



Journey to work, buzz or bore? A phenomenological, ethnographic study of motor scooter riders in Sydney

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Abstract

As is the case in most modern cities around the world, Sydney's traffic congestion is growing. Cars are notoriously inefficient users of energy and highly efficient generators of both noise and air pollution. Statistics show that the majority of inner city car usage involves a single passenger and relatively short distances. This describes a very inefficient transport situation and an urgent need for change. In many parts of Europe this change has been partially bought about by an upsurge in scooter popularity.

This paper explores the western phenomena of scooter riding with comparisons between the experiences of the Municipality of Rome and the fledgling Australian phenomena.

This is an Ethnographic Phenomenological study of the rising numbers of people who prefer to ride a single person form of transport in preference to a car.

Using literature reviews, observation techniques, interviews and surveys, this study provides an understanding of the culture and context of these riders and the mystique associated with this mode of transport. It shades the allure of these machines. It identifies the sub-cultural groups affected and influenced by this allure, and it highlights the problems and issues facing this group if it is to offer a solution to increasing congestion. This study offers valuable insights into the lives of the people who are using our roads in new ways and their view of the travelling experience. It will be valuable to those wishing to understand this important aspect of the future needs of inner city transport or developing more sustainable alternatives to cars.

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Introduction

Two years ago I traveled to Italy for the first time. Everywhere I went there were swarms of people riding motor scooters, particularly in Rome. Here was a society that appeared to have embraced an alternative to cars and woven it successfully into the basic framework of the transport system. Indeed motor scooters have slipped so naturally into this environment that they seem to have become an intrinsic part of Italian culture.

When I returned to Sydney I might have had a heightened sensitivity to the presence of scooters but I couldn't help noticing an increase in the numbers of people riding them here. I resolved to determine whether it was my imagination, Italian experiences or was there something beginning here that was similar to what I had seen in Rome?

Review of available literature related to motorcycle and/or motor scooter riding, discovered that the majority of previous work was primarily quantitative, statistical and safety data focussed. There was very little research on the emotive aspects of driving or riding experiences.

Why do people choose to travel the way they do? What are their motivating factors? Why are we so addicted to cars?

A report on Powered Two Wheelers (PTW's) prepared by Professor Marcus Wigan of Napier University, Edinburgh, was commissioned by the Victorian Government, Motorcycle Advisory Board for VicRoads Wigan (2000). He said in this report, "Fresh information is needed to assess the factors that affect motorcyclist's choice of mode, and by implication also to address those that affect the decision to obtain a motorcycle in the first place. Fresh work is required to clarify what factors might be addressed in a strategy to increase the use of PTWs" Wigan (2000) p1. While he was generally speaking about all PTW's I have focused my study on a particular sub-group called motor scooter riders. These road users adopt seemingly unusual modal choices by mainstream standards and choose their transport mode for strong emotional and subjective reasons but by doing so they, 'inadvertently provide disproportionately high transport, environment and societal benefits" Wigan (2000) p47.

This paper is in part designed to follow on from Professors Wigan's call for more information. It also touches on other issues, such as *enjoyment* in choice of travel mode, transport's contribution to cultural capital and environmental sustainability. Much has been said about western society's preoccupation with cars as a primary mode of transport Page (2001). The City of Sydney council says that transport is probably *the* major challenge facing Sydney in the next twenty years and modal diversity is much muted as an essential strategic solution CSC(2000). Scooter riders are a small group of transport users who appear to have broken the normal pattern of car dependence and are using alternative transport. If alternatives to cars are to be encouraged and modal diversity is necessary, we will need to study and understand the motivating factors within such groups. Perhaps they can teach us something that will help transport in the longer term.

Are numbers the answer?

Is transport only about numbers and costs, of people and goods traveling? Is how we choose to travel only about road and safety statistics? Do all transport questions only have logical, quantitative answers? In Sydney there is a small but significant and growing community of road space users doing something different. In this paper I shed some light on the thinking of these people, and the reasons they are making a different transport mode choice. I will argue the validity of studies such as this in helping to understand their way of thinking and the benefits accrued for future transport planning strategies. I will challenge the reader to consider an alternative mode of thinking. One that promotes a move away from the postmodernist, post economic rationalist methods of quantitative justification of road strategy and planning decisions. I ask you to look closer at how the 'people' element of the transport debate can be better used to expand the range of possibilities in transport diversity. By not researching and describing the PTW world in traditional quantitative terms but in emotional terms, I am asking readers to suspend their natural skepticism and to adopt a challenging perspective on a new paradigm. One that values the enjoyment element of travel. One that understands the *new* value of personal time. One that is more considerate of the sustainability contribution of modal choice. One that offers glimpses of a richer, more diverse transport world. Transport choice is not simply a matter of numbers.

