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## Addressing Diversity Issues in Cycling An Analysis of Three Media Brands' Strategies

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### Abstract

Cycling as both a sport and an activity has a chequered history in terms of its diversity and inclusivity. On the one hand, bicycles played a part in early moves towards the liberation of women by providing them with a vehicle of escape (Ross, 2021), on the other the sport of cycle road racing has evolved as a sport that is primarily the domain of white men (Hylton, 2017; Sharpe & Bird, 2017). It seems ironic that the bicycle, a tool so well suited to promoting physical freedom and camaraderie irrespective of gender, race, or even class, has become ridden competitively in a sport riddled with diversity issues (David, 2020; Edwards, 2019), overseen by conservative institutions such as the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI). This paper begins by setting out some of the issues in terms of the economic and other discriminatory distinctions between male and female professional cycling as well as its racialization. However, the main part of the paper considers some key examples of how this lack of diversity is being challenged through business initiatives which reflect the importance of diversity as an integral part of marketing. In particular, the paper will focus on the media and discourses used to promote diversity in cycling by cycling-focused brands. The three main examples discussed here are the Global Cycling Network (GCN) a prominent YouTube channel; Zwift a virtual platform for indoor cycling (Delaney, 2020); and Rapha a cycle clothing manufacturer (Rapha, 2021e). While the business type and models of these brands are completely different, they are all dependent for their growth on the expansion of the niche sport of cycling and treat growth in terms of diversity and inclusion as a central part of this mission. The different ways in which they do this also illustrate some media and practical strategies that are potentially useful examples of how

promoting diversity might form an integral part of corporate identity and growth.

## Introduction

The men's Paris-Roubaix is a storied race famed for its challenging sectors of cobbles that dates to 1896 but 2021 marked the first edition of the women's race. This inaugural race was won by the British rider Lizzie Deignan who held aloft the distinctive trophy, identical to the men's, consisting of a large cobblestone block set in a brass base. She explained in her post-race interview that despite the fact that the prize money offered by the organisers amounted to only €1,535, approximately one twentieth of the men's reward of €30,000 she would, in fact, receive the same sum as the winner of the men's race due to her Team Trek-Segafredo's policy of paying out the difference in races where there was a disparity between the men's and women's prize money (Frattini, 2021). This episode shows both the progress being made in women's racing with the creation of a women's edition of the race, and the progressive policy of Trek-Segafredo and the huge inequalities in prize money in cycling (Diaz, 2019; Flottorp, 2021; Giuliaani, 2021). These inequalities permeate cycling, with differences in both prize money and pay; shorter limits on the maximum distance and number of days in women's races; and considerably less coverage of women's cycling on television and in the media generally. Despite the bicycle being closely associated with the liberation of women from the time of Susan B. Anthony the suffragette campaigner who has been quoted as saying that "the bicycle has done more to emancipate women than anything in the world." (Macy, 2017), cycle road racing which dates to the invention of the modern bicycle in the latter part of the nineteenth century, with notable exceptions, has been dominated by and acquired the image of a men's sport and more specifically a white one, with a highly conservative culture. The storied history of road cycling as captured in the wealth of literature on the sport is one largely populated by white men from Maurice-François Garin who won the first Tour de France, through Fausto Coppi, Jacques Anquetil, Eddie Merckx, to Chris Froome and Tadej Pogačar. While female cycling has its own pantheon from Louse Amaindo back in the days of the penny farthing (or "ordinary") bicycle, through such stars as Jeannie Longo, Beryl Burton, Connie Carpenter, to Marriane Vos and Annemiek van Vleuten, like women's cycling in general, female cyclists have not been given the media or historical attention they deserve. In particular, the failure to attract

media attention is problematic in a sport that originally gained publicity and interest through newspaper coverage and is dependent on television and the media to attract sponsors. Nevertheless, as Deignan's win at the inaugural women's Paris-Roubaix shows, things are changing due to progressive sponsors like Trek-Segafredo and others in the cycling industry who have much to gain from broadening the appeal of the sport and participation in cycling. Likewise, the globalization of cycling as a sport is incompatible with its current largely white image. This paper introduces three organisations that have prioritized diversity and inclusion in cycling, offering a way forward for a sport that has struggled with both its niche status as a sport and preoccupation with white men. These examples also potentially illustrating effective strategies for combating discrimination more generally. To begin with, however, the following section provides an overview of some of the current issues regarding discrimination in cycling today.

