

Engaging with motorcyclists:  
UK Police and the BikeSafe road safety programme.

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## **ABSTRACT**

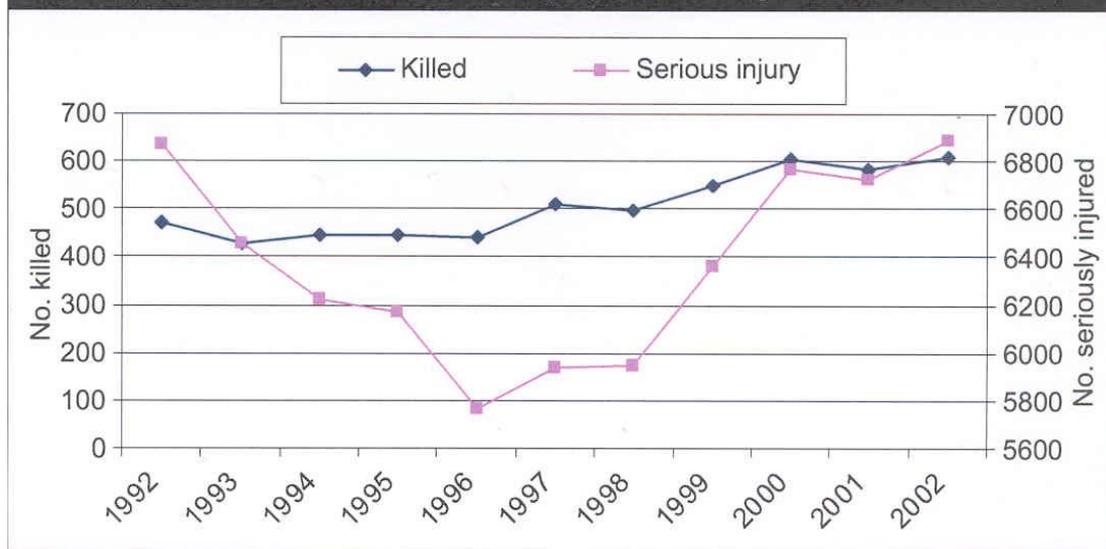
The goal of crash prevention necessitates a range of interventions to influence road user behaviour and to stimulate the adoption of training that develops and refines rider/driver awareness and skills. A recurring dilemma for Police authorities is how to engage with road users who have traditionally demonstrated apathy towards further training and misplaced confidence in personal riding/driving skills. BikeSafe is a motorcycle road safety initiative instigated by North Yorkshire Police in the UK. It was set up in response to rising road casualty rates that accompanied a formidable increase in participation in motorcycling; a trend mirrored in many parts of the developed world. This paper sets out how the innovatory BikeSafe scheme was designed as a road safety intervention with the intention of engaging with motorcyclists for the purpose of assessing their training needs, then providing motivation and direction to riders for further training.

Alongside the roll out of BikeSafe across the UK a major research programme was undertaken to explore the alternative directions of rider development taken by motorcyclists. The implications of the research are set out and demonstrate how the generation of a well-configured, attractive and competitive development offers intense, positive experiences for participating motorcyclists.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years across many countries changing patterns of motorcycle ownership and use have created impetus to develop interventions to improve road-safety for the motorcycling population. In 2000 the UK government set a target of achieving a 40% reduction in road casualties by 2010 across all transport modes collectively. Therefore, if one mode falls behind target, the target as a whole is not met. As Figure 1. demonstrates, motorcycling casualties have been rising significantly. Yet despite noteworthy improvements in casualty rate in recent years, motorcyclists remain a vulnerable group when compared to other road user groups, with their killed and serious injury (KSI) rate in the UK per million vehicle kilometres approximately twice that of pedal cyclists and over 16 times that of car drivers and passengers. Motorcyclists make up less than 1% of vehicle traffic but their riders suffer 14% of total deaths and serious injuries on Britain's roads.

Figure 1: Numbers of killed and seriously injured motorcyclists



Reeder et al, (1999) have reported a similar picture in New Zealand where motorcycle riders accounted for approximately 20% of fatalities and 25% of hospitalisations for road traffic accidents as a whole, but motorcycles represented only 5% of licensed vehicles and *accounted for* only 1.4% of estimated total vehicle mileage.

