

Intergenerational arts and culture

Lessons across middle Australia

October 2023

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About ANA

A New Approach (ANA) acknowledges the cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia and their continuing cultural and creative practices in this land.

ANA is Australia's leading think tank focused on arts and culture. Through credible and independent public leadership, ANA helps build an ambitious and innovative policy and investment environment for arts, culture and creativity. We work to ensure that Australia can be a great place for creators and audiences, whoever they are and wherever they live.

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About this Analysis Paper

ANA Paper No. 2023-03, October 2023

This report was written by Aakanksha Sidhu, Dr. Angie Vivian and Kate Fielding from A New Approach (ANA). Cite as: Fielding, K., Sidhu, A., & Vivian A., October 2023. 'Intergenerational arts and culture: Lessons across middle Australia'. Analysis Paper No. 2023-03. Produced by A New Approach (ANA). Canberra, Australia.

ANA thanks the people who generously reviewed this paper for their time and excellent feedback. The opinions in this Analysis Paper do not necessarily represent the views of ANA's funding partners, the individual members involved in the governance or advisory committees, or others who have provided input.

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Introduction

Australia's cultural landscape changed in 2023. The federal government announced its new national cultural policy (*Revive*), New South Wales and Western Australia launched the development of updated cultural and creative industry state policies and several other states and territories are preparing to refresh their policy settings for arts and culture. Industry and audiences are enjoying the return of international and national festivals, institutions, events and community gatherings as they rebuild from the COVID-19 pandemic.

These shifts are occurring in a time of broader change. Australians will vote in October, via referendum, on whether to recognise the First Peoples of Australia in the constitution by establishing a body called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. Global and national economic upheaval remains front of mind for the public, as does the global climate crisis.

Understanding the views of people in Australia - the voters in elections and referenda who are also keen consumers of cultural goods and services - can support industry, governments and other investors to navigate this change and bring Australia closer to becoming a global cultural powerhouse by 2035.

The purpose of this Analysis Paper is to summarise attitudes on arts, culture and creativity among cohorts of middle Australians aged 18-75, drawing on ANA's middle Australia Insight Report series. The paper compares, contrasts and synthesises the findings of the middle Australia series to present the key similarities and differences across three generations. It also draws on the recommendations from ANA's broader research program, updating them for 2023 and beyond.

The middle Australia series is an intergenerational national focus group study, focused on the attitudes of young, middle-aged and Baby Boomer Australians, between 2020 and 2022. The people we listened to:

- live in outer suburbs and regional areas,
- are politically unaligned (they have changed their vote to a different major party more than once, and at both state and federal elections) and
- are from low or middle-income households in predominantly marginal federal electorates.

The three age groups are:

- Young, aged 19-29 at the time of focus group, (born 1992-2003)
- Middle-aged, aged 35-60 at the time of focus group (born 1960-1985)
- Baby Boomer, aged 58-75 at the time of focus group (born 1947-1964)

Australians from every walk of life participate in and benefit from arts, culture and creativity. The Australian Bureau of Statistics found that 82% of Australians attended at least one live arts and culture activity in 2017-18. More recent figures, collected during the COVID-19 pandemic (specifically, from July 2020 to June 2022), found attendance had slipped to 64% during this disrupted period.¹ Creative Australia's 2022 National Arts Participation Survey found that 97% of Australians engaged with the arts in some way and that 84% acknowledged the positive impacts of arts and creativity.² Middle Australians' participation should be understood in this context.

Four key themes emerged from the series. Middle Australians characterise arts and culture as:

- [Essential to being human](#)
- [Drivers of wellbeing and productivity](#)
- [Fostering innovation, imagination and expression](#)
- [The building blocks of community and place](#)

The direct quotes from these middle Australians along with the synthesis of themes presented in this paper explore these varied roles of arts and culture in everyday life. Understanding these can help foster Australians' sense of belonging as well as individual and community capabilities. The perspectives of middle Australians can also illuminate programming decisions - for example views on digital and non-digital formats or the language to present cultural programs to Australians in a relevant and engaging way.

This paper's recommendations - informed by the rich discussions among middle Australians and ANA's wide-ranging research and engagement program - tie in with various government priorities and the national model of Australia's growing, ageing and diversifying population.³ These are steps we can take to ensure Australia can be a great place for all participants in arts and culture, whoever they are and wherever they live.

