

# Executive Summary

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This report provides current insights into the attitudes and beliefs held by 'young middle Australians' towards arts and cultural engagement and the role it plays in their lives. It includes the findings of a national focus group study of 18-29-year-old 'undecided voters' from lower- and middle-income families, predominantly living in outer suburbs, regional areas and federal marginal electorates. We spoke with young people from every state and territory in Australia in the period April to June 2021.

### How ANA defines 'middle Australians'

- swing or undecided voters
- from low and middle income households
- living in regional or outer suburban locations

ANA's interest in young middle Australians stems from the role they will play in shaping our culture and the national political discourse over the coming decades. As Australia ages, this cohort will become one of the most influential voting groups and will occupy a key demographic for decades to come. Currently, a disproportionately high number of Australians in this age group are undecided or unaligned swing voters.

During 21 focus groups, 84 young middle Australians from every state and territory in Australia gave us their perspectives and perceptions on the following core questions:

- What *is* 'arts and culture'?
- What is *Australian* arts and culture?
- What is the value of arts and culture *to society*?
- What is the value of arts and culture *to them, personally*?
- How do the cultural and creative industries *work*?

In a nutshell – young middle Australians view arts and cultural experiences as being woven into the very fabric of everyday life. They don't associate arts and culture with elitism – they see it as integral to a full and rounded life. As such, arts and culture will play an increasingly critical role in shaping our nation's future direction, as the arts and culture that young Australians so enthusiastically engage with will have a pervasive influence on how they think and behave. This will, in turn, inform both the opportunities and preferences of many Australians in the coming decade.

Young middle Australians have told us that arts and culture is embedded in every aspect of their lives, every day, in almost every kind of activity. They value arts and cultural engagement because it:

- helps them express themselves
- helps them connect with others, both alike and different from them
- makes them feel inspired
- helps them learn new things and think differently about the things they already know.

Engaging with arts and culture is not the only means they use to get those needs met – but it's most assuredly one of their favourites. They connected it to their enjoyment of sport, their choices of fashion or interior design, their leisure time and their attendance to their mental health needs. Many connected their engagement with arts and culture as children to their capacity to think laterally as an adult or be innovative as an employee. Critically, they felt that anyone who wanted to engage in these activities could and should be able to.

Comparing these new findings with the findings of our previous focus groups with middle-aged middle Australians, we can see that the way Australians create, share, participate in and consume arts and cultural content and experiences is changing rapidly. Digital disruptions, changing demographics and a global cultural market are shaping opportunities and preferences. This has broad-reaching implications for the future of Australian society. The consequences could be hugely positive if the nation strategically capitalises on these implications now.

ANA has been calling for a National Arts, Culture and Creativity Plan to help Australia respond to and anticipate these changes. Governments, businesses, philanthropists, cultural organisations and creators can all play roles in this transformation. The findings of this work with young middle Australians add fresh urgency to ensuring our public and private investments are directed towards arts and cultural opportunities that are relevant and significant in twenty-first-century Australia.

This report tells the stories of young middle Australians' engagement with arts and culture in their own words. The findings may surprise you, but not always in the ways you might expect. At a time when a third of all young Australians report serious or very serious concerns about their mental health, we hope this report provides nuanced insights into aspects of life that can bring this generation a sense of connectedness, happiness and hope.

## How sporting matches are like live arts and cultural events

Well, they [sportspeople] are performing. And yes, they're competing, which maybe is not an arts and culture element... But yeah, it's about the community, the spectacle, the excitement, the sounds. Everything that I think gives me the same sort of feelings and emotion that I experience when I go to a Fringe show [at the Adelaide Fringe Festival] or when I go for a drink at Winter Festival down at the beach, and there's performers there and fireworks and stuff like that. I think it's the same sort of emotions and feelings that I get from it.

(SELF-IDENTIFIES AS MALE, 27, SOUTH AUSTRALIA, ANGLO-SAXON, ACCOUNTANT)

# Summary of key findings

Young middle Australians think:

## Finding 1

**Arts and culture are embedded in and inseparable from everyday life**, partly because digital and physical experiences are so thoroughly intertwined. It is impossible for them to imagine a world without arts and culture as they access these experiences constantly. Any approach that treats arts and culture as separate, or 'add-ons' to daily life, will not make sense to this cohort.

## Finding 2

**The stigma that some Australians attach to high arts is largely absent.** They are as keen to engage with traditional 'high arts' as they are to engage with any other kind of arts and cultural experience, as long as those experiences are accessible and the stories they tell feel relevant.

## Finding 3

**Australia's arts and cultural content should reflect the diversity of our population, and the stories of our First Nations peoples.** This cohort believes arts and culture help deepen Australians' understanding of different people and perspectives, and also help tell Australia's diverse range of stories to international audiences.

## Finding 4

**Arts and culture are community-building tools that help mitigate loneliness and social isolation.** Consequently, this cohort believes politicians and governments have a critical role to play in supporting cultural and creative organisations and industries.

## Finding 5

**Childhood interactions with arts and culture influence creative thinking in adulthood**, as well as innovation outcomes in the workplace and in society more broadly. However, they worry that the cognitive, social and emotional benefits are decreased when schools are poorly equipped or choose to reduce the time spent on arts and culture in the classroom.

# Summary of key opportunities

Public policy initiatives that would serve the interests of or be supported by young middle Australians:

## Opportunity 1

Prepare and implement a National Arts, Culture and Creativity Plan to inform more coherent, non-partisan policy settings and investments, and clarify responsibilities across the three levels of government. Digital disruption, changing demographics and a global cultural market are changing our opportunities and preferences; a Plan will help Australia respond to, and anticipate, these changes.

## Opportunity 2

Update policy, regulatory and legislative settings to reflect the value young middle Australians place on: (1) making arts and cultural experiences and infrastructure accessible to people wherever they live, (2) increasing accessibility in the way public spaces are designed, and (3) making interactive engagement activities a priority.

## Opportunity 3

To mitigate loneliness, social exclusion and social isolation among young middle Australians, prioritise using arts and cultural activities in existing and new initiatives, especially in placemaking and community-building, recognising that they can be creators, consumers, co-collaborators and enthusiastic attendees.

## Opportunity 4

To support good lifelong outcomes for young people, arts and culture, and the benefits of engaging, should be taught consistently at school. This is especially relevant for those from lower-to middle-income families and those living in outer suburban and regional areas. This could be supplemented by subsidy programs for arts and cultural activities and/or tuition to ensure cost is not a barrier to access for any Australian child.

## Opportunity 5

Prioritise schemes, incentives and requirements that support production and distribution of diverse Australian content and iconography that is relatable to young middle Australians in all communities across Australia. This includes drawing on Australia's cultural inheritance to create international public diplomacy initiatives that celebrate Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander arts and culture as well as the diverse stories of our multicultural nation.

## Opportunity 6

Take an industry transformation approach to supporting arts and cultural organisations in pivoting to digital, given the importance that Australians, especially young middle Australians, are now placing on digital engagement with arts and culture.

**A New Approach  
(ANA)**