



Micromobility – Has COVID-19 unleashed its potential?

COVID-19 gives micromobility another stage to showcase its potential



Few years back, the trend of using small, lightweight vehicles for short miles, known as micromobility, brought a transition in the industry. This included mopeds, bikes and scooters (electric or manual; docked or dockless). The benefits included being a convenient, cheap, light, easy to ride, emission-free mode of transport. Despite the industry rapid growth, it faced regulatory and operational challenges (Refer to WSP Paper on [*Going Small - The Transition to Urban Micromobility*](#)).

As the world was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown orders were passed, demand for these vehicles reduced. As a result, many shared micromobility operators were forced to downsize.

MICROMOBILITY OPERATORS FACED WITH REDUCED SERVICES AND SOME WITH DOWNSIZING

1. Bird laid-off ~30% of its employees through a video call in March 2020.
2. Bird and Lime suspended operations across US, Canada and Europe.
3. Uber transferred its e-bike service, Jump, to Lime in May 2020.
4. Singapore-based Beam, which has recently started services in Western Australia, laid-off employees.
5. Australia-based Neuron Mobility withdrew its scooters from Adelaide.

Even though the services were halted/reduced, the usage of e-scooters and e-bikes did not completely evaporate. In a world of no/reduced access to public transit, social distancing measures, and fear of infection, it started to be viewed as an alternative to public transport and a potential solution to move around people in cities.

Figure 1 shows how trends quickly emerged within micromobility across the world during the COVID-19 crisis.

Figure 1

Micromobility support during crisis time



As we can see, the pandemic, in a way, accelerated the use of these vehicles. Many states in the US classified e-scooters as essential services that could operate during COVID-19 times. Private ownership of these vehicles increased, as it was a more hygienic option. Also, private owners are bound to ensure vehicles are properly maintained, which could likely reduce accident rates.

The UK, who banned the use of e-scooters, is now running trials to assess their legalization. The operators renting e-bikes and scooters are increasing the frequency of disinfection and

looking at new ways of cleaning. For instance, Wheels, a US-based e-bike operator, partnered with NanoSeptic, to come up with self-cleaning surfaces (self-cleaning handlebars and brake levers).

Could this transition really give micromobility a chance to change/aid the conversations between cities and operators? Could this crisis let the future welcome micromobility with a more efficient governance model?

Fully Private	Public-Private Partnership/Fully private
Not a recognized market	Recognized/Valuable market
Less guidelines make it risky	Proper guidelines on safety element and speed limits make it safer
Traditional sponsorship model	Government subsidies
Trials in last mile journey using e-bikes/scooters	Last mile journey using e bikes/ scooters is a norm
Lack of safe physical infrastructure	Dedicated lanes and parking lots
Used for personal trips	New B2B partnerships
Traditional e-bikes	Navigation powered e-bikes
Lack of data sharing between operators and cities (policy makers, urban planners, regulators)	Operators and cities developing better decisions together



Micromobility devices entered the transport scene as the cool, hip and trendy mode of the generation and in these times of COVID-19, this attitude is also transforming in this space. With the rising focus on health, wellness and social distancing, use of scooters and e-bikes have become more attractive providing an alternative mode beyond the typical first and last mile use.

There is an attitude shift in this space from the operator and user point of view. Operators have altered their approach to incentivizing and bringing confidence to users of increased cleaning and maintenance. For users, micromobility provides a safe and effective way of travel as well as improved option of choice as there is a less crowded space of operators during these times.

The rising return and popularity of micromobility is likely to rebound as attitudes of social distancing and active transport modes become the preferred choice. These behaviours are already seen in some cities are seeing a mode shift away from public transport to some users riding more and longer compared to pre-COVID-19 times. The recent push for more active transport paired with increased usage of micromobility devices may prove to be one of the major benefits in the new transport world we will live in.

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