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Australian Gun Culture, a Rich Web of Meaning

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Using a sociocultural approach the Australian firearm sub-culture is explored with the aim to better understand why Australian firearm owners consume firearms. These findings are the culmination of Nine years of ethnographic research while also validated by ongoing monitoring of the lifestyle. The findings demonstrate that Australian shooters not only love their guns, but through possession and usage achieve four specific consumption metaphors; namely, identity construction, identity reconstruction, appreciation and catharsis. Specific enabling objectives form the conduit to achieving these ends. Enabling objectives include mechanical precision, mechanical potential, martial potential, nostalgic symbolism, recreation and functional utility. Shooters also value firearms for the opportunity to derive a sense of self, through cathexis, contamination and self-extension, demonstrating the complex and multi-faceted nature of what is considered in Australia a cloistered, semi-deviant consumption activity.

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Australian Gun Culture, a Rich Web of Meaning

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ABSTRACT

Using a sociocultural approach the Australian firearm sub-culture is explored with the aim to better understand why Australian firearm owners consume firearms. These findings are the culmination of Nine years of ethnographic research, with a commitment to dependability by ongoing monitoring of the lifestyle. The findings demonstrate that Australian shooters not only love their guns, but through possession and usage achieve four specific consumption metaphors; namely, identity construction, identity reconstruction, appreciation and catharsis. Specific enabling objectives form the conduit to achieving these ends. Enabling objectives include mechanical precision, mechanical potential, martial potential, nostalgic symbolism, recreation and functional utility. Shooters also value firearms for the opportunity to derive a sense of self, through cathexis, contamination and self-extension, demonstrating the complex and multi-faceted nature of what is considered in Australia a cloistered, semi-deviant consumption activity.

INTRODUCTION

Rifles and pistols hang on my friend's living room wall like old family portraits. They are lived with as comfortably as a family heirloom. My friend speaks knowingly of their shape, describes each weapon lovingly, as if it possessed its own substance. He is both literate and civilised, but he would never deny these guns are more than a possession to him. They are an altar before which he bends the knee. A right of ownership he considers inviolable, even sacrosanct. And yet my friend is not a violent man. (Kriegel, 1999, p. 149).

To the wider Australian community and shooters alike there is magic, mystery and meaning residing in guns. To aficionados guns are true marvels of craftsmanship, representing centuries of refinement in precision and lethality, honed with such measured singular purpose. What lethal potential, rich with meaning, symbolism and zeitgeist. They are empowering when possessed, sentient when dispossessed, undoubtedly puissant yet also cathartic in use. They are the ultimate extension of self. They connect us with the past, influence the present and shape the future. They represent an extraordinary Euclidean-type paradox (MacCarthy, 2009); salvation

of the oppressed, oppression of souls, or merely unexceptional tools for animal husbandry and sport. Regardless, they are a sobering reflection of culture. Although considered a tool in competition guns have enormous potential for user cathexis (Otnes, and Lowrey, 2004; Schouten, 1991), self-definition (Belk 1988, 2001; Erikson, 1955) along with permitting their owners a sense of uniqueness and individuation (Fromkin and Snyder, 1980; Jung, 1962).

Consumer behaviour is replete with concepts that extend our understanding of the worth of products to their owners. Concepts such as form and function distinguish between the pragmatic utility of a product and any allied meanings associated with semiotics and shape. Further, allied meanings can include brand equity; that esoteric concept of 'nothingness' that is this collection of contrived positive ideas, ideals, associations and contaminations (Belk, 1988). Cathexis, to a degree dependant on individuation, is also a product 'value-add', or enhancer. In the same way salt not only changes the taste of our food and in doing so adds value to the food so does any consumer investment of emotional energy in a consumable. This extended definition of a product exists at all phases of the consumption activity; from the communication and display to the decision processes, to the preparation for consumption, the act of consumption and finally the disposition. In this study we consider the multitude of paradigms and opportunities in the context of one particular product; that being firearms in an Australian setting.

METHODOLOGY

The data used in this paper comes from a nine-year ethnographic study, commencing in 1999 and finishing in 2008. This investigation examined the cultural meanings associated with the consumption of firearms in Australia and their use in social settings ('gunplay'). Initially one gun club in Western Australia, The Pine Valley Pistol Club was chosen for an in-depth case study; however as the result of an iterative methodological process three more clubs of different types and disciplines were included. This occurred after realising the closeted nature of this shy and restrictive enclave manifests in subtle differences in sub-cultural dynamics between clubs and disciplines. These findings were in turn

considered in a wider context of firearm use; that being hunting and paramilitary. This examination of social construction was not only for its own sake, but also in consideration of the argued interconnection between sociocultural phenomenon and consumption behaviour (McCracken, 1988; Sahlins, 1976).

