Bikeshare Cycle-Ology:
Portland's Nike BIKETOWN and Public-Private Partnerships

By

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Introduction

Our increasingly globalized and connected world is creating more opportunities for cross-sector approaches to urban problems. We live in a shared-power world where both public and private groups are involved in, affected by, or have partial responsibility to act on public issues. The rise of deregulation and privatization has also led to non-governmental actors working on problems of public interest (Bryson et al 2006). In terms of how people move, over 1,300 transportation projects between 1984 and 2008 have been planned through public-private partnerships (Siemiatycki 2013). For the purpose of this paper, public-private partnerships (PPPs) are defined as "a risk-sharing relationship based on a shared aspiration between the public sector and one or more partners from the private and/or voluntary sectors to deliver a publicly agreed outcome and/or public service" (Public Works Financing 2009).

Although the concept of PPPs has existed for decades, their merits and drawbacks remain hotly contested. Supporters of PPPs maintain that they provide increased funding for public facilities, stimulate innovation, and save taxpayers from having to shoulder the burden of cost overrun for large-scale infrastructure projects. On the other hand, critics argue that PPP projects largely serve over-invested areas, thereby continuing to exacerbate social inequalities at a global scale (Blake 2004). Furthermore, it is inevitable that both sectors will need to compromise their interests to a degree due to the collaborative nature of PPPs.

PPPs rely on the individual strengths of public and private groups to address the multifaceted nature of complex and interwoven issues. The growth of semiotics, otherwise known as the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation, is a significant strength

in the expansion of PPPs. Public groups can use corporate sponsorship, and its recognizable brand, as a way to connect with their constituents.

The globalization of today's biggest corporations such as Nike, Starbucks, and Apple have brands and logos iconic enough to do the selling for them (Flowerdew 2004). A logo by itself is simply an empty vessel, but the logo acquires meaning and value when it is repeatedly associated with other culturally meaningful symbols (Goldman 1998). As an example, athletes sponsored by Nike such as Tiger Woods or Michael Jordan add to the value of Nike's brand because Nike is able to draw on the popularity of these athletes in association with their brand. The emphasis on the production of semiotics has pushed the abstraction of commodities to the point of concepts: brands will even go so far as to refer to a certain genre of their products as "lifestyle." For example, Nike is known for their sports shoes but today makes shoes, clothes, hats, and more that are meant for everyday wear, and not just on the sports field. A company's brand allows it to stretch the limits of what the company is generally known for producing. In a very similar way, PPPs allow for companies to associate their brand with products, places, and services people use everyday, even if those products, places, or services are not created or funded solely by the company. PPPs funded by big brands play into the lifestyle concepts they align themselves with (Crupi 2012). We may be inclined to consume their products because of the PPPs they support, or use their branded PPPs because we trust their products. We perceive it as being a part of an ideal lifestyle that we desire to have, and want others to believe we have (Goldman 1998).

This extension of corporatization to the very way we live our lives is an important part of creating the "world city." World cities are defined by their global control over political and economic systems, not by the size of their population (Friedmann 1982). A key characteristic of these major metropolises is that the headquarters of large multinational companies tend to be concentrated there (Flowerdew 2004) so it is little surprise that PPPs also tend to be concentrated within world cities; particularly in developed countries (Siemiatycki 2013). The headquarters, their employees who populate the city, and the massive capital they create have a significant influence over their locational context. An example of this is MetLife Stadium, home to the New York Giants and Jets, with a four-way sponsorship between MetLife, Verizon, Bud Lite, and Pepsi. This multibillion dollar investment in the stadium, the team, and most importantly, the fan, provides brands huge leverage and advertising power over their competitors (Crupi 2012). The corporations to fund these products are supposedly chosen to

reflect the people, and the people can also come to reflect the corporation's lifestyle concept by being influenced to consume their products.

This is where my research takes off: I am curious as to the extent to which corporations, private groups, and public organizations can effectively represent and keep the interests of consumers in mind through their involvement in PPPs. As critics argue, an expanded role of the private sector in public affairs exacerbates uneven development, even if they help solve funding issues in underinvested governments. If private funders are selected with the intent to reflect the values of the people, can this be upheld throughout the planning and execution of the PPP? Who is being served?