## Cycling and diversity issues

*Table 1: Prize Money for Recent Professional Global Sporting Competitions*

Sport	Competition	Men's 1 <sup>st</sup> Prize	Women's 1 <sup>st</sup> Prize
Tennis	US Open (2021)	\$2.5 million	\$2.5
Cricket	T20 World Cup	\$5.6 million	\$5.6 million
Cycling	UCI World Championship RR/TT	€20,000	€20,000
Golf	US Open (2021)	\$2.25 million	\$1 million
Soccer	World Cup (2018men/2019 women)	\$38	\$4

*(Sources: tennis (WTAStaff, 2021); cricket (Williams, 2021); cycling (Gijy, 2021); golf (Golfchannel, 2021; Herrington, 2021); soccer (Hess, 2019))*

When comparing the UCI world championships with other major global sporting competitions as illustrated in Table 1, cycling appears relatively progressive and on a par with tennis, one of the first sports to have equal prize money for men's and women's competitions and cricket, which has more recently made moves towards equalizing pay. Unfortunately, the UCI World Championships is the exception rather than the rule, as prizes for women's races are generally much lower than those for men's races. Even the overall winner of the ten stage Giro d'Italia Donne, the most prestigious women's stage race, only earned €8,000 in 2021 (A. Jones, 2021a). The winner of the men's 21 stage Giro d'Italia received €115,668 (stickybottle, 2021), and the winner of the most prestigious men's race, the Tour de France €500,000 (Bonville-Ginn, 2021).

Meanwhile, although the situation regarding minimum rates of pay at the elite WorldTeam level for female cyclists is gradually improving, there remains a huge gap in comparison, with the minimum annual pay for the elite level men's ProTour which is €40,045. Nevertheless, the minimum salary for elite WorldTeam women of €15,000 in 2020 rose to €20,000 in 2021, with a planned increase to €27,500 for the 2022 season and up on a par with the men's second tier ProTeam minimum of €32,100 for 2023 (A. Jones, 2021c). An independent audit for the UCI by EY Lausanne also showed that whereas male ProTeam riders earned 67.53% more than women's WorldTeam riders in 2020, the gap fell to 44.21% in 2021 (ibid). There are several institutional and practical issues behind these economic discrepancies not the least of which is inadequate television coverage of women's professional races (swisscycles.com, 2021).

Arguably, the lack of television coverage is one of the most severe issues facing women's racing because not only does it mean that income from TV is lost, and sponsors cannot gain visibility, but the opportunity to develop the audience for women's racing is lost too. Committed fans can read reviews after the race but it is never the same as seeing the drama and colour of the event on live TV. Those who were able to watch the TV coverage of Deignan win Paris-Roubaix were unfortunately only able to tune in to the last part of the race, where she led all the way, leaving cycling fans to imagine what had happened beforehand. Sweetspot, the organisers of both the men's and women's Tour of Britain, who had matched the prize money in both events, had signed an agreement with Eurosport and GCN to provide daily live coverage. The UCI stipulates that female WorldTeam events must provide at least 45 minutes of live coverage each day. This is a small amount for races that last for 3-4 hours or more and when considering that the men's race had been broadcast live in full. Even so, a week before the race, Sweetspot cancelled the live broadcasts citing "commercial realities" and instead offered only free nightly highlights on GCN (Cyclingnews, 2021). Sweetspot presumably set out with good intentions and the race did go ahead, after what had been a two-year gap due to the pandemic, but disappointingly were unable to show the race as promised, let alone as they had done the men's event.

Financial issues aside, another discriminatory feature of women's cycling is the limit on race distances. Under UCI rules, while men's road races have an upper limit of 280km, women's are limited to 160. As a result, the women's equivalent of the men's Belgian 259km classic race Liege-Bastone-Liege, the Liege-Bastone-Liege Femmes is only 140km and, unlike

the men's round-trip route, a one-way route from Bastone to Liege (in spite of the name!) (Lewis, 2021). Likewise, the stipulated limit for women's stage races is six days, though, as with the Giro d'Italia Donne, it is possible to apply for exemptions. Arguably, these shorter distances are one reason why women's races are so much more dynamic, yet the UCI's premise seems to be that women should not be encouraged to ride races as long or hard as those ridden by men. It was for this reason that the UCI refused to sanction the 17 stage Ore Ida Women's Challenge held between 1984 and 2002 (A. Jones, 2021b). It is somewhat ironic then, that this year, arguably the toughest ultra-endurance cycling event the 3,000-mile (4,828km) Race Across America (RAAM) was won by a 52 year old woman, Leah Goldstein (Hurford, 2021). She completed the event in just over 11 days ahead of all other competitors including the first man. While she was the first woman to win this race outright, Lael Wilcox had won the 4,200 mile (6,759 km) Trans Am race (also across the US) outright in 2016. Neither Trans Am or RAAM are UCI sanctioned events and such ultra-endurance require a different physical make up to road racers, nevertheless, Goldstein's and Wilcox's successes in completing races considerably longer than the Tour de France and in much shorter times underlines the outdatedness of the discriminatory intentions behind the different race distance limits for men and women.

