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The Australian Grey Nomads – are they who we think they are? Enhancing formative research through the quantitative assessment of psychological constructs

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The Australian Grey Nomads – are they who we think they are? Enhancing formative research through the quantitative assessment of psychological constructs

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ISSUE ADDRESSED:

Measures of 'social identity' and 'psychological sense of community' were included within a broader formative research inquiry to gain insight into the identity characteristics and level of connectedness amongst older recreational road travellers (commonly known as Grey Nomads). The research sought to gain insights on how best to reach or speak to this growing driver cohort.

METHOD:

Participants included 631 older recreational road travellers ranging in age from 50 years to over 80 years. Data were obtained through three scales which were incorporated into a larger formative research survey; an identity hierarchy, the Three Factor Model of Social Identity and the Sense of Community Index.

RESULTS:

Older recreational road travellers see themselves principally as couples, with social group identity being secondary. Although many identified to some degree with the Grey Nomad identity, when asked to self categorise as either members of the Broad Network of Recreational Vehicle Travellers or as Grey Nomads, the majority categorised themselves as the former. Those identifying as Grey Nomads, however, reported significantly higher levels of 'social identification' and 'sense of community'.

CONCLUSION:

The Grey Nomad identity may not be the best identity at which to target road safety messages for this cohort. Targeting travelling 'couples' may be more efficacious. Using the 'Grey Nomad' identity is likely to reap at least some success however, given that many identified to some degree with this group identity. Those identifying as Grey Nomads may be more open to community participation or behaviour change given their significantly higher levels of 'social identity' and 'sense of community'.

SO WHAT?

The findings of this research should be taken into account when planning programs which specifically target older recreational road travellers. Assuming that travellers relate to the Grey Nomad identity may inhibit the success of programs aiming to influence this group.

KEY WORDS:

Formative research; interpersonal profile; quantitative assessment; sense of community; social identity; road safety

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Introduction

With population ageing on the Australian doorstep, the safety of older drivers will become increasingly important.¹ Identifying and tailoring road safety messages to at risk sub-groups of senior drivers will be an ongoing road safety priority.² The delivery of effective road safety education, however, requires the careful amalgamation of a number of primary elements. Not only must the specific and distinctive needs of various groups or communities be identified and fulfilled through the provision of pertinent information, but this ‘content’ must be presented and delivered in a manner to which a particular target group will be receptive. In essence it is not only about providing the “right message” or arriving at the correct ‘content’, but it is also about “getting the message right” in terms of using language and an approach that will gain the attention of the intended audience.³

Achieving this synchrony requires those responsible for developing road safety initiatives to have an intimate knowledge of their target group. Identifying sub-groups within a broader target market, understanding how a target audience see themselves in terms of their most salient identities, and gauging connectedness or ‘sense of community’ amongst members will enable program planners to tailor communication strategies to the profile of a group and to build on existing social networks to achieve success.

Grey Nomads and Road Safety

Whereas the contribution by older drivers to crash statistics has in the past been relatively insignificant, due to the fact that there were fewer of them and they travelled fewer kilometres,⁴ this trend is expected to change in coming decades, as older drivers are reported to be taking more trips and travelling further than prior generations.^{5,6} The Australian Grey Nomads are an excellent example of the changing driving patterns of older citizens. Although the label ‘Grey Nomad’ has yet to be formally defined, previous authors have described this group as retired or semi-retired individuals, 50 years of age or older, who tour within Australia for a minimum of three months in caravans, campervans, motor-homes and the like.⁷ Data from the caravanning and camping industry confirms the rising popularity of this lifestyle; retired Australians are reported to take 200,000 caravanning trips of six weeks or longer,⁸ annually, with approximately 70,000 – 80,000 caravans touring the country at any one time.⁹

In addition to the risks confronting older drivers, which arise as a result of normal ageing, anecdotal information from Australian newspapers, recreational vehicle clubs and police suggests that the road safety risks faced by the Grey Nomad community are considerable and may be quite different to those typically experienced by older drivers. Many nomads may be embarking on extended road trips, often driving and towing heavy vehicles in rural areas with limited experience or training relevant to the type of road travel. Despite this potential risk,

there has been no formal study pertaining to the threats facing this group and little is known about the interpersonal or social features likely to impact on their receptiveness to road safety messages and programs. Pertinent questions include, how do these travellers see themselves? Do they relate strongly to the Grey Nomad identity, or does this title have limited relevance to them? What is the best language to use with this group in order to foster high levels of message relevance and to enhance the success of road safety initiatives? Is there a strong psychological connection between older recreational road travellers that is likely to support community participation and the adoption of positive behaviours perceived to be aligned with this group?

