Exploring young adults' perceptions of cycling and cyclists (working paper)

Policy background and research rationale

The objectives of this project are to explore non-situational barriers to functional cycling (work and transport oriented), such as perceptions of cycling and cyclists, as these relate to the 18 to 25 age group. In 2014 the UK Government drew up a plan to invest £214m to promote cycling - David Cameron's so called 'cycling revolution' (Deputy Prime Minister's Office, 2014) - to address such issues as obesity, the nation's health, EU emissions targets, road safety and congestion. The Government has also made a strong economic case for increased cycling, citing a positive cost-to-benefit ratio of around 5:1 (Department for Transport[DfT], 2015).
There is evidence to suggest that following long-term decline more people are now cycling (Paton, 2015), but it also appears that this increase is largely due to the 'Bradley Wiggins effect' (Gupta, 2012) and the rise of the MAMIL (largely Middle-Aged, and largely Men, In Lycra). The challenge, therefore, is to get many more non-cyclists to cycle and to mobilise a larger proportion of the population (British Cycling, 2015). If the Government's targets are to be achieved, it is adolescents and young adults who will ultimately need to replace aging MAMILs. However, the age range 15 to 25 years is that when young people typically turn their backs on physical activity, with their time often dominated by technology instead of sport and other physical endeavours (Sport England, 2014).

Research already points to a range of situational barriers to cycling, such as infrastructure, traffic volumes and cost (Pooley, 2011), but there is limited research exploring less tangible concerns, such as how cyclists and cycling is perceived. Perceptions that are held of people, institutions, products and activities – and especially of peers and reference groups - are important to young adults, and unless cycling can be seen as both attractive and aspirational, efforts to increase participation will be hampered. This research seeks to provide insight in this area. Here we outline our plans based on three distinct phases, designed, iteratively, to explore the pertinent socio-cultural domain. We have secured seed-corn funding for the first of these phases, and in this paper we report on the findings from some initial qualitative data collection.

Theoretical perspective

The research will be undertaken within the broad theoretical context of social marketing, a individual-oriented marketing approach designed to deliver benefits to society (National Social Marketing Centre, 2015). The UK Government seeks to *"kickstart a cycling revolution which would remove the barriers for a new generation of cyclists…"* such that "*…cycling levels rival those in Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany"* (DfT, 2014: p4). The achievement of such ambitious goals would involve considerable behaviour change amongst key population groups; social marketing's focus on individual level behaviour change (Hoek and Jones, 2011) suggests its application has a part to play in supporting policy implementers to achieve these goals.
We are aware that neither exhortation nor conventional information deficit approaches are likely to significantly impact our target-group; understanding the relevant social context will be key. Consequently, we intend invoking a number of concepts to guide our work, and posit these broadly within the domain of consumer culture theory (CCT), defined by Arnould and Thompson (2005) as a composite doctrine that addresses (individually and collectively) consumer identity, marketplace culture, socio-historic patterning and consumer ideology. Of especial interest is understanding the associations that exist between identity formation and

personal development, and how the notion of what might be called 'cycling culture' (e.g. Rosen, Cox, and Horton, 2007; Kuipers, 2012) might impact this relationship in the context of calls for a more energised youth/young adult population.

Identity formation is one of the major assignments of growing into adulthood, a process that involves both continuous self-evaluation and social comparison (Neff and McGehee, 2010). Within the psychology literature it is now accepted (Stets and Burke, 2000) that the identity domain comprises two related, but separate, concepts - personal identity and social identity, and that 'identity work' (Watson, 2008) is undertaken at the interface between the two. Social identity needs a social context, and 'being at one' with a certain group, or being similar to that defined group, is key. These people represent the 'in' group, whilst all others are the 'out' group (Stets and Burke, 2000) and, paradoxically, social identity theorists suggest that similarity can be a source of differentiation (Jetten, et al, 2001). That differentiation itself needs to be perceived as personally beneficial; that is, the *"...normative fit of a social ... category should generally be higher to the extent that it allows for positive self-definition."* (Haslam, et al, 2000, p. 325). Identifying with, and feeling part of, a positively perceived social category (or reference group) helps in the affirmation of personal identity but if a chosen category (e.g. cycling fraternity) is perceived to be at odds with positive self-definition then this will be perceived as the 'out' rather than 'in' group. Understanding how to align the multiple identities of self, young adult and 'cyclist' may well offer some insight into how adolescents/post-adolescents can be encouraged to engage with cycling. Key to gaining an insight into how this might be achieved is to understand how 'cycling culture' is perceived by our target group.

Research Design and Methods

The objectives of this project are to explore non-situational barriers to functional cycling as these relate to the 18 to 25 age group. The problem is seen as one that is unlikely to submit to a single approach, so we are proposing the use of multiple methods to allow for both a multi-stakeholder input and for methodological triangulation. We perceive the project as a three-phase endeavour, to be conducted over a period of two to three years.