To investigate this question, I chose to research the new Nike BIKETOWN bikeshare in Portland, Oregon. Portland is often cited as an example of a city with efficient public transportation (Hemingway 2012). With a large public bus system, streetcar, and extensive bike lane network, there are a multitude of ways for people to get around.

Even with its extensive transportation system, Portland is also becoming known for its gentrified and gentrifying neighborhoods. The strict urban growth boundary (UGB) means that the city has historically focused on concentrating development closer to the city center in order to make the metropolitan area more pedestrian friendly and to be able to maintain a higher density of residential and commercial developments (Jun 2004). Unfortunately, this development has raised the cost of living prices to a point where low-income individuals and communities of color have been largely pushed out of the neighborhoods they historically occupied (Hemingway 2012). In 2000, concentrated poverty within the UGB was generally found near the Portland city center and a small number of suburbs around Gresham. By 2009, the number of high-poverty areas have been pushed out to Portland's periphery, showing the decentralization of these populations (McKenzie 2013).

My questions revolve around the intersection between social equity and PPP involvement in transportation planning. Who does Nike BIKETOWN serve, and to what extent is this PPP balancing public and private interests? I argue that while PBOT and Nike make strong efforts to create a bikeshare that is accessible to all Portlanders, high levels of ridership are confined to the downtown area. A diverse group of potential riders in Portland's neighborhoods east of the Willamette River have yet to take advantage of these accessibility efforts.

Background

In July of 2016, seemingly overnight, hundreds of bright orange bikes appeared across the city of Portland, Oregon. The new Nike BIKETOWN bikeshare is funded by a partnership between the Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT) and Nike, along with Social Bicycles, the producer of bicycle GPS technology, and Motivate, a multinational bikeshare management company.

The idea of a Portland bikeshare has been in the works for nearly a decade -- cities across the nation, most notably Washington, DC and New York City have large scale bikeshare systems that Portland sought to model its after (Buck et al 2012). For several years now, the question has not been to do or to not do a bikeshare program, but a question of where the money for a bikeshare program would come from. In 2010, the Portland Bureau of Transportation was awarded a $2 million federal grant to be used by the city, but this grant alone was not nearly enough for a city-scale bikeshare. Comparable bikeshare systems cost upwards of $10-$12 million and for this reason cities generally partner with other entities to help shoulder the cost (Fishman et al 2013).

This is where Nike comes in. As a multinational corporation headquartered in the Portland metropolitan area, Nike is able to lend an authentically Portland quality to the bikeshare. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, is Nike's ability to give $10 million to the bikeshare in exchange for a title sponsorship. This means that PBOT gives Nike full reign over the marketing and design of the bikeshare in return for their funding. The two main purposes for bikeshare, according to PBOT, are to get cars off the road and bring new people to biking. With such a familiar logo such as Nike, the Bureau felt bringing the corporation into the partnership would be a step in the right direction towards achieving those goals.

Methodology

At the intersection of transportation planning and social justice, this project requires a multi-method approach. I used in-person interviews, text and image analysis of social media pages, and geographic mapping of spatial data to investigate the topic.

First, I interviewed Steve Hoyt-McBeth, Operations Manager of Nike BIKETOWN at PBOT. Hoyt-McBeth has been working on the bikeshare since its inception nearly 10 years ago. His knowledge of the entire process of how BIKETOWN came to be, particularly in how and why PBOT negotiated the partnership with Nike, is invaluable for understanding the successes and shortcomings of the bikeshare from PBOT's perspective. Hoyt-McBeth's interview represents the viewpoint of the public side to this cross-sector collaboration. However, it is important to

acknowledge that his opinions cannot speak for every user of BIKETOWN, and is limiting in that respect. He was also able to shed some light on the position of Nike in the partnership, as Nike, the private entity in the collaboration, did not respond to any of my calls or emails requesting an interview.