The data collection followed the techniques contained in Denzin and Lincoln's (1985, 1994) qualitative research treatise, comprising observation and participation at club meetings held on weekends, at the various clubs over nine years. While eight rifle clubs and six handgun clubs were visited the bulk of the formal data came from four clubs; that being two rifle and two handgun clubs. These four clubs, Pine Valley Pistol Club (PVPC), Swanbourne Services Shooters Club (SSSC), Perth Rifle Club (PRC) and Armadale/Byford Rifle Club (ABRC) are where the author held financial membership during the data collection phase. For comparison purposes gunplay was also observed in a rural non-competitive setting on four farms with non-club members (city dwellers and farmers). Attitudes towards firearms were obtained through discussion with club members, rural firearm owners, respondents involved in regulation (e.g. Police), current and former Army personnel.

The data collection comprised observations of firearm usage activities. These observations were recorded into field notes; further divided into perspectives 'in-action' and perspectives 'of-action' (Belk and Wallendorf, 1989). These were supplemented with over 100 digital photographs (Worth, 1975) taken, with redundant photographs culled at a later date (Bateson and Mead, 1942). Unstructured communication occurred with three quarters of the PVPC members, all members of the PRC, SSSC and roughly half of the ABRC. Also, approximately twenty visitors from other clubs, five police officers, ten civilian security officers (with handgun endorsements), five Defence-Force personnel, five gun-shop workers, and seven farmers. The cut-off point was determined by saturation through informant response redundancy and diminished returns (Arnould, 2001). Respondents ranged across all levels of experience and involvement from young neophytes to those counting five decades of shooting experience. Iterative methods and emergent design was used to steer the research project along; early hypotheses and inferences leading eventually to the final genres of external force on firearm ownership. The constant comparative method of data analysis was used, as detailed by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

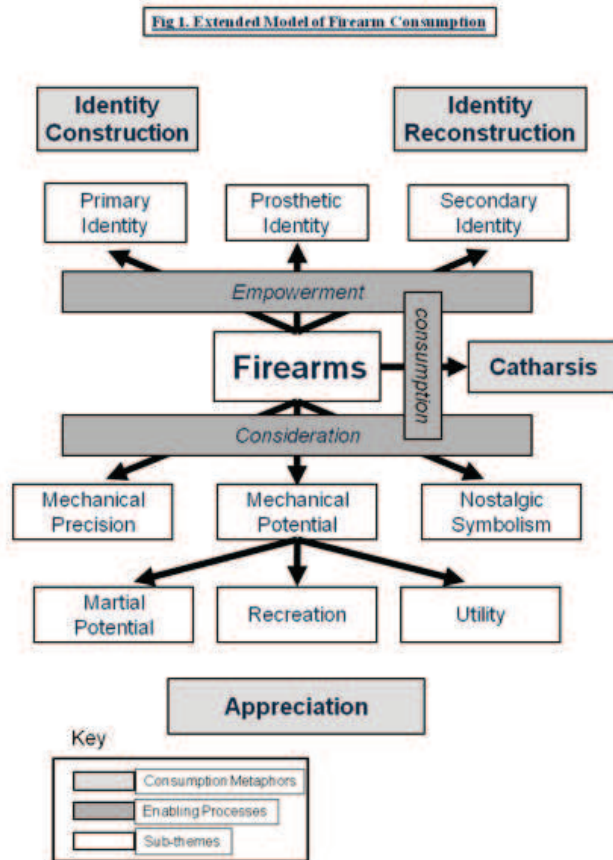
Although constant comparison methodology has its roots in Grounded Theory, the project cannot strictly be called such, as prior assumptions were deliberately made and explored. The rationale for this paradigm of pre-disposition and assumptions stems from the authors prior involvement with firearms from an early age, through to serving in the Australian army.

Issues of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity have arguably little relevance in a qualitative setting, however the study was conducted bearing in mind the equivalents as outlined by Wallendorf and Belk (1989), and Hirschman (1986). The qualitative equivalents referred to being credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Triangulation (Denzin, 1970) was obtained across sites, sources and time. Member-checks (Heisley and Levy, 1991) were used when the opportunity presented itself, not only as an aid to establishing credibility and accuracy, but also to solicit further discussion from key respondents. Contrary to Hirschman's (1986) advice however disquiet did not always result in revising the interpretation, given respondents were often keen to present their lifestyle in the best possible light and saw the project as an opportunity for doing so.

FINDINGS

Analysis of the data not only confirmed the intuitive expectation that shooters love their guns: but also revealed a rich extended web of meaning and possibilities afforded by firearm possession and usage. For this paper we consider the multiple facets of Australian firearm appreciation that ultimately lead to a holistic appreciation of the seminal artifact and associated lifestyle. This web of meanings typifies what is a cloistered (Celsi, Leigh and Rose, 1993), niche sub-culture of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), resulting in consumer values often at odds with the wider non-shooting community. This wider non-shooting community view firearms differently, while a legal consumable with appropriate licensing, firearms fall well within Hirschman's consumer definition of 'The Dark Side' (1991a, 1991b).

Figure 1. sums the various sub-themes in the dynamic that is product engagement (Bowden, 2009). Considering 'Appreciation' (Holt, 1995) as the ultimate consumer goal we consider the intrapersonal relationship between individual owners and their firearms.



