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Publication date:
2023

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Citation for published version (APA):
Anker, T., Sewell, J., Fitchett, J., Schyns, R., & Nuatror, J. (2023, Sept). E-scooters as Cultural Object and Lived Experience: A Socio-cultural Perspective on E-scooter Trials in the UK. University of Dundee.
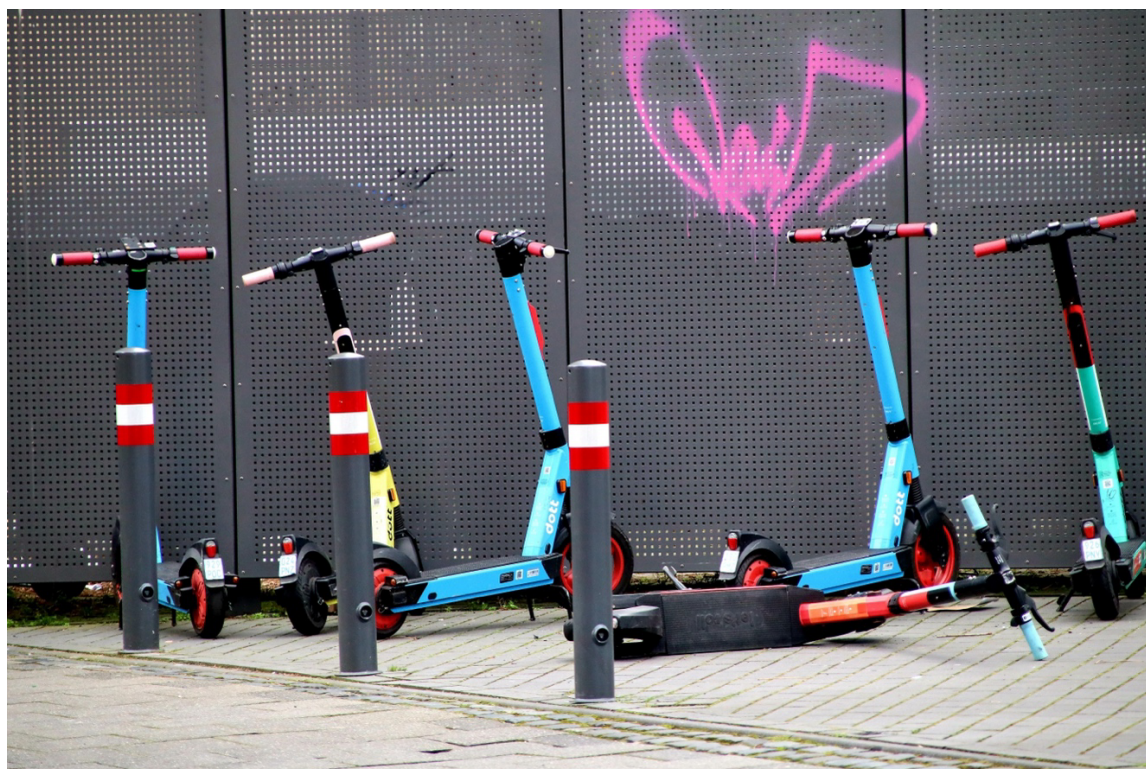
WHITE PAPER

E-SCOOTERS AS CULTURAL OBJECT AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

A socio-cultural perspective on e-scooter trials in the UK

E-SCOOTERS AS CULTURAL OBJECT AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

A socio-cultural perspective on e-scooter trials in the UK

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September 2023

Introduction

The national debate on e-scooters has been dominated by concerns over safety. Various stakeholder perspectives have been expressed and discussed in reports, news media and in heated exchanges on social media, but the common denominator is the relative risk associated with this new form of micromobility. The wider socio-cultural significance of the adoption and potential legalisation of e-scooters has thus far been largely ignored. Historically, the bicycle was revolutionary in its democratisation of vehicles that greatly expanded the range of mobility for the masses. There are certain important parallels to e-scooters that we should consider in our national debate: to some, e-scooters are all about the joyride, to others it is an essential means of necessary transportation to work and education. The joyriders tend to be from higher income households and representative of a varied demographic. By contrast, regular e-scooter users who are riding to work and education are predominantly from low-income households and from ethnic minority groups.[1]

The dialectic tension between rich and poor, leisure and necessity, experiential and functional consumption that we find throughout contemporary society also manifests through the adoption of e-scooters. In this short report, we reflect on findings from interviews with young e-scooter users in the City of London. Our primary aim is to add a socio-cultural perspective to the national debate and evaluation of e-scooters, based on evidence of the lived experience of using e-scooters among adolescents in London.

