**Formal Report**

Perceptions of the bike commuters

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For graduate students at Berkeley who live further away from campus, one popular mode of commuting to classes is by bicycle. There are several cultural perceptions about people who bike, resulting in categorizations of bikers into groups such as cyclists, commuters, and MAMIL (middle-aged men in lycra). This study aimed to understand how students viewed themselves in regards to their biking experience, and their perceptions about these groups through discussions about their behaviors and experiences bike-commuting to school. This study also strove to understand whether students viewed their cycling-commute as anything beyond a transportation method. This was uncovered by discussing motivations and environmental factors that led individuals to begin cycling to school instead of using other modes of transportation.

Five graduate students in the Masters of Information Management Systems program at the School of Information, Berkeley were interviewed for approximately 1 hour. Four out of the five students had begun bike-commuting to school the previous year, with the remaining student only starting a few months prior to the interview. Two of the interviewees were students who were known from previous experiences to have biked longer distances for leisure. Two other interviewees primarily used an electric bike as their main bike for commuting to classes, while the other three students had non-electric bikes. Each of these participants also completed a non-traditional interview activity, where they did a “ride-through” of a portion of their commute using Google Maps’ Street View. During this activity, participants were asked to discuss their favorite and/or least favorite portions of their commute. By immersing themselves in the virtual environment, they were able to recall details about previous events or the physical environment that contributed to their opinions.

With the objective of the study being to understand a bit about the perceived variability between different groups or categories of bike riders, participants were asked to describe what their perception was of someone described as a “cyclist”. Participants listed out several characteristics that they would expect the cyclists to portray, including athletic physical appearance (skinny but muscular). Additionally, expected behaviors included biking long distances (30 miles and more), and importantly that the motivation for biking was not for transportation but for sport or recreation. One participant argued that the rise of “cycling culture” was a result of Americans’ need to “sportify everything”, meaning that traditional biking was in a way exploited in order to gadgetize and hyper-focus on performance. This was described as an exclusionary action, because it does not push for advantages to the entire biking community but only those who can afford “expensive, uncomfortable bikes” that are designed to enhance speed rather than practicality. One participant, who owns a road bike and cycles long distances for fun, also described that the archetypal cyclist is usually a “privileged, white male". For this reason, they felt like the term “cyclist” did not envelope their identity. Interestingly enough, some participants referenced a biking group among MIMS graduate students as examples of who they considered to be “cyclists”, but members of that group who were interviewed did not consider themselves to be cyclists. While they did mention they like to ride long distances for fun, they described the frequency of their cycling (a long ride every month or so) to not be at the same cadence to meet the criteria. This is interesting, because it suggests that criteria for belonging to the “cycling” category of bikers differs among individuals, and the boundaries for that category might be changed by individuals when confronted with their own activities.

Participants were then asked to give a term that reflects how they view themselves. The term “commuter” was sometimes used, but so were “pragmatic”, and “practical” riders. In describing the scope of these terms however, they all seemed to be describing a very similar archetype: someone who bikes primarily as a means of transportation. One participant likened this group of riders to their own mother, someone who bikes to the grocery store and short distances in their bike-friendly town. Another participant argued that the term cyclist should be used to describe all bike riders, whether they use an electric bike, bike for transportation, or for fun. This was common across participants, who while able to distinguish between typical characteristics between groups of cyclists, viewed the boundaries to not be set but rather as a spectrum.

Another objective of this study was to understand whether these students viewed their cycling-commute as anything beyond a transportation method. To understand this, participants were asked to discuss how biking made them feel, related to their mental space and things they thought about as they biked. A few mentioned the biking commute to be a chance to relax, and enjoy being present in the environment. Some used the time as a chance to make plans or organize their thoughts. Overall, there was a varying degree of cognitive anxiety or stress related to cars across the participants. Some in fact felt the opposite, a sense of elation and adrenaline to be able to zip through cars. While this was for some related to speed, two participants related feeling satisfaction to be passing cars as a sort of sense of competitive pride. One participant described thinking in their own head “Ooh I’m better than you for biking and now I get to pass you [to the person driving the car]”. This competitiveness was an interesting finding, because it reflects a social value that places virtue among those who choose to bike instead of using cars. Other participants also recalled sensing there being a sort of sense of encouragement to bike within the Berkeley community, but that also extended to most of the Bay Area and California itself. In addition to the warm community attitudes to biking, students noted that infrastructure through the presence of bike lanes and bike shops further encouraged students bike-commuting. However, the main motivating factor for bike-commuting amongst all participants was convenience, and not having to rely on unreliable public transportation or finding difficult parking.

Throughout the study, students reflected upon their own experiences and examined the aspects of their commute. These insights led to the conclusion that there are particular motivations for “commuters” that are deeper than just convenient modes of transportation. There is a sense of societal encouragement within Berkeley (in contrast with cars) that feels a bit like a social movement, which is further reinforced and reflected by the surrounding infrastructure. An interesting future research question could focus on how societal attitudes towards biking impact the development of city infrastructure and further enable the growth of the biking community. Despite being a state with a lot more biking infrastructure than most, all students noted short-comings of bike lanes along their commute, one of which resulted in a severe accident. Understanding how this growing group of bikers views themselves and their own motivations can bring insight into how the community expects and hopes to move through a city, which is important for city planning to develop infrastructure that is safer and more supportive.