Title of Paper: Understanding the self-image incongruency of British non-cyclists: Implications for social marketing

Form of presentation: Seminar presentation

General subject area: Cycling, travel mode

Method: Quantitative nationally significant (UK) online survey
UNDERSTANDING THE SELF-IMAGE INCONGRUENCY OF BRITISH NON-CYCLISTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL MARKETING

Abstract

Drawing on primary quantitative research, this paper uses self-image incongruency as a theoretical framework for analysing the key constructs which form the gap between the self image of non cyclists and their perception of cycling. The authors argue that branding is a potentially useful tool for changing the image of short-trip cycling and aligning it with non-cyclists actual and ideal self image.

Introduction

British people make only 1-2% of their journeys by bicycle (Gatersleben & Appleton, 2007), far less than adults in many other European countries (Pucher & Buehler, 2008), yet regular cycling can contribute to an individual’s personal fitness and health, reduce congestion and contribute to our ongoing struggle against environmental damage (Gatersleben & Appleton, 2007; Shephard, 2008). Increasing the number of people who exchange driving for cycling on short regular trips has become a political priority in the UK.

This paper uses the theoretical framework of self-image congruency to explore possible reasons why large numbers of adequately fit British adults (‘hot and warm prospects’¹) do not make their regular short trips by bicycle. Self Image congruence refers to the perceived degree of fit between a consumers’ self concept (Actual Self, Ideal Self (Freud, 1965)) and

¹ We examined disposition to take up cycling for short everyday journeys and amongst cyclists to make more such journeys on their bikes. We asked for agreement amongst non cyclists that ‘I have been contemplating cycling recently for short everyday journeys’ and/or ‘I have actually made plans to take up cycling for short everyday journeys. We asked current cyclists if ‘you are seriously thinking of cycling more often for everyday short journeys’. Our ‘hot prospects’ (whether non or current cyclists) had to strongly agree with either question; our ‘warm prospects’ had to ‘tend to agree’ with either question.
the user’s image of a brand, product or behaviour (Kressmann et al., 2006). This paper will present and discuss quantitative research which aimed to understand the self-image incongruence between ‘prospect’ non-cyclists and their perception of cycling. This research may provide an opportunity for social marketers trying to produce behaviour change interventions to improve the numbers of people making regular short trips by bicycle.

**Methodology**

The survey was conducted using an online interview administered to members of the YouGov Plc GB panel of 275,000+ individuals who have agreed to take part in surveys. An email was sent to panellists selected at random from the base sample according to the sample definition, inviting them to take part and providing a link. The sample definition was ‘GB adult population’ and consisted of 3855 adults representative of all GB adults (aged 16 to 64) by working status, age, gender and socio-economic group. Fieldwork was undertaken between 27th April and 9th May 2010. The research approach was purely inductive, with the intention of developing theory during the analysis of this research stage; the first of a multi-stage mixed-method research programme.

**Findings**

Research findings suggest there is a gap between some perceived concepts of our prospects’ ‘self’ and that of cyclists. Respondents were presented with twenty personality descriptions and asked to select those that applied to them and then, later on in the interview, those they associate with cyclists. The result was two lists; those attributes that ranked higher for cyclists than for themselves and those attributes which ranked lower for cyclists than for their ‘self’ concept, shown in Table 1. These lists indicate the composition of the self-image incongruency gap between our prospects and cycling.
Respondents considered cyclists to be *more* fitness conscious, environmentally friendly, free spirited, adventurous, and confident compared with their self perception. Respondents also considered cyclists to be *less* happy, less money conscious, less independent and less hardworking than their self-perception. The implications of these findings to social marketers will be discussed.

**Discussion**

Research has identified a gap between the image of cycling and the perceived self-image of adults who could (but do not) make their regular short-trips by bicycle. A working hypothesis from this preliminary research is that cycling is viewed as inaccessible for those who have serious jobs and do not view themselves as having time to become ‘super fit’. Perhaps this group are not ‘free spirited’ or ‘adventurous’ because they are weighed down by the daily...
juggling of deadlines, meetings and conflicting priorities. Perhaps cycling is incompatible with their drive for success through hard work, discipline and responsibility. It is therefore one of the tasks of social marketing to shift their perception more in line with the ‘reality’ of short-trip cycling; that it is healthy, convenient and environmentally responsible.

