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Australians and their Leisure Time

AUTHOR(S): Simone Pettigrew

ABSTRACT

Understanding Australian's perceptions and consumption of leisure time has significance for marketers of products to be used during leisure activities and advertisers wishing to employ leisure-related symbolism in their communications. The study reported in this paper explored Australians' perceptions of leisure and the particular pastimes they prioritise. Informants nominated alcohol consumption, sporting activities, taking holidays, attending barbecues, television viewing, and going to the beach as the leisure pastimes that are most important in Australian society. Their discussions illuminate the ways in which these pastimes are integrated into Australian life, providing contextual information to assist marketers in product and communications development.

ARTICLE

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Introduction

The ways in which people organise and experience their leisure time indicates much about their culture (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), and in Australian culture in particular there is symbolic meaning to be found in the ways in which people utilise their non-working hours (Fiske, Hodge, and Turner 1987). Leisure has been discussed in the literature as an Australian cultural value (Bedwell 1992; Mackay 1993). Rather than just being an important aspect of Australian life, leisure has been argued by some to be the meaning of life for the average Australian (e.g., Horne 1988). The dominance of leisure in the minds of Australians is evident in the over-representation of

leisure scenes in advertisements compared to work scenes (Rowse and Moran 1990). Rowe and Lawrence (1990) posit that there has been inadequate research into the role of leisure in Australia, and it remains a topic worthy of closer examination.

Leisure has been described as being exceptionally difficult to define due to its subjective nature (Green, Hebron, and Woodward 1990). In order to operationalise the concept, the Australian Bureau of Statistics defines leisure as "the free time people have for pursuits other than those which are necessary, contracted or committed" (ABS 1992, p. 349). Leisure is then divided into passive leisure (e.g., watching television and reading), active leisure (e.g., activities such as sport), volunteer work, and social life and entertainment. Adult Australians on average dedicate 22% of their day to leisure, with passive activities accounting for the majority of this leisure time (ABS 1998). Twenty-four per cent of leisure time is devoted to social life and entertainment, while active pastimes such as sport and hobbies account for a further 13% (ABS 1998). These percentages have remained stable since the early 1990s (ABS 1992).

This paper does not attempt to offer new understandings of the Australian way of life. Instead, it offers insights into the leisure time priorities of Australians at this particular point in time. As such, it can provide useful information to those who market and promote products to consumers for use during leisure periods, or who employ leisure themes in their communications. Wearing and Wearing (1990) suggest that leisure time is increasing due to technological advances in the home, flexitime, longer lives, and earlier retirement. As the leisure industry continues to grow in size, its contribution to production and consumption continues to increase (Rowe and Lawrence 1990). There is thus a need to understand the importance of leisure to individuals in order to appreciate the marketing opportunities inherent in this social phenomenon.

Methodology

The data employed in this discussion of Australians' perceptions of sport were derived from a larger data set resulting from a qualitative study of Australian culture. This study was carried out across the three states of New South Wales, Victoria, and Western Australia, with informants interviewed in a range of locations, including homes, schools, retirement villages, and pubs. The objective of the study was to identify the products Australians most associate with their culture. The majority of interviews were individual or paired interviews, although some school students were interviewed in class contexts. Of the 423 Australians who took part

in the larger study, 139 spontaneously discussed leisure and what it means to Australians. These references to leisure and leisure pastimes were coded separately in NUD*IST and subsequently extracted for analysis. Of those who discussed leisure, 76 (55%) were male and 63 (45%) were female. This gender split is similar to that found in the larger sample. In terms of age, 35 (25%) informants referring to leisure pastimes were adults, 69 (50%) were adolescents, and 35 (25%) were children. This distribution is different to the characteristics of the larger sample (32%, 47%, and 21% respectively), suggesting that the age of informants may have influenced their tendency to discuss the role of leisure and leisure activities in Australian culture. In particular, adults were more likely to spontaneously discuss leisure time pursuits and the importance of leisure in Australian culture than were adolescents or children.

