

A Journey Inside Tourist Souvenirs

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Abstract Through a naturalistic interpretive approach, our videography conducted in tourism research invites to travel inside tourist souvenirs around the world. To bring back souvenirs is as old as travelling itself. Tourist souvenirs are often considered as special possessions that may convey deep meanings to consumers' lives and play a role in their identity construction. Through a grounded theory approach, the film presents the motives for buying and consuming souvenirs. Two major motives, that is, remembrance and enduring involvement, as well as more specific motivations (i.e., utility, hedonism, improvement of a collection, bargain hunting, gift-giving, or need to reciprocate a favor or a gift) are underlined. A typology of four types of symbolic souvenirs, that is, tourist trinkets, destination stereotypes, paper mementoes, and picked-up objects is also developed. Finally, it emphasizes five functions these souvenirs fulfil in terms of consumer identity construction, that is, connection, integration, socialization, self-expression, and sacralization.

1 Introduction

Souvenirs are as old as travelling itself. As soon as human beings started to travel far away from home, they brought material souvenirs back from their trips. For instance, in the late sixteenth century, art collections appeared as collectors wanted to immortalize their Grand Tour in the form of souvenirs such as guidebooks, illustrated maps, or minerals. The contemporary tourist makes no exception. Shopping is one of the prevailing contemporary tourist rituals (Belk 1997). It represents a major business for tourist destinations. In 2013, the U.S. Travel Association indicated that shopping was the primary leisure travel activity for

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overseas visitors travelling to the U.S., before sightseeing, fine dining, national parks/monuments, and art galleries/museums (U.S. Travel Association 2014). However, significant cultural differences exist in shopping behavior. Compared to American, European, or Australian tourists, Asian tourists usually devote a higher share of their total travel budget to shopping (up to 61%) (Timothy 2005). Such a difference may originate from traditions or cultural imperatives. For example, in Japan, buying an “*omiyage*” for family members, friends, and colleagues is highly valued when travelling. Gifts and souvenirs make up a substantial part of tourist expenditures (Lehto et al. 2004; Littrell et al. 1994). In 2013, 42.6% of international tourists visiting the UK purchased tourist souvenirs (i.e., food or alcoholic products, items for home, and other holiday souvenirs), while 40.7% bought clothes and shoes (VisitBritain 2014).

Our videography invites to travel around the world of tourist souvenirs, considering more specifically material souvenirs, i.e., all the objects that are bought, picked-up in the natural environment, or received from a significant person (e.g., a local) during the vacation experience. We excluded specialty goods (e.g., clothing, perfumes, or jewelry) bought by tourists from the scope of this research because our informants do not consider them as tourist souvenirs. Our research goal is to understand better and more deeply the motives and meanings associated with the purchase and consumption of souvenirs.

2 Literature Review

Consumers may feel a strong attachment towards their souvenirs and consider them as special possessions (McCracken 1988; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988; Wallendorf et al. 1988). According to Belk (1988) and McCracken (1988), consumers attribute importance to their possessions because they encompass a part of themselves, they belong to their self and reveal their identity. Possessions contribute to define who consumers are: “men and women make order in their selves (i.e., retrieve their identity) by first creating and then interacting with the material world. The nature of such a transaction will determine, to a great extent, the kind of person that emerges. Thus the things that surround us are inseparable from who we are” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, p. 16). Such a strong attachment may also stem from the sacred status of these special possessions as opposed to the profane status of other objects: “sacred objects are seen as mystical, powerful, and deserving of reverential behaviour, as opposed to the ordinary, common, and mundane behaviour accorded to profane commodities” (Wallendorf et al. 1988, p. 529). However, despite its importance for self-identity development, the field of tourist special possessions has been under-studied in consumer research. In addition, extant studies on tourist souvenirs lack depth (Swanson and Timothy 2012) and fail to explore both their functional and symbolic dimensions. They traditionally focus on the types, uses, and functionalities of souvenirs (Gordon 1986), rather than on the meanings given to them (Love and Sheldon 1998). The current

research aims at filling such gaps. Specifically, the following research questions are addressed through the film: What are the motives for buying and consuming souvenirs? Which meanings are associated with souvenirs? Which functions do souvenirs fulfil in terms of consumer identity construction?

