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Road wars? The role of language in perceptions of bikes and cars sharing the road:

Possible implications for social marketing interventions.

Abstract

In '(re)emerging cycling regions' such as Australia and the United Kingdom, cycling has experienced increased interest as a viable form of everyday transport as an alternative to cars and public transport, as well as growing popularity as leisure or sporting activity. In the absence of segregated infrastructure, harmonious *road sharing* is going to be an important issue to sustain this growth. Road sharing, however, has become a controversial issue. Media reports in both the United Kingdom and Australia, albeit somewhat exaggerated, have described the altercations between cyclists and motorists as *road wars*. Whether exaggerated or not, the consequences of this rhetoric are potentially serious for the growth of cycling: rhetorical battles may only serve to feed yet more negative perceptions about the safety of going cycling on car-dominated roads. Ultimately, the rhetoric of 'road wars' could discourage cycling. In seeking to avoid this outcome, social marketers can design interventions to increase harmony between road users. However, early attempts at encouraging harmony such as Delaware's 'Share the Road', and Scotland's 'Nice way Code' campaigns have not been regarded as successful. Hence, a crucial first step in improving this track record is to understand more fully the rhetorical context of the problem.

The aim of this research is to critically analyse the on-line and media rhetoric surrounding the 'road wars' issue. Using Braun and Clarke's five step thematic analysis approach, researchers will seek to uncover insights that will help generate social marketing solutions. Whilst initial coding has been completed 'bottom-up' using a grounded approach, the data will henceforth be analysed using a theoretical framework consisting of social representation theory, and theories of in/out group representations, stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination.

Introduction

This paper reports preliminary insights from research undertaken in the United Kingdom and Australia to understand as part of a project to develop social marketing interventions to increase harmony between road users, specifically motorists and cyclists, and support the growth of cycling in shared road spaces. There is plenty of material (e.g. Pucher and Buehler 2008, Horton and Parkin 2012) that outline the barriers to cycling, including the difficulties of sharing road space, in car dominant societies such as the UK and Australia. In such countries, it seems clear that one of the single biggest barriers to cycling growth is the perception that cycling is dangerous.

As awareness grows that cycling can benefit society, so the pressure to accommodate cyclists on roads designed for motor traffic increases. This pressure manifests itself in an apparently growing antagonism between 'motorists' and 'cyclists', primarily rhetorical in nature, and typically conducted on-line and in social and traditional media. Data on 'real' altercations on-road between cyclists and motorists is scarce, but it is entirely possible that such altercations are in fact quite rare, but are magnified by media coverage, thus fuelling the rhetorical battle between the two sides. Whether unfounded or not however, the consequences are potentially serious for the growth of cycling: rhetorical battles may only serve to feed yet more negative perceptions about the safety of going cycling on car-dominated roads.

Hence, this project seeks to understand the rhetorical battle in more detail as a precursor for designing appropriate solutions. Specifically, we ask: *what can we learn from a content analysis of 'road wars' (media and on-line expressions of the arguments between motorists and cyclists over sharing road space), that can inform intervention ideas whose aim would be to generate harmony between road users*, in such a way as to allow cycling to grow?

Research background

For some years now, in *emerging cycling regions* (Chataway et al 2014) such as Australia and the United Kingdom, cycling has experienced increased interest as a viable form of everyday transport, and as an alternative to cars, buses and trains, as well as growing popularity as leisure or sporting activity (e.g. Bauman et al 2008). As a result, road sharing is regarded as more important in regions where, until relatively recently, motor cars reigned supreme. Road sharing, however, has become a controversial issue. Media reports in both the United Kingdom and Australia have described the situation as *road wars*, although sections of the media have been accused of contributing to these wars by sensationalising news involving cyclists and motorists, and attempting to sway public opinion through editorial policies. Road sharing is also a political issue. From a public policy viewpoint, governments in Australia and the United Kingdom promote cycling as having significant and important benefits for society – health, lowered obesity levels, mental wellbeing, reduced congestion, lowered pollution, and reduced carbon footprint (Austroads 2005). However, public policy has been criticised for not providing the infrastructure to support cycling, thus causing the need for road sharing, and for inadequately and ineffectively regulating road sharing (Pooley 2013). On the other hand, there is a view that road sharing should not be considered a result of policy failure as it reinforces the idea that roads are for motor vehicles alone. In this view, cyclists and motorists have equal rights to existing roads and road sharing is the ideal policy (CTC 2014).

