Social Media Discourse on Cycling and Cyclists

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Abstract:

As part of a wider analysis of discourse related to cycling and cyclists, the public social media discussion related to utility cycling in Ireland was examined. The discussion was found to be predominantly negative, with the two most prominent beliefs underlying opposition to cyclists' cause, rights, and safety being that drivers are the legitimate owners of the roads, and that cyclists do not deserve a place as their behaviour violates societal norms and expectations.

Research Question

What are the characteristics of the public social media discourse related to cyclists and cycling?

Method

Data was gathered from posts made to Facebook and Twitter by the three leading print news outlets in Ireland, to promote cycling-related articles they have published. An overall tone was assigned to each comment. The comment was then was examined statement by statement, and codes assigned which were deemed to capture the essential message of each statement.

A total of 1,460 comments were collected and analysed, resulting in the assignment of 2,364 codes. Consistent with Facebook's majority share of users (Ipsos MRBI 2017b) most of the comments were gathered were from this platform (68%). Consistent with circulation rankings, most comments were from Irish Independent posts (48%), followed by Irish Examiner (30%) and Irish Times posts (22%). No significant difference in tone and content between comments was found.

Findings

Tone

Comments were divided into five broad overall tones:

Opposition: Comments deemed to overall communicate a position opposing cyclists' rights, cause, or wellbeing.

Support: Comments deemed to overall communicate a position supporting cyclists' rights, cause, or wellbeing.

Neutral: Comments which did not display a clear bias either in favour of or opposed to cyclists' rights, cause, or wellbeing.

Discussion: Comments deemed to overall communicate a position more concerned with the discussion itself than the topic.

Trolling: Comments deemed to overall be aimed more at provocation than contribution to the discussion. In some rare cases trolling was used as a tool to make a point.

The majority of comments were categorised Opposition (59%), with Support (30%) the next most common category. Neutral (6%), Discussion (3%), and Trolling (2%) comments were in a clear minority. The topic of cycling therefore seems to be polarising, with people tending to take definite sides.
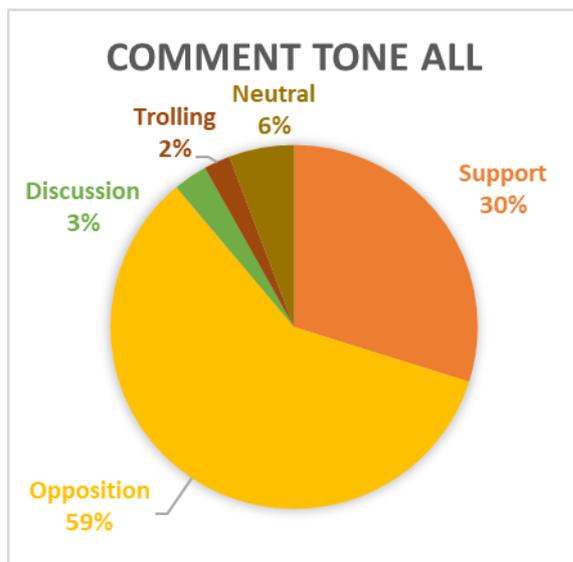

Figure 5 Comment Tone All

Opposing Comments

A total of 23 codes were created to describe the core message of opposing comments. These codes were grouped in categories, where the motivating belief was deemed to be the same.

Drivers Own the Roads

Codes were grouped together in this category when the code could conceivably follow the statement: "Drivers are the real owners of the roads, if not by law then by social law, therefore…" Ten of the 23 cycling opposition codes were deemed to fit this category, a combined 49% of opposing statements. In the context of the overall analysis, this category represents 34% of all statements examined.

Cyclists do not deserve a place

Statements in this category argued, directly or indirectly, that cyclists were not deserving of equal or equitable treatment or rights as their behaviour does not conform to societal norms and expectations. The sentiment was also used to argue that cyclist deaths and/or injuries are their own fault, or a natural and logical result of their behaviour. Seven of the 23 cycling opposition codes were deemed to fit this category, a combined 35% of opposing statements. In the context of the overall analysis, this category represents 24% of all statements examined.

Cyclist Hatred

Commenters in this category directly expressed sentiments which can be reasonably described as hatred against cyclists. It should be noted that such sentiments were also expressed against other road user groups by both cyclist opposing and supportive commenters, the most frequent target being taxi drivers. Four of the 23 cycling opposition codes were deemed to fit this category, a combined 8% of opposing statements. In the context of the overall analysis, this category represents 6% of all statements examined.