3 Method

To address these questions, we chose a naturalistic interpretive approach. The goal of such approach is to understand the occurrence of natural phenomena in situ (Lincoln and Guba 1985). To get such an idiosyncratic understanding, immersing oneself in the field is needed to achieve *thick descriptions* (Geertz 1973). In total, 39 Belgian tourists were interviewed. Specifically, we interviewed 19 informants at home and we observed their souvenirs in the home context. Furthermore, we participated in a one-week package tour in Portugal during which we observed 42 Belgian tourists and their souvenir buying behavior and we interviewed 20 of them in depth. Non-participant observations were also conducted in other tourist destinations such as New York, Turkey and Egypt. The collected data included interview transcripts, field notes, and visual materials (i.e., pictures and videos). They were analyzed and interpreted through Grounded Theory, which is an inductive and systematic way to generate theoretical insights from empirical data through different layers of coding (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990).

4 Results

The core of our film is built around emerging findings. These are supported with quotes, interview chunks, pictures, and videos and are divided in three sections. Firstly, the motives for buying and consuming souvenirs are considered. Two major motives, i.e., remembrance and enduring involvement, as well as more specific motivations (i.e., utility, hedonism, improvement of a collection, bargain hunting, gift-giving, or need to reciprocate a favor or a gift) are developed.

Second, a typology of four types of symbolic souvenirs, including tourist trinkets, destination stereotypes, paper mementoes, and picked-up objects is presented. Tourist trinkets involve small trinkets or gadgets (e.g., mugs, key rings, and tee-shirts) that are bought for a cheap price in souvenir shops anywhere in the world. The second type, destination stereotypes, entails tourist objects depicted as “the specialty of the place” (e.g., Egyptian papyrus, Eiffel Towers, and Russian dolls). Although tourists are aware that such mass-produced objects are not unique, they still buy them because they stand for the destination. In addition, before and during the vacation experience, tourists collect and keep all types of paper

mementoes (e.g., city maps, entrance tickets, books, and leaflets). Finally, picked-up objects such as stones, sand, seeds, and coral are the type of souvenirs mentioned by tourists with the greatest enthusiasm. Tourists often bring back something for free from the natural environment in order to escape the market or simply to have something more typical and unique in their eyes. Rather than a monetary or intrinsic value, a strong affective or symbolic value is conferred to these objects.

Thirdly, our film examines the meanings given to souvenirs. In addition to the private/individual or public/cultural meanings attached to souvenirs, this final section emphasizes five functions souvenirs may fulfil in terms of consumer identity construction: connection, integration, socialization, self-expression, and sacralization. When purchasing and consuming souvenirs, tourists can be connected with a person, a particular destination, a memorable vacation event, or a significant anecdote. They can also tend to affirm their integration within a group of travellers or within the broader tourist sub-culture. Moreover, souvenirs may be a way to communicate and socialize with other people. In addition to the social functions, souvenirs may help consumers to express their personal taste and to affirm their status as tourists. In other words, they may fulfil self-expression and ego-enhancement functions. Finally, some souvenirs may become sacralized. Proofs of the sacred are found in collection rituals, commitment, objectification, symbolic contamination, and shrines made of souvenirs.

5 Conclusion

Tourist souvenirs are a typical example of special possessions that may convey deep meanings to tourists' lives. This film provides a deep understanding of the motives and meanings for buying and consuming such souvenirs. Therefore, it contributes to consumer research and tourism marketing. In contrast with previous research on souvenirs, our study explores the functional and symbolic dimensions of souvenirs through a naturalistic interpretive approach. It also underlines the power of souvenirs as messengers of deep meanings (Love and Sheldon, 1998). It shows that these meanings can be individual or cultural, private or public (Richins 1994). The significant role of tourist special possessions in consumer identity construction is emphasized as well. Finally, tourist souvenirs seem to be the perfect illustration of a hierophany (Belk et al. 1991) as the souvenir's sacredness is intrinsically related to the story of the object for his/her owner.

As material agents or messengers of meaning, tourist souvenirs can ease the transition from the tourist experience, which is often related to something extraordinary, sacred, and unique, to everyday life, often described as ordinary, profane, and mundane. Our videography concludes on the significance of souvenirs

in the tourist experience and their ubiquity in every corner of the world. “Souvenirs have existed for thousands of years, and as long as people continue to travel, they will continue to be an important element of the experience” (Swanson and Timothy 2012: 497).

Notes

You can find our videography on <https://vimeo.com/144092450> (password: ATMC2015).

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