A deeper understanding of the socio-cultural significance of e-scooters is important to appreciate the environmental rationale underpinning the UK Government's national e-scooter trials led by the Department for Transport.[2] If deemed sufficiently safe and culturally acceptable, e-scooters offer a significant break-through in terms of offering self-propelled, electric transportation at a price point that almost

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[1] Department for Transport (2022) National Evaluation of E-scooter Trials: Findings Report (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1128454/national-evaluation-of-e-scooter-trials-findings-report.pdf).

[2] The national e-scooter trials were originally planned to end by 30 November 2022 but have been extended to 31 May 2024. This is to collect more evidence on the prolonged use of e-scooters in order to better appreciate how micromobility solutions may play a permanent role in the national transport, urban development and environmental strategies. See Electric Scooters: Pilot Scheme – Question for Department for Transport (UIN 2890) (https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-07-01/28907); E-scooter Trials: Guidance for Local Authorities and Rental Operators, Department for Transport (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/e-scooter-trials-guidance-for-local-areas-and-rental-operators/e-scooter-trials-guidance-for-local-areas-and-rental-operators).

everyone can afford. Politically, the e-scooter is thereby an attractive asset from which a green agenda can be popularised. Even more excitingly, 'going green' often means doing less of what we like or doing it in new ways that are unaffordable to many if not most. The e-scooter, by contrast, allows citizens to travel green by adding a new affordable choice of sustainable, personal transport that is associated with freedom, fun and enjoyment. If the risks – real and perceived – can be managed…

One real risk is that we fail to appreciate the socio-cultural significance of e-scooters and thereby potentially base a nationwide political decision to ban e-scooters on incomplete evidence, overlooking the fact that e-scooters are already an integrated part of essential travel for many young people, particularly from ethnic minorities living in low-income households.[3]

Our report is based on ten interviews with young people who participated in Unique Talent's RollSafe programme, which included a series of bespoke e-scooter safety courses held in London.

Participant inspecting an e-scooter at one of RollSafe's e-scooter safety training courses.

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[3] Department for Transport (2022) National Evaluation of E-scooter Trials: Findings Report (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1128454/national-evaluation-of-e-scooter-trials-findings-report.pdf).

To fully appreciate the uniqueness and significance of the experiences that the young people in this study have shared with us, we also conducted four interviews with key stakeholders (e.g. the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety (PACTS) and London Metropolitan Police (MET)). The contrast between the professional views on e-scooters and those of young riders enabled us to better understand the depth of the lived experience. This approach has led to a range of new perspectives on existing discussions (e.g. risk and safety). But it has also enabled the identification of experiences that are rarely if ever given serious attention in the national debate: experiences of racialisation and cultural denigration, for example.

To analyse the data collected through the interviews, qualitative analysis software NVivo has been used. This tool has given the research more depth as it allowed us to sort through all the data to find relevant and reoccurring themes that are of importance to our report.

This report invites the e-scooter community in its broadest meaning to think about e-scooters in a new socio-cultural perspective and challenge existing standpoints.

The cultural and social dimension of risk

All forms of transportation involve a degree of risk. As a society, we readily accept the danger to life presented by cars, motorcycles, aeroplanes, ferries, etc. because the benefits are deemed to outweigh the risks. Such decisions are of course informed by scientific assessment of risks and benefits, and society as well as industry invest heavily in harm reduction and safety improvements. However, at the end of the day it is a political and cultural decision whether a society accepts a certain degree of risk associated with a given kind of transportation. When is a product too risky? How do we compare the risk profile of different products? Should e-scooters be less dangerous – relatively speaking – than e-bikes or other forms of self-propelled micromobility to be politically acceptable? These are cultural decisions that can and should be informed by science, metrics, trials, etc., but ultimately must be based on a normative consideration of what we allow or ban, include or exclude as a society.

The UK's e-scooter trials aim at creating a strong evidence base to inform the political decision to legalise or ban e-scooter use in the public space. The public debate has centred heavily on the risks associated with e-scooters, particularly the risk to others that riding an e-scooter may pose. Whilst public debate on whether to accept the adoption of radically new products such as the e-scooter naturally includes considerations over risk and safety, our findings indicate that young people are

concerned about what they perceive as misrepresentation of the relative risks of e-scooters and an unbalanced focus on risks, ignoring the advantages of e-scooter use.