Social Identity

Based on Social Identity Theory,^{10,11} an individual's social identity is defined by the groups to which they belong. Social identity plays an influential role in behaviour (e.g., road safety), as those who identify strongly with a group are more likely to be influenced by what is considered appropriate behaviour or by the norms of that group.^{12,13} When a social identity becomes salient, an individual is more likely to see themselves as a member of that group, as opposed to an individual, and their similarities with the group and meanings that they associate with the group are brought to mind. For those developing road safety interventions, understanding the identity characteristics of a target community can therefore be very useful, as messages and information channelled to identities that are not salient are unlikely to catch the attention of the target audience and consequently may not be successful. As individuals can hold many different social identities concurrently,¹³ it is useful to determine saliency of the Grey Nomad identity for older road travellers in Australia, particularly as this 'label' is one which is believed to have derived through the media and other sources, not necessarily from within the community itself. It is also valuable to determine the saliency of this identity in comparison to 'individual' identities (e.g., seeing oneself just as an individual, or as a couple, as opposed to a member of a social group).

Sense of Community

Sense of community is a psychological construct which refers to the feelings of belonging and attachment that one has to their community, whether this be a geographic (e.g., township, suburb) or relational community (e.g., Grey Nomads).¹⁴ A strong sense of community within a referent group is particularly important for the success of health promotion initiatives (e.g., road safety), as it contributes to feelings of empowerment and to community participation.^{15,16} The existence of a strong sense of community within the Grey Nomad community would infer that members would be more likely to see community challenges aligned with Grey Nomads (e.g., road safety issues) as relevant to them, and consequently to engage in action.¹⁴ As Australian road safety initiatives have traditionally been driven from the 'top down' by government and non-government bodies, the need for greater community participation within this field is recognised.¹⁵ Although several authors report evidence of strong social networks and sense of community within the Grey Nomad community^{7,17} an objective quantitative assessment of the construct had not been completed.

The current research endeavoured to answer two key questions in relation to the social identity and sense of community of older recreational road travellers in Australia. Firstly, the study aimed to explore the range of identities embraced by members of the target group when travelling and the saliency of these identities. The second objective was to explore the level of 'sense of community' within the target group. While a limited number of studies have investigated these constructs qualitatively, no prior quantitative research has been completed. Although it is difficult to suggest why this area has remained relatively unstudied, it is perhaps a reflection of the fact that it is only in recent years that this retirement activity has grown substantially in popularity in Australia and as such has become important from a road safety perspective. By gaining an understanding of these two psychological constructs, the research may provide insights on how best to reach or speak to older recreational road travellers when devising road safety messages and, in fact, whether the Grey Nomad title is the best identity at which to target road safety information.

Method

Respondents and sampling

Respondents included older recreational road travellers ranging in age from 50 years to over 80 years in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania. Sampling was convenience based and included two strategies: face to face survey distribution and electronic completion. Surveys were distributed at a variety of sites including recreational vehicle events and rallies, caravan parks and via third person to members of caravan and camping clubs. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the Queensland University of Technology.

Measures

A comprehensive survey assessing a multitude of factors was designed to meet the specific objectives of the study; identity characteristics and 'sense of community' were evaluated using three scales which were embedded within this broader questionnaire. The first of these was an identity hierarchy, which assessed the extent to which participants saw themselves as a range of possible travelling identities. Identity choices moved from a broad level of group identity (i.e., member of the Broad Network of Recreational Vehicle Travellers, Grey Nomad, member of a recreational vehicle club and a member of an informal group), down to an individual level of identity (couple or an individual traveller). Using a Likert-type scale (1 = not at all, 5 = very strong), respondents rated the extent to which they saw themselves as each identity when on the road. This inventory was included to gauge the saliency of individual vs. group identities within the cohort.

Group identity was explored further by asking participants to categorise themselves into one of two broad group identities (a) Grey Nomad or (b) a member of the Broad Network of Recreational Vehicle Travellers. This strategy established the *broad* group identity that captured the greatest contingent of older recreational road travellers and which may therefore gain the attention of the greatest proportion of travellers when targeting road safety messages.

Participants subsequently completed the Three Factor Model of Social Identity¹⁸ and the Sense of Community Index¹⁹ with their chosen identity category in mind.

The Three Factor Model of Social Identity¹⁸ evaluated the participants' *level* of identification with their chosen social group category when touring (e.g., Grey Nomad or member of the Broad Network of Recreational Road Travellers). The inventory contains 12 items and respondents were instructed to complete the scale with their chosen identity category in mind. While the scale incorporates three subscales (i.e., centrality, in-group affect, in-group ties) the aim of the current formative inquiry was to simply evaluate total scores. Item responses were documented using a 7 point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*I strongly disagree*) to 7 (*I strongly agree*). Mean total scores were calculated for all 12 scale items for each participant, with higher scores indicating a higher level of social identity. Internal reliability for the total scale is deemed sound ($\alpha = .83 - .91$)^{18,20,21} and research examining test re-test reliability of the instrument confirms its stability across time¹⁸.

