed drivers perceived traffic laws and safety on the road. It helped students learn more about policies that influenced how unlicensed students viewed traffic laws and regulations. On the other side, this study benefited student drivers who did not yet possess a license by letting them realize how important it was to get one. This study encouraged policymakers such as the Land Transportation Office (LTO), the Philippine National Police (PNP), and the Department of Interior Local Government (DILG) to host a symposium on all rules and impounding vehicles. It also benefited teenage drivers who did not have licenses. This study was not just for student drivers but also for teenage drivers who did not go to school but were still driving without a license; it encouraged them to get their license and deal with the rules of the road.

Additionally, this study helped general unlicensed drivers out there know more about how vital a license is and the primary purpose of having a license. It was also helpful to the parents of unlicensed student drivers because it enabled them to assess the potential repercussions of their child not obtaining a driver's license. Lastly, it benefited future researchers who were collecting ideas from this study.

METHODS

Research Design

The researchers used a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the perceptions of unlicensed student drivers towards road safety and traffic rules. Exploring phenomenological inquiry provided the researchers with a comprehensive framework for conducting phenomenological research, emphasizing the importance of understanding an individual's lived experiences and subjective interpretations (Smith, 2011). This method enhanced the depth and richness of the study by enabling the researchers to capture the intricate details and complexities of participants' experiences, shedding light on their unique perspectives and contributing to a more comprehensive analysis.

Research Participants

There were two participants from different strands of Sta. Cruz National High School-Senior High School, making a total of eight participants. The participants were required to have at least one year of driving experience and be between sixteen and twenty years old. Researchers used purposive sampling to ensure participants could provide relevant information about the research focus. The purpose of purposive sampling was to deliberately select individuals or groups with the information or perspective needed to address the research problem. This method allowed researchers to target specific populations or individuals who could provide valuable insights and an in-depth understanding of the research topic.

Instrument and Analysis

The researchers conducted in-depth interviews to collect participant data for the study. The collected data underwent thematic analysis using Colazzi's method, a seven-step procedure outlined in Colazzi's work (1978), as referenced by Morrow et al. (2015). Colazzi's phenomenological approach to data analysis emphasized detailed narratives from participants. Employing this method aided researchers in comprehending the data gathered from participants, including the transcription of diverse languages into English, particularly the language utilized by respondents in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges and difficulties faced by student unlicensed drivers

Emotional Challenges. The challenges and difficulties young unlicensed drivers encounter present a complex landscape to navigate. By examining the emotional and physical barriers they confront, their interactions with law enforcement, and the broader implications for road safety, we seek to understand their experiences and the implications for public safety efforts. The emotional challenges faced by young unlicensed drivers are indeed compounded by the practical

limitations imposed by their lack of mobility, which often leads to heightened stress and anxiety. This anxiety can be further intensified by the constant fear of being caught by authorities while driving without a license. An informant, who wished to remain anonymous, shared his poignant experience and the whirlwind of emotions he grapples with each time he gets behind the wheel. *"Nervous because, for instance, there are checkpoints it will become a big problem if we get caught by the authorities"* (R1, Page 1, L9). He described the overwhelming sense of responsibility he feels. The result presents that young unlicensed drivers have experienced emotional challenges, personal characteristics of psychological traits/states of anxiety, depression, sensation-seeking propensity and reward sensitivity to explore the influences on self-reported speeding of young drivers (Scott-Parker B., 2013).

Physical Challenges. In addition to these challenges, young unlicensed drivers also experience physical challenges. When young individuals grasp the steering wheel for the first time, they are met with an exhilarating rush of excitement, marking the start of newfound independence. However, beneath this thrill lies a world of physical hurdles accompanying the driving experience. *"When you drive, you are terrified because you do not know the flow of time; maybe when you drive, there will be a policeman, and you will be afraid that you will be caught. You are afraid that you will be caught because you do not have a license, and your money will run out"* (R6, Page 1, L7). Teenage drivers without licenses exhibit more dangerous driving behaviours during the collision than licensed drivers. Unlicensed youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are disproportionately involved in crashes that cause the worst injuries, much like licensed drivers (Hannah C et al., 2010).