I also interviewed Shawn Fleek, Communications Director at OPAL (Organizing People Activating Leaders). OPAL is a non-profit focused on environmental justice and transportation equity in the outer neighborhoods of Portland. Fleek provided input on the accessibility of Nike BIKETOWN and the ultimate feasibility of its usefulness in periphery areas of Portland where predominantly underserved populations live. Whereas PBOT and Nike opinions of the bikeshare are wholly positive, as they are the instigators and managers of Portland's bikeshare, Fleek provides a critical viewpoint of BIKETOWN that helps us understand the extent to which methods of alternative transportation are reaching new users, or even wanted by underserved populations, as they can often be excluded from planning decisions (OPAL 2016).

Using data from the US Census Bureau, I also created a map in GIS (Geographic Information Systems) comparing the fraction African American population by census tract to the location and rental rates of BIKETOWN stations. This provides a visual description of how accessible the bikeshare is to different people across the Portland metropolitan area. It helps answer my question in regards to the geography of accessibility for alternative public transportation.

Text analysis of Nike BIKETOWN Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter pages reveal how the public-private partnership is using social media to advertise and cater to potential users of the Portland bikeshare. This mode of analysis helps understand the audience that BIKETOWN is aiming for. Using 20 randomly selected posts from each social media site (60 posts in all) I sorted the overall themes of the texts and images into categories of either gender, weather/seasons, equity, safety, technology, ethnicity, events, convenience, or product promotion. These categories were created to encapsulate concepts relevant to my research on equity, branding, and bikeshare. I used 20 posts from each site because this gave a broad overview from when the bikeshare was first established in July 2016 to the point at which I was performing my analysis in early November 2016. Each post could be assigned to more than one category if it had multiple themes present.

Results

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My interview with Steve Hoyt-McBeth at PBOT was integral to my understanding of how BIKETOWN came to be, especially in terms of Nike involvement. I thought it was particularly interesting in the way he said that PBOT was hesitant to bring Nike, as a large multi-national corporation, onto their project, but eventually did because of the huge monetary benefit of $10 million they brought to the bike share. Even though Nike has had tumultuous past with sweatshop use and wage inequality, this shows how monetary benefit can sometimes take precedence over ethical concerns. The partnership allowed the bike share to have 250 more bikes than originally planned, and also helped bring the world-renowned swoosh to the bikeshare. Hoyt-McBeth discussed an initial interest survey that found roughly 15,000 people knew what bike share was compared to roughly 600,000 people who recognized the Nike brand. The survey findings evidence how Nike can bring a sense of familiarity or even trust to the bikeshare, in an effort to bring more people to riding.

However, a sense of familiarity does not guarantee a particular value association. Nike is known for high quality athletic gear, and the sponsorship of many Olympic-level athletes. At the same time, their products are quite expensive: the average pair of shoes goes for more than $100. Even if everyone knows the Nike brand, the Nike brand is not accessible to everyone. In some cases, owning Nike products may be used as a status signifier (Klein 1999). Clearly there is a hybridity to Nike in correlation with bikeshare, representing both high-quality coolness and unattainable elitism simultaneously.

Hoyt-McBeth also pointed out the measures BIKETOWN has taken to intentionally make the bikeshare inclusive to all Portlanders. Over 4,600 online and in-person comments from Portland residents were used in the planning of BIKETOWN, with five community forums held in the months before BIKETOWN's establishment to gain resident input on where bikeshare stations should be located. According to Hoyt-McBeth, 55-60% of bikeshare stations are within walking distance from hundreds of affordable housing units. To further encourage use by low-income Portlanders, the bikeshare has also issued a number of membership passes at $3 per month for those associated with affordable housing and other community organizations. Without the discounted membership, a single ride costs $2.50 for 30 minutes, $12 for 24 hour access, or $12 per month for an annual membership (BIKETOWN 2017). As of November 2016, riders also have the ability to pay with cash for the rental of a bike, making BIKETOWN more accessible to those without credit.

On the other hand, my interview with Shawn Fleek at OPAL relates a very different point of view: while he calls the Nike BIKETOWN a "noble effort" to bring more alternative

transportation to the Portland metro area, he also feels that the bike share is clearly only serving over-invested, gentrified areas such as downtown and inner southeast. Roads and intersections in the periphery of Portland are so bad that even if there was a bike share established, it would probably not last long because the bikes would be easily damaged by bumpy roads and the routes may be relatively unsafe for users.