Far from denying or downplaying risks associated with e-scooter riding, our participants acknowledge the dangers of irresponsible riding. But they are concerned about the cultural representation of e-scooter riders as inherently irresponsible youth. And they are concerned about what they experience as racialisation and cultural denigration of e-scooter users from certain demographics: young males in general, young black males in particular. The following quotes from research participants put this experience in context:

> "Like compared to females getting stopped and males getting stopped, a majority of it is males getting stopped. Because it's a case of, alright cool, they see a young black man, let's be real… young black man in a hoodie or something on an e-scooter and they'll pull them over and speak to them.

> And I think Croydon … I feel I will still cause commotion due to the fact that there's some slight discrimination/racism going on in Croydon."

> "I think, say for instance, if you are of a certain age or certain demographic, they will frown upon or look down upon you due to the fact that you're coming … on the e-scooter. "

The perceived racialisation and cultural denigration of young e-scooter riders that we have found may be an isolated issue. However, if larger studies document this to be a common experience across the cities taking part in the national e-scooter trials, then this lived experience must be an important reference point in our political and cultural discussions of risk. The problem is that the perception of risk in this context may be disproportionate when compared against similar product types such as e-bikes and that this disproportionality is a result of racial and cultural bias. As such, seemingly objective and scientific categories like 'risk' and 'safety' cannot be separated from our subjective and inter-subjective social and political reality.

The differing perspectives on risks and e-scooters is also reflected in our interviews with professional stakeholders and e-scooter riders. Whilst there seems to be agreement on what constitutes unsafe behaviour in terms of putting others at risk, the perceptions of what it means for an e-scooter rider to be safe differ significantly. Professional views in the transport community tend to focus on the objective risk to the rider when accidents happen. This view influences public narrative to focus on vehicle safety such as quality of brakes, size of wheels and use of safety equipment. By contrast, young, regular riders have a more subjective view of what it means to be safe and emphasise personal experience and familiarity with riding under different circumstances. It is likely that for high-frequency e-scooter riders who use their vehicles as regular means of transportation to work and education, the perception of being safe cannot be separated from the functional role that e-scooters play in their

lives. Perhaps more than anything, for regular riders the e-scooter is a product that enables personal agency and a feeling of independence which cannot be separated from the perception of what it means to be safe. Because of the substantive personal benefits that e-scooters offer the individual, they feel safe to use. Our interviewees highlight that safety equipment is no longer important to them once they feel confident riding e-scooters. This type of reasoning feeds into a narrative that is largely ignored in public discourse: a narrative based on the lived experience of young people where the e-scooter is a product that is evaluated not based on its relative safety but on the agency and personal autonomy it engenders.

The socio-cultural significance of e-scooters

The e-scooter is a fascinating new consumer object promising fun and excitement. This characterisation resonates with user statistics from the national evaluation of e-scooter trials: the top reasons for rental e-scooter journeys are travelling to a leisure activity (29%) or for fun (22%).[4] Going to and from work and travelling to education account for just 14% and 2%, respectively. The perception of the e-scooter as a joy ride is further evidenced by a German study finding that e-scooters "are mostly viewed as fun objects".[5]

However, a deeper look at the user statistics allows us to appreciate the socio-cultural and ethnic significance of e-scooters as a functional object that solves daily needs of transportation. A comparison of infrequent and one-time users with frequent users paints a different picture: while 49% of one-time users report their e-scooter journey to be a joy ride, only 6% of frequent users cite fun and excitement as a motivating reason. Of those who rent e-scooters three to four times a week, 44% are riding as a primary means of commuting to work or education, compared to just 4% of one-timers. Regular users are predominantly males under the age of 35, more likely to be from ethnic minority groups and from low-income households.

The political decision on the potential legalisation of e-scooters should be responsive to the socio-cultural context of consumption. We interpret the user statistics from the

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[4] Department for Transport (2022) National Evaluation of E-scooter Trials: Findings Report (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1128454/national-evaluation-of-e-scooter-trials-findings-report.pdf).

[5] Kopplin, C.S., Brand, B.M. and Reichenberger, Y. (2021) "Consumer Acceptance of Shared E-Scooters for Urban and Short-Distance Mobility." *Transportation Research Part D: Transport and Environment* 91 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trd.2020.102680).

