

Progress in Tourism Management

Souvenirs: Icons of meaning, commercialization and commoditization

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the development of souvenirs research in tourism studies. It looks at souvenirs from four broad vantage points, namely historical perspectives on souvenirs research, souvenirs as messengers of meaning, souvenirs as tradable commodities and the commodification of souvenirs and handicrafts. Part of this includes the supply and demand aspects of souvenir production and consumption, including the distribution system and various aspects of producers. The paper also considers the commodification process of native arts and crafts into consumable tourism products and suggests future directions for additional works in this understudied area of tourism research.

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1. Introduction

The souvenir—national park t-shirts, hand-painted Russian matryoshka dolls, miniature replicas of the Eiffel Tower, or myriad other objects—is a universal element of the travel experience. Almost without fail, travelers return home with souvenirs to help them preserve and commemorate their experience. Worth billions of dollars each year, producing, selling and buying souvenirs are routine activities in tourist destinations. Shopping, too, is considered a ‘must-do’ activity for most people on vacation, and much of what tourists buy can be classified as souvenirs. Despite the inseparable association between souvenirs and tourism, the souvenir as a topic of scholarship is relatively recent.

This paper examines the growth and development of the academic topic of tourist souvenirs. The article begins by reflecting on the research directions of early pioneering works, and how souvenirs studies have developed from modest origins into a major subject of scholarly research. The discussion then critically examines three lines of study: souvenir meanings, souvenirs as tradable commodities, and commodification. The article concludes by drawing attention to gaps in the research and recommends future directions for the continued academic study of souvenirs.

2. Historical perspective

Souvenirs have long played an important role in travel. Early records indicate that even thousands of years ago ancient Egyptians, Romans and other explorer-travelers brought mementos home from their journeys abroad. Later, during the explorer era and medieval period, it was not uncommon for voyagers to return to their home ports with large quantities of handicrafts and artworks bought, traded or looted from the places they explored and colonized (Horner, 1993; Stanley, 2000). Grand Tour participants in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also were known to have acquired miniature replicas of sites they visited in the art cities of Europe (Evans, 1998; Mars & Mars, 2000). Many museums were, in the words of Jolliffe and Smith (2001) direct manifestations of travel in that they were established to display the souvenir collections of the elites and early explorers. During the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Native American Indian tribes in the United States were encouraged to produce ‘native souvenirs’ for sale to travelers (McLerran, 2009; Nicks, 1999; Phillips, 1998).

Despite these accounts, some observers have argued that the modern-day souvenir has its true origins in Christian pilgrimages, wherein religious travelers would collect relics connected to saints (e.g. icons, cures and talismans) and sacred sites in Rome, Constantinople, and the Holy Land (Houlihan, 2000; Shackley, 2006; Teague, 2000; Tythacott, 2000). While most original religious mementos were raw pieces of holy places (rocks, soil, water, leaves, broken pieces of churches and statues), keepsakes began to be

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manufactured specifically for pilgrim consumption to avert pilfering of sacred sites and structures (Evans, 1998). Despite their humble beginnings, souvenirs have today become one of the most salient targets of tourist consumption that contribute billions of dollars in annual revenue to all corners of the globe (Cohen, 1995, 2001; Evans, 2000; Morbello, 1996; Timothy, 2005).

In tourism studies, the earliest works to examine souvenirs dealt with the evolution of handicrafts and ethnic art as commodified products for tourist consumption and were especially concerned about the changing forms and functions of traditional arts (Bolabola, 1980; Gormsen, 1981; Graburn, 1976; de Kadt, 1981; Schädler, 1979). In 1986, Beverly Gordon took the souvenir as a subject for academic study a step further conceptually by considering it to be a “messenger of the extraordinary” (p. 135). She suggested that her paper might “serve as a beginning point for serious scholarly consideration of the subject” (p. 145). In the following quarter of a century, souvenirs have become recognized as a salient part of the tourism industry and a subject worthy of additional research.

Early souvenir research emerged among anthropologists and other cultural studies specialists involved in the field of tourism. Nelson Graburn (1984) edited the first collection of journal articles on tourist arts in a special issue of *Annals of Tourism Research*, which focused on changes wrought by tourism on material culture. Nine years later, Erik Cohen (1993a) guest-edited another collection of souvenir-specific articles on the theme ‘Investigating Tourist Arts’ in the same journal. Varying perspectives on the meaning of souvenirs were evident in the articles in these two theme issues.

