The Job You Could Get:

Change in the Bike Messenger Community of New York City

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Introduction

New York City 2012, with 8 million inhabitants, is one of the largest cities on the East Coast of the United States. With such a huge number of people one can imagine that traffic is extremely crowded. Traffic jams and lines cause huge congestions making work for postal services nearly impossible. In the late 1960's multiple entrepreneurs found a simple, yet very efficient solution to this problem by using bicycles to make quick deliveries (Kidder 2006: 38). The person who delivers objects, like parcels and important mail is called a bike messenger or pedal courier. With the growth of business in the 1980's 'messengering' (the act of delivering objects and documents by bike) became increasingly popular in New York. In this time there were no fax machines or Internet so the quickest way to deliver important documents and/or objects was hiring a messenger who was able to swirl through traffic on a bike, making deliveries faster and more efficient than motorized traffic. In the modern age of telecommunication the bike messengers are mainly hired for deliveries of goods that cannot be send through telecommunication like portfolios, legal documents and diagrams (ibid. 38).

In a congested city like New York it is obvious that riding a bike is not a safe thing to do and the bike messengers are notorious for their dangerous behaviour in traffic. In order to be as fast as possible these couriers swirl through traffic at high speeds while avoiding pedestrians, car doors and many other obstacles that cause the threat of a potential collision. In fact, Dennerlein and Meeker (in Kidder 2006: 39) found that the injury chances of a bike messenger are three times higher than those of a meat packer, making messengering one of the most dangerous professions in the United States. Although many companies use bike messengers for speedy deliveries, the profession is both loved for its speed and hated for the dangerous traffic situations they cause. In fact one of the tourists brochures I read about New York warns for the potential hazards of speeding bike messengers. To make matters worse I heard about messengers riding on brakeless bicycles: commonly known as the fixed gear. I got intrigued by this fact and wondered why somebody wants to ride on a brakeless bike in a city that is renowned for its dangerous traffic.

I started my fieldwork in the second half of April to find out why the messengers want to ride a fixed gear bike. When arriving in New York I quickly learned that cycling in New York traffic is even more hazardous than I imagined. Cars come from all sides, there are no clear priority rules, aggressive taxi drivers speeding up to the next client and most remarkable of all, very poor road conditions. The urban jungle of New York is a hazardous playground for everyone who is engaged in traffic, either motorized, cycling or by foot. By doing some preparative research about bike messengers in New York City

on the Internet, I learned that messengers are found scattered all over the city, but one park in particular in the East Village, Tompkins Square Park, used by the bike messengers' for weekly gatherings. I was offered an apartment right across the street from this park and in the light of my research the situation could not be better, living right across the place where the action is.

In my first week I spend nearly every evening in this park waiting for bike messengers to arrive in order to make the first contacts, but I never saw one. My neighbour told me that he knew a few bicycle shops in the area often used by bike messengers and advised me to start from there. I gladly took his advice and visited some shops only to learn that they were not interested to help me. In fact they advised me to conduct a different research because also the bike messengers would not be interested in helping me. Very de-motivated by these events I decided to search the Internet for messenger companies and used social media to contact various people who had 'bike messenger' listed as their profession. I e-mailed the alleged messengers and contacted the companies who told me that they were either very busy and had no time for me, or did not respond to my messages at all.

I learned later in my fieldwork that the reason for the absence of bike messengers is because of the current political and economic situation. Numbers had dropped from several thousands in the 80's and 90's to somewhere in between 700 and a 1000 in 2012 (although there are no known statistics about the actual numbers, this is an estimate based on the narratives of my respondents). The bike messengers appeared to be very frustrated about the current affairs with regard to the financial situation and competition between the messenger services. Many dispatch services have disappeared and the ones still existing are struggling to survive. A good example of one of these struggling dispatch services is Flash Couriers, one of the bigger dispatch services in the city. One dispatcher explained that due to the decline in workload they would not hire new bike messengers for the next eight months. Next to that he explained that the concept of bike messengering is becoming less profitable for the companies in general, due to the high costs of rent, employee insurance and wages in comparison to what an average bike messenger can earn for the company in a day. Furthermore, due to the Bush-crisis many companies are trying to safe money by not hiring bike messengers but let interns (who seldom get paid while doing their internship) deliver the objects.[1]

After nearly two weeks in the field I came across a social website named UrbanCyclistsWorlswide.com. This website held a huge amount of recent information

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[1] The Bush-crisis is the name given to the international financial crisis, which started in 2008.

about bike messengers and their activities so I subscribed to this website and started to randomly address individuals in its integrated chat room. That is how I met Kid (an ex-messenger and owner of the messenger company StreetKings NYC) and Carlos (a bike messenger working for Kid and founder of UrbanCyclistsWorldwide). After setting up a meeting with Kid for a quick interview I learned that Kid was one of the highest regarded messengers of New York City and asked him if I could make observations at his company. He was remarkably open about his life story and was very willing to let me do my observations at his company. Kid explained me all the technical aspects of the profession and how the profession came into its existence. However my question was still there, why do the bike messengers ride a fixed gear? After meeting multiple messengers I noticed that nearly every bike messenger rides a fixed gear and I started wondering if riding a fixed gear was as special as it was portrayed by Kidder (2005, 2006, 2011).

One day Kid showed me a picture of a painting made by Greg Ugalde, a messenger and an artist, called 'The city is killing the messenger', referring to the declining lifestyle and community of the bike messengers. This is when I learned that there is much more going on in the bike messenger community than the difference between fixed gear and free wheel. The community was strongly influenced by changes in the technological and economic landscape and so fighting for survival. At that moment I decided to change the focus of my research and changed my research question from why messengers choose to ride a fixed gear to the question: "*why has the bike messenger community of New York changed so significantly?*"

The main argument of thesis will focus on that particular question and I argue that the effects of both September 11th and the 2008 Bush-crisis had a profound impact on how the bike messengers work and more important, how they interact with each other. As this thesis will show, after the start of the crisis a new generation of messengers came to the street that displays different behaviour and perceive the lifestyle, symbolism and the boundaries of the community differently than the pre-2008 generation.[2]

Kidder and Fincham are the only social scholars who did multiple researches about the bike messengers and Kidder in fact conducted a field study one decade before me in New York City. In his book 'Urban Flow' (2011) he describes a living and rich community of bike messengers, a very different community in comparison to the

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[2] In order to clearly distinguish these two generations I use the description pre-2008 for messengers who started working before the crisis and post-2008 for the messengers who started working after the crisis.

community that I found in 2012. When looking at the changes in the profession from the last decade, one year was mentioned every time: 2008, the year in which the recession struck, a year in which one of the most important races of the New York Bike messengers was cancelled and many other social and political events happened, affecting the bike messengers and their community.

In order to answer the main question, "*why has the bike messenger community of New York changed so significantly?*" I formulated a series of sub-questions that help me answer my main question.

The first sub question I pose is: "*what is the history of the bike messenger profession in New York?*" In order to give an understandable account of the changes in the community I need to display the history and the changes in the profession. Each chapter will start with a certain moment and the resulting effects. Chapter 2 describes the so-called golden age (1980-2001), chapter 3 describes the post-9/11-period up to the crisis (2001-2008) and chapter 4 describes the period during the crisis until present day (2008-2012).

The second sub-question that I pose is "*what are the changes in the lifestyle of the bike messengers?*" During my fieldwork I learned that the profession is tightly connected to a certain lifestyle, adopted by the individuals found in this particular profession. Chapter 2 focuses on this question and I will describe who the bike messengers are, what the aspects of messenger lifestyle are and how these aspects have changed throughout the year.

The third sub-question is "*what is the meaning of the bike for the bike messenger profession?*" The bike is an important object for the bike messengers, it is used for work, but it also represents their identity and symbolizes experience and skill. I will focus on this question in chapter 3 and will give a description of how bike messengers use the bike and how the meaning of the bike has changed in the last four years.

The last sub-question is "*which aspects of the community have changed in recent years?*" In order to answer the question why the community has changed I argue that I first need to look into which aspects that make the contemporary notion of community and how these aspects have changed hence affecting the messenger community. Chapter 4 will focus on this question, combining the information provided in chapters 1, 2 and 3.

Although some accounts may be very technical, I argue that this is necessary to explain, since not all readers know what the profession and its used objects entail. Furthermore, each chapter will start with a description of certain period in time. Each of this time periods is then linked to one of the sub-questions. I argue that each sub-question relates to a change in the community as a result to the so-called 'zeitgeist'.

Fields of study

        This research engaged multiple fields of study both theoretical (the theoretical concepts used to state my argument) and practical (the space I used while conducting my fieldwork).

Theoretical

        The main theories this thesis is built on are based on the contemporary notions of the terms lifestyle, object meaning and the identity and construction of (imagined) communities (Chapter 1). Throughout this thesis I will make use of the concepts posed by multiple authors like Appudurai and Kopytoff, Anderson, McMillan and Chavis and many others. As mentioned above, research about bike messengers is rare, meaning that just a handful of social researchers devoted a research about them. Jeffrey Kidder (Assistant professor at Northern Illinois University) is one of the main authorities on this subject so many theories I used are adopted from his works about the bike messengers.

Practical

        The practical field is for obvious reasons the city of New York, New York, The United States. The main stage of the profession is the island Manhattan, where most of the companies are situated and most deliveries are made by the bike messengers. But as I noticed the bike messengers are very mobile and the social life is mainly expressed in the boroughs Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx. In order to be with the messengers as much as possible (in both their social life and professional life) I was travelling through the whole city of New York. Therefore the practical field of this study is the entire City of New York.

Ethical decisions

        Before conducting my research and while doing my fieldwork I was contested by several ethical decisions that I had to make. When interacting with my respondents I had multiple options how to present myself as a researcher. I argue that it was best for my respondents that they knew I was conducting research about them and the changes in their community. I do advocate the point that a researcher should act as a friend to his respondents (or at least have very close contact) in order to get the trust needed to conduct the research. But this trust connection goes both ways. When a researcher gets so involved with the subjects that the subjects give the researcher sensitive information

it is up to the researcher to decide what to do with that information. I personally confronted my respondents when I thought the information given was sensitive and asked them if they would mind that I would publish this information or whether there is a way to reframe this information, making it less sensitive. My role as a researcher in the field was standing open to the messengers as a friend but I always made clear that I was conducting research. All the respondents were notified/informed that I recorded the interviews and were given the option for anonymity if they preferred this, as stated in the American Anthropological Association's code of ethics (2009).

Next to the research ethics I also had to think about several personal ethic questions. The most personal ethical dilemma I was confronted with was related to the concept of the participant observation. In order to gain the experience the bike messengers have, I was willing to try this profession for a short time. However I was not familiar with New York traffic and the dangers bike-messengers face. I already had a very severe accident with a bike so I was scared to try this because I am afraid that I would endanger myself and other people, similar to Woermann's experience when researching the lifestyle of freestyle skiers (2012).[3] A second ethical dilemma I had to face was if I wanted to try the profession and I would get caught, I would jeopardize both my personal life and academic career. Penalties on illegally working in the US vary from expulsion to imprisonment. Eventually I decided to take the risk in order to know what it feels like and how it works to make a delivery.

Contributions to

This research will explore and describe the changes that affected the construction of the bike messenger community. This thesis will fit in the line of prior researches about community changes and the effects on its members such as Bourgois (2006)[4]; Ferguson (1999)[5]; Kral, Idlout, Minore, Dycke and Kirmayer (2011)[6]; Coulton, Chan and Mikelbank (2011)[7]. Furthermore, this research will show the how and why the changes in municipality legislations and the economic recession of 2008 had a large impact on how the messengers perceive their own community and identity. I argue that in contemporary times, where the economic situation is unstable and more uncertainty

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[3] Woermann injured himself multiple times during his fieldwork.

[4] Bourgois' research about crack dealers in East Harlem, NYC shows how this community is changing under municipality rules and changing economic situations causing the community to self destruct.

[5] Ferguson's research about the Zambian Copperbelt concerns elements of lifestyle change and community change caused by technological progress.

[6] An elaborate research about how colonial rule influenced the Inuit community, causing the suicide rates to rise.

[7] How a government funded neighbourhood project influenced the perception of community feeling in a neighbourhood.

arises for the communities that are directly influenced by the declining economy, more research needs to be conducted about the sustainability of communities in critical times and how anthropological topics are influenced by this crisis (Hart 2006; 2011). But not only the change of community due to the economic situation, but also the rise of online social media plays a part in the change of the physical community. Therefore this research will also contribute to the discussion on how social media changes the perception of individuals with regard to their own community. A third discussion I would like to contribute to is the discussion about the role of material objects with regard to the creation of culture. Tilley (2006) poses the question whether it is the object that created the culture or was it the culture that created the object? As this research will show, there is a clear difference between the old generation and the new generation messengers with regard to the perception of the bike as a symbol.

Not only does this thesis contribute to several academic debates but it also contributes to better understanding of the bike messenger community. What I understood during my fieldwork is that the bike messengers are often associated with negative actions and traffic hazards. This thesis will not deny that these events happen but it will give an understanding to why these actions are undertaken.

Bike messenger as a profession

As final piece of this introduction I would like to introduce the reader to the main aspects of what bike messengering is. In order to understand many topics that are addressed in this thesis I argue that it is vital to understand and have basic knowledge of what the profession entails. Hence, in this paragraph I will describe the professional aspects of the bike messenger profession as I observed them and how they were explained to me.

The profession of being a bike messenger can best be described as an all-weather on demand service. The work hours for bike messengers are the same as most office hours in New York City, roughly from seven to seven, in which the bike messenger normally works 8 hours. This means that there are two shifts of bike messengers working with a shift overlap in between 12 pm and 3 pm. During these hours the work becomes the most hectic because most deliveries are being offered in this time span. The bike messengers ride in all types of weather, when the sun is burning in the summer or even during blizzards in the winter. As long as there are dispatches, the bike messengers go out and deliver these. Bike messengers nowadays deliver almost everything that cannot be delivered by electronic means. This entails everything from important letters that need to be signed for, to bridal dresses or audio/video material for broadcasting

networks. Of course there are physical limitations to what a messenger can safely carry on a bike but the decision to carry something is mostly for the own responsibility of the courier. Nevertheless, most messenger services do have a weight restriction on the deliveries, of approximately 25 kilograms. Everything above this weight is transferred to either a cargo carrier (a bike messenger with a cargo bike) or to a truck driver (often also working for the messenger service).

On a typical day a bike messenger starts in the morning by checking in via the radiophone from a certain starting point, preferably somewhere in between the financial district or mid town. After the check in, the dispatcher gives several addresses for pick up and delivery and the times when each dispatch needs to be delivered. The courier then writes this information on a sheet called the 'manifest'. The manifest contains information about deliveries (where to pickup and deliver and at what time) and is also a method of securing the delivering since it contains the autographs from the recipients. Depending on the experience of the bike messenger the dispatcher either guides the messenger step by step or relies on the courier to make the right choices.

The average messenger is able to make between 20 to 30 deliveries a day, depending on the workload, weather and distances that must be covered. Weather circumstances like rain, snow or hot weather slow the work down for obvious reasons and the same applies for workload and distance. In the most ideal situation the dispatcher is able to keep his/her bike messengers in certain areas of the city, minimizing the distances that need to be covered by a single courier and so enhancing the speed of a delivery. However in most situations the messengers are pedalling between the financial district and the midtown area holding three to six dispatches at the same time.

Although the messengers are given great freedom while on the road, the dispatcher still watches them closely. Nowadays some radiophones are equipped with GPS, so the dispatcher can see exactly where they are. The dispatcher relies on the bike messengers to execute the orders given and the bike messenger relies on the dispatcher that these orders are in workable fashion.

Bike messengers are not allowed to choose their own dispatcher nor pick ups, so constructing a good relation between the dispatcher and the courier can be hard for both individuals. A bike messenger can win favouritism by working fast and execute the orders accordingly. The dispatcher then will give the courier more freedom in executing the orders and give special (better paid) assignments to this particular courier.

The communication between dispatcher and messenger is fast and both individuals use a special constructed code language to keep the communication short.

Examples of this communication and their meanings are: "Knock out the last order" witch means that the last order must be delivered immediately. Other examples are; "holding four" (holding four orders), "come to base" (pedal to the dispatch office) and "call me empty" (establish contact with the dispatcher when all orders are delivered). When a dispatcher asks a question to the courier these are often simple questions, which can be answered by a simple yes or no. Also to keep communication short certain areas in Manhattan are given specific names. Although Manhattan largely has a gridlock system the most southern point of the island lacks street numbers or the gridlock system. This resulted in the name "the Hole" referring to the fact that it is a metaphorical hole where you fall in and is hard to get out without proper knowledge of the city map. A similar metaphor is used for the mid town area which is called "the mid-town monster", referring to the heavy traffic located in the mid-town area.

Another job of the dispatcher is to keep the cycle distances as short as possible for the messenger. This results in a great knowledge of how the city demographics of New York are build up. Kid often said, when pointing at a map of Manhattan hanging in the Street Kings office, "This here, is tattooed in my brain!" With this expression he meant to show that he exactly knows where every street is and without map and hesitation is able to locate every street on the Manhattan Island. Of course every bike messenger must know where the streets are by hart, but it is up to the dispatcher to quickly locate the nearest delivery or pickup from the point where the messenger is standing.

The relationship between a messenger and a dispatcher can be seen as symbiotic; both parties need each other to do their work properly. Both jobs are heavy and require lots of concentration and that is why sometimes both the messenger and the dispatcher can engage in heavy verbal confrontation. Kid would sometimes throw his radiophone through the office when he was frustrated and his frustration could have an effect on the messenger who frustrated him, who in his turn got frustrated and would release this anger in traffic. Often bike messengers would remark that their mood is as good as that of their dispatcher, referring to the influence a dispatcher can have on the courier.

But these are only the logistic aspects of being a bike messenger; the real work is done on the street with all the dangers it entails. During a working day a courier faces a wide range of dangers.

The dangers of messengering

New York City is a congested city with only a few bicycle lanes to 'protect' cyclists. One of the biggest dangers a messenger can encounter is 'getting doored'. Getting doored occurs when an unaware car driver or passenger opens the car door without looking for other traffic. In some cases a passing cyclist is hit by this door, while riding at full speed. One can imagine that coming from full speed to a dead stop at once, creates an immense impact, often resulting in the cyclist flying through the air and falling down on the road. Nearly every messenger I spoke to got doored at least once (most of them several times). The bike messengers deal with this by creating a wider awareness of what is happening around them. Edmund (a bike messenger I rode with) explained that he learned to read 'car language'. He explained that by looking in a car he can assess the situation of what was happening inside. He told me that if a taxi stops and there are people sitting in the back of the taxi there is a higher chance of them getting out without looking and therefore this taxi should be passed with enough space to evade the open swinging door.

Another danger is rain and the resulting wet roads. With the vast number of cars in New York there is also a great number of substances on the road. When it rains these substances form a slippery layer. When braking or cornering this can result in loosing grip, slipping and eventually falling down. This in combination with the lower visibility during rainfall it is not uncommon that messengers get hit by cars, while lying on the road. Next to that the condition of most roads in New York is very poor. Almost every road has large holes in it in which (when not evaded) a bicycle wheel can get stuck, again resulting in a cyclist loosing balance or control over the bike.

Although these are often dangers caused by others it would be naïve to think that bike messengers do not create hazardous situations themselves. It is certainly not uncommon for them to ignore traffic lights or road directions. But here an interesting paradox arises when inquiring both messengers and dispatchers about these situations. I asked multiple dispatchers if they encourage such behaviour on the road and they all said that they did not. Kid actually explained that the job of a messenger is to go from A to B 'accordingly'. The paradox is in the word accordingly, that would suggest that a messenger should obey traffic rules. However stopping at red lights would slow the work significantly, resulting in messengers being addressed on their speed by the dispatcher, so in order to evade this messengers deliberately choose to run traffic lights. In this sense the dispatcher does not encourage running a red light but he/she also does not discourage this. The dispatcher leaves the choice up to the messenger but by

pushing the messenger to work as fast as possible, the messenger feels that he/she has no choice but to run red lights.

Another point of notice is that dispatchers are very much aware of how dangerous the work is but they hardly advocate messenger safety. Kid, being a very experienced messenger, actually compelled his messengers to wear helmets. The couriers that did not wear a helmet were send home to pick up their helmet. Although wearing a helmet during work is choice that is mostly up to the bike messengers, remarkable enough many messengers choose no to wear a helmet. Arguments for this decision vary from a helmet being too hot during summer time and not heaving a helmet makes them aware of how dangerous this work is.

Next to these obvious dangers there are also hidden dangers most bike messengers are not aware of until it is too late. One of these dangers is the physically demanding nature of the profession often leaving the messengers who do the work for multiple years with bad backs and knees. The messengers who ride fixed gear are especially vulnerable to bad knees since riding this type of bike puts lots of restrain on the knee joints. A different danger is the risk of severe haemorrhoids due to the narrow bicycle seats. In some cases this medical condition can get so worse that surgery is needed and the individual is not able to work for multiple weeks.

Despite the great dangers this work entails most messenger services do not provide healthcare for their employees. With the wage of the bike messengers being very low, many of them are not able to afford a (proper) medical insurance. During my fieldwork I heard several stories of persons who needed to keep doing their job with broken bones before they were able to afford medical care.

The profession of messengering is a dangerous profession, so why do people choose to do this job? And how have large events affected the messenger community in general? Chapter 2-4 will focus on these questions. The next chapter will concern the theoretical side of this research and how I incorporated these theories in the fieldwork.