My biggest takeaway from the interview with Fleek is that we cannot call a project like the bike share "sustainable" if social justice is not involved. He strongly emphasized the importance of community involvement in these types of urban renewal projects. Money spent by the city should be used efficiently in a way that not only works for the communities they serve, but also includes local communities as a central part of the workforce supporting the projects. This way, underserved areas can get the most benefit possible out of transportation systems such as Nike BIKETOWN.

BIKETOWN has also recently suffered its first case of vandalism. On April 4th, 2017, over 200 bikes in east Portland of the 1,000 bike fleet were found with slashed tires, cut spokes, and graffiti sprayed across bicycle control screens and station infrastructure (Ryan 2017). "Our city is not a corporate amusement park" as well as "Nike hates the poor" are examples of the sentiments spray painted across the stations. Flyers from a group called the "Rose City Saboteurs" were found in association with the damages, showing that anti-corporate notions are present in relation to the bikeshare being partially funded by Nike (Hanson 2017). The location of the vandalised bikes coincides with several of the least used bike stations in east of the city, suggesting that BIKETOWN is not viewed as valuable of a service as it is on the west side of the city. Some degree of vandalism is to be expected with any public infrastructure, but there will be a lower likelihood of vandalism if the bikeshare is located in areas where the community is invested in using and taking care of the service.

Textual content analysis of social media pages run by Nike BIKETOWN shows that these communication outlets are largely used for advertising events related to BIKETOWN, or suggesting how you can ride Nike BIKETOWN to various happenings around Portland. "Convenience" and "Events" were the most used categories across all three media accounts, while themes of transportation equity and accessibility only made up about one-sixth of the text posts analyzed. Of the equity focused posts, three used the hashtag #womenwhobike, showing that the bikeshare is intentionally reaching out to an audience of bikers who identify as women. When I interviewed Hoyt-McBeth, he described how women can be seen as an "indicator species" to judge the safety of a transportation service such as bikeshare. If women are using the

bikeshare in similar numbers as men, it is considered a success because women are generally more cautious, according to Hoyt-McBeth.

Of the 60 posts analyzed, one-third included people in the images. For the purpose of my analysis, an image is considered to have a person when there is more than 50% of a human figure and a visible face within the frame. Of the images featuring people, 40% included people of color and 54% included women. These percentages show that even though image captions usually do not explicitly focus on racial or gender equity and accessibility, these themes are still subtly present in the apparent intentionality of image composition.

While the content results between Facebook and Twitter are relatively similar, Instagram had more than double the posts focusing on weather and seasons. BIKETOWN's Instagram also features more artistic shots, such as images of a BIKETOWN station at sunset or pictures of dogs and cats sitting inside BIKETOWN bicycle baskets. These posts were generally submitted by users rather than being original content created by BIKETOWN, which gives us a look into the experiences of real BIKETOWN riders, rather than posts created by BIKETOWN to intentionally look a certain way or promote a certain theme. Images on Instagram are still curated to an extent, because BIKETOWN has the power to decide which pictures to repost and which to not. However, Instagram images allow us to see BIKETOWN from the riders' perspective more than does Facebook or Twitter. This makes sense as Instagram is generally an image based platform, whereas Facebook and Twitter emphasize textual posts.

