

Beach Cruisers at UC Davis: Living in the Slow Lane

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WRITER'S COMMENT: As a STEM major who is almost done with her general education requirements, I will probably not have another chance to do an extended writing project the same way I did for Melissa Bender's UWP 101 class. I wanted to put together the most interesting concepts I had learned from my general education experience at UC Davis. My essay is a sociological take on the issue of cruiser-hate at UC Davis. This is for the professors who, put bluntly, got us angry about inequality. Often the sociological theories we examine come from observing broader phenomena. I attempted to do the inverse by looking at the local context of our university.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: The phenomenon of stepping on someone else in order to take the next step up the ladder is unfortunately familiar to any of us who pay attention to social relations in our stratified culture. However, every once in awhile, we may still be taken aback by having our attention drawn to a situation in which such behavior unfolds in an unexpected manner. Such may be the case for readers of Kim-Thu Pham's essay, which presents us with an unsavory slice of life in our own community. The bicycle-friendly culture of which the City of Davis and the UC Davis campus is quite proud takes on a different tone in "The Beach Cruiser: Life in the Slow Lane." In this essay, Kim-Thu moves gracefully between offering evidence gathered from social networking sites, to introducing a critical framework drawn from the fields of sociology and psychology in order to create a convincing argument regarding the hierarchical structure of our bike-friendly campus. Above all, by connecting "cruiser hate" to other forms of discrimination, such as sexism, Kim-Thu shows us that much more is at stake here than simply the bicycles we choose to pedal.

—Melissa Bender, University Writing Program

Abstract

Student discussions on the social networking site Facebook show that the beach cruiser bicycle is highly stigmatized. Examples are taken from posts on the Freshman Class of 2016 Facebook group in which newcomers are dissuaded from buying cruisers, fearful of being judged by upperclassmen (UC Davis Freshman Class of 2016 (official)). Social dominance theory frames the beach cruiser as the vessel of the majority-minority conflict against females and freshmen, two marginalized groups at universities. The theory explains how cruiser-hate is a legitimizing myth, a false assumption treated as a social norm. Cruiser-hate exacerbates the struggle by females and freshmen for equal treatment. It is a new form of old discrimination. The popularity of bicycling at UC Davis allows us to observe this in a local setting.

“ATTENTION INCOMING FIRST YEARS,” writes an upperclassman in caps lock, “...DO NOT, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, GET A BEACH CRUISER STYLE BIKE... trust me, PEOPLE WILL JUDGE YOU” (UC Davis Freshman Class of 2016 (official)). This quote is from one of many anti-cruiser posts on Facebook, a heavily frequented social networking site and source of popular student opinion. The blunt phrase “people will judge you” sets the tone of future bike encounters; it warns the community that one’s bicycle choice affects how they are socially accepted, and it reinforces group bias against beach cruisers. On the UC Davis campus, more than anywhere else, the bike you ride sends out a message as strongly as the car you (don’t) drive. Nearly 18,000 bicyclists traverse the campus daily (Lovejoy and Handy 5). The importance of bike culture in Davis means social issues surrounding bicycle choice have significant impact. The beach cruiser is owned by a minority of UC Davis students, yet this minority is still several thousand people. The stigma affects each cruiser owner by pushing him or her down the social ladder. Unique processes of social stratification arise due to the large bicyclist population. Cruiser-hate reveals that UC Davis bike culture seeks to reinforce hierarchical norms.

The unpopularity of the cruiser might be explained by its structure and functionality. Participants in the UC Davis Freshman Class of 2016 (official) Facebook group cite cruisers for “blocking the road” and being “frustrating to park next to.” The beach cruiser is notorious for its large,

curved frame and wide handlebars. Its speed is slower compared to other bikes, but it wasn't created to go fast. The cruiser was built for comfort. The large seat and wide handlebars support the back, encouraging a more upright, open posture. The image of the "inefficient" cruiser contrasts the faster, sleeker bicycles. Its structure is exploited in social media by people trying to make their cases against cruisers. "If you own a cruiser and it falls on its side while it was parked because you couldn't secure it properly, I automatically hate you," writes one student (UC Davis Freshman Class of 2016 (official)). A participant points out: "Hate is a strong word" (UC Davis Freshman Class of 2016 (official)). But from the twenty-nine "likes" that the original post earned, it is apparent that the student's anti-cruiser opinion garnered support. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins's theories may explain the support for the student: "When individuals develop... a sense of belonging to a community, they can be more easily moved to act to defend that community's putative interests" (448). Beach cruiser owners are portrayed as violators of bike community principles. This implies that openly expressing dislike for cruiser owners is acceptable and even applauded. Within the bike community, one steps-up in status by stepping on a specific group of bikers.

