



Understanding values of souvenir purchase in the contemporary Chinese culture: A case of Shanghai Disney

Wei Wei*

Hospitality Services department, Rosen College of Hospitality Management, University of Central Florida, Office 284C, 9907 Universal Blvd, Orlando, FL 32819, USA



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ABSTRACT

This research explores souvenir values under the influence of contemporary Chinese culture. Taking Shanghai Disney as the study context, a total of 32 onsite interviews with Chinese visitors to Shanghai Disney were conducted. Based on the analysis of 246 pages of interview transcripts, this research identifies three overarching souvenir values germane to modern Chinese culture, encompassed by *sign value*, *meaningfulness*, and *hedonic value*. In addition, a list of seven other values are found to uniquely exist depending on the specific recipient of souvenirs. These are classified as *family orientation*, and *knowledge and positive education* for children; *individuality*, *instrumental value*, and *conformity* for oneself; and *kindness*, and *trust and harmony* for others. These values provide insightful explanations for Chinese consumers' souvenir purchase behavior in contemporary Chinese society. Theoretical and managerial implications as well as directions for future research are discussed.

1. Introduction

Shopping experience forms a significant component of many people's travel experiences (Lin & Wang, 2012). While on vacation, tourists often obtain memorable reminders of their special moment and life events with the purchase of souvenirs (Trinh, Ryan, & Cave, 2014). Souvenir purchase is further recognized as a prime example of *experience intensification* by way of tangibilizing an otherwise intangible experience (Dong & Siu, 2013). In recognition of the importance of souvenir purchase to tourists, tourism marketers have been called upon to gain a more thorough understanding of tourists' souvenir shopping behavior and experience (Swanson & Horridge, 2004).

Research on tourism souvenir purchase behavior has been mainly polarized between souvenir producers/retailers and tourists (Kim & Littrell, 2001). Research on souvenir producers/retailers covers topics including their perceptions of souvenir purchase behavior (Trinh et al., 2014), the impacts of commercialization on their lives (Swanson & Timothy, 2012), and the meanings of selling souvenirs (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2013). Other researchers adopted the perspective of tourists to identify the attributes by which tourists evaluate souvenirs (Shanka, Setiyati, & Taylor, 2008), to explore the meanings associated with souvenirs obtained during travels (Littrell, 1990), to understand tourists' purchase motivations (Swanson & Horridge, 2006), and to examine the influence of product characteristics (Lin & Wang, 2012) and social networks (Boley, Magnini, & Tuten, 2013) on purchase behaviors. Nevertheless, relative to the breadth of souvenir research across

disciplines and themes, none of the areas of focus within the souvenir scholarship have been explored in depth (Swanson & Timothy, 2012). Souvenir research has remained a minor but consistent subtheme within the tourism literature for the past decade (Trinh et al., 2014).

Despite research on tourists' shopping behavior conducted in the US (Yu & Littrell, 2003), Swaziland (Ramsay, 2009), Belgium (Decrop & Masset, 2011), Hong Kong (Law & Au, 2000), and South Korea (Kim, Chung, Lee, & Preis, 2015), in-depth souvenir studies in a fast-emerging world market, China, are still limited. Modern China has experienced a stunning increase of income per person, which has paved the way for a consumption-oriented economy (Ren, 2007). More than half of all Chinese tourists reported that shopping expenses make up the majority of their vacation expenses (Petersen, 2009). Shopping was also found to remain as a strong motivation for Mainland Chinese visitors to visit Hong Kong (Huang & Hsu, 2009). In 2015, Chinese outbound tourists to the US spent US\$30.2 billion and contributed nearly US\$83 million per day to the US economy, making China the largest source market for the US (NTTO, 2016). In 2016, Chinese consumers continued to lead the global tourism market as the largest spender on international tourism (UNWTO, 2016). Ong (2017), more directly, pinpointed the "retail-oriented consumerist experiences" demonstrated by the contemporary Chinese middle class (p. 1). It is evident that there is a critical need to better understand tourists' souvenir shopping behavior in the contemporary Chinese consumer culture.

A special call was made for additional tourism research to enhance the theoretical understanding of the sociological aspects of souvenir

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Wei.Wei@ucf.edu.

purchase by interpreting souvenirs as commodities with attributed values (Decrop & Masset, 2011; Paraskevaidis & Andriotis, 2015). According to the first typology for souvenirs developed by Gordon (1986), souvenirs include five categories: pictorial image, symbolic shorthand, markers, local products, and piece-of-the-rock. For this study, souvenirs at theme parks were identified. Theme parks represent a sizable sector of the tourism and leisure businesses internationally (Ap & Sandiford, 1998). The past decade has witnessed a growing amount of research addressing the topic of consumer behavior at theme parks in China. For instance, Ren (2007) approached China's theme parks from the perspective of spatial theming and indicated that in the ordinary lives of urban residents, amusement and entertainment were often entangled with shopping activities (Ren, 2007). Ong (2017) examined the consumption of the Chinese middle class in a theme park in Southern China and discussed how cultures can be made tangible and available for purchase in forms of theme parks souvenirs in contemporary China. Notwithstanding these contributions, souvenir purchase-related experience in theme parks in China is relatively unbeknownst to scholars and practitioners.