Figure 1. Image from BIKETOWN's Instagram (@biketownpdx) showing women and people of color riding bikes
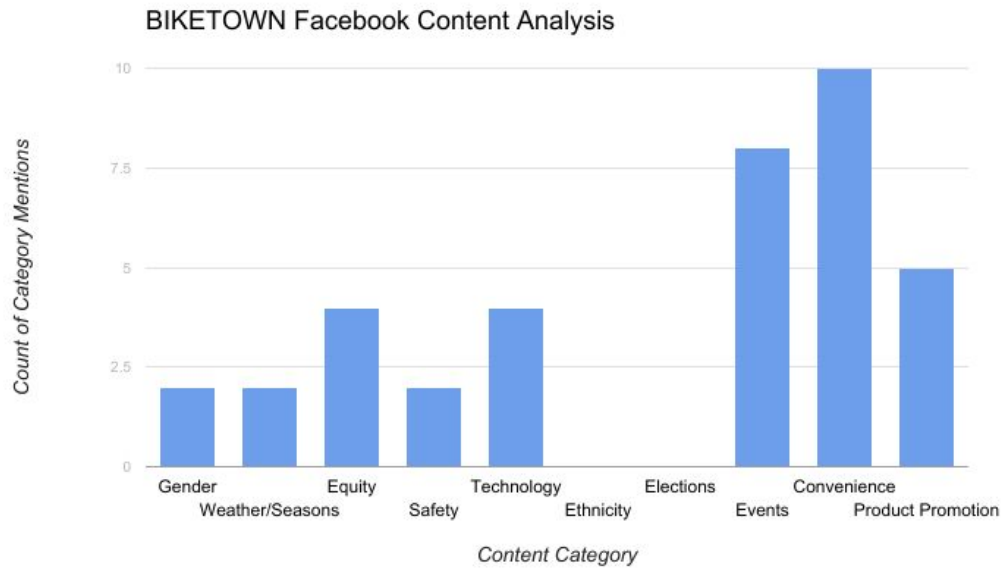

Figure 2. Bar graph showing content analysis of Nike BIKETOWN Facebook page.
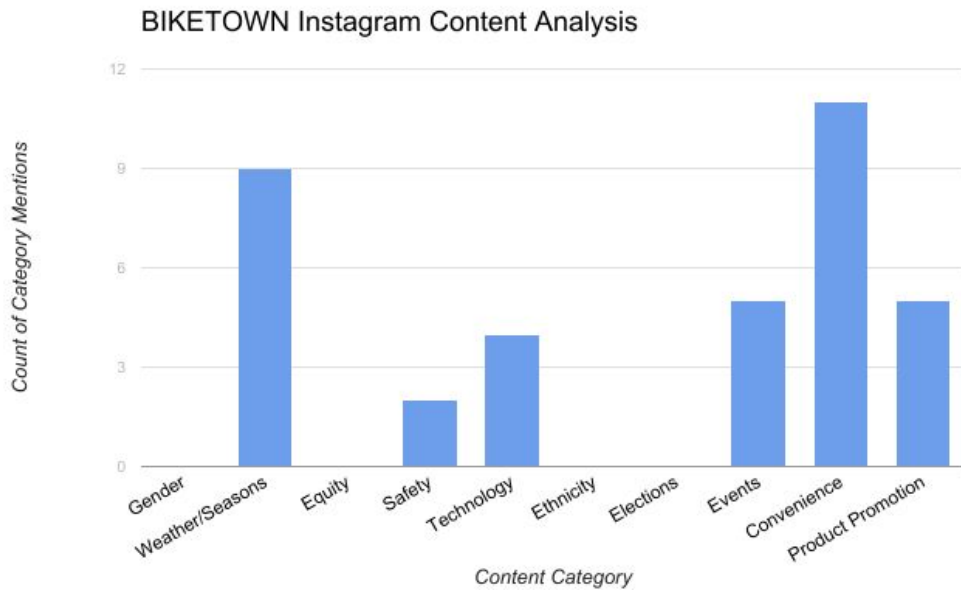