Department of Transport as a clear documentation of the e-scooter being a primary mode of essential transportation to work and education for a significant demographic in urban areas. As such, affordable EV micromobility such as the e-scooter constitutes a strategically important asset class in the attempt to reduce carbon emissions in general, and to reduce emissions in urban centres such as London, Birmingham and Glasgow specifically. A decision to ban e-scooters would likely deprive a significant part of our population from low-income, ethnic-minority groups from using sustainable, personal transportation in urban centres. This would be reserved for those who can afford EV cars and motorcycles.

The national evaluation of e-scooter trials deserves praise for its detailed appreciation of different user demographics and their reasons for using e-scooters. This perspective, however, is rarely articulated in public debate and is also absent in sociological and consumer-oriented studies of micromobility. We found new evidence pointing to a lack of understanding of the cultural importance of e-scooters for young people from ethnic minority groups. One participant shared their experience of commuting to college on an e-scooter:

> "I get to the front gate [of my college]. They say you can't bring that in. I said why? They said no, there's nowhere to put it. I was like I've got one lesson today. Only one lesson and I'm out. They were like no we can't, we can't. And I was like, so what do I do, can't I leave it in reception? They were like, no, you have to go home. So, I went home, and I didn't go back to my lesson."

> "But it doesn't make sense because people would bring so much stuff with them. Like people would bring suitcases with them. People will bring massive like folders and stuff. I was just like, it literally folds as well, the scooter, so it's like I could just hold it like a folder. It didn't make sense."

At best, this experience reflects general insensitivity and inflexibility towards a young person. But we cannot rule out the possibility of this experience being a manifestation of cultural denigration of a certain form of essential transportation that is common among young people from low-income, ethnic minority households. At least, the research participant experiences the situation as an unfair and disproportionate sanctioning that ultimately leads to unattendance. Given that young people from minority ethnic groups in low-income households are statistically much more likely than any other social group to use e-scooters as a regular mode of transportation, we must be open to the possibility that this experience reflects cultural and racial biases among educational institutions rather than a negative attitude towards e-scooters as such.

Rider safety and youth culture

The use of personal safety equipment when riding an e-scooter is recommended but not legally required. Our participants' views on safety equipment show that young people are aware of the importance of personal protection and generally supportive of the use of helmets. However, the findings uncover three serious barriers to routine use of safety equipment.

Participant getting ready to ride at one of RollSafe's e-scooter safety training courses.

First, young people are often very self-conscious and care greatly about how they are perceived by their social reference groups. Expectedly, our participants share concerns about other people's negative perception of riders wearing helmets. There is a clear stigma attached to wearing helmets and other safety equipment. Second, this is compounded by the negative experience of using safety equipment. Fitting and adjusting helmets as well as carrying them around is seen as a major obstacle to its frequent use. The following quotes clearly demonstrate how stigma and convenience are both important elements in the decision not to use helmets.

> "Because I think there's not many instances where like, the cool guy in a TV show or something has a helmet on…"

> "They think it looks dumb … teenagers care a lot about what other people think, at least in my experience, like maybe they think it's not cool or it's just a hassle to … bring around with you like a helmet and stuff."

> "I was just going places very close like around the corner. So, it was like I have to do 15 minutes to put the equipment on to go somewhere that's two minutes away. It was just a hassle."

Both these issues can be effectively addressed. First, the inconvenience of carrying around helmets when not riding can be easily solved through a legal requirement for all e-scooter rental operators to provide helmets at point of rental. Second, dismantling the stigmatisation of riders wearing a helmet can, over time, be effectively addressed through social marketing campaigns and interventions designed to change the social norms associated with helmet-wearing.[6] A recent systematic review documents the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns to increase the use of bicycle helmets, especially among children and adolescents.[7] Mobilisation of role models to popularise the use of e-scooter helmets is likely to change the social norms associated with their use and can be a real catalyst for positive behaviour change. It is worth noting that in countries such as Denmark where bicycling is an engrained part of the culture, public acceptance and usage of helmets is very high indeed.[8]

Easy access to helmets at point of rental and de-stigmatisation of their use are necessary conditions to improve regular usage. However, even when this is obtained our findings point to a final barrier: wet helmets in inclement weather and general lack of hygiene are significant hurdles to uptake of safety equipment provided by e-scooter operators.