Methodology

The purpose of the study was two fold. Firstly, to determine if a scooter-usage phenomenon is taking place in inner Sydney. Secondly, to research the sociological aspects of this activity from the rider's perspective to better inform future studies on developing transport alternatives. This answers the call for fresh research from Wigan in his paper mentioned above and also provide information on the ways of thinking of a societal group of road users who have 'broken the mold' of accepted car usage patterns. Designing a social science research project of this nature suggests an ethnographic phenomenological approach.

Two definitions from Gary Bouma, Professor of Sociology at Monash University, Melbourne, were used to guide interpretation of the research design.

"Phenomenological research focuses on the way in which social actors make situations meaningful. It focuses on the way people interpret the actions of others; how they make sense of events and how, through communication they build worlds of meaning. Research that attempts to discover and express the 'everyday' social experience... is an example of this approach" Bouma (2001) p180.

The study was designed to capture this 'everydayness' of scooterists and record the world experience of the riders. It bases the existence of a sales and marketing phenomenon on base level quantitative statistics and a sociological phenomenon through the actions and reactions of the participants.

“Ethnographic research attempts to describe the way of life of a group, culture or subculture. It usually uses extended participant observation. Like Phenomenological research, the focus is on the meaning of the social action and organization, and the description of the basic structures of the group or society being studied” Bouma (2001) p180.

I have endeavored to weave through the narrative the real meaning sometimes hidden in participants actions and where possible let the meaning come out in their own words. This illustrates the richness that Qualitative research can provide, and how it can inform strategic planning and encourage positive social change. “There is a pressing need to show how the practices of qualitative research can help change the world in positive ways. It is necessary to reengage the promise of qualitative research as a generative form of enquiry” (Peskin in Denzin and Lincoln 2000) p3.

Defining the field

The field of qualitative research is constantly evolving and its various methodological schools are far from united. A fundamental principle to which they commonly aspire, is a strong humanistic commitment to study the social world from the perspective of the individual. Denzin and Lincoln (2001)

Quantitative and Qualitative researchers seldom see issues in the same way and this paper will be somewhat dismissed by some as armchair commentary or not being in the ‘real world’. However I argue that the Ethnographic approach and the Participant Observation techniques used, provide a more intimate perspective on the sociological needs of daily consumers of road space in Sydney. I believe there is an important role for qualitative research to play in strategic transport decisions. I have applied strict rigor in the methodology to help deflect the criticisms of those who would simply dismiss my findings and in doing so, miss the deeper research potential they expose.

Participant observation and Interviews

This study was conducted over three months in the inner city of Sydney (approximately 10 km radius of the CBD) and adopted a holistic approach to the ethnographic context and subject selection. The inspiration for this approach came from the ground breaking ethnographic studies done by William Foote Whyte in the 1940’s with Chicago street gangs Whyte (1993). He buried himself in the culture being studied, hung out with them, learned their language, took part in their activities all so that he could understand things as they saw them but still analyse and interpret them sociologically. I applied these principles by spending time with the people involved in the non-rider aspects of the industry as well as riders.

I dressed casually, sat in coffee shops and listened to subjects conversations; I talked to waiters, chefs, mechanics and sales staff, people on the fringe of the experience. I spoke to dealers who had been in the game for nearly fifty years and importers who had seen the start of the popularity wave and were now riding high on it. I went to the scooter club meetings at the pub, and then drove to the destination of the day’s ‘run’. I could however in the time available, only

speak to a few riders at each meeting and subsequently did not speak to all of them.

I watched, talked and joined in. I also walked the streets, 'staking out' favorite scooter parking spots early in the morning. I observed, noted and talked to those who came. I handed out calling cards designed to ask for riders help with the research and got a satisfactory 10% response. This could have been higher if more research resources were available.

