Souvenirs: Messengers of Meaning

Lisa L. Love, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Peter S. Sheldon, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

ABSTRACT - Studies on souvenirs typically adopt object-oriented descriptive approaches. In contrast, our paper emphasizes the symbolic meanings of souvenirs by exploring stories about travel experiences. Our findings suggest that the types of meanings assigned to souvenirs are often dependent on the extent of the tourist's prior travel experiences. Specifically, more experienced travelers focus on relationships, events or people, while less experienced tourists associate meanings with places or destinations. Additionally, travelers authenticate meanings through souvenirs. Finally, we argue that these meanings are fluid, constructed and reconstructed over time, and are related to evolving definitions of Self and the Other. Thus, approaching souvenirs as messengers of meaning may contribute to the understanding of the essence of consumption experiences.

Souvenirs: Messengers of Meaning


[ to cite ]:

[ direct url ]:
http://acrwebsite.org/volumes/8149/volumes/v25/NA-25

Advances in Consumer Research Volume 25, 1998 Pages 170-175

SOUVENIRS: MESSENGERS OF MEANING

Lisa L. Love, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Peter S. Sheldon, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

ABSTRACT - Studies on souvenirs typically adopt object-oriented descriptive approaches. In contrast, our paper emphasizes the symbolic meanings of souvenirs by exploring stories about travel experiences. Our findings suggest that the types of meanings assigned to souvenirs are often dependent on the extent of the tourist's prior travel experiences. Specifically, more experienced travelers focus on relationships, events or people, while less experienced tourists associate meanings with places or destinations. Additionally, travelers authenticate meanings through souvenirs. Finally, we argue that these meanings are fluid, constructed and reconstructed over time, and are related to evolving definitions of Self and the Other. Thus, approaching souvenirs as messengers of meaning may contribute to the understanding of objects as representing the essence of consumption experiences.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of souvenirs to economies, cultures, and visitors is reflected in extant research. Souvenirs are integral to the economic structure of many destinations, accounting for more than $25 billion in sales annually in the United States alone (Harper 1981). The identity and image of a culture are often represented by souvenirs as evidence of history, heritage, or geography. Souvenirs can also serve as tangible symbols to signify or commemorate travel experiences.

In popular culture, souvenirs typically refer to objects that tourists acquire when traveling on vacation. Many people have adopted this operationalization of souvenirs and think of them in this way. But as we reflected upon souvenir purchases following recent trips, we began to think that common conceptions of what qualifies as a souvenir might be incomplete, and therefore, subject to further development. The unquestioned acceptance of the way souvenirs have been defined fails to incorporate the stories and experiences that are an inextricable part of our souvenirs. While important, current conceptions of souvenirs as reflected throughout published research may be lacking depth. Traditionally, studies focusing on souvenirs have been limited to an analysis of their types, uses, or functions. Thus, little is known about how tourists assign meaning to souvenirs, and even less is known about what those meanings might entail. We suggest that while souvenirs can be perceived as simply functional or decorative objects, close inspection reveals tangible expressions of meaning and expressions of the experiences these meanings represent. Therefore, the purpose of our paper is to investigate the meanings tourists assign to souvenirs through stories about their travel experiences.

Traditional Notions of Souvenirs

Prior research suggests that experiences are often considered as possessions that require a marker signifying ownership (Belk 1985). Scholars in anthropology and tourism acknowledge the importance of souvenirs, but the treatment of these objects is indirect and often subsumed in a discussion of tourism (Grubman 1983, 1984, 1989). Stewart (1984) recognizes the depth of meanings found in souvenirs, but relies on a conceptual critique of selected research. Other researchers have limited their focus to souvenirs, but those approaches are largely functional (Gordon 1986; Littrell 1990; Littrell, Anderson and Brown 1993; Littrell, et al. 1994; Anderson and Littrell 1995).
Naive versus Experienced Travelers

