AUTO RAD

Power of Identity:

Chance for cycling mobility in car industry region

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Gefördert durch:

Bundesministerium für Verkehr

aufgrund eines Beschlusses des Deutschen Bundestages

Modellvorhaben NICHT-INVESTIV
Radverkehrsförderung des Bundes

Research Project AutoRad

Wolfsburg and Salzgitter, 2025 - 2027

How cycling mobility can gain a positive image in regions, where the automobile is a foundational pillar of collective identity and existing structures of power?



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Wolfsburg (Germany)

Setting the Scene in 2026

- Autostadt – “Car City“ – semi-official branding
- The birthplace of Volkswagen (VW)
- 125,000 inhabitants and 78,000 daily commuters, the majority of whom arrive by car[1]
- Around 60,500 people work at the VW plant
- Ongoing crisis facing the automotive sector
- Municipal elections on September 13th 2026



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We have entered the wolf's den

...and we ended up meeting a lot of wonderful people there

- Research based on 15 narrative interviews with key stakeholders/identity drivers (IDs)
- IDs are key local figures from politics, industry, civil society, and underrepresented groups
- IDs represent a shared group identity and are deeply connected to Wolfsburg
- Our objective was to examine the relationship between regional identity and mobility



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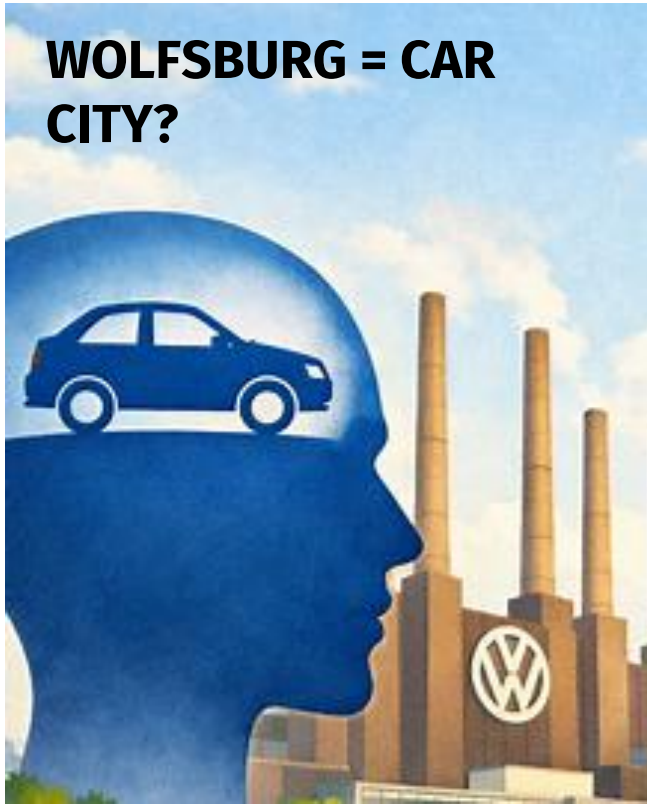
Initial Situation: Assumption

No sense of shared attachment to cycling (unlike city of Münster in Germany)





Regional Identities

Automobility dominates shared identity

The Image of Cycling

- Rather negative associations
- No emotional connection
- Negative emotional associations

Research approach

Role of different types of identity in shaping mobility in different groups

Reconstructive social research (rekonstruktive Sozialforschung) uncovers the implicit "orientational frameworks“ (Orientierungsrahmen) of groups of identity through their representative (IDs).

Documentary Method (*Dokumentarische Methode*) by Ralf Bohnsack (also Harold Garfinkel):

1. **Formulating interpretation (*formulierende Interpretation*).** Reconstruction the thematic content of the text using participant´s own words.
2. **Reflecting interpretation (*reflektierende Interpretation*).** Uncovering the implicit knowledge (*implizites Wissen*) underlying actions and statements.
    a) Description of the discourse trajectory (Beschreibung des Diskussionsverlaufs).
    b) Type construction (Typenbildung).

Power of Identity

Role of different types of identity in shaping mobility in different groups

"People identify themselves primarily with their locality. Territorial identity is a fundamental anchor of belonging…"

(Castells, Power of Identity: xxiii)



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Power of Identity

Three types of collective Identity according to Manuel Castells

Legitimizing identity: introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination vis a` vis social actors.

Resistance identity: generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination…

Project identity: when social actors, on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society…

(Castells, Power of Identity: xxvi , 8)



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Formulating Interpretation (Thematic Structuring)

The statements of the interviewees are divided and summarized into thematic sections. Few examples

Construction of Space and Cityscape: Wolfsburg as a green, manageable “small town with high recreational value”.

Autostadt Identity & Status: Automobile as a central status symbol.

E-Cycling: Growth of e-bikes as a trend/leisure medium. Lack of infrastructure (missing secure parking/elevators). E-Bike is not a high-status symbol yet. Cargobikes as a "Second Car" for Families.

Urban Development & Future: Tension between automotive focus and possible alternatives. Optimism regarding urban transformation.