This research has therefore chosen theme parks as its study context and aimed to advance the current understanding of souvenir consumption among Chinese domestic consumers by identifying the attributed values in relation to the contemporary Chinese tourists' souvenir purchase behavior at theme parks. Theoretically, this research will advance souvenir literature by applying a sociological perspective to a specific consumer culture, expanding the knowledgebase of the sociological aspects of souvenir purchase in the modern China. Practically, the findings of this research will equip souvenir designers, marketers, and retailers with a better understanding of the underlying values that drive Chinese consumers' consumption of theme park souvenirs, help them improve souvenir design and promotion, and eventually, adapt to connect with the modern Chinese consumers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Souvenir shopping and tourism

Shopping is one of the most ubiquitous tourist activities in many tourism destinations (Chang, Yang, & Yu, 2006). Good shopping was considered a strong pull attribute of destinations that draws tourists (Oh, Uysal, & Weaver, 1995). While on vacation, tourists like to acquire souvenirs as memorable reminders of their special moment (Trinh et al., 2014). Souvenir purchase thus forms a significant component of the shopping expenditure. Souvenirs are commonly interpreted as commercially produced and acquired material objects that provide tangible ways of prolonging an otherwise intangible travel experience (Gordon, 1986; Paraskevaidis & Andriotis, 2015). Selling souvenirs, on the other hand, have made great contributions to the viability of the retail trade (Jansen-Verbeke, 1998). Previous research has further stressed the significance of souvenirs to tourism development as a useful vehicle in reinforcing a tourist destination's image (Trinh et al., 2014). Taken together, souvenirs are central both to the tourist experience (Timothy, 2005) and to tourism practices (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2013). Despite the recognized, inseparable connection between souvenirs and tourism, souvenirs as a subject of scholarship have not been a primary research focus within the tourism field (Ballantyne, Packer, & Axelsen, 2009; Swanson & Timothy, 2012). This research strives to fill in this gap by studying the values of souvenirs, which is delineated in the following section.

2.2. Souvenir values

Understanding values is an important thread in the sociology literature. In a recent publication in the journal *Tourism Management*, Paraskevaidis and Andriotis (2015) pinpointed the limited theoretical understanding of the sociological aspects of souvenir purchase in the

tourism literature, as reflected in the paucity of research exploring the values of souvenirs. Among the few exceptions, Babin, Darden, and Griffin (1994) claimed that shopping is a deliberant and efficient activity, suggesting the utilitarian value of shopping which is determined by whether or not the particular need of the shopping trip was accomplished. Some manifestations of such utilitarian value are functionality, decoration, and gift-giving (Decrop & Masset, 2011). A group of researchers proposed the extended role of souvenirs as objects with symbolic and implicit values (e.g. Shenhav-Keller, 1993) such as remembrance and extension of a vacation experience (Decrop & Masset, 2011). The hedonic value of souvenir shopping was also studied in forms of recreation and emotional worth of shopping (Zulaikha & Brereton, 2011).

Paraskevaidis and Andriotis (2015) put forward a social theory framework, whereby souvenirs were interpreted as commodities with four attributed values, namely Marx's (1976) use (e.g. as a memento of the travel experience) and exchange (e.g. for the price or investment purposes) values, Baudrillard (1981)'s sign-value (e.g. for social status gaining and prestigious purposes), and the spiritual-value (e.g. for the empowerment of religious faith). In a study on Asian theme parks (Ap & Sandiford, 1998), quite a few interviewees shared that theme park souvenirs represented a lack of practical use and high price, implying visitors' expectation of use-value and exchange-value when purchasing theme park souvenirs. These souvenir studies nevertheless discussed only one or some aspects of the perceived values and few have systematically examined the perceived values as related to theme park souvenirs in their empirical analysis. To advance the previous research on souvenir values, this paper aims to understand tourism souvenirs values in a specific consumer culture.

Consumers' evaluation of experience has long been viewed as inseparable from the prevailing cultural influences (Mattila, 1999). Understanding tourists' needs in specific cultural contexts is thus a prerequisite for effective and successful experience management (Yuksel, 2004). Shopping behaviors based on cultural variables have become one line of inquiry in the shopping literature (Cheng, Xu, Zhang, & Zhang, 2010). Pertaining to souvenir shopping, a call was made for tourism souvenir research in the context of commoditization of modern social life and consumer culture (Watson & Kopachevsky, 1994). To answer this call, some researchers endeavored to examine the associations between cultural characteristics and tourists' preference for souvenir types (e.g. Wong & Law, 2003), while others attempted to investigate the authenticity of culinary souvenirs in Japan and Korea considering the culture influence (e.g. Buczkowska, 2014; Park, 2000). Since cultural values are recognized by marketing theorists as one pivotal driver of consumer behavior (Hsu & Huang, 2016), it is reasonable to suggest that the values associated with souvenir purchase are not universal but vary with a specific culture. To advance this line of scholarly investigation, the following section discusses the need to identify culture-specific values associated with souvenir purchase in contemporary Chinese society.

2.3. Need to identify values of souvenir purchase in the contemporary Chinese consumer culture

Research on cultural values has been dominated by a Western paradigm developed from the mainstream Western philosophies and ideologies (Hsu & Huang, 2016). However, in the modern era, the Eastern cultures are playing an increasingly significant role in influencing various aspects of human life and the Western-centric research paradigm has begun to face growing criticism for its limitation in understanding non-Western cultures and associated behaviors (Winter, 2009). A number of scholars examining tourism developments in Asia and other developing world regions have also argued that tourism theories and concepts have been long dominated by a Eurocentric view (Cohen & Cohen, 2015; Winter, 2009). While the shopping behavior of some ethnic groups and nationalities in Asia (e.g. Japanese, Koreans,

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