Discussion, which connects these ideas, explicates of travel experienced travelers seem to are representations of travel destinations. Further, we believe travelers representation, focusing more abstractly on

Our findings suggest that, most importantly, there seems to be a relationship between the degree of travel experience and the types of souvenirs meanings assigned to objects come to represent experiences. In doing so, we borrow the conceptual constructs of the Self and Other, which have roots in anthropology (e.g., Evans-Pritchard, 1940, Said, 1978). The Self is defined by that to which it is compared. Thus, the Other is a dynamic, fluid notion, and can be operationalized as any point of comparison or contrast. [For a more thorough treatment of the Self-Other dichotomy, see Evans-Pritchard (1940) in his discussion of Self and Other in the tribal Nuer and Said (1978) in his examination of Orientalism. More contemporary scholars writing in this area include Bhabha (1990), Fine (1994), Spivak (1988), and Trinh (1989).]

There is theoretical support for the relationship between objects or possessions and definition of the Self. For example, Belk (1988) contends that possessions are symbolic representations, and that the symbolic value of possessions is adaptive, changing as representations of the Self and identity demand modification or growth. Dominguez (1986) also suggests that "things 'cultivate' the Self by affirming or extending the boundaries of the Self" (p. 554). Thus, we explore the Self by examining souvenirs and their meanings.

Therefore, in the spirit of this body of work, our research seeks to move away from functional, descriptive, or comparative perspectives, and toward the understanding of meanings and how they evolve over time.

Method

To approach our study of souvenirs, we employed interpretive methods to explore the meanings assigned to souvenirs through stories and narratives about memorable travel experiences. This phenomenological strategy was adopted because it allows informants to discuss souvenirs and their meanings in a way that is not always possible in more structured research situations.

Thirteen informants, six male and seven female, representing diverse occupations, were interviewed over a nine-month period. They ranged in age from 21 to 57 years and all resided in the Midwestern U.S. Informants were contacted and referred by colleagues who were unaware of the study’s purpose or were asked not to reveal the goals of the study. This process identified informants who were unknown to us, but who felt comfortable talking openly because of a mutual acquaintance. Purposive diversity in the study’s purpose or were asked not to reveal the identities, events, or people. In contrast, more naive travelers tend to assign differences in souvenir preferences. Littrell, et al. (1994) consider souvenirs from the perspective of determining travel activity preferences, implying a relationship between the types of souvenirs purchased and preferences for four categories of tourist activities. Finally, Anderson and Littrell (1995) examine the souvenir purchase behavior of women tourists. Their findings suggest that women purchase souvenirs for many reasons: to serve as reminders, to authenticate the destination, for personal use, or to give as gifts.

As mentioned earlier, these studies consider the importance of souvenirs in signaling the travel experience, but their efforts are largely descriptive. Structure-functionalist accounts represented by these and other studies are likely motivated by market demands, returns on investment, and economic impact. For an economic purpose, then, it is useful to consider souvenirs from a functional perspective. However, negligible progress has been made toward an understanding of souvenirs and the meanings they communicate.

We argue that without an understanding of the connection between the object and the individual, it is impossible to fully appreciate how the meanings assigned to objects come to represent experiences. In doing so, we borrow the conceptual constructs of the Self and Other, which have roots in anthropology (e.g., Evans-Pritchard, 1940, Said, 1978). The Self is defined by that to which it is compared. Thus, the Other is a dynamic, fluid notion, and can be operationalized as any point of comparison or contrast. [For a more thorough treatment of the Self-Other dichotomy, see Evans-Pritchard (1940) in his discussion of Self and Other in the tribal Nuer and Said (1978) in his examination of Orientalism. More contemporary scholars writing in this area include Bhabha (1990), Fine (1994), Spivak (1988), and Trinh (1989).]

