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Souvenir shopping in Switzerland; A qualitative analysis of travel blogs and its implications for the souvenir trade

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Abstract:

Tourism shopping represents an impressive investment by tourists in terms of the time and money involved. In an inductive approach based on case-studies, travel blog entries of tourists who had recently visited Switzerland were analysed, leading to a theoretical proposition and to pragmatic, reality-driven suggestions for the souvenir business. The notion of 'Expert tourist' emerged as an overarching theme. Depending on the tourists' own judgment about how good or bad they are at being expert tourists, their perception about souvenirs and subsequently their souvenir buying preferences vary greatly. This needs to be taken into account by the souvenir trade.

## Souvenir shopping in Switzerland; A qualitative analysis of travel blogs and its implications for the souvenir trade

### Introduction

Recent studies regarding spending patterns of tourists (for instance Kämpf, 2006/2007) bring an important feature of tourists' lives to the centre stage: an impressive amount of time and money is devoted to shopping in the wider sense of the term. The percentage of tourists' travel budget spent on retailing varies considerably depending on the destination visited. Kämpf (2007) claims for Zurich that 11% of the travel budget is spent in the context of shopping activities, whereas looking at European tourists visiting Seoul in South Korea, almost 14% of the budget was found to be allocated to shopping. A paper investigating spending patterns among tourists in South Africa revealed that 21% of total expenditure was attributed to gifts and souvenirs (Saayman, Saayman and Rhodes, 2001). Regardless of the precise percentage of travel expenses devoted to shopping, the numbers are impressive and the rationale behind such behaviour needs to be explored in more depth. Tourism shopping in general and souvenir shopping in particular have so far been treated as orphans in academic research. It appears as if theory development does not keep track with the ever increasing importance of this revenue generator for local businesses. Swanson and Horridge (2006) report that although researchers have begun to understand the importance of shopping, the actual product of shopping – the souvenir – has received very little attention. Consistent with Wearing and Wearing's (2001) claim to 'get inside the heads and hearts of the tourists themselves' (p.155), this paper intends to address this gap in tourism consumer behaviour literature by analyzing travel blog entries from tourists who recently visited Switzerland. The overarching objective of this research project is to make a decisive step towards a better understanding of the phenomenon of souvenir consumption. The underlying research question for the present project is defined as follows: 'How do tourists reflect on their souvenir shopping activities?'

### Method

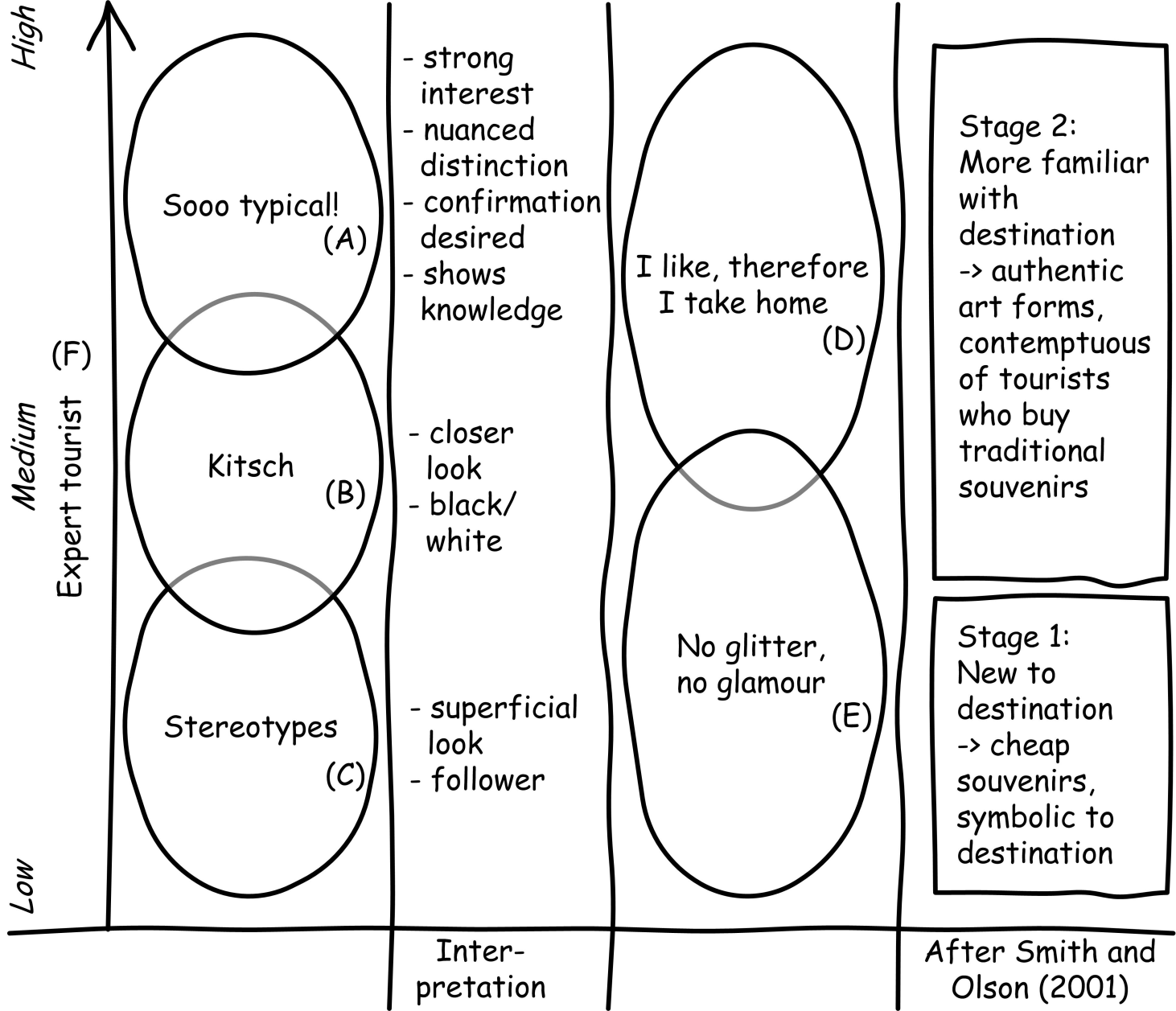
The phenomenological stance adopted in this study represents a holistic-inductive approach which leads seamlessly, as a first step, to theoretical propositions (Decrop, 2004) and to pragmatic reality-driven suggestions as a final step. Contemporary best practice in qualitative research calls increasingly for naturally occurring data as opposed to 'manufactured' (Silverman, 2008) data coming from the traditional interview. The dividing line between the two data classes is indeed blurred and it would clearly be beyond the scope of this paper to continue this academic debate. As Potter (1996) stressed, qualitative researchers tend to rely too much on interview data and hence risk missing inspiring clues which could potentially be uncovered by means of alternative data collection methods. With the advent and the ever increasing popularity of the internet, plus the willingness of people to share their views using publicly accessible digital diaries, a new source of valuable data has become available - blogs. In their agenda for future tourism and hospitality research, Holmes et al. (2007) identified blog analysis as one of three most important issues to be addressed in the methodological context, and they called it 'a highly innovative and new method for data mining' (p.76). In a recent study, Pan et al. (2007) explored travel blogs and gained a clear understanding about how visitors perceived their stay in Charleston, South Carolina, and their perceptions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the destination. It can be argued that the real value of travel blogs lies not only in the