I handed these cards to riders I saw in the street, at stop lights and even one who pulled into a garage while I was there. One of the best interviews came from a rider I passed one day on a Paddington street. I turned my car around and followed him home. The highest response rate was from the interview cards I handed out in person. A total of twenty-one riders responded by making time for interviews. An accurate population figure for motor scooter riders in Sydney is difficult to obtain so the number interviewed cannot be confirmed as a percentage of population.

The meetings were always at neutral places like coffee shops in order for the interviewees and the researcher to more quickly relax and be productive. These semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted over many hours, provided real richness to the ethnographic research. The participants all had insights they wished to communicate and freely exposed their thoughts without much prompting. They offered insights that only participants in an activity can offer. These observations were rigorously hand noted and each individual observation was entered on the same day into a computer database.

Sorting and Coding

Sorting was accomplished by coding related comments using 'Field of interest' segmentation, then re-sorting according to these codes. The multilevel sorting enabled trends to be identified and a clearer view of the findings to inform the analysis. Field note codes included Environment, Phenomenon, Society, Legal and Political, Marketing, Technical and Historical.

Interview codes defined themselves into Allure, Lifestyle, Fashion, Weather, History, Attitudes, Safety, Parking and others.

The methods outlined above are the Qualitative Social Science techniques used to record the phenomenology found within the ethnographic group 'Motor scooter riders in inner Sydney'.

Context

City development

The inner City of Sydney's frenetic development and increasingly cosmopolitan urbanisation serves as a backdrop to this study Pund. G (2001). In the past three years there has been large-scale conversion of office space to residential living, massive high-density residential development of inner city industrial sites and continual demolition of older residences to be replaced by multiple residences Stynes (2000). This has resulted in a rapid increase in the inner city residential population, which is set to continue into the future CSC (2002).

By-products of this explosion of residential population can be seen in;

- 55% of city workforce suburb of origin is under 10kms CSC (2000).
- 27% of 500,000 per day use private transport. CSC (2000).
- 67% of car drivers travel alone CSC (2000).

As well as,

- Wider pedestrian access ways and more street scaping CSC (2000).
- Increases in retail convenience stores Cummins C (2000).
- Large numbers of well patronised sidewalk cafes. Dugal (1997).
- Increase in after-hour's activity on city streets CSC (1997).
- Increased traffic congestion. Warwick (2002).
- Traffic delays and increased driving times CSC (2001).
- Higher noise and car emissions pollution levels CSC (1997).

City character

The character of the inner city has altered significantly, whether as a direct result of the 2000 Olympics or simply by its own nature is debatable Derriman (2000). Moreover, Sydney is now a truly international city. It has come of age and has all the hallmarks of sophistication that it yearned for in the past. Gone is the cultural cringe and in its place is a level of international exuberance, cross-cultural sophistication and relative harmony, difficult to find anywhere else in the world. It is within this climate of internationalism that the subject of this study is flourishing so well. The 'Scooter culture' phenomenon is an every day part of European culture. We admire and absorb much of Europe's sense of style and fashion quite naturally into our own Australianism Dowling (2002). We are a bohemian society. At once gregarious, outdoors, fun loving and a little ostentatious, in an understated Australian way.

In European cities, riding a scooter is not simply a logistical transport choice but is a strong statement of their sense of style Calabrese (1996). Inner Sydney readily emulates this ethos with an increasingly stylish inner city urban population, which seems to be happily adopting the European style scooters, as a viable and 'cool' alternative to city traffic congestion.

What is a scooter?

Scooters or motor scooters are not simply small two-wheeled vehicles with a motor generally on the back axel as defined by the insurance industry. Scooters are small vehicles capable of transporting one person comfortably and two people *intimately*.

Vespa is the most popular brand of scooter on the market and have, 'the look'. acquired over many years of careful marketing. Vespa styling has had a very strong influence on the styling of many of the other brands on the market. It is a testament to this remarkable transport icon, that sixty years after the first Vespa rolled out of the Piaggio factory, its users still love it, just the way it was. Today the most sought after scooters in the Sydney market are 1960's vintage Vespas that have been rebuilt from the ground up. Scooterists respond strongly to brand authenticity with loyalty and passion.