Figure 3. Bar graph showing content analysis of Nike BIKETOWN Instagram page.
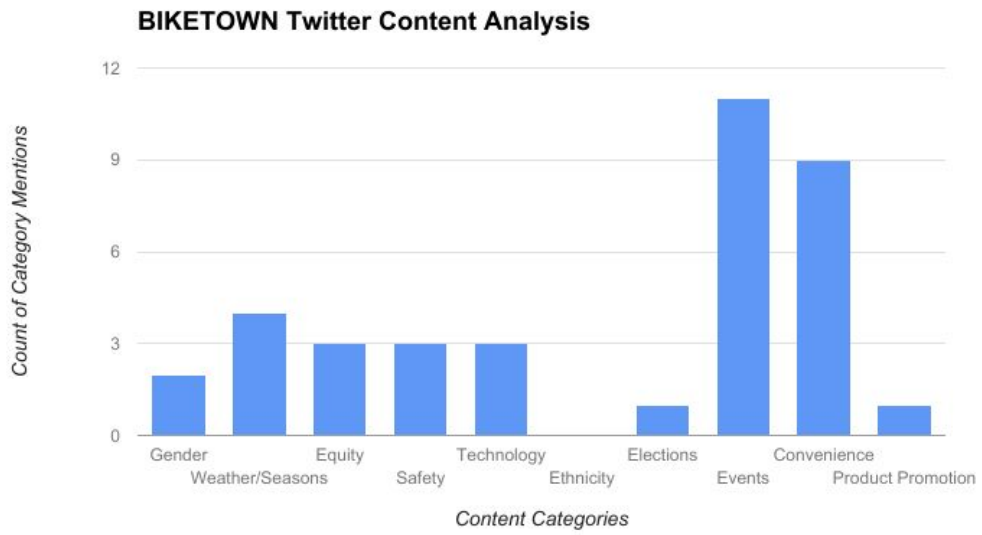
BIKETOWN Twitter Content Analysis

Figure 4. Bar graph showing content analysis of Nike BIKETOWN Twitter account.
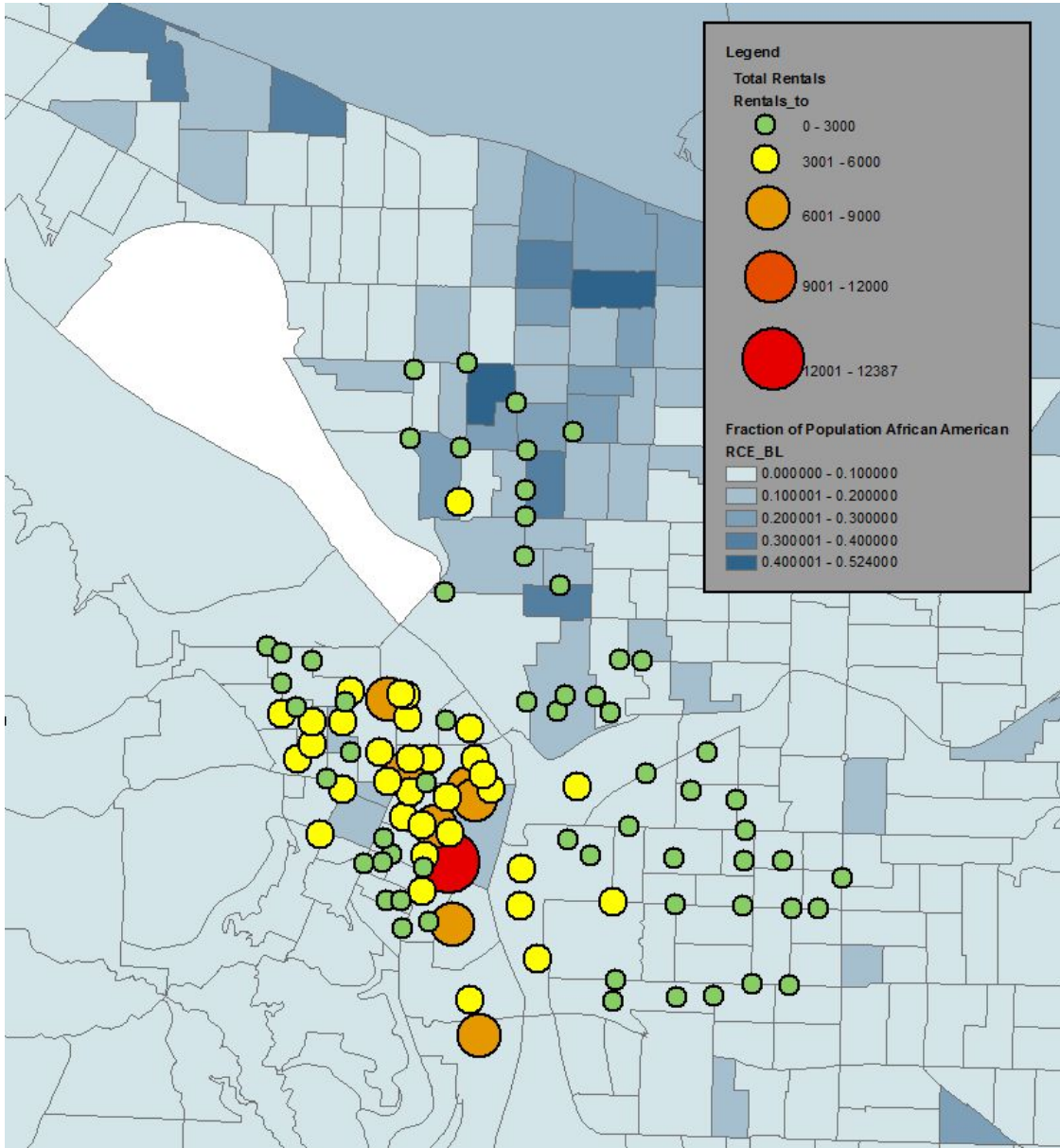
Figure 5. Heat map showing fraction of population of African American residents in Portland by census tract in relation to the Nike BIKETOWN stations and their rental usage.