In understanding the differences between men's and women's professional racing it is important to recognise that women's racing is a relatively new sport with a much smaller pool of participants involved in the WorldTour and women's racing as a whole. Duplicating the men's ProTour calendar which includes three three-week Grand Tours and numerous one day and stage races (i.e. multi-day events) from January to October would not only require greater sponsorship but also more and larger teams. The women's WorldTour consists of only nine teams of around 15 riders, compared with the current 19 ProTour teams who also have much larger rosters of riders (Jary, 2021). Anna Van der Breggen who won the world championships three times and retired in 2021, in a recent interview, highlighted this issue of scale in relation to the Women's Tour de France Femmes avec Zwift which will begin in 2022 as an 8-day event. As she explained, holding a 21-day event on top of the current schedule would create too much of a burden for the teams and riders:

"If we do that [hold a three week Tour de France], it's way too fast. Maybe in the future, when the teams are growing and, when there's more money because there

are more live broadcasts on television, then it might be possible, but for now, eight days is doable while also doing the other races.” (Jary, 2021)

From this perspective, development of equality may require patience and such developments should be recognised as laying the foundations for future progress.

Gender issues aside, cycling as a professional sport in the heartland of Europe is a remarkably white sport. It is perhaps telling that the stereotype of the amateur road cyclist is a white, middle-aged, and often middle-class, man—hence the acronym MAMILS which stands for “middle-aged men in Lycra”. Cycling is not alone in becoming popular with people as they move into middle age and become aware of the importance of exercise to maintain health. However, compared with other forms of fitness training such as yoga, swimming or even running, cycling has been found to be dominated by men (H. Jones, Millward, & Buraimo, 2011). Moreover, these men are predominantly white (Hylton, 2017). In a study undertaken in London where one third of the population self-identified as black, Asian or other ethnic minority (ibid), 86% of male cyclists and 94% of female cyclists were found to be white (Chandrasekaran, 2011). In the professional peloton, while Columbian riders have a remarkable history in European road cycling dating back to “Cochise” Rodriguez, who participated in the 1975 Tour de France and culminating with Egan Bernal’s overall victory in the race in 2019 (A. Fotheringham, 2019), professional cycling is dominated by white riders. Asian participation to date has been limited to a few riders from Japan, and only Ji Cheng from China, besides some riders from Kazakhstan which sponsors the ProTour team Astana as a country. The few black riders that have participated in European professional cycling at the elite level have mainly come from African countries, notably through the South African registered team originally started in 2013 as MTN-Qhubeka which included as its rationale, the promotion of cycling across Africa (Brown, 2014). Currently a WorldTour team named Qhubeka NextHash, the team were reported to be losing WorldTour status for 2022 due to a shortfall in sponsorship (Benson, 2021). A recent count of African riders included 14 male European professionals including 11 at WorldTour teams, and one woman (Ashleigh Moolman, the South African national champion) (Quénet, 2020). While even this small number of participants may serve as an inspiration for other Africans, racial diversity in professional cycling in Europe, like cycling in general, as the London example shows, still has far to go.

## **GCN: a challenge to conventional media**

The Global Cycling Network (GCN) (mentioned above as the provider of televised race coverage) is a YouTube channel which set itself apart from other channels which were either adjuncts of cycling magazines or online news or product review sites, or hobby sites set up by individuals, with its ambition to dominate cycling YouTube media. Based in Bath the West of England, with a growing cast of former professional cyclists, GCN created a weekly show and regular videos on every aspect of road cycling, which it quickly expanded to a separate channel for mountain biking as well as channels in other languages including German, Italian, Spanish, and Japanese, more recently separating out channels for cycling tech and news. Providing a wealth of informative and entertaining cycling content, subscribers to GCN quickly swelled to a million and now stand at 2.8 million just for its main channel. Among other things, GCN provides detailed reports on cycling news which has more recently expanded into a partnership with Eurosport to broadcast races live online on a subscription basis. Despite the all-white cast of presenters and only managing to attract one long-term female presenter, the channel has consistently provided equal coverage in its reporting of men's and women's races, something which cannot be said for most cycling media, let alone the media in general. A better understanding of how gender parity is promoted by GCN can be gained by looking more closely at the media content they produce. Below, two examples are considered, a GCN news round up from their show; and a video focusing on Paralympic "tech" in the wake of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

### ***GCN Show News Roundup: Towards Parity for Women's Cycling***

The October 5 edition of the GCN Racing News Show was released on the GCN Racing YouTube Channel under the title "A ~~Sunday~~ Weekend In Hell! Cobrelli and Deignan Conquer Paris-Roubaix" (GCN\_Racing, 2021). The deleted "Sunday" and replacement with "Weekend" highlights the inclusion of the women's race on Saturday, modifying a nickname for the race derived from the famous Danish documentary film about the race directed by Jørgen Leth (Leth, 1976) and described in detail in Fotheringham's book about the film (2018). The show was dominated by the news of Paris-Roubaix the main races for both for both men and women. The report was split almost evenly in terms of time between the Women's



race (reported first and ending at 4:55) and Men's (which ended at 10:30) and occupied almost half of the 22-minute show as summarised in Table 2. As the table shows, there are more men's events to report on, resulting in slightly more time devoted to reports/announcements but there is a clear attempt to provide equal coverage overall.