Cycling Typology and Conflicts: Differentiation of cyclists (sports enthusiasts/showtime cargo bikes vs. socially disadvantaged utility cyclists). Cars/cycling as triggers for everyday conflict.

Politics & Resource Struggles: Monopoly position of VW. Resource conflicts; dominance of the automotive lobby and municipal policy aligned around car traffic.

Reflecting Interpretation (Frame of Orientation)

The second step analyzes how the interviewees structure their reality and what practical habitus is documented

Interview 01:

Frame of Orientation: Ex-insider / Straddler between worlds.

The interviewee shifts between the perspective of a VW insider ("we earned very well") and that of a distanced critic ("self-service shop", "lacking sense of reality").

The presentation regarding cars relies heavily on patterns of differentiation and distinction (company cars, license plate codes, Dacia vs. premium e-bikes).

Documentary Meaning:

The car is reconstructed as a social organizing tool. Vehicle choice serves to locate individuals within the regional power structure ("Inside" VW vs. "Outside").

The bicycle (especially the e-bike) is understood not merely as transportation, but as a middle-class status symbol for wealth and health ("a sign that one is doing better").

Reflecting Interpretation (Frame of Orientation)

The second step analyzes how the interviewees structure their reality and what practical habitus is documented

Interview 02:

Frame of Orientation: Civil society campaigner for transport transition.

Narrative of striking everyday episodes. Uses an evaluative and structurally analytical diction ("car-dominated city", "resource allocation struggles").

Documentary Meaning:

Actions are shaped by the experience of conflict in urban space. Motorized vehicle traffic hegemonically occupies public space ("My home, my castle, my car").

Cycling in this habitat represents an act of daily resistance. A divide emerges between representative lifestyle cycling (Riese & Müller – German premium brand / cargo bikes) and functional poverty mobility.

Typology of the Bicycle in an Automotive Habitat

Step 3: Type Construction & Comparative Analysis

Compensatory Status Symbol: E-bike as an equivalent to the prestige or company car. Identity is defined through high-priced models (€4,000–€12,000), transferring classic automotive distinction logic onto the bicycle.

Subversive Mode of Transport: Functional cycling on car-dominated traffic routes challenges the established spatial order and triggers aggressive defensive reactions from the automotive majority (Schillerstraße).

Project Identity Instrument: A mode of transport used by green activists and even VW employees who, despite encountering obstacles while cycling, continue to choose it because it offers value beyond basic A-to-B mobility—such as social prestige within their peer group, or a sense of environmental responsibility.

Ersatz-Auto (Car Substitute): A niche mobility mode utilized by students and schoolchildren prior to purchasing their first car. Members of this group easily refuse cycling and adopt e-scooters for flexible, spontaneous trips.

Weekend and Leisure Mobility: Transport used primarily for recreational purposes, family outings, and holiday travel (e.g., *“I have two bikes that we take on vacation with our campervan”* or *“I bought an e-bike to go for Sunday rides with my granddaughter”*).

Uncovered types of identity

after Manuel Castells

Legitimizing Identity: Social standing in Wolfsburg historically linked directly to VW corporate hierarchy and specific license plate numbers designating company cars.

Corporate dominance is reinforced through high financial expectations, company-provided leasing, and brand loyalty expectations.

Resistance identity: Cyclists experience active hostility and marginalization on the roads from drivers protecting motor vehicle priority.

The backlash against bike lanes illustrates resistance dynamics between drivers defending car privileges and non-car actors.

Individuals outside the VW corporate core express frustration towards the perceived entitlement and lost sense of reality among high-earning VW employees.



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Uncovered types of identity

after Manuel Castells

Project Identity:

Transition from "Autostadt" to "Mobilitätsstadt" & Health Hub: Social actors and local initiatives aim to redefine the city's purpose beyond auto manufacturing into a broader hub for sustainable mobility, leisure, tourism, and health management.

Ecological & Cycling Activism: Organizers engage in civic activism to redefine urban space and shift societal values from car supremacy ("Freie Fahrt für freie Bürger") toward broad-based quality of life, environmental sustainability, and multimodal mobility.

The adoption of high-end e-bikes, cargo bikes (*Lastenräder*), and public transit memberships (e.g., *BahnCard 100*) serves as a conscious cultural repositioning away from pure private car ownership toward a flexible, sustainable lifestyle model.



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Conclusion

Overall Result of the Documentary Reconstruction

Wolfsburg is anchored in the actors' frames of orientation as a habitus landscape deeply permeated by automotive manufacturing and car region identity:

Modes of Transport as Means of Distinction: Both cars (via brands or license plate codes) and bicycles (e-bikes and cargo bikes) serve primarily for social positioning.

Spatial Claims & Privileges: Passenger car traffic enjoys a habitual self-evidence. Alternatives (such as cycle lane projects) are treated not merely as infrastructural measures, but as threats to vested rights and privileges.

Social Binarity: Urban society is divided in everyday consciousness primarily into "inside" (VW employment) and "outside" (Non-VW).



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What's next?

AutoRad project logic

- Regional identity and image analysis
- Co-creation workshops with local residents
- Idea evaluation by the project council and project team
- Events to improve cycling's image across two cities
- Development of a best practice toolbox



Key References

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