Common themes across the middle Australia series

Essential to being human

Middle Australians have a broad definition of arts and culture, and see it as essential to being human. They recognise its benefits in everyday life and think governments should help make these benefits accessible.

Middle Australians say that a world without arts and culture would be 'colourless', depressing', 'uninspiring' and 'like a totalitarian state',⁴ and they compare it to an 'authoritarian' or 'war-torn nation' or even something completely alien.⁵

You may as well live on Mars. (Female, 35-60 years, New South Wales)

All three middle Australia cohorts treat arts and culture as necessary to being human and living in Australia, suggesting that separating it from daily life or treating it as a 'nice to have' will alienate them.

Middle Australians also described far-reaching negative impacts when asked to imagine life without arts and culture, including effects on mental health, quality of life and even on crime rates.

I think, like I said, crime rates would go up and I think that there would be - I think a lot of people rely on stuff like that, and government - I don't know; a lot of those events are the things that people look forward to, and we've sort of seen, with COVID, with events not being able to happen, a lot of people feeling sad and not having anything to look forward to. They're very withdrawn and suicide rates have gone up. I think having culture and arts engages the community and being engaged in the community gives you a lot of things to look forward to in your calendar, and that's important for mental health. (Trans male, 19-29 years, Northern Territory).

It supports our mental wellbeing, so it's a health issue. It should be up there with priorities like aged care and healthcare. (Female, 58-75 years, Northern Territory)

Across the series, ANA identified that middle Australians believe engagement with arts and culture in daily life generates diverse benefits, for both themselves and for others. They expect governments to play a role in making that possible, which the middle Australia series notes is linked to the concept of a public good.⁶ Middle Australians have a broad and inclusive sense of what arts and culture is, from opera to video games, community festivals to films and museums. They prefer the term 'arts and culture', over just 'arts'.

Drivers of wellbeing and productivity

Middle Australians across the three generations note the role of arts and culture in driving wellbeing and productivity-related skills, including in the workplace and through education. In short, arts and culture connects various government portfolios through its impacts.

Middle Australians see arts, cultural and creative activities as having wide-ranging impacts in their lives, including in policy areas that span several government portfolios. For example, middle Australians understand that arts and culture can assist in the recovery from natural disasters and significant social and economic disruptions such as the pandemic and can respond to, or help prevent health issues. The focus groups evoked rich discussions in many government policy and program areas, but the role of arts and culture in children's education stood out for middle Australians across the series:

It's [a] very good learning activity for the kids; it will help them to develop - personality development for the kids. Yes. It's very good for the kids. It's preparing them for the real world. (Female, 35-60 years, Queensland)

Education is, for me, the biggest one, because education is this phase of secondary socialisation; people are learning who they are and learning to be themselves in society. And so, at this key stage, they need arts and culture to build up that identity, figure out what cultures they fit into and who they identify with. (Male, 19-29 years, Tasmania)

Arts and culture teaches us that we're all valuable, and we are gifted in different things. It teaches children to appreciate the creation and that there is no right or wrong. It's all about teaching acceptance. (Female, 58-75 years, Northern Territory)

Arts, culture and creativity can build connections in the workplace according to middle-aged middle Australians.⁷

Culture is belonging, too. Even though someone might come from a different culture, it's like we belong to a culture. 'Which culture do you fit into?' You go to the workplace and it's a different culture. It's more than background and traditions: it's more about where we feel we fit in. (Female, 35-60 years, New South Wales)

Young middle Australians believe that arts and culture helps to mitigate loneliness and curbs social isolation.⁸ When asked about a world without arts and culture, one member from this cohort explained:

The first word that came into my mind was, it would be kind of sad. Even though I do engineering, I feel like I'm still quite a creative person and I like doing art and reading or

doing sport. That's bringing people together, so, when you don't really have that, no matter what form it's in - bringing people together - it's a bit lonely and a bit sad and the world isn't as colourful or vibrant in various ways. (Female, 19-29 years, South Australia)

Baby Boomer middle Australians associate these activities with skills for the future. They say cultural participation helps us 'test opinions', 'negotiate', 'listen', 'compromise' and 'see others' points of view' - behaviours that are 'pro-social' (distinct from anti-social).