*Table 2: Overview of content on a GCN Racing News Show*

Timestamp	Topic
0:00- 0:30	overview of topics
0:31- 1:00	intro to Paris-Roubaix
1:01- 4:55	Paris-Roubaix (women's)
4:56-10:30	Paris-Roubaix (men's)
10:31-14:15	Other men's races (Sparkassen Munsterland / Giro de Sicilia/ Giro dell'Emilia/Crow Race)
14:16-15:08	This week's men's races: Coppa Bernocchi; Milano Torino/Gran Piemonte; Il Lombardia; Tour de Vendee; Binche-Chimay-Binche; European Track Championships*; Track Champion's League Majorca*
15:09-15:41	This week's women's race (The Women's Tour)
15:42-16:12	Coming cyclo-cross races: UCI World Cup (Waterloo)
16:13-18:54	Review of recent cyclo-cross with reports of women's and men's events for each race.
18:55-19:34	World hour record, successful attempt: (women's: Joss Lowden)
19:35-20:45	British hour record, successful attempt: (men's Dan Bigham)
20:45-21:05	Cancelled races in Australia
21:06-22:05	Retirements: (three men, one woman, one (male) sports director)
22:06-22:37	Transfers (two men)

*(The parts including a focus on women's cycling are highlighted in grey.)*

*\*The track events are for men and women and an image of a women's track team is shown while introducing these events.*

The choice to report on the Women's race first is framed as "So much happened over the weekend of racing, it's quite hard to even know where to start. But I'll start at the beginning with the women's race on Saturday." In doing so, the presenter prioritized the women's (Saturday) event over the men's race which took place on the Sunday, based on the schedule. This orientation towards parity was also reflected in the cover image for the video which showed a composite image of Deignan (left) and Cobrelli (right), the women's and men's winners. The report highlighted the momentousness of the occasion— "an historical moment 125 years after men first competed over those horrific roads, and finally, the female peloton got to do exactly the same"—and the drama and excitement of the race. Nevertheless, it also made mention of the minimal TV coverage which started so late that it did not cover the decisive break by Deignan: "whilst there was no live coverage of the race, we managed to get a camera by the side of the road to capture the moment, the race was

effectively won.” This was followed by a clip of this moment. The magnitude of her win is underlined by the failed attempt to chase her down by pre-race favourite Marianne Vos “the greatest female cyclist of all time”. Showing Deignan crossing the finish line alone, presenter Dan Lloyd commented, “And what a way to do it: solo from the first section of pavé, through to the last, an average speed of 39.7kmh. That was well ahead of any of the predicted time scales. Pain had subsided from her face but was still evident on her hands covered in blood caused by the constant jarring of the cobblestones. Chapeaux!” Following this, the part of Deignan’s post-race interview is shown where she situates her victory in the context of the progress of women’s cycling:

*Women’s cycling is at this turning point. Like you say, today is a part of history. I am proud to be part of a team that also makes history. And you know, we are so grateful to everybody behind the scenes. All the viewers watching because every fan who is watching this is also making history. It’s proving there’s appetite for women’s cycling and that athletes here, can do one of the hardest races in the world. And I am so proud that I can say I am the first ever winner, yeah. (GCN\_Racing, 2021: 2:49-3:18)*

Given the joyful smiles with which she says this, her comments seem less of a dig at the minimal coverage and more a genuine appreciation of the support from fans, her team sponsor and the race organisers. Lloyd then highlighted the role of this victory in Deignan’s remarkable palmarès and the high calibre of the podium with Marianne Vos second and Elisa Longo Borghini, the Italian champion in third, which he characterises as “three of the best riders in the world, showing their power and class—absolutely brilliant!” Not shirking the issue, he continued:

*Now, unfortunately, they would take home just a fraction of the prize money compared to the men. But Trek-Segafredo made amends for that themselves, confirming to us that they would add to the €1,535 first place prize to bring it in line with the 30,000 first place prize for the men’s. That’s not a gap, that’s a chasm! So, plenty still to work on. But the most important thing is that we now have a women’s race and it will only get bigger and better. (GCN\_Racing, 2021: 3:45-4:10)*

Both his commentary and comments therefore firmly align him (and the GCN channel) as unambiguously supporting women's racing and gender equality in cycle road racing. Similarly, later in the show, Lloyd draws attention to the lack of TV coverage of the Women's Tour of Britain, introduced above, as follows:

*On the women's side, this week it's the Women's Tour, here in England. Now, unfortunately, there's no live coverage. Organizers SweetSpot tried their best to make that step for the first time this year, but unfortunately the sponsors and therefore the budget to make it a reality.* (GCN\_Racing, 2021: 15:10-15:21)

As GCN were due to provide this coverage in conjunction with Eurosport, this may well have been unfortunate in terms of the channel's business too as, instead of being able to offer the pay coverage, GCN, instead, only provided free highlights, but it is framed more as an apology to viewers with his compensatory promise to "have those highlights up each day, as soon as we possibly can."