The Sense of Community Index¹⁹ was the third scale contained in the questionnaire. This was used to evaluate the strength of psychological sense of community or level of connectedness amongst travellers who had categorised themselves as either a member of the Broad Network of Recreational Vehicle Travellers or a Grey Nomad. The scale incorporates 11 items, and as with the Three Factor Model of Social Identity (Cameron, 2004), respondents were required to complete the inventory with their chosen group category in mind. Items were answered using a 7 point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*I strongly disagree*) to 7 (*I strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating a higher sense of community. A total mean score across items was calculated for each participant. Past studies have shown the scale to have good internal reliability²¹.

Statistical analysis

A paired-samples *t*-test was used to assess whether respondents identified more strongly with individual identities compared to group identities. Planned comparisons were used to determine the saliency of various group and individual identities in comparison to the Grey Nomad identity. Independent samples *t*-tests were also used to identify significant differences between respondents who categorised themselves primarily as Grey Nomads or as a member of the Broad Network of Recreational Vehicle Travellers and their strength of social identity and sense of community with these respective groups.

Results

Surveys were completed by 631 respondents. Of these, 440 were male, 139 were female and 52 did not report their gender. While 73.4% were from Queensland, 9.7% were from New South Wales, 8.9% were from Victoria and a further 5.6% resided in Western Australia, South Australia or Tasmania.

Identity hierarchy.

The degree to which individuals saw themselves as a range of individual and group travelling identities is depicted in Figure 1. A paired-samples *t* test confirmed that respondents related significantly more strongly with individual identities (i.e., an individual or a couple; $M = 3.73, SD = .85$) as opposed to group identities ($M = 2.36, SD = 1.05, t(289) = 19.20, p < .001$). In keeping with the fact that most respondents travelled as couples, this was the identity that most respondents identified with most strongly.

A series of planned comparisons confirmed that amongst the broader group identities, respondents related to the Grey Nomad identity ($M = 3.35, SD = 1.45$) significantly more strongly than to other social group identities, including the Broad Network of Recreational Vehicle Travellers ($M = 2.45, SD = 1.54, t(325) = 8.48, p < .001$), a specific recreational vehicle club ($M = 2.33, SD = 1.53, t(349) = 10.68, p < .001$), or an informal group ($M = 2.31, SD = 1.41, t(330) = 8.95, p < .001$). Travellers saw themselves significantly less strongly as Grey Nomads however, than as couples ($M = 4.59, SD = .91, t(406) = 16.40, p < .001$).

Insert Figure 1

Interestingly, when asked to *categorise* themselves as either Grey Nomads or as a member of the Broad Network of Recreational Vehicle Travellers (i.e., to choose between the two groups), as opposed to indicating the *extent to which they related* to the various identities (i.e., as was the case in the previous identity hierarchy), only 35.7 % of the sample categorised themselves as Grey Nomads, compared to 64.3% who categorised themselves as members of the Broad Network of Recreational Vehicle Travellers.

Strength of social identity and psychological sense of community.

While the level of identification and sense of community was generally moderate within both groups, strength of identification was significantly stronger within those who categorised as Grey Nomads as opposed to those who categorised as members of the Broad Network of Recreational Vehicle Travellers ($t(424) = 2.30, p < .05$). Similarly, sense of community was significantly stronger within those who categorised as Grey Nomads, ($t(481) = 2.96, p < .01$; see Table 1). Whilst fewer participants self categorised as Grey Nomads, the greater sense of identification and connectedness within this group may be conducive to community action and participation. Social Identity and Sense of Community were found to be strongly correlated ($r = .71$).

Insert Table 1

Discussion

Although Australian society has come to know this group of older travellers as *Grey Nomads*, it is apparent that for many this may be a label ascribed to them, as opposed to one that they have chosen. The research confirmed that most travellers see themselves principally as couples when on the road, with social group identity being secondary. Although many

identified to some degree with the Grey Nomad identity (e.g., slight or moderately), when asked to self categorise as either members of the Broad Network of Recreational Vehicle Travellers or as Grey Nomads, the majority categorised themselves as the former. While it would be desirable to compare these findings to prior research, this is the first quantitative study of the identity characteristics of older recreational road travellers in Australia.

Social marketing and health promotion literature emphasise the importance of tailoring messages and programs to the specific needs of communities²². Similarly, Social Identity Theory suggests that messages are more likely to be picked up by individuals if they see themselves as part of a group and if the messages are specific to their group. The present research identifies segmentation within the cohort of older recreational road travellers and as such, a multifaceted approach to road safety messages and program promotion for this cohort may be necessary. For example, the findings suggest that campaigns and interventions should principally target travelling couples and if group identity is to be used, it may be necessary to acknowledge both the Grey Nomad and the Broad Network of Recreational Vehicle Traveller identities in order to capture the attention of the bulk of the cohort. Promoting messages and programs purely to the Grey Nomad community is likely to reap at least some success, however, given that many identified to some degree with this group identity.