Cyclists cannot be accommodated

These statements encompass only two codes. This is a combined 8% of opposing statements and 5% of all statements examined. The commenters in this category either claim that the existence of cyclists simply cannot be accommodated in Ireland (**no place, 4%**) or that it is not possible to provide a safe cycling experience in Ireland (**safety impossible, 4%**). In the former case, it is argued that Ireland's existing roads network and/or its landscape simply cannot accommodate cyclists. In the latter case, physical incapability to accommodate the existence of cyclists is implied, but the emphasis is on the unreasonableness of demands on drivers, such as having to wait until it is safe to overtake.
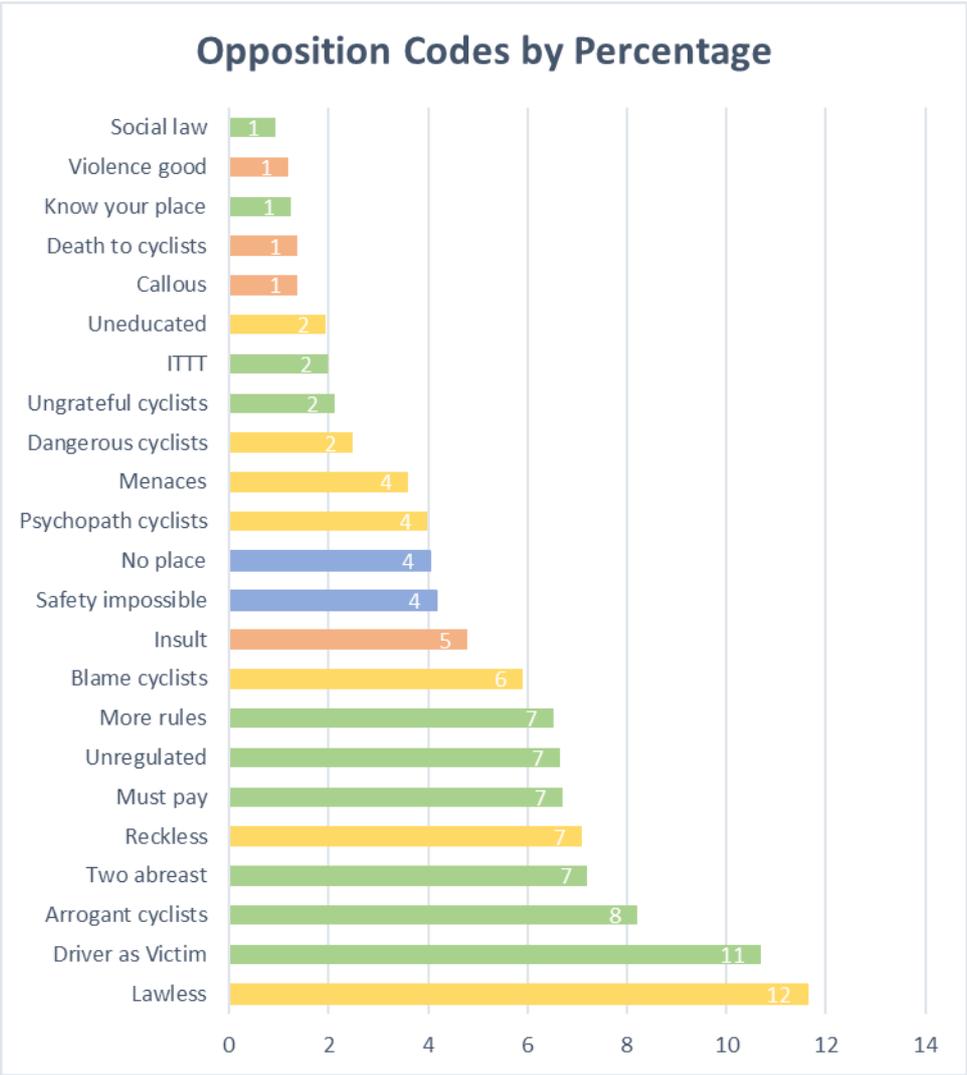
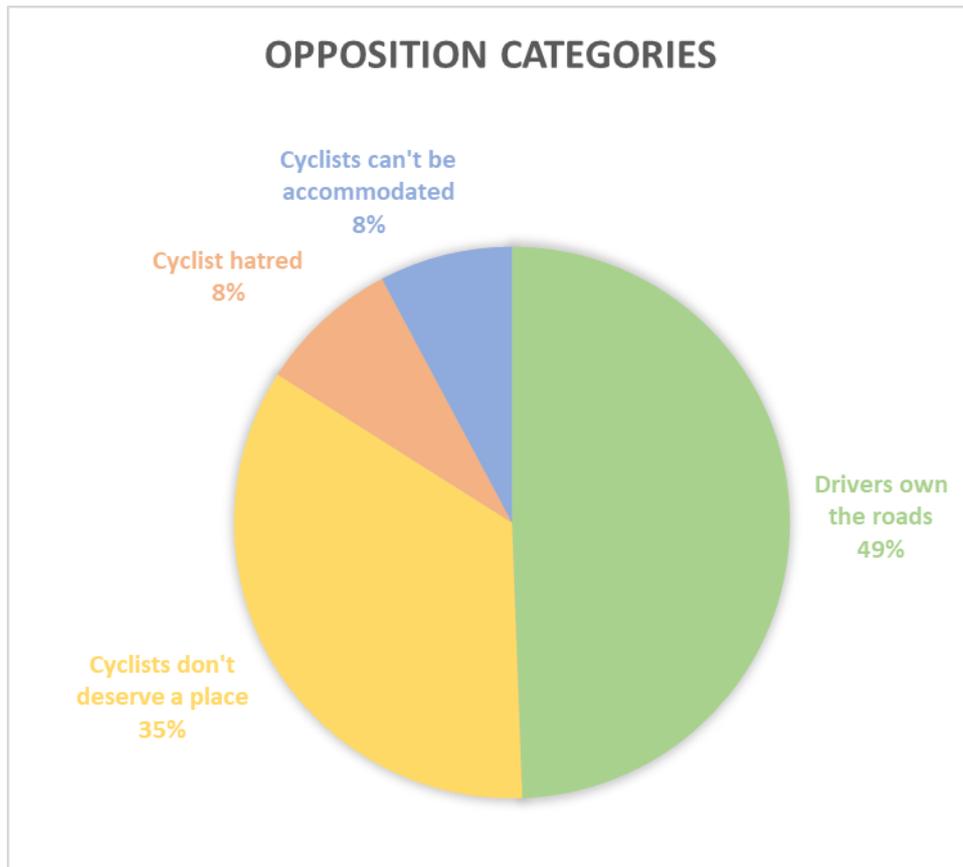*Figure 7 Opposition codes by percentage. Bar colours indicate category.*