Findings

Six major themes were evident in informants' discussions of leisure: (1) the consumption of alcohol, (2) engagement in sporting activities, (3) the importance of holidays, (4) the role of the barbecue, (5) a reliance on television for entertainment, and (6) the lure of the beach. These themes are discussed below, with the exception of the findings relating to alcohol consumption which have been discussed elsewhere (Pettigrew 2001). In particular, alcohol has been excluded as almost all informants discussed alcohol consumption at some time during their interviews, making it a separate topic of analysis. While the remaining themes are presented here as relatively discrete pastimes, there was a significant amount of overlap between them. For example, going to the beach and consuming alcohol were discussed as popular holiday pursuits, and many reported spending their leisure time watching sport on television, sometimes consuming alcohol in the process. Drinking thus permeated the other themes in many and varied ways, and the other pastimes were also highly inter-connected.

Sport

Regardless of whether the emphasis is placed on participation or spectatorship, sport is recognised in the literature to be an important aspect of life to many Australians (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997; Cashman 1997; Howell and Howell 1987; Lenskyj 1999). Hundreds of millions of dollars are invested in sports sponsorship each year (ABS 1999), and sporting themes are frequently used in product promotion, especially for products that are heavily endowed with Australian connotations.

After alcohol, sport was the leisure pastime most frequently discussed by informants. Over 84% of those discussing leisure raised sport as an important element of Australian culture. Many

different active leisure pursuits were raised, ranging from individual activities (such as fishing, shooting rollerblading, swimming, and golf) to team activities (such as football, cricket, basketball, netball, hockey, tennis, and soccer). Water sports were also popular, with references made to life saving, swimming, body-boarding, surfing, sailing, water-skiing, jet-skiing, and para-sailing. The sheer number of sports mentioned in the data was staggering. The climate was attributed with encouraging active lifestyles, and the Australian emphasis on leisure was seen by informants to be conducive to both participating in and observing sports. While informants acknowledged that many Australians confine their sporting activities to spectating, they also felt that participation levels are high compared to other countries. Famous Australian sportspeople were provided as evidence of a general sporting prowess:

Look at Kieran Perkins for a start. That has got to focus on Australians as a sporting people (adult male).

Many informants noted the gender segregation that continues in many areas of Australian sport. Gender imbalances in all facets of sport (i.e., participation, organisation, and promotion) have been frequently noted (Adair and Vamplew 1997; Adler and Adler 1998; Heaven and Rowe 1990; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1992; McKay 1990, 1991, 1992; Vamplew 1994). In particular, women's sports attract less media attention and have lower participation rates, a situation that is mirrored in other countries (Burnett, Menon, and Smart 1993; Dewar 1993; Green et al. 1990; Hargreaves 1993). Sport seemed to play a lesser role in the lives of female informants in this study, as indicated by a smaller number of females referring to sport and the more limited extent to which sport was discussed once raised. Among both male and female informants, sport was typically referred to in terms of Australian males and "male" sports (e.g., football and cricket). The various codes of football (AFL, rugby league, and rugby union) received the most attention, particularly in terms of spectating. Spending part of the weekend positioned in front of "the game" on television was portrayed as a very Australian pastime, although further discussion revealed that this was mainly amongst male Australians. Children discussing their parents' sporting activities talked about their fathers' preferences for participating in or watching organised team sports and their mothers' tendencies towards more individual activities such as aerobics, walking, and gardening. The recognition in the literature that there is a significant bias towards male sports was mirrored by some informants' observations that male sports are much more heavily aired on Australian television, particularly the commercial stations.

The government station is left to cover the less commercially attractive women's sports:

When they play football on channel 9, the female thing is on channel 2 (adolescent male).

The reference to women's sport as "the female thing" speaks volumes about its perceived unimportance compared to men's sport. Younger female informants occasionally noted the disparity in the treatment of men's and women's sport, some with obvious resentment:

(Women) play the same sports as the men, just with the rules changed. Men's sports get all the attention, and you can watch them on TV (adolescent female).

On a more positive note, informants typically emphasised the social interaction aspects of sport that provide a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction. They felt that sport can offer a source of new relationships and a means of reinforcing existing relationships. In terms of new relationships, sport can provide access to new acquaintances of both sexes. Similar sporting interests can constitute a basis on which to establish a bond with others outside of the other common meeting place - the work environment:

*Adult male 1: We met about four or five years ago playing tennis.
Adult male 2: You are not talking about work or anything like that, the only thing you have got in common really is your sport, so you talk about that. It's relaxing and it's fun.*

In terms of reinforcing existing relationships, sport provides a source of interaction and emotional linkage that enables bonding to occur between individuals. Whether participating or spectating, people can use sport as a topic of conversation, a basis for an exchange, a reason for meeting, or a part of ongoing friendly rivalry:

Dad and I usually place bets on each other, like \$5 or something, and start like insulting each other and stuff and yelling at the TV (adolescent male).