The stronger social cohesion amongst those categorizing as Grey Nomads is likely to support greater involvement of community members in the planning and implementation of road safety initiatives¹⁶ and should be seen as a key resource by program developers. Consequently, for those wanting to involve older road travellers in the development and implementation of programs, it may be more fruitful to seek or advertise the opportunity using the 'Grey Nomad' identity, as opposed to a broader group identity, as this group may be more likely to engage.

While the level of connectedness amongst those who categorised themselves as 'members of the Broad Network of Recreational Vehicle Travellers' was significantly less than those in the Grey Nomad group, there was certainly a moderate sense of community within this group. As such, there may be opportunity for program developers to draw on this existing connectedness in order to encourage positive road safety behaviour, including the use of language which reflects the broader group identity as opposed to the Grey Nomad label. Strengthening this level of connectedness in order to encourage greater community participation is likely to be a long term challenge¹⁵, but one which may be achieved through activities that encourage cooperation and which build trust between members²³.

While these recommendations are made, it is acknowledged that further research will be required before conclusions can be drawn as to the most effective road safety education strategies for this group. Several study limitations are also recognised. While the sample surveyed in the research was reasonably large, it is accepted that the study may not have captured a representative sample of Grey Nomads. Obtaining a more balanced representation of recreational road travellers and proportions of participants from all areas of Australia may have been beneficial. Additionally, the social identity categories used within the study (i.e., broad network of recreational vehicle travellers, member of a recreational vehicle club, member of an informal recreational vehicle group) were specified by the researchers and were based on informal discussions with target group members. While these social categories were

piloted during survey development, their validity as the most appropriate choices may have been better confirmed through a focus group discussion prior to questionnaire development.

In conclusion, the research has provided valuable information on the interpersonal attributes and processes of what is known publically as the Australian Grey Nomad community. The results have unveiled important information on the identity characteristics of this group and have confirmed a level of connectedness amongst travellers that may be conducive to community participation. While it may have been possible to reveal *some* of this information through qualitative means, the quantitative assessment of these constructs across a large sample, provides confirmatory data that would not have been obtained through traditional focus group discussions. The study also highlights the value of using psychological constructs in the formative research in health promotion.

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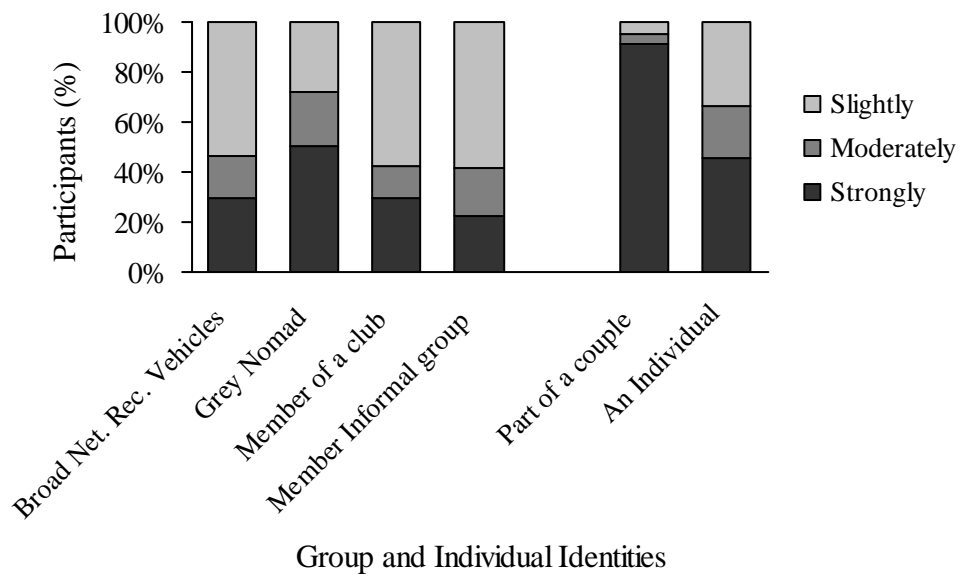


Figure 1. Participants expressed degree of identification with a range of individual and group identities.

Table 1

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations on the Three Factor Model of Social Identity Scale (Cameron, 2004) and the Sense of Community Index (MacMillan & Chavis, 1986)

Identity	Social Identity			Sense of Community		
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Part of the Broad Network of Recreational Vehicle Travellers	285	4.77	0.86	310	5.00	1.08
Grey Nomad	141	4.98	0.86	173	5.29	1.02