There are more than ninety scooter models in Australia which range from 50cc to 250 cc motors with some of the 'cruiser class' getting up to 600cc. By far the most popular are under 250cc, although scooter riders are not overly preoccupied by performance capabilities and mechanical specifications. When asked about mechanical issues only 15% said they were at all interested in doing any repairs themselves. In most cases this 15% owned classic scooters and liked to 'tinker' with them but the balance said they have had little or no mechanical problems, and even less desire to become involved in maintenance.

What they are most interested in is, 'the look'. The scooters 'step through' design was originally so that women could mount them in a feminine way and sit with their legs together without their skirts blowing up Calabrese (1996). This riding position is still considered one of the most ergonomically comfortable and safe ways to ride. Riders say that the higher riding position provides a better field of view and makes them more visible to motorists. The feminine shape of the scooter is no accident either. It was a completely conscious Piaggio design decision, the success of which can be measured by the scooter's rising popularity with young females Lusher (2002).

A scooter is considered 'cool', it is European chic, and it is rapidly developing its own Australian city-style. A rider putting down Oxford Street in Darlinghurst turns heads; a scooter parked outside a café in Paddington raises the sophisticated image of that café. In my study I observed that Café owners are realising this and either park their own scooter outside or encourage others to do so. This can be best seen at the Vesbar Café and Ecabar, which are recognised as dedicated scooterists hangouts and at other cafes around the eastern and inner western suburbs. The owners of these cafes know that a scooter parked outside, is good for business. Why?

Evidence of a Phenomenon

An article in the Australian Bulletin Magazine concludes, "Australians are embracing the motor scooter as a viable method of transport, not just a fashion statement." It quotes Mike Lusher, Piaggios official national distributor, "sales have jumped 160% in the past financial year. They (scooters) solve a very real problem in city environments, you don't have parking problems, they're inexpensive to run, and they help people get rid of a second car" Gliddon (2001).

This picture is further supported by the following;

- The NSW Roads and Traffic Authority confirm that registrations of the main European brands of motor scooters have grown by an average 105% per year (Source: Space-Time research) over the last three years. Gliddon (2001). This is of course from a small base starting point.
- Inner Sydney (<10km radius) has the highest national growth in motor scooter usage recording 47% increase last year while NSW was up 31% and nationally usage was up 23%. Inner Sydney accounted for around 16% of the national total, and more than 63% of the states total. NSW has the highest usage with 25% of the national figure. Source: Vespa Australia.

These figures have small bases with national sales now topping around 2500 vehicles and Sydney accounting for 400 of these.

- Piaggios national sales have grown 343% in the last three years while many other brands reported a similar upswing in the same period Gliddon (2001). Figures for 2001 showed a 72% increase for the year. This was the highest increase in any brand in the market MS online (2001).
- The above figures should be read in the context of a current general sales downtrend in the motorcycle market of around 10% p.a.

During field research I uncovered the following information, which further suggests the presence of a phenomenon occurring in this market.

- Two of Sydneys longest running motorcycle dealerships have shifted their stock mix from motorcycles to almost exclusively motor scooters
- Three new motor scooter dealerships have opened in the inner city area in the last three years.
- Dealers and importers are forecasting continued large sales increases in coming years.
- Scooter cafes, clubs and boutiques report strong increases in attendance.
- Scrutiny of the Trading Post indicates second hand scooter prices appear to be static and even appreciating as dealers say supply of good second hand vehicles is falling behind demand.

The above further supports the argument that there is a phenomenal interest in motor scooter riding in inner Sydney disproportional to any other location in Australia. An aberrant and developing transport group has been uncovered and this is an opportunity to study it. In order to understand possible impacts for transport we need to understand the reasons they have broken with the mainstream and are making this different choice.

Factors affecting this choice of transport mode

Purely emotional factors

In order to find out, why people chose to ride a motor scooters versus drive a car, it is important to firstly know, what is the essential *allure of riding*? Here are some of the answers.

One rider, a very smartly dressed senior finance analyst for an international bank in Martin Place, has lived and worked in New York, London and Tokyo. He owns a jeep Cherokee and a Vespa ET4-125. He rode mountain bikes in the other cities he has worked in, but thought that Sydney drivers were so aggressive, it would be safer to ride a scooter. He answered my allure question in this way,

“ I ride to work through the back streets of Paddington past 19th Century houses and somehow my Vespa just seems so appropriate. I come up to William Street and pull up beside a guy looking pretty flash in his Mercedes or BMW. He’s just sitting there in his luxury car stuck in the traffic like everyone else and I feel a glow inside and smile to myself, because I know, I’m *having the fun he thought he was going to have*”.

