**$UCCE$$: A Social Media Analysis of Australian and American Celebrations of Success**

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**ABSTRACT**

In this proposal, I aim to continue the work of my 2018 Honors Summer Research Fellowship: *Tall Poppy Syndrome: Opiate of the Masses, the Causes and Implications of Tall Poppy Syndrome in Perth, Australia,* this time wanting to approach the subject from my field of study, marketing. After traveling to Perth and conducting a series of interviews regarding Tall Poppy Syndrome’s role in society, I have concluded that it finds its origins in Australia’s collectivist culture and affects people’s perceptions of success. Many interviewees valued judgements of those in their immediate social circles over society itself. Because of this, they were often inclined to keep personal achievements private. In the United States, on the other hand, success appears to be celebrated more openly and materially.

The age of social media has made it increasingly easy to measure personal value in societal recognition and compare one’s self to others. Many Americans default to social media to share recent achievements or big purchases, and are usually met with support. In Australia, however, this type of behavior comes to form a stereotype that Americans can be attention seeking. Building upon my Fellowship findings, I want to compare the ways both cultures display success, and how that relates to social media, branding, and friendship. I would like to conduct a social media based analysis between Australia and America to evaluate how the showcasing of luxury brands encourages or discourages friendships, and if brands themselves have the same ties to success in Australia as they do in America.

**INTRODUCTION**

Tall Poppy Syndrome, or TPS, is the sociocultural phenomenon where if an individual obtains noticeable or envious success, wealth, or power, their peers will prevent them from attaining more success; in other words, they will “chop down the tall poppy” (Mouly). Current literature suggests that Tall Poppy Syndrome harms individual success and self-esteem while promoting social conformity. I chose to investigate this in Perth, Australia after hearing from its Lord Mayor that being one of the most isolated cities in the world increases its likelihood for TPS to occur. While Perth is quite metropolitan, the city prides itself in having a friendly, communal feel. Because of the interconnected nature of the city, the people of Perth pride themselves in being good neighbors who look out for each other. Knowing a lot about others in this way, though, can lead to a sort of comparison when all are held to a standard of excellence.

Ideas of success and failure are issues at the forefront of Australian business and innovation. Peter James, chairman at Macquarie Telecom Group, thinks that Australia’s businesses run the risk of being mediocre because of Tall Poppy Syndrome. He says that in Australia, failure is used to humiliate and expose, especially when it comes to the media. Whereas in America, he thinks, failure is more welcomed, and often encouraged. He comments on the countries’ differing views of success, saying “We have this tall poppy syndrome and if you go to the US, over there they celebrate success … here we don't want to be too successful because you might be letting your mates down” (Connolly). Interviews we conducted often echoed a sentiment that public celebrations of success are more acceptable in America than Australia. Given the societal differences between both countries, I want to research how displays of success on social media affect a consumer’s reputation, and how this affects companies’ marketing to them.

**BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK**

Throughout my research, I have discovered that different groups of Australians perceive success in different ways. A common thread, though, was that often it came down to being able to enjoy life and have quality time with friends and family. Success was less about salary or status symbols. However, there are some outliers to this ideology. As I was enlightened after one interview that Australians have coined the term “Cashed Up Bogans” to describe a group of young consumers with high incomes and a desire for luxury and individualization. Their purchases are said to come from a source of entitlement, using these goods as status symbols. The term comes with a negative connotation, as this spending is viewed as both reckless and selfish (Alarcon). Cashed Up Bogans seem to fit the ostentatious, American individualist stereotype of celebrating success, while operating in a collectivist, humble Australian society. A comparable group to Cashed Up Bogans has begun to emerge in America. Known as “Hypebeasts,” Urban Dictionary defines the relatively new slang term as someone who “collects clothing, shoes, and accessories for the sole purpose of [impressing](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=impressing) others. Although the individual may not have a dime to their name they like to front like they are making far more than everybody else.” Hypebeasts and their showiness are usually met with the same negative reactions as Cashed Up Bogans.

In turn, brands acting as status symbols play a large role in how these people are able to display their success. By driving fancy cars and wearing expensive clothes, other members of society can clearly see that they have had financial success. I am curious as to how brands affect these other Australians, and what kind of roles they play in their success. This leads back into Tall Poppy Syndrome, as I am curious to see if these Australians are less inclined towards conspicuous consumption in fear of being “cut down.”

Scholar John Matthews even offers a view that Tall Poppy Syndrome may just be a myth perpetuated by those who would be subjected to it. Although his thoughts are controversial, he makes a point of status symbols being markers for people to measure their success. However, he says the brands that are used as status symbols for the masses must be chosen specifically for what they represent (Matthews). For example, a misaligned brand runs a risk of being associated with Cashed Up Bogans. As a result, it is very important for marketers to Australian consumers to consider what connotations come with supporting their brands. From my observations thus far, I can agree with Matthews that status symbols will always be used to celebrate success, but I believe Tall Poppy Syndrome deals more with showcasing these symbols than simply owning them.

