



# Souvenir sellers and perceptions of authenticity – The retailers of Hoi An, Vietnam



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Reports on perceptions of souvenir sellers of authenticity.
- Research undertaken at UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- Micro-ethnographic and case study approach adopted.
- Analysis using textual analysis software.
- One of a few studies on souvenir retailers.

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## ABSTRACT

Authenticity has long been a theme within the tourism literature, but relatively little has been written about the attitudes of souvenir retailers. This paper, based on a combination of case study and micro-ethnographic approaches, reports findings derived from interviews with 25 souvenir retailers in the UNESCO World Heritage site of Hoi An, Vietnam. It uses a thematic and content analysis aided by the use of textual analysis software to identify dichotomous yet holistic perceptions on the part of the retailers. They seek to sell souvenirs perceived as authentic of Hoi An, yet source both nationally and locally. The items are thus representative of Hoi An and Vietnam, and these attitudes can be justified by an appeal to the past trading heritage of the ancient city. The retailers also perceive tourists as potential 'prosumers' who create their own experiential authenticity.

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## 1. Introduction

Research into souvenirs has been a minor but consistent sub-theme within the tourism literature for several decades. At one level this is not surprising because physical, tangible prompts of memories of travel have been purchased almost since the time when humans commenced travelling. As Redfield. (2013, p. 270) comments about Herodotus's *Histories* 'Like any collector, Herodotus likes his *nomoi*, rare, gaudy and curious.' In terms of one of the antecedents of modern tourism, namely the Grand Tours of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, any current visit to the mansions and stately homes of the aristocracy of North-western Europe provides evidence of how the aristocracy purchased and purloined Roman and Greek artefacts as souvenirs of their travel

(Hibbert, 1969). Historically souvenirs have taken many forms, from the marble statues of the aristocracy to the UK's Donald McGill 'saucy' post-cards of the mid-twentieth century and now the digital photographs of the twenty-first century.

Among these different forms of souvenirs a consistent favourite has been items that represent some aspect of the culture and heritage of the visited place. There are many reasons for this. Among these is the desire to acquire mementos of a visit that differ from the familiar items of home and thereby are demarcated as being 'different'. This 'difference' is therefore based on something specific to the visited destination, and destinations often seek to differentiate themselves from others through the use of traditions, handicrafts and artefacts derived from the past. Souvenirs thus become a means of reinforcement of not simply difference but extension of place image and brand. For MacCannell (1976) that search was partly premised on a belief that tourists seek to escape from a daily world where they felt alienated, having lost touch with what is 'real' and 'natural'. Hence the purchase of a souvenir becomes not

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simply a memory of place but also a finding of something real if based upon tradition and heritage (Swanson & Tomothy, 2012). Utilising Goffman's (1959) concepts of self-presentation and the staging of self, MacCannell (1976) argued the tourist sought the 'authentic'.

This perception initiated a long and continuing debate about the authenticity of objects and experiences, and such debates have informed understandings of tourism. The issues have been varied, and include for example Urry and Larsen's (2011) concepts of gazes, romantic and otherwise, and ludic playing tourists to debates about just how serious is the search for understanding in heritage, cultural and indigenous tourism (McKercher & du Cros, 2002).

This paper continues these debates with reference to souvenirs purchased in the Vietnamese World Heritage site of Hôi An. The research question is: how do the souvenir sellers themselves perceive the authenticity of what they sell? Much of the past literature on souvenirs has had the emphasis placed on the tourists as consumers of interpretations and authenticity (Wang, 1999; Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011). Equally it has been recognized that tourists come with past patterns of experience and varying sources of information. These shape expectations (Li, Lai, Harrill, Kline, & Wang, 2011), and tourists then engage in their acts of interpretation, emotions and dissonance when on site (Hosany, 2012). It is suggested that they act as prosumers, that is as consumers engaging in acts of production as they consume (Pappalepore, Maitland, & Smith, 2014).

Yet within this discussion there are relative areas of silence, and one such silence is the voice of the retailers. To what extent do they shape productive processes to create 'traditional' artefacts that they feel will sell, and to what extent do they intentionally act a role in a presentation of local authenticities when they may equally knowingly source product from outside the region in which they are based? Hôi An was chosen as the area within which to ask these types of questions for various reasons. First, it is a UNESCO inscribed World Heritage site, and is marketed strongly within Vietnam as a place of heritage. To that extent it has created commercial festivals based on selected traditions – the most notable being the Lantern Festivals held each Lunar month (Di Giovine, 2009a, 2009b). Second there were the pragmatic and convenience reasons of the site being easily accessed by the first author. The nature of Hôi An is described in a little more detail below.