Compulsory, standardised, training and testing for novice riders in the UK has contributed to casualty reduction. However, once a full motorcycle licence has been acquired, few motorcyclists choose to participate in advanced rider training. Motorcycling remains largely an informal, often impromptu, activity and motorcyclists rarely explore formal means of improving skill, ability or enjoyment of their machines. To some extent this is a function of other demands on time and financial resources, there is also the question of awareness that such opportunities exist and of what they offer or entail, yet in many cases it appears that there is a fundamental contradiction between the rider's previous experience of developing skills and ability through formal education or training and their current self-image as spontaneous, capable and self-governing. Clarke et al (2004) comment on evidence that an older 'born again biker' subgroup seem to be mismatching the performance of new machines with their own previously learned abilities. Moss (2000), in his report on rural motorcycle accidents, was more specific regarding the type of behaviours these riders are exhibiting, saying that '... riders are failing to ride their machines within their personal capabilities'.

Whilst casualties are higher in urban areas more motorcyclists are killed rural roads than on built-up roads – in 2002 the figures were 347 and 242 respectively. In view of concerns about the rising number of casualties amongst older riders, the Driving Standards Agency (DSA) produced advice and guidance aimed at full motorcycling licence holders. A free information leaflet, "Motorcycling – the more you know, the better it gets", was produced in April 2002. The leaflet, which was distributed by trainers and retailers, reminded those returning to motorcycling about the particular skills needed to ride safely and encouraged them to seek refresher or developmental training.

Across the UK in response to escalating rural motorcycle crashes, several Police Constabularies took up a policy of "zero tolerance" of motorcycling misdemeanours

including the use of small registration plates and noisy exhausts as a means of discouraging illegal riding behaviour. However an alternative approach was seized upon by North Yorkshire Police; instead of confronting the risk-taking culture of motorcycling a decision was made to attempt to work closely alongside it.

## **BIKESAFE DEVELOPMENT**

BikeSafe was born in the mid-nineties with a mission to engage and educate motorcyclists in a safe, professional and conflict free environment, encouraging them to seek out further training to hone their skills and abilities and create a genuine desire to learn lifetime riding skills. The scheme was set up by the Police to introduce riders to the concept of post test training with a view to reducing casualties through education. This is done by assessing their skills, highlighting areas that may need improvement and encouraging them to seek remedial training through advanced training bodies. Rider assessment by advanced Police motorcyclists would assist riders to develop insight into risk and self-limitations as well as control skills. In face-to-face, informal discussion between assessor and rider, issues about risk anticipation and handling could be explored and routes for appropriate personal development identified.

The scheme developers identified a confusing situation facing motorcyclists considering further training. This had contributed to a lack of perceived relative advantage for involvement in rider training against alternative methods of gaining riding experience and skills, (Crowther & Brown, 2002). This was later picked up in a scoping study on motorcycle training by Sudlow (2003) who found that the motorcycle training industry in the UK was very fragmented, with many small businesses providing a wide range of training. To be successful, engagement with motorcyclists was vital and many alternative routes for development were considered, including the use of information technology. .

Marketing safety to motorcycle riders requires an awareness of the differentiated marketplace as well as a sound appreciation of the multiple tools available from the sophisticated marketer's armoury. Precise targeting is a key ingredient of successful positioning and this depends upon a full understanding of market dynamics. As a first step in the marketing process market analysis requires a thorough understanding of the "customer," starting with a broad grasp of market trends and funnelling down through shared values and beliefs to the deep motivations underlying behaviour.

Positioning BikeSafe as a key element in rider development pathways was carefully considered from the outset. For too long motorcycle training had been perceived in a negative light by motorcyclists and schemes were often delivery oriented instead of customer oriented. The use of a marketing approach in the development and delivery responding of road safety policies offered safety campaigners a fresh challenge. Indeed the innovative scheme became a winner of a coveted Prince Michael of Kent Road Safety Award in 2000. As a fundamental part of the development process, BikeSafe employed a detailed understanding of sports motorcyclists to improve both the configuring and targeting of intervention programmes. By 2005 the UK government has eventually recognised the customer focus needed; the Government's Motorcycling Strategy, (2005) stresses that "for post-test training to be pursued it

must be attractive to the individual,” (pg 32) A major study of older motorcyclists by Jamson et al (2005) has recommended amongst other things, that training should be tailored to meet the needs of a motorcyclist’s experience, bike preference and riding habits and not their age.

## **RESEARCHING RIDER DEVELOPMENT**

A key element of the research programme associated with rider development in the UK was to tap into the diverse narratives and the risk environment that shape motorcycling experiences in the UK. Special emphasis in this study was placed upon the stories that motorcyclists tell through their discourse. A range of means were used to gather qualitative data for the project, including, participant observation, semi-structured depth interviews; adopting Denzin’s (1997) interpretive biography approach. The aim was to explore motorcycling the fantasy scenarios and narratives that drive motorcycling.