Branding is a key technique which commercial marketers have used for decades as a mediating construct to build positive and long-standing relationships between their customers and products (Evans & Hastings, 2008), and it will be argued that social marketers targeting travel mode shift can also use branding to shift people’s perceptions of cycling.

From a customer’s perspective a brand is a set of associations which reside in their minds about a product or behaviour (Basu & Wang, 2009). Through marketing, the perception of the brand becomes the ‘reality’ for the customer and so branding has been used as a technique for creating an image of a product portfolio which can add a perceived sense of glamour, exclusivity or desirability (for Prada, for example) or perhaps quality, affordability and tradition (for M&S, for example) to a product.

When people consume a product, the brand image appeals to their self-image (Sirgy, 1986) and so there is self-image congruency. The degree to which the consumer feels bonded to the brand depends on how closely they feel it fits their perceived self image (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 1997). It is important to note that the ‘self’ in question could be the actual self or ideal self, although if the image appeals to an extreme version of the ideal self it may be viewed as out of reach (Spotswood & Tapp, 2010).

Social marketers have been late adopters of branding, but the case for its use is growing (Basu & Wang, 2009; Keller, 1998; McDivitt, 2003) and successes such as ‘Truth’ (Sly et al, 2001) and ‘Verb’ (Banspach, 2008) are well documented. The result of good branding is a
strong relationship between consumer and brand (McDivitt, 2003) which strengthens all other marketing activity. The authors contend that branding may be a powerful technique for social marketers as they try and shift the perception of cycling more in line with the target group’s self-image and encourage non-cyclists to view cycling as congruent with having the responsibilities and fulfilment that come with having a successful career.

There are difficulties with this approach, however. The crux of self-image congruence is that consumers will choose brand personalities that are most congruent with their own (Sirgy, 1982), and yet the ‘self’ is dynamic and is derived from numerous self perceptions that are activated intermittently depending on the situation (Aaker, 1999). For example, a senior business executive may perceive herself to be ‘successful, professional and a high achiever’ at work, ‘relaxed and family-oriented’ at home and ‘exciting, fun and adventurous’ with her friends. These selves are not mutually exclusive but are accessed with different intensities in different situations. It may be that the perception of commuter cycling is currently less congruent with the ‘high-achiever’ self. Through rebranding, social marketing may bring the image of short-trip cycling more in line with the actual, ideal or social selves of this group.

Cycling itself has multiple forms; from being an extreme training activity to an occasional leisure activity or convenient mode of transport. Here, however, we are interested primarily in regular ‘commuter’ cycling and the challenge of aligning the brand image of this form with the actual or ideal self of our target group. This suggests that careful segmentation of cycling is as important as a careful segmentation of the target population.

**Conclusion**
Research suggests that self-image incongruency is one of the reasons so few British adults make regular short trips by bicycle. Cyclists are seen as less hardworking and less happy than ‘the self’ and more fitness conscious, independent and adventurous. We hypothesise that for people who prioritise their work, commuter cycling may be seen as unappealing because it implies a lack of focus, responsibility and maturity. By carefully branding short-trip cycling (as a result of further primary research and rigorous concept testing), social marketers could aim to realign the image of short-trip cycling with the actual or ideal self-images of the ‘prospect’ group. However, people have multiple selves which they access in different situations and also there are multiple types of cycling. Thus, we conclude that for branding to be successful, segmentation of cycling types is essential so the brand can be specific to ‘commuter’, ‘sports’ or ‘leisure’ cycling and also social marketing work must be targeted to different ‘situations’ to access different variations of the self-concept.

**Note**

YouGov were responsible for the data collection but analyses and interpretation are the responsibility of The Bristol Social Marketing Centre (BSMC) at UWE and any enquiries should be directed to Professor Alan Tapp (*alan.tapp@uwe.ac.uk*). BSMC would also like to thank South Gloucestershire Council for part-funding the research.
References


