Does Size Matter? Exploring Experiences of Large Recreational Vehicle Users

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Abstract

Recreational Vehicles (RVs) are a rapidly emerging market within tourism. Despite their growth, little research has been conducted into RVers’ motivations, experiences and the diversification of the RV market. Using qualitative research methods, this study explored these issues. The research revealed motivations which included a desire for freedom from standard care and work and home life. It also found that RVing creates its own complexities such as the status afforded by ownership of big rigs, and issues related to rig size.

Introduction

The marketing of recreational vehicles (RVs) is a triumph of marketing communications and has contributed to a major surge in this market by emphasising the freedom of the road. In Australia, a new recreational vehicle is built every nine minutes (CRVA 2008) and it is estimated that the RV market creates revenue of over AUD $2 billion per annum (IbisWorld, 2009). In this sense a recreational vehicle is defined as “…a form of tourism where travellers take a camper trailer, van conversion, fifth wheel, slide-on camper, caravan or motorhome on holiday with them, and use the vehicle as their primary form of accommodation” (Hardy and Gretzel, 2011: 194). There are now 330,000 registered RVs in Australia (Caravan and Camping Industry Association 2007) and it is estimated that in Australia, the RVing industry is growing at rates of up to 10% per year (Lebski, 2009). The market is diverse in product terms. Not only do different types of RVs now exist but the range of sizes and specifications within each type also differ dramatically. For example, motor homes now vary greatly in their sizes, from large bus-like units ranging of up to 14 metres long, to van conversions which can be a small as four metres. Anecdotal evidence within the RV industry is strongly supportive of a trend towards larger RVs which are highly sophisticated vehicles (CCIA, 2007) with flat screen televisions, microwaves, GPS technology, air conditioning and fully self contained showers and toilet facilities. The cost of these vehicles ranges from AUD $35,000 to well above $400,000.

Despite this product knowledge, marketing on websites and magazines has been broadly targeted (Hardy, Hanson and Gretzel 2011) at least partly because we know little of the characteristics of RV buyers and users. This paper focuses on this research gap by interviewing RVers.

Literature Review

The act of driving has been described by Pearce (1999) as ‘touring for pleasure’ and this forms a central part of the RVing travel experience. Urry (2002) unpacks the essence of the RV experience by describing the vehicle, the highway, and the view through the windscreen as an integral component of the tourist gaze, whilst leaving the past behind. In Australia, it has been suggested that every year, anywhere between 200,000 – 500,000 Australian Grey Nomads embark on their RVing journey of 6 weeks or more (Carter 2002 in Onyx &
Leonard, 2005; Cridland, 2008). In addition, the popularity of the RVing phenomena is growing rapidly amongst younger people. It has been reported that while grey nomads aged 55-64 still have the ownership levels of RVs, the fastest growing demographic of people buying RVs is those aged in their 35-45 years old (Curtin 2005).

The experiences which attract travellers to RVing have been explored by several authors (Guinn, 1980; Counts and Counts 2001; Mattingly, 2005; Onyx and Leonard, 2005; Hardy and Gretzel, 2011). Specifically RVing has been documented as an activity which gives travellers a sense of freedom, flexibility and at the same time lets them explore destinations in their homes on wheels. The social aspect of RVing is also seen as highly significant, and may be considered a subculture of consumption, described by Schouten and McAlexander (1995:43) as a “distinctive subgroup of society that self-select on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand or consumption activity.” Other characteristics include: “an identifiable, hierarchical social structure, a unique ethos or set of beliefs and values, jargons, ritual and modes of symbolic expression” (Schouten & McAlexander 1995:43).

At the centre of a sub-culture is ‘jargon’ and RVers demonstrate the notion of a subculture in several ways. They have a large RVing vocabulary, including words such as: rigs (for vehicles), boondocking (free camping), sani dumps (sewage disposal), pull throughs (campsites which do not require reverse parking), and full hook ups (camping sites where electricity, water, grey water and sometimes even sewage disposal is provided). Their behaviour is also representative of a subculture with special rituals. For example, Happy Hour when at around five pm every night RVers sit outside their vehicles and have evening drinks, inviting fellow RVer to join them. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) also described members of subcultures as showing display deep commitments to brands and RVers display also this behaviour, with clubs now appearing for owners of specific RV brands (eg the A-Van club, the Winnebago club) or RV types (such as fifth wheels, motorhomes etc).

In sum, we know from industry sources much about RV products, and numbers, and can distinguish RVers by age categories. However, we know little about the motivations of the broad category of RVer.

Methods

Given this is an under researched area, in depth interviews were chosen as the key method. They promise to yield rich data and may serve to establish quantitative research in the area at a later stage.

