

FINDING THE CLUES THAT COULD HELP CHANGE SUNBATHING BEHAVIOR – A MULTI METHOD APPROACH

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Abstract

Skin cancer has been increasing in Sweden recently and more frequent sun bathing has been identified as an important reason for this. Being a rather dark and cold country for a greater part of the year, this might seem like a surprising problem. The responsible government agency needed to understand the background to the problem as well as the motives and behaviors in the population in depth, in order to find solutions to the problem and what could be done with respect to prevention. The aim of the research project was to give recommendations on how to tackle the problem.

Previous quantitative research had proven to be insufficient as the subject of sunburn is connected with shame and regret, resulting in unsatisfactory reporting. Also, so was our assumption, inconvenient truths are easy to forget. In order to understand the sunbathers better we chose a multi-method approach in order to understand both depth (e.g. what driving forces lies behind a certain behavior) and width (how widespread is a certain opinion in the population). These were the steps:

- A basic research on changing travel behavior in different segments of the population, changing values connected to beauty and health etc. Also research on how other countries with a long tradition of dealing with skin cancer prevention (e.g. Australia) had dealt with the problem in order to learn from “best practice”.
- An ethnographic field study during the summer of 2015 where our researchers followed informants to the beach, the park, into the garden etc. in order to watch and learn from their actual behavior and better understand underlying motives and drivers.
- A netnographic study where the discussions on sunbathing in social media were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively in order to understand different discussion landscapes and the focus in these.

Our research showed, that the concentration of possibilities to sun bathe in Sweden only during a few warm and sunny days/weeks of the year, combined with an increasing share of the population being able to travel abroad during the winter months, causes a strong urge to use the few sunny occasions intensely. Thus, people are stretching the limits and taking risks in order to make the most out of each opportunity. The result is a phenomena we call “sun stress”. The solution for how to turn the skin cancer trend around is probably not to be found in a broad campaign. Several different segments in the population each have their view of sunbathing and a rather disparate knowledge level when it comes to UV and sunburn. This calls for a fine tuned and complex approach, a long-term perspective and sufficient recourses. The sun is presently mainly associated with health, vitality and beauty – not with danger.

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