



The bicycle and the dream of a sustainable city: An explorative comparison of the image of bicycles in the mass-media and the general public

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the representation of the bicycle by comparing data from various mass media sources and the general public in Italy. In study 1, a number of commercial advertisements published on paper magazines and aired by the major TV channels, as well as 405 articles published by the major online newspapers were content analysed in order to identify the main concepts and evaluations characterising the representation of bikes in the media. In study 2, 94 Rome residents were interviewed on their beliefs regarding the pros and cons of using the bike in the city and their perceived social approval. Results showed several points of overlap between the two representations, although different themes and structures emerged as well.

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[...] *the worst enemies of the bicycle in the urban areas are not cars, but longheld prejudices* [...] (Bjerregaard, 1999)¹

1. Introduction

In modern western societies, mass media are one of the many contexts in which social cultural values, beliefs and evaluations concerning relevant social objects are constructed and socially shared (e.g. Atkin, 1980; Jovchelovitch, 2001; Moscovici, 2001). For example, according to the Agenda Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Shaw, 1979), a correlation exists between what is included in (or excluded from) the content of mass media and what people tend to include in (or exclude from) the content of their knowledge, beliefs and evaluations (Andrews & Caren, 2010). Nevertheless, the role of mass media in the diffusion of preferences or habits concerning specific travel modes still needs to be defined. In particular, little is known about the way mass media can contribute to the diffusion of alternative travel modes such as cycling. The

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¹ European Commissioner.

present study aims to address these shortcomings by comparing the representation of the bicycle as it emerges from the mass media with people's beliefs and evaluations regarding the use of the bicycle in the city.

1.1. The effects of mass media communication on the audience

News media are considered as a primary source of information that can reflect and reinforce the attitudes of a community. In this sense, news media play an important "agenda setting" function as they influence what people think about (McCombs, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and their attitudes towards issues (Kitzinger, 2007); the higher up an issue is on the news agenda, the more likely it would be seen as important by the public. However, this is not an all-or-none phenomenon, but can entail different levels of salience and knowledge of the issue from general to more specific, depending on various intervening factors (Benton & Frazier, 1976). Among these factors are the more passive vs. active role of the audience in relation to specific media (press, TV, internet, etc.) and the genre (news, advertisement, entertainment, etc.) of the communication (Livingstone, 1990; Losito, 2009). In this sense, paper and online press are often seen to stimulate a more active role in their audience (based on a more thorough process of information selection, interpretation and memorisation), while TV programmes, and among these, TV commercials, are often placed at the opposite end of this continuum as the audience tends to play a much more passive role. Another intervening factor concerns the audience's personal values and background. Becker and Connor (1981) found that people with different values showed different patterns of exposure to different media (TV, newspaper, magazines). Zaho (2012) found a positive correlation between altruism and the extent to which participants used various media sources (e.g. newspapers, books, internet, TV news, etc.) to collect information about some environmental issues. The empirical evidence suggests that this might be due to the different values underlying the communications produced by different sources, as people tend to select the sources and the messages that appear congruent with the values they hold. A crucial role has also been ascribed to the social and normative context (often referred to as the situation) in which the communication takes place. This has to be intended at both the macro or distal level (society and community) and the micro or proximal one (family, peers, colleagues, acquaintances, etc.). Indeed, the final interpretation and relevance attributed to a media message is typically negotiated with the people with whom the audience directly interact, or with the internalised representation of the norms accepted by such people, and in general, it is usually compared with the normative rules of the broader social categories considered relevant for that behaviour (Denham, 2004). Hence, these studies suggest the importance of investigating mass media communication that focuses on different media and taking into account aspects such as the social values and norms that they explicitly or implicitly support.

1.2. Mass media, environmental issues and urban cycling

Many studies have suggested a significant media agenda-setting effect for environmental issues; the public relies heavily on the media for information about the environment, and a strong correlation has been found between the media coverage of an issue and public agendas (Ader, 1995; Brondi, Armenti, Cottone, Mazzare, & Sarrica, 2014; Holbert, Kwak, & Shah, 2003; Sarrica, Brondi, & Cottone, 2014; Zaho, 2012). In turn, the media's environmental agenda is highly dependent on the agenda-building efforts of sources who provide information subsidiaries to the media to ultimately influence public and policy agendas (Curtin & Rhodenbaugh, 2001; Gandy, 1982; Turk, 1986). In the cycling domain, a study by Rissel, Bonfiglioli, Emilsen, and Smith (2010) documented the representation of cycling in the newspapers of two Australian cities (Sydney and Melbourne). The coverage appeared to reflect the degree of development of cycling in different areas of the two cities, but the various newspapers differed substantially in terms of how they reported the stories, ranging widely from positive to negative representations. Another important aspect to notice is that the study showed a widespread use of positive framing of "cycling" as a practice, while "cyclists" were often portrayed negatively. Discussing the plausible implications of this result, the authors suggested the possibility that unfavorable news might deter people from considering cycling as a transport option. More generally, it seems plausible that the prominence and type of news coverage that cycling receives could shape public understanding of cyclists and cycling, and could affect both the uptake of cycling as a common practice and public support of the policies directed to increase its use. Because of the importance of cycling for sustainable mobility in urban contexts, further research is needed about the way in which it has been framed in the mass media in recent years. While the existing literature on media and cycling has exclusively focused on news coverage, more attention could be given to the way in which various media address this particular issue in a given context, and to its relationship with the audience's parallel opinions.

1.3. Aims of the studies

The general aim of the studies reported here was to compare the image of bikes (and its users) as it emerges from various types of media in Italy (study 1) with that derived from the individual experience of people living in a big Italian city (study 2). In other words we aimed to identify the conceptual dimensions to which the two representations were anchored and explore the overall social support towards the use of this means of transportation. In order to do this, in study 1, particular attention was dedicated to explore the main topics addressed (e.g. concepts, ideas, themes), the references to the physical (e.g. when and where) and social (e.g. work/leisure, family/peers/colleagues,

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