<u>**Chapter 1: Theory and methodology**</u>

This chapter will focus on the theoretical themes this thesis uses to build its central argument and the methodologies I used to gather the data needed. The first part of this chapter addresses the theories I used based on the social scientific notions of the terms lifestyle, meaning giving to objects and community as well as several other secondary theories like gang culture and urban societies. The second part will focus on the methodologies I used and the reasons why I choose these particular methods for the benefit of data gathering.

1.1 Theoretical outline

Low describes New York City as a contested city: a city where "events temporarily invert the urban power structure through symbolic control of the streets" (Low 1996: 391). One thus has to look at how symbolism and power are used in this city. Urban anthropology focuses on these power relations as Foote Whyte (1981), Ferguson (1999) and Steinbach, Green, Datta and Edwards (2011)[8] showed in their researches. With regard to this notion of power the bike messengers use their profession and lifestyle to influence the members of their community and the city. This explains the title of Culley's novel 'the immortal class' (2001).[9] Through exerting power on the streets bike messengers want to take control over the streets, which is seen as their domain. Due to all hardships the messengers need to endure (as described in the following chapters) the messengers are able to maintain their own space and visions throughout the last decades, hence the name 'immortal class'.

As mentioned in the introduction the profession of being a bike messenger goes further than a simple 9am to 5pm job, in fact one has to breath and live the bike messenger life to belong to the community of bike messengers. Jeffrey Kidder already gave a similar account of this and stated that researching bike messengers also means becoming a bike messenger (Kidder 2011: 199).[10]

The first thing noticeable before one meets the bike messengers as a group, is their portrayal as street gangs by outside viewers such as media or inhabitants of New York City. However when relating this vision to Foote Whyte's research (1981) about Italian immigrants and their interaction, there is not much overlap. This might be due to the time differences (early mid 20th century vs. early 21st century) but more important

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[8] This research focuses on how cycling influences social class, gender and ethnic identities as a result of health concerning choices.

[9] The immortal class is a novel about bike messenger life and work in Chicago written by Travis H. Culley.

[10] Kidder researched the bike messengers of New York from 2002 to 2003 and during this period worked as a full time messenger.

because the bike messengers are no street gangs in general. As Foote Whyte vividly shows in his research the groups he researched are smaller than the bike messenger community and more organized in terms of hierarchy. An article about Vietnamese youth gangs written by Jun Sung Hong (2009) sketches a similar approach but also focuses on how childhood and education eventually caused the individuals to participate in gangs. As I noticed the bike messengers do not talk about their youth a lot but multiple respondents told me that bike messengering is a way to get away from gang and prison life by having an accepted and legal job. Dal, Arifoglu and Razi (2004) conducted a research about why individuals choose for a nursing education and came to the conclusion that choosing a professional career enlarges acceptance by society and further future growth. This is similar to the reasons why people choose to become bike messengers; to ensure them from a stable income, hence giving them more acceptance from the society they live in. But here a paradox develops; contrary to becoming a nurse, bike messengering is a profession that does not requires formal education of any sort and bike messengers commonly act as if they want to stand outside the society as their own individual.

An explanation for this paradox can be related to Robertson's visions on the creation of individualism (1978). Based on the shared views of Durkheim and Simmel Robertson gives an explanation for how individualism in a society arises. One vision is, that based on a society created by the individual and individualism originating from the interaction with multiple individuals,[11] the other vision is that of individualisation arising from the society based on changes in the political landscape (Robertson, 1978: 149-151).[12] In the light of this research the last explanation is the most interesting. This thesis argues how changes have affected the messenger community. The profession is highly individual and the persons engaging the profession are keen on profiling themselves as individuals.[13]

The vision of lifestyle

The notion of the messenger as an individual can be seen throughout the lifestyle. Although a high consensus of conformity exists (how to live and how to act are all mediated by visions of the community), the messengers state that their choices are individual. But this leads to the following question: what is the modern day

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[11] This is Robertson's explanation of Simmel's argument.

[12] This is Robertson's explanation of Simmel's argument.

[13] See chapter 2 for further explanation.

anthropological notion of the term lifestyle? When looking at the term lifestyle in general it is very intertwined with the concept of sub-culture. However the term lifestyle is also used in the English language to simply describe a style of life. Nevertheless it is interesting to see that the terms subculture and lifestyle are used as both synonyms and as separate descriptions for to social life of individuals. When looking for a clear definition of the term lifestyle one is quickly directed to medical science where lifestyle is commonly described as the literal way of life; the type of food that a person eats and the overall choices with regard to health (Walsh 2011: 579). From this definition one can say that lifestyle is an aspect gathering descriptions of the choices made with regard to living in the broader sense of the word living. But this then leads to the question what are the aspects that make a lifestyle and what are the differences with regard to sub-culture?

A clearer definition of the term lifestyle is given by Edwards and Walker, who defined lifestyle as: "The relationships between consumption, identity and identification" (Edwards & Walker 2010: 4). An even broader description is given by Chaney in Edwards and Walker: 'Lifestyles are patterns of action which differentiate people" and thereby become a basis for social stratification. They are reflexive projects expressed through ''practical vocabularies" which are used in ''everyday life to identify and explain complexes of identity and affiliation" (ibid. 4). From this definition it is clear that lifestyle is a descriptive term used to separate the different visions on life between individuals. But Edwards and Walker go even deeper: "Lifestyles thus represent practices and attitudes, usually expressed through patterns of consumption and behaviour, intended as signifiers of status and identification. In particular, material objects become presentational symbols of self-perception, and of social alignment and positioning (ibid. 6). The process of identification is thus made visible throughout the choices one makes in the daily life; the style of life one chooses to live. But how effective are these choices with regard to identity shaping? Chaney gives a clear answer to this question: The effectiveness of identification projects via lifestyles thus depends on performance and visualisation forms of public ''show" and the surface imitation of esteemed others. Such symbolic indicators of status are historically and culturally specific but might comprise fashionable adornment of the body; acquiring impressive places of residence; sophisticatedly decorated and furnished interiors; presence at cultural events; or, the display of emblems of association with venerated organisations (Chaney 1996: 99-111). This description draws forth on the notion that lifestyle is mainly a concept constructed throughout consumption and material display.

The relation between lifestyle and consumption is shared by Cohen, who states that the term lifestyle is mainly used to define consumerist behaviour Lifestyle is hence created by a growing choice in consumption goods, giving the opportunity for different styles and decision between those styles to be made (Cohen 2011: 1537). However in the case of the bike messengers, money is not an abundant commodity leaving consumption at a minimum. Cohen therefore also gives advocates to look at the behaviour of the people who are seen as belong to the specific lifestyle (ibid. 1538). Through the work of Sobel, Cohen defines lifestyle as "any distinctive, and therefore recognisable, mode of living" (ibid. 1538).

But if the definition of lifestyle can be seen as material display and consumption on the one hand and distinctive behaviour on the other how does this concept differ from the concept of sub-culture? Researches about lifestyle-sports posed similar questions. Can a sport be seen as lifestyle or an actual sub-culture? Brown and Ford conducted an elaborate research on the surfing sport asking the question whether this sport is an actual sub-culture or a lifestyle. They come to the conclusion that lifestyle is mediated throughout an overlapping (sub)-culture and both concepts cannot be disconnected in the case of sports (Brown & Ford 2006: 62-63). This is very much in line of what the bike messengers encounter in their daily life. Although bike messengering is seen as a profession rather than a sport, many respondents pointed out that they see it as an extreme sport, due to the dangerous and physical aspects of the profession. But in the case of lifestyle sports, consumption also plays a vital role to distinguish the one lifestyle from another, as Brown and Ford advocate.

Material symbolism

A second aspect often seen in the lifestyle of the bike messengers is the way they interact with their bike.[14] The bike can be seen as a sort of symbol in the bike messenger society. Tilley (2006) poses the question whether it is the object that created the culture or was it the culture that created the object? The object when answering this question is the bicycle and although the bicycle was invented and used before the profession bike messenger came to origin it is still a vital question. However some bike messengers chose to ride fixed gear bikes, but did they made this choice because they affiliate with the culture of bike messengers, or because they affiliate with the bike as an object?

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[14] Chapter 3 will address this topic in a broader range.

In the book 'pedal power' by J. Harry Wray (2008) the bike has been noted as an object that can divide certain groups in society. This book argues what the aspects are that caused cycling to gain more and more popularity, as an alternative mod of transportation in, American social life. The reason Wray advocates is that due to the growing ecological and health concern of the general public in the United States more people choose for a bike as a form of transportation. Remarkable of this book is that Wray speaks about the bike as an object with a high social status and the respondents perceive themselves as different from "car driving"-peers. The point of being healthy and staying 'in shape' is well known aspect of why the bike messengers love their profession. A special case was that of the young bike messenger Roti, who told me that he lost a substantial amount of weight since and gained stamina since he started his job. Also Wray advocates the point that "there is something about the bike" (Wray 2008: 215). Despite the fact that the research of Wray is different, it shows how people who cycle with an ideological aspect see the bike and how these people make a distinction between two different groups. In the case of Wray's research the difference was a distinction between driving and cycling people. Due to the huge differences between cars and bicycles this distinction can be clearly denoted. The bike as used by a bike messenger (whether fixed gear or not) is used for the same purpose, namely delivering goods. The distinction between the two groups will be found in the meaning of the bike for the bike messenger on terms of style, as Kidder (2006) and Fincham (2007) noticed, and symbolism to identify oneself with a certain group.

In "the social life of things" (2011) Appadurai states that commodities are given meaning by human transactions, attributions, and motivations (Appadurai 2011: 5). But, according to Appadurai, this poses an anthropological problem with regard to concrete and historical meaning of the object. In order to conduct research about the social meaning of objects he advocates that the researcher must focus on researching the form, trajectories and uses of the object itself (ibid. 5). Another strong point that Appadurai advocates is that the "flow" of commodities is "a shifting compromise between socially regulated paths and competitively inspired divisions" (ibid. 17). This argument again states that commodities are given meaning by the people who use them. By researching these paths the researcher can find a biography with concern to these commodities (ibid. 17). Appadurai concludes his essay by arguing how politics concerning commodities, influence the meaning of the commodity. They can be created for diversion and display, authenticity and authentication, and the politics of knowledge and ignorance (ibid. 57).

The argument about the biography of commodities is adopted from Kopytoff. Kopytoff advocates the point that one can ask similar questions about commodities as one would ask about people (Kopytoff 2011: 66). A striking example is given with regard to a car bought in Africa. According to Kopytoff this can produce a wide arrange of cultural data when focussing on questions like; how did I got to money to buy the car, who was the previous owner and how is it produced (ibid. 67)?

Both Appadurai and Kopytoff refer to commodities rather than objects. Here I pose the question: is a bike a commodity or an object? According to the definition of Kopytoff:

"A commodity is a thing that has use value and that can be exchanged in a discrete transaction for a counterpart, the very fact of exchange indication that the counterpart has, in the immediate context, an equivalent value. The counterpart is by the same token also a commodity at the time of exchange. The exchange can be directed or it can be achieved indirectly by way of money, one of whose functions is as same a means of exchange. Hence, anything that can be bought for money is at that point a commodity"(Kopytoff 2011: 68-69).

The first aspect of this definition (the exchange for another commodity with equivalent value) argues that a bike must be acquired by trading. The second aspect; exchange can also be by the way of money, argues that a bike can also be bought in order to become a commodity. The key term of this definition is "transaction" in any certain context. Combined with the argument of Appadurai that commodities have certain meanings given by the people who use this commodity, I argue that the bike is more a commodity than it is an object in aspect to the bike messengers. Although there are no rituals when preformed when a messenger buys or trades a bike, the exchange of money can be seen similar to Kopytoff's example of a car in Africa. Also Kopytoff argues that in industrialised societies (such as the United States) commoditization is present in every aspect of existence due to technological advantages, leaving a multitude of classifications for individuals and small groups (Kopytoff 2011: 88). Kopytoff goes even further, stating that social identities of people in complex societies are often uncertain because of the constant shifting between identities effect commodities, which's meanings are constructed by identity, in a similar pattern of uncertain meanings (ibid. 89-90).

What does this say about the bike as a commodity? As shown above the meaning of the bike will differ with regard to the social groups. I stated that for ridding a fixed gear bike, more experience is required. Being an experienced or un-experienced bike

messenger will give the person a certain status or identity in the bike messenger world as was shown through the classification of rookie versus veteran.

By following the research methods as argued by Appadurai and Kopytoff I am able to find the meaning of the bike for its rider. When searching for the biography of the object its life story, how and why the person choose for this bike, how they got the money to buy it, the usage (beside delivering) and how this bike defines this person's identity. Acquiring information about the meaning of the bike in the bike messenger society I found, as mentioned before, that there is a clear distinction between the pre- and post- 2008 group. This difference is mainly based on the perception of what the bike is used for and how the individual messengers want to be seen by their peers. Hence the way the bike messengers see their own identity is constructed through the way the individuals use their bike both professional and in their personal life.

The relation between an object and the construction of personal identity is a field of study mainly researched in the field of psychology. Themes vary from consumerism and identity to emotional attachment and identity shaping. As chapter 2 will show there is strong relationship between the bike messengers and the concept of consumerism since it is also part of their identity construction. I therefore argue that for this research prior researches about consumerism and identity construction are useful to gain insight on how the bike is used as an object of identity construction.

Cox and Dittmar argue that clothes are symbolic as a representation of personal style and taste (Cox & Dittmar 1995: 237). Although the style of clothes the bike messenger chooses are mainly based on performance while working, a similar aspect can be seen when looking at the bike. The bike shows the style of the bike messenger. Carlos for instance was nicknamed 'el Diablo' (the Devil) because he always rode in black and choose a complete black fixed gear to match this outfit, and so supporting the view other messenger had about him as a person always riding with black clothes. The example of Carlos his riding style related to the definition that Cox and Dittmar give about personal objects and a person's relationship towards these objects: "personal possessions are perceived as "part of the self" by individuals, and that they constitute symbolic expressions of owners' personal and social attributes" (ibid. 240). The expression "part of the self" as these authors use it, can be seen as a form of identity, the way persons perceives themselves and express themselves. In a later article Dittmar, Beattie and Friese give a more in-depth description of the relationship between an object and its owner: "Belk (1988) speaks of "extending the self" through *ownership* of material goods. Product symbolism refers to the "idealized people associated with [the good]. . . " (Wright et al. in Dittmar, Beattie & Friese 1992: 312). For example, the design

we wear on our T-shirt signals the type of person we are (or hope to be) (Dittmar, Beatie & Friese 1995: 494). The example given of the shirt and its representation of the person who wears it is also applicable on the bike and its messenger, namely the bike represents who the bike messenger is.

Community theories.

Community has always been a highly ambiguous term. Not one clear definition can be given, since the definition of the word community already differentiates in daily language, it is even harder to give a definition with regard to social science. Roberto Esposito (an Italian political philosopher) displays in his book 'communitas, the origin and destiny of community' (2010) an elaborate explanation of the word community. He argues that the word community is deprived from the Latin word *communis*, in which another Latin word, namely *munus,* stands central. However, the meaning of the word *munus* also depends on context (Esposito 2010: 3-4). Throughout an elaborate analysis of the linguistic meanings of the words *communis* in Latin and the word *Gemein* in Gothic, Esposito concludes that *communis* revolves around having an obligation to the group and so creating a 'debt' to their peers (ibid. 6-7, 9-10).

George Hillary (in Jewkes & Murcott 1996) also tried to define the term community and eventually came with 94 different definitions. The only aspect these definitions had in common was that they addressed people in general. Jewkes and Murcott therefore advocated the point that the concept of community should be used as a guideline rather than a clear definition (Hillary in Jewkes & Murcott 1996: 557).

Due to the highly ambiguous definition of the term 'community' it is very difficult to find a proper research paradigm. Erikson (2001) poses that there are two aspects to be noted when researching local communities. The first aspect deals that a community is methodologically manageable unit in which an anthropologist is able to get acquainted with the inhabitants. The second aspect is that communities may be studied like they are self sustaining (Erikson 2001: 58). This definition however poses a problem as Erikson himself argues: "(…) although the setting today is rarely an isolated village" (ibid. 58). Despite this statement Erikson stresses that the logic of inquiry and methods used when researching larger systems with unclear boundaries, remains the same.

Norbert Elias argued in his research the established and the outsiders (1965) that any community has a clear distinction, a so-called boundary, between the people belonging to the community (the established) and the 'other' (the outsiders). Giving this

fact one has to search for boundaries that mark a difference between groups of individuals.

Vaisey (2007) addresses the same point as Erikson, namely that it is hard to find manageable research settings with regard to the concept of community. But Vaisey poses a different question based on Tönnies's and Webber's researches, namely "what underlies the sense of community?" (Vaisey 2007: 853). Chavez also poses this question. Chavez (1994) argues that community, as definition, cannot be defined but that the researcher has to look for a symbolic constructed boundary, a vision shared with Cohen (in Jewkes and Murcott 1996). These boundaries are made visible when looking for the reasons that make individuals feel that they belong to a community. Hence the question "what underlies the sense of community?" (Chavis 1994: 54) (Vaisey 2007: 853). Vaisey also argues a research model able to "measure" the sense of community. This model however is based on doing quantitative research. Regarding the number of bike messengers in New York (around 700-1000) and the time span I spend in the field (three months of doing actual fieldwork) I argue that this was not a correct method to use when conducting research about the sense of community simply because the sample was too big and the time span too short. Nevertheless units of analysis used by Vaisey can proof to be useful.

The units of analysis Vaisey uses are all brought back to numbers, however I argue that I can use the same indicators. One indicator that Vaisey uses is the "we-feeling". With this Vaisey means the number people refer to "we" to address the group this individual belongs to. This aspect can also be noted when interviewing respondents when conducting qualitative research. Other interesting indicators named are spatiotemporal (the number of meetings, the total of people gathering), homogeneity (age and education) and moral order (how to live, importance of ideology) (Vaisey 2007: 855- 858).

Imagined community

As I remarked, the number of bike messengers in New York is around 700 to a 1000. This is a very large group and it would be impossible for one individual to know all other individuals. Anderson stated that nations could be seen as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1995: 17). Even though the boundaries of a nation might be geographically fixed, a nation is far too big for the inhabitants to know everybody. Anderson argues that language is the factor, which makes people feel connected (ibid. 46). Another statement made by Anderson is that the shared history of a nation connects the inhabitants without them ever meeting (ibid. 175-176).

In the case of the New York bike messengers there is a difference. The messengers live in the same country and speak the same language, but so do people who have different occupations.

In a study about the community feelings of Mexican immigrants McMillan and Chavis argued that four elements are at the basis to create a sense of community: membership, influence, reinforcement and emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis 1986). McMillan and Chavis explain these concepts in the following way:

Membership: This element mainly helps with the construction of symbolic borders for insiders, which protect them from the outsiders (McMillan & Chavis 1986: 9). According to the authors, indicators like language and clothing are able to mark these boundaries. According to McMillan and Chavis the element of membership can be made visible using five factors (ibid. 9-11)

-The visible boundaries (certain neighbourhoods, areas)

-Emotional security (being in a surrounding where your peers understand you and your actions)

-Identification (belonging to the group and identifying yourself with the actions this group undertakes)

- Personal investment (willing to bring new ideas into the group and spending time with this group)

-Having a common system of symbols (understanding the meaning of objects and the purposes these objects have)

Influence: this is an element, which according to McMillan and Chavis, can work in two different directions. The first direction is that people who feel drawn to the community have the possibility to influence this particular community. For example, implementing new ideas, which are adopted by the other members in the community. The other direction is that the community is able to influence the behaviour of its members. McMillan and Chavis state that conformity will have a positive effect on the continuity of the community (ibid.12).

Reinforcement: with this element the authors mean that members of the community will reward feelings of affection towards the community. For example if someone shows commitment to the community the other members will reward this commitment by giving certain privileges or by giving emotional security to this member (ibid. 12-13).

Emotional connection: The final element being addressed entails being connected with other members via a shared history or through knowing the shared history of the other members (ibid. 13-14). This element is connected with Andersons'

statement about having a shared history between the inhabitants of a nation because both arguments address the point that there must be a shared history between the different individuals within the community.

Even though these four elements are constructed based on a research about immigrants, they are still usable for a research about bike messengers. The first reason for this is because these elements make the concept of community researchable on the level of indicators. For each of these elements I will address multiple indicators such as actions, clothing, language, narratives and symbols. I shall use these elements as a basic 'checklist' and looking for these elements within the group of bike messengers. The second reason is that bike messengers (just like immigrants, only on a smaller scale) are spread throughout a geographical area. Fincham already addressed that bike messengers feel connected without knowing the other (Fincham 2007). The same can be said about immigrants who feel connected even though they have never met in person (McMillan & Chavez 1986: 8).

The theories and elements McMillan and Chavez use to argument the feeling of community are useful for this research but they also pose a problem. The community is slowly changing and falling apart. As chapter 4 will show, these elements will give a vision on how this community is changing from a physical (imagined) community to an online community. But discussions are rising on how online communities must be seen within anthropology; can they be treated from the classic perspective or are there new elements to incorporate. An answer to this question is given by De Koster who conducted research on multiple online forums and came to the conclusion that each Internet forum can be seen as a community on itself hen searching for the concept of commonality (De Koster 2008, 2010). Commonality entails understanding the peers who also use the forum and feeling connected with them on the subjects that are being discussed online. I argue that in a community that is slowly vanishing and changing to an online community searching for this concept of commonality is useful because it will give an extra insight on how these messengers connect.