The collection of interview subjects raised interesting methodological phenomena. RVers are highly social, most often travel in pairs, and move during the day, either to new camp sites, or to visitor attractions. Therefore the most appropriate time of day to conduct the interview was when they were stationary at around five pm, when the ritual of ‘Happy Hour’ is observed. The formal nature of a focus group was not appropriate, nor was taking an individual away from their social group to conduct a one on one interview. Consequently, in-depth interviews were used, but the unit ranged from one individual, to groups of up to four travellers by necessity. Groups of larger than four were not approached as the informal nature of the interview setting was not felt to be conducive to larger group interviews and obtaining rich data.
Interviews were conducted during summer in Hobart, Tasmania at the Royal Hobart Showgrounds and the Mayfields free camp site on the East Coast of Tasmania. The Royal Showgrounds site is run by the Royal Tasmanian Agricultural Society and caters to larger RVs at a minimal cost. Facilities are scarce - dump stations are available at central locations, as are toilet facilities, but the minimal facilities necessitate that only those RVs able to be fully self contained and able to hold their own grey and black water (sewage), may stay there. In total 10 RVers in large rigs (20 foot plus) and four RVers in medium sized RVs (14-20 foot) were interviewed at this site. In contrast, the Mayfields site on the East Coast of Tasmania has no facilities except for a pit toilet and difficult, narrow access. This means that only smaller RVs may stay at the location. Consequently, visitors in smaller RVs were interviewed at this site in order to provide comparative perceptions. In total seven RVers in small RVs were interviewed at this site. Interviews were continued until saturation was reached.

Results

Motivations to RV

Regardless of the size of the RV, there were commonalities in RVers motivations to free camp. Freedom, flexibility in movement, exploring the country with their home on wheels and the social aspects of meeting people were important motivating factors for RVers, regardless of their size. For example:

Smaller motorhome user: “It’s the RVing life- freedom, relaxation, new places and new people.”

Large motorhome user: “It’s freedom, we’ve got our house on the back”.

The concept of freedom dominated motivation statements. Effectively, the RV is a freedom machine. In this context, it is certainly not freedom from the complexities of advanced capitalist society because the rigs come laden with the benefits of a high technology world. It is more a freedom from the standard cares of a work-life and suburban lifestyle than a freedom to roam at will – after all, they can only go where the facilities are up to standard.

Motivations to Buy a Larger RV

RVers were asked why they chose the rig that they were currently using. A progression of size seemed apparent, with many RVers reporting that they had previously owned a rig, but had up-sized for convenience and comfort. The issue of outcompeting friends was referred to as well. For example:

Medium sized caravan owner- “We wanted something a bit wider and longer. We wanted it longer. Our friends got 14 foot so we wanted a foot longer!”

Large motorhome owner- “We were not comfy in a pop top- but we live in this one!”

Large motorhome owner: We had a caravan and were lousy parkers, it sat in the back of the yard- I got sick of that. It’s all one thing, has the bath shower, the whole lot.
The Impact of RV Size on the RVing Experience

RVers reported on a range of issues in relation to the impact of RV size. One was the issue of status, one was the issue of the impact of large vehicle size on behaviour and the third was the impact of large vehicle size on their experiences.

RVers were divided in their opinion of whether there was status associated with size. Some reported that they mixed with all types of RVers, regardless of size. Those who did not own RVs often described Larger RVs in derogatory terms.

A small rig: “Imagine trying to park, the fuel bill and parking."

A large rig- “All have same experience. Size you have is generated by money you have. It might also been their needs. We are all different but we all have the same experience You don’t have to keep up with your neighbour, we are all doing the same thing.”

Large Fifth Wheel owner: “It’s them and us- small van conversions try to stay here but they are not proper RVs. This [RV park] is for big rigs and they try to take up our spots”

Some RVers reported the impacts of owning a large RV in terms of their travel and destination behaviour. The bigger the rig the harder it gets to travel. For example:

Large Fifth Wheel owner: “We have batteries and solar and that makes it hard in Tassie ...we have to be careful where we stop and how long for. We have solar so we are struggling to stay here- we need to plug in."

Large motorhome user: “We have to choose carefully...Most caravan parks are too small for us”

Size also impacted on freedom to travel where you like. Larger RVers expressed some difficulties travelling and parking around Tasmania when the roads, or camping sites were narrow, or did not have pull throughs. Consequently, to some it created a sense of disappointment, as their dreams of travelling freely around Australia were hindered by their large rig and its inability to stay in many campgrounds. As a result, many larger RVers free camped as these places have easier access, plus minimal costs. Larger RV owners frequently noted that they did not wish to pay large sums to stay at places, because their well equipped rigs meant they did not need to use facilities. Consequently, they commonly used free or minimal camping sites. However when they did stay at sites, it was often to re-supply batteries and the ideal site would have water, power, an accessible grey water dump and an accessible sani dump. For that, they were willing to pay. For example:

Large fifth wheel user: “Parks don’t provide pull throughs, large enough sites, power, grey water, plus they charge us extra for power because we are large, they don’t charge us on our power use. I have solar, I don’t use much power.”

Large motorhome user: “Tassie has small roads and the drivers don’t understand how to deal with us”
Discussion and Conclusions

This coverage of motivations and behaviours of RVers reveals a mixed pattern of responses centred on the desire for freedom. RV travel is based on freedom from standard cares and work and home life, but creates its own complexities. For example the status afforded by ownership of big rigs which mirrors ‘big house/big job’ status issues in wider society. A big rig also carries the seed of disappointment; it can travel on narrow rods with difficulty, and can only camp when facilities are well developed. This is a sub-culture with otherness at its core, one defined by opposition to the conventional. It is also, however, a culture that mirrors the discontents that they are culturally opposed to, for example the status anxieties of wider society are mirrored in ‘rig envy’. Finally, the research has revealed a complex pattern within the broad category of RVer. Marketing of RVs will therefore benefit from these findings.

References