Summary Project Report

Equality in the driving test

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Driving test performance differences in Great Britain

In the Category B (car) driver testing process in Great Britain, different groups of candidates are more likely to pass than others. The pass rate for male candidates on the practical test is consistently higher than that for female candidates for example, while the opposite is true for the theory test. These test outcomes do not always align with safety outcomes. For example, despite their higher pass rate on the practical test, males have a higher (not lower) risk of being involved in injury collisions when they begin driving.

This project was commissioned by the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) to better understand such inequalities in test outcomes, with the goal of improving test fairness.

This study took a mixed-methods approach to understanding inequalities within driver testing for the car test.

First, existing quantitative data for car practical and theory tests were analysed; the focus of this was on gender differences, but disability and ethnicity were also discussed. A short review of literature on gender differences was also undertaken.

Second, interviews were undertaken with learner drivers, recent test passers, instructors, and examiners. This qualitative work aimed to understand barriers that might be faced by males and females in preparation for the test, and in the testing system itself.

Findings

The quantitative data analysis confirmed that there are consistent differences between males and females in terms of how they prepare for the test, and how they perform in it. Males are more likely than females to pass the practical test, and females are more likely than males to pass the theory test.

Gender differences in the theory test

Regarding the theory test, there was broad agreement among interviewees that the reason females are more likely than males to pass is that they are better prepared, because they make more effort to prepare. Males were perceived as being more likely than females to just 'give the theory test a go', and as being more confident in their ability as drivers (and thus not think they need to revise). The finding in the quantitative data that males are around twice as likely than females to post a very low score of 'under 20' (out of a possible 125) corroborates this suggestion.

Gender differences in the practical test

Four hypotheses were formulated from the qualitative work and the wider review of evidence, as possible reasons why males are more likely than females to pass the practical test.

Hypothesis 1: Males are better prepared for the practical test

Higher levels of motivation and interest in driving may mean males obtain more, and more relevant prior experience before they take the test.

Hypothesis 2: Males' higher confidence gives them an advantage on the practical test

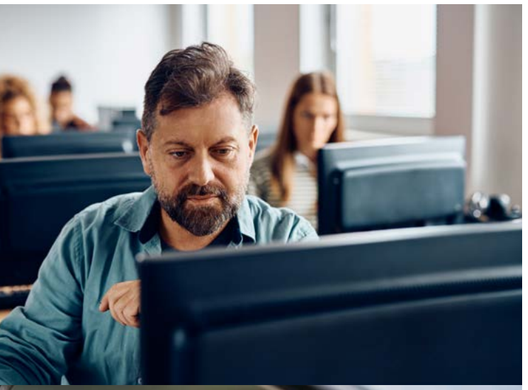
Males may be more confident in both their ability to manage tasks (helping them to confidently 'make progress') and in their own judgements (not being 'hesitant' or 'overthinking'). Part of this might be that females, to compensate for their lack of confidence, may become stressed, something that may not happen to males, who are trying to compensate for overconfidence.

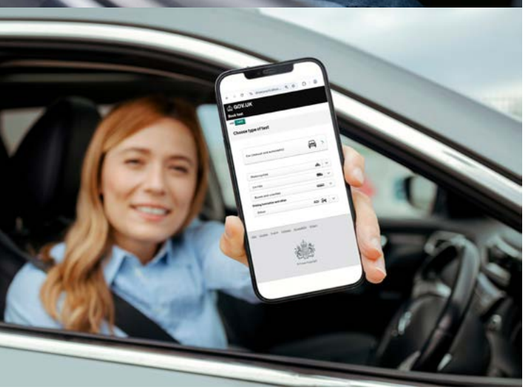
Hypothesis 3: Males' performance in the practical test is less affected by stress

Males may be less prone to anxiety, or better able to manage its impact on their behaviour, in the practical test.

Hypothesis 4: Males' performance in the practical test is less affected by the examiner

Females may be more likely to notice and interpret an examiner's behaviour and demeanour, and this may prompt self-judgement and worry about how they are doing.





Data supporting the hypotheses

One major limitation of the current study is that the variables in data available to DVSA (for example fault data on tests, survey data on test preparation) were not designed to test such hypotheses; they were designed to assess test performance. Nonetheless there were some indications in the quantitative data analysis that are compatible with some of these hypotheses. Notably:

Hypothesis 1: Males are better prepared for the practical test

Males are more likely than females to report being completely prepared for their test (although this is true for those who pass and those who fail – thus it only partially supports the hypothesis).

Hypothesis 2: Males' higher confidence gives them an advantage on the practical test

Males who fail the test are more likely than females who fail to report being 'unlucky on the day', while females who fail are more likely to say they made 'a silly mistake on the day'; this partially supports a 'males are more confident' hypothesis. Some of the faults males make more often than females are compatible with having more (and in these instances too much) confidence – for example, failing due to a serious fault related to inappropriate speed, or failing to slow down at a pedestrian crossing.

Hypothesis 3: Males' performance in the practical test is less affected by stress

Females are more likely than males to report failing due to nervousness, which lends some support to this hypothesis.

Research gaps

Two other specific questions are raised by the work and would benefit from research to answer them.

The first is that the male advantage in the practical test outcomes does not align with later safety outcomes.

Research focused on understanding the link between test performance and later safety, and the mechanisms by which the former can influence the latter, would help in aligning policy intention with outcomes. While the female advantage in the theory test does align with later safety, the theory test is a less onerous and costly part of the licensing process. This means its ability to discriminate based on the knowledge and skills needed for safe driving is diminished, relative to the practical test. Research focused on how the theory test can exert more influence on later outcomes would be useful.