Another vision on how to see slowly separating communities can be found in the research of Ferguson. In this research Ferguson is dealing with a community that is changing and splitting in a 'rural' and an 'urban' part. Similar to this research, Ferguson describes a community that is slowly declining due to outside influences as political and economic change. As Ferguson noticed, in order to classify the differences between these two groups the members relied on stereotypes to describe the other (Ferguson 1999: 84). Ferguson contests the different visions of the stereotypes rural and urban and developed his own term "cultural style" (ibid. 86). Cultural style is a contraction to

both the way lifestyle is seen and perceived "refers to practices that signify differences" (ibid. 95). Furthermore Ferguson focuses on the question of cultural dualism and the methodological problems that it entails; how do you conceptualize this contrast between old (rural) and new (urban) (ibid. 93). This question is closely related to the problem found within the bike messenger community. There is a difference found between old and new which does rely on stereotypical views of the other. The focus of Ferguson's argument is how to construct a paradigm that signifies cultural dualism in a society which is not analytical different. The answer for finding this difference is that it is not located between two different cultures or social systems but that is "produced within the logic of class society"(ibid. 94). The bike messenger community is not a class society but when looking at the problem that Ferguson sketches, a differentiation between two groups in the same society, his notion of cultural style and looking at the differences in behaviour between two groups in one society (in this case the bike messenger community) are very useful.

The idea of cultural style is a construct created based on difference in performance under certain circumstances, which is obtained by experience (ibid. 96). In this case there is a connection with the bike messengers in the sense of experience. The pre-2008 generation will have more experience than the post-2008 generation and therefore adopt a different style (chapter 2). But cultural style also allows bracketing off the differences in values, beliefs and worldviews (ibid. 97).

Ferguson's idea on the differences between groups belonging to the same society relates closely to the case of the messengers and the concept of cultural style enables me to search for these differences. McMillan and Chavis created elements for the assessment of community and the elements can be used to answer the question if the community is still alive, where as Ferguson's cultural style allows the researcher to search for significant differences between members of the same society, and marking a boundary between these two groups. In this case the community can still exist, but there are two different social groups visible within this community. The concept of cultural style allows me to find these differences and mark them.

1.2 Incorporating the theory.

Where the first part of this chapter gave a theoretical outline on what the main concepts in this thesis entail this second part will focus on how I am going to use these concepts in order to connect them to my data.

Lifestyle

The modern definition of lifestyle is thus a definition similar to that of sub-culture only with one major difference: the concept of consumption. Lifestyle is expressed throughout behaviour and consumption creating a social identity. The implementations of lifestyle are found within the overall life of the bike messenger, even though consumption is largely kept at a minimum. It is impossible to state that every bike messenger has the same way of living but there is a notion to be found of what is regarded as bike messenger life and what is not. I noticed that the bike messengers seem to have split the word lifestyle in two different aspects, namely messenger life and messenger style. Messenger life involves all the aspects of living in general: how/what to eat, what to do in your spare time and how to deal with the changing world around the individual. Messenger style refers to the way you ride a bike, the way you dress and the way you behave in general. Both split aspects hold the key concepts (behaviour and consumption) of what entail lifestyle according to the above definition. But there is an ambiguity with regard to the term consumption in the separation between messenger life and style. Consumption can mean both the buying and the using of goods. To give a clear description of the terms messenger life and messenger style I must separate the notion of economic consumption (the act of buying) and the practical consumption (the act of using) in order to give a clear description of what messenger life and style mean for the bike messengers.

Symbolism

Combining the theories used by Appudurai and Kopytoff about material objects and meaning making and the theories by Cox and Dittmar and Dittmar, Beatie and Friese about identity and personal objects, I am able to construct a workable theoretical construct to research the relation between bike messengers and their bikes. The first step is to inquire the bike messenger how they got their specific bike. Similar to the earlier mentioned example of the car by Kopytoff, I will be looking if there are special questions and interests a bike messenger has before choosing the bike they are riding on. What I noticed when posing the question "why do ride your type of bike?" was that each messenger gave a different answer varying from "because I just like it" to "it was the type of bike I wanted and worked for because it has everything I prefer and it makes my job easier". It is Remarkable that the pre-2008 generation has more points of interest with regard to looking at a bike than the post-2008 generation has. The focus will be on the bike as an object and how the messengers talk and interact with their bike.

Community

The final theory I will be discussing is that of community and how this is constructed. I will combine the visions of Elias, Vaisey, McMillan and Chavis, De Koster and Ferguson to give an accurate representation of how the community is constructed and on which points there is a lack of community and so this group is differing from a classic anthropological notion of community. Even though Vaisey uses his indicators on a quantitative scale, they can also be used when conducting qualitative research. By observing the number of gatherings and the total of people gathering and observing the age and asking about the education of the respondents, one can establish a clear picture of how the group is constructed. In the case of the old generation messengers in comparison to the new generation messengers, I argue that the aspects of morel order is the most important to unravel because their vision of how they do their job and what meaning is given is the main aspect that makes them differ from their counterparts. Vaisey's factors concerning the construction of community give a platform on which I am able to unravel differences between the two generations, however they do not able me to describe and assess the concept of community. As stated in this chapter McMillan and Chavis offer a better platform for that. The concept of Elias' boundaries is integrated with the aspect of 'membership', which, as shown, excludes outsiders from the community, hence creating a boundary. As final assessment I will compare my data with the concept of commonality as de Koster used it but instead of applying it to the online environment of Internet forums, I will also apply it to the real life community in order to see if a transition from physical to online community is visible.

The second part of analyzing the community will incorporate the earlier mentioned vision of cultural style as used by Ferguson. I will search for the boundaries that mark the two different styles of each generation and argument that even though these generations belong to the same community, there are two significant different groups to be found.

1.3 Used Methodologies.

In order to gather the data needed for this research I used multiple research techniques. The most important aspect of gathering my data was actually going to New York in order to make face-to-face contact with the messengers. As Earl Babbie describes field research "field research offers the advantage of probing social life in its natural habitat" (Babbie 2007: 289). As mentioned earlier, during my three months of fieldwork I lived in The East Village across Tompkins Square Park, a small block located on the island

Manhattan. I deliberately choose this location because narratives on the Internet stated that The East Village, with Tompkins Square Park especially, is one of the main places where bike messengers could be found. Although the practical aspect turned out different than I hoped it was still a good and central location making it possible to get to every location in the City by subway and, as my fieldwork progressed, by bicycle.

The best method to research bike messengers is referred to by Kidder as "becoming fully immersed in an activity as it intrinsic part of one's life" (Kidder 2011: 199). A side note has to be made that Kidder when, conducting his research, had the advantage over me of being an American citizen and was allowed to work as a messenger. I, on the other hand, came to New York with a tourist visa, which confines the visitor to a maximum three-month stay and not being allowed to work. In order to immerge myself in the life of the bike messengers I was forced to search for different methods than working as a bike messenger.

This research makes use of three different research methods with which I was able to gather my data. The first method was the classical method of (participant) observation, the second method was conducting interviews and the third was the usage of secondary resources. In the next part I will briefly describe what the advantages were of these methods and how I used them in the field.

(Participant) observation

Participant observation is method adopted by Bronslaw Malinowski and has been since his pioneer research in 1922 the standard of anthropological research. The advantage of this method is that the researcher has personal contact with the research subjects and participate in the activities they see as important. By this participation I am able to show my willingness to get acquainted with their customs. Next to that I am able to experience the emotions my respondents feel in certain activities, making it able to give a more accurate description of the events and emotions my respondents encounter. Participant observation also makes it possible to follow certain links between persons but also between persons and actions which otherwise would have stayed hidden. However acquiring access to this community was difficult since I am not a bike messenger myself and did not had a working permit. Both Foote Whyte (1983) and Sluka (1995) encountered similar problems during their fieldwork but posed that openness, neutrality and avoid being threatening helped gaining access.[15] I hold tight to

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[15] Sluka researched IRA support in Catholic ghettos in Belfast.

these concepts, I avoided heavy political discussion and showed genuine interest in the visions of my respondents.

The first form of observation I did was observing the daily routines at StreetKings NYC, A small messenger company on Times Square. I spend 6 workdays sitting and observing the way the messengers interact with their dispatchers and how they conduct their work.

A second form of participant observation was exchanging footage with Carlos for the website UrbanCyclistsWorldwide. Since I own a professional camera which I had with me during my fieldwork, I made a simple deal with Carlos that I would go to gatherings and take pictures for his website. In exchange he would allow me to gather as much data as possible at these gatherings and eventually adopt me in his team. Being part of the UrbanCyclistsWorldwide team opened new doors with regard to gaining trust from the messengers who now saw more as an outsider willing to be part of the inside. I was able to go to gatherings without messengers questioning my reasons to be there or questioning my legitimacy as a researcher.

The third form of participant observation was making a gangster rap for the messenger community. Carlos inquired me about my musical skills and I told him that I am a DJ and guitarist. He then asked me if I could write and record a gangster rap for him and his website. Although reluctant to do this at first, I later decided to do it after doing some background research about rapping. As I found out rapping is mainly about expressing feelings and frustrations and I figured that if I could write and perform a messenger approved rap it could be seen as a conformation that I understand the messenger profession and lifestyle and so giving me conformation that my data was representative for this research.

However, the actual participation in the profession was nearly impossible for me. I was a tourist and United States laws forbid tourists to work, even if this work is non-profit. Next to that there was the logistics problem of not owning a bike and not being able to afford a bike due to a strict financial planning. Eventually I managed to gain the trust of Carlos who lend me a bike for the last 5 weeks of my fieldwork and I tried to make one simple delivery for StreetKings. I was stopped at the door because my personal identification was not in recognized. So even though I wanted to do some messenger jobs, the lack of domestic identification was a problem impossible to overcome due to the sort time span I had left in the field.

Having a bike however meant a great step forward in my observations since I was able to arrive by bike at messenger gatherings. This was a sign for most messengers that I was willing to learn and adopt aspects of their lifestyle so they began to become

more open to me. Also, having a bike allowed me race an alleycat, which I did once. During this race I experienced what is to be in an alleycat and how these races start and finish and how the interaction between the competitors is expressed during the race. Each observation was combined with the taking field notes. This field notes are either made by writing, taking photos and video and audio footage.

Interviews

The second method I used to gather data was conducting interviews. I choose for semi-structured interviews because this type of interview does have a few fixed questions that help the interviewer keep on track but also give the interviewee the possibility to elaborate on topics he/she finds important. The data that is generated by these interviews are personal views of the topics addressed in the interview (Babbie 2007: 305). When decoding these interviews I need to use the same markers I used to analyze my field notes in order to get a systematic list of indicators. These data results I will then combine with the data of the participant observation. By combining these two sets of data I am able to create an argument supported by both my observations and the explanations of my respondents (ibid. 306).

In total I conducted 20 interviews varying from 30 to 90 minutes in length, which were recorded with the consent of the respondent. I then divided every respondent in a category. The three categories are: (1) an overview group, which entails all the (ex)-messengers I interviewed about the history of the profession and stand out from the community due to their years of experience and knowledge about the community, (2) the old generation, which holds all the messenger who started working before 2008, and (3) the new generation, which are all the messengers who started working after 2008. Selecting the respondents proved to be a challenge since the individuals in the profession are very diverse. Some messengers were advised to me for being representative and others I choose because of their willingness to cooperate. I allowed the respondents to choose their own location.[16] I did this for two reasons; first they would be in an environment they felt comfortable with, second because they perhaps would show me a place important for them and telling more about the messenger history.

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[16] Locations changed with each messenger, some I would meet in a coffee shop or MacDonalds others showed me their favourite bar or a location they hold special (such as Tompkins Square Park or Washington Square Park)

Secondary resources

By looking into secondary resources like UrbanCyclistsWorldwide and facebook I gained more insight into how the messengers organize their gatherings and which aspects are important for the bike messenger's daily lives (de Koster 2008).

By combining the theories mentioned and the methods of research I will construct an elaborate history of bike messengering and the aspects that come with it. The next chapters of this three thesis will address these different theories per chapter together with a chronological account of the events related to this theoretical concept.

Chapter 2: The professional life of a bike messenger.

The profession of bike messengering appears to be a simple, straightforward job. The messenger picks up the object at point A and drops it off at point B. However when looking closer at all the factors that influence the daily routine of a bike messenger it becomes clear that there is much more to the job than just delivering objects

The aim of this chapter is to give a description of the history of bike messengering and beyond, in New York City. Bike messenger lifestyle does not stop at the end of their shift but it is something that is part of the person's life. As some of my respondents described it "you have to live and breathe biking". Besides the daily routine of their job, bike messengers engage in street races called 'alleycats' or gather to celebrate special events. Next to this there is a huge aspect of bicycle safety and bicycle awareness as well as art. This chapter will describe the many aspects of the profession that cannot be seen from the outside.

The second half of this chapter will engage the lifestyle of the bike messengers, how they live and how their profession influenced their life choices. I will primarily engage the term lifestyle from the theoretical perspective as argued in the previous chapter, engaging the question how does lifestyle influences the identity of the people who engage in the messenger profession?

2.1 Bike messenger history

It is hard to say when bike messengering was created since it's a given fact that since the invention of the bike this object is used for several transportation usages. Kid, one of my respondents and both an ex-messenger and dispatcher, had a picture on his desk of a bike messenger in New York City that dated back to 1898. He would always proudly say that 'bike messengering has always been around'.

Although the usage of automobiles grew heavily during the early twentieth centaury, postal services like Western Union always kept using pedal powered couriers. Nevertheless motorized transportation had the overhand and the bike became nearly extinct as a transportation form to deliver goods. In the late 1970's there was a turnover however; In New York City the number of bike couriers rose from only a handful to several thousands in the mid-1980's (Kidder 2011: 18).

This resurrection of the bike messengers can be explained by the rapid growth of economy during the 1980's. The increase of companies relocating their headquarters to select cities, as New York, created more work for the bike messengers and so created more job vacancies in the profession. Especially in the borough Manhattan this led to an increase of workload since New York is one of the mayor cities on the east coast of the

United States and the island Manhattan has a good connection to the mainland of the United States. Another reason why bike couriering became so popular in New York in particular is because of the way the city is build. The city demographics are based on the so-called 'grid-lock' principle; all the horizontal streets are numbered and there are twelve main, vertical streets called the avenues. This makes it very easy to find your way around town for the bike messengers, since you only need to know which street and avenue you are on at the moment, before riding to your next dispatch. New York also has another advantage for bike couriers over other cities because the main clientele is located mainly in the downtown area, commonly referred to as 'the financial district' or in the midtown area. The workload is mainly concentrated in these two areas giving the bike messengers a relative small area to work in and being able to get acquainted with their surroundings fast.

1980-early 2000: The golden age of messengering

The period roughly between 1980 and early 2000 is by the messengers referred to as 'the golden age of messengering'. The narratives of my respondents describe this as a period when there was enough work for every bike messenger and the wage was good (good in the sense of being able to pay rent and afford several secondary luxury objects). Especially in the beginning of the Golden Age bike messengers were able to experiment with routes through the city that were the best and fastest, making the messenger more efficient in what he/she did. The success of the profession in delivering an on-demand service became so popular during the 1980's that more courier companies were founded. One has to imagine that during the 1980's until the early 1990's the Internet was not yet a commonality and fax machines were only preserved for the extreme wealthy, so there was a huge platform for bike messengers on which they could operate. Especially during the 1980's courier companies flourished and were able to make a good profit from their clientele.

But all this wealth had a downside; New York City is not a city that is used to cyclists in daily traffic, let alone cyclists who are working against the clock to make deliveries and in doing so display reckless behaviour. Complaints by other traffic users almost led to plans advocating a closedown for couriers of three mayor avenues in the midtown area and so risking to cut the couriers off from their clientele. Several days of protesting eventually let to cancelation of these plans but it was clear that changes needed to be made in order to keep traffic safe for both pedal and engine traffic. Although it is unclear what the direct implementations were of these plans some messengers argue that this was the start of the taxi vs. messenger vendetta.

With the Internet still developing during the 1990's, bike messengers still had enough work to sustain a wealthy living. New York traffic was getting used to the fact that there were cyclists pedalling rapidly through traffic and there still was enough work for anyone who wanted to become a bike messenger. Approximately in the mid of the 1990's a new type of bicycle entered the urban arena: the fixed gear bike. Due to the low maintenance and easy pedalling this bike offered, messengers were getting faster. However since the fixed gear lacks brakes, this was a bike only ridden by the couriers who had lots of experience and know how in and of New York traffic. Being able to ride a fixed gear became the symbol of expertise and dare. Still many couriers rode on a single speed road bikes and only the best, most experienced couriers were able to ride a fixed gear bike.

In the late 1990's technology was growing and this was not unnoticed in the bike messenger profession. The courier companies adopted a new form of communication namely radio controlled messengers. Kurt gave me an old flyer of his company that proudly says: "Mobile Messenger Service; radio controlled couriers".[17] I inquired Kurt why the notion of being radio controlled was so important and he simply replied that before the radio, messengers either needed to go back to the dispatch office for new assignments or had to look for a payphone, call their dispatcher, quickly write down all the orders on their manifest before being able to get back on the road. Being radio controlled the dispatcher and the messenger always maintained a direct link. The dispatcher is able to send new dispatches to the messenger while being on route and the messenger is able to update the dispatcher about his current location and/or situation. This made the work more efficient and faster.

The arrival of the radio also had another benefit for the bike messengers. In the beginning these radios were 'open source', meaning that everyone locking in on a certain frequency could talk to each other and so making it able to meet up with other bike messengers. Where meetings were formerly spread from mouth to mouth by connecting on the street, or just because meetings were standard on fixed days and places, messengers were now able to reach a far wider group within their own profession via radio. Anyone willing to meet up with co-workers from the same or other dispatch services was able to meet up, giving the community a stronger connection and made it more accessible for new comers in the profession.

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[17] Kurt Boone is a 54 years old African- American foot messenger from Queens, New York. Kurt is known for his published poetry about the messenger lifestyle and profession, which is inspired by his 30 years of experience with the messenger world.

Nevertheless, with New York becoming more and more congested due to heavy traffic and more messengers adopting a fixed gear bike the profession still had a very hazardous undertone. Slowly also the messengers grew aware of this and they started advocating bicycle safety. This lead to the rise of an event commonly referred to as *critical mass*. Although originally from San Francisco and founded in 1992, these monthly gatherings also occur in New York. The idea of these gatherings was to create bicycle awareness by gathering as many cyclists as possible.

2.2 When not on the job.

As mentioned earlier, the average active work hours of a messenger are approximately eight hours. Despite the huge physical demanding nature of the job the messengers don't seem to fatigue after their work. Many of the messengers I spoke to have different side projects like poetry, art or music. They use the 'empty' time between deliveries to gain inspiration for these side projects which results in art form that are clearly influenced by the situations they encountered while on the job.

Despite the fact that bike messengers no longer meet in public parks, messenger gatherings are not rare at all. One of the biggest brands used by the bike messengers, Chrome, opens up their store for a gathering every third Thursday of the month. The Chrome parties are a reoccurring gathering for the bike messenger industry. Every third Thursday of the month the Chrome brand store in Lower east side, New York City organize this gatherings where both bike messengers and brand enthusiasts come together.

But the gatherings at the Chrome store are not the only gatherings. The gatherings of the Fixed or Die Crew are held every first Thursday of the month. Just like the gathering in the Chrome store, the Fixed or Die meetings are also held a fixed location, namely a bar named Billy Hurricane in the East Village, Manhattan.

Next to several monthly meetings, the bike messengers also use American national holidays to meet. Holidays like Memorial Day, Independence Day, Halloween and Thanksgiving are often used as a reason to gather. The same is done when new bike messenger lifestyle stores open (like clothing or bicycle shops).

A different meeting hold weekly on Fridays is the meeting at Quick Track messengers where the messengers working at Quick Track messenger service come together to talk about the week and play a gambling card game.

Often the couriers refer to these meetings as 'parties'. Even though there is not always a clear notion of a celebration during the weekly and monthly meeting, the main point of these parties seem to be 'having fun' in general. One thing that all these

meetings have in common is the huge quantities of alcoholic beverages that are being consumed. Alcohol containing drinks like beer and tequila seem to be a wide spread commodity in the bike messenger community. It is safe to state the almost every bike messenger drinks beer, and it almost a must to drink beer during these events.

Racing

Partying is not the only the way in which bike messengers interact outside of their job. One of the biggest forms of gathering are the alleycats. Alleycats are street races held on bikes to show which bike messenger has the most skill, the best knowledge of the city and the most stamina. Most alleycats are randomly organized in certain time periods of the year. But again like most parties, some the alleycats are connected to national holidays or special events.

An alleycat starts at a designated place and time where the competitors then gather and engage in some small talk about their professional and personal life and about their tactics for the race. Although winning an alleycat is mostly about honour, there are also some prices to be won. These prices may vary from t-shirts and/or bicycle parts to a certain amount of money. The competitor checks in at one of the contest officials, often also the organizer of the event, and pays a certain entrance fee. Entrance fees may differ from just a few dollars in small alleycats to larger amounts in the more well know races (like MonsterTrack). This money is used by the organizers to cover some of the expenses for the race and for the price money. After registering the competitor receives a manifest with checkpoints. Each checkpoint needs be visited and signed of by one of the officials in order to complete the race properly. It is up to the competitor in which order the checkpoints are visited. The only rule in an alleycat is that the rider must finish all checkpoints by any means necessary. It is up to the racer to finish because of superior speed or because of personal knowledge of the shortest routes.

After all the competitors are registered the race begins. Depending on the number of racers small discussions can start about the best way to start. There are multiple types of starts and during my fieldwork I encountered three different types: The traffic light start, Flying start and Le Mains style.

