



# WHO ARE THESE VIRTUE SIGNALERS ANYWAY?: ANSWERS FROM A SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION SURVEY

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## Introduction

Virtue signaling – publicly expressing an opinion that reflects a moral character – is a popular cultural concept, but there has been little research exploring who in the general population engages in virtue signaling and how it is manifested in every day life. While some find this practice annoying, we think it may be a force for social change. When many people speak up, their voices reiterate norms and values (Zaki & Cikara, 2019) and virtue signaling may reflect “virtuous” attitudes. The present study aims to describe virtue signaling as observed in a naturalistic context – while people responded to a survey about sustainable transportation habits.

## Method

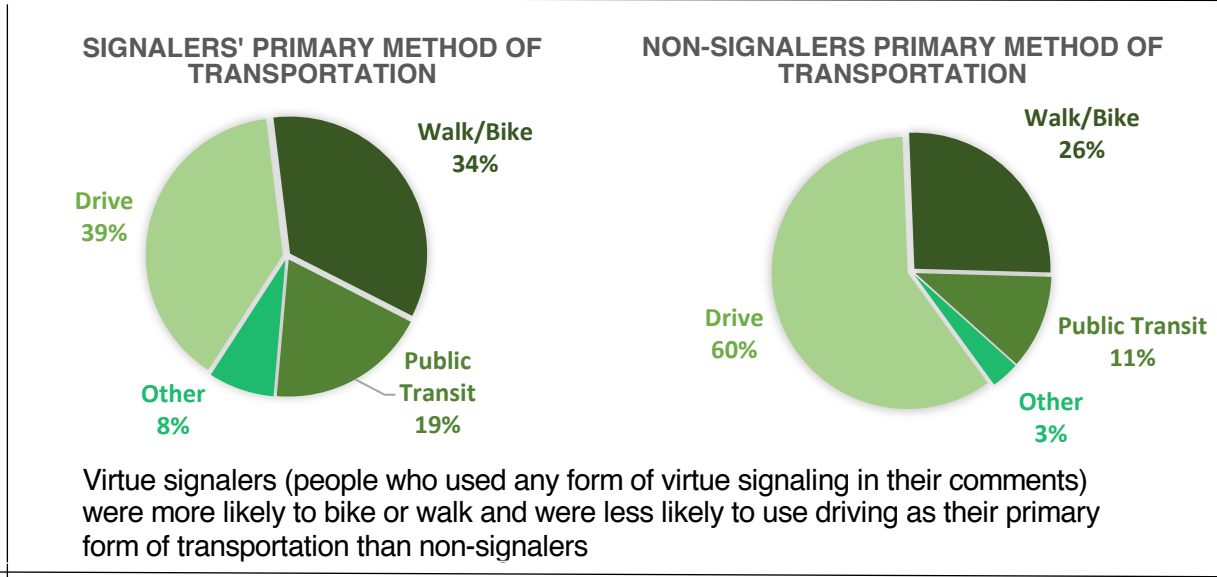
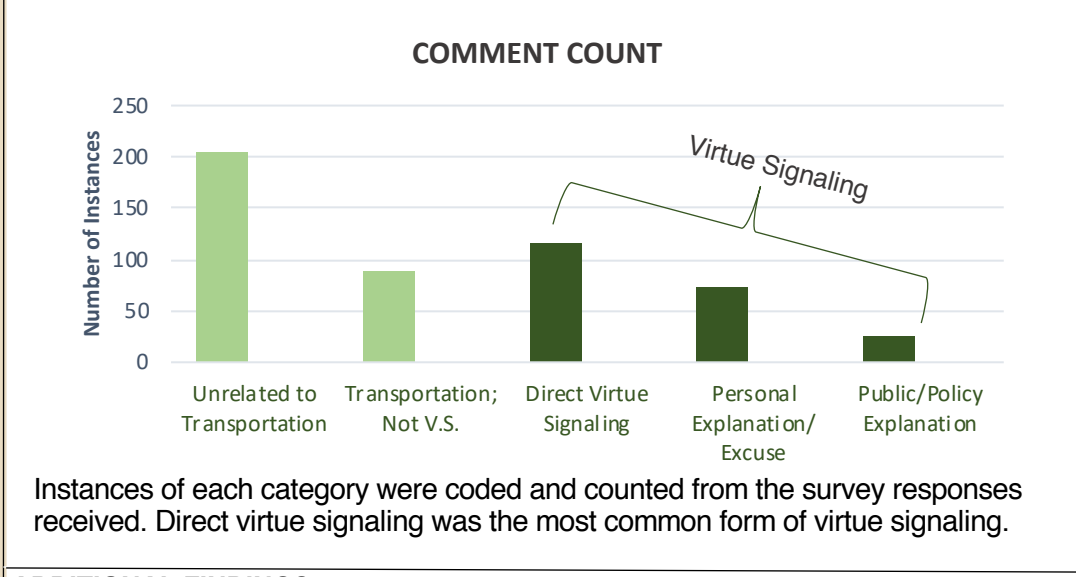
**PARTICIPANTS**

- 673 residents of Eugene and Springfield, Oregon **Age:** 18-82 ( $M_{age} = 47.2$ ), **Gender:** Male, 18.0%; Female, 53.2%; Other, 4.9%; Chose not to say, 23.9%
- Completed online survey conducted by UO and city of Eugene researchers in exchange for an opportunity to win a \$50 gift card

**PROCEDURE**

- In addition to focused survey questions about transportation habits and how they got around town both before and during COVID-19, participants had 4 opportunities to respond to open-ended questions. These questions asked, “*Is there anything else you’d like to add or clarify about your answers*” that were provided in the immediately preceding section of the survey.
- Any open-ended responses provided were then first coded as relevant or not to transportation (e.g., “I used to bike more but my bike needs repair”) versus (e.g., comments about the survey’s wording). Next, transportation-related comments were coded for three forms of virtue signaling (where the “virtue” was using sustainable transportation):
  - Direct Virtue Signaling** (e.g. “We have a solar charging station for our electric car”)
  - Excuses for one’s own personal behavior** (e.g. “Because of where I live I have no other choice than to use my car for transportation for work”)
  - Excuses for others’ transportation habits or public policy limitations** (e.g. “...more people would commute by bike in my hilly neighborhood if it were easier to get up the hill”)
- Responses were coded by two coders, who achieved at least 88% agreement on all coding categories. Discrepancies were resolved by discussion.

## Results



**ADDITIONAL FINDINGS:**  
Of the 673 participants, 144 engaged in some form of virtue signaling. Interestingly, there were no significant age or gender effects predicting who was a virtue signaler. Those who scored higher on pro-environmental attitudes and policy beliefs were more likely to comment in the open-ended response section and when they did comment, they were more likely to engage in virtue signaling.

## Conclusion

People’s responses to a survey reveal multiple ways to virtue signal. Virtue signalers engage in sustainable transportation habits more often than the rest of the population. Our results found that virtue signalers are more likely to support initiatives to increase sustainable transportation use, suggesting they may be more likely to engage in future environmental protection interventions.