One manifestation of firearm appreciation is as mechanical objects. We marvel at their craftsmanship, curves, and components. We appreciate their historical significance as we weigh their nostalgic properties. We marvel at these magnificent engines of moving parts. Each part designed to perform a key and interesting function with interrelated efficiency. Undoubtedly magnifying this appreciation is the knowledge that we control these special engines; through triggers, knobs, bolts and catches, through consideration, skill and choice of components. In controlling these engines so do we realise their potential. Not simply the obvious martial potential for destruction (although this should not be underestimated), but also for the potential implicit in sporting competition and subsequent enjoyment from a recreational perspective.

Self-empowerment through armament (Kohn, 2004a, 2004b; Lattas, 2005) or martial potential was indeed a recurring theme, although one that was not something the majority of shooters would willingly admit to, especially in light of there being no provision to possess firearms for self-defense in Australia. This admiration can be present regardless of whether or not the shooter intends to ever use it in this type of situation, and irrespective of any level of age, maturity or responsibility. Many

Australian owners of the German Glock brand of handguns admire its primary function as an efficient and reliable defensive weapon. In Australia however the most a Glock owner can expect to realise of its martial potential is making holes in cardboard targets (albeit while simulating a martial situation). This admiration of a gun's martial potential is related to the concepts of self-worth, self-assurance and in some cases, self-completion (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982).

One manifestation of empowerment is evident when in possession of a firearm, and the emasculation that occurs in dispossession was evident in discussion with an Australian private security contractor returning to Perth from work in Hilla, Irbil and Baghdad, Iraq. On asking how it made him feel, to be empowered in Iraq with the opportunity to shoot at people with relative impunity.

Actually it makes me feel pretty calm. You feel pretty powerful, like a God. I'd be sitting in the car and watch some joker doing something stupid on the road and I'd think, 'It's OK, I forgive you... You may live' [while making the sign of the cross as a priest would bless a congregation]. They stare at you and it's clear they don't like you. I bless them, 'Forgive them Father for they know not what they do' [laughing at the Christian/Islamic juxtaposition and irreverence]. Here [in Perth] I'd be pissed off [if they did that]. But what can you do? You can't drive round Perth shooting people. (M38)

On another occasion the author was introduced to 'Old Painless', a Sako [brand] 22.250 [calibre] scoped rifle used by a Farmer (M35) in the South West. This person had personified his favourite rifle by giving it a name that evoked both tradition and nostalgia, while at the same time making a subtle claim to accuracy. The accuracy claim comes indirectly from the result, an accurate killing shot has on an animal; a quick and therefore painless death. Personifying the rifle also justified the lavish care vested in one of his most prized possessions.

Allied with martial potential and personification is the consuming of guns for recreation. While the nature of competition precludes everyone from winning there is certainly no shortage of opportunity to personally 'win' when consuming firearms. Each shooter considers and constructs personal definitions of success and then applies these to their participation. When this occurs in competition the individual realises numerous situations of success over time, enhanced by the challenges of achieving it, of desiring it and along the way, failing. All the

while this intense personal focus on recreational consumption is facilitated by the marketing of firearms and associated accoutrements that complete the picture, or as Scammon (1986) referred to in the context of horse racing as material and social 'side-bets' (cited in Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). As one respondent sagely proffered, "Every shot makes someone happy." (M40)

Lastly, firearms can be appreciated through the utility of the mechanism. A multitude of different types and calibres translates into never-ending comparisons of potential utility. Bullet construction for example allows appreciation through impact comparisons on various targets, either living or inanimate. Firearms being systems of components allow individuals the opportunity to choose and vary components to achieve an imagined result, throughout which is evaluated and appreciated (Bryant, 1994; Holt, 1995). As the model in Fig 1. demonstrates, utility is but one aspect of firearm appreciation in a myriad of possibilities and meanings.

SUMMARY

This paper highlights the strong bonds of affinity between owners and their guns. It also reveals the complexities, subtleties and nuances associated with a multi-faceted consumer lifestyle. A person's commitment to firearms as a product, and shooting as a lifestyle is rich with meanings and complexity beyond the intuitive expectation of mainstream society. The consumption of firearms affords the consumer the opportunity to construct an identity sometimes, but not always, in keeping with symbolic self-completion (Wicklund and Golwitzer, 1982). For others it is an opportunity to construct a secondary identity or avatar. A shooting avatar is displayed when in the company of other shooters and remote from the wider community. This is partially due to the normative 'semi-deviant' label of firearms usage in contemporary Australian culture, but partly due to the added value having two identities affords a person. Firearms usage also affords the consumer the opportunity for agon and catharsis. A situation of 'conflict' is constructed whereby the shooter is pitted against a worthy opponent; be it a paper target in a challenging scenario or another shooter in competition. Following the inevitable 'battle' there are winners and losers, however all to a degree revel in catharsis and denouement. Finally there are a myriad pathways to appreciation ranging from appreciation of a firearms destructive potential to an appreciation

of the intricacies involved in engineering such machines. While there is no doubting the contentious nature of firearm consumption in any society with no similar US Second Amendment guaranteeing the right to bear arms in Australia firearms remains closely and cautiously controlled. They are not taken for granted by Australian society as whole, but nor are they by shooters themselves.

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