The traffic light start is the least chaotic. The competitors line up at a traffic light and when it turns green the race start. The Flying start entails riding up to a certain point and when this point is passed the race starts resulting in a fast acceleration to gain head position. The most chaotic and arguably the most favourite type of start is the le Mains style- start. The concept of this start is taken from the le Main car races in which

the drivers need to run to their car before entering the race. The same is done during an alleycat; the competitors need to leave their bike on the ground on a designated point, and after the start signal run to their bike, pick it up and race of to the first checkpoint.

The average alleycats lasts about an hour, but depending on the race and the experience of the competitors, it can even last for several hours. Although there is a strong feeling of competition during these races many people entering the race respect each other for competing. However, this does not mean that accidents and physical confrontations do not happen. At one alleycat I witnessed the winner of the race was immediately attacked by the runner-up. An argument started and I asked the organizers of the race how they wanted to sort this out. They simply replied with the answer "it's a street race, if they want to fight, they gonna fight".

Despite all the dangers an alleycat entails it is without doubt one of the most favourite pass times of the bike messengers. The alleycats are a combination of gathering and skill display. One of my respondents said that "showing up at an alleycat means business, people know you are not joking around as a messenger then".

The novel 'the immortal class' (2001) by Travis Culley leads to believe that the bike messengers are a special type of individuals who perceive themselves as different from the established society. However several bike messenger who I spoke to, criticised Culley's book for giving a too romantic view of what being a bike messenger entailed and diminishing the job and the lifestyle to a simple break away from regular society.

On the other hand the authors Kidder and Fincham (2005, 2006) give a similar but more elaborate description of who the bike messengers are. Separate from each other Kidder and Fincham describe the profession of bike messengering ideal for actors, writers and freelancers who are in between jobs. Nevertheless I found out that the bike messengers (especially those that started working in the Golden Age) often come from a different background and different social status than Kidder and Fincham describe.

The next paragraph will describe the type of people that feel drawn to the profession and the how my respondents described their lifestyle to me. Although it is hard to describe how a 'stereotypical bike messenger' looks I aim to give an accurate description of my own observations and respondent narratives on how the bike messengers behave and how they give meaning to their own life.

2.3 The job you can get.

Many bike messengers referred to the profession as 'the job you can get' meaning that there are no particular skills needed in order to start a career as a bike messenger. In an interview with Kid I asked what the rush is about being a bike

messenger and he replied by saying: "There's really not a big thrill anymore, but it's a job you can get. "[18] He elaborated on the reasons why he became a bike messenger:

"I was an ex-convict so I came out in 1992 and I got a messenger job. And it was quick, but I took advantage of it. I don't want to go back on the street and I don't want to be around negativity. (…)Ha, you wanna laugh? I was in a work release program in prison and they gave me 8 hours to go outside and find a job. I got the job, I went working for a messenger company. They told that I needed a bike and a bag. I had a duffle bag and my sister's 10 speed 32" frame, so I was killing my back, my knees was just barely missing the handle bars, and it was pink. "

This quote shows that becoming a bike messenger was a way out from prison for Kid. While spending time with Kid he used to tell me al sorts of stories about ex-convicts and drug addicts that used the profession as a clean start. A way of getting out of a spiral of negative energy by any means necessary.

As I stated above, the requirements for becoming a bike messenger are low. The application form of Street Kings asks multiple questions about age and education and references but this is because Street Kings wants to maintain a higher level of messenger quality than other courier services. One of my respondents told me how his 'job interview' went at one of the biggest messenger companies in Manhattan:

"They told me to come on Tuesday morning and they were doing a show on like the weather channel and somewhere there's a little video of me and there was this guy; if you get hit and you don't deliver, you're fired, and if you hit somebody else and they want to sue us, you get fired and if you lose a package you're fired, if you don't get a clear signature for the package you're fired so you know, that was basically the interview".

Throughout my fieldwork I encountered similar stories about individuals simply showing up at a company and given a radio and a dispatch and just start working without any job interview at all.

The stages of messengering

The profession of a bike messenger lacks a formal hierarchical status between the messengers. In other words, there is no official separation made between 'junior bike messenger' and 'senior bike messenger', nor does the wage differ between the

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[18] Kid, a messenger with 18 years of experience, is the founder and owner of the courier company *StreetKings*. He was a big man, often referring to himself as the "Masterking". Kid was born and raised in the Bronx, New York and often would tell stories about the Bronx. He was sentenced to 10 years of prison in the 1980's for reasons he never told me and it was clear to see that he was not proud about his time in prison. It came clear to me that he sees messengering as a second chance and therefore takes the job very serious.

experienced and the inexperienced messengers. However the bike messengers themselves make a clear distinction between the levels of experience. A starting bike messenger is called a 'rookie'. Rookies are seen as inexperienced in riding a bike, inefficient at their work and often lack the 'ethics of a bike messenger'. In the middle of spring when the weather is becoming more pleasant to ride a bike, rookies decide to start the bike messenger profession. Above the rookies are the 'veterans', highly experienced bike messengers that already practise the job for roughly 8 years or more. In between the inexperienced years of a rookie and the skilled veterans there are the people that simply refer to themselves as 'messengers'. The transition from being a rookie to being a messenger is done by working one entire New York winter. Since the New York winters can be very harsh with temperatures under -20 degrees Celsius and snowfall and blizzards, working the winter is seen as a good chance for the rookie to display the skills that were acquired in the previous months. Working a winter can be seen as a rite of passage. Although there are no ceremonies connected to the transition from rookie to messenger there is a strong similarity between this transgression and Pinnock's notion of rites of passage in gang culture (Pinnock 1997). In both cases the individual undergoing the rite has to show dedication for the group (in this case profession) to show his/her worth and will to belong to the group.[19]

The core of the profession is thus build up by rookies, messengers and veterans. But the profession knows two other sub-groups; the flyby and the hipster. These are two groups that are regarded with negative attitude by the core workers. The flybys tend to come around the same time as the rookies, when the weather is turning for the better, however; when the weather is getting cold again a flyby leaves the profession in search of a less harsh and physical demanding job. Flybys are seen as people who steal work (and because of that, also money) away from the 'serious' core messengers. The critique given to them is that they are inexperienced, only looking for money and don't contribute to the lifestyle of the bike messenger. Especially the veteran messengers would look at distrust to flybys because the idea that they take work away is not tolerated. The notion of the flybys also posses a problem for the rookies because they need to work harder to prove that they genuinely want to become true experienced bike messengers.

The second group are the hipsters. The description of a hipster is very ambiguous. The hipster does not have a clear description and cannot be pinned to a

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[19] The rite of passage as described by Pinnock involve theft and in some cases murder. The rookie bike messengers gain their 'messenger-status' by working over the winter at one messenger company.

person. Being a hipster on is an insult and people labelled as hipsters will deny that they are 'a hipster'. I inquired multiple messengers about how to recognize a hipster but none could give a proper description. Reconstructing the different narratives about the hipster I argue that hipsters are a hybrid form between a flyby and a person adopting the commercialized aspects of the bike messenger lifestyle. I will talk more about the hipster further in this chapter.

Seeing the differences between the rookies, veterans and flybys is a very hard task for the untrained eye. I remember looking out of the window from the Street Kings office onto Times Square with Kid standing next to me. From the third floor Kid was able to see the differences between these three categories in the blink of an eye. He would just point a single cyclist and state: "that's a rookie and that's a veteran". When I asked him how he spotted the difference he always replied: "you just know". The difference between the rookies and the veterans is clearly made visible by experience. This experience is made visible through the type of clothing they are wearing, how they are riding their bike and how they disperse the weight on their bike. A rookie for instance would wear clothing that is not suitable for any weather condition or clothing that would not fit tight around the body, enlarging the dangers of getting stuck in a bike part or on a car.

Although the profession itself makes a division based on the experience of a bike messenger the differences do not does not stop there. The profession itself is divided in dozens of smaller subgroups that cluster together under different names. In the next paragraph I will give a description of these subgroups.

2.4 Messenger posies and teams

There are no known statistics about gender differences and ethnic differences in the New York City bike messenger community. However there are several estimates made by the messengers and dispatchers themselves varying from 90/10 % male/female rate and roughly 75% being either African- / Latin- or other non Caucasian- American. Although the ethnical aspects are not regarded as differences (there is no racism found in the bike messenger community) it is remarkable to see that the ethnic backgrounds lead to the creation of small groups of friends who often share the same ethnicity. These small groups are called "posies" or teams. Some examples of well know posies in the bike messenger community are the Lockfoot posy, the Caribbean team and Track or Die. The idea behind these groups is to gather people with a similar life philosophy and attitude towards the profession of bike messengering.

The example of the Lockfoot posy is an interesting example because a young courier named Brandon Lockfoot created it.[20] The group itself is not big; around 5 members, but they all share the same notion of spreading positive energy. To belong to the core of the group is not something that is given to any random individual, Brandon himself has to give his approval of you as a person, an approval he will only give when he knows you as a person and think you can be a valuable addition to the group. After this approval the aspiring members are compelled to get a tattoo on their right index finger that says 'Lockfoot'. This tattoo is a symbol for dedication for, and proof that you are part of the group. The members of the Lockfoot Posy are also very recognizable because of their clothing. Often they are seen wearing ripped jeans, jean vests with a patch saying Lockfoot Posy and trucker hats.

The other group, the Caribbean team, is more open to outsiders. The core members are, as the name would suggest, from a Caribbean background. Similar to the Lockfoot Posy, people engaged with the Caribbean team share a certain life attitude that entails positivity and pride of the bike messenger job. The core members of the Caribbean team appear to be more experienced bike messengers. This can be seen in the type of clothing they wear which revolts mainly about efficiency and comfort while cycling. This is in contrast to the Lockfoot Posy who wear ripped jeans as a statement against established society.

The Track or Die group is a group that is open to anybody who rides fixed gear bikes. Again the core members of this group try it advocate a positive attitude towards life in general. Remarkable about this group is that although a large part of the members are bike messengers, not everybody is a bike messenger. The idea behind the Track or Die group is to advocate cyclist safety in 'strength by number', a concept identical to the critical mass gatherings. The members of Track or Die occasionally gather and than ride through the heavy traffic of Manhattan claiming a space on the road through the simple method of 'being with many'.

When looking more closely at the resemblances of these groups it is evident that the people who organized these groups share the same outlook on life; namely being positive. However this is not always the case. The average, stereotypical bike messenger is portrayed as an unschooled, aggressive wildling by most New Yorkers I have spoken to. It is impossible to deny that there is a great feeling of anger found among bike

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[20] Brandon was 21 when I met him and rather shy. While we were talking he was focussed on making a couple of stickers. He explained that he wanted to become a graphical artist and that messengering was just a medium to get money. He was more interested in riding a bike in general because it would help him think and gain inspiration for his artwork.

messengers. This anger is mainly directed to established society for being too restricting and too narrow minded. But where does this anger come from? As I will explain in the coming chapters the bike messenger profession has changed significantly over the past few years affecting the way bike messengers did their job and with the lowering wages also altered their personal life. Bike messengers referred to their profession as something that is part of your life, a so-called lifestyle. In the next paragraph I will describe the aspects of the bike messenger lifestyle.

2.5 Messenger life/style

As described earlier in this chapter there are three categories of bike messengers. The three categories are described as the ones who adopt the bike messenger lifestyle, a life of freedom and mentally and physically hard work. The messengers belonging to these categories found a way to combine their profession with their personal life, creating a lifestyle in which they are able to conduct their job and have time for their personal interests. Although the common consensus is that bike messengering is a professional sub-culture, the bike messengers themselves seem to take more value in the classification of the profession being a lifestyle than of a sub-culture. I argue that the use of these terms can be distinguished by looking at the main sociological definitions of these concepts as discussed in chapter 1.

Messenger life

Due to the lowering wages and the hard labour the bike messengers constructed their own way of life that gives meaning to the way they perceive the world and their identity. It would be over generalization to state that all the bike messengers live the same life but there are many resemblances to be found between the different individuals. Since the wage is low, a bike messenger is not able to afford high housing prices. Many bike messengers live in the boroughs Brooklyn, Queens and The Bronx where the housing prices are cheaper than Manhattan. In order to keep the rent as low as possible these houses are shared with multiple roommates, depending on the social status of the bike messenger. When a messenger is married and has children, the chances of them living with roommates is far less likely than when a bike messenger is younger and without a relationship.

With regard to economic consumption the messenger life is very minimal and the only products that are bought have a direct effect on job performance, like bike parts and clothing. The reason for spending more money on bicycle performance and clothing than personal wellness is because this work is their income and being insufficient can

cost them their job. The small amounts of money the messengers are able to save they use for personal investment, like saving for education or for means to leave the job. In many cases I noticed that bike messengers hardly have money to pay for a proper meal so many bike messengers go to the local churches in order to get a nutritious meal. In terms of economic consumption the bike messenger life is very low. This is in contrast with the actual practical consumption. Since the economic consumption is kept to a low, the bike messengers try to get as much as they can get for their money's worth. This results in buying huge quantities of products when they are for sale or in some cases going through trash in search of something valuable. When I was buying a hotdog one of my respondents said to me: "you want to see the real messenger life?" He then walked up to the self-service counter and used nearly all resources there to fill his hotdog with cheese, sauces and other toppings. This is an example of the practical consumption. For the lowest prizes he tried to get the most out of the free service from the hot dog company. Also when conducting interviews some of my respondents asked for a small compensation in the form of dinner or beverages. They told me that if I wanted their story I had to 'pay' for it. Since my own financial resources were also low, I managed to settle with them for small returning favours like dinner or drinks when they asked me for this. The reason why they asked me for this compensation is because "time is short and in the time I am spending with you, I could have made money elsewhere". From this statement I argue that although the financial resources in the messenger life are low, they manage to 'hustle' different objects or payments by giving away certain skills. Other examples are making artworks, writing poetry and other profitable side projects.

Although the execution of the work is largely individual and solitary, their personal life is not, as the earlier example of the posies and teams showed. In fact before the economic crisis the bike messengers used to hang out at multiple parks around Manhattan talking about their workday and experiences. During these gatherings the drinking of beer is a huge part of the gathering. Bike messenger life is mainly about having fun as Dominico explained to me:[21] "The world itself is shit, so lets make the best out of it by having fun in what we do". This notion of fun is often combined with heavy drinking and partying. Most of the times when I was present at bike messenger gatherings I would immediately been given beer and prove my "manhood" by drinking it as fast as possible. Some bike messengers keep drinking all day and work while being

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[21] Dominico is a veteran bike messenger from Venezuela. The few time that we met he was always keen on showing me things important for the bike messengers. Dominico always remained mysterious to me; it was not clear to me where he lived or what his social status was. Sometimes he would just pop up, hang out, and disappear, only to pop up again a little time later.

under the influence of alcohol or even drugs. Although this is not a form of behaviour encouraged by the messenger society in general, it is a situation that occurs often enough to mention.

The relationship between client and messenger is also part of the messenger life. The fact that direct contact between client and messenger is lost over the years makes their relation more stressed than it was before. Clientele and/or their dispatcher blame the messenger for dispatches going wrong, directly influencing the behaviour of a messenger in a negative way. When I inquired my respondents about how they felt about being yelled at most of them replied "that's messenger life". Due to the harsh conditions of the messenger life, many messengers claim to be malnourished and fighting for survival. These factors also affect their behaviour in a negative way. Multiple bike messengers claimed to be more competitive in their profession because of the low pay and more aggressive in traffic to protect their bike from accidents.

The Bush-crisis had its direct affect on how the messenger life was lived. Nearly all pre-2008 messengers would look at this time period as the time when being a bike messenger still was a respected job to have and a time in which they were happy about their personal life. When I asked some respondents about how they see their life in comparison that that of the post-2008 messengers they state that they don't know what messenger life is about. As Squid said "They are not that hardcore as we were, they don't know what it is to flip every coin" [22] Joe said: "some of them still live with their parents they don't really know what is to work for a family and gather enough money to get through the month".[23] On their turn the pre-2008 generation is criticized for living too much in the past. Louis explained that: "they dwell too much in the past, they can't change the situation as it is now, so they may as well accept it".[24]

The notion of who lives the true messenger life is one of competition, the one who works the most and the hardest with the hardest life is seen as better representative of messenger life than an individual who has a good life and strong financial resources. In some cases I had the impression that individual bike messengers in fact deliberately were keeping their life on such a low standard, in order to live the messenger life to the fullest, and so hoping to gain respect from their peers. This idea of

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[22] Squid is one of the most notable messengers in New York. A tall, but thin guy, who was a messenger since the early 90's. Squid would look after starting messengers and nowadays advocates bicycle safety on schools and tours around the world to engage in races.

[23] Joe is an African American messenger who does messengering since the early 2000's. Even though he has a masters degree in economics he remained doing messenger work because he likes it.

[24] Louis is a 23-year-old messenger from Latin -American decent. He met him via Dominico, in the centre of Manhattan. He has a no non-sense attitude with regard to his work as a messenger and does it because he wants to save money for his kid and his own education.

searching for the best way to live like a bike messenger is also noted by Brown and Ford. They argue that one of the key aspects to a lifestyle sport is the search for authenticity; the best way a sport can be practiced and advocated that it is part of the individual's identity (p. 63). The competition between bike messengers with regard to their personal lifestyle can be seen as this search for authenticity because the lower the life standard, the better the messenger life is lived.

The aspect of messenger life is an important part of the bike messenger lifestyle, but as argued above this lifestyle has a second aspect that makes an individual a 'full bike messenger'. The concept of messenger style I will explain in the next part.

Messenger style

Messenger style is the result of a combination between work ethics (the behaviour aspect that defines lifestyle) and the commercialization (the consumption aspect that defines lifestyle). The combination of these two terms creates a stereotypical apparel and mode of behaviour typical for the average bike messenger and a type of behaviour created by the profession itself. Once again I emphasize the fact that not all bike messengers fit in these concepts but that it is an accepted view of my respondents about what being and looking like a bike messenger entails. Furthermore the recent commercialization of this profession created a niche for a new type of individual to arise, namely the earlier mentioned 'hipster'. As I will explain the concept of the hipster is a person that adopted aspects of the messenger style but *not* of the messenger life.

The aspect of behaviour comes to expression in messenger style through out the work ethics the messengers display. The slogan of StreetKings NYC is "a cheap messenger is not good, and a good messenger is not cheap". This slogan was created and adopted by Kid for two reasons. The first reason is to display the fact that StreetKings is a more expensive dispatch company in regard to delivery rates, however for this higher price potential costumers get a high service standard in combination with very experienced messengers who work more efficient and therefore faster than competing companies. The second reason to adopt this slogan is to advocate the concept of proper messengering; an efficient workflow in which the client does not need worry about their dispatch. Kid and Carlos both claimed that this is the way a messenger company and its employees should operate; fast and efficient deliveries.[25] In order to achieve this form of

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[25] Carlos Ramirez was born and raised in Mexico and left with his grandmother to the United States when he was 19. During my field he was my main respondent. As founder of UrbanCyclistsWorldwide and messenger working at StreetKings, Carlos wants to connect the community of bike messengers by gathering information about anything related to cycling. Throughout his website he wants to make the world aware about cycling and the messenger lifestyle.

messengering, Kid shaped every new coming messenger to this image by a strict yet seemingly fair regime in the company. Kid himself did not accept mistakes made by his employees but instead of directly firing them, he would give an explanation on how he thought similar mistakes could be avoided in the future.

With regard to the shaping of behaviour Kid is well aware of all the personalities of his employees, know which task he could give to which messenger. But kid also said: "A bike messenger is polite and courteous". Although these words are synonyms he stressed the importance of politeness towards clientele and others in general. "The bike messenger profession is a hard profession and with the rates of a delivery getting lower and lower I try to stand out be providing good and trustable messengers". Kid's opinion is that messengers should pay attention to the little things like keeping doors open for clientele, a combination between informal and formal conversation when engaging the client and most important overall respect for people who have work in general. The employees of StreetKings do not only display these examples, Kid himself was willing to be a strong example by adopting the aspect of being polite and courteous. As Kid knows about himself he was keen on swearing, however as he said himself "I can't be in here or out there swearing to everybody, that will drive clientele away". In order to overcome this characteristic he had a little swear jar in his office in which every time when he cursed he put a dollar. But this swear jar was not only meant for him, but for everybody that was present at the office at that time. Even I, as an outside observer, had to donate the occasional dollar in the swear jar for cursing, and so did his employees. When this jar was full, the money was used to either buy a little treat of the employees or for the clientele in order to maintain a close relationship between company and client and company and employees.

The work ethics of StreetKings are clear; a bike messenger should be polite and thoughtful of others. Other companies however do not share this vision of 'the gentleman bike messenger'. As Kidder's research (2011) also showed there are numerous accounts of bike messengers swearing and perceiving the common worker as different and as a result respect the people outside of the profession less for whom they are. In these cases the dispatch offices did not seem to intervene in order to straighten relationships between messenger and client. As multiple respondents stated they get a large amount of freedom and they use this freedom to out their frustration gather in the messenger life. Hence the behaviour of messengers in the messenger style can be seen as clear result from the events of the messenger life.

This connection leads to a separation between how the behaviour is regulated throughout the two different aspects of messenger lifestyle. In the messenger life the

messengers are free to do and act as they please, the behaviour in the messenger style on the other hand is constructed and guided by the way a messenger company likes to portrait their own image. The dispatchers managed to shape this behaviour by paying little attention to the personal problems of the messengers and have them focus on the work alone. Although many companies are not able regulate their employees when they are on the streets, StreetKings employees cycle with the logo of the company on their bag and/or jersey. Kid occasionally used to inquire clientele about the way they were treated by his employees and would address the designated messenger in case of misbehaviour.

