

Humanising cyclists: an interdisciplinary collaborative approach to improving attitudes towards cyclists in regional areas

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INTRODUCTION

Cycle tourism is estimated to be worth over AUD\$120 million in the north east area of Victoria Australia. With fewer than 100,000 residents in the region, the area attracts local and visiting cyclists to climb in the steep, mountainous roads for fitness, sport and leisure. Despite the value of the sector, a local government authority in the region, Alpine Shire Council, recognised the need to improve attitudes towards cyclists, particularly road cyclists. The aim of this project was to create a campaign that humanises cyclists and contributes to improved safety outcomes. The work was conducted by an interdisciplinary collaboration of experts from cyclist safety, design, legal disciplines, and the local community. Notably the project commenced during the COVID-19 pandemic (July 2020) and required flexibility during strict state 'lockdown' conditions (i.e. 123 consecutive days of curfews, restrictions on mobility, travel prohibited between metropolitan Melbourne (research team) and rural Victorian communities (project area)).

METHOD

The mixed-method project was conducted in four stages.

Focus groups: two focus groups were held with key stakeholders in the Alpine region and included tourism operators (e.g. accommodation), cycling related businesses (e.g. bicycle shops), government (e.g. state parks, police), education and health.

Community Survey: informed by the focus groups, the online survey explored five key themes, related to cyclists and drivers sharing the roads: concerns, attitudes, road rules, infrastructure, and road user behaviour. The survey was open to people over 18 years who lived in, or travelled to, the Alpine area.

Campaign development and creation: with the aim of humanising cyclists and directly address that "those cyclists" were not anonymous people. The campaign included eleven people who lived in the Alpine area. They were filmed on and off the bike highlighting their roles (e.g. bank manager, pharmacist, teacher, parent etc). The Campaign consisted of digital and print collateral, including video clips (30secs; 90secs), short film (3:36), posters, postcards, and social media content. Distribution was mainly online and at the 'Alpine Classic' cycling event (5,000+ participants) held in Bright on 23-24 January 2021.

Evaluation Survey: a second online survey was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the campaign in terms of empathy for road users, knowledge of road rules and understanding of safe, shared road use.

KEY RESULTS

Sentiment about cyclists on the road was generally positive, with recognition of the value to the area. However, there was some tension in the focus groups with some participants considering motor vehicles more legitimate road users than cyclists.

For the Community Survey, we received 569 completed responses, half from local residents (54.4%). Key findings: top two concerns about sharing the roads with cyclists while driving were 1) being able to pass safely (70.8%), and; 2) not enough space on the road (44.5%). Almost a quarter of respondents had no concerns about sharing the roads (22.0%).

The Campaign has had almost 90,000 points of contact on social media, and an article published was distributed to a readership of almost 1 million. We have been able to track over 4,500 views of the full length video.

For the Evaluation Survey, we received 97 completed responses, with a slightly higher proportion of locals (59.8%) compared to the Community Survey. Key messages from the campaign were: people riding bikes are normal people and the need for mutual respect when sharing the road. Community conversations, prompted by the campaign, were also reported. In a public meeting a man said, "I know where all cyclists belong. They belong in the cemetery." A woman at the meeting stood up, and responded 'I am a cyclist', and when she asked the meeting 'who else is a cyclist?', six other women stood up. The man apologised. While the man may have intended his comment to be flippant or humorous, it may indicate deeper anti-cyclist sentiment within parts of the Alpine community.

CONCLUSION

This project provides an excellent model for a robust and collaborative approach that engages the community. Specifically, the inclusion of local people filmed in local areas was more important than celebrities or influencers. However, we also identified that even in an area that strongly supports cyclists, additional issues need to be addressed to improve cyclist safety.