Cruiser-hate serves the majority by suppressing a minority. Bike ownership indicates social worth—just as displays of wealth and fame increase one's status in society. In his article "Why We Need Things," Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes that power is "still symbolized by kinetic objects," such as bicycles (22). But the UC Davis bike community has changed this symbolism for the beach cruiser. It is now an object of disempowerment. Two sociologists, Felicia Pratto and Andrew L. Stewart, give reasons for the cruiser's stigmatization via social dominance theory. Social dominance theory examines group dynamics in different communities and explains how dominant groups suppress subordinate groups politically, economically, socially, and culturally. Pratto and Stewart introduce the idea of "legitimizing myths." Legitimizing myths are ideas created and spread by society; they are taken for granted because they are framed as obvious. Often these myths are hierarchy-enhancing as they reinforce the power of a dominant group by increasing social inequality. Legitimizing myths dictate how "people understand what they deserve and how they and others should be treated" (Pratto and Stewart 2). It is important to understand that legitimizing myths are not concrete—they can be shaped, changed, and completely reversed to fit

the needs of the dominant group. Cruiser-hate is a legitimizing myth. Cruiser owners are depicted as nuisances to the bike community due to the size and bulk of their bicycles. However, many complaints target the alleged behaviors of cruiser owners, not their bikes. These complaints single out cruiser owners, but they can actually be applied to any type of bicyclist. The legitimizing myth tries to cover this reality by targeting only cruiser owners, thus driving group sentiment.

The common complaints about cruisers can be applied to all types of bikes. Students complain that cruiser riders get in the way of others on the road and at bike racks. The same can be said for any rider who is careless about how they bike around others. Any bicyclist, not just a cruiser rider, can bike slowly in the middle of the road during rush hour and impede traffic flow. Any type of handlebar that is improperly aligned, not just wide handlebars, at a bike rack can prevent other people from parking their bicycles. Any bike that is not carefully locked up at a bike rack can fall onto neighboring bikes. The forces of gravity do not discriminate between bikes. In a response to an inquiry on the Class of 2016 page about cruisers, one student wrote, “It’s not what you ride, it’s how you ride and park that earns you the death glare. Stick to the right if you’re going slow; pay attention in the bike circles; don’t tangle up other bikes’ handlebars with your own when you park, and you’ll be fine” (UC Davis Freshman Class of 2016 (official)). These physical inconveniences are not specific to cruisers. Rather, they are universal consequences of inconsiderate bicycling behavior.

Physical factors do not explain cruiser-hate; instead, we must examine the social motives behind cruiser-hate. Social dominance theory allows us to interpret cruiser-hate as a majority versus minority conflict. In college, two prominent social categorizations are sex/gender and academic seniority. Likewise, the relationship between bike choice and social categorization suggests that females and freshmen are more likely to own a cruiser. The same people who experience marginalization in the bike community also face discrimination in academia. Power objects are supposed to represent “traditional virile virtues such as strength and endurance,” but the cruiser is associated with marginalized groups, which are excluded from depictions of traditional power (Csikszentmihalyi 22). This is because the beach cruiser attracts a specific group of bicyclists.

