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Australians and their Leisure Time

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ABSTRACT

The ways in which people organise and experience their leisure time indicates much about their culture, and in Australian culture in particular there is symbolic meaning to be found in the ways in which people utilise their non-working hours. 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.

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Introduction

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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. Of those who discussed leisure, 76 (55%) were male and 63 (45%) were female. In terms of age, 35 (25%) informants referring to leisure pastimes were adults, 69 (50%) were adolescents, and 35 (25%) were 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

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.

Many informants noted the gender segregation that continues in many areas of Australian sport. 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. Younger female informants occasionally noted the disparity in the treatment of men's and women's sport, some with obvious resentment:

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. 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.

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. 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.

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.

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

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. 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.

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, 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.

Television

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.

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.

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.

The Beach

Informants liked to describe Australia as a nation of sun-lovers and beach-goers. 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.

Conclusion

There are no great surprises in the leisure pastimes most frequently discussed by informants in this study. Alcohol, sport, holidays, television, barbecues, and the beach have all been noted in the literature as important aspects of the Australian lifestyle. The findings of this study serve to highlight the continuing emphasis placed on such pastimes by Australians today, and to locate these leisure themes within the broader Australian culture. The six leisure pastimes identified in this study 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.

References

Pettigrew, Simone (2001), "King or Pawn? The Role of the Australian Beer Drinker," *Journal of Research for Consumers* (www.jrconsumers.com), 1

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