quantity of data within easy reach, but much more with the quality. Sharda and Ponnada (2006) remind us in this context that tourism bloggers tend to provide more authentic information backed by genuine personal experience. Hence, travel blog analyses constitute a promising avenue for exploring tourists' perceptions of the souvenir shopping activity and the roles they adopt in this process.

For this study, the sampling frame was defined as publicly available blog entries authored by English speaking travellers who had a) visited or transited Switzerland in the last two years, and b) mentioned souvenir shopping in their narratives. Based on these criteria, 40 blog entries were selected, each reflecting one single day. A first examination of the data revealed that the act of souvenir shopping was most often described in a single sentence or a very short section of the blog entry. In consequence, a pragmatic approach was chosen. Based on Eisenhardt and Graebner's (2007) strategy of inducting theory using case studies, ten blog entries were selected on a convenience sampling basis and aggregated to take the form of a single case. This case could subsequently undergo within-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989) which is a characteristic trait of this inductive, case-oriented process. With the tentative findings from the first case in mind, it was possible to proceed by applying replication logic to the following cases (cross-case analysis), each of them being again composed of 10 randomly selected blog entries. Theoretical saturation was reached after the third case and hence the fourth case was used to cross-check findings on a spot check basis. The analytical phase was composed of two distinct coding cycles (Saldaña, 2009). The first coding cycle served to locate the relevant data which most often appeared in the form of a single sentence or a short passage hidden in the wealth of information given in a diary entry. To this end, a structural coding approach as outlined by MacQueen et al. (2008) was followed by the application of in-vivo, emotion, or action codes to capture meanings at the explicit level. The second coding cycle was characterized by a focused coding strategy which searched for the most significant codes generated during the first cycle, and which had the potential to develop 'the most salient categories' (Charmaz, 2006 p.46). Further rounds of analytic reflection ultimately led to the identification of an overriding theme.

### Findings & Discussion

The major insight that emerged from the data in this study was that the experience of souvenir shopping as perceived by the tourist was strongly dependent on the tourist's own interpretation of his level of expertise as a tourist, or 'Expert tourist' level. A number of indicators point in this direction and they deserve to be analysed in detail before conceptualizing the term of 'Expert tourist'. The proposed 'Interpretative Model of Souvenir Buyers' illustrates the most salient categories as they emerged from the study and their assumed inter-relationships. In the following paragraphs each of the categories (A – E) and the overriding theme 'Expert tourist' (F) will be discussed and supporting evidence presented.