### ***GCN Paralympic Tech: Promoting inclusivity***

One prominent feature of cycling as a sport is the bicycle itself and the continual innovations in technology which often, ultimately target the amateur cyclist consumer market. For this reason, many of the features on GCN's Tech channel are sponsored by manufacturers whose products feature in the video. Products reviewed on GCN are not subjected to the kind of critical pros and cons analysis found on other channels such as BikeRadar or Road.CC in the UK, or CyclingTips in Australia, that situate themselves as independent reviewers, but instead presented in glowing terms. For example, introducing SRAM's first wireless shifting on one of their first "unboxing" videos, presenter Simon Richardson opened: "I am super excited, we love a bit of tech here on GCN, so I think you are going to be excited too..." The channel embraces many aspects of road race cycling technology including viewer's projects and questions. However, a staple of the Tech channel is technology used by professionals. This may offer few opportunities to promote diversity but one where it did focused on the technology of Paralympic riders, an athlete minority who have gradually become more visible through coverage of the Paralympic games (GCN\_

Tech, 2021). In this case, the enthusiasm for the technical innovations used by cyclists with physical impairments provides the same gloss and glamour that has presumably made the channel so popular with cycle manufacturers seeking to advertise their products.

The video is introduced by GCN's Manon Lloyd (no relation to the show's founder mentioned above). She explains:

*Innovative bikes and equipment played a crucial part at the Tokyo Paralympic Games just a few weeks ago. So, it felt only right that we take a closer look at some of these amazing bikes and equipment that helped these athletes win gold medals.* (GCN\_Tech, 2021: 0:00-0:13)

As such it is presented as a topic that is both timely and perfectly matched to the Tech Channel's purpose. Indeed, the focus on the equipment of athletes who have special needs requiring specialized equipment is represented as a natural extension of the focus on innovative bike design, hence the title, "Innovative bike and body tech behind Paralympic gold". The presenter continues:

*The bikes we see at the Olympics are so unique to the athletes, from two-wheeled bikes to three-wheeled bikes, and hand cycles. And the Paralympic games just goes to show that there is a bike out there for everybody.* (GCN\_Tech, 2021: 0:13-0:27)

As such, she frames this focus on technology as part of a message that cycling is an inclusive sport, welcoming of diversity. Technical innovation itself is implicitly an integral part of this inclusivity. Besides the bikes, she also focuses on the adaptations made to prosthetic limbs interfacing with the bicycle. Specifically, she highlights three prominent British Paralympic Cyclists as a focus for exploring the technology: (Dame) Sarah Storey, Jody Cundy, and Jaco Van Gass. Not only does this focus on British athletes for this British-based channel offer an appeal to British nationalism, but one of the features that she highlights in her introduction of Cundy, are the custom painted designs on his prosthetic legs including a Union Jack and a Japan-themed one for the Tokyo Games. This glamorization of artificial legs as innovative and artistic tech serves as a refreshing change to the kind of embarrassment over disabilities that, for example in Japan (as well as

elsewhere), has, until recently, caused people with disabilities to be kept out of public view (Hayashi & Okuhiro, 2010).

### **Zwift: Building a new world**

If YouTube channels such as GCN represent an emerging branch of cycling media reporting that has enabled a more gender-balanced reporting of cycling, and a greater focus on inclusivity through things like highlighting Paralympic tech, virtual indoor cycling platforms such as Zwift represent a new form of cycling altogether, and with it an opportunity to promote equality and diversity in cycling from the outset.

Zwift is a fantasy indoor cycling world that was founded in 2014 by Eric Min and Scott Barger, with Lloyd Murphy as creative director, based on a project started by video graphics engineer Jon Mayfield. The first activity on Zwift was posted by Mayfield on 22nd October 2014 on the virtual Jarvis Island. Jarvis Island was superseded by the current virtual main world: Watopia on 23 April 2015 (Shlange, 2020). Watopia includes a wide variety of cycling landscapes from flat sandstone desert to snowy peaked mountains, as well as jungles with Mayan ruins, forests with roaming dinosaurs, a volcano mountain with roads through it surrounded by bubbling lava, as well as beaches and even transparent underwater tunnels surrounded by sea life. Since then, several worlds have been added, mimicking the landscapes of UCI road race world championship courses or other famous cycling locations including Yorkshire, London, Paris, France, Richmond, New York, and Innsbruck. This year, a new fantasy world based on the Japanese countryside called Makuri Islands, and a recent extension modelled loosely on Tokyo called Neokyo—a nighttime only neon-lit cityscape—were also added. The growth of worlds also reflects the expanding user base which saw a remarkable rise during lockdown with current Zwift accounts said to number over three million (Reed, 2021).

Although the worlds are fantasy worlds populated by avatars of the riders, the cycling is remarkably realistic, enabling a new form of cycling challenge and competition. Participants on Zwift ride a bicycle connected to a “smart” trainer which both measures rider power output to control movement through the virtual landscape and raises or lowers the power needed to travel at a given speed depending on the terrain. Some sections are even modelled on the topography of real roads, such as the Alpe du Zwift climb which

replicates the famous Tour de France climb the Alpe d'Huez. The realism of climbs on Zwift is such that, for example, one of the ultimate climbing challenges of Everesting—riding up and down a specific climb until accumulated vertical gain reaches the height of Mt Everest—can now be done virtually on Zwift (de Neef, 2021, pp. 21-23). Moreover, professional racing on Zwift is possible and took off during lockdowns across Europe with races aired by GCN complete with expert commentary by Hannah Walker, Dave Towle, Nathan Guerra, Matt Stephens, and other celebrity presenters. These broadcasts show both the virtual world and the riders on their trainers in their disparate locations. Unlike, professional racing in general, all professional Zwift races have men and women's events to ensure equality from the outset.