In recent years, academic and institutional research has begun to focus on the attitudes and behaviours of cyclists and motorists who share the roads, the emotions and tensions experienced, and the precursors and consequences of road incidents (Basford et al 2002, Christmas et al 2010, Chataway et al 2014, Joshi et al 2001). Prevailing themes from such research are that road sharing may cause anxiety, anger and fear among cyclists, and irritation amongst motorists. The experiences are often characterised by confrontation (Joshi et al. 2001), harassment and aggressive on- road

behaviours by both motorists and cyclists (Heesch et al. 2011; O'Connor and Brown 2010). Motorists have been described as resentful and frustrated about sharing the road (Rissell et al. 2002), with the primary stimuli for such feelings being the perceived inadequacy of infrastructure and a sense of ownership towards the roads (Chataway et al 2014).

Some reciprocal discomfort between cyclists and motorists on the road may be predictable when the space being shared is unsuited to the task. However, if this discomfort is rhetorically described as “war” the risks for all road users’ safety are potentially increased, particularly risks to cyclists who are physically much more vulnerable. Ultimately, the rhetoric of “road wars” could discourage cycling. While policy debates continue and short-term infrastructure solutions appear unfeasible, there are opportunities for social marketers to design interventions to increase harmony between road users. Early attempts at encouraging harmony such as Delaware’s ‘Share the Road’, and Scotland’s ‘Nice way Code’ campaigns (Schmitt 2013, Stevenson 2013) have not been regarded as successful. Hence, a crucial first step in improving this track record is to understand more fully the rhetorical context of the problem.

The theoretical framework

Social Representation theory (SRT) provides a useful framework for hypothesising how culture, society and behaviour are dynamically linked. Moscovici defined a social representation as “a system of values, ideas and practices” and as the “elaborating of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating” (Moscovici, 1963, p. 251). Social representations therefore are contextual and create a shared social reality for a particular social group (Burr 2002).

SRT is a social constructivist as well as a discursively oriented approach with the verbal and non-verbal behaviours of group members constructing and expressing social representations and providing the frame of description within which the relationship between objects and subjects is defined (Burr 2002). SRT links sociology and psychology, and hence provides a framework for linking culture with behaviour. Part of SRT is explicitly cognitive in nature, focusing on mental process such as thought, imagination and memory. Representations have both conceptual and pictorial elements that imply not an emphasis on just language per se, but on mental constructs – allowing for all the paraphernalia of marketing. Representations are used by individuals to form belief systems called schema, and people then accept or reject bit of new information based on how well they fit these belief systems. Because they are shared, and social, these schema allow people to use them to help form identities (motorist, cyclist, etc), and lead to shared social practices that are often implicit/unconscious (it is ‘natural’ that cars are afforded priority when sharing roads; cycling is an occasional pastime not a serious way of travelling about, etc).

Three processes are at work in the construction of social representations - anchoring, classification and objectification – and serve the purpose of making the unfamiliar become familiar. Anchoring involves making sense of something new and unfamiliar (more cyclists on the road) by searching amongst memories and past experiences for something that resembles the new phenomenon and then naming it. Classification marks out the new entity as within a pre-identified category. For example: ‘look at that in that sports car, he must be a reckless driver’.

Objectification is the social process of socially creating a language that enables people to talk about and respond to the new entity in a way that we can cope with. For example when the notion of dyslexia first emerged it began as a difficult subject but through a social process of continual development and definition, it gradually hard-wired and simplified into something that could be given a name and a set of characteristics that people could more readily understand. Thus, people simplify complex ideas and distil into a few images that they can easily remember. The complexities of sharing road space implies a new set of rules, conventions, culture changes, rebalancing of rights

and taking on new responsibilities. It may be easier to objectify the new phenomenon of cycling-for-transport by assuming a set of simple characteristics: ‘...“they” (cyclists) slow me down... they take up more road than they need to.. they.. etc’.