Opportunities for interaction through sport, however, appear to be greater for males than for females. It was primarily male informants who discussed the social benefits of sport, often in the context of communal sports spectating. The greater tendency for females to interact with others in less active ways is evident in the following quote from two ten-year-old children:

Female child: Men like more physical things.

Male child: And women like more gossip.

Female child: My Mum goes and sees my Grandma while Dad is watching the football.

Females, particularly those in the young family stage of the family life cycle, were often described as being more home-bound, resulting in them engaging in forms of social interaction that did not remove them from the home for long periods. For example, telephone conversations and the sharing of a coffee were described by female informants as important means of relating to others and achieving a sense of social connection.

The two subjects of sport and alcohol appeared to be "naturally" aligned in the minds of many informants. The association between sport and alcohol exists at multiple levels. In the first instance, consuming alcohol is seen to be a communal pursuit that compliments the interactions that occur while spectating or participating in sporting activities. The camaraderie that occurs while engaging in sport can have similarities to that experienced while drinking alcohol with others. For this reason, the line between the two pastimes can become blurred:

We go fishing together, (but) we don't do no fishing when we get there. We just drink (adult male).

Sport can thus constitute a legitimate excuse to consume alcohol, and it works whether the level of engagement is participation or spectating:

Dad drinks lots of beers while watching sport, one after the other (female child).

Holidays

The literature makes repeated reference to the special place that holidays hold in Australian culture (Fiske et al. 1987; King 1978; Mackay 1993). Horne (1988) in particular has suggested that life takes on special meaning for Australians when they are on holidays. While this emphasis on leisure and holidays has led some to conclude that Australians are essentially lazy (e.g., Archer 1984), Horne (1988, p 18) counters this argument by proposing that Australians "work hard at their leisure". Similarly, Mackay (1993) notes that Australians have always had a serious attitude to their holidays.

According to the informants there are two types of holidays, both of which provide the opportunity for rest and recuperation and neither of which occur frequently enough. First is the longer break from

work or school that enables people to "get away" from their normal lives by travelling away from home. Such travel can range from a camping holiday to international travel. However, it ideally involves going to a location that facilitates particular activities, whether it be swimming, surfing, sunbaking, or skiing.

(On an ideal holiday) I would go somewhere with a nice beach. In winter I'd go down to the snow. On holidays I like to go surfing, skiing, fishing, and sleeping (adult male).

Second is the weekend that provides a more temporary but more frequent respite from the aggravations associated with the working week. Considered a mini-holiday, the weekend affords the opportunity to engage in activities relating to sport (including both participation and spectating) and to indulge more freely in alcohol and food consumption. According to informants, the barbecue is an important part of weekend food consumption behaviours, both in terms of perceptions and actual usage.

Barbecues

Barbecues have been discussed as a notable element of the Australian lifestyle (Bedwell 1992; Healy 1994; Moorhouse 1984). When asked for things they associate with being Australian, informants frequently raised cooking on barbecues and consuming barbecued food to be distinctly Australian pastimes. In particular, barbecues were discussed by country informants as being central to Australian life. Some even nominated barbecued food to be the national cuisine. When asked what makes her Australian, an 8 year-old girl answered:

I do the same things that most Australians do, like cook on a barbecue. Other countries' children might not know how to do that sort of thing.

Reports of barbecue usage varied, with some citing almost daily use while others described it as a more occasional activity. The weather was often provided as a reason for the popularity of barbecues in Australia, along with the suitability of the barbecue for entertaining and facilitating interaction between family and friends. This perception of the importance of barbecues to relationships amongst Australians was shared by informants born elsewhere. According to one English migrant:

It is a real honour to be invited to an Australian barbecue because they will keep that to just their close circle of friends, their own clique (adult male).