Souvenirs have been studied through esthetic, economical, functional and philosophical lenses. Souvenirs research is not isolated but rather coupled with, or embedded within, studies of shopping, retailing, handicrafts, authenticity, material culture, gift-giving practices, and consumption. The meanings and messages of mementos have been examined, and the souvenir object itself has received scholarly attention. Souvenir scholarship in its broader context has gained status with the publication of several full volume works (Hitchcock & Teague, 2000; Stewart, 1993; Timothy, 2005). The breadth of souvenir scholarship spans multiple disciplines – consumer behavior, art history, geography, museum studies, anthropology, history, philosophy, retailing, literary criticism, and sociology. Souvenirs serve a dual purpose in the academic literature as a subject for study, and as a medium for studying other tourism-related phenomena (e.g. authenticity—objective and subjective).

Compared to the breadth of souvenir research across themes and disciplines, the depth of any one focus area within souvenir scholarship is shallow. Studies on souvenirs are more fragmented and sporadic than many other studies on tourism phenomena, often based on individual cases, rather than comprehensive research programs (Coles, 2004b). While advanced online search capabilities have empowered scholars to hit upon more threads of research, souvenirs studies continue to be elusive and isolated. Even within the field of tourism, souvenirs have not been a primary research focus (Ballantyne, Packer, & Axelsen, 2009), despite their extreme importance in the tourist experience and as signifiers of memory (Timothy, 2005).

3. Studying souvenirs

Souvenir is originally a French verb indicating the action to remember. Translated as an English noun it represents an object through which something is remembered. In addition to a thing, the object might be a place, occasion, event or even a person. The term ‘souvenir’ has several general connotations within tourism literature as illustrated in Fig. 1. The first refers to the tourists’ perspective—objects that are symbolic reminders of an event or experience. They may be purchased or found and serve as tangible

markers of an otherwise intangible and ephemeral experience. Souvenirs are sometimes described as metonymic of events, places or experiences, imbued with meaning and consequence. Souvenirs can trigger an imaginary return to memorable times and places, and are often strategically placed in the home where they can best be seen by family members and visitors (Peters, 2011). The second view of souvenirs can be seen primarily from the merchant’s or supplier’s perspective—that of a tourist commodity, which is found in souvenir shops and handicraft markets. The object has exchange value in the marketplace and is produced, distributed, and consumed with few emotional attachments. It should be noted that these two (i.e., meanings and commodities) are not co-terminus. Instead, these two concepts help provide a better conceptual understanding of the role of souvenirs in tourism studies.

Based on the definition of souvenir as noted above, not all souvenirs fit these normative forms or expressions. Many commodities are sold for tourist consumption but are not intended to be souvenirs. For example, ordinary goods that were forgotten at home (i.e., personal hygiene products, items of clothing, travel necessities) are purchased during travel. They may be just that – a forgotten item – or they may take on the role of souvenir as symbolic reminder of a journey every time the item is used or worn at home. Commodities not directed at the tourist market may become souvenirs when purchased by a visitor. Items that are stumbled upon during travel (i.e., specific flatware pattern, electronic device not available at home) are used in ordinary time and space but also trigger memories of the experience.

In an even broader sense, souvenirs include items not always purchased or shopped for but nonetheless remind travelers of their experience. An immigration stamp or visa in a passport, a receipt from a memorable restaurant, or a museum entrance ticket are often kept as mementos of an extraordinary place and time. A suntan has always been a ‘souvenir’ of travel to share with friends and family (and in artificial light) the traveler’s opportunity to be away while those at home had to stay. Photographs, stories, recipes, plants, stones and seeds have long served the role of souvenir as memorable keepsakes. In times past and present, tattoos have signified certain journeys to and experiences in the destination.

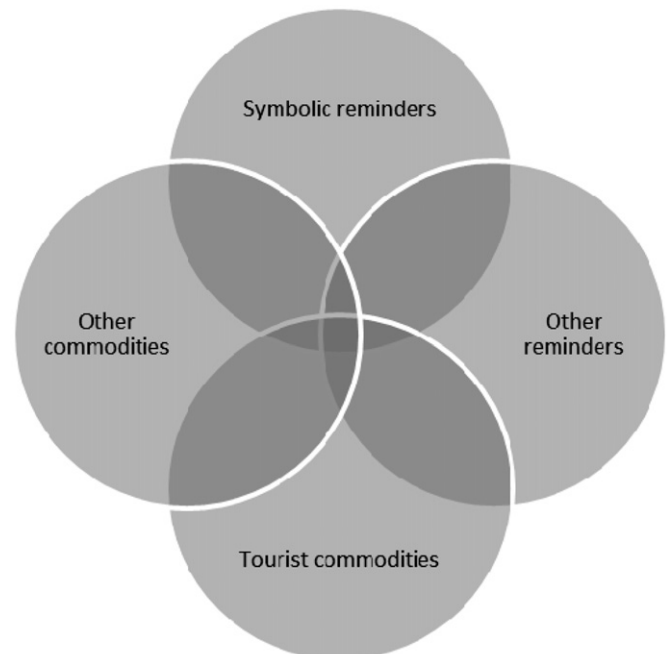


Fig. 1. Souvenir taxonomies.

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