Another remarkable development both in terms of the progress of virtual cycling and the promotion of inclusivity in cycling is Zwift Academy. The Zwift Academy is a series of virtual training rides bookended with benchmark tests, which, while open to all Zwift users, serves as a testing ground to select the top female and male athletes who are then offered professional contracts with the elite professional teams CANYON/SRAM Racing and Alpecin-Fenix respectively. With over 150,000 participants in 2021 and only 5 men and 5 women selected as finalists, and only one of each to receive a contract it represents limited opportunity, but at least a fair one.

Avatars are not particularly realistic, and customization is limited but they have been designed with gender and diversity issues in mind. Rider gender, weight and height are factored into calculations of speed as well as affecting the appearance of avatars. All avatars can be customised for skin, hair colour, and hair style, with facial hair options for men. The skin palette is from a pale skin tone to a dark one and hair varies from short to long including an afro and covering blonde to dark hair as well as grey. Ginger or dyed hair colours are not available, and neither are tattoos or any details of skin, body shape, or racially identifiable facial features. There are just five avatar types allocated according to gender and weight with small, medium and large for men, and small and medium woman avatars. All are average builds, neither fat nor thin. How far avatars should reflect diversity of physical shape does not seem to have been debated so far, perhaps indicating that this is an effective choice. Considerably more customization is available in terms of virtual bike brands and models and cycle clothing, showing the importance of the shared identity of cyclist over gender and ethnicity.

The combination of a realistic ride-feel and a fantasy world populated by avatars of other riders offers a more attractive riding experience than the monotony of indoor rollers used by cyclists in the past, yet the key to Zwift's success is the gamification and social interaction it enables. Like many digital games, riders accumulate points through participation to level up and also acquire "drops" (of sweat) through putting in harder efforts or climbing more vertical meters. Drops can be used to "purchase" bike frames and wheels in the "drop shop." These bicycle components even mimic their IRL counterparts by providing in-game aerodynamic or weight gains, to improve speed. On the social side, riders can give each other a thumbs up called a "ride on" which appears as a giant blue hand. These hands collect in the avatar's jersey back pocket. Riders can also follow each other so that they see each other's rides and give ride ons both during and after the ride. There are also badges allocated for short and long routes, as well as from simple challenges such as giving three ride ons to difficult ones like riding 100 miles (160km), with Everesting being the most challenging challenge of all. At the same time, there is an ongoing calendar or group rides, races, and training programs, many of which offer new jerseys or kit to customize the avatar, meaning that there are always in-game goals to pursue or social rides to enjoy.

These dimensions of gamification and social interaction are also what makes Zwift an inclusive platform ideal for promoting diversity in cycling. Not only is it possible for anyone to participate without having to worry about their physical appearance or level of fitness but regular events are held in support of minorities, along with brand and charity promotions. For example, one of the most flamboyant kits on Zwift is a beautiful rainbow coloured outfit available through participation in one of the annual LGBT rides. In addition to the women only categories available for events and races generally (though women may also participate in men's categories too), there are also some specific women's only events such as the Women's 100 which includes four weeks of training events leading up to the Zwift group rides which, like the original IRL event organised by Rapha took place on 12 September in 2021. As the name suggests, the challenge is to ride 100km, a popular target among all cyclists. Rapha sponsor the event and Zwift finishers earn the virtual version of the jersey sold by Rapha to celebrate the event.

Whereas the Women's 100 is an event exclusively for Women, the Black Celebration Series was open to all riders and "highlighting the history, athletes and joy the Black

community brings to Zwift.” More importantly, these events were associated with activities outside of Zwift through the British organisation Sporting Equals whose aim is encapsulated in their slogan “promoting ethnic diversity in sport & fitness”. The event was also promoted through prominent black athletes including blogger Jools Walker, Kofi Kyei, Mo Farah, and Aurélien Raphael, as well as the Women of Colour Cycling Collective (WCCC). Such links not only give the events themselves greater meaning but provide publicity for those working to promote diversity.

Users of Zwift receive regular mailings to keep them abreast of the numerous events open to them but are also provide with a weekly show hosted by the charismatic and entertaining O. J. Borg. Although, it is apparent from this show that many of the key people in Zwift are white men, it also provides a space for introducing organisations such as the WCCC. This year, O. J. Borg’s participation in the Zwift Academy was reported in the show together with his virtual training partner Erica Elle, a UCI rider agent who founded Level Up Cycling Movement described on the show as “an incredibly successful Miami-based cycling movement that makes cycling more successful to minority communities and helps generate the next generation of pro riders.” Elle brought her own charisma and offered a glamorous example of a black woman undergoing a rigorous indoor cycle training program that must have served as an inspiration to all those who watched the show who participated in Zwift Academy.