Gerard is French. He is a fifty-five year old office manager working in the centre of the city, he is impeccably dressed, very dignified and rides a 1997 50th anniversary Limited edition Vespa PX200E. He recently cut his longish hair to accommodate his new helmet. His parents in France don't approve of his riding, but the renegade in him rebels against this and he doesn't speak to them about it. His friends think he's a little odd but he likes that, especially when they say 'we saw you on Oxford Street the other day'. He wears a tailored dark suit and carries a distinctive brown shoulder satchel, which he says helps people recognise him. He likes that too. He told me "I only travel a short distance into the city to work each day. My journey takes around ten to fifteen minutes in the thick traffic but he says, (with a sparkle in his eye) "I get 400 metres of excitement at a time"

'Sergio' is a suave, good looking, pony-tailed, Italian waiter in a Café in Surry Hills. He wants his own Vespa but cannot afford one yet. His friend and he go out after work on the back of a scooter to their favourite clubs. "I love it" he says, "We finish work, jump on the scooter, buzz down to a club, pull up outside and walk in. It's that easy. When we leave we just come out of the club hop on the scooter and we are home in five minutes. I love it, it's so cool"

These are not special stories pulled out to prove a point. They are everyday rider's stories. I spoke to sixty year old retirees about to buy two scooters to ride around their new retirement community on the gold coast, teachers who rode to school, lesbians, gay men, creative and builder types, Aussies and Europeans, strong silent types and wilder scooter riders who did wheelies down the street. They all have this type of rapturous anecdote inside them and attempt to describe this indescribable feeling in different ways, but they all experience it and it's the reason they ride.

Rational / Emotive Factors

If you ask riders *why* they choose to ride you almost invariably get a very rational first response, with answers such as convenience, cost, fuel efficiency or low cost of the vehicle. But these statements in themselves barely mask other, more emotional reasons.

Convenience to them is really more emotion than efficiency based. Motorcycles, in general move people about in the most efficient manner of all the transport modes Wigan (2000) p46. Motor scooters or course also fit into this general category description.

Riders value their time in a different way to others. Most of the participants were not prepared to wait in a bus or train queue. It was said that they are too time-conscious to sit in a bus crawling down William Street slower than they could walk. They want to go now! One rider stated emphatically "I can't stand waiting in traffic in a bus or worse in a taxi watching the meter tick over when I know that on a scooter I could *be there already*".

Time and convenience is such a large concern for these people. I spoke to riders in the city squeezing their scooters into minute spaces in between pylons in King Street, and asked why they didn't park a block away where there were more spaces available. They simply said, "It will take me another ten minutes to walk back" Initially I mistook this for laziness but after speaking to them, discovered their real motivation came from a desire for convenience and particularly, freedom of movement. They want to ride to their appointment, hop off the scooter and be there. That simple, that free and that convenient. It's why they ride. It's how they think.

Terms such as cost and fuel efficiency also thinly veil real emotional concerns about environmental and cultural waste. Veronica, a teacher in the eastern suburbs said, "I hate cars they are noisy and dirty, but I'm a bit of an environmentalist I guess" and Craig a solicitor from Rose Bay said " It is important to me that I am making an environmental contribution by riding my scooter". While they are admittedly not exactly environmental warriors, these people are genuinely concerned about their small contribution to the environment they live in. They see congestion and pollution in the city and they feel that scooter riding is a positive contribution. 70% of the riders interviewed also own a car and more than half of these could be classified as luxury cars (>\$50,000) and yet they prefer to ride a small relatively cheap motor scooter. Why? My research has led me to believe this is because their concept of conservation frowns upon wastage, particularly in the form of money, time and effort.

Parking factors

Parking appears to be a big issue with riders. Parking is free on the street *if* they can find a spot, and if they can't, public parking stations are expensive. They all say there is not enough parking in the city but they eventually find somewhere to park and they are very canny at this. The City of Sydney Council Development Consent Plan CSC (1996a) has over many years built up a substantial excess of parking space in buildings all over the city and yet there is a shortage of on-street parking and riders continue to complain about it.