The overall result of the social object’s elaboration from the unfamiliar to the familiar is exemplified in Jodelet’s (1991, cited in Howarth, 2006) summary of social representations as “images that condense manifold meanings that allow people to interpret what is happening; categories which serve to classify circumstances, phenomena and individuals with whom we deal, theories which permit us to establish facts about them. When we consider social representations embedded in the concrete reality of our social life, they are all the above together”.

The problem is that social representations can often emerge in a negative form. Strategies and assumptions (see e.g. Franzoi 2000 for extensive coverage of these) adopted in the construction of social representations include fundamental attribution errors, out-(in) group homogeneity biases, stereotyping, prejudices and discrimination.

Fundamental attribution errors occur when personality-based explanations for observed behaviours of others are over-emphasised relative to situational explanations (cyclists ride on pavements because they are reckless people). Out-group homogeneity bias refers to the assumption that out-group members are similar amongst themselves and dissimilar as a group from other groups (all cyclists jump red lights); in-group bias involves a tendency to favour the group to which an individual feels most allegiance, leading to feelings of superiority among in-group members and inferiority towards out-groups (motor traffic helps the economy).

Stereotypes are fixed ways of thinking about ‘other’ social groups that do not allow for individual variation. Labels are created, often based on visible markings (wearing lycra may be an example). These labels are often negative. These negative labels can form the basis for later negative prejudicial feelings and discriminatory actions. Stereotypes of social categories are incredibly powerful and have enormous resistance to change within a cognitive schema.

Prejudices are negative attitudes directed towards people because they are part of a specific social group (Franzoi 2000). Prejudices can develop as a way to justify oppression: ie the powerful dominant group can use prejudices as a way to excuse and justify oppressing the smaller minority group. So, cyclists as the smaller group may regard themselves as ‘oppressed’ by the socially dominant motoring group. Finally, discrimination involves taking (negative) action of some sort against another group based on prejudices. Thus, a dominant group (say, motoring lobby) advocates banning cyclists from certain roads.

A series of research questions emerge from this review. To what extent are road users anchoring and categorising to existing schemas to make sense of changes to road use? Has an objectification process been used to solidify differences between motorists and cyclists? Is there a tendency to make out- and in-group attribution errors? What stereotypes are being created by each group about the other? Finally, is there evidence of prejudicial feelings and consequent discriminatory behaviours?

Method

Wagner et al. (1999) noted that the discourse accompanying collective social representations is maintained more by the media than personal conversations. In 2014, the situation has evolved further with the changing nature of news media and the growth of social media in a digital world. In

this context, media may be increasingly conceptualised as not only maintaining the discourse, but actually being the discourse.

Thus, focusing on both media and also on-line user content, this study contributes to understanding road wars by critically analysing the discourse on road sharing as manifested in news and social media. The research applies thematic-analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to the data as method to organise and interpret the data. Thematic-analysis consists of six steps: (i) familiarizing with the data, (ii) coding the data, (iii) searching for themes, (iv) reviewing the themes, (v) refining and naming the themes, and (vi) reporting the results. Thematic analysis has the advantage of flexibility which allows an inductive-deductive approach to data searching, coding, and interpretation.

The raw data consisted of on-line materials from news and social media sites, including twitter, facebook, blogs and discussion boards. The data was collected independently by researchers in the United Kingdom and Australia between January to May 2014 using keywords such as cycling, cyclists, motorists, drivers, road rage, altercation, crash/collision/accident, road wars, red-light-jumper, cycling on pavements, etc. Retrieved data was organised in Evernote and coded inductively by researchers independently in the first iteration. Further code iterations and conceptual mapping was undertaken by researchers collaboratively. Thematic classification was grounded in social representation theory,

Analysis and Results

Preliminary results will be presented at conference. Content and thematic analysis will be informed by the theoretical framework, allowing for key themes to emerge.

Next steps

We will use preliminary results from this thematic analysis to conceptualise the changes required and we will then use social marketing principles to propose appropriate designs of programmes that can address the issues raised.

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