Motorcyclists as social actors regularly engage in the retelling of their experiences and lives. As they do so they chronicle their lives in terms of a series of events, happenings, influences and decisions. The narrative describes the way in which people articulate how the past is related to the present. In so doing the motorcyclist is organising his/her life and experiences through stories and in so doing makes sense of them. Stories serve to illustrate the relationships between the rider and his/her environment and the narratives chronicle a rider’s life experiences and development.

The evolution of motorcycle activity into fresh directions has been matched by the development of new opportunities to gain mastery over the machine through expert tuition and support beyond novice training. As well as further road-based training for qualified riders there are dedicated schools existing to teach race and off-road technique, cornering, braking and stunt skills. Guided tours and organised group holidays offer back-up staff and vehicles, pre-booked accommodation and entertainment. Such developments reflect contemporary consumers’ almost obsessive absorption with the acquisition and pursuit of leisure experiences. This is reflected in the vast array of products and services made available by enterprising marketers who seek to equip motorcyclists for their adventures. Motorcyclists as people are concerned with having experiences that perpetuate and extend their self narratives and effective engagement with motorcyclists requires interventions to demonstrate consistency with the long term riding goals expressed within them.

### **Novice Motorcyclists**

Novice motorcyclists face a difficult task when selecting a pathway for development as motorcyclists. They are likely to have considerable uncertainty about the desirability of choice alternatives and to assist in making a decision they create consumption visions of possible motorcycling activities; these might include advanced riding courses, track days, off road experiences, a day at a motorcycle stunt school or a Sunday afternoon burn up. All these avenues of motorcycling involve a degree of edgework or risk taking. Indeed, edgework, as defined by Lyng (1990) is an integral part of motorcycling and includes practicing wheelies, negotiating traffic,

taking bends on twisty roads, stunting at a venue, fast riding on track days, maintaining pace in group riding, or riding through an alpine pass. Motorcyclists as edgeworkers, typically seek to define the performance limits of both themselves and their equipment. They regard the opportunity for the development of skills as one of the most valuable aspects of the experience yet they tend to rely on informal, unstructured routes to goal attainment. Research by Crowther & Brown (2004) demonstrated that once engaged in rider training, most riders anticipate further involvement in formal training in the future.

Whether born again biker or novice, entry into a new leisure arena necessarily involves not only the development of skills but also new roles to be learned and norms to be absorbed. As participants become immersed in motorcycling culture they rapidly accumulate beliefs and values relating to their pastime. Such narratives may originate informally through interaction with other motorcyclists and abundant specialist media, or more formally through rider instruction courses. Many bikers in the UK meet regularly at venues such as pubs, cafes, dealerships or racetracks and exchange information and impressions about all matters linked to motorcycling. In the context of such discussions groups of riders develop beliefs not only about appropriate riding styles but also service expectations of suppliers that are based on the shared experiences and perceptions of group members.

Monitoring cultural values was an important step towards developing a full understanding of rider behaviour and initiating programmes that sought to influence beliefs, perceptions and attitudes towards road safety. High risk activities such as motorcycling provide a well defined context for personal change as well as a new, and sometimes central, identity. Those who seek to gain influence within this arena need to appreciate the symbolic aspects (e.g. venue rituals, clothing and machine styles) of the diverse elements within it. This may lead to the identification of safety programme options that produce a long lasting, enduring engagement with motorcycling sub-cultures.

### **Police as partner**

The originators of BikeSafe believed that Police assessed rides would serve as turning points in motorcyclists riding careers. The process of getting closer to the experiences of motorcyclists allowed observation of not only shared cultural codes, but also recognition of the role of embodied experience of motorcycling. This is an essential ingredient that non-motorcyclists such as the car bound Traffic Police may find hard to relate to. The motorcycle becomes an intimate partner, an object of desire, which is eyed and touched by the rider. Beyond its performance as a form of mobile transportation it becomes here a transport of delight, a journey of sensual pleasure without even moving. This emphasises the fundamental role of Motorcycle Police in delivering the service through articulating the narrative of desirable rider development experiences. Skill is highly prized amongst motorcyclists and consequently, those who are highly skilled are often respected and admired.

## **Developing consumption visions**

The assessor can facilitate the construction of consumption visions where motorcyclists imagine themselves playing the major role in a tentative future motorcycling situation. A consumption vision consists of a series of vivid mental images of product-related behaviours and their consequences, which allows consumers to more accurately anticipate actual consequences of product use (Phillips, 1996). Consumption visions are not merely self-relevant images of the future, they are visions of the self behaving within an imagined scenario and experiencing the outcomes of those behaviours; for instance, safe riding behaviour is linked to enduring engagement with motorcycling and group approval.