I observed that almost all the council designated motorcycle parking bays were repeatedly over filled. In King Street I saw sixteen bikes in eight spaces, in Market Street six bikes in two spaces and the same thing repeated all over the city. I saw riders physically lifting other bikes closer together trying to fit their own bike into an already overcrowded space. I saw scooters parked on private lawns, in minute spaces between buildings and in foyers of offices. Why?

Again you must look at the thinking of riders. Their sense of freedom is affronted by the concept of paying to park their bike. It certainly isn't that they cannot afford to pay. The act of pulling into a parking station and paying for a space is simply not part of the scooter riders' ethos. It is what Drivers do. They want to protect the renegade 'on the street' feelings they experience when they pull up to a space and passers-by look enviously at them. They live life

more on the edge. They feel they are exceptional and they enjoy feeling that way. Parking has a big role to play in maintaining this emotional edge.

Safety factors

Most opponents of motorcycles and scooters are prone to cite safety statistics as the basis for an argument against the practice. But paradoxically these statistics are too often used as an emotional tactic to justify support for regulatory controls.

Wigan in his report to VicRoads Wigan (2000) discusses safety statistics and cost to the community. He says, "Motorcycles have been primarily treated as a safety issue rather than as a means of transport. Most of the data available is therefore safety related. The reasons are clear, motorcycle users are one of the three most vulnerable road users, along with pedestrians and bicyclists" Wigan (2000) p12. However this information must be viewed with the understanding that Australian motorcycle rider and passenger fatalities have fallen by 56% from 1980 to 1990, even with the larger numbers of riders on the road (Federal Office of Road Safety 1999 in Wigan 2000). Wigan goes further to say, "Casualty rates for bicycles and motorcycles are now almost the same with a significant improvement in the motorcycle rates and small deterioration for bicycles over the 15 year period for comparison". Wigan (2000) p15 and "clearly motorcycles, scooters and mopeds need to be assessed in a similar manner to bicycles" He goes on to say, "Bicycles now benefit from more progressive and balanced safety, encouragement, education and infrastructure provision policies at state and national level and are generally regarded as a less significant safety issue" Wigan (2000) p45. Wigan has also said, "it is difficult to push the total cost of safety up as high as 10% of the total resource flows along a road and the balance of safety and other factors needs to be kept in perspective. Safety is not the only measure to be used, and a balance needs to be maintained in debates about any mode and the safety costs involved" Wigan (1982). In a personal communication earlier this year he again confirmed that the safety debate has been overly emphasised and in his opinion, should "move on" Pers. Comm. Wigan (2002). This is a good point at which to leave the statistical safety argument and return to understanding the underlying reasons why people choose to ride at all.

Safety and the 'Buzz' factor

Safety is of great concern to riders but not in the same way as it is to statisticians, transport strategists, insurance companies and medical organisations who all have their particular agendas, which are mostly at odds with the participants. Riders view each journey as an adventure. They travel to work and it's play. They pleasurably wrestle with elaborate mental gymnastics, their minds working feverishly on the fastest route between lines of traffic and congested streets. It's a game, ducking in and out of traffic, beating the line of cars, being the first at the lights. It's a high.

They talk about this heightened state of awareness and alertness as 'a buzz'. They talk about Zen-like meditative states of reflection that are mixed with the

kind of adrenalin-induced elation that comes with the sensation of speed. They are not speaking this way about close shaves, near misses or dicing with death. No, they are merely describing how they feel travelling to work each day on a scooter. The Adrenalin induced pleasure of the buzz actually increases their alertness and safety.

Safe speed factors

Scooter riders are by nature slower paced travellers. They apply the classic Hare and the Tortoise approach to transport. They travel a little slower than motorists but because they are more agile in traffic, they arrive at their destination sooner and so spend less time on the road. "Motorcycles, car driver, and buses are the fastest road travel modes (in that order) Motorcycles have the highest average travel speed of all modes. Bicycles report total travel time delays of 1%, cars 0.5% but motorcycles have virtually nil"

Wigan, (2000) p24

In the study a serious safety issue peculiar to scooter riders was noted. Many of the riders had had dangerous, even life-threatening experiences in traffic. No more they said than any other road users could mention but again it is the reaction to this that is unusual. All interviewees spoke of the poor attitude of car drivers, particularly taxis. Mary, a young journalist from Chatswood, has had two minor altercations with taxis and been knocked off her scooter, fortunately at very low speed. She says 'they are dangerous, they don't look, and they don't seem to care. Subjects repeatedly remarked that motorists had a callous willingness to put riders lives at risk with unthinking behaviour and arrogance. This is a relatively common event however, the most startling thing to consider, is that *virtually no one could be found that had given up riding because of it*. I am sure they exist, but in the three months of the study, I found none were mentioned by any riders interviewed, nor by non-riders, general interviewees or anyone spoken to, about the study. The absence of negative reactions in the face of this overwhelming animosity is remarkable.