Phase 1 – Exploratory phase: This will involve visiting a number of sector experts working at Nottingham City and County Councils, Sustrans (Sustainable Transport), Cycling UK and British Cycling. Collectively, these represent a cross-section of the established 'push-for-cycling' infrastructure and will be able to provide insight from local, regional, national and institutional perspectives. These meetings will help us understand the national policy framework more fully and, also, how it is being interpreted by different organisations. Phase 1 will also include four one-hour focus groups, each comprising eight undergraduate students, which are designed to explore and identify the main themes relating to young adults' perceptions of cycling. We anticipate that, drawing on both focus group data and conceptual insight derived from both the identity and social marketing literatures, that a suitable set of items can be developed for survey application amongst our respondent group, and for subsequent analysis and factorial synthesis. An initial focus group has already taken place.

Phase 2 – Quantitative data collection and analysis: Following the insight gained from Phase 1 the team will explore funding opportunities to extend the scale of the project to include the collection of quantitative data, via questionnaire, from a large sample of at least 1000 respondents. The primary aim of this part of the project will be to gather descriptive data related

to behaviour, attitudes and intentions, and to explore relationships between key variables. Our focus here will primarily be on scale, and on evaluating the nature and extent of sentiment in respect of cycling, within our chosen segment. Although adopting a quantitative approach will not allow us *deep* insight into young adults' concerns regarding the socio-cultural context of cycling, it will provide for a structured framework on which to project, subsequently, a more nuanced perspective on the problem to hand. We consider undergraduate students to be both a convenient and also highly apposite population group for study, and will be drawing our sample from across a range of universities. We acknowledge the limitations of this group and research beyond the initial three phases will explore other groups.

Phase 3 – Qualitative data collection and analysis: Having gained some structural sense of attitudes and behaviours within our target population, the next phase of the project will focus on drawing out, qualitatively, underlying understandings. With a sample of at least 100 participants, projective techniques will be used to gain a more nuanced understanding of how young adults 'make sense' of cycling, and of the meaning these have in their lifeworlds (Husserl, 1936). Projective techniques have been used primarily for analytical and therapeutic purposes (Boddy, 2005; Hutcheon, 2010) but also within market research where, it is claimed, an especially deep insight into consumer allegiances can be derived (Dykens, *et al*, 2007). It is suggested (Pich et al 2015) that projective techniques have the potential to ilicit more latent meaning than other methods of enquiry. Relevant techniques are categorised as either: association, completion, construction, expression or choice ordering (Donoghue, 2000; Hofstede *et al.*, 2007; Porr, *et al*, 2011). We propose that such techniques lend themselves well to the creation of insight in the highly perception and identity heavy agendas at the centre of our research topic.

Initial Results

Initial results from the first focus group of 10 UG students produced challenging results for the Government's cycling ambitions.

Identification as a Cyclist: The majority of participants did not identify as a cyclist. Cycling was considered an activity one would engage in when younger or as an activity for the over 30s. A cyclist was seen as male, thirty plus, corporate and in business. Cyclists are. However, some participants viewed cyclists as 'snobbish', elitist and cycling an expensive sport. Cyclists are seen as intimidating to newcomers as many are part of a group or club. Many participants view cycling as dangerous especially female participants. Cycling was seen as 'uncool', 'impractical' and something that did not appeal to young students as they did not see any value in the activity. However, it was highlighted that cycling may become of interest to the group if more young people became interested in the activity resulting in a change of its image for example, "If it (cycling) becomes a revolution (then I'd do it); it's not cool so people wouldn't do it" (Female Participant 1).

Barriers: Cycling was seen as dangerous on the roads especially amongst female participants as it was seen as unsafe, cycling paths were too narrow, and drivers were inconsiderate and often violent. Further, participants believed cycling was dangerous because of the lack of clarity and understanding of cycling proficiently, regulations and guidelines. For example, "there is nowhere for cyclists to cycle, more guidelines are needed so you know where you need to be and more guidelines for drivers so they know where to be" (Female Participant 2). Finally, cycling was not seen as 'convenient' due to the idea they have to wear helmets, high-

viz jackets and cameras. Further, participants believed it was inconvenient to cycle to work as they needed to change and shower before work.

Overview: Overall, the majority of participants believed that they would not be interested in cycling during their time at university or at this point in their lives apart from cycling abroad on holiday but not in the UK. However, when pressed for areas to improve the appeal of cycling the majority of participants revealed that they would be tempted into cycling if they lived far away from their work or university, regulations were clearer, dedicated cycling lanes were built, and safety increased. Finally, a small number of participants believed they would be tempted to cycle if bicycles were more visually appealing and more 'Amsterdam-like'. All 10 participants lived within walking distance of the university campus.

Concluding remarks: We propose to complete phase one by conducting a further three focus groups to strengthen the validity of these initial findings. However, initial results suggest that this age group is not inclined to cycle for a variety of tangible reasons in addition to it not being seen as socially attractive. The very things that is driving current resurgence (MAMILs) appears to be creating an image of cycling virtually guaranteed to limit take up by a younger generation.

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