Beach cruisers are highly gendered bicycles in terms of appearance, marketing, and ownership. A casual pencil-and-paper survey of traffic

around the Silo bike circle shows that 74% of cruiser riders are female. This survey was done on a weekday afternoon in the span of half an hour; over one hundred bicycles were counted. A more meticulous version of this survey would reveal slight variations, but the general conclusion is that a disproportionate number of cruiser owners are female. Cruisers are the Volkswagen Beetles of the bicycling world. Both objects have curvier and “cuter” structures than their counterparts. They also tend to come in softer colors associated with femininity. *The New York Times* article, “To Be Cute as a Bug Isn’t Enough Anymore,” cites Volkswagen’s statistic that “women accounted for nearly 70% of buyers [of the Beetle]” (Patton). To attract more male buyers, Volkswagen redesigned the typical Beetle for “more power, less flower” by flattening the roof and elongating the body. Manufacturers relate female ownership of the VW Beetle to its physical appeal; changing the Beetle’s appearance means changing its consumer base. Similarly, females may choose the cruiser because it appears girly and cute.

The cruiser is tied to the female identity—an identity that is still targeted by gendered college culture. In her presentation, “Educational Pipelines for Women,” Nancy G. Leveson quotes a female PhD student in computer science who speaks about discrimination in the male-dominated field:

I think it is very subtle, and the women who experience it have so little power to do anything about it. I can’t tell you how many times I gave a suggestion...and got no response from the professor, only to have one of the nearby males in the class suggest the same thing a few moments later and be congratulated for a good suggestion. I hate this—I never forgot how much this hurt and actually came to expect it after a while.

The hostile environment for women in computer science is not a phenomenon that can be fixed by university policies; it comes from underlying social currents in an academic system that clings to patriarchal traditions. Robyn Rodriguez, an Asian American Studies professor at UC Davis, conducts a sociological experiment at the beginning of her classes. She stands in front of her students, lined up next to her male graduate teaching assistants. Her class is then asked to identify the professor. Without fail, Rodriguez says, she is never selected. To this day, the typical image of the professor remains masculine (Rodriguez). Women are still

one of many groups treated as minorities in academia. At Davis, the fact that certain females own beach cruisers simply creates another outlet for patriarchal views to manifest.

The second image associated with the beach cruiser is the UC Davis freshman. Most freshmen lack sufficient knowledge about bicycles to make informed decisions about the type they will bring to college. The cruiser excels in terms of rider ergonomics but is not built to optimize speed compared to road bikes, the more common choice for students who commute to campus. “It’s one of the ‘freshman!’ things to do,” writes a Facebook group member, “...that’s because at least half of each freshman class gets [a cruiser]” (UC Davis Freshman Class of 2016 (official)). Whether or not this student’s statement is accurate, it suggests that the image of the Davis freshman and the cruiser are synonymous. The stigmatized bike is associated with freshmen who are perceived as clumsy and inexperienced.

Additionally, freshmen are marginalized because of their newcomer identities. Their actions stand out in the bike community and the whole university setting. This makes them easy targets for ridicule by upperclassmen. At the beginning of every school year, upperclassmen set up lawn chairs outside the busiest bike circle on campus to watch neophyte bicyclists crash into each other. Their intentional presence worsens the public humiliation. By reinforcing cruiser-hate, upperclassmen have found new channels to reassert their control. They are able to effectively tie the image of the cruiser to the negative connotations of “freshman” status and then propagate the idea through social media. Such practices are shrugged off as introductions to campus life. However, studies show that the level of social acceptance felt by freshmen is crucially linked to their academic motivation (Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen 218); actions that separate newcomers from the college population have both negative social and academic repercussions. The cruiser stereotype also allows freshmen to shed their subordinate status by replacing their cruiser with a more accepted bicycle; they undergo a “rite of passage” into the dominant group, thus improving their social position. However, this empowerment is facilitated not by fighting for dominance but by accepting the prejudices of the dominant group. It still reinforces the group’s control and therefore sustains social hierarchy.

Social processes in the bike community affecting that power distribution reveal that cruiser-hate is not just about the bike. It’s

about who owns the bike. What we see is not a new type of bike-based discrimination, but a reinforcement of traditional roles. Cruiser-hate points to underlying social inequalities within the college setting. The size and scope of the Davis bike community allow us to examine how outdated prejudices take new forms in a local context. Universities pose as open, equal institutions, yet this is not the case in many ways. The cruiser is more than just a whimsical bike. It symbolizes the ironic persistence of traditional discrimination at UC Davis.

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