

Meanings

In the UK, two negative stereotypes associated with cycling have perhaps been most influential.

- One is the cyclist as someone who cycles for transport because they have no money and no other choices. This cyclist is looked down on, seen as someone who is probably incompetent and doesn't know how to behave on the roads, most likely jumping red lights.
- The second is the cyclist as someone (usually he!) who rides as an expensive hobby. He is sometimes called the MAMIL (Middle Aged Man in Lycra) and is seen as someone in funny clothes whose slightly odd leisure pursuit gets in the way of 'proper transport' - i.e., driving. (He is the 'Lycra Lout' who jumps red lights because he thinks he is above the law).

These kinds of stereotypes shape how cyclists view themselves. The Cycling Cultures research often found cyclists struggling to distance themselves from these images and to define themselves as 'good cyclists'. Cyclists are also often portrayed as being a particular threat to pedestrians.

The screenshot shows the Mail Online news website interface. At the top, there are navigation links for 'Find a Job | M&S Wine | Feedback' and social media links for 'Like' (132k) and 'Follow @DMAILnews'. The date and time are 'Tuesday, Apr 23 2013 6PM' with weather information '8°C' and '9PM 5°C' and a '5-Day Forecast' link. The main header features the 'Mail Online' logo and the word 'News' in a large blue font. Below the header is a navigation bar with links for 'Home | News | U.S. | Sport | TV&Showbiz | Femail | Health | Science | Money | RightMinds | Coffee Break | Travel | Columnists'. A secondary navigation bar includes 'News Home | Arts | Headlines | Pictures | Most read | News Board' and a 'Login' link. The main content area features a large headline: 'The hit-and-run Lycra louts: How thuggish minority of cyclists are terrorising our roads with one elderly pensioner being hit twice in a month'. Below the headline are two bullet points: '• 'A law that will force cyclists to take a proper test and abide by the Highway Code is long overdue'' and '• 'My mother might have died last week''. To the right of the headline is a search bar with 'Site' and 'Web' radio buttons and a 'Search' button. Below the search bar is a 'FEMAIL TODAY' section with two featured articles: 'Duchess of Cambridge wears £1,065 dress for visit to school on poverty-stricken estate On Wythenshawe estate in Manchester - used to film Shameless' and 'TOWIE's Lucy Mecklenburgh gets over exit from Mario Escobar'.

Typical tabloid article about Lycra Louts

On the other hand, cycling has apparently positive connotations in the UK, being associated with health and environmental benefits. However, in a context where cycling is marginalised and cyclists are stigmatised, the associations with health and the environment can become negative. Cyclists can then be looked down on either as health freaks or as eco-warriors, and the Cycling Cultures project also found people struggled to deal with these negative perceptions.

Context

1. The historic decline with cycling falling from 12% of all distance travelled in the early 1950s to 1% of all distance travelled in the early 1970s
2. From the early 1990s, cycling promotion has focused upon the benefits of cycling, both to individuals (cost, health) and society (health, environment, congestion).
3. Ongoing marginalisation of cycling within mainstream transport planning
4. Local increases in cycling in a few cities such as London and Bristol.

Interview Extracts

Positive views of cycling/cyclists

"I did miss [my car]. I mean, I didn't use to drive far or often but I had a car. It was handy, and it did seem a little bit strange at first. But I got used to it and I was, you know, just cycling everywhere. Only occasionally I'd go on the bus, because the buses were unreliable. And so, obviously, cycling to work, much quicker, cheaper, more enjoyable, good bit of exercise for you and you're not emitting any greenhouse gases. And I can remember cycling into work one day and I was on the Wells Road, and I was stuck behind a bus, and it was emitting these awful diesel fumes, and I can remember just seeing what was coming out...that really made me think about pollution, local pollution and environmental issues. The kind of, the big picture environmental issues, global, greenhouse gases and how that was affecting local community. So that awareness kind of, that's when that arose for me really and just being a little bit more aware of the environment and our impact on the environment. So, again, it's another good reason for cycling. And I think, I started (laughs), I started, I started writing letters to the local magazine and the local newspaper about the benefits of cycling and the evils of pollution, and wouldn't it be great if we had more cycling provision in Bristol and more investment in cycle lanes is needed' (Steve, forties, Bristol)

Negative views of cycling/cyclists

"I try to not run red lights and things like that because I think cyclists can give other cyclists a bit of a bad name, but I find it really hard to not get angry with other people that I see. So, the first part of my journey is normally quite fraught with me thinking that everyone else is a bit of an idiot, (laughing) to be honest and then you come to a red light where there is nobody crossing and there's no cars waiting and you can see in both directions and so you break the rules yourself and then you feel like a right hypocrite. So most of my journey is kind of emotional wrangling and then we get to the towpath and it's different because it's a thin towpath, a narrow towpath with a lot of pedestrians especially at certain times of the morning and there's also a lot of people going in opposite directions along the towpath, and some people don't, obviously haven't read the rules of the towpath or whatever and I've only recently read them so I don't know everything, but basically my understanding is that you have to use your bell and all that sort of thing. But people can get quite angry so if you ring your bell at pedestrians, which you're meant to do to let them know that you're coming so that they don't step out in front of you and you don't push them in the canal, they quite often will, like give you an evil look or something, like "Why are you ringing your bell at me?" and stuff like that. So, I always find it a little bit nerve wracking going along the towpath as well. I guess I'd describe myself as an anxious cyclist.' (Nina, twenties, Hackney, London)

Questions:

1. What are your reaction to the quotes - do you recognise the positive and negative perceptions that they express?
2. What are the positive and negative meanings associated with cycling in your context/s? How is this related to the types of people that cycle?
3. Do you think this has changed in the past? Do you expect it to change in the future?
4. Reflect on the differences between the meanings and images associated with cycling in your context/s, and in the UK.