Figure 5 shows BIKETOWN rentals by station for the first 5 months of operation mapped on top of the fraction of population of African American residents by census tract in Portland. Keep in mind that Portland's African American population only makes up 6% of the total population (US Census Bureau 2015), so even in areas where there are higher percentages of African Americans, there still are not many. However, the map shows that the highest concentrations of African Americans are generally located in NE Portland.

According to the map, the stations with the lowest rentals are generally located on the east side of the Willamette River. Although the census tracts of southeast Portland have a lower fraction of African American population than do northeast tracts, the low degree of bike station usage is generally the same across both areas. Stations in the city center and even east stations bordering the downtown area have much higher levels of usage, showing that BIKETOWN ridership may depend more on one's location in the city than their demographic.

This map seems to show that Portland's bikeshare is primarily being used for short rides within the city, or as a quick means to get from one side of the river to the other. Tourists spending the majority of their time downtown may also make up a significant portion of BIKETOWN rides as well. Although BIKETOWN is making strong efforts to extend accessibility, it appears higher levels of ridership are not occurring beyond the city center.

Discussion

While some important strides have been taken, including providing reduced ride passes to low-income families and making cash payment an option for BIKETOWN users, it is possible these efforts are not being fully utilized. For many communities on the outskirts of Portland, a bikeshare may never be a priority. There are a multitude of more pressing projects that BIKETOWN funds could be spent on instead, such as improving road quality, strengthening the safety of intersections, or creating more sidewalks. It is important that PBOT has reached out to communities of color such as the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon and remains cognizant that not every community may need a bikeshare.

Portland has already seen this issue of differing community interests come into contention on North Williams Avenue. With the unveiling of a new traffic safety plan by the city meant to improve bike lanes and protect bikers, the susceptibility of the area to processes of gentrification came into play (Navas 2011). The communities of color who have historically occupied the area were worried that the expansion of bike lanes would expedite the demographic shift from a black neighborhood to a white neighborhood. It has become a debate of who and what to value: the safety of (predominantly white) bikers, or saving the area from gentrification. Even with community forums in place, bicycle advocates and their voices often outnumber and overpower the people of color (ibid 2011). It is important that organizations making planning decisions not only provide opportunities for public opinion, but actively seek out those whose voices are missing.

In a similar vein, limitations for this project include the inability to more broadly include the voices of BIKETOWN riders. As research for this project occurred mostly during Portland's coldest and wettest months, tracking down many BIKETOWN riders to talk to was very difficult. During the summertime or early fall, it would be great to distribute a more widespread survey of BIKETOWN riders in terms of why they are riding, whether or not they are from Portland or are visiting, if they own their own bike, and what form of transportation they would be using if the bikeshare were not available. Compiling data from the bikes' GPS technology on the routes of the rides would also be valuable to analyze because it may signify who/what area riders are from and why they are riding (where they are riding to) without having to talk to individual riders.