Student unlicensed drivers' feeling/reaction when there are authorities

Guilt. The journey of young unlicensed drivers is often marked by moments of realization that carry profound significance. This delves into the feelings and reactions of young individuals driving without a license when confronted by law enforcement. From anxiety and fear to guilt and distress, the emotional responses of these drivers reflect the internal conflicts they face. Many were caught between the exhilaration of being independent and the sobering reality of the consequences of their acts. Despite their regret, they find it difficult to change their behaviour. An unnamed informant described his moving experience and the roller coaster of feeling he has every time he gets when there are authorities. *"It is hard to get past, especially when there are traffic enforcers; I might get caught"* (R4, Page 1, L15). Imagine the difficulty of navigating through the streets, especially when traffic enforcers are around. The fear of getting caught without a license weighs heavily on the mind, adding stress to the already challenging task of driving. As stated by the idea of reasoned action, attitudes have a conscious and deliberate impact on conduct; nevertheless, our actions are frequently reflexive in response to a particular stimulation rather than purposeful. (Gesser-Edelsburg et al., 2018).

Distressed. The fear of legal penalties, such as fines or even criminal charges, sends shivers down their spine, heightening their anxiety and leaving them feeling vulnerable and exposed. Students who drive without a license encounter a mixture of fear, anxiety, and guilt when they are confronted by law enforcement since they are well aware that they are not allowed to drive. The fear experienced by unlicensed student drivers stems primarily from the potential repercussions of their actions, including legal penalties and parental consequences. When confronted by authorities, this fear intensifies, triggering a cascade of emotions and reactions. *"It is better to avoid driving on the super highway to avoid a big problem. It is the same as how you are on the super highway, even if you do not have a license, it's your problem"* (R1, Page 1, L15).

Realizations of young unlicensed drivers

Privileges of Drivers' License. The possession of a driver's license extends far beyond its legal status, offering individuals an array of privileges and freedoms that greatly augment their ability to move and live independently. This realization serves as a stark reminder of the boundaries set by law and underscores the importance of adhering to regulatory standards. From the mandatory age restrictions for obtaining a driver's license to the specific training and testing procedures required, these legal constraints highlight the rigorous process designed to ensure road safety and driver competency. Therefore, for young unlicensed drivers, recognizing and respecting the limitations and requirements imposed by the law are crucial procedures towards fostering a culture of responsible driving and upholding societal norms of safety and compliance. An unnamed informant shared his realizations as a young, unlicensed driver. *"For those who do not have licenses, we should be responsible when driving because we do not know what will happen; we should be careful about our actions"* (R1, Page 1, L21). The statement expressed here emphasizes responsibility and caution for people who do not possess a driver's license. It suggests that despite lacking formal authorization to drive, it is crucial to remain vigilant and mindful of one's actions. The uncertainty of potential outcomes while driving underscores the need for careful and responsible behaviour behind the wheel, regardless of licensing status. For instance, for those without a driver's license, it is vital to recognize the responsibility of operating a vehicle. Even though they may lack official permission to drive, they must understand the potential risks and uncertainties involved. Therefore, They should drive carefully and attentively, following all traffic laws and safety precautions to reduce the likelihood of accidents or injury to themselves or other road users. The driving behaviors of young people can be defined and directed by establishing community standards, regulations, and practices that are openly stated, modeled by parents, and consistently upheld by young people. (Imai & Mansfield, 2008). Embarking on the journey to acquire a driver's

license marks a significant milestone in one's life, symbolizing newfound independence and the ability to navigate the world with greater autonomy. This process involves navigating through legal requirements, training programs, and assessments to ensure drivers possess the knowledge, skills, and responsibility necessary to operate a motor vehicle safely. Another unnamed informant shares his realization as a young, unlicensed driver. *"It is hard because we might pay penalties, we should obtain a license so if we are driving we will not think about possible problems on the way because we have complete papers and requirements"* (R6, Page 1, L21). For example, obtaining a license is crucial because we might face penalties and legal consequences if caught driving without proper documentation. By ensuring we have a valid license, we eliminate the worry of potential problems on the road, as we have all the necessary papers and requirements to drive legally and confidently. A driver's license is a formal authorization permitting an individual to drive a motorized vehicle on public roads legally. The regulations, prerequisites, age restrictions, and complexity of acquiring a license differ (Hanna C., 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

This study revealed that student unlicensed drivers encountered emotional hurdles such as heightened stress and anxiety stemming from their limited mobility and fear of legal repercussions. They also faced physical challenges associated with driving without a license. Interactions with law enforcement evoked a mix of guilt and distress, highlighting the internal struggles these drivers endured. Moreover, realizing the legal constraints emphasized the importance of obtaining a driver's license for responsible driving conduct. Thus, obtaining a driver's license was more significant than a legal formality. It symbolized the transition to adulthood, independence, and assuming responsibility. Each step of the process, from learning road regulations to passing the driving test, shaped driving skills and underscored the importance of safety and adherence to rules. As individuals embarked on this journey, they carried forward the acquired lessons and skills, ensuring their presence on the road fostered a culture of safety and responsibility, benefiting all road users.

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