It is clear that there is a commonly accepted code of ethics in the bike messenger profession; a messenger keeps the personal problems separated from work. But this mode of behaviour is related to executing the profession of picking up and delivering. Another form of expressing behaviour and the identity that comes with it is through the way messengers ride their bikes. The concept of riding the bike in traffic is contextualized as the word 'flow' by Kidder (2011). Kidder states that flow entails all aspects of riding the bike in traffic; from understanding how traffic work to finding a mode of riding that portraits the identity of the particular messenger (Kidder: 74-76).

The behaviour of the courier in traffic is what a bike messenger separates from the 'standard urban cyclist'. As I stated earlier a messenger has to get "from A to B accordingly" but the difference between riding like a maniac and a controlled cyclist is very small. 'Accordingly' means that the messenger has to behave in traffic as appropriate in each specific situation and the 'right' action in each situation is assessed on the moment with experience of riding in traffic being a vital factor. By looking for the fastest route and knowing what the body is capable of in which situation are crucial factors for adopting the messenger style of riding.

The messenger style of riding is picking up with the flow of traffic. Although New York City is congested and with traffic lights at nearly every intersection, one would think that a bike messenger is compelled by law to stop at every traffic light. A messenger who is able to pick up with the flow of traffic can gather enough speed and get caught up in what some messengers refer to as 'a green lane'. A green lane means that all traffic lights on the avenue are green and so the bike messenger can quickly cycle through all these traffic lights with a smaller chance of getting hit by other traffic that has right way and putting the risk of a fine at a minimum.

Picking up with the flow is not the only aspect to riding messenger style. Another aspect of riding messenger style is using the space between traffic for quick manoeuvring and personal safety. Dominico and Edmund explained to me how this flow

works and what the best way is to capture and maintaining the flow is.[26] Edmund explained that it could be useful to learn how to 'read car language'. As explained earlier, small factors can determine the actions of a car driver and their passengers. Dominico thought me that enough people who ride a car in New York are overwhelmed and scared to drive in the street and as a result make mistakes. He pointed out that if I wanted to ride as a messenger in New York I needed to let go of my own fear and adopt a secure riding style (maybe even arrogant) to claim my personal space on the street. The same was said to me by Roti and Louis who told me that I should not be scared of minor collisions like hitting side view mirrors,[27] as Louis said: "If you keep on riding, what's the problem? Make a turn into a one way street and you're gone, they never going to find you anymore". Although this may seem as irresponsible behaviour for outsiders of the community adopting this style of riding is crucial for messengers to execute their job for personal safety and maybe even more important status within the community. A good messenger is seen as a person who knows the flow of the city well enough to make split second decisions without endangering themselves or others.

Not only knowledge of the traffic is important but also the type of bike a courier chooses to ride is important for their perception and execution of the concept flow. As I stated before a bike messenger can choose two types of bikes: the free wheel or the fixed gear. The advantage over the freewheel is that it is more safe to drive since these bike have brakes and the fixed gear is a low maintenance bike that does not have brakes. However since the rear gear of the fixed gear is attached to the rear wheel, coasting is impossible giving the rider a more direct feel over the bike. But because these bikes have no breaks reading car language and understanding traffic flow is more important than when riding a freewheel bike. When observing the streets and the differences in riding between the messengers who ride fixed or free wheel I noticed that the riding style of the fixed gear is much more fluent. Big Al explained to me that the fixed gear is not made for breaking so you try to avoid any situation in which there is a chance you might have use the brake (in the case of the fixed gear this is called 'skidding'),[28] but avoiding braking situations is best done by holding on to the flow for as long as possible.

Riding messenger style is the notion of being able to understand traffic flow and most preferably riding a fixed gear bike to display skill and control over other cyclists.

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[26] Edmund is bike messenger who was trained by Kid himself. Being in his early 30's, he did not know what he wanted to do in life with regard to education or work. I met him at StreetKings when he met with Kid and Carlos. He was a happy figure and part of the Lockfoot Pose

[27] Roti is a young messenger from African- American decent. He is good friends with Louis and I met the two together. Roti actually became a messenger because of Louis and his will to loose weight.

[28] Skidding: The sudden stopping of pedalling on a fixed gear bike, blocking the hind wheel and by doing so stopping the bike.

The behaviour constructed by these elements can be seen as reckless by outsiders but by insiders as the preferable method to execute the job. However not everyone is in favourite of this method of riding. Kid told me that he saw to many accidents happen because of inexperience and mistakes by others. He therefore advocates the point that a messenger should always use a single speed freewheel for safety and the possibility to brake. In fact he explained that he rather would not hire a messenger that rides fixed gear to the safety aspect and if they prefer to ride fixed gear, they are compelled to get a brake on their bike.

Here another aspect of behaviour with regard to messenger style comes to play: the notion of safety and safe behaviour. This is also an aspect where there is a substantial difference to be found between the pre- and post-2008 generations. The pre-2008 generation are very much in favour of personal safety like wearing helmets, having brakes and picking up with the flow rather than creating a flow by aggressively claiming a place on the road. The post-2008 generation does exactly the opposite by not having breaks on their fixed gear, not wearing a helmet and aggressively claiming their own space on the road. There are multiple explanations for this different perception of messenger safety. One explanation is the difference in perceiving the object fixed gear bike between the two generations, a difference I will describe in chapter 3. The second explanation is how the individuals from the two generations perceive their own identity with regard to the profession, a difference I will elaborate on in chapter 4. The third explanation is related to the 'search for authenticity' as earlier mentioned. Throughout the years the pre-2008 generation gained a substantial amount of experience and came to a point in which they figured they didn't need helmets and brakes anymore. However with the messengers getting older and having families they became more aware of their own dangerous behaviour and started to advocate messenger safety in order to learn the young generation about the dangers of the profession. Archive footage of the older generation shows how well known and influential messengers ride without helmets and fixed gear bikes without brakes as a display of skill. The post-2008 generation sees the old generation as role models of how to display messenger style but look at the archive footage as the way it was supposed to be. Discussion I witnessed between old en new generation often involved questions about what the veterans did and looked when they were rookies. The new generation adopts the descriptions given by the old generation as "the way it is supposed to be".

Bike messenger style is not only constructed by the way a messenger rides and behaves in traffic, apparel and the consumption of bike messenger related products are also very important in terms of creating a proper messenger style. The stereotypical

bike messenger wears old, yet comfortable, shoes, shorts in the summer and thermo pants in the winter, a shirt or jersey (depending on the season) and has a messenger bag displaying the logo of the company or a personal bag. Although all my respondents denied that there is a specific messenger style, a way a messenger should dress or not dress, it is clear that messenger have a certain way of looking. Kurt Boone jokingly remarked that a bike messenger looks harder than the common New Yorker in terms of filthy face, old clothes and the suffering of the hard labour. The apparel of the bike messengers is created through the aspect of consumption. In order 'to look like' a bike messenger one has to buy the objects a bike messenger is commonly seen with. Therefore the economic consumption with regard to the messenger style is far higher than the economic consumption found in the messenger life. Most of the money the messengers earn goes directly to apparel made to make the profession as comfortable as possible. Since the economic resources are low the practical consumption is also high. Each bought object is used until it is well beyond repair. This results in worn of shoes and trousers as well as gloves and helmets. Messenger style consumption is directed at apparel that is able to withstand weather and work elements. But since messengers are often related to 'street culture' their way of clothing had an effect on multiple clothing styles found in popular contemporary culture. Kidder argues that the rolled up trouser sleeve adopted by hip-hop artists is a style that originated from the bike messengers who rolled up their sleeve to protect their pants from getting caught in the bike chain (2006).

With bike messengering becoming more popular as a clothing style, the commercialization of the profession started. Although there is not a clear year in which this commercialization actually started the earliest accounts date back to 2004. Carlos showed me a photo in which he was model for the Swiss watch manufacturer Swatch. In this photo he is seen wearing a swatch Irony as he rides through New York traffic as a messenger. I was a sales employee for Swatch back in 2007-2008 and we used to sale the Irony line as "the toughest watch on the market with features of being water and shock proof as well as being fashionable". The relation between sturdy manufacturing and fashion is seen in the photo Carlos showed me. The hard nature of the profession requested a watch that was robust and able to withstand harsh environments, just like the messengers do. This photo shows how the profession was used to sale products for the 'robust and adventure seeking' individual.

A different account comes from the company Chrome, a brand that has always directed at making products for bike messengers and incorporating bike messenger experiences in their products. Kurt explained how Chrome went from a small apparel

company to a market leader for bike messengers because of the promotion a professional skater and bike messenger did in the early 2000's. Kurt explained that this particular messenger always used to wear Chrome apparel and with his coming to fame in the professional skating scene questions by admirers about the Chrome brand gave this company a growth boost both within the messenger and other societies.

By 2012 Chrome is one of the market leaders with shops located in New York, San Francisco, Portland and Chicago. Although their product are directed at messengers in special, also non-messengers adopted this brand as a mode of affection and showing relatedness to the messenger profession. However, most of the objects made by Chrome are very expensive and in most cases too expensive for the messengers to buy, therefore Chrome stores give a 50 percent discount to individuals registered with a messenger company. Single individuals do not get this discount. The popularity of Chrome as a brand know for their sturdy apparel (especially their bags and shoes) was spread under multiple cycling enthusiasts especially those who adopted the stereotype 'figura' of the bike messengers even though they never did any messenger work themselves. This is often seen as the birth of the hipster; a person using the commercialized aspects of the bike messenger profession to portrait an identity they did not acquire through actually working as a messenger. Since the hipster is often not connected to a messenger company they have to pay full price for the products, which in the eyes of the messengers means they have money to spend, and this is not in line with the messenger life. As Jose noticed " a true messenger does not have the money to spend 250 dollars on a bag". Because of the affection the hipster displays with the messenger style by wearing similar clothing and objects, it is hard for an outsider to notice the difference between a hipster and a messenger. This poses a problem with regard to the notion of identity construction throughout lifestyle for the bike messengers.

2.6 False messengers

The messenger life and messenger style are two different aspects which both need to be lived and adopted, in order to be seen as a fully accepted bike messenger. Despite the discussion going on within the bike messengers community between the pre- and post-2008 generation about what the true messenger life is both parties agree on the fact that a hipster is not a messenger and can be seen as a threat to the messenger profession due to the behaviour and identity a hipster portraits. Common conceptions of the hipster are that it are young people with money pretending to be poor and only pick up the messenger style because it is a popular clothing style in New York at the moment. According to the narratives a stereotype hipster wears expensive cycling clothing, rides

a fixed gear bike because they identify that with messenger lifestyle but without the knowledge and experience of a bike messenger and has no mentionable experience as a messenger. As stated before: for an outsider, a hipster and a messenger look the same. Because the hipsters also tend to imitate the flow created by a bike messenger in traffic while cycling, but with the lack of experience, a hipster creates hazardous situations, which are than generalized by outsiders and applied to every person who looks like a messenger. This does not mean that the messengers themselves do not create dangerous situations but often critique on the riding style of messenger is originated from experience with hipsters.

Kidder argued that the rise of the hipster started in 2002 but the effect of their existence clearly came to display in 2010 (Kidder 2011: 59). In fact the hipsters started to take over alleycats and caused more and more frustration with the messengers. The frustration rose to a climax when the MonsterTrack, an alleycat held by bike messengers in which only fixed gear bikes may enter, was cancelled due too many hipsters. Although the official reason to cancel the race was the death of fellow bike messenger two weeks earlier and a part of the organization found it un-respectful to continue the race, Cooper explained to me that the starting point of the race was relocated to a secret location that was only told to messengers who were accepted as part of community.

In 2012 the hipsters still create feelings of frustration and are being blamed for killing the profession and the industry due to their reckless behaviour and false identification with the messenger profession. As mentioned earlier this chapter, being a hipster is regarded as an insult and especially the rookies put effort in showing their identity as a true messenger by adopting the lifestyle as quick and as authentic as possible.

2.7 Conclusion
Although the profession only exists for some 30 years, the messengers made a clear ethical code for themselves and a lifestyle, which defines them as a person and separates them from the other. The answer to the question 'who are the bike messengers?' is a very open answer. Since it is 'the job you can get', anybody is able to become a bike messenger. However, in order to be fully accepted as a bike messenger by the community itself, one has to go through several stages in the hierarchy of the messenger world. Furthermore a messenger has to accept and live the two aspects of the messenger lifestyle, The actual life of the bike messenger: a life with low economic recourses and low economic consumption but using the recourses one has to create high practical consumption, and adopt the aspect of messenger style: an identity shaping

factor mediated by the ethical codes of the profession itself. Knowing these factors leads to the question: Who feel drawn to this profession? To answer this question one has to understand the difference between the pre-2008 generation of messengers who created the lifestyle as it is in contemporary times by constructing a meaning for a relatively new job through out their social and economic background. The old generation is often low schooled and sees messengering as a second chance in life and as a profession to give meaning to their life. The new generation however, knows about the hard lifestyle and voluntarily adopt this lifestyle as theirs. Although not much has changed with regard to the social and economic background of these individuals, it is striking to see how more bike messenger have a college degree and so a proper education offering them a broader job perspective.

In the next chapter I will describe these different relationships and explain in depth what the fixed gear bike means for the two generations as well as show how the events between 9-11 and the Bush-crisis have changed the profession with regard to how it is executed.

CHAPTER 3: September 11th and the bike as an object

One of the major impacts on New York as a city was the terrorist attack of September 11th 2001. Due to new safety measures implemented in the years after the attacks, the bike messengers lost a great amount of freedom while conducting their job. But not only the effects of the terrorist attacks changed the way the profession was executed. In the years leading to the crisis (2001 until 2008) many other factors changed with regard to how outsiders understand the bike messengers and how the bike messengers met. These same changes had influence with regard to how the messenger lifestyle, as discussed in the previous chapter, changed and how the bike as an object lost it's meaning with the coming of a new generation of bike messengers.

This chapter will focus on the questions how the period between September 11th 2001 and the beginning of the economic crisis in 2008 influenced the messenger community and how the bike changed as an object of meaning.

3.1 The day that changed everything

Due to the new electronic innovations adopted by the messenger profession the job became more efficient and faster. Multiple messengers argued that during the beginning of the 21st century messengering was almost at the highest point of popularity. However when the terrorist attacks of September 11th destroyed the Twin Towers (one of the main sources of work for the messengers) and killing 3500 people (allegedly mainly clientele of the messengers) the once so successful profession of bike messengering changed drastically.

Despite the fact that the attacks where committed by Muslim extremists, the companies located in New York started to get aware of safety in general. This resulted in doormen being more cautious about who they let into the buildings slowing the bike messengers down because they needed to be checked for potential hazards. Doormen were now asking for identification before the messengers could enter a building. During this period the bike messenger profession was still big and this led to messengers standing in line before entering the building. In order to streamline this process companies compelled the couriers to drop their objects of in the central mailroom. This decision was made for two reasons: the first was to stop the growing lines at the main entrance of the building and second because the mailrooms are often located in the basement of a building, hence making the risk of potential threats to a minimum because the object is located further from the core of the building, providing more safety for the people working there.

This change had both an advantage and disadvantage for the bike messengers. The advantage was that now they had a place where they could incidentally meet and have a brief conversation. Because of these short meetings, individuals that are seen more often have a better chance of being accepted in the community of bike messengers. The disadvantage is that the messengers were now also relying on the speed of the mailroom workers instead of their own speed. During my observations it was not uncommon that an angry client would call the dispatcher with the question why the object has not been received yet. When the dispatcher inquired the messenger responsible for the dispatch, the messenger was already cycling to the next assignment, often coming to the conclusion that the people in the mailroom did not work fast enough to get the object with the right person. Another disadvantage of the mailroom was the loss of the direct contact between the client and the messenger. Clients cannot see who is delivering their goods and therefore a loss of intimacy disappeared, something that is important for the messenger ethics, as discussed in chapter 1. By loosing this personal contact, potential clients started looking at the company that is the quickest and more important; cheapest.

The growing competition

Because of the 9/11 attacks and the resulting devastation, a large part of the clientele of the bike messengers was destroyed or seriously crippled and as a result many messenger services went bankrupt. The messenger services that managed to survive engaged in a fierce competition concerning the best and fastest service. This in combination with the loss of direct contact between messenger and client resulted in messenger companies that were focussing more on the output of their personnel than on the work ethics, resulting in a growing work pressure on the messenger, which affected the work ethics and their concern for traffic safety. It might be clear that traffic safety was never a priority issue with bike messengers but with employers now concerning more about the speed and clientele satisfaction, the messengers were almost driven by their employers to display hazardous behaviour in traffic.

During this same period something changed in benefit for cyclists in general in New York City. Lance Armstrong just won the Tour de France several times.[29] As one dispatcher explained: "These events, maybe in combination of the critical mass, led to the American people to pick up biking and New York City decided to build cycling roads"

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[29] A professional cyclist who survived cancer and won the Tour de France 7 times in a row before being stripped of his titles due to a doping scandal.

With the construction of these roads both bike messengers and recreational cyclists had a safe place on the road where they could ride.

New York City still had a very high crime rate at the beginning of the 21st century and the municipality decided lower this. By starting renovation and rehabilitation projects in multiple areas to increase housing prices and lower the drug use and so make the neighbourhoods more interesting for wealthy people and families, the city was able to lower the crime rate in the borough Manhattan. But with the growing competition and increasing lower wages of the bike messengers, the couriers living in Manhattan could not afford their housing and were forced to move to the outer boroughs Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx, resulting in messengers living further away from their work area; Manhattan.

During this same time telecom providers who contracted the dispatcher's radio-phones found out that bike messengers use the open source connection on the radios in order to meet. Using this information they tried to make profit from this open source by charging the messenger service extra for having an open radio. Of course in an industry that is already struggling, many services decided to choose a closed connection, so that communication remained within the circuit of the messenger service. Since the open source was a medium for meeting others, many bike messengers got cut off from connection with their peers.

A critical mass gone haywire

Although more attention was paid to bicycle awareness, critical masses were still organized. The original idea of addressing bicycle awareness was slowly changing to a more political meaning. When the 2004 republican convention took place in New York, many people attending the critical mass took this as an opportunity to protest against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Eventually this protest ended in severe riots in which more than 1800 people were arrested by the New York City Police Department. Despite the fact that the bike messengers were not directly the causers of these riots, it influenced the relation between police and the messengers. The police, with whom they always were able to keep a neutral connection, saw every cyclist as a potential threat and thus are treated that way. Where the bike messengers were given right of way in many occasions, the police now carefully watched them and ticketed them for offences they could have gotten away with a few years earlier.

3.2 The change of an object.

The most important attribute for a bike messenger is the bicycle. The bike is what makes the messenger a *bike* messenger and profession guidelines state that every bike messenger must have his/her own personal bike. With the arrival of the track-bike, the bike became something more than just an object needed for work; it became an object for displaying skill and control over traffic. The track bike (or fixed gear) became widely adopted in the bike messenger community. The advance of the track bike is the extreme low maintenance this type of bike requires. The bike basically exists out of a frame, a handle bar, two wheels, a saddle, two gears with a chain and pedals. The number of parts that can break during work hours is the absolute minimum. The highest risk of parts that can break are the inner-tubes, causing a flat tire. However since most bike messengers always carry a set of spare tires with them they can easily fix this problem while still at work. When other parts than inner tubes break, the repairs often do not cost that much, so the bike also helps the messenger save money on more expensive parts. This is a huge contrast with other bikes like road bikes or mountain bikes that require substantial maintenance in order to work smooth.

But a fixed gear has one other difference that makes it stand out from conventional bikes; it is supposed to be ridden without brakes. Since the bike cannot coast, the rider has direct control over the speed of the bike, making braking in a sense obsolete when the rider has enough experience with regard to traffic situations. However, New York City traffic is very chaotic and the bike messengers have a high chance of getting doored while riding through traffic.[30] Therefore the fixed gear bike was adopted as symbol of experience and control, being able to ride on a fixed gear bike symbolized experience and control over the bike.

But the bike is more than a symbol of control and experience; the bike is an extension of the bike messenger's own identity. Many bike messengers customize their bike to so that the object is part of how the community sees them. This paragraph aims to explain what the relation is between the bike messengers and their bicycle. I will especially focus on the fixed gear bike because there is a difference separating the pre-2008 bike messengers from the post-2008 messengers with regard to how they see their bike in general. Nevertheless the difference is not only visible through the notion of the fixed gear bike, it is also the notion of how they see cycling in general as an activity and as a construction of their identity.

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[30] Getting doored is the action when a bike messenger is hit by an opening car-door.

Next to that this paragraph will explore and argue how the bicycle as an object is part of the bike messenger's own identity and how this object is used to give meaning to their own profession and the lifestyle that comes with this profession. By looking at general accepted theories (discussed in chapter 1) about the relation between objects and their meaning and objects and shaping of identity I will give an overview of how the bike messengers use their bicycle as an object that symbolises their relation with the profession. This relation will apply especially for the fixed gear because, as this chapter shows, it is one of the objects that characterizes a bike messenger.