Barbecues were often discussed as an element of the male domain. This was perceived to be both a matter of choice and of necessity. Associated with the masculine outdoors (Fiske et al. 1987; Moorhouse 1984), the barbecue represents a food preparation method that both maintains and creates a perception of manhood. It thus provides a 'legitimate' way by which men can perform 'women's work' without loss of self-esteem or credibility. As described by one adolescent female:

When mum can't be bothered to cook, that is the only thing that Dad can do.

Television

Adult Australians spend on average between 10 and 15 hours per week watching television, depending on marital and parental status (ABS 1994, 2001). However, one of the heaviest segments of television watchers is adolescents between the age of 12 to 14 years, who watch an average of 20 hours per week (ABS 2001). Almost all Australian homes have a television set, with almost 60% possessing two or more televisions (ABS 1997). Almost 80% of homes also have a VCR (ABS 1997). Television has thus become one of the main ways in which Australians interact with the culture in which they live (King 1978), and according to O'Regan (1993), it provides them with much of their understanding of the Australian identity. This is particularly the case for Australian teenagers, who can receive much of their socialisation via television viewership (McCaughan 1995).

Television was discussed by informants as an important element of their post-work leisure time. They described their evenings as a time where they consumed a meal and relaxed in front of the television. Watching television was discussed as a source of escapism, relaxation, and family togetherness. Adolescents spent considerably more time discussing television, commenting at length on their favourite programs and how they relate (or not) to their own lives. They appeared to be seeking guidance on appropriate ways to manage social situations, and some acknowledged that what they saw on television influenced their expectations and perceptions of reality. At the same time, they recognised that most of the programs they watched were American, and thus do not necessarily reflect Australian values and lifestyles. Some adults also commented on the increasing 'Americanisation' of Australia, an outcome they attributed to the growing number of American television programs aired in Australia:

We are going more Americanised as time goes by. TV has a lot to do with it (adult male).

Among adolescents, the perceived poor quality of Australian programs relative to American programs was occasionally offered as a reason for the preference for imported television content. By comparison, adults tended to express greater satisfaction with local programs. For adolescents, American programs can be more satisfying due to the bravado and self-assurance of the characters depicted in their favourite programs:

We see them as being loud-mouthed and cool, and that's how most Australians want to be (adolescent male).

Here the informant generalises about Australians, attributing them the same self-identity needs as he himself experiences. Many adolescent informants seemed to value American programs for the "wicked" nature of the programs' protagonists. By this they appeared to mean their ability to impress their peers and flout traditional authority figures. They noted that Australian programs lack something in comparison, primarily in their failure to be as exciting and dramatic as their American equivalents. This suggests that current Australian values may be an endangered species, with the increasing encroachment of American values as adolescents age. Such an outcome has been forecast by some (e.g., McCaughan 1995), although others have suggested that such concerns are based on changes that are more imagined than real (e.g., O'Regan 1993).

The Beach

In the literature, the beach is associated with Australian stereotypes and lifestyles (Conway 1985). In particular, it is representative of the informal outdoors and provides a "close-to-nature" alternative to the less accessible Outback (Fiske et al. 1987). Informants liked to describe Australia as a nation of sun-lovers and beach-goers:

We are beachgoers, all of us...In the sun types. We are outdoors types (adult male).

The beach thus appears to play a continuing role in perceptions of the Australian identity. Many references were made to such stereotypes as "beach bronzed Aussies" and "beach bums", phrases that were acknowledged to be stereotypical yet still relevant in terms of Australians' preferred lifestyles. Informants discussed the beach as an important aspect of both leisure periods - weekends and holidays, and it was nominated as an important attribute in travel destinations. For singles, the beach provides a site of relaxation, sport, and peer interaction. For families, the beach represents a way of achieving togetherness and a promoter of healthy exercise. Numerous physical activities were discussed as

occurring at the beach, including swimming, surfing, windsurfing, lifesaving, scuba diving, para-sailing, and fishing.

We go to the beach practically ever weekend because my father is a lifesaver...and we go swimming as well (adolescent female).

To conclude, the six leisure pastimes identified in this study (alcohol, sport, holidays, the beach, television, and barbecues) continue to hold a special place in Australian culture. They represent the best things consumers associate with their leisure time, and may thus constitute the ideal Australian lifestyle as it exists outside of working hours.

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