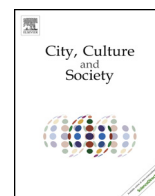




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# Examining the generational differences in consumption patterns in South East Queensland

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the generational differences in consumption patterns in South East Queensland (SEQ) – a ‘sun belt’ region of Australia characterised by an urban and consumption-oriented lifestyle. Drawing on the SEQ quality of life survey data, characteristics of consumption are measured using a range of behavioural items that reflect the lifestyle choices the survey participants have made. These survey items have been factorised to determine the underlying structures that largely explain key consumption patterns in the region. Participants were categorised into one of four generational cohorts and their consumption patterns differentiated using a discriminant function analysis. The evidence from this study suggests that there exists little difference between generations in terms of consumption of public/common goods in the SEQ region except for ‘Generation Y’ as it is commonly known. The study findings also suggest that the ‘new leisure’ (i.e. internet, theme parks, fast food and rock concerts) is the most discriminating component that differentiates consumption patterns across generations.

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## Introduction

The South East Queensland (SEQ) region has been undergoing rapid growth and socio-economic transformation over the last two to three decades, with in-migration driving that growth in what is a classic ‘sun-belt’ migration phenomenon (Chhetri et al., 2010; Chhetri et al., 2009). This particular region has been the epicentre of the sea-change movement for more than a decade, and, despite depictions of the region as a landscape of urban consumption and tourism spectacle (Curran & de Sherbinin, 2004; Harrison, 2006; McCarthy, 2005; Rawlins, 2006; Smith & Holt, 2005), very little is known about this particular populations’ consumption patterns or lifestyle choices. Since the region has attracted a large number of retirees and lifestyle-oriented migrants, it would seem likely that consumption patterns would be differentiated across the generations.

Analysis of current trends in global consumption patterns indicates that we are entering an era characterised by consumers who are more generationally diverse and eclectic in their lifestyles than previous generations (Schewe & Meredith, 2004). In order to identify different groups of consumers and their specific needs/desires, ‘generation-based research’ has experienced rejuvenation in the last ten years (Corster, 1999). Age-related changes in values and embedded intergenerational differences (Badger, Simpson-Craft, & Jensen, 1998; Burke, 1994; Carmichael & McGue, 1994; McConatha & Schnell, 1997; Penn, 1977; Prager, 1998) have been examined by researchers in a series of attempts to ascertain the desired lifestyle choices that define and differentiate contemporary consumption patterns (Feather, 1996; Kahle, 1996). The purpose of such studies has ranged from mapping shifts in consumer values to the identification of consumer behaviour patterns to enable the development of effective marketing strategies (Beller, Weiss, & Patler, 2005).

Some authors have argued that so-called post-materialist values and consumption patterns are age-specific and generationally bound (Anon, 2002;

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Carrigan & Szmigin, 1999; Corsten, 1999; Johnson & Moore, 2001; Rawlins, 2006; Rice, 1995; Zukin, 2004), but as yet, there has been little research to tease out such arguments. Consumers, it has been argued, usually choose different products and services over their life-course and thus their preference for clothes, furniture, and leisure activities varies significantly over time (Leventhal, 1997; Solomon et al., 2002). Despite the importance of 'life stages', the focus of consumer-focused research has largely been on developing marketing and advertising strategies to attract a younger cohort (Grant, 2004, Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003). For example, research has identified that middle aged consumers tend to exhibit greater propensity to spend more on housing and cars, whereas younger cohorts are more interested to spend money on clothing, internet and mobile phones (Spero & Stone, 2004).

The notion of post-materialism has been utilised to reflect a certain cultural shift in and around consumption in recent years, including a *value orientation* that emphasises self-expression and quality of life over economic security. Post-materialism has been articulated as major cultural shift in values from a primary focus on functional goods/materiality toward sustainability/lifestyle (Abramson & Inglehart, 1995a, 1995b). A characteristic of the developed world, over the last part of the twentieth century, it is argued that attitudes and values for the environment and quality of life issues, such as sustainable consumption, environmental consciousness and societal responsibility, are drawing relatively more support as compared to the previous so called 'materialist values' (food and housing) (Featherstone, 1991; Hannigan, 1995; Zukin, 1998). Importantly for this paper, these socio-cultural shifts are not necessarily experienced consistently (and are sometimes not shared) between different generational cohorts. For example, the values generally held by those people who grew up during the boom years of 1945–73, are typically different to those values prioritised by older generations (those born before 1940). Exposure to different shifts/economic conditions/value systems inevitably shapes consumption patterns. For example, those born before 1940 are more likely to hold what are traditionally considered 'materialist values' due to their growth at the time of material hardship (particularly the Great Depression). Each generation has a subtly different mix of cultural influences which shapes but does not determine their consumption behaviours. We were interested in exploring the relevance of debates regarding materialism and post-materialism and contemporary forms of consumption across and within different generations in Australia.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section provides a framework for situating changing patterns of consumption, and that is followed by a section describing and characterising the concept of genera-

tion. The paper then discusses the methodology used in the SEQ quality of life survey and the collection of data to investigate the downshifting phenomenon. That is followed by an analysis of the data and a discussion of the implications of the findings.

### Situating consumption

It is useful at this point to broadly consider what is meant here by consumption and consumer values. Consumption takes place in, and is part of, every aspect of people's lives ranging from basic eating habits through to the use (and purchase) of services for emotional needs. Sheth, Newman, and Gross (1991a, 1991b) identified five distinct consumption values that impact the consumer choice behaviour; namely, functional, social, emotional, epistemic and conditional values. Consumer goods are more than just the objects of economic transaction, 'they are goods to think with, goods to speak with' (Fiske, 1989). In effect, consumption is part of an individual's broader identity work and social integration, and in this way, is one mechanism of self expression. This relates to the central proposition of postmodern theories of consumption – that consumers no longer consume products for their material needs, but rather, for their symbolic and interactional needs. Such arguments denote a shift away from materiality toward symbolism within consumption behaviour. Social theorists have also recently pushed for a diversification in our understanding of consumption, emphasising its evolution and the emergence of new types such as 'conspicuous' and 'compulsive' consumption (Elliott, 1997); while the behavioural geographers (Golledge & Stimson, 1997; Walmsley & Lewis, 1993) tend to explore variegated patterns of spatial behaviour and consumption of space.

In examining consumption patterns, we first need to consider the various ways in which consumption has been conceptualised within the academic literature. A basic premise of work in consumption has been the proposition (central to the postmodern theories) that consumers no longer consume products purely for their material utilities but consume the symbolic meaning of those products. While there may be a material element, consumption centres on the creation of meaning, shared values and development of the self (Elliott, 1997). This has in turn led to the development and refinement of our ideas of forms of consumer behaviour including the notions of *conspicuous* and *compulsive* consumption. Compulsive consumption, it is argued, is largely triggered by a sense of dissatisfaction with life (Lee et al., 2000) and the need to gain social approval and recognition (Faber, 1992). This, it is argued, is driven by issues of low self-esteem (Marlatt et al., 1988) or psychoanalytic reasons (Lawrence, 1990) and is enhanced by forms of peer

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