It's really healthy to be challenged. This provides a way to do it on common ground. You're both trying to understand something new and each other's perspective. It helps to diffuse any conflict. (Female, 58-75 years, Queensland)

Fostering innovation, imagination and expression

Middle Australians have high hopes for arts and culture's impacts on innovative thinking, our collective imagination and creative expression. These impacts support middle Australians' calls for participation through greater access and a range of formats for cultural and creative experiences.

Middle Australians associate arts and culture with imagination, inspiration and hope. They hope for cohesion through engagement in arts and culture, and they believe that culture and creative activity spurs inspiration and innovative thinking. The potential for stimulating creativity and imagination is seen as one of the core purposes of arts and culture in Australian society.

It creates more innovation in people, definitely. Arts and culture always gives flexibility; people love to think more or think outside the box when they have been exposed to art; it gives them creativity. (Male, 35–60 years, Victoria)

While the preferences for cultural and creative goods and services vary across the three generations – and indeed across individuals – middle Australians assert that everyone should be able to experience and access their preferred activity. In practice, this led to discussions on improving access regardless of income (*A view from middle Australia*); the location and time of day or night (*The next generation of voters*) and level of mobility (*Lifelong*).

I think that, you know, as one gets older, you still have an ability so long as you have transport. So long as you are mobile, you can go wherever your source of culture is and enjoy and be with others who enjoy and appreciate it and have an experience. (Male, 58–75 years, Queensland)

The building blocks of community and place

Middle Australians believe that cultural and creative engagement helps build a sense of belonging and connection at individual, community and national identity levels. The benefits of arts and culture as the 'building blocks of place' emerged through valued local activities, jobs and tourism.

Middle Australians believe that arts and culture helps bring communities together, breaks down barriers between different groups within society and encourages greater communication and social cohesion.⁹

Governments are meant to support things that bring the community together. It's how we grow. Investment in arts and culture just validates this. (Male, 58–75 years, Tasmania)

Reflecting on the middle Australia research, ANA identified three related to community:

- Participation in and connection to culture brings the community together.
- Cultural access, online or in-person, increases access and helps foster connection to the community.
- Content should reflect Australia's diverse population, including the stories of First Nations peoples.

Middle Australians also believe that Australian stories, cultural heritage and content should be reflected back locally and on the world stage. They believe that arts and culture helps express identity and the diversity of thought that comprises their complex and nuanced sense of belonging.

I think there's so many different experiences of being Australian. It's not one shared, unified thing. It's this whole different range of how people express being Australian, and I think art is a way to express that and build their understanding of what that looks like for people outside of Australia coming into Australia, to get an idea that there's a really diverse range of people here. (Female, 19–29 years, Northern Territory)

Without Australian arts, we would lose our sense of identity. You would lose your heritage as well and lose the connection to your country. You want to have something to be proud of and to pass it on [to] the future generations. It's a very important thing, I have never really thought about this before. (Female, 35–60 years, Queensland)

Place (online or in-person) clearly plays an important role in increasing access and helping to foster social cohesion, connectivity and other community values. Activities mentioned as being highly valued by the middle Australians in

the focus groups include attending and participating in local festivals, live performances and local institutions.¹⁰ The core value they perceive in Australia's cultural heritage and specific places (e.g. Uluru, the Great Barrier Reef and the Sydney Opera House) lead into discussions of local jobs, tourism and the broader economic value of cultural activities and events.

Findings unique to each generation

As well as many commonalities, there were also perspectives that were unique to each of the three generations of middle Australians.

Young middle Australians

Young middle Australians, aged 18–29 at the time of focus groups (born 1992–2003) are an age group with a high percentage of undecided or swing voters in Australia.¹¹ We found that they:

- do not distinguish between high arts and other cultural activities;
- view digital and in-person formats as equally enjoyable and important.

Middle-aged middle Australians

Middle-aged middle Australians, aged 35–60 at the time of focus groups (born 1960–1985), are typically associated with a range of life transitions. We found that they:

- make some distinction between high arts and other cultural activities; and
- are moderately interested in digital participation, but recognised and generally respected that younger generations valued digital culture.