3.3 The messengers and their bikes

During an interview with StonedTone I inquired him about his bike and he said:

"The square build, was a present from the builder, Lance, came on my birthday with the frame and I was in a state of shock. And the Pinnerello, I got that from the super of my girlfriends building. I guess he used to ride road races back in the 90's, he sold me the whole bike for 100 dollars, but there was work that needed to be done, I needed a new crank bracket and everything on that was (special brand) that was not cheap and I needed to save money for that. And the affinity low pro. I really don't choose to speak about that. But I love that bike. But I don't want to talk about how I got that bike. "

Although being mysterious about how he got one of his bikes it is clear that StoneToneowns multiple bikes each having its own story.[31] In case of the 'Squire Build'[32] it was a gift. By saying "I was in a state of shock" it is clear that he wanted this bike for a while. With regard to the Pinello bike, it was just a bike he was able to get for a cheap price and through out the interview I noticed that this bike is just a spare bicycle. The narrative Carlos tells about getting one of his bikes is rather similar:

"Well this guy was on the street then I saw him and I told him, that's a nice bike and it was a Pannasonic, black, they don't do that no more, so I said like nice bike. And he was like yeah yeah, but I'm tired with…… If you gave me…. . I guess it was 125, or 100, or 150. But it was no more than 150, I will sell to you right now. And I was working. And it was my last job, or something like that, and it was on Friday. So the guy was like, I sell it to you for 150 or 125 and I was like, Alright and I got paid and I bought it so I went home with two bikes. ".

Both narratives from Carlos and StoneTone entail the impulse buying of a bike that they liked just by the looks of it. But just as the story of the Squire Build from

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[31] StoneTone is messenger since the late 90's, early 2000's. He is from African American decent and I estimated him to be in his late twenties, early thirties.

[32] A cycling brand founded by an ex-messenger; Lance.

StoneTone, Carlos also got a new bike while I was conducting my fieldwork. This particular bike was given to him because of his reputation as a veteran bike messenger in New York. The special feature about this bike was that it is a replica of the bike used in the movie *Premium Rush* (2012). This movie had a special value for Carlos because he believed that this Hollywood produced movie about bike messengers would show a different perspective of the profession and so help to put the bike messenger profession in a different, more positive perception.

Another thing that can be noticed from the narratives of StoneTone and Carlos is they both have multiple bikes. The explanation of StoneTone shows that he has three different bikes and Carlos also has multiple bikes. The owning of multiple bikes is quite common within the pre-2008 generation (where StoneTone and Carlos both belong to). I saw the same at Edmunds's apartment where he had a total of four bikes. The most extreme example can be made when I met with Brandon at his house. When entering the main hallway there were many bikes and bikes frames, which were all owned by him and his roommates. The reason to have multiple bikes is quite obvious: always being able to ride and do your job. By having multiple bikes the chances of not able to work due to a broken bike are smaller because there are spare ones. But Edmund also explained to me that it sometimes is a matter of emotion. When I met with him and we were getting ready for a short ride through the Bronx he choose the bike he rode that day based on the weather and his personal state of mind. Like he said: "I feel a bit tired and stuff, so I want an easy bike to ride". He then chose one of his lighter bikes with a lower gear that would cost him less effort and had a brighter colour. The colour, he said, was just because he liked the way it looked in combination with the light that day.

Although messengers belonging to the pre-2008 generation have multiple bikes, the messengers that are part of the post-2008 generation often own only one bike. Roti gave the reason for this by simply saying: "if it rides, it rides and I don't want to spend huge amounts of money, which I don't have, on stuff I do not need". He was supported in this statement by Louis, who elaborated by saying: "Having one bike keeps your mind clear and more aware, you don't go around doing stupid stuff with it because you only have one".

The difference in the number of bikes owned by each messenger and to which generation they belong leads to believe that the post-2008 generation tend to be more careful with their bikes. However this idea is rejected during a group conversation I had with multiple veteran messengers who came to the conclusion that owning a certain number of bikes is also representative for the work ethic that a messenger portraits. One messenger said that rookies who called in sick because their bike was broken

aggravated him because it would give him more work for reasons which, in his eyes, are ungrounded. The number of bikes owned by a messenger is hence representative for the work ethic displayed in the eyes of the pre-2008 generation. Owning multiple bikes means more serious engagement with the profession in their eyes because you are eliminating the chance of missed workday due to technical problems.

But the notion of having multiple bikes is not only useful for work itself. I observed that during alleycats some messengers use other bikes than they would use for work. Explanations for this difference are based on the showing of style and technical aspects. As mentioned earlier, the alleycats are mainly about showing skill and personal style as an extension of the personal identity. For the competitors it is important to show their style by racing on a certain type of bike. I therefore argue that a bike messenger's identity can differ with regard to the social situation a messenger indulges him/herself in. This relates to the shifting of identity as noted by Kopytoff due to the moving between different social setting settings (personal life versus professional life), changing the meaning of the object. A clear example of this case is 'The king of New York': a messenger who wanted to stay 'below the radar', meaning that he does not want to be interviewed or related with the media aspect of the bike messenger profession (like photos or other footage). The king of New York kept himself below the radar in his professional life but was well know in the social life of the alleycats. Being a fierce adversary who was nearly impossible to beat in races, he acquired strong popularity within the messenger community and is well know for his antics while racing. Carlos knew by the type of bike where this person was when he saw it and what he was doing since he had a clear distinction between a bicycle for racing and a bicycle for messengering.

Another interesting observation about messengers and the bicycle as display of their identity can be noted from that account. Carlos was able to recognize one of his fellow messengers be his bike. This form of recognition is something that occurs more often within the messenger community because the bikes are customized by means of colour, stickers and parts. During my fieldwork I used Carlos' bicycle and especially veteran messengers immediately recognized this bike as Carlos' bicycle. When I met with Squid the first question he asked about the bike was: "That's Carlos' bike, how did you got it?" This question shows two reasons for why a customization of the bike is seen as necessary for the bike messengers. The first reason is to portrait the individual style of the messenger, as the earlier example of the shirt, given by Dittmar, Beatie and Friese. The second reason for customization is related to the high bicycle theft in New York City. Nearly all messengers told stories about how quick a bicycle gets stolen and how easy it

is for bike thieves to steal a bike. One messenger stated that some bicycle thieves pray on messengers deliberately because due to the rush of the job and not being allowed to take the bicycle with them while transferring the dispatch to the receipting individual, bike messengers (especially rookies) rush the locking of their bike by attaching it wrongly to an object or locking it in the wrong way so that bicycle thieves can quickly cut the lock on the street or even pick the bike up from the street when it is not locked to an object. Having a more recognizable bike results in a more recognizable description of the object and when spreading pictures of stolen bikes within the messenger community this sometimes results in a bike being found and being returned to the rightful owner. Therefore messengers decorate their bikes with noticeable colours like lime green, blue, white and other colours that are not often seen on the majority of the bikes in New York City and recognizable wheels in order to make their bike as noticeable and unique as possible. Nevertheless the vibrant styles of many messenger bikes lead to a more desired object for bicycle thieves. This is of course a paradox that by making a bike more noticeable to fend off theft, it becomes an object more prone to theft. An explanation for this paradox can be given that it is a result of the commercialization of the messenger style (as explained in chapter 1). The special types of bikes often used for customization are expensive, both for messengers and enthusiast of the bike. Therefore there is a large second hand market with lower prices than conventional stores. Although the legal origin of these bikes is highly debatable, people still feel attracted to these second hand and black markets.

The risk of the bicycle being stolen in combination with the high prices of new bikes and low economic resources leads to a different symbol in the bike messenger profession namely the bicycle lock. The type of lock a bike messenger chooses differs with each individual, but the most popular types are the chain and the U-lock with each heaving its advantages and disadvantages. The chain lock is a hardened metal chain commonly around one meter long (although shorter and longer versions obviously exist). The advantage of these locks is that they are extremely difficult to cut without any heavy power tools and they broaden the number of objects a messenger can lock his bike to, due to the length of the chain. However this lock is very heavy (some weighing up top five kilograms) and large. Next to that it is uncomfortable to carry with you since there is hardly any space in the bag to fit it and it has to be carried on either the body or the bike. Common styles of wearing a chain lock are either strapped around the waist as a belt or over on side of the shoulder. Kid was able to tell the amount of experience of a messenger and in which age the messenger started just by looking at how the chain was

worn by a passing messenger. He explained that only rookies would and 'parolies'[33] wear this chain as a necklace. "But that kills your neck" he explained. In the early 2000-nds it became popular to wear this chain as a belt, but as Kid explained: "you had these dumb asses locking it up and then they lost their key, so you had this stupids on the street not able to lock their bike since they were locked". The modern accepted way to wear a chain is to swing it around one shoulder and switch with shoulder when every time the lock has to worn again to minimize shoulder pains.

The other lock type, the U-lock, often preferred by the post-2008 generation and fixed gear-riding messengers due to its lightweight and small size. The disadvantages are also the size and the smaller chain. The U-lock is, as its name suggests, shaped like a U with a steel brace connecting the two loose points. Sizes may vary from large (roughly 50 cm) to very small (5 cm). The space in the U is used to secure the bike but this poses a problem with regarding to size. The smaller the lock the harder it is to 'twist'[34] a lock open but also makes the number of objects to attach the bike to smaller. A larger U gives more objects being able to lock up to but also give more room to twist the lock. The second disadvantage of this lock is the small diameter of the U, making it easier to cut.

The best way to lock up a bike is a never-ending argument between bike messengers. Some prefer the chain; others the U-lock and some prefer both. Rule of thumb however is that if a thief is able to get the bike flat on the ground, they can break any type of lock. Messengers try to avoid this situation by locking their bikes with as much as possible together or by literally hanging it some where on the street. The act of locking together is only done with meetings because being locked by others while on the job is a deadly sin. The object of attachment is also important. Messengers prefer to attach their bike to either a lamppost, bus stop cabin or a full-grown tree with a thick stem. When I attached my bike to a tree that was seen as unfit for a lock up by a messenger I jokingly remarked that nobody is going to chop down a tree before stealing the bike, he simply replied saying "Than you don't know New York yet rookie, once they broke a signpost to get my bike".

Although the lock is not a direct symbol of identity nor status or experience for the messenger profession, I argue that, as social researcher, I am able to distinguish differences with regard to work speed and experience based on the type of lock a messenger uses. As I pointed out the post-2008 generation preferred the U-lock to the chain because of its low weight. However it requires more time to search for a proper

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[33] People just coming out of prison.

[34] Twisting is the act of placing a hard bar in the lock and twisting the bar until the metal of the U shape breaks.

object to lockup to than it when locking up with a chain, slowing the delivery time. Pre-2008 messengers argued that rookies prefer this method because they prefer comfort to lowering the risk of theft. Furthermore, good U-Locks are expensive and here the discussion about economic resources and being able to afford such a lock because they don't live the messenger life comes to play again. However the post-2008 generation argues that buying an expensive lock one time is better than buying an expensive bike multiple times due to theft, since it saves money for obvious reasons. The locks that are used are sometimes used to refer to work ethic and interest in the job giving the pre-2008 generation an argument to criticize the work ethics and the idea that the post-2008 generation does not want to endure the hard physical challenges that the pre-2008 messengers endured. As Squid puts it: "they are not that hardcore, they ride fixed because it's easy with regard to paddling not because they are able to control it". Here Squid marks one of the biggest differences I found between the pre and post-2008 generation namely the usage of the fixed gear bike. I will elaborate on these differences in the next paragraph.

The bike in the messenger community symbolizes work ethic (when having multiple bikes) in the eyes of the pre-2008 messengers the bike is an extension of personal style through customization. This style originates from how the individual messenger sees him/herself and as how the community sees them as an individual. The theory of Appudurai and Kopytoff that an object has to have a certain story about it does not apply to the reason why a messenger chooses a specific bike, they just ride what they want to ride and what feels good to ride, whether this is fixed gear or not. It has to be remarked that the acts of customization an expression of personal style applies for all messengers with any type of bike, whether it is a fixed, road single speed or mountainbike. The fixed gear on the other hand was a bike adopted be the messengers because of the easy maintenance and the ability to show control and experience by being able to ride such a bike. Chris, a former messenger, explained to me that I was five years too late if I wanted to research the differences between fixed gear riders and free wheel riders and that there are no longer any differences anymore, a remark that was shared by his peers (all pre-2008 in less than five years? I will focus on the different meaning with regard to messengers). So how did an object that symbolized the notion of experience and control loose meaning?

3.4 Adopting a meaning

As mentioned many times the pre-2008 generation adopted the fixed gear bike as a symbol of experience and skill. Kidder made an account of this in his article stating that he was noticed by riding a fixed gear although he was a rookie (Kidder 2005: 358). Originally the fixed gear bike is part of the most ancient form of cycling; when the bicycle was just invented, free rotating rear axels did not exist, so every bicycle was in fact a fixed gear. But with the invention of free rotating axels cycling became safer and more comfortable since the bike was no longer need to be controlled by pedalling and braking by hand was also possible. The bike with a free wheel is now a world standard but the fixed gear bikes were still used in the velodromes.[35] Since the fixed gear lacks many parts found on conventional bikes (like differentials, brake cables and brakes) it was brought back on the streets by the bike messengers, who were drawn by the bike's low maintenance and the needed skill to ride this bike in traffic. In the mid nineties the fixed gear bike became an object to show experience over other messengers. By this time it was common for a bike messenger to start on any type of bike and with gaining experience a switch was eventually made to a fixed gear. As Carlos explained why he switched from freewheel to fixed gear:

"The reason, well I saw a guy I don't know if he was Jamaican but I saw a black guy on a track bike and I didn't know what it was. And I saw it and I was, what is that bike? And back in the days that was really like, it's nothing compared like today, you see only a few track bike out there. It was like only five people that had one. I saw it and I was like woah I got intrigued about the bike. How come this guy can stop while having no brakes. And later on I found out how it was and everything. I have three friends and somebody owned him some money. And somebody got him like a bike and that bike that he gave him was a track bike then me and the other guy were like "look at that" and lets get one of those. So the same guy, the same time, the same day my friend and I got a track bike. And that's when we started riding track bike. And everybody and everywhere you were, everybody was amazed about the bicycle, because it wasn't a popular, it's not something that you ride on the street. Because these bikes are only for the track, they were designed for the track. In the beginning of the bicycle there were. The first bicycles were tracks. There were no brakes, there were no gears just one simple. The most simple machine, was that simple and later on it started with the brakes and gears. But that bike, they designed it for the tracks, the velodome. So now only in the velodome they are using it, back in the days. But now everybody has one. And everywhere you

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[35] A racing track where speed is essential and, since it is a racing track, the cyclists do not have to worry about traffic.

were going everybody was amazed about the bike. It's so skinny, has no brakes and the bike, it can go so fast bro. I mean you just need to push it and it goes. It's made for speed you know. So that's something that, once you ride the bike, you feel the difference, from riding any other bicycle. You start riding you feel the difference, it's a bicycle but it's just different. "

This account shows that Carlos appealed to the bike because it was something special, something that he used to stand out with from other messengers. Carlos continues about the why the fixed gear was so special:

"It was back in the day you ride track, everybody would respect you, just because everybody knows you ride a bicycle without brakes through traffic in NYC, that's something a person, especially when not related to bicycles and then they are amazed about you doing that you know. And that gives you the situation that you are like superman. Not like common people. It gives you some sort of prestige. "

Riding a fixed gear was special in that time. People, especially non-messengers, would react on the fact that one would dare to ride a brakeless bike in the urban pandemonium of New York City traffic. Through out the years the fixed gear bike was adopted be more bike messengers for similar reasons. As Kid explained about the fixed gear bike:

"(...)a fixed gear is getting you from point A to point B. See that's the whole key of being a messenger in New York city. Getting from point A to point B, accordingly, so when I used to ride fixed gear, and I needed to go east to west, I didn't need to go flying full speed and when you had a good sprint then you had a good sprint. Fixed gear would get you to full speed, lets say I was getting for 23th street to 84th street through 3rd avenue, this was done. You could make all the lights. You could go through traffic, you understand. "

Here the other notion of fixed gear comes to play; it helps the messenger pick up with the flow (as described in chapter 2).

So the advantages of the fixed gear are that it is low maintenance, it helps the messenger pick up with the flow of a city and it stands out from other bikes in traffic. Through time, riding a fixed gear became more popular with bike messengers and riding a fixed gear was remarked as an object and an ability that a bike messenger should have to be seen as a true bike messenger. But of course the lack of brakes made it also a very dangerous bike to ride and the fact that it does not have brakes makes the bicycle illegal for street use. With more accidents happening the New York City municipality decided to tighten controls on the road legality of the bikes used in the city, referred to as the crack down on cyclists (chapter 4). In order to use the fixed gear's potential and

escaping prosecution for not having brakes messenger use a single front wheel hand brake which provides the bike with brakes, hence escaping prosecution, but still allows the messenger to endure the experience of riding 'brakeless'. I inquired StoneTone about the fixed gear and what he thought about having brakes on this type of bike:

"Me: so the brakes are still important, even though the fixed gear bike was never designed for the road or to have brakes at all, but because of the safety it is better to have brakes on the fixed gear? St: No, why do you need a brake, I can understand you need a front brake which you see on a lot of fixed gears but I don't understand, because the bike messenger lifestyle is like getting drunk and wasted and what happens when you are riding. You see somebody and your instincts hit the front brake and next you know you hurt yourself. I don't like brakes on a fixed gear in particular because it is just not meant for it. Check Any bike that I ride, I ride an affinity low pro, there is no brakes on that bike, I ride a custom build frame that was build in Brooklyn New York and there is no holes for breaks. "

From his answer it is clear that StoneTone doesn't like brakes on his bikes because 'they were not made for it'. But the notion of not having brakes on a fixed gear bike is not shared by every messenger as Joe explains:

"I decided to ride fixed, because it's better exercise for you. So I liked that aspect of it. You keep your legs constantly moving so don't cool that down. Plus you don't have the same speed. My job is all about speed so with this speed just go. But when talking to guys who did this shit before me; they highly recommended brakes. And their knees are completely torn to shit. I don't want to be 45 with knees that are broken from stopping that way all the time. I hang with guys that ride without brakes. But I've also hit shit with no brakes and then realised that if I had brakes, I didn't hit like that taxi. And I see a lot of them just riding around with no helmet, that's just stupid. It's just not smart. If you are out in New York City and you are riding somewhere in between cars there are people out there, there are kids out there, don't be a dumbass get some brakes, you don't want the one when the bike messenger kills. Brakes are the best. The guys riding without brakes they are on something else. Because I would never remove the brakes from my bike

Me: Have you ridden without brakes before?

Joe: yeah and I got into an accident doing it too. Somebody opened a car door in Philly and I went right through the glass of the door, and that shit hurts. But I was fine, I just fractured my forearm and I had a cut on my face.

Me: and that was the moment you said 'brakes'

Joe: Yeah because mentally it messes with you also. Once you get hurt really bad the first time, you want brakes

The turn around moment for Joe to get brakes was an accident in which he got injured. But Joe marks another point of the fixed gear, the problem of bad knees. This problem starts due to the method of 'braking' called skidding (the act of stopping with pedalling, forcing the rear wheel to stop). This causes the knee, that is meant to bend horizontal in one way, to shift up vertically, causing joints to stress and, when weak, break. But not only with skidding, also when cycling and regulating speed, which is done be pedalling harder or slower, the knees take a forceful blast, causing joints to be stressed. The deterioration of the knees is also a reason why many veteran bike messengers do not ride on fixed gear bikes anymore. Dominico told me that he used to ride fixed gear but due to the bad state his knees are in he is not able to do it anymore. Joe also remarks a different aspect with regard to the fixed gear, and that is the aspect of safety. As shown before, safety is an important aspect in the bike messenger profession, for both messengers and other traffic users. Pre-2008 generation believe that they are more safe on their fixed gear than the post-2008 generation. In a group discussion conversation heated up when talking about the new generation and how they use the fixed gear in traffic. According to the messengers participating in this discussion the new generation held low esteem with regard to personal and public safety. Joe makes a similar regard to that: "A guy like Angel; he'd do wheelies between cars in traffic.[36] He's crazy, he's out off his mind. I say to him put brakes, you are going to kill yourself.

The pre-2008 messengers have accepted that riding a fixed gear is a dangerous undertaking, which requires mastering when riding in New York traffic. The old generation did this by starting of on freewheel bikes and making a switch to a fixed gear when they themselves thought they were ready for it. The fixed gear for them is an elaboration on their work to keep 'it interesting' so to say. But with the commercialization of the messenger style people outside the profession adopted the fixed gear. This resulted in the post-2008 generation often riding fixed gear before they began doing messenger work.

When meeting John I immediately noticed that he was riding a brakeless fixed gear.[37] I asked him about why he already rode a fixed gear and he explained that he and his friends rode fixed before he started doing messenger work. I asked him how he learned to ride fixed and he told me:

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[36] The act of riding on the back wheel only.

[37] John is a 20 year old Asian-american who started doing messengerwork roughly two months before I interviewed him. Athough he has a degree in photography he wants to be messenger because he likes riding his bike.

"Hell, I had some friends and we were always out riding bikes, one day they told me that they wanted me to ride fixed and gave me a fixed bike. I was said to go to a specific location somewhere In downtown Manhattan with this bike……. And I lived in the Bronx. The bike had no brakes so you pick up pretty quick how it works. I never turned around ever since".

He continued to explain to me how riding bikes, especially fixed gear, influenced his choice to do messenger work. The story of liking to ride a bike and the affiliation with fixed gear and messenger style was a common story to be found with the post- 2008 messengers. Other than the older generation who generally began with little knowledge about bikes and the messenger profession the new generation began doing messenger based on the experience of the older generation adopting their knowledge as a starting point. This argument is made visible in the difference between how the new generation perceives the fixed gear as the only true way of cycling messenger style and the old generation sees it as the 'next level' of the profession. As Eric (a veteran messenger) explained: "the start at the top of the profession, not going through the other stages, they are getting damn lazy". The remark of being lazy comes from the idea that riding a fixed gear allows the rider to build more speed and cover more distance with less body effort. A post- 2008 messenger confirms this idea:

"So if they are messegering and they are doing freewheel at this point I would question the fact… how much messagering are they doing? After while if you messenger every day, every day for 8 hours you NEED a track bike. "

This messenger likes to ride fixed gear because it is easier and since it costs less energy, a point Erik criticized. A similar point is made by Roti and Louis. Louis persuaded Roti to work as messenger but also told him that the work would be easier when riding a fixed gear bike.