The next question was how to initiate the research process. Hôi An has been the subject of past research and that literature is reviewed below. However, very little attention has been directed toward the retailers of souvenirs and their use of local facilities for design and sourcing, and thus it was decided to undertake this project as a case study.

The nature of the case study as a mode of research has long been subjected to criticism, debate and analysis. Key overviews of the subject can be found in texts such as *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* in 1994 by King, Keohane, and Verba and more recently *Field Guide for Case Study Research in Tourism, Hospitality, and Leisure* by Hyde, Ryan, and Woodside (2012). Yin (1994) suggests that the case study approach is appropriate where the researcher has little or no control over contemporary sets of events, while Ryan (2012) also suggests the case study is pertinent where little is known about a subject and hence it is not possible to develop hypotheses for testing. This is not to state that the case study, while atheoretical, is not empirical. George and Bennett (2005) describe various forms of case studies approach noting that these differences reflect the debates between "... rational choice theorists, structuralists, historical institutionalists, social constructionists, cognitive theorists, postmodernists, and others, who at times may see themselves as having a stake in debates over case study or other methods" (p. 9).

Ryan (2012) discusses the role of positivistic and empirical research methods and the nature of causality in cross-case study analysis. In doing so it is noted that model building is itself an abstraction from reality, a simplification of reality. He also reasons that the 'rich description' of the more interpretative approaches often associated with case studies does not preclude observations of directions of causality. Yet in his conclusion he notes the commonplace of irrationality in much of the tourism experience and product and concludes "There is no one way in which the case study can be written and read, other than being transparent as to the modes used and the perspectives taken and being tolerant of those who adopt other methods. Relativism requires comparison, but is accepting of pluralities ..." (Ryan, 2012, p. 556).

The findings reported here emanate from a case study approach which was adopted as the initial part of a wider study. It represents a micro-ethnographic study because it utilised the skills of the first author, not only an academic researcher, but also one who is immersed in the society and culture of not only Vietnam but also of this place near her home town. It is also pragmatic in the sense described by Creswell and Piano Clark (2007) as being driven by the research questions 'how do souvenir sales people in Hôi An source their product and to what extent do they believe it possesses authenticity?', and was in fact the first stage of a wider mixed methods study.

## 2. Literature review

As noted above, the subject of authenticity in tourism has been long debated. An evolution in the debate can be observed whereby writers have come to question not only the nature of the authentic, but also the necessity for fusions and hybrid forms to emerge in order that cultures and traditions retain vitality and meaning in a post-modern world (Baudrillard, 1998; Rapaport, 1994). Given the abundance of literature this review will primarily concentrate on two issues, namely the nature of souvenirs and Hôi An as a traditional place.

Littrell, Anderson, and Brown (1993) suggest a series of criteria used by tourists when buying souvenirs. These include uniqueness and originality, workmanship, aesthetics seen as traditional in function and looks, cultural and historic integrity, local craftsmanship and the genuineness of the shopping experience. Swanson and Horridge (2006) also look at the shopper's perspective and link the traveller's motives to the perceptions of the traditional and authentic, the assessments made of the aesthetics of the product, and additionally draw attention to the role of the retailer and the way merchandise are displayed. It also needs to be noted that while souvenirs are seen as possessing meaning for the purchaser, that meaning itself becomes fluid over time. Collins-Kreiner and Zins (2011) provide an example of this in their study of Israeli tourists when one informant commented how a pair of socks purchased as a practical item became a souvenir of a past visit to New York. Equally their study indicates that over time, as more trips occur, souvenirs become marginalized spatially in homes as those from earlier trips make way for those from later trips, and indeed as their purchasers become more experienced as travellers, so too the amount of souvenir purchases become fewer in number.

Akin to this Anderson and Littrell (1995) cite Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), who argued that in that stage of life they characterized as 'pre-retirement adulthood' the human begins to emphasise the self through what a person possesses rather than what they do.

Anderson and Littrell, who compared females of different ages, concluded however that the evidence can only be described as 'patchy'. There appeared to be no differences in terms of a desire for authenticity, and the major difference seemed to be that those of

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