

Limitations on the use of the term 'cyclist' to describe people who ride bicycles.

Russell Greig

Abstract

This paper presents evidence supporting the contention that the term 'cyclist' is narrowly interpreted as referring mainly to 'serious' sports cyclists by both people who ride bikes and those who do not.

Most (over 70%) people who ride bikes at least occasionally do not self identify as *cyclists* and for others the term has negative connotations. This suggests the term cyclist should be avoided in communications promoting cycling to the non-cycling public and motorists.

This has relevance to cycling promoters, writers of cycling material and cycling event organisers in composing messages to best reach their audience.

Alternatives to the term are suggested.

Introduction

A large proportion of communication intended for people who ride a bicycle may miss the mark by referring to them as *cyclists*, a term with which most riders do not identify and to which others hold negative connotations.

It is suggested here that when addressing the public or motorists terms should be used that retain a human or behavioural element such as 'children riding bikes', 'commuters cycling to work' or 'locals cycling to the shops' in place of the term *cyclist*.

Background

Though the range of people who ride bikes is vast they are all generally referred to in conversation and the press as cyclists.

While technically the term 'cyclist' refers to anyone on a bicycle it is apparent that in popular use it refers only to a narrow sub-set of all the people who ride bikes.

When reading that 'a group of cyclists is riding to the beach, or that 'cyclists hope for lower speed limits' it is a fair bet the images these statements may generate were not those of the group of twelve year old children they actually referred to.

During focus group research conducted on behalf of Bikewest (Donovan Research 1999 unpublished) the group was asked about the perception motorists have of cyclists. The results indicate the term *cyclist* has negative connotations for this group and appears to define for them almost exclusively to on-road, Lycra wearing sporting riders.

The term 'cyclist' is imprecise and the negative connotations among the lay public will dilute or distort the messages cycling promotion organisations issue to make cycling appealing.

Furthermore, messages aimed at people who do ride may be missed by them if they are addressed to 'cyclists'.

Experience in the health promotion field has encouraged practitioners to work hard to get the right message for the audience, and then get the message to the right people.

It became apparent in the early days of designing health promotion and disease control messages that people may not see themselves in the way that the educators had hoped. They may even actively refuse to classify themselves that way.

For example;

- The many people that smoke socially are unlikely to attend to messages addressed to 'smokers' as they may not see themselves as such.
- Otherwise functioning adults who drink more than they should are unlikely to attend to messages beginning "Alcoholics need to know .."
- Men who occasionally have sex with other men while overseas on holidays or in prison etc were found not to attend to the important health messages that were addressed to gay men, as that is not how they classified themselves..

In these examples people have been engaged in the behaviour but did not classify themselves in the same way health had, as smokers, alcoholics or gays, making it easier for people to ignore the messages which were more easily seen as irrelevant to them.

Health authorities subsequently tailored the messages to suit the *behaviours* not the collective nouns. This then changed the messages from focussing on group identity to behaviours, hence;

- Every cigarette is doing you damage
- More than 4 standard alcoholic drinks per day is harmful
- Men who have sex with other men should . . .

These messages have an inherently behavioural reference rather than using the stereotypical reference to groups, which many members of the target audience did not see themselves as part of.

Similarly, it can be asked, will someone who rides to work twice a week, or cycles at weekends for exercise relate to messages, cautions or statistics that are addressed to 'cyclists'?

Who is it then, among the range of people who ride a bike, that self-identify as a cyclist and what proportion of this group of riders do they constitute?

Method

The Department of Transport's Bikewest Branch annually conducts a survey of around 400 Perth residents to monitor their attitudes and behaviours in relation to cycling.

The 2009 survey was conducted online with the random sample drawn from the contractor's online panel (MyOpinions) which is representative of the Australian population. Respondents had to be aged 18 or over and reside in the Perth Metropolitan area to take part.

Fieldwork commenced prior to Easter 2009 and was completed in early April. The sample was evenly split between genders, and the average interview duration was 11.3 minutes.

Among a range of other questions on attitude, respondents were asked if they had cycled in the last six months, what level of frequency they cycled, whether or not they considered themselves to be a cyclist and why (or why not).

Results

(Rounded figures)

Ninety four (24%) of the sample of 400 indicated they had cycled in the last six months.

When these 94 respondents were asked if they considered themselves to be a cyclist 19 (20%) said yes, 71 (76%) said no. Four percent did not know.

These 94 were asked to indicate their level of cycling activity.

- Twenty (21%) indicated they rode a lot or regularly and of these 14 (71%) considered themselves to be a cyclist.

- Sixty five (69%) indicated they rode a fair bit or occasionally and of these 60 (91%) did not consider themselves to be cyclists
- The remaining 9% did not know

Asked more specifically about their cycling frequency, 47 (52%) cycled between 11 and at least 50 trips in the last six months, with 33 (37%) cycling between 21 to over 50 trips in the last six months.

The 19 respondents who self identified as cyclists were asked why they saw themselves that way;

- 7 (38%) indicated they love cycling and cycle everywhere and as much as often
- 5 (25%) indicated they cycle regularly
- 6 (30%) indicated they were serious about cycling and its equipment etc.
- 1 response was irrelevant.

The 65 who rode bikes, but did not classify themselves as cyclists, were asked why not;

- 36 (50%) said they don't cycle often enough
- 12 (18%) indicated they only ride for recreation, pleasure, relaxing or exercise
- 9 (12%) indicated they don't wear Lycra or tights.
- Others responses included that they don't ride fast enough, are not competitive, don't have a professional bike and so on.

Conclusion

While far from conclusive these results indicate that the majority of people who ride a bike at least occasionally do not self identify with the term *cyclist*

This supports anecdotal evidence that most people who ride a bike do not self identify as a cyclist and, among people who do not ride a bike, earlier research indicates the term holds negative connotations.

This has implications for the language used when conveying information, warnings and promotions to people who ride bicycles.

Recommendation

Communications outside of the cycling industry may be better to avoid the term cyclist and use behavioural and human references.

These alternatives would include, among many others, children cycling to school, commuters cycling to work, families riding in the park, couples riding to the beach, locals cycling to the shops, people cycling to lose weight and so on.

Limitations

The sub-sample of people who cycled was small though the strength of the differentiation between the non and self-identified cyclists make the concept worth exploring with a larger sample of riders. The connotations attributed to the term cyclist may be peculiar to West Australian or Australia.

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Author

Russell Greig

Department of Transport

Perth, Western Australia

(08) 9216 8673

0419 935 555 Russell.greig@transport.wa.gov.au

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