Young Australians of Western Sydney talking about who they are and what it means to be Australian

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'My identity shifts. Sometimes I think I’m too Leb to be Aussie, but sometimes I think I’m too Aussie to be Leb.'

18 years old, Lebanese-Australian woman, Parramatta

Would you describe yourself as being Australian?
'I don’t know. I find myself laid back and easy going but it doesn’t mean that I’m necessarily Australian. I’d consider myself as Turkish even though I was born here, lived here and have the whole accent thing going.'

Are you stuck in between?
'Not really. I consider myself to be Turkish.'

What if somebody asked?
'I’d say I’m Turkish. They always ask me.'

What does an Australian look like?
'Fair, white coloured hair, light eyes.'

Sarah, 17 years old, Turkish background

How would you describe your own cultural background?
'It’s really hard to define myself in that way because I’m Australian right now. I was born in France – my parents were both born in Cambodia but their background is Chinese but they were in Vietnam and they spoke Chinese and Vietnamese. My Mum speaks eight languages and my Dad about six. So it’s really hard to say ‘Oh I have an Asian background’. I was born in France and I live in Australia, you know. I get this identity crisis, you know, you’ve got people saying well, what nationality are you? So I think I’d say it’s just an amalgam of everything put together. I do get little bits from here and there. I do find that I am Asian. I do have that cultural thing because of family, from my parents – things like that. But I do have the Australian in me as well, but I think I have some French thing as well from growing up there, so yeah'.

Haline, 20 years old female, Cambodian-Chinese–Vietnamese-French background

'I am Lebanese but I think I am more Australian. I think like that because I am a single, unmarried mother. I identify with the Australian background all the time, it's my life and I am raising my son to be an Aussie.'

Janet, 18 years old, Lebanese background
Would you describe yourself as Australian?
Not really'
Why?
'Because our lifestyle is much different to theirs even though we live in Australia. We have a different way of raising our children, we eat different foods, and we do just about everything different to them, even though we are Australian.’

Manaya, 15 years old, Lebanese background

'You look at Aussie soapies, are there any Asians in it? No. And when they are it's like they're just there because we need one Asian in there or something. It's like you can’t have two, you can’t have three. You know, if there's one, that's enough.

And there are always ... I notice when they're on TV they're there when it’s an Asian issue or when the issue is about being Asian, not being Australian. It’s not just a normal Australian life and there’s an Asian in there, or a lot of them in there because you know there’s not just one Asian in Australia. That's what you'd think if you just watched TV and you didn’t live here. And in that way I don't feel Australian because in the media we’re invisible and we don’t exist until a boatload of illegal immigrants come to the shore or someone gets shot in Cabramatta. We’re only here when they need it so ... I find that a lot of people in real life who don’t converse every day with Asians will also believe that and then when that's not what the real Australia is, they're very shocked because they probably had their own idea of Australia where Asians don’t exist.’

Siv, 21 years old female, Chinese-Cambodian background

OK if I said the term 'Australian culture', what does that mean to you?
'I normally think of Aussies, of ‘surfies’, but I think that’s because of the way I’ve been taught and told.'

By whom?
'By society, the media. The men are supposed to be macho and good-looking and the girls are supposed to be beautiful and tall. That's what comes to my mind but when I really think about it I think Australian culture deals with different people, the interrelationships with one another and hope they behave. The way they help people, the way they communicate with language and I think Australia is a more accepting culture than others so Australian culture is a more warming feeling, more accepting. More positive.’

Are you part of that culture?
'Yep definitely.'

Stephen, 16 years old, Chinese-Vietnamese background

What about Western Sydney, do you feel like its part of your identity?
'Yeah definitely. Part of my identity is being from south-western Sydney. And also feeling different when I went somewhere else. I didn’t notice you were regionally different until like I’d gone into high school and I had to go to meetings, conferences and things like that, and I had to speak in front of an audience. And students were so articulate, people were different, some people were political. I never really understood things like that, I never knew ... it was so different and I felt very
ignorant. But you know it’s like I’m not dumb but I felt ignorant. And I felt people looked upon me and saw that I was from that area and that we were all hooligans or trash and not really worth it, you know what I mean.

Like my parents, my dad was actually a process worker, something like that I’m proud of it as well. But then again I hate it. I feel it’s sort of holding me back as well. But because we know it’s not bad, but its sooo bad, it’s like the cage with the door open but you just don’t know how to get out you know? You’re just in the cage but you want to be out there and not just regionally just mentally in your head you want to surpass all this, you know shit about where you’re from but it’s hard.’

Siv, 21 years old female, Chinese-Cambodian

What about Western Sydney do you feel like it's part of your identity? 'Of course it's part of my identity. Western Sydney is very diverse culturally, so obviously that's influenced me ... I have lived in a more Anglo-Saxon place like Coogee, but I've only lived there for half of my life and the second half of my life I've lived in western Sydney, and that second part of my life was more the important part of my life because it was a more impressionable part of my life. Because I was an adolescent growing up and obviously what was around me was going to influence me more than childhood I think.

Because when you say Western Sydney you associate western Sydney with gangs, with crime, with violence such as Lebanese gangs, Vietnamese gangs, and when someone asks me 'where are you from?' and I say 'Canterbury, western past of Sydney' immediately they think of what they have been hearing in the media and therefore it does influence my identity. I'm not ashamed of that at all.

The way we dress, the way we act, it's so different. Like my friends and I go to the city or Chatswood (wealthy, north shore Sydney) or something and everyone is so dressed, so proper. It was so funny, we went to the J-Lo concert thing and the girls in front of us they were so proper they just stood there calmly. And we were being loud and I distinctly heard one of them say 'Damn Westies' (laughs). It was so funny that people could pick out that we were Westies. I can feel it in me. It's a place I can always come back to ... We were on the train back (from Darling Harbour) and we could see Penrith station outside the train window and I said 'Ah we're back here from being in the Harbour' and (my friend) said to me 'But it's a place I will always come back to' because we've got so many memories there, it's a great place.'

Martell, 16 years old, Filipino background

What about Western Sydney, do you feel like it's part of your identity? 'Yeah, it's cos I'm ghetto (laughs) but I like being scum. That's if scum involves being laid back and accepting everything and not having a silver fork in my mouth then hell I love being a Westie piece of scum.’

Mustafa, 20 years old, Lebanese background