

“The Instability is a Bit Off-putting”: A Social Practice Perspective on Framing Disruptive Bicycle and E-scooter Sharing Services

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Introduction - Australia’s history with bike and scooter sharing

From the introduction of free-floating shared bicycles in Australia in mid-2017, followed by electric kick scooters (e-scooters) from November 2018, there have been 34 commercial operations across 15 companies and 12 cities. In the first few years of dockless bikes and scooters on Australian streets, these schemes became synonymous with hazards, dumped bikes and scooters, urban clutter, and misuse of these devices. Users of bike and scooter schemes are also believed to exhibit irresponsible or risky behaviour when compared to those who own a bike or e-scooter, as has been observed in Brisbane (Haworth et al. 2021).

Through 2020 our transport habits and needs were re-evaluated, and the place and purpose of shared micromobility was also scrutinised. Both of Australia’s docked bikeshare schemes, *Melbourne Bike Share* in Melbourne (2010-2019) and *CityCycle* in Brisbane (2010-2020) were closed, the latter of which has been replaced with two commercial e-bike schemes from *Neuron* and *Beam*. Adelaide offered a two-year permit to *Neuron* and *Ride*, but those who were not offered permits [criticised the permit process](#).

Nonetheless, governments in Australia continue to experiment with shared micromobility with new operators and modes in both regional and metropolitan councils. Since January 2020 e-scooters have travelled over [1 million kilometres](#), e-scooters have been found to have a positive [influence on tourist spending](#), and bike and scooter sharing in Brisbane are currently being used as part of a [Mobility-as-a-Service pilot in Brisbane](#).

Why We Should Care about Practices

Social practice theory argues that behaviours and activities (such as cooking, showering, or driving) are enacted in particular ways that are shared between people and adapt and evolve across time and space. Shove et al. (2012) argue that practices consist of three basic elements: materials (tangible physical objects, technologies), competencies (skills and know-how), and meanings (symbolic meanings, ideas, and aspirations).

Research that focuses on behaviour change or changes in infrastructure often isolates the phenomenon of concern and assumes that other elements of social life remain unchanged and unaffected. While such approaches are valuable for examining a particular topic in explicit detail, social practice perspectives examine the connections between different parts of social life and maps how related practices adapt and evolve in response to changing infrastructures and social norms.

Practicing Shared Micromobility

Bike and e-scooter sharing providers were able to quickly establish a customer base by exploiting different pre-existing practices and their elements, for example combining populations with a high level of access to enabling materials (smart phones and bank cards), who have the competency to use new apps and are open to new and innovative forms of transport (Fitt & Curl, 2020).

As the practice matures, meanings related to bike and scooter usage changes. Some scooter operators believe that establishing themselves as part of the urban fabric will help normalise their presence by non-users and critical actors and actively try to achieve this through place-making activities, such as sponsoring public events such as the Adelaide Fringe or hosting regular safety trial days.

For users of bike and scooter sharing schemes, practices are often established from bringing elements of existing practices together, namely the competencies related to bike riding and using a mobile phone app, meanings of fun or convenience, and material access to the bike or scooter itself, a helmet, and infrastructure to ride on.

Rental bikes and e-scooters are predominately used for recreation, [however data from Neuron states](#) that e-scooter use is replacing up to 42% of car trips in Australian cities, with 62% of e-scooter rides resulting in a purchase at a local business.

Attitudes to Changing Elements

The turnover between bike and scooter sharing operators and adaptive regulatory frameworks has raised concerns among users and non-users alike about the viability of shared micromobility services and their suitability to Australian cities.

As the elements change, practices both recruit new practitioners as existing practitioners defect. The introduction of new micromobility providers met with the departure of incumbents has had a mixed reception. For some it is enough of a deterrent to stop riding bikes and scooters, others see it as a function of the market and may encourage micromobility providers to provide cheaper, safer, or more environmentally conscious services.

Potential Futures for Shared Micromobility

Bike and scooter sharing practices will continue to evolve in Australia. While there is some sentiment that shared micromobility is little more than a fad, bike and scooter schemes are being actively incorporated into multi-modal Mobility-as-a-Service platforms. The recent amendments to the Australian Road Rules to recognise e-scooters (and other personal mobility devices) is also indicative of how state and local governments are actively incorporating micromobility into their cities.

Bike and scooter sharing practices are dependent on the presence of supportive pre-existing elements. The ongoing growth of shared micromobility practices will be shaped by how transport policies evolve, how regulatory bodies and mobility

start-ups engage with one another, and how urban forms adapt to emerging transport technologies. As cities move through a period where transport technologies change rapidly, understanding how all aspects of social life change with them is crucial to developing more effective transport and land use policies.

References

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