## **PURSUIT OF EDGEWORK**

A decrease in physically and culturally passive forms of leisure in favour of more active pastimes is a widespread feature of post-industrial societies. The challenge of adventure stems partly from the perceived physical danger existing within a context of outcome uncertainty (Lupton, 1999). In this respect motorcycling bears comparison to other high-risk recreational activities such as rock climbing, paragliding and white water canoeing where the main attraction is the controlled courting of danger. Lyng (1990) applies the term edgework to refer to participant's experiences in dangerous activities that are voluntarily undertaken as part of leisure. Edgework is characterised by an emphasis on skilled performance of the dangerous activity, involving the ability to maintain control over a situation that verges on complete chaos.

The pursuit of edgework and the search for sensual velocity were revealed in the research as key ingredients in motorcycling experience. A popular narrative theme recounts visits to track days where riders enjoy the experience of their machines onto race-tracks and explore the performance envelope of themselves and their machines in a more controlled setting than the public road; this is an edgework encounter. In response to the apparent dangers of fast road riding, sports motorcyclists are increasingly choosing packaged adventure experiences within controlled domains such as race tracks. The race track it seems must be negotiated to unlock a bike's inner truths.

## **Search for Flow**

The BikeSafe education programme seeks to question a prevailing belief held by many motorcyclists that fulfilment in motorcycling derives from the assembly of fast riding experiences available only through possession of the super-sports bike, the racer gear look, and enhanced by a regularly practiced repertoire of stunting display. Almost inevitably this regularly discussed scenario is represented as an aspirational pathway for the newcomer to motorcycling in the popular specialist press. BikeSafe is as an intervention that has sought to question prevailing mythologies in motorcycling that knee-down action is a requirement for authentic motorcycling experience. Achievement of flow experience, as Csikszentmihalyi (1975) pointed out, occurs when a situation demands total participation from the individual. The practice of safe

motorcycling requires total absorption that provides motorcyclists with sensual stimulation and involvement that transcends mundane experience. A key theme communicated in the BikeSafe programme is that the sustained enjoyment of flow in motorcycling may be secured through the style of motorcycling adopted.

In the UK an increasingly popular option is the motorcycle track day that allows participants to take their machines to a race track to practice their skills. Venues such as race tracks have developed into adventure activity enclaves representing communities defined by the shared experience, actions and objects involved. These social environments are a means for escape and an opportunity for challenge within a performance encounter. Through the use of appropriate clothing, behaviours, speech, and artefacts re-enactment of communal fantasies may be created and recreated. In contrast the time-honoured approach to progression up the motorcycling skill learning curve was attendance at the School of Hard Knocks. Through a combination of near-miss escapes and no-miss spills, the novice would serve an “apprenticeship” akin to initiation rituals, emerging mostly unscathed he was then able to graduate onto “real” bikes of 500cc or more.

Motorcyclists, in common with today’s leisure adventurers, expect to graduate through their chosen high-risk pursuits quickly, by exploiting a process of cultivated risk-taking that accelerating them along towards their goal of mastery. This involves deliberate exposure to uncertainty allowing the activity in question to stand out in relief against the routines of ordinary life (Cohen and Taylor 1992). Simmel (1971 p.193) discusses how we abandon ourselves to the “powers and accidents of the world, which can delight us, but in the same breath can also destroy us.” The search for thrills, or the sense of mastery that comes with the deliberate confrontation of danger, derives in part from its contrast with routine. Grant McCracken (1990) refers to escapist and fantasy attachment to goods that serve as bridges to hopes and ideals that in motorcycling may become a heroic quest. Within modern-day motorcycling, a range of contemporary discourses draw on such fantasies.

## **MYTHIC MESSAGE**

Mythic message is a process of assuring viewers that the gap between myth and reality can be bridged. Contemporary consumers have an insatiable desire to experience in reality the pleasurable dramas that they have already enjoyed in imagination (Campbell, 1995). Advertising that provides a repertoire of contemporary mythology facilitates the presentation of self via commodity construction of adventure identities. Motorcycle manufacturers exploit consumer images of heroic racers linked to the acquisition of motorcycle related equipment. Advertisers stimulate fantasy development and feed such dreams as part of the imaginative process of pleasure seeking. “Own the Race-Track,” implores current advertising for the hyper-sports, race-replica Suzuki GSXR1000, asserting the dominance of this machine and its rider in its home domain, the race track. The use of images portraying sports bike riders as invincible road warriors on magical steeds is an example of content designed to stimulate fantasy involvement from aspirant sports motorcyclists.