There is theoretical support for the relationship between objects or possessions and definition of the Self. For example, Belk (1988) contends that possessions are symbolic representations, and that the symbolic value of possessions is adaptive, changing as representations of the Self and identity demand modification or growth. Dominguez (1986) also suggests that “things ‘cultivate’ the Self by affirming or extending the boundaries of the Self” (p. 554). Thus, we explore the Self by examining souvenirs and their meanings.

Therefore, in the spirit of this body of work, our research seeks to move away from functional, descriptive, or comparative perspectives, and toward the understanding of meanings and how they evolve over time.

FINDINGS

Our findings suggest that, most importantly, there seems to be a relationship between the degree of travel experience and the types of souvenirs meanings assigned to souvenirs. Specifically, we assert that more experienced travelers tend to assign souvenirs meanings through hedonic representation, focusing more abstractly on relationships, events, or people. In contrast, more naive travelers tend to assign meanings that are representations of travel destinations. Further, we believe travelers authenticate meanings through their souvenirs. That is, less experienced travelers seem to seek more conspicuous authenticity in their souvenirs, while the authenticity desired by more experienced travelers appears to be more idiosyncratic or abstract in nature. Finally, we noticed that meanings assigned to souvenirs are fluid, regardless of travel experience. More specifically, the meanings change over time with respect to the object, the Self, and the Other. The following discussion, which connects these ideas, explicates our findings.
The results of our conversations with informants suggest that meanings assigned to souvenirs vary according to travel experience. Specifically, some tourists attach meanings to the place that souvenirs were chosen to represent, while other tourists seem to relate souvenirs primarily to relationships or experiences. Whether meanings are attached to specific locations or more generally to relationships or experiences, meanings seem related to the informant’s travel experience. Informants with minimal travel experience or those who visited unfamiliar or exotic destinations seem to assign meanings specific to the locale. In contrast, informants with moderate or extensive travel experience or those who were familiar with the destination assign meanings more generally. For more seasoned travelers, souvenirs are “representations of hedonics,” relating to friends, family, or other experiences, rather than to specific geographic locations, which we term “representations of place.”

**Representations of Place**

For those informants who report less travel experience or visits to unfamiliar destinations, meanings tend to be assigned to souvenirs in specific contexts and are typically associated with a particular place or destination. For example, the souvenir Robert (male, 35) bought on his honeymoon illustrates its close association with the destination:

> When we went to Europe, we went to Aberavenny in Wales which is the used book capitol of the world and we did buy a lot of books there. ... There were sheep everywhere. We bought a wool blanket. We wanted woolen sweaters, “life-time” sweaters my wife calls them, but the wool from Welsh sheep aren’t very good, especially for sweaters, and when they make sweaters, they’re just plain ugly. So the blanket was the obvious choice.

Likewise, Andrew discusses his first-time trip to the Hawaiian Islands:

> I went to this store that’s on each of the four islands of Hawaii. I had visited each of the four islands. They had a lot of Hawaiian shirts, I sort what they’re called. They are really colorful and have a lot of flowers on the shirts.

In these examples, souvenir meanings represent the travel destination very literally. Additionally, both stories suggest that the Self can be identified against what the Other represents as the unknown. Graburn (1983) asserts that tourists, “in order to more fully understand the world, bring parts of the experience home to understand it and make it safe/Cin other words, the impulse to ‘conquer’ the Other, whether it be space, the wilderness, foreignness, the past, and so on, to order, categorize, and consume it, and often to show it off” (p. 18).

**Representations of Hedonics**

In contrast to specific meanings, well-traveled informants often assign more abstract meanings that relate to relationships or experiences. For example, Jenny (female, 52) tells a story about a bouquet of paper flowers that she bought in an open-air Mexican market during one of her many trips to Mexico. Her experience focuses on the aesthetics and the impact on her senses, and the memories these sensations created, rather than on Mexico or the paper flowers specifically:

> This was a typical Mexican market. Some of them can be very dirty, but there are certainly an assortment of sights and sounds and smells. ... I immediately liked those paper flowers because they are so brightly colored, so I have several of them. ... I just pick up what appeals to me, especially the colors, not necessarily what I do with the flowers, or how I display them.