The symbol of the fixed gear as a unique bike for the pre-2008 generation that marked the transgression from inexperienced to experienced bike rider is now an object of necessity for the post-2008 generation. The new generation hardly looks at the free wheel bikes as an object that can also be used for messenger work since it requires more energy and because of the fixed gear bike being so closely related to the messenger lifestyle. In a sense it was the older generation that adopted an object and used this particular object to gain recognisability within their community which later lost its meaning because of this recognisability. Hence the fixed gear bike is no longer regarded as a symbol of experience and skill but a feature on a bike that helps with doing the job.

This posed a question about identity for the old messengers, they were no longer special because of their ability to control a fixed gear bike, but ordinary in the eyes of the

new generation messengers. But the usage of the fixed gear bike by the post-2008 generation gives another problem for the bike messengers in general. In experienced fixed gear riding messenger cause more accidents and for the general public, who know little about the messenger community, messengers are commonly generalized. The poses a problem for the old generation because they are being addressed on the mistakes the young generation makes even though they distantiate themselves from the reasons why the new generation rides fixed gear. Due to the municipality discission with regard to adding brakes on a fixed gear bike in order to gain control over the behaviour the messengers display the object was altered without consent from the community itself.

Many things have changed with regard to the lifestyle and the perception of what a bike means for the community. But how has this affected the construction of the community itself? Do the differences between the two generation altered the way the community sees itself or can we speak of two different, yet tightly connected, communities based on the concept of pre- and post-2008 generation? In the next chapter I will look into these questions.

Chapter 4: The Bush-crisis and the messenger community.

The previous chapters showed how changes within the profession have changed the way the messenger lifestyle is lived and how the coming of a new generation has changed the way messengers perceive the bicycle as an object. This chapter will focus on the last and main point of this thesis, namely how recent events, as the 2008 crisis, affect the bike messengers and the way they see their community. In this chapter I will give an outline of what the recent events were and how these events influenced the perception of community for the bike messengers.

4.1 The new era

2008 was a year of huge change for the bike messengers in both positive and negative aspects. Most of the bike messengers working in the *golden age* were now in their late 30's or early 40's and started a family life, which resulted either in them leaving the profession or becoming dispatchers themselves. Hugo (a former messenger and now a dispatcher) explained how in 2008 messengers became dispatchers and so using the experience that they gathered during their time as a courier to guide a new, younger generation through the job. This made it easier for the new couriers to get acquainted with the aspects of the profession and, as the old generation believes, makes the profession as whole easier for them.

2008 was also the year in which the municipality of New York put a ban on public smoking. The many parks of New York City, places where many bike messengers would meet after work hours, were transformed in smoke free areas. Since it is not uncommon for bike messengers to smoke cigarettes, many bike messengers lost a public space where they could meet after work. Next to that the bike messenger wage became increasingly less, making meeting and drinking in bars almost unaffordable for the bike messengers since they had other financial obligations.[38]

Because of this decline in financial situation the New York Bike Messenger Federation (NYBMF) was almost disbanded. This organisation gave bike messengers a platform to aid and financially assist bike messengers who got injured during their work. However, volunteers who operate outside their normal work hours founded the NYBMF and with the declining of the financial situation less volunteers were working for this organization. Now bike messengers were loosing their last form of a 'workers union' that gave aid when they got injured.

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[38] Common financial obligations for bike messengers are paying rent and bills, groceries and bike maintenance.

Although the previous series of events already had a profound influence on the bike messenger community, the financial crisis of 2008 arguably affected the community the most. This crisis, commonly referred to as "the Bush-crisis", led to many clienteles going bankrupt, causing the loss of work. This resulted in dispatch services going bankrupt since there was no work for them anymore and the messenger companies that did survive this crisis engaged in a 'price war'. This competition about delivery prices was more severe than the one that started a few years earlier. According to the bike messengers I spoke to, they saw their wage lower to 1/3rd of their wage in the golden age, in less than 6 years.

In 2010 the New York City Police Department started with a new project to increase bicycle safety. Originally created to make the streets safer for cyclists, this project is named by cyclist as the "Police crack down on bikes". Cyclists in New York argue that instead of creating a safer traffic situation for cyclists by sharpening surveillance towards motorized traffic, police were now monitoring the behaviour of cyclists in traffic and penalizing offenses with heavy summits. Next to that the usage of a fixed gear bike in normal traffic became illegal since this bikes lack breaks. Also when a cyclist gets caught multiple times for several offenses there is a chance that this individual will get his/her drivers license suspended for indefinite time. The bike messengers felt that they were the first victims of these new rules because many of the offenses that are fined hardest are also the offenses they commit the most. One example of the offences is not stopping in front of a red light which, when caught, results in a $250 fine (almost a quarter of the monthly wage a bike messenger makes). It is obvious that when a courier stops in front of a red light, valuable delivery time is lost when doing so and that is why many messengers decide to run red lights.

The bike messenger community by this time was just a shadow of what it was 10 years earlier. Poverty and misunderstanding of this professional group had taken their toll on the community. Nevertheless a small group of people is still working hard to keep the community bonded together. Carlos is the creator of "UrbanCyslistWorldwide.com" (UCW) and puts great effort in searching and gathering all sorts of information that is bicycle and bicycle riding related. The initiative of this website started in 2010 and the concept is to create a social media website to connect cyclists all over the world. This website was quickly adopted by the bike messengers since Carlos, being a bike messenger with a strong reputation, was able to reach a large group and addressing one of the main problems the bike messengers were facing for several years; the falling apart of their community. Where the radio was used to spread messages of gatherings in the *golden age*, nowadays the word is spread trough social media, with UCW as one of

the main platforms. However the community is still struggling from the effects of the Bush-crisis.

The rise of social media

With the coming of smart phones and social media like twitter and facebook, messenger meetings became more spontaneous. I inquired Victor (ex bike messenger and one of the co-founders of Affinity Cycles) how he thought about the loss of meetings due to new city rules and he simply replied that the meetings were now easier to arrange. He showed me that if he posted a small message on Facebook and Twitter about a meeting in the evening, people would show up and indeed when I got back at the Affinity Cycle store ate the end of the workday there were several messengers that responded to the messages.

Social media became a new method to arrange meetings. Although Facebook and twitter are widely used throughout the bike messenger profession most information about meetings can be found on UrbanCyclistsWorldwide.com. This website gathers as much information about the bike messenger community as possible. It is a worldwide Internet forum in which every bike messenger or bicycle enthusiast can make a profile and provide information about new projects, up coming events or photographs and movies. Despite the loss of physical connection between the messengers there is a clear they found a new form of connection on this particular website. Carlos explained to me that the idea behind UrbanCyclistsWorldwide is to reconnect the cycling community and to give information about who bike messengers are and what they do. Social media has a profound place in the bike messenger community since it allows the couriers to connect and spread information about themselves and their interests.

4.2 The changes of the community

Where the previous chapters showed how the concepts of lifestyle and object and identity shaping have changed with the coming of a new generation of bike messengers, this chapter focuses on the question how the changes influenced the construction of the community? Is the construction of the community influenced by these changes in the first place? And if yes which factors remained the same and which factors have changed? If no, is the group of bike messengers still a community? The coming paragraphs will use the theoretical concepts discussed in chapter 1 and I will present my data and show how this data supports the argument that the messenger community has changed and in what aspect.

The messengers and their community

From the beginning of my research the messengers I met referred to their group as a community and feel connected through their profession, as Fincham stated above. The bike messengers idea of being a community can be contested by analyzing their notion of community by searching for the combined factors as given by Vaisey and McMillan and Chavis.

The 'we-feeling'

The first factor that Vaisey used when searching for community and its construction is the usage of the term we. In the case of the bike messenger this is a switch made very often. When addressing a topic that concerned every bike messenger they clearly used the word *we* to mark that it entails every bike messenger. This is in contrast when I inquired my respondents about their lifestyle in which case the clearly spoke about their own personal choices and stated this clearly with emphasizing that it were their personal decisions: "I don't speak on anyone else. I do what I do, and they do what they do okay?". With regard to the lifestyle there are many individual choices involved but there is an overall consensus found with the bike messengers about how one should live as a bike messenger (as Chapter 2 showed). The difference in using *we* and *I* is remarkable because it is the result of the job becoming more individual due to changes in the work field. This is largely noticeable when engaging in conversations with the older generation. The new generation on the other hand uses the word we more often. The veteran messengers are more likely to state their own choices as part from their perspective as an individual than the new messengers who, as the previous chapters show, adopted many aspects about cycling, objects and lifestyle from the old generation. It is arguable that the new generation sees the old generation as mentors and therefore take over the customs of that generation and believing that these customs are the part of the messenger lifestyle. When using the word *we* one has to look at the generation the messenger originates from and in which context it this word is used.

The second factor that Vaisey uses is the concept of spatiotermality, the number of meetings and the number of people meeting. This is one of the main changes in the bike messenger community of the last decade. As the beginning of this chapter showed, the number of meetings has drastically declined due to new legislations as well as the declining financial resources the bike messengers have. Chapter two shows that there are several meetings but these are often visited by the same persons. As Cooper noted "every time you see the same faces, at gatherings and on the street". The spatiotermal aspect hence is declining as the bike messenger themselves noticed:

"I think for me the golden days as a bike messenger in New York City were the days when we used to hang out in Tompkins Square Park. There was the gathering of everybody after work. There were all the people that we knew. There were like thousands of messengers, but most of them they just do it as work. They come in, they leave they forget the community. (...)But our friends were always coming. We weren't that tight, but we knew each one that was coming in. That's the community that I know".

In this quote Carlos says how the change in gatherings worked, how bike messengers started to leave the gatherings and focussed on work alone.

The third factor Vaisey names is that of homogeneity. The old generation of bike messengers are in general lower educated and for obvious reasons older than the new generation. The individuals belonging to the new generation are often higher schooled and it is not uncommon for a bike messenger of the new generation to either save money for an education, using the job to finance the college fees or even to be graduated from a college.

The last factor Vaisey addresses is that of moral order. The idea of how to live and importance of ideology is also a point where the two generations clash. Although there is a common idea of what messenger life is, the way *how* this life is lived is subject to debate within the messenger community as chapter 2 showed. With regard to this notion of moral order, I state that there is a difference between the pre- and post-2008 generation. As chapter 2 shows there is a constant debate about who lives the messenger life, as it was meant to live, where both generation criticize each other for the way they live.

With regard to the second aspect of moral order, ideology, this is a harder point to unravel for the bike messengers. As I noticed when interviewing messengers and inquiring them about their ideological points of view I learned that the ideology of a bike messenger varies from each person and that messengers do not advocate one fixed ideology. However there are overlapping aspects on which the messenger I met draw back. Examples of these ideologies are the notion of 'staying positive', accepting the changes around them and make the best out of the job and the situation that they have. These visions of life are shared by both generations, although the pre-2008 generation tends to exclude the younger generation from their ideology. This is once based on the different notion of how to live the messenger life.

Harlan[39] explained to me that in his time there were "a lot more 99/1 percent-ers".[40] With this argument Harlan describes how he thinks that ideology has changed in very recent years. Although he was not able to give a clear explanation for why he thought this or how he noticed this change, it is a common view with the pre- 2008 generation that the post- 2008 generation cares less about politics or the well being of the community from an economic perspective. This is visible when having a conversation about politics with post- 2008 messengers. I noticed that they are little aware of the changes in the political and economic landscape around them and are, in general, more interested in the profession itself than the political and economic aspects this profession brings with it.

From this point I state that the general political activism of the bike messengers is fading. One of the moments when this is most noticeable is was during the critical mass I attended in June. Carlos already warned me for the high risk of being arrested at one of these gatherings and therefore did not attend these meetings anymore. When arriving at the critical mass in Union Square I immediately noticed that a gathering as this was carefully watched by the NYCPD.[41] Roughly 50 cyclists showed up for this meeting and we were outnumber by the police by almost three to one, but even more remarkable was that there were no bike messengers present and that most of the attendants were Caucasian-Americans and told me to be higher educated. I inquired a man who is attending critical mass gatherings in New York since the beginning and he said that messengers are hardly seen attending these meetings in recent years. Although he could not give a clear explanation for the reason why they did not attend anymore, I argue that this is due to the high risk of being arrested in combination with the fading ideological standpoints of the newer generation.

Even though the classic messenger ideology of 'man against the establishment of society' is fading, it is remarkable to see that a new ideology concerning the preservation of the community is now rising. A website like UrbanCyclistsWorldwide aims to gather cyclists and spread word of what bike messengers are capable of and do for the society. Both Carlos and Kid explained that with the negative associations the profession has, it is important that people understand the bike messengers. So instead of contesting society on its flaws, messengers now seem to embrace these flaws and help

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[39] Harlan is an ex-messenger who worked from 2005 to 2010. Originally from the mid west of the United States he became a messenger to earn money to get a college degree. When I met him he was doing an study on acting.

[40] 99% vs. 1%: a vision adopted in 2011 by the occupy movement. The thought behind this ideology is that 1% of the wealthy population controls everyday life aspects of the less wealthy 99% of the population.

[41] NYCPD stands for New York City Police Department.

to create understanding for their point of view and aim to aid other people that are struggling in similar situations as they are.

Although the moral order is an aspect subject to heavy change in the messenger community, it is clear that many aspects still exist when looking at the pre-2008 generation. The post-2008 generation on the other hand tends to be less interested in ideologies concerning political and economic aspects and are more focussed on themselves and the act of riding their bikes. An explanation for these differences is often directed at the fact that post-2008 messengers are commonly seen as rookies and 'still need to learn the ways', ways in this context meaning the advocated ideologies.

4.3 The imagined community

Membership

Vaiseys indicators of community can be combined with McMillan and Chavis their indicators of community. One of the first indicators that McMillan and Chavis name is the notion of membership. In the case of the bike messenger community membership not a fixed something. Although actual experience as a messenger is required for this indicator it is not fixed in the sense that one has to be a messenger to belong to the community, hence membership can also be interpreted as being an accepted part of the group and identifying oneself with the group by opening up for the actions the messengers undertake. As these authors advocate the element of membership becomes visible by indicators such as clothing and language. However, as chapter 2 shows, with the commercialization of the profession, clothing is an ambiguous indicator to establish a boundary since non-messengers now also have access to the clothing styles the messengers adopted. As a result the boundaries based on clothing are fading and as Joe remarked "Hell you can even wear a suit nowadays and be a bike messenger". Although clothing as an object itself might not be a proper indicator for a boundary, the way these clothes are worn and used can mark the difference between an experienced and inexperienced messenger. As Kid thought me: "an experienced messenger wears comfortable clothing fitted for every type of weather situation and is based on a principle of safety". As a result messengers often wear tight fitting jerseys and cycling pants, which keep them warm and dry in the winter and in the summer keeping the rider safe from getting sunburned, while remaining cool hence, lowering the chance of overheating. Clothing as an indicator for membership does not so much concern the question "which type of clothing brands and style of clothing does a messenger wear" but more the question "why does a messenger wear this specific shirt". The answer to

the last question is a straightforward one, namely functionality. Bike messengers separate themselves from other cyclists by the concept of functionality.

The element of membership is not only expressed throughout clothing, for instance a visible boundaries as neighbourhoods can also demarcate a boundary. In case of the bike messengers they live scattered around the city of New York, but because of the high housing prices in the borough Manhattan many messengers are found in the outer boroughs; Brooklyn, The Bronx and Queens. It is unrealistic to think that there are neighbourhoods in which many bike messengers live together as minorities, in fact, their numbers are far to few for that. However, when inquiring the messengers about their neighbourhoods I learned that popular places like Astoria Hights, Brooklyn and Jamaica, Queens are often mentioned because of the cheap housing prices.

As mentioned: a bike messenger does not live in a certain neighbourhood or area, they live where the housing is affordable and so, the place where a messenger lives does not influence their membership of the community. However, there is one exception to this rule, which entails living in the borough Manhattan. The average housing prices in Manhattan are so high, that a courier, living the messenger life, cannot afford a house there. Messengers living in Manhattan are not excluded from the community but have to put more effort in proving themselves as true messengers willing to live and adopt the messenger lifestyle. It has to be taken in mind that messengers were able to afford housing in Manhattan until a few years ago. Marking Manhattan as a potential boundary, separating real messengers from outsiders, is a result of recent economic changes in the community, influencing the way they perceive their own boundaries.

The second factor for membership is emotional security. Bike messengers meet in order to talk about their job and meet other messengers in general. Being around peers allows the messengers to express themselves and gain understanding from other messengers. When looking at this factor there is difference to be found between the pre-2008 and post-2008 generation. It seems that although both generations are present at the same meetings, they hardly interact, leaving two different groups of messengers. The basis of this difference is based on the earlier mentioned different perception of ideology.

Identification as third factor is the most distinct boundary for membership. One can identify oneself with the messenger community but it is the community that has the recognized themselves in that particular person. This mode of boundary making is the result of the commercialization and the rise of the hipster. Since hipsters are not seen as a part of (and even a threat to) the community, it is the community that accepts the person as true messenger and so part of the community.

With regard to the concept of personal investment the bike messengers have a very strict hierarchy concerning the acceptance of new ideas. Implementation of ideas was a privilege for those who already proven themselves through years of service and experience. Due to the different visions between the pre- and post-2008 generations it is difficult to implement new ideas. Pre-2008 generation messengers often ignore or criticize new ideas offered by the post-2008 generation and vice versa. These different visions are based on the different acceptance of the current situation. With regard to membership the discussion once again arises of who the true messengers are. The pre-2008 generation argues that the post-2008 generation does nothing to invest in the community, while the pre-2008 generation does not adopt ideas offered by the post-2008 generation. Ideas often talked about are how to execute the job and how that can be changed. Noticeable is that the younger generation tends to be more aggressive with regard to traffic violations and contact with clientele and so contesting the ethical code constructed by the pre-2008 generation, which is adopted in the messenger style. Discussions about work ethic would eventually concern the simple matter of making money and there the frustration about the current financial situation would rise again. Where the pre-2008 generation was used to make more money with the ethical code they had, the new generation only sees the current ethical code as a barrier for making more money.

The second aspect about personal investment, spending time with the group, is also something that is slowly disappearing due to political and economic changes. As the beginning of this chapter shows, actual messenger meetings occur less and more selective then before. Although social media might be an open source, one needs to have access to this form of media to get the information. And there lies another problem; due to the decline in the financial situation some bike messengers cannot afford to have a mobile phone that supports social media or even basic domestic Internet connection. As a result some of the messengers are cut of from the community because they cannot reach the community by means of social media. Spending time together is encouraged throughout the community but the actual logistics of where, how and when, that are often spread through social media, make it hard to meet with one another. When the messengers have meetings there is also the problem with financial resources such as money to buy drinks and food so many opt not to go to meetings in order to save money.

The last factor McMillan and Chavis mentioned was having a common system of symbols. As the previous chapter shows the way how the two generation perceive these objects has changed with regard to usage and meaning.

When looking at the community of bike messengers with regard to boundaries there are no clear boundaries to be distinguished. Yet outsiders and insiders are able to clearly distinguish differences. Although there are no visible boundaries in the sense of clothing or geographical boundaries that allow the inclusion or exclusion members, the messengers look at the person based on their actions with concern to how the symbolism and lifestyle is adopted by the individual.

The moment when looking at the different teams and posies (chapter 2) the construction of boundaries becomes more visible in terms of clothing and personal investment. However, I argue that these groups that often entail a maximum of 20 people cannot be seen as communities on themselves since they are part of the larger community of bike messengers. Furthermore they share the same ethics of the majority of bike messengers and these teams are created by a friendship that was created while the individuals worked as a bike messenger or outside the bike messenger profession, in a personal and private setting.

Influence

The second element that McMillan and Chavez name is that of influence, which works, as told in chapter 1, in two directions. The first direct, members of the community being able to influence the community, is found on a rather small scale in the bike messenger community. In fact as advocated before there is only a small group that influences the bike messenger community in terms of dress, and social behaviour towards the outsiders. Next to that it has to be stressed that the behaviour displayed by the messengers is the direct result of aspects coming from outside the messenger community hence leading to new ideas on how to engage these negative or positive aspects. But adopting these new ideas poses a problem with regard to the difference between the old and new generation. As mentioned many times before the old generation looks in hindsight to the days in which the messengers were able to make a good wage and had a good living while the new generation accepts the current situation as it is and tries to make steps forward instead of looking back at the past. This results in new ideas offered by the old generation not being fully accepted by the new generation and vice versa. With regard to this situation it is understandable that decision making and new idea implementation in the current messenger community has come to a halt however new decisions are made, implemented and adopted by the messengers although it takes a longer time than it used to according to my respondents.

The second direction of influence is that of the community influencing the behaviour of its members and so creating conformity. This direction of influence is

widely visible in the messenger community in terms of dress and behaviour. With regard to dress, one has to imagine that the pre-2008 generation found a method of combining comfort and efficiency in the way they dress. The post-2008 generation quickly learned, largely through observation and possibly through the commercialization (as discussed in chapter 2), how to look the same way as the old the generation and they have adopted this look. But not only the aspects of commercialization and observation have resulted in this, also the messengers becoming dispatchers and teaching rookies how to conduct and engage this profession have resulted in post-2008 messengers being taught and believe that this method of dressing is the best.