In the context of sign value, we can understand possible motivations for Nike contributing both financially and stylistically to Portland's bikeshare. As discussed earlier, companies are increasingly applying their brands in association with other culturally significant symbols such as influential people and popular organizations or events. Brands gain more value from these connections, and the funding or free merchandise brands can offer their partners can make these collaborations positive for both parties. It is possible that the strengthening of brand value can also help improve brand reputation. Over the years, Nike has faced strong backlash for their sweatshops in China, Vietnam, and Indonesia where workers earn roughly only $1 per day and put in long hours (McCall 1998). This negative image of Nike has persisted over the years, even though it still remains a popular brand. Organizers across the world, including in Portland, occasionally protest outside of Niketown stores and call for boycotts of the company's products (Klein 1999).

In light of Nike's tarnished past, it makes sense that the corporation is interested in associating its brand with people, organizations, and projects that benefit its consumers. Joining this PPP and having full reign over the design and marketing of BIKETOWN allows Nike to align itself more broadly with alternative transportation and an active lifestyle through Portland's bikeshare. As a collaborator on a project meant to benefit Portlanders and tourists, people may view Nike in a more favorable light for helping support public alternative transportation.

The Nike BIKETOWN experience is also uniquely Portland. As Nike headquarters are located in nearby Beaverton, Oregon, Nike has a strong corporate influence over the region. Many Nike employees live in the Portland area, and world class athletes sponsored by Nike often visit. Although Portland is not considered a global city, BIKETOWN is an example of increasing corporate influence on the city, as is characteristic of global cities (Zukin 2009). Through

BIKETOWN, Nike is reflecting the transportation-savvy Portland we have always known, and at the same time, shaping the experiences people have with the Nike brand.

Nike can also use BIKETOWN to extend its brand from the clothes consumers wear to the way they get around Portland. BIKETOWN riders are a free advertisement in motion, and their use of the bikeshare is a primary example of how corporations can use PPPs to become a part of the lifestyles and stories of their consumers. More than a catchy jingle or an iconic symbol, Nike is able to tap into the lived experiences of riders by providing them with bikeshare. Furthermore, riders are active participants in the stories BIKETOWN allows them to create. The idea is to leave the customer with a memory, not just an impression (Smith and Hanover 2016).

To explore more about the stories and experiences of BIKETOWN riders in an effort to further understand who Portland's bikeshare serves, I created what I call a "lifestyle map." Using Esri Story Maps, I created a story of the experience of a hypothetical BIKETOWN rider. Using text, images, video, and mapping, the story shows a possible example of the lifestyle of a BIKETOWN rider. You can access my Story Map [here](#).

At this point, the BIKETOWN rider's lifestyle belongs to those who frequent the downtown area, whether they be commuters, residents of the city center, or tourists. I believe the systems are in place to make the bikeshare more easily used by those in neighborhoods beyond downtown, but it is a matter of making Portland's outer communities aware of the opportunities available to them.

At the same time, as discussed in the bike lane controversy on North Williams Avenue, there is still a stigma that exists around bike culture as a white culture and as a possible symptom of gentrification. While biking has its benefits for encouraging exercise, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the expense of gas, it must be recognized that transportation purely by bike is not realistic for many Portlanders, and may not ever be. Those who have long distances to travel to get to work, or simply do not have the time or energy to bike to where they need to go have valid reasons for not choosing bikeshare.

Similar to the public forums that PBOT held with Portland communities prior to the launch of BIKETOWN, I believe it would be helpful for multiple public forums to occur across Portland on the one year anniversary of BIKETOWN's establishment. After living with and using the bikeshare for 12 months, residents may have new input on the bikeshare. It would be valuable for Nike and PBOT to have this information moving forward so that further improvements to BIKETOWN will keep the bikeshare working for the public.

Public private partnerships are inevitably faced with the challenge of balancing different levels of leadership and responsibilities across entities. Researching and understanding the viewpoints of each stakeholder, while a challenging process, is what will allow policy makers, planners, and private groups to bridge perspectives and realize projects not possible on one's own. Without understanding the complexities of partnership, opportunities to solve some of our most pressing issues in a collaborative effort will be missed. The Portland Bureau of Transportation and Nike can combat this challenge by continuing to align their goal for bikeshare on the public's values.

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