Editorial content of the specialist motorcycle press frequently exploits the race track as the context for reviews of new motorcycles adding to prevailing discourses

concerning usage of sports motorcycles. Since motorcycle riders are mostly devoted to an avocation that brings them enjoyment, additional acquisitions of quest experiences are a sacrament celebrating their serious leisure activity. This commitment to the consumption community of sports motorcycling repeats a pattern of desire creation that prevails within the sub culture.

Specialist marketing communications bristle with scenarios featuring adventure quests. Much of what guides the newcomer's purchases of protective clothing, footwear, helmets and accessories can be explained as tasks of impression management driven by perceptions of audience expectation combined with formal rules of engagement. In the case of track day motorcycling for example, protective helmets, boots, gloves and leathers must be worn. Sports bike riders contrive styles that reflect the equipment worn by contemporary racing heroes.

It is largely through the mass media that the affective and cognitive expectations of motorcyclists are shaped. Dramatic story lines frame the context of magazine road tests, novels and films and the avid audience embrace them willingly. The powerful attraction of imagined scenarios or consumption visions, entails bikers thinking, fantasizing or day dreaming about motorcycles and motorcycling experiences. Heroic images of motorcycling imbue motorcycling with a distinct attractiveness involving challenge and danger confrontation. Reading specialist press titles such as Motor Cycle News or Fast Bike allows motorcyclists to "plug" into their subculture, engage in fantasy shopping and vicariously ride all the latest machines. In particular it feeds the discourse that take place amongst groups of motorcyclists about latest bikes and topical issues such as speed cameras and how to beat them; for instance, Performance Bikes magazine ran a cover headline, "Stick the Pigs – How to Stuff Police Radar" in October 1996.

The Advisory Group on Motorcycling in its Final Report to Government (2004) commented that the press should be discouraged from glamorising inappropriate speed and behaviour, and from publishing advice on how to copy professional racers on public roads. They propose that careful consideration needs to be given to the stereotypes and portrayal of motorcycling in both the specialist and non-specialist media. Whilst policy guidelines may have a part to play it is through the engagement of motorcyclists at the person-to-person level that such discourses can be challenged and modified through appropriate information exchange and education.

Arnould and Price (1993) focus on the relationship between white water rafters and their guides when they drew attention to their significant role in unlocking the 'magic' of the adventure experience. Participants emerged with enhanced knowledge and awareness of the context of their voyage, i.e. the river and its eco-system and their position within in. BikeSafe is able to deliver revealing insights to motorcyclists through effective interpretation of the challenging context of riding by assessors and the need for perpetual vigilance when negotiating roads.

## DISCUSSION

Rider education and assessment, as a truly engaging experience, can function as a tool for changing beliefs about motorcycling, thus affording an important platform on which cultural scripts in motorcycling can be re-directed to include alternative aspirations for personal development in motorcycling. BikeSafe has evolved as an intervention that has transformed motorcyclist education and assessment into extraordinary encounters where Police personnel act as guides to new motorcycling perspectives by transferring new riding outlooks to participants through intense, positive experiences. The assessor within the service encounter delivers an engaging experience that comes from an interpersonal dynamic developed over the extended interval of BikeSafe. Indeed, overall satisfaction with the development experience is dependent upon the success of the delivered narrative.

As an intense, positive experience, BikeSafe has the opportunity to impart to riders a new assurance in their biking by reducing anxieties, increasing rider confidence and clarifying directions for future development. Because participants are uncertain of their estimated skill levels, the assessor can be seen as an informant to a new perspective with the potential to re-engage riders, informing previous assumptions and re-directing participants to a more careful, safe, and responsible riding style.

The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), with the support of the Department for Transport are working to promote BikeSafe on a national basis and create a standardised approach so that riders know what they are getting for their money and can access to the scheme wherever they live. The new structure will have common pricing, syllabuses and products ranging from short ride-outs to two day assessments. It is envisaged that the national status will mean BikeSafe can negotiate better insurance deals for riders who go through the program and thereby provide added value.

Marketers of advanced riding programmes need to consider the links between the end goals of motorcyclists and the necessary means for their achievement. The situation where those riders who have resisted opportunities to engage with rider training due to a perceived lack of clarity about provision of training programmes calls for responses that offer improved credibility and greater flexibility of delivery with increased transparency of outcomes. As motorcyclists engage in their chosen activity in an on-going reflexive way, road safety campaigns can function as a tool for adapting motorcyclists' values, imparting fresh meanings and re-directing motorcyclists towards alternative aspirations for personal development within long-term, sustainable motorcycling careers.

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