Purchasing luxury brands make a statement in person, and can make an even bigger statement online. A research article published by the California Management Review finds that consumers purchase luxury brands and experiences both for entertainment, and to be seen consuming luxury in exclusive and hard-to-obtain surroundings. This is especially the case with restaurants and entertainment (Berthon and Pitt). Social media is the new way to “be seen” in this generation. People curate their social media profiles as a representation of how they want to be seen by both friends and strangers. Cultural critic Jean Beaudrillard writes, “We as the masses wish to be seen and not seen, we want to appear but not lose our privacy” (Hegarty). There is a superficiality that comes with media, as its falsity provides an alibi for the non-falsity of real life. Media is perhaps an escape from real life where we can craft our own identity. Many only share positive personal updates on social media and photos where they are looking their best. Because of this, we must take social media with a grain of salt, and consider why someone posts something, and what they want to convey with it.

Scholars have hypothesized that people who “flex” on social media, or post in a way that highlights their success with material goods, are seeking approval and friendship. While many people purchase luxury goods because they think they will attract new friends, studies show that when looking for friends, people don’t like feeling inadequate. The research shows that people get [uncomfortable when their friends outperform them](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0065260108602270) and that they are [less okay with a friend’s success than with a stranger’s](http://www.psych.nyu.edu/jost/Zuckerman%20&%20Jost%20(2001)%20What%20Makes%20You%20Think%20You%27re%20So%20Popular1.pdf) (Pinsker). People all over the world use social media to meet new and keep up with existing friends, so they are inclined to put their best foot forward.

**METHODOLOGY**

Building upon the results of my previous study as I continue to analyze them, I would like to evaluate the correlation of showcasing luxury brands and having a good reputation in Australian and American societies. I plan to do this using a study based around coded Instagram posts, which I will conduct at Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia while studying abroad in Fall 2019, and at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California in Spring 2019.

I will construct a study in which I show voluntary college-age participants a series of three images, and ask them to rank 1-3 which person shown seems like the best one to be friends with and why. Each image will have the same smiling facial expression, but feature a different outfit and background. The first image will show someone wearing flashy clothing with recognizable logos standing in front of a car. The second image will show someone in plain clothing in front of a plain background. The third image will show someone wearing athletic team clothing outdoors. I want to see what people infer about personality from physical appearance alone, and specifically how the different levels of “flexing” affect this inference.

I would also like to conduct short interviews with random survey participants to receive more specific answers. The first part of the interview would explore their thoughts on “flexing” on social media and what is and is not cool for friends to post. It would next ask them to rate their comfortability 1-5 for wearing noticeable logos in their own Instagram posts. For Australians specifically, it would ask if they find it more acceptable for Americans to “flex” than themselves. Lastly, the survey would finish by asking what it takes for Australians to classify someone as a “Cashed Up Bogan,” and for Americans, a “hypebeast.”

**EXPECTED RESULTS**

Through these methods, I want to evaluate how Australians and Americans use social media to evaluate peer and self success, and how brands affect this evaluation. By understanding how people think physical characteristics translate into trustworthiness and friendship, my study will help me understand how each country perceives showcasing luxury brands and monetary success. I hypothesize that the second image will appear more friendly than the first. I am also curious to see if the third image would appear the most friendly because it shows someone who is part of a team. Finally, I hope to get specific insights from the participants’ explanations for their choices.

Overall, I think that these results will be affected by the prevalence of Tall Poppy Syndrome in Australian society. With the use of social media, I expect Australian people to prefer more conservative posts, and want to “cut down” the more showy ones. I expect that most Australians surveyed will generally show negative attitudes towards celebrating success in a ostentatious way. I also think they will acknowledge that such behavior would possibly be acceptable in America, just not Australia.

Lastly, I think Australians will be more cognizant than Americans of the findings Joe Pinsker puts forward in his research that dissociate the consumption of luxury goods with friendship. Overall, I think the friendship survey will rank the images with the plain and athletic profiles higher than the showy one in both countries. However, I expect a significant gap between image types in Australia.

I will share the results of my study in both a paper and a presentation at the Undergraduate Research Symposium. I hope to publish this paper in conjunction with the work of my 2017 Summer Research Fellowship as an overall work of research on Tall Poppy Syndrome.

**CONCLUSION**

By conducting this study, my goal is to compare Australian versus American displays of success through the use conspicuous consumption on social media. Using the data collected, I will be able to apply the results to my field of marketing, and offer insights for luxury brands that market to Australian and American consumers. Lastly, I hope that my analysis between the two countries will offer readers around the world a greater understanding of the difference in values among two first world, English dominant nations. I want to pioneer the research on Tall Poppy Syndrome given the current lack especially in business, and pave the way for others to look deeper into a phenomenon that affects the purchases and general behavior of so many people.

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Budget

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Item** | **Cost** | **Total** |
| One-way plane ticket to Perth, Australia | $895 USD | $895 USD |
| Monthly Bus Pass to Curtin University from my Residence x 4 months | $216 AUD x 4 months = $864 AUD  $864 AUD to USD at current exchange rate = $620.94 USD | $620.94 USD |
| Time Compensation | LMU Research Rate $12 USD per hour x 20 hours | $240 USD |
| **TOTAL PROJECTED EXPENSES:** |  | **$1,755.94 USD** |