### **Rapha: a brand with a mission**

Rapha is a high-quality cycle clothing brand that was started in 2004 through its founder Simon Mottram’s dissatisfaction with the lack of style and comfort in cyclewear yet has increasingly oriented to his goal of making cycling the most popular sport in the world (Hawkins, 2018). Rapha has acquired a divisive reputation among cyclists, with some critical of the brand for the high prices of their clothing which is seen as targeting wealthy cycling snobs, perhaps even as catering to the MAMILS by providing them with their Lycra (Nash, 2016). Nevertheless, this is far from Mottram’s intention—something that has become increasingly clear as the brand has grown. On Rapha’s website page for recruitment, it explains the rationale for the company as:



*To make cycling the most popular sport in the world. This purpose defines everything we do at Rapha. Since 2004, we have set out to celebrate the unparalleled beauty of the sport.* (Mottram, 2021)

This is accompanied with a video in which Mottram outlines the origins of the company as going against the traditional principles of business. He nevertheless justifies starting a company that he was told could not work in cycling terms:

*And yet, cycling is all about pushing yourself to do more... “I can’t go on. I must go on. I will go on.” That’s what the cyclist says to himself. And that’s what the innovator says to themselves.* (Mottram, 2021)

Even though Mottram uses the male pronoun “himself”, the video itself diversifies this by showing a group of male and female riders (wearing Rapha clothing) riding on hilly roads through a wild natural landscape on a cold and wet rainy day. Moreover, even though the brand draws on the “incredible aesthetic, and amazing stories” arising out of the heritage and traditions of the sport, they are reconfigured to appeal to more diverse audience, through the use of male and female models of a range of ethnicities in the website photography and videos.

The goal of making cycling the most popular sport in the world, as he explained at a recent event at Rapha’s London Clubhouse, is not compatible with targeting white middle-aged males like himself. This particular event called For the Culture (Rapha, 2021a) was organised on October 1st to celebrate Black History Month. It included prominent figures who have promoted cycling among black communities in Britain such as Jools Walker (author of the Lady Velo bog and numerous books), Michael Pusey, founder of the Peckham BMX club, which fostered talents such as Kye Whyte who won a silver medal in BMX at the Tokyo2020 Olympics and his brother Tre Whyte (another prominent BMX rider) who also spoke; Cadeena Cox, winner of two Paralympic gold medals in track cycling at Tokyo2020 on top of her gold from the 2016 Rio Olympics and six World Championship medals. In addition to these and other British participants, Justin Williams who founded the California based profession club L39ion of Los Angeles (pronounced “Legion of Los Angeles”) with his brother Cory also flew in for the event.

L39ion of Los Angeles, a team sponsored by Rapha, was founded by the Williams brothers with the explicit aim of promoting diversity in cycling. The brothers are themselves professional cyclists but decided to form their own team because of the discrimination they experienced as black cyclists in a white dominated sport in the US. On the team's website it explains:

*L39ION of LA was created to advance the sport of cycling, eliminate boundaries, and promote diversity, representation, and inclusion. We want to grow the sport in America and let the American masses know that you don't need to conform to be a part of the cycling community.* (L39ion\_of\_Los\_Angeles, 2021)

Even though, the club is a US and California based one, far from the traditional cycling heartland of cycling in Western Europe, the sponsorship by Rapha and the global reach of Rapha as a brand has helped amplify their message as well as an image of "cool" for the club and the diversity in cycling that they stand for.

Besides the For the Culture event, and a similar event promoting women's cycling featuring Lael Wilcox that focus on serious discussion of diversity issues, and mixed in with the product promotion videos which include a diverse image of cycling and cyclists through the choice of glamorous male and female model cyclists of a range of ethnicities (mentioned above), are videos highlighting Lael Wilcox's remarkable endurance rides, the achievements of the Canyon/SRAM women's team which Rapha also sponsor, and the Criterium successes of L39ion of Los Angeles.

Even though, Rapha also sponsor the men's Pro Tour Team EF Education-NIPPO, attention on the Rapha website during this year's Tour de France was shifted to Lachlan Morton, one of the team's riders, who, instead of participating in the race, undertook a charity endurance ride around the entire course of the Tour de France plus transfers self-supported. He covered some 5,500km, climbing 65,000 metres in 18 days raising over £500,000 for the charity World Bicycle Relief, a charity that provides bicycles for transportation to improve the lives of people in remote places across Africa (Morton, 2021). Although Morton characterised the challenge as getting back to the spirit of the early Tour de France races that were also self-supporting and covered much longer stages than are found in today's races, he also commented that the challenge, that was dreamed up by EF's

manager Jonathan Vaughters, was made for him. Unlike his teammates, Morton has flourished in endurance and off-road “gravel” races. During the Rapha documentary of his “Alt Tour” challenge, he explained that he did not like the competitive self that drove him in road racing events and instead relished the idea of challenging himself, a notion which echoes Mottram’s ethos for the Rapha brand quoted above. The focus on this ride also showed Rapha’s broader focus on cycling as a diverse sport and activity, with the charity World Bicycle Relief itself being one that literally makes more people cyclists by providing bicycles to people who really need them to better their lives.

