



Environmetrics

Youth Audiences—recalcitrant or discerning?

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It appears that one of the most alluring audiences for Australian museums in recent times is the Youth Audience. Museums seem to be a little jaded with their 'old familiars' — the families, the school groups and the greys. Most museums I've talked to in recent years have singled out Youth as an important target audience. It seems that they all want to attract these bright young things — perhaps they want to be sought-after by society's future style-makers.

But this particular audience segment seems to be remarkably resistant to the usual offerings of even the most dynamic 'new' museums. "Boring!" is their most common response to museum fare as they glance up from their enthusiastic engagement with their own social and cultural milieu. It seems that once they no longer have to endure compulsory school visits to museums they are quite blithe in their dismissal of these worthy institutions.

Some museums are stretching the envelope of traditional practice to make themselves relevant to new audience groups. For example, most major museums now offer hands-on play areas for pre-schoolers.

But while museums have tackled the special needs of the pre-school set, few have taken a systematic approach to discerning the special needs of Youth Audiences, which may be loosely defined as the decade between 15 and 25 years.

At Environmetrics, we have been researching Youth Audiences from various perspectives over the past 10 years. In this paper, we look at some of the defining characteristics of this age group in terms of their lifecycle. Then we present Australian data on participation in cultural activities. Finally, we point at some implications for museum programming.



Lifecycle stage

Theorists, both academic and popular, have developed descriptions of key stages in the human lifecycle. Many of these theories have been applied directly to educational practice and some have been related to leisure participation.

Erik Erickson is an important theorist whose Theory of Psychosocial Development is particularly useful in understanding the social tasks and roles that are adopted at different stages of development from birth to death. The following table summarises his eight stages and the significant events and social influences for each stage.

Stage 4 is the well-known stage where the emphasis is on getting to know the physical world and the culture lived in. Natural history museums, historical museums and science centres have drawn strong audiences from this age group through schools and parents.

While it is interesting to examine how museums might offer experiences which help people in each stage of life to achieve these 'psychosocial' tasks, stages 5 and 6 are of particular relevance to Youth Audiences.

	Stage		Significant events and social influences
1	Birth-1 year	Trust vs mistrust	Learn to trust others. Primary caretaker is the key social agent.
2	1-3 years	Autonomy vs shame and doubt	Learn autonomy in basic self care. Parents are key social agents.
3	3-6 years	Initiative vs guilt	Resolve conflict between acts of initiative and rights of others. Family is key social agent.
4	6-12 years	Industry vs inferiority	Mastery of social and academic skills, development of self-worth. Teachers and peers are key social agents.
5	12-20 years	Identity vs role confusion	Developing a sense of personal identity derived from social and occupational roles. Peers are key social agents.
6	20-40 years	Intimacy vs isolation	Developing strong relationships to achieve sense of love and companionship. Friends and partners are key social agents.
7	40-65 years	Generativity vs stagnation	Adults face the task of being productive in their work and raising families or looking after young people. Significant social agents are spouse, children and cultural norms.
8	Old age	Ego integrity vs despair	The sense of integrity will need to be maintained in the face of declining capabilities. The life's achievements will be the main social agent for achieving this.



Stage 5 notes the task of developing a sense of personal identity. People in this age group are on the threshold of their adult life, looking into an uncertain future.

Personal identity may be explored by trying on various roles or by joining cultural sub-groups which have clearly defined identity markers. These markers may be as obvious as body piercing or a brand of shoes, or relatively more subtle. Because identity is a central concern of older teenagers, museum exhibitions and programs which refer to currently popular expressions of identity by describing them or providing a forum for expression/participation are likely to be relevant to this age group.

An exhibition soon to open at the Australian Museum, *Body Art*, aims to do just this. Nevertheless, it has been criticised by church leaders who disapprove of the content as a “cynical marketing ploy to attract young audiences”. It seems that a museum can be damned when they don’t attract young audiences and damned when they do.



Identity also derives from occupational choices and leisure interests, especially those relating to personal skills. Exhibitions and programs which intersect with these are also likely to attract this age group. For example, it is likely that the annual *ArtExpress* exhibition provides opportunities for older adolescents reflect on their identity in relation to personal skills and interests.

In Stage 6 the emphasis shifts from the establishment of personal identity to the formation of strong personal relationships. The well-known role of museums as a backdrop for social interaction fits with this stage of life. Couples and peer groups may explore and deepen their relationships through engagement with exhibition materials.

We note that a high proportion of Australians aged 15-25 years are engaged in formal education, often on a full time basis. It is likely that many of them find that their ‘thirst for knowledge’ or ‘natural curiosity’ is satisfied by these studies. Consequently, they may be less likely than some other age groups to choose educational activities in their discretionary leisure time.



