College Students’ Perceptions of Roadside Memorials

Daniel Holland and Kimberly Kinsey Mannahan, Ph.D.
Department of Social Sciences, College of Coastal Georgia, Brunswick, Georgia

Abstract

Despite the prevalence of roadside memorials in North America, little research has been conducted investigating the psychological impact of roadside memorials on individuals. The current study was designed to measure overall feelings and perceptions towards roadside memorials to develop an understanding of how people view roadside memorials in general, and to investigate how seeing a roadside memorial makes people feel in the more immediate context.

Results revealed that the size and complexity of the roadside memorial had a significant impact on participants’ perceptions of roadside memorials and their emotional responses to the memorials. Personality and gender differences were also explored.

Hypotheses

Participants who view a photo of a more elaborate roadside memorial will report being more distressed and feeling more sadness than participants who view a photo of a simple roadside memorial.

Participants who score high in religiosity will report higher levels of sympathy and sadness after viewing a photo of a roadside memorial.

Females are more likely to experience feelings of sadness and sympathy after viewing a photo of a roadside memorial than males.

Method

Participants

155 participants (100 females and 55 males)
- 66.4% Caucasian, 16.1% African-American, 5.8% Hispanic, and 9.7% Other
- 72.3% Christian, 10.3% Catholic, 7.7% Agnostic, 3.2% Atheist, and 6.5% Other

Materials & Procedure

Roadside Memorial Attitudes Survey
An original survey was developed for this study. The survey consisted of demographic items such as age, gender, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. The next several questions were designed to measure the participants’ general feelings about roadside memorials. These 1-item-type items were on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely) and included questions like, “How sad/sympathetic/sorry/lonely/uncomfortable do roadside memorials make you feel?” and “To what extent do you feel that roadside memorials are intrusive/appropriate expressions of mourning?”

Roadside Memorial Photo and Survey
Two photos of roadside memorials were used in this study. Half of the participants saw a photo of a simple roadside memorial and the other half of the participants saw a photo of an elaborate roadside memorial. These photos were immediately followed by the same survey questions they had answered previously. However, this time participants were asked to imagine they just saw that memorial on the side of the road and to answer the questions about that roadside memorial.

Saints Clara Measure of Religious Faith
This 10-item scale is designed to measure the strength of one’s religious faith (Plante & Boccaccini, 1997). The Likert-type items are on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), and include questions such as, “My religious faith is extremely important to me.”

Staircase Procedure

Results

One-way ANOVA tests revealed that the participants who saw the photo of the elaborate roadside memorial reported significantly more sadness (F(1,153) = 5.204, p = .024) and distraction (F(1,153) = 15.39, p = .000) than those who saw the photo of the simple roadside memorial.

In terms of gender, females reported significantly more sadness (F(1,153) = 4.64, p = .036), sympathy (F(1,153) = 5.21, p = .000) and anger (F(1,153) = 5.14, p = .000) than males in response to the general questions about roadside memorials. After viewing the photos of roadside memorials, females reported greater feelings of sadness (F(1,153) = 14.97, p = .000), sympathy (F(1,153) = 16.15, p = .000), distraction (F(1,153) = 4.19, p = .042), and awareness of their surroundings (F(1,153) = 4.18, p = .044) than males.

Factors differences emerged with respect to personality. The only Big Five dimension with significant results on the roadside memorial attitudes survey was Agreeableness. Participants who were high in Agreeableness reported being more distressed (F(1,153) = 5.52, p = .003) and sympathetic (F(1,153) = 14.97, p = .000).

Discussion

As hypothesized, participants who viewed the photo of the more elaborate roadside memorial reported being more distressed and the memorial than participants who viewed the photo of the simple roadside memorial. Although past research on the potential risks of roadside memorials to traffic safety has produced conflicting results, our results suggest that self-reported distraction should be further explored in future research.

Also in line with our hypotheses, we found that participants who viewed the photo of the more elaborate roadside memorial reported feeling more sadness than participants who viewed the photo of the simple roadside memorial. Perhaps the more elaborate memorials elicit higher levels of emotion, which could also be a risk factor for traffic safety.

Participants high in religiosity reported greater feelings of sympathy and sadness in response to the photos of roadside memorials. It is possible that cross in the roadside memorials caused the participants high in religiosity to feel a personal connection with the victims and/or the victim’s families.

In terms of gender, results supported our hypotheses as females reported significantly stronger emotional responses to roadside memorials including more sadness, sympathy, anger, and a heightened awareness of their surroundings than males. The personality differences that emerged showed that participants high in Agreeableness and Extraversion were more affected by roadside memorials. Further research is needed to fully understand the implications of the gender and personality differences we identified in response to roadside memorials. However, this study provides a good foundation from which this exploration can begin.

References