### A) Sooo typical!

So often heard from tourists, this dictum suggests a comparison between an individual state of knowledge and the situation which is commented on. Something is called typical when its appearance or lack thereof matches one's preconceived ideas. Such ideas are built over time and through repetitive exposure to the same kind of situation. Indeed, when someone notes the same thing several times and thus thinks it is a normal occurrence, this often leads to the verbal expression of 'typical'. Depending on the situation, an object or situation labelled with this adjective can have a positive or a rather negative complexion. For instance, it can be a compliment in the sense of a joyfully expected situation that has made an appearance. Or, if delivered in a certain way, it can be understood as a sarcastic criticism proving that one's worst expectations have come true. Another aspect of using 'typical' is the fact that it tends to document a sound knowledge of which the speaker is proud and of which he would now like to reap the benefits in the form of receiving admiring looks or enjoying the status of an expert in the group. Someone who judges a thing or a situation to be typical proves that they are able to differentiate in a much more nuanced fashion. Only based on this body of knowledge is the tourist capable of categorizing and determining the actual degree of conformity by using such terms as 'not really typical', 'kind of typical' or 'sooo typical'. In the following excerpt from one of the bloggers, the matching of one's well documented should-be-situation against reality can easily be felt even though the author does not use 'typical'. *"The rest of the afternoon was spent at the pub again, sampling fine Swiss beers and chocolates"*. In addition, this blogger demonstrates his competence in differentiation by formulating a word of advice. *"Don't go without a camera and don't leave without visiting a chocolate shop – they are everywhere and they are to die for"*.

### B) Kitsch

Whereas 'typical' subsumes the availability of a whole array of nuances to describe a situation or an object, kitsch is commonly used to pin down an extreme and its opposite, such as white in 'black and white' or good in 'good and bad'. Kitsch most often describes an object or a design which is seen as absolutely tasteless, vulgar and worthless, and the usage of the word concerned is truly devastating in implications for the object. It is argued that for the traveller of a certain standing it would be socially unacceptable to be associated with buying kitsch stuff. Kitsch is indeed an expression of value and it shows clearly that the user of the word is in a position to make a distinction, even if it is only the distinction between kitsch and non-kitsch. One would want to show that one is able to stay clear of such temptations and that one has a discerning taste and a well developed sense of aesthetics. Hence, one can maintain that the user of the term kitsch probably has a certain level of expertise in terms of being a traveller and a souvenir buyer. But, compared to the user of the term 'typical', he neither has the cultural or experimental background nor the linguistic capabilities to make more nuanced judgements. This kind of souvenir buyer is happy with a simplified version of the world in which there are only two options to choose from. It can be assumed that the comparison process while away from home includes two worlds which are matched against each other: home and away from home. The resulting findings are equally expressed in a binary mode. The following excerpt illustrates trenchantly a certain level of existing knowledge paired with the binary judgment. *"The building was used initially as a set for a 70's James Bond. It is now a revolving restaurant and of course a tacky souvenir shop selling 007 jackets and key rings."*

### C) Stereotypes

A stereotype is a widely held and oversimplified image of a person or a location (Oxford Reference Online Premium, 2009). This very basic and fragmented knowledge base is often built up over a long period of time. It is based on narratives, newspaper headlines or even cartoons and it is hardly ever scrutinised in reality. The actual user of a stereotype, in our case the tourist, is most often satisfied with this kind of previously acquired knowledge. When he visits a certain location or gets in touch with a specific person, he checks his immediate impressions against the stereotypical knowledge in assessing the overall situation.

The following excerpt magnificently illustrates the stereotype which this blogger carried with him and the contrast that can emerge if stereotypes are reality checked.

*“There were window shops with cow bells, embroidery, naïve paintings etc. alongside a bank ATM machine which I naturally didn’t ignore. Oh, the wonders of techno-banking”.*

Or this contributor, who summarizes all prevailing stereotypes about Switzerland in one single sentence. Note the capitalisation!

*“The Swiss Alps, Swiss Army Knife, Swiss Bank, and Swiss Cheese all in one place!”*

### D) ‘I like, therefore I take home’

It was astonishing to see how closely related the expression of liking is to the intention of taking home. In many of the researched cases, the blogger did not simply limit himself to liking or admiring an object or a landscape. A clear expression of will to take home was often detectable in very close textual proximity to the expression of liking. Not always is the act of taking home to be understood in a physical sense.

Taking pictures or a video often serves as a substitute in the quest to make this moment last longer. From what is said in the blogs it can be argued that the hurdles between the first enthusiasm and the final act of buying are less prominent and therefore the purse seems to be open wider while on a vacation than in a similar situation back home. The following excerpt illustrates particularly well the connection between liking and taking home.

*“The air up in the Alps is so crisp and fresh I wanted to put some in my backpack and bring it back to Australia”.*

Or a case in which the taking home was made real.

*“The material the baths is constructed from – Valser Quartzite – is everywhere and I managed to souvenir myself a piece”.*

### E) No glitter, no glamour

As alluded to earlier, the initial inspection of the blog data showed that textual content pertaining to shopping in general or souvenir shopping in particular is often limited to a sentence or