> "Oh, I think it's very difficult because there's often like, it's not that I'm not trusting the helmets, it's that I'm not trusting the people that have been using it and stuff. Like you see them on the floor, you don't know … where it's been and it's just been outside, so, yeah."

Improving weather protection and hygiene standards of shared helmets provided by rental operators is of course possible. But the real question is whether this will have the desired effect as shared helmets may still be perceived to be contaminated due to having been used by other people, regardless of improved hygiene practices.

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[6] Social marketing is the application of marketing concepts, methods and tools to influence individuals and communities to change behaviour for the greater social good. Social marketing has proven to be an effective approach to improve traffic safety.

[7] Lankarani, K. B. et al. (2023) "Mass Media Campaigns to Increase the Use of Bicycle Helmets: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Journal of Transport & Health*, 30: 101616 https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jth.2023.101616.

[8] In Denmark, 79% of all children who are riding their bike to school are using a helmet, according to statistics from the national Committee for Safe Transport (https://sikkertrafik.dk/rad-og-viden/cykel/cykelhjelm/hvor-mange-bruger-cykelhjelm/).

There are two alternative safety strategies that should be considered as they have substantial potential to improve safety. On the one hand, innovative products already exist on the market which are more fashionable, easier to carry around and likely to be perceived as more hygienic when shared. The invention of airbags for cyclists that folds into a collar sitting around the neck like a snood has proved popular among fashion-conscious cyclists, particularly in Scandinavia.[9] As e-scooter users are encouraged to use bike helmets rather than heavier helmets used by riders of mopeds and motorcycles, the collar-based airbag is a real and viable alternative to helmets. Interestingly, this is also a hi-tech product type that is likely to appeal to the core demographic of young e-scooter users in the UK. We know from our findings that part of the appeal of e-scooters is a sense of futurism and novelty that fits into contemporary street fashion.

> "It's just the technology is so futuristic. […] Personally, that's probably why I would want to own an e-scooter."

> "It was something new, something fun. I was working, I was making money. I was like cool. What can I buy that's cool and fun? I said cool, a scooter. "

> "I think the more trendy people are, they want to get into new stuff. E-scooters are pretty new. So, I think more trendy people are going for the newest things."

On the other hand, a radical rethinking of e-scooter safety would be to shift the perspective away from the rider onto the vehicle itself. The company, Autoliv, has developed an e-scooter airbag that is mounted to the vehicle and conducted their first crash tests back in 2020.[10] Given the substantial commercial scale of sustainable micromobility, it would be reasonable to require the industry to invest in innovative safety systems such as the vehicle mounted e-scooter airbag as a condition of legalisation in the UK.[11] Vehicle mounted e-scooter airbags should be seen as an important addition to rider safety that complements – not replaces – the use of helmets or airbag collars.

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[9] The Swedish company Hövding has invented the first commercial, urban airbag for cyclists and is the global market leader (https://hovding.com/).

[10] See Autoliv's press release: Autoliv Performs First Crash Test of an E-scooter Airbag (https://www.autoliv.com/press/autoliv-performs-first-crash-test-e-scooter-airbag-1769461).

[11] According to industry projections, the global e-scooter market was worth $15 billion in 2021 and is forecast to grow to $31 billion by 2028. See: Fortune Business Insights – Electric Scooter Market Size, Share & Industry Analysis 2021-2028 (https://www.fortunebusinessinsights.com/electric-scooter-market-102056).

Recommendations

Based on our socio-cultural analysis, we make the following recommendations.

1. Inclusion and recognition of the cultural and social dimension of risk in public debate and policymaking relating to the legalisation or prohibition of e-scooters.

2. To enable and initiate informed public debate on the potential legalisation of e-scooters that is responsive to socio-cultural issues, we recommend a large-scale consumer-ethnographic study of e-scooters as an essential means of transportation for work and study, particularly among low-income frequent users from ethnic minority groups.

3. The e-scooter industry should fund a set of national awareness campaigns to inform about the risks of serious head injury and to change the negative social norms associated with wearing helmets.

4. The UK Government and relevant national trade bodies should enable market entry and penetration of e-scooter airbag collars and promote consumer choice and uptake of innovative safety equipment.

5. If the UK decides to legalise e-scooters, this should be conditioned on a legally binding mechanism ensuring substantive industry funding of new research and product development of vehicle mounted airbags and airbag safety collars.

Acknowledgements

Credits

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