Although Mexico and the flowers cannot and should not be separated from the experience, Jenny focuses primarily on the sensations she remembers from this trip. The narrative also seems to reflect an effort to define the Self and that which is familiar as compared against a very different Other.

In another example, Karen (female, 21) tells a story about souvenirs from Paris: a hat and a blouse that she bought in a small, out-of-the-way shop. These items, she says, remind her of times both in Paris and times to come:

> You can’t tell what Paris is like. ... you know, a lot of it is just feelings; feelings you can’t put into words, or [that] pictures cannot capture. ... They are just reminders of, you know, that it can’t be that bad. You know, like no matter how bad I have done on my test or how stressed out I am or who I got into a fight with again. You know those memories are always there in my mind, but often at different times.

For these informants, souvenirs are representations of emotions and sensations. Further, these examples are consistent with Berk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989), who suggest that an important way souvenirs communicate meaning is to make memories real. It seems that Karen’s clothes serve as catalysts of meaning that she cannot express in other ways. They also seem to define the Self in terms of the Other, where the Other is made real and shaped by thoughts of the past, present, and future.

**Authenticity**

We also note that there seems to be a relationship between the degree of travel experience and the type of authenticity assigned to souvenirs. Specifically, the communication of authentic meanings appears to vary in terms of how public or personal the meanings are to the informant as well as by degree of travel experience. We term these two distinctions ‘conspicuous authenticity’ and ‘idiosyncratic authenticity.’

When meanings are generally transparent, public, or evident to the casual observer, we call that conspicuous authenticity. In contrast, idiosyncratic authenticity emphasizes private meanings that tend to focus on the symbolical, intangible elements of the souvenir, which are not often evident to an outsider. While no set of meanings is exclusively public or private, we assert that there is a tendency toward this dichotomy.

**Conspicuous Authenticity**

Among less experienced travelers, public meanings of souvenirs are more prevalent. Meanings that signify conspicuous authenticity emanate from external sources, usually the producer or artisan. For example, Steve (male, 36) expresses the importance of authenticity in his souvenir of Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Although the meanings he and his wife attach to the pewter bowl also involve memories of their honeymoon trip, he emphasizes the perceived authenticity of the souvenir:

> When we look at a place [to purchase a souvenir], we try to find a place that doesn’t look as though it’s incredibly mass-produced. ... a place that looks like the guy made it there. Otherwise what’s the point of saying I got it here if it’s not true to the crafts of the area? The traditions are there.

Steve’s perception of the difference between a souvenir that is “true to the crafts of the area” and other mass-produced souvenirs is supported by research on perceived authenticity of both objects and experiences (Greenwood 1982; Cohen 1988; Bruner 1994; Littrell, et al., 1993). This example also illustrates an effort to define the Self against images of the Other. The Other in this case refers to what Steve views as “true to the crafts of the area” in other unfamiliar or exotic cultures, as compared with what he evaluates as “mass-produced” or contrived
In another instance, Andrew (male, 21) emphasizes the public meanings of his souvenirs from a trip to New Orleans:

Another item I got was an alligator head. It is six inches to about a foot [long]. And it is a primitive alligator. Its teeth aren’t very pointy, spiky. It has real teeth, real skin. . . And it’s smaller than we’re used to seeing.

Andrew’s description of his souvenir mirrors any description an outsider might make of the same object. That is, he did not attach any significance to the alligator beyond the physical, public representation.

Idiosyncratic Authenticity

In contrast to conspicuous authenticity, more experienced travelers seem to assign personal, less obvious meanings to souvenirs. In the case of idiosyncratic authenticity, meanings originate from within and are, therefore, more abstract. For example, when Karen describes her favorite Walt Disney World souvenir, she says:

It represents mostly just my life, you know. . . all good times. I mean everything. . . when it was just me and my family. . . and things we don’t get to do anymore.