If Morton’s Alt Tour raised money to get people on bicycles, and in doing so inspired others to challenge themselves on their bikes, this was even more so with Lael Wilcox’s rides also made into Rapha films. In particular, she offers a remarkable inspiration for female cyclists, which is made explicit by her “Lael Rides Alaska” 2021 Femme-Trans-Women’s Scholarship. The scholarship, run for the second time in 2021, required applicants to design a 1,000mile (1,600km) bike adventure in her native Alaska to be ridden between May and September 2021. The successful applicant was rewarded with a bike and equipment suitable from the journey provided through sponsors of the equipment, as well as a \$1,500 stipend provided by the wheel sponsor Easton (Wilcox, 2021). Although, by remarkable coincidence, Rapha’s video shows Wilcox encountering the winner in a remote part of Alaska during her journey along the Alaskan pipeline road (Rapha, 2021c), her website claims that dozens of women who did not receive the funding still managed to make their trips happen. It seems reasonable to suppose that many more who have watched the videos of her journeys have been inspired to undertake their own cycling adventures. The filming of these videos were also women’s projects, filmed by her wife and photojournalist Rue Kaladyte, and produced by an all-female team at Rapha (Rapha, 2021d).

In these cases, the production and distribution of the video was Rapha’s principal contribution, but as with its sponsorship of the Canyon/SRAM team and L39ion of Los Angeles cycle teams, their Rapha Foundation provides a range of grants to promote diversity in cycling. Some 20 organizations are listed on the Rapha Foundation page including the GrowCycling Foundation, established in LA in the wake of the death of George Floyd “to tear down barriers to entry into cycling and create avenues into sport for people from all walks of life” and Black Girls do Bike (BGDB) which aims “to provide assistance with coaching, nutrition, and help with race fees and travel expenses…to make a real

difference to female athletes.” (Rapha, 2021b).

A cycling apparel maker with a nostalgia for the sports history may seem like an unlikely organisation to be promoting gender and racial diversity, yet Rapha has made diversity issues an integral part of its mission. A large part of this would seem to be attributable to the founder Simon Mottram's long-term goals for his company and the world. Recently, Mottram announced his intention to step down as CEO so that it remains to be seen how the company will develop in the future but it seems likely that the promotion of cycling and diversity will remain central to its mission.

## Conclusion

This paper has introduced some of the ways in which cycling as a sport is struggling to address discrimination and sexism. It has also introduced three examples of commercial businesses that illustrate ways in which cycling can promote diversity and inclusivity as an integral part of promoting cycling more generally. While the issues themselves date back to the emergence of the sport, and the invention of the bicycle itself, it is perhaps no accident that the examples focused on here derived from recently founded organisations and the specific examples used here from media activities this year. Taken together, it can be said that there are a number of key common points among these companies in their strategies for promoting diversity and equality in cycling:

- **Visibility:** Targeting of the product to a diverse community through inclusion and representation of men and women and a range of ethnicities in publicity material: This can be seen in Rapha's choice of models, and Zwift's decisions about avatar customisation, but remains a challenge for GCN in terms of ethnicity. Coverage of women's racing is done well and Manon, though the only current female presenter, is a prominent member of the cast.
- **Alignment:** Expression of solidarity with discourses of diversity including the explicit celebration events aimed at raising awareness of the needs of minorities in cycling: The GCN reports of women's racing and Paralympic tech, Zwift events focused on diversity, Rapha's public events and Mottram's declarations are all good examples of this.
- **Involvement:** Cooperating with and providing support and recognition for those actively

promoting diversity in cycling: Rapha and Zwift are exemplary in this respect since both organise events specifically promoting diversity and in conjunction with organisations and individuals campaigning for diversity.

- Support: Financial and logistic support or creation of charitable activities related to the promotion of diversity in cycling. Rapha's proactive work in terms of sponsorship of men's and women's professional teams, as well as L39ion of LA, World Bicycle Relief activities and activities through its foundation are a remarkable example of a business that is clearly focused on extending the promotional of diversity in cycling to financial commitments. GCN and Zwift also promote charitable events.

While in one sense, it is shameful that discrimination in cycling has endured so long, these examples also offer reason for optimism, as they suggest that it is possible for organisations to be successful while making diversity and equality a key part of their branding and promotion. The examples discussed here are limited to those within the niche sport of cycling. In one sense, the niche position of cycling as a sport currently means that in a sense it is an activity naturally sympathetic to minorities. Nevertheless, these examples and the growth that cycling has been experiencing, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic offer a positive example of how promotion of diversity, can potentially go hand in hand with the growth and development of an organisation.

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