Figure 8 Opposing statements categories

Supportive Comments

A total of 15 codes were created to describe the core message of supportive statements. These codes were also divided into categories where the underlying sentiment was deemed to be the same.

Advocacy

Two statement codes were deemed to have the same sentiment at their foundation, though these together account for 38% of cycling supportive statements. In the overall analysis 10% of statements fall in this category.

Appeal for Reason

These statements called for language and attitudes conforming to societal norms, especially in response to a general tone in the discussion that the commenter deemed to have become

particularly hateful towards cyclists. The commenters were not necessarily cyclists, and sometimes specifically pointed that out, but deemed the level of animosity expressed towards cyclists to be toxic. A total of 33% of supportive statements fall in this category. The category represents 8% of all statements examined.

Driver Dislike

Statements in this category showed exasperation with or dislike of drivers. In some cases, they can be said to express hatred of drivers, though the level of vitriol directed against cyclists was rarely if ever equalled. A combined total of 15% of cycling supportive statements fell in this category, or 4% of statements in the context of the overall analysis.

Role of Drivers

The role of drivers in the cycling experience was deemed to be the underlying sentiment for two codes, for a combined total of 13% of all supportive statements. In the overall analysis 3% of the statements analysed fell in this category.

Hopelessness

Only one code fell in this category, and only a total of 12 statements, or 2% of all supportive statements, were assigned this code. These commenters expressed despair that the powers-that-be will ever respect cyclists, understand the needs of cyclists, understand cyclists, or understand the protection cyclists need. In the overall context this represents less than 1% of statements, however, the fact that the sentiment was expressed was deemed of sufficient concern to justify this brief description.
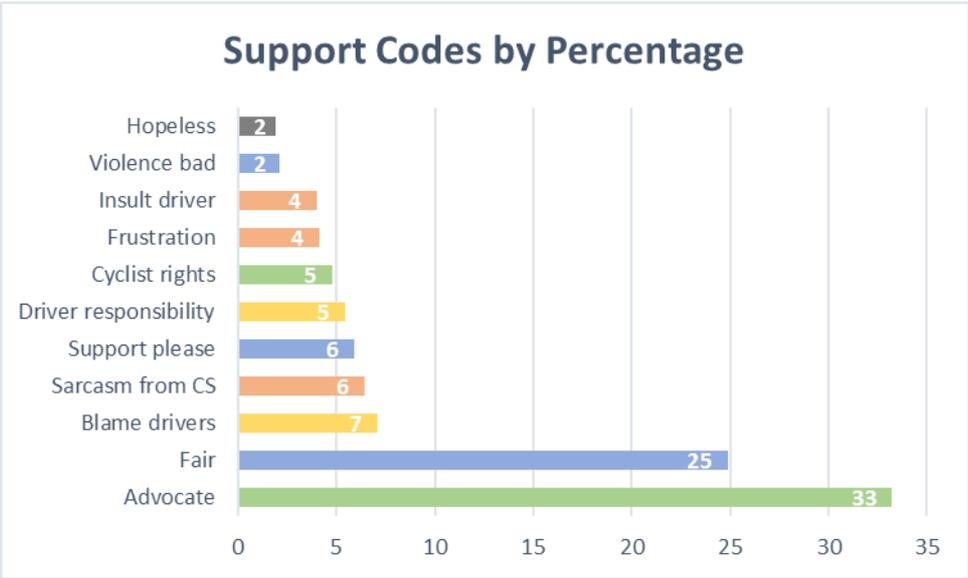
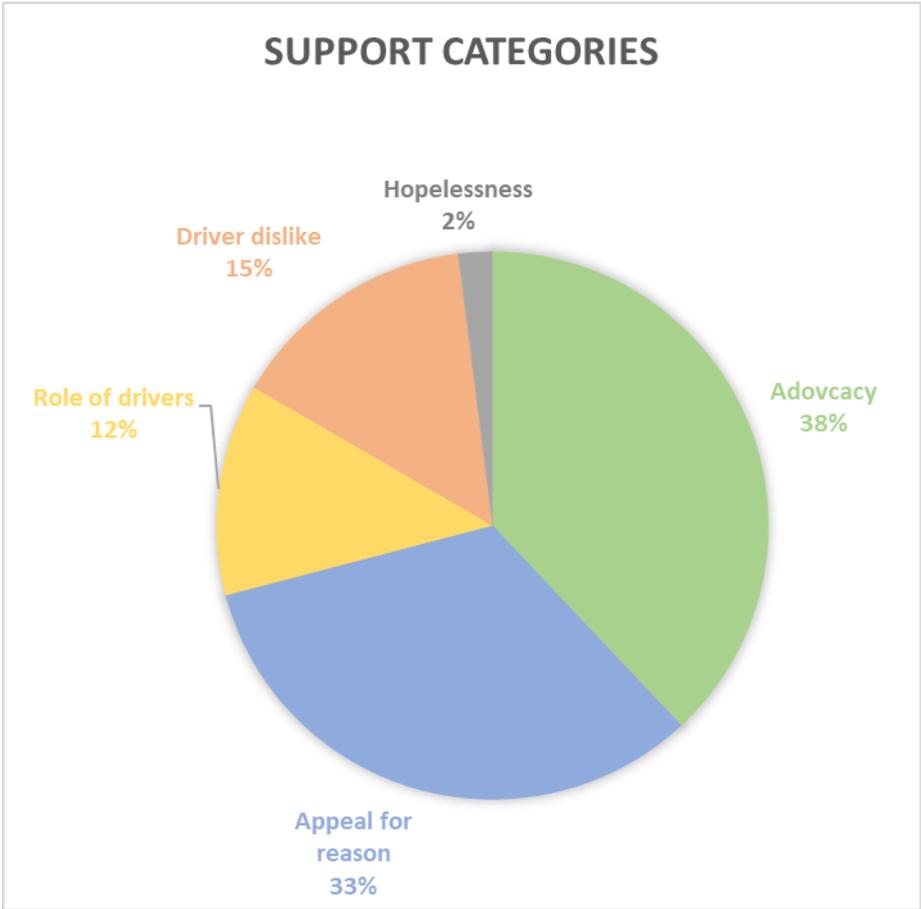*Figure 9 Supportive codes by percentage. Bar colours indicate category.*

Figure 10 Supportive statements categories.