The Mickey Mouse sweatshirt symbolizes her trip to Disney World on one level, the close relationship with her family on another level, and the memories of happier times on yet another level. Here, too, Karen’s image of Self is recounted and reflected in the many personal meanings of her souvenir.

Jacque’s (female, 26) story about a ceramic goddess charm also illustrates the idea that souvenirs have multiple personal meanings:

Just before we were leaving. . . my parents arrived and we took them, showing them around the islands, showing [them] a lot of the artists. We wanted to buy some pottery but we knew it would be hard to get back here. But then I saw this goddess woman and she is said to represent an island goddess and also I guess fertility, which I didn’t find out until recently. . . The thing I really like about this little figurine is that it is not a skinny woman. . . She is obviously very feminine and round and not small at all, and I thought that was very important for me because the idea of a little goddess wasn’t pictured as, you know. Kate Moss, was more realistic and a sign of what was, you know, thought of as important, so I really like her.

For Jacque, the goddess is important because it does not represent the stereotypical goddess. Unlike Kate Moss (a waif-like model), this goddess represents a more realistic representation of women to Jacque. The goddess also represents their time on the island, and later gains meaning as a personal symbol of fertility. In this example, we can also see Jacque’s search for more acceptable models of the Self or an alternative image of what she considers to be feminine and beautiful.

Later in the interview, we asked her to tell us more about her ceramic goddess and memories of the island. She explains:

She is a memory of certainly the island. . . a good memory of the island. . . The neat thing about it was I bought it the last day, and the people with whom we were living never saw it. . . It was special. It was something from the island that they didn’t have an idea about.

Jacque again suggests that the goddess represents a positive memory of the island, but also symbolized something “special” that only Jacque and her husband share. Since no one else saw the object, the meaning is intensified because of its exclusivity. Because the object was not shared, Jacque and her husband have more control over its private meaning.

Fluidity of Meanings: Changing Definitions of Self and Other

Finally, we contend that meanings assigned to souvenirs are constructed and are, therefore, continually evolving. However, we notice that this tendency for meanings to evolve seems to be independent of travel experience. Thus, regardless of travel experience, souvenir meanings are constructed and reconstructed over time in ways that result in changing definitions of the Self and the Other.

Jacque’s boomerang charm from Australia elicits an evolving narrative about her personal growth and independence. She also articulates the importance of the boomerang in symbolizing that she has “come full circle” in defining her life priorities:

I had a really wonderful trip and really sort of discovered myself, you know. I learned to be independent on my own. I really didn’t have the money to buy this [necklace and charm], but I decided I wanted something really permanent. . . The boomerang is a symbol of going back there sometime. . . I sort of had the idea that yes, I will return back here, and it was like returning to myself.

Jacque’s boomerang also seems to symbolize the transformation of Self she experienced during her trip to Australia. The Self was defined in contrast to the Other. In Jacque’s situation, the Other is the Self of another time.

In another example, the meanings attached to a small teak cat by Kristen (female, 25) have evolved over time. When we asked Kristen to describe what she thinks about when she looks as this souvenir, she said:

The people in Thailand are really, really friendly. I’ve never been to another country where the people are really that friendly. They just seem very warm. It was such a neat trip. But I only saw part of it, you know, because now I read the stories about the girls being sold by their families into prostitution and the very high percentage of people who have HIV. It horrifies me because I would never expect that from that country.

For Kristen, an object that once conjured pleasant memories now produces ambivalent feelings; Kristen’s experiences in Thailand seem to be tainted by new knowledge about the place.