Safety equipment

Helmets are universally disliked by riders. They are considered a necessity by law but not by scooterists. In Italy even though helmet laws have been in for ten years, 20% of riders still refuse to wear them. Bitz (2002) Here our laws are more stringently enforced. Helmets detract from the essence of motor scooter riding by reducing what can be described as the 'wind in the face' factor even though they are accepted as an obligatory item of safety equipment. 57% of participants preferred minimal open face helmets compared to 43% using full-face helmets. Riders enjoy being in the elements, feeling the cold air, smelling the air and being a part of 'outside'. Helmets create an 'enclosed' sensation similar to being in a car. This shuts off the rider to a degree from the 'outside' experience, an essential element of the 'buzz'.

Helmets create havoc with hairstyles and the riders' sense of freedom. Men and women are known to cut their long hair to avoid 'helmet hair' and go to

extraordinary lengths to accommodate gelled hairstyles. 'James' showers at home, rides to work, and while his computer 'boots-up', he goes through an extraordinary ritual of grooming. This involves re-wetting his hair and applying hair gel until he attains the hairstyle he prefers. Women often recount similar, less dramatic experiences, as they appear to be more used to catering to this need as a normal part of their everyday grooming activities.

Ambient Factors

Lifestyle, fashion and weather

Freedom is the key word here. Riders come from many walks of life but all value highly their freedom and independence. 37% of the people I spoke to in the research period were self-employed in businesses such as Law, Psychology, Property Management, Multimedia and Graphic Arts. Another 57% worked in positions that allowed a greater degree of freedom such as retail, teaching, surveying, information technology, advertising and senior management.

They enjoy 'going out' or being outdoors. They are not stay-at-home types: they watch less TV and cook less at home. They go to movies, theatre, the beach, restaurants, art galleries, work functions, friends' places and coffee shops.

They like to be 'seen'. They are extroverted and relish the stares and odd looks of others. In fact many quite like being considered 'different' and 'unusual'. This is an important part of the 'new age renegade' image they have of themselves. Gary a Macquarie Street barrister said about the reaction of his family and friends to his scooter riding. "My mother is horrified, by friends bemused, and my wife concerned, but my uncle was so excited by it that he went out and bought one himself and he's sixty".

Fabio an Italian chiropractor from Balmain said his family "think my scooter is a mad idea and I'm eccentric. That's great!"

Their range of dress may vary from street grunge to Armani but above all they like to have 'the look'. The look is one of the most influential aspects of rider motivation and yet it is the hardest to define. There is no one or common 'look', however they all have it. It is something in the total package of rider, clothing and scooter that causes admiration and envy from onlookers and it says 'I don't care what you think, I am an individualist, I am a renegade and I'm making a fashion statement.

This might be described as sophisticated chic, quirky avant-garde or renegade conservative. There are many variations but all have an indefinable commonality that is scooter style.

I saw this best when I was sitting at a café on Oxford Street one day in April. Three young girls on scooters pulled up onto the sidewalk, they looked like models. These long, lean gazelle-like females, removed their helmets, and with a deft check of their hair in the window reflection, strode into the café, sat down and immediately picked up a conversation that had begun elsewhere. They were stunning, and sophisticated looking with immaculate dress and makeup.

They wore the latest bare as possible summer outfits, high heels and jewellery. No leather jacket, gloves, protective clothing! This was an in-your-face fashion statement, pure and simple.

