

THE ROLE OF POLICY IN SHAPING THE PUBLIC IMAGE EVERYDAY CYCLING

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ABSTRACT

Urban policy-makers are increasingly encouraging the use of bicycles for transportation because of their environmental, social and economic benefits. In this agenda, a growing body of studies show how social perceptions, beliefs, meanings, and social norms influence transport modal choices. In the cycling literature, these socio-cultural attributes are now recognised as an important component shaping societal acceptance of everyday cycling in addition to others such as road design and urban form. In this light some scholars have called for cultural transformation in order to improve the public image of cycling. What is the role of urban policy in social-cultural change?

Drawing on insights from a diverse range of literatures including transitions theory, actor-network theory, consumption studies, sociology and the mobilities literature, I develop a conceptual framework to explore changes in the public perceptions about everyday cycling. I use this framework to analyse the collapse of cycling in Johannesburg from the mid 1930s onwards. In the late 20th century, Johannesburg, like many other cities in this period, was described by observers as being in the grip of a cycling “craze” and “mania.” While sport racing was popular, bicycles were also widely used as a means of transportation. Vehicle licensing data from the City of Johannesburg shows that up to 1935, there were more bicycles registered than automobiles. However in subsequent decades, there was a precipitous decline in the use of bicycles for transport. Nowadays everyday cycling is seen as a practice for the poor although there maybe very early signs of a revival. I discuss the role of policy, other non-state actors, and the socio-economic context in weakening the public image of everyday cycling in Johannesburg in conversation with contemporaneous developments in Beijing, Amsterdam and Chicago.