Jacque’s small plastic dinosaur acquired at a gas station in Spearfish, South Dakota captures the importance of souvenirs in remembering and sharing:

About six weeks after our wedding, we had the first major fight of our married life. It was such a silly fight. We were both just tense and there were all these motorcycles zooming around and I had pulled in to get gas on the wrong side. . . I had to go around to the other side and so I just pulled around and I was still on the wrong side. And Mark said “Are you paying any attention?” So I started to yell and we both went in to buy this [souvenir] to make up. It is sort of a memory of a time when things were really so uncertain and seemed so difficult. . . having the fight seemed like such a big thing. I mean now there’s so much more certainty, so much more stability.
Jacque’s memories about the object itself or the location where it was acquired are secondary to her memories of her relationship with her husband. In fact, the memories evoked by the object have evolved along with her relationship with her husband. Where it was once a symbol of conciliation, it has become a symbol of the certainty and stability she attaches to her marriage.

Jacque’s dinosaur illustrates the emergent nature of meanings through the communication of nostalgia (Belk 1990; Davis 1979; Holbrook 1989; Starobinski 1986; Stewart 1984). Davis (1979) describes the value of nostalgia as an integral part of “the never ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities” (p. 31). Thus, Jacque’s notions of Self seem to develop by comparison to the Other, where the Other represents memories of Jacque, her husband, and their marriage at another point in their lives. “Possessions may show where we have come from and thereby remain valuable as a point of contrast to present extended Self” (Belk 1988, p. 159).

Conclusion

Through the process of considering informants, their souvenirs, and the stories that define them both, rather than just the objects, we have come to believe that popular conceptions of what constitutes a souvenir are inadequate. Informants’ narratives illustrate that people assign meaning much more broadly than can be captured by focusing exclusively on the objects that tourists acquire when traveling on vacation.

Consistently throughout this research, it became evident that these meanings are central to the ongoing process of Self definition. Thus, any examination of symbols, including souvenirs, must explore meaning lest understanding be compromised for functionality. Graburn (1989) agrees: “souvenirs are tangible evidences of travel that are often shared with family and friends, but what one really brings back are memories of experiences” (p. 33).

Our findings build on this knowledge. First, we argue that meanings vary between naive and experienced travelers. Naive travelers are more likely to assign meanings to souvenirs as representations of the place, while experienced travelers are more likely to assign meanings as representations of the hedonic elements of the experience. In addition, authenticity seems to be central to the assignment of meanings to souvenirs. Specifically, naive travelers describe a more conspicuous authenticity in their souvenirs, while a more abstract, or idiosyncratic authenticity seems characteristic of more experienced travelers. Finally, souvenir meanings are fluid, embracing experiences before, during and after the time souvenirs are acquired. However, these layers of experiential and emergent meanings are intertwined with notions of Self. The Self is defined against images of the Other, where the Other might represent another culture, another person, or the Self at another point in time.

This paper suggests souvenirs communicate meanings beyond both form and function. The study contributes to the body of knowledge by deviating from traditional ways of approaching souvenirs and by giving voice to the meanings of souvenirs. Because these meanings are so personal and complex, it is important that the voices of the informants be encouraged to communicate them.

This study demands that we rethink souvenirs, and makes problematic the research supporting an industry promoting experiential consumption. Further, these findings speak to our own culture of consumption, and compel a re-examination of the Self and the Other in these terms. While our discussion was limited to travel experiences, it is clear that meanings are not so easily bounded.

In many ways, our findings raise more questions than they answer. For example, we believe the relationship between naive and experienced travelers should be explored. This examination must start with a more clear idea of what constitutes each group. Further, it seems important to consider how the differences in these two groups further manifest themselves in the consumption experience. Additionally, our study possesses the same limitations as all cross-sectional research in that we were not able to follow changes in souvenir meanings. Thus, a longitudinal study may offer additional insights into the evolution of meanings over time. Finally, future areas of inquiry into souvenirs should broaden the scope of meaning to include the entire process of pre-consumption: that of the producer, the artisan, the sculptor, the painter, the native performer. It seems that the absence of this meaning, the meaning contributed by the Other, would render the resultant symbolism somehow incomplete.

REFERENCES


Bhabha, Homi (1990), Nation and Narration, New York: Routledge.