Baby Boomer middle Australians

Baby Boomer middle Australians were aged 58–75 at the time of focus groups (born 1947–1964). The 2021 Census revealed that Baby Boomers were Australia's second-largest generational grouping.¹² ANA's research found that they:

- think arts and culture provide opportunities for intergenerational dialogue and connection, including with their children and grandchildren; and
- say that cultural experiences create lifelong memories and help them 'stay young'.

Opportunities for arts and culture stakeholders

Informed by the shared perspectives of middle Australians, ANA highlights the following opportunities for consideration by arts and culture stakeholders, including those working in policy, industry and investment.

These opportunities may support stakeholders working across these areas to more effectively discuss investment in arts and culture; communicate with participants and consumers; identify new social and economic development initiatives; and prepare advocacy documents and grant applications.

- To communicate more effectively about arts and culture with middle Australians:
 - Use both words—“arts and culture”—together to demonstrate relevance, make them feel welcome and evoke a positive emotional response.
 - Discuss the relevance of arts and culture through the themes of a) imagination, inspiration and creativity; and b) community, connection, diversity, acceptance and national identity.
 - Discuss the direct societal and economic benefits of arts and culture to local communities to communicate with everyday Australians in a way that aligns with their priorities.
- Reduce barriers to participation - including time, cost, distance and safety - to support access to arts and culture at all stages of life.
- Prioritise using arts and culture in place-based and community-building initiatives.
- Leverage innovation, expression and imagination through arts and culture to help individuals and communities address future challenges and respond to change.

The voices of middle Australia should give arts and culture stakeholders the confidence to act boldly and urgently in their actions to support the development of a rich cultural life for all Australians.

Opportunities for policy leaders

It's evident that everyday Australians hold nuanced perspectives about the role of arts and culture in their lives and its impacts on their communities. Reflecting on these shared perspectives has re-inspired hope about the cultural landscape that future generations of Australia could inherit.

To facilitate and promote a cultural landscape that meets the needs of Australia's growing and diverse population, ANA puts forward the following opportunities for policy leaders at the national, state and territory and local levels to consider:

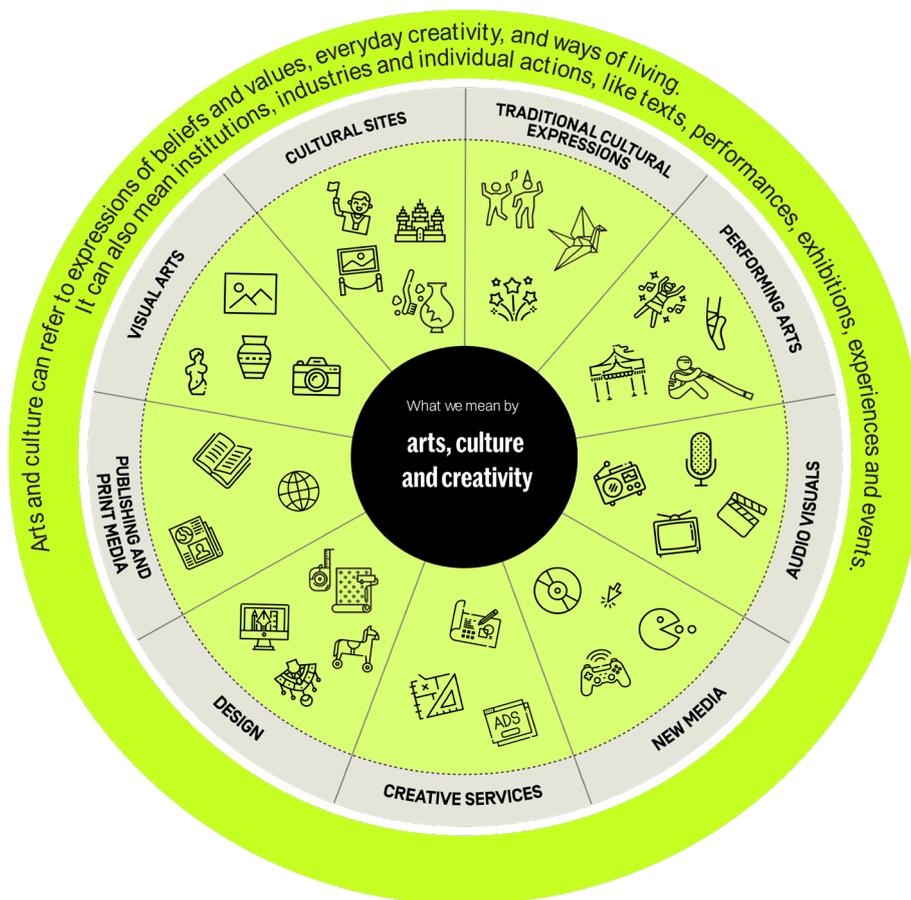
- Pursue the public good impacts of arts and cultural participation, as recognised by middle Australians, across all three levels of government, including through the Cultural Ministers' meeting and, where appropriate, National Cabinet.
- Promote the integration of arts and culture into broader social and economic development strategies through an intentional cross-portfolio approach.
- Strengthen purposeful public investment to help ensure Australians have opportunities to access the benefits of arts and cultural participation and expression.
- Support industry, business and investment stakeholders to collaborate successfully at the national, regional and global levels, including through appropriate regulatory and policy settings and mechanisms for better long term planning.