The second wider question relates to the other potential sources of inequality that might exist in driver test outcomes but for which data available do not support full understanding.

These include (from gaps identified in the quantitative data analysis and the interviews) age, ethnicity, automatic versus manual transmission, self-described health conditions, special requirements, region of the country, and socio-economic disadvantage.

Considerations

Three main considerations are offered for future efforts to reduce inequality in driver testing in Great Britain.

1

Building on hypothesis 4, DVSA could examine the way customer service is interpreted by examiners on the practical test. Feedback from interviewees was that different people can interpret different communication approaches by examiners in different ways. It may be that a simple change to interaction with candidates could help to reduce any inequalities these differences in interpretation may cause.

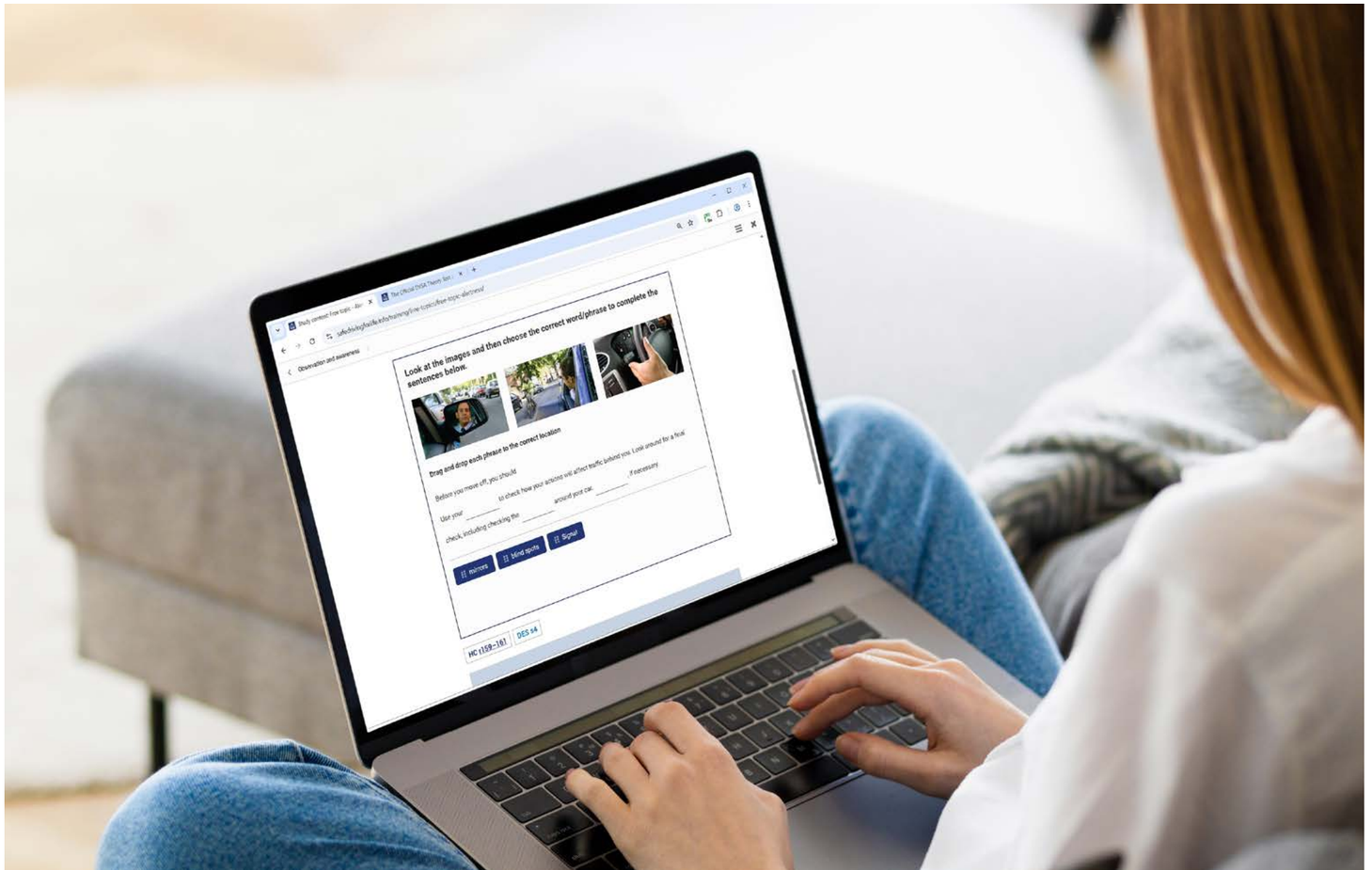
2

Relating to the confidence elements of hypothesis 2, it may be useful for DVSA to explore ways of addressing a possible asymmetry in the practical test between compensating for a lack of confidence, which is likely to cause anxiety, and compensating for overconfidence, which is not. Several potential approaches to this are offered.

In each of these three cases, there would be value in collecting data that allows the hypotheses identified in this research to be tested. This might be through routine data-collection by the DVSA or through additional targeted research.

3

A third consideration relates to the wider narrative surrounding what 'good driving' really is – which may, by shaping the motivations, opportunities and therefore capabilities of male and female candidates, underpin inequalities. This narrative can broadly be described as one that misrepresents the driving task in favour of the characteristics of maleness that seem associated with driving in wider cultural references. Several interviewees mentioned variations on the theme of 'boys will be boys' when discussing the approach that males take to preparing and taking both the practical and theory elements of the driving test. Males were seen as more practical, more confident and less likely to 'overthink', while females were seen as and, in some cases, expected to be more cautious and more prone to self-judgement. DVSA is in an ideal position to challenge this narrative.



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