Attendance at Sydney cultural venues

The following table (Source: Venue Monitor™) shows the percentage of Sydneysiders aged 18-24 who attended selected cultural leisure venues in six monthly periods over a two year period.

A range of venues are included in this analysis because some museums have the opportunity to be seen as multi-faceted cultural venues which use indoor and outdoor facilities for innovative programming possibilities.

The following table indicates that in the summer of 1998 4.3% of Sydney people aged 18-24 went to the Australian Museum in the six months before February, compared with 32.7% who went to the Opera House¹ in the same time period. It appears that the Opera House was more successful at attracting audiences in this age bracket than the Australian Museum or the other venues on this list.

Table 1. Attendance of 18-24 year olds at cultural venues²

Visited in previous six months	Summer 1998 %	Winter 1998 %	Summer 1999 %	Winter 1999 %
Australian Museum	4.3	8.1	0.8	9.1
Powerhouse Museum	9.1	4.9	4.3	7.1
Museum of Sydney	0.7	2.6	2.7	2.0
ANMM	6.3	2.3	1.5	1.9
Art Gallery NSW	12.3	17.5	10.8	7.0
MCA	5.5	10.7	11.2	7.0
Opera House	32.7	24.7	11.8	27.6
Imax cinema	20.4	13.3	14.2	23.1

Some comments on the data:

- The variability in figures for each of the venues may reflect the importance of programming in attracting this audience. For example:
some Imax films are likely to have greater appeal than others;
the Australian Museum has presented exhibitions which are specifically intended

1. Includes audiences for events in the forecourt.

2. Source: Venue Monitor®



to attract young people, e.g. *Punk Culture*, which may have boosted numbers in some timeframes;

similarly, the Powerhouse Museum has a regular program of exhibitions with special appeal to youth, e.g. *Young Designers' Awards*;

the Opera House has occasional major events in the forecourt some of which have special appeal to youth audiences.

- The data may reflect a summer/winter trend in attendance at events. This may be relevant to programming for Youth Audiences.
- The data may reflect an intrinsic interest in particular themes or topics amongst this age group. For example, it appears on the surface that contemporary art is more interesting to them than maritime matters. Could it be that art provides more people in this age group with opportunities for reflecting on identity and relationship than maritime history does? Programming for youth audiences needs to create a bridge that links the intrinsic interests of this age group with the central purpose of the institution.
- This table gives an indication of the proportion of young people who said they went to these places. It does not try to give an indication of the value of the experience they had there. It could be argued that the relatively smaller numbers who attended the museums had experiences that were richer, more educational or more 'worthwhile' than the larger numbers who went to Imax or the Opera House forecourt. Effective evaluation goes beyond 'head counting' to include a measure of the quality of the experience enjoyed by visitors.

Implications for Museums

Forward-looking. This age group has a short personal history most of which was spent in childhood. Their focus is forward looking rather than retrospective. Accordingly, few of them are deeply interested in Australia as it was, instead, they are more intrigued by what is happening right now and what is just around the corner. They wonder what their life will be like. They are likely to be attracted to material relating to contemporary styles, modes of discourse and topics which may not have existed in previous periods.





Identity. Many museums present exhibitions which address the notion of identity, whether it be the identity of the nation as a whole, or the identity of a particular group of Australians such as the Chinese community in Darwin. Youth Audiences, however, are critically engaged with the emergence of their own personal identity which is in-process and open-ended rather than an accomplished fact. Exhibitions which highlight the processes of contemporary identity formation are likely to be of interest to Youth Audiences. Topics such as dress, fashion, music, film, language and values are all relevant to identity formation.

Talents + skills. As part of engaging with adult life, 15-25 years olds are discovering and developing their talents, skills and interests. Exhibitions which feature the current work or achievements of this generation in fields such as art, design, science, literature, food, charitable works, exploration, commerce, etc, are likely to engage Youth Audiences. This kind of exhibition can give individuals an overview of their cohort and thus help them to understand their place in the world.

Learning vs recreation. Given the heavy educational load carried by a high proportion of 15-25 year olds, exhibitions and programs which are not overtly 'educational' may be more successful in attracting this age group.



Getting to know you. As well as discovering their own tendencies and talents, people in this age group are forming new relationships and getting to know others. This process of 'getting to know you' is staged in many forums. Museums can provide safe public spaces for simply being together, but, more importantly, they offer content which encourages visitors to share their views with each other and get to know each other better.

Targeted programming. Because of the specific needs of this age group, especially those needs which revolve around identity formation, they will respond strongly to programs which appear to be tailored specifically for them or which are quite definitely 'speaking their language'.



Conclusion

It is widely recognised that people at different stages of the lifecycle have different abilities, orientations, goals and interests. These differences have been well articulated for children versus adults and applied to the services offered by museums.

A critical task for Australian museums is to articulate with some clarity the particular characteristics of people aged 15-25 and to develop relevant programs for this age group.

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