With the OECD calling on nations to view arts and culture as an investment for the future, not simply a cost,¹³ all governments have a key role to play in ensuring that Australians at every stage of life can access the benefits of arts and culture.

For a summary of these insights that can be used to inform discussions and decisions, please see the [one-page overview](#).

Appendix

What do we mean by arts, culture and creativity?



Source: Reproduced from Trembath and Fielding (2020, 163). The original was created using inputs from Australia's Cultural Funding by Government data series 2007-08 to 2017-18, the UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics and UNCTAD's Creative Economy Report 2008.

At ANA, we acknowledge the cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia and their continuing creative practices in this land. These practices remind us of the importance of sharing knowledge, skills and stories and help us to understand what we mean when we talk about arts, culture and creativity.

At ANA, arts, culture and creativity include activities such as:

- attending cultural events,
- visiting cultural venues,
- creating or performing something and
- engaging with arts, culture and creative content in your home.

We also know that not all arts, culture and creative activities appeal to all people but most people feel that there is something that they can enjoy and that is both relevant and significant to them.

The word 'culture' has many different meanings. At ANA we use 'culture' to refer to the ways of living and the everyday forms of expression and creativity that we either share as Australians or that we share with other members of our particular social groups or communities.

We also note that arts and cultural activities can sit within the industrial category of the cultural and creative economy, which includes industries and occupations that use creativity for production, and where cultural symbolism is evident in the finished product. This includes the activities listed in the bullet points above, but also includes activities in industries and occupations that may be less obvious, such as advertising, design and architecture.

Additionally, please find ANA's [return on investment framework](#) from our most recent Insight Report, *[To Scale: Mapping Financial Inflows in Australian Arts, Culture and Creativity](#)*.

Research design and methodology

The research design and methodology for each of the middle Australia series discussed within this paper can be found on ANA's website, www.newapproach.org.au and via the following links.

- [A view from middle Australia: Perceptions of arts, culture and creativity](#)
- [The next generation of voters: Young middle Australians talk arts, culture and creativity](#)
- [Lifelong: Perceptions of arts and culture among Baby Boomer middle Australians](#)

Endnotes

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- 4 Vivian and Fielding, Lifelong: Perceptions of Arts and Culture among Baby Boomer Middle Australians. (Canberra, A New Approach (ANA), 2020). Insight report no. 2022-02
- 5 Fielding and Trembath, 2020, A View from Middle Australia: Perceptions of Arts, Culture and Creativity. (Canberra: A New Approach (ANA) think tank with lead delivery partner the Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2020)
- 6 Public goods are defined as items or effects that (a) have social benefits beyond their market price; (b) are (or should be) available to all members of a society without exclusion; and (c) do not become less available to one individual because they are also being used by others.
- 7 Fielding and Trembath 2020, A View from Middle Australia: Perceptions of Arts, Culture and Creativity (Canberra: A New Approach think tank with lead delivery partner the Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2020)
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- 16 Public goods are defined as items or effects that (a) have social benefits beyond their market price; (b) are (or should be) available to all members of a society without exclusion; and (c) do not become less available to one individual because they are also being used by others.