When looking at behaviour it is clear to see that the aspects of the messenger life and the messenger style influenced the behaviour of the messengers. Since the messenger life and style are the result of the communities visions on how to be a true messenger. It should be noticed the old generation is the group that constructed both aspects of the bike messenger lifestyle and that these aspects are adopted by the new generation. Since the old generation constructed the community in the beginning I argue that the new generation adopting this lifestyle is influenced by the old generation giving a platform to state that the old generation in fact influences the new generation in the aspect of behaviour, since they have created a mode of which they think the profession should be executed and how the life of a messenger should be lived.

Although it is maybe unclear to see how the messenger community influences its members, and how its members influence the community, there are some traces found of how the bike messengers influence each other. The biggest source of influence for the bike messenger community in general comes from the view outsiders have of them and how the last decade has changed the way this profession is executed. In case of the conformity, as McMillan and Chavis mention a problem arises due to the clash of the pre- and post-2008 generation. Because of their different visions on how the community should be constructed and how to see and engage the profession there is less conformity, resulting in a negative effect of continuity of the community. I argue that it is too early in this process to state that the pre- and post-2008 generation are two different communities but if the current affairs and changes keep having their effect on the messenger community as it is in 2012 a clearer distinction between these two groups is almost imminent.

Reinforcement

The third element mentioned by McMillan and Chavis is reinforcement: rewarding feelings of affection towards the community. Although the previous elements of membership and influence are less important for the community, the element of reinforcement is very important for the messenger community. A clear example of this is seen on the UCW website. Carlos rewards individuals or groups who work hard to organize events or simply provide footage for the website with an extra mention on the website or by helping them conducting their work better (this can be in means of tips or small material objects such as helmets or cycling clothing). Another form of reinforcement I noticed was when I was recording the rap I wrote at the Fakemoney recording studio. Drew owned this studio and he helped Carlos and me with making a good performance and recording the sound.[42] Drew even made a beat to conduct the rap on and was coaching me through the recording process. After the recording Drew even spend some extra time to master the track to his liking and giving it a professional finish. Since both Carlos and me had never been to Drew's recording studio we were impressed by the professionalism of his coaching and his will to cooperate. Carlos clearly felt guilty by not offering Drew money for his service but Drew replied "Oh no man, this is what I do for the community". In return Carlos helps Drew promote his studio via UCW.

The example of Drew shows how reinforcement works for this community. The messengers are aware of what the community has done for them and try to show their gratitude and affection for the community by helping promoting the positive sides of the messenger community. Organizing alleycats or just simple gathering events are other forms to enforce the community and its (positive) image.

As I noticed during my fieldwork, reinforcement is very important for the bike messengers. I was taught this the hard way before I left the field. One of my respondents criticized me for taking too much from the community in terms of information and time without giving anything back to the community. This resulted in multiple threats of violence and lawsuits to intimidate me. Although these threats were not taken seriously by the other messengers of the community it was a scary thought that I possibly overstayed my welcome and I learned that to be part of the community means being an active member by means of organizing events and investing time for the benefit of the community members.

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[42] Drew is a bike messenger in his late twenties, early thirties. He started Fakemoney recording because of his interest in music and music producing. Drew saved all his money, earned by messengering, to invest in his studio.

Although these threats came from one single rookie messenger I found it noticeable that most rookie messengers do not engage in this concept of reinforcement. One explanation for this might be because rookie messengers don't posses the influence yet to actually help reinforce the community. A different explanation draws back on the difference between the old and new generation. I found it remarkable that many individuals of the old generation are the ones that invest personal time and that individuals of the new generation simply 'tag along' with their elder peers without suggesting new ideas to reinforce this community. This behaviour from the new generation is clearly a result of the inability to influence and implement new ideas offered by the old generation (as mentioned above). But here arises a problem. As it seems, the new generation somehow lost their will to invest in the messenger community. This is noticeable by observing at the bigger alleycats where most competitors are pre-2008 messengers.

But the lack of reinforcement does not only come from the inside, influences from the outside have also had its influence. As mentioned earlier in this chapter the disbandment of the NYBMF and the reasons for the disbandment resulted in less reinforcement in the community. Although it is clear that some individuals are willing to invest both time and energy in the community they often lack time or financial resources. Since there is no active organisation promoting and engaging the bike messengers on a personal level, it seems that there is no real drive for individuals to engage in making the community better. This relates to the changes in the social, political and economic landscape.

The element of reinforcement is an important and very noticeable element in the bike messenger community but is mainly expressed through the behaviour of the pre-2008 messengers. The post-2008 messengers are either unable to reinforce the community due to the pre-2008 messengers or lack the interest in preserving the connectedness of the community. This results in a lack of continuity of the messenger community forcing a form of disbandment.

Emotional connection

The final element mentioned by McMillan and Chavis is that of emotional connection and having a shared history in particular. However this element poses a problem for this research since the bike messengers come from different ethnic backgrounds thus having different ethnic histories. In this case I state that it is important to look at what the messengers know about the history of bike messengering. However, one has to keep in mind that the individuals who constructed this history are

still alive and still participate as vivid actors in this history. This results in most pre-2008 messenger knowing about the history since they actively took part in it. In this case it is interesting to look at what the post-2008 messengers know about the history of messengering since they are a new generation that only knows about the history through narratives of the old generation.

Here an interesting play develops; many of my respondents belonging to the old generation loved to talk about the golden days of messengering and hardly paid any attention on the present. Because of this the old generation is criticized by the new generation for living in the past, resulting in the new generation, clearly distantiating themselves from this historical view, since they live in the present. Although they are interested in the stories from the past, the post-2008 generation does not share this history nor adopts it as their own. In fact they construct their own history by grasping the moments they live in.

I encountered one of these situations when I invited Louis and Roti for an interview in Tompkins Square Park. When I asked them if they knew where they were they knew it was Tompkins Square Park but they were not aware of the history it has as a messenger hangout. This situation applies for multiple post-2008 messengers; it seems that they are not aware of the history of their profession in the broader sense. The same applies to the use of the fixed gear bike as a symbol, as discussed in chapter 3.

The concept of having a shared history applies for each generation separately. Although the profession has a history going back to the late 19th century the actual history which sparked the lifestyle and symbolism starts in the late seventies and early eighties of the 20th century which is, as mentioned, constructed by persons still alive and working today. I therefore inquired both generations why they became a bike messenger and remarkable was that the old generation often became messengers because of their low education and/or prison past. Messengering for them, is a way out and a job to provide for their livelihood, whereas the new generation sees it as a temporary job before they go to college or before they engage in, a for them, more serious job which fits their education or future perspectives.

So although the history of the profession leads to believe that there is a shared history between bike messengers, there is a difference to be found in how they perceive this history and which elements of this history they choose to adopt. The result is two different perspectives of the same timeline in which both parties acknowledge the events that happened, but choose to give different meaning to these events. Once again, in terms of continuity this poses a problem since both parties are unwilling to adopt each other's history, resulting in different narratives about the important moments in

the profession's narrative. The lack of a common history and knowledge about this history leads to believe that there is little to no emotional connection.

The feeling of being connected is a very strong feeling found between bike messengers. As Fincham (2006) describes messengers all over the world feel connected because they are messengers. Some my respondents stated that the feel connected with everybody who does messenger work because they are willing to get to know the profession and the people engaging this profession. Even though messengers have never met, they feel connected and greet each other.

The four elements of McMillan and Chavis show the problems that arise when trying to classify the bike messenger community in an anthropological sense. I argue that each of the elements is present but that current affairs have caused a split in how to see these elements and that the clear different perspectives of the different generations on these topics cause the continuity of the entire community to slowly stop. In other words, the community is not moving forwards nor backwards but remains in a status quo that is unable to incorporate changes in the outside world and so slowly driving the community apart.

One has to keep in mind that the changing and the loss of visible community and its boundaries is not the direct fault of its members but it is a result of the changing world around them that causes internal conflict, leading to this split. As I mentioned before it is too early in the process to actually distinct two different groups because the messengers themselves still see their community as a whole, despite the different visions on current affairs, history, membership and personal investment in the community. Therefore I argue that the bike messengers can still be seen as one (imagined) community, but there has to be added an extra aspect in order to prove this statement.

Since the rise of social media more messengers engage in contacts over social media. UCW might be one of the biggest examples in this case but there are many more Internet forums to be found where messengers and non-messengers engage and connect. As argued in chapter 1 an important factor in researching the feeling of online community is the feeling of commonality. When looking at online conversations between bike messengers the concept of commonality is very visible. Through use of professional jargon messengers are able to exclude outsiders on Internet forums.[43] When looking closely at the topics being addressed by the messengers on the Internet, there are no differences found with the topics discussed in the real world. However the

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[43] See chapter 2.

feeling of commonality is more expressed since all participants know what they are talking about. But if commonality is observed in the online world how does this relate to the real world?

Commonality in the sense of a coherent group with similar thoughts and behaviour is found within the bike messenger community since this a direct result of the bike messenger lifestyle. Although there are discussions about how to live while being a bike messenger and execute the job, the fact that they are bike messengers and have an ethical code concerning their profession shows that they have certain aspects in common. The members of the community are aware that they have these aspects in common and therefore classify themselves as a community based on their similarity. Despite the discussions about work ethics and lifestyle and the different perceptions of how they see their community constructed there is still a large feeling of coherence within this professional group of people.

4.4 Cultural style

When assessing the community based on the combined elements of Elias, Vaisey de Koster and McMillan and Chavis, it is clear to see that the community, although still regarded by the messengers as such, has problems with identifying itself. I argue that this is due to the different perspectives of the old and new generation. As I discussed in chapter 1 the concept of cultural style of Ferguson allows the researcher to look at differences in the same society, which, in this case, is the messenger community. With regard to style the pre-2008 generation has worked hard and created the style that belongs to the messengers as was shown in chapter 2. The post-2008 generation has adopted this particular style and is now criticised for not doing it the way it was intended. Ferguson argues that the differences in cultural style are made visible throughout clothing (Ferguson 1999: 98). However, as chapter 2 shows, the messenger style has its own 'dress code', which is adopted by both parties. But cultural style, as explained by Ferguson, is something that comes sub-conscious, something that is shown with the body (Ibid. 98). In this case the differences in cultural style can be seen in the behaviour and the adopted symbols of the two generations.

As chapter 2 shows the pre-2008 generation tends to be less aggressive in traffic and behave more safely with regard to wearing helmets, having brakes on their fixed gear bike and in general accept the traffic pandemonium more as a given fact. This is in strong contrast with the post-2008 generation who tends to be more aggressive and lack most of the traffic rules while endangering themselves and others. This leads to a difference in the work ethic of the bike messengers. The old generation adopted a

different work ethic than the new generation with regard to safety and execution of the job. The old generation is still used to the personal contact with the client and so tries to be courteous towards the client and tries to maintain contact on a personal level. The new generation is more focussed on the speed of the delivery than on the personal relation with the client. The way they execute their job can be seen in a difference in style, style meaning the way a messenger works. But another difference in cultural style is noticeable throughout the symbolism in the profession.

The Pre-2008 messengers have always seen the fixed gear bike as a display of control and skill (chapter 3), a bike you can only ride when you have enough experience. This is in contrast to the post-2008 messengers who see this particular bike as a must for the profession to make it easier and the low maintenance. The notion of work ethic is visible again when looking at the number of bikes owned. The new generation often owns only one bike, which they treat very carefully but when this bike is broken they are not able to work. The messengers of the old generation often own multiple bikes given them the possibility to switch between different bikes depending on the day or in case of a repair.

The difference in cultural style is made visible when looking at the differences in work ethic, behaviour and symbolism, but the largest difference is visible when looking at the way the two generations perceive the profession. Many messengers of the old generations are low educated and either recovering from a drug addiction or a prison past. They choose to become bike messengers because they had no choice and this is one of the few legal jobs that they are able to do. The individuals of the new generation became messengers because they like cycling and they use their time as a messenger to contemplate about their future career. Where the old generation sees the profession as a way out from negative situations and allows them to feel accepted since they have a legal job, the new generation sees the profession as period in between life choices. The two generations give different meanings to the job and the corresponding ethics, lifestyle symbolism and resulting in a different view of how the community is constructed. The old generation wants to hold on to the classical sense of a community, a community in which the members are closely related and have a common system of values, symbols and a knowledge of the shared history, whereas the new generation has less interest in the community as a tight knit group and prefer to maintain connected over the social media.

Although the messenger community still refers to itself as a community, it is clear when looking at the different cultural styles that there are two different groups with different perspectives visible in the same community. These two different groups

feel connected because the have the same profession and encounter the same situations. Despite the fact that each generation gives their own meaning to these situations and solves problems in a different way, the fact that they are all messengers in New York makes them feel connected even though there are major differences found between the two groups.

4.5 Conclusion

It is a given fact that the construction of the bike messenger community has changed under the influence of social, political and economic pressure. Due to the commercialization of the profession, the prior constructed boundaries have faded and internal disputes have stopped the continuity of the community. But the bike messenger community is slowly making a change from a (imagined) community to an online community where the boundaries are less fixed and the differences in years of experience matter less.

In case of the question McMillan and Chavis asked what underlies the feeling of community, the answer does not come from one of their argued elements but rather from an element searching for community in the online environment, namely: commonality. The bike messengers are clearly struggling with the loss of community feeling along their peers, but still the feeling of commonality, or similarity, remains due to the fact that they are all bike messengers. The feeling of commonality results in the bike messengers referring to their group as a community.

As I remarked, I argue that the messenger community is slowly disappearing due to a stop in the continuity as a result of a lack of conformity. The internal disputes and the absence of knowing each other's history (the old generation's history vs. the new generation's history) slowly bring the development in the messenger community to a stop. The new generation is not used to acceptance of their ideas and with individuals of the old generation slowly leaving the profession because of their age the new generation will be the leaders of this community but with little knowledge of the personal investment their predecessors did. Once again I would like to stress that the individuals belonging to the community do not cause this happening on purpose, but it is a result of how each generation handles the changes in their direct surroundings and the way how each generation accepts and engages these changes, which are also are subject of debate.

These differences are made clear when looking closer at Ferguson's concept of cultural style. The two generations have different visions on what the profession means for them and how the work as a bike messenger is done. As the analysis of the elements

of McMillan and Chavis showed, the community is slowly changing but it does not give a clear explanation why, since the messengers still regard their group as a community. The concept of cultural style searches and explains the differences between groups within the same society, in this case showing two different groups with different perspectives on the profession.

Conclusion

When looking at the profession of messengering, there are many aspects, which are not immediately obvious. The messengers are proud of their profession, and the profession is heavily connected with a distinctive lifestyle, which has to be adopted in order to call oneself a 'true messenger'. Bike messengers are adopting the bike as more than just a mode of transportation, it is a symbol for their work ethic and shows their identity as both a person and a messenger. The third aspect is living and connecting with the community, living by their values and adopting their aspirations.

Messengers and change

The answer to the question why the bike messenger community has changed so significantly incorporates all of these aspects. Chapter 2 shows how the lifestyle has changed due to economic changes. Although from a historical point of view the lifestyle already incorporated the notion of a minimal mode of living, the economic crisis has changed the lifestyle into a mode of survival. With regard to this, there is a different notion in how the living of this lifestyle should be, according to the two generations. The pre- 2008 generation looks back at the financial better times and longs to go back to the golden age, where messengers were able to make money and were given respect for what they did. This is in contrast to the post- 2008 messengers who know the job as a low paying one. These individuals use their time as messengers to bridge their future life and often do not consider a career in bike messengering. They choose to only adopt certain aspects from the lifestyle, and are criticised by the older generation for not living the messenger life or adopting the messenger style in the way they originally intended, resulting in tensions between the two generations about how to see the profession. For the older generation it is a way out of a negative spiral in life, but for the new generation it is a job giving them an amount of freedom, which they value.

The fixed gear bike, once highly regarded by the pre- 2008 generation, is now a standard bike for the post- 2008 messengers. The fixed gear as a symbol of control over traffic, and the bike as an object, is no longer regarded as such by the new generation. Instead they see fixed gear as a feature on a bike, something that makes cycling and executing your job easier. The new generation often only owns one bicycle, resulting in critique of the old generation that they do not posses the proper ethic to be a messenger, because they are not adequately equipped in case of a broken bike, which causes them to loose a day of work and therefore putting more restraint on the workload of their co-workers.

Chapter 4 argues the community is now in a status quo. Due to the commercialization of the profession, individuals need to prove harder that they are willing to be part of the community. The aspect of membership and the imagined boundaries created to maintain the difference between the insiders and outsiders is fading due to people who look like messengers but do not practise the profession. This also creates tensions between the two generations since the old generation is looking at the new generation as possible hipsters (chapter 2). These tensions are noticeable when looking at the aspect of influence. The old generation is unable to influence the young generation and vice versa. This results in a halt on continuity in the community. The community itself is not able to progress but it does not give the impression that it is in crisis or struggling for survival, the community is just slowly dissolving due to these changes. The same applies for the aspect of emotional connection. The new generation is not aware of the history of the community and so tries to create their own history. On the other hand the old generation keeps looking at the past hoping that the wealth of the golden days will return.

Despite that nearly all elements created by McMillan and Chavis can be found in the community, they are heavily contested or vanishing. Remarkable enough, this does not apply for the element of reinforcement. The messengers are still willing to put personal time and energy in the community to ensure its progress. The same applies when looking at the concept of commonality as argued by de Koster. The bike messengers still feel that they have certain aspects in common and through this commonality they feel connected as a community.

The community feeling among bike messengers has not disappeared. It is in fact a grey area; anthropological speaking I argue that it is not a community in the classical sense of the word: a tight knit group of people who share equal values, histories and symbols. On the other hand the messengers themselves see their group still as community. When looking at Ferguson's concept of cultural style it is clear that there are two different groups that contest each other within the same community. These groups belong to the same community and are not yet separated by boundaries or see themselves as completely different but are different in ways of ethic, symbolism and behaviour. As I argued, it is too early in this changing process to speak about two distinct communities of bike messengers in New York but it is clear that there are two different groups within the same community who see the profession as different.

It becomes visible that over the last decade changes in the political, social and most noticeably the economic situation had their effects on the way this community was constructed and how the messengers perceive themselves in their profession. Although

it is too early to speak of a shattered community or of a community that is split in two different sub-groups with their own imagined boundaries, I argue that if this community remains in this status quo, one of these scenarios is bound to happen. But this is not yet the case; the community is in a grey area of transition, a transition that seems to be heading towards a community, which is based on online membership due to the growth of social media.

September 11th and the Bush-crisis had their effects on the messenger community. These two events clearly mark beginnings of new eras in the history of bike messengering in New York. Not only these events, but also the growth of telecommunication and high insurance rates for the messenger companies have their effect on the community. The growing telecommunication effects the workload of the bike messengers which is decreasing since the Internet offers a faster and cheaper alternative and due to the high physical risks this profession entails insurance companies are charging the dispatch companies higher rates.

The notion of the Internet as a modern medium made to create progress but causes the opposite effect for a certain group is also noted in Ferguson's research about the Copperbelt. Although it is not the Internet which caused the problems in the Copperbelt it was a modernization that caused a disturbance in the local community. Ferguson's describes a community that is clearly divided in two different groups with their personal values and physical and imaginary boundaries. This is different from the community of bike messengers since they still have a form of commonality and do have any physical boundaries for instance. The messenger community is not gone but it is clear that the outside influences have had their effects on the members of the community, separating the profession in two distinct groups who each maintain their own values but still feel as if they belong to the same community.

Reflections on methodology.

Although the messenger community is a hard group to reach when you are not a bike messenger, they are willing to tell their ideas and stories when you are open for them. I argue that if I did not engage in participant observation (such as riding a bike) they would accept me less. Riding a bicycle, hanging out with them and asking them their vision helped with gathering the data. I also learned that participant observation is not just joining in the activities with your respondents, it is the willingness to adopt their lifestyle that allows the respondents to adopt you in their environment and open up to you.

Even though searching for the right respondents was difficult from time to time, I argue that the persons I found are good representatives for the community and the sub group (chapter 1) they advocate. They were willing to explain and show me their visions and even came up to me if they wanted to hang out or simply wanted to show or tell me something.

The combined methodologies of participant observation, interviews and secondary resources benefitted this research because I was able to show my willingness to understand the community and the problems that they faced.

Further research and the future.

Kidder described the 2002 messenger community of New York City and I described the same community ten years later. In this period of ten years many things have changed. It would be interesting to see how ten years from now, in 2022, the messenger community is constructed. The technological development does not stop, so how will that affect the community? How will new social and political developments influence the community? These are all interesting predictions to see if the statements made in this thesis are correct.

Another interesting topic to research is how women in the bike messenger community see themselves. As mentioned, roughly 10% of the messengers are female, a strong minority. As I noticed during fieldwork these women try to create more attention for female bike messengers and their lifestyle.

The last topic I would like to see researched is how bike messenger in other cities (such as Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles) deal with the crisis. How do the messengers in these cities deal with the changing economics and political situation?

It is unlikely that the profession of bike messengering will disappear completely in New York. When I was conducting the fieldwork in New York City, the Freedom Tower stood firm and proud, towering high above Manhattan. Carlos explained that when the Freedom Tower is finished, it shall create more work, which will help the bike messenger community to flourish again. Shortly after leaving New York, Hollywood released a movie named 'Premium Rush', an action movie about bike messengers in New York City. UCW gave a lot of attention to this movie since it is about the profession these individuals hold so dear and because they are hoping that it will spark a new generation to pick up messengering.

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