In comparison to most European countries where motor scooters are thriving, Sydney's weather is said to be perfect for scooter riding. It is in Europe that many riders say they first caught the 'scooter bug' and continued it when they returned home. In weather related issues as in most other ways, scooter riders are not the most practical thinking individuals. They do not ride for purely rational reasons and so naturally what they wear is not determined rationally. Minimalism and style are the keys. In summer, riders scoot around in T-shirts and jeans completely flouting the conventional norms of motorcycle safety which dictates that leathers and gloves should be worn at all times. In winter their idea of 'cool' is a heavy European style, long overcoat, thick woollen gloves and scarf. Scooter riders do not see themselves as similar in any way to other road users particularly others on two wheels. Harley riders wear black leather and studs, motorcycle riders wear racing leathers and leather safety gear, and cyclists wear spandex in Italian racing colours. In the scooter world, what you wear is about who you are and these people want you to know who they are. They dress to their personalities not the conditions.

Bad weather does not seem to bother most riders. They accept it as part of the riding experience in a stoic, badge of bravery, kind of way. A number of riders working in the city told me that, if it were raining heavily, they would wait a while. If the rain stops, then well and good, if it doesn't then they will simply ride home in it and accept that they will get wet.

They have all worked out their different strategies for dealing with bad weather, whether it seems imminent or they are caught out suddenly, but they all keep this apparel to a minimum. Gerard wears original Dryzabone, Chris wears top of the line Patagonia gear and a web designer from Newton simply keeps a garbage bag in the toolbox and wears that if it rains.

Sensory factors

In sensory terms motor scooter riders participate in their surroundings more than any other motorised transport user. Ask a driver when was the last time he smelt fresh cut lawn as he drove past a park, smelt the onset of rain on an over cast day or even realised that the mounted police had passed this way and left fresh droppings on the road. These are the simple sensory joys of scooter riding that are even denied many motorcycle riders. Scooterists are in it for the journey rather than the destination. They talk about the crispness of Sydney's wonderful autumn and spring air on their face, the experience of being *in* the society they are passing through. This is quite a different experience to that of motorists cocooned in air tight metal containers with music just loud enough to ensure they are as distanced as possible from any interaction with life outside. Scooter riders want to enjoy a richer interaction with life, that is why they choose to ride and not drive.

Suggested improvements

The following is a list of system and other improvements, which surfaced as issues within the study and from the observations of the researcher. Many of the changes appear relatively simple but need to be much more fully researched and costed. They do however offer an opportunity to address issues which could affect a greater number of potential users of alternative transport in the future.

- A review of laws relating to sidewalk parking
- Trial of a 'Scooter friendly city' program
- Review of toll fees and mechanisms for payment.
- Review of parking resources and charges in the city and inner suburbs.
- Installation of advanced stop lines at main feeder intersections.
- Review of laws relating to lane splitting or filtering.
- Promotion of bus and transit lane use to scooterists and motorcyclists.
- Promotion of bicycle lanes use to scooterists and motorcycles.
- Review of the disproportionate focus on infrastructure and funding for cyclists so as to include other two-wheeled vehicles.
- Increase rider awareness training for drivers in the driver-training scheme.
- Review licensing requirements to ensure less unsuccessful or disillusioned applicants for licenses under 250cc.
- Special consideration for applicants already holding a drivers licence.
- Review registration fees for vehicles under 250cc.
- Review of blanket, safety data based, assessments for insurance rates especially for vehicles under 250cc fitted with approved security devices.
- Review of environmental impact of scooters including the full Life Cycle Analysis and consideration of a Carbon Credit scheme to reward positive environmental contribution.
- Assurance that vehicles with two stroke motors cannot be registered.
- Fast tracking ADI compliance evaluation of new vehicle concepts such as 'encapsulated' scooter vehicles (BMW CT1, Binelli Adiva) more in line with international practice.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to highlight the factors affecting a test group of motor scooter riders and their choice of transport mode in order to gain further insight into how alternative transport modes might be fostered. I have confirmed the presence of a developing social phenomenon in inner Sydney, and presented the participants thoughts and experiences as they have communicated them. Now I challenge our transport strategists and planners to consider how this form of qualitative research analysis can assist in the greater transport debate. How the findings might be used to excite popular thinking away from motorcar dependence, towards greater variety in transport mode choice. How it might assist strategic transport planning reflect the greater value society now places on sustainable transport, cultural capital and quality of life. I consider this study to be simply a starting point for more in-depth research on

this social phenomenon, and how it might be used to foster more interest in transport alternatives. Gary Boama said that Ethnographic research was about building worlds of meaning from the actions of others, I hope that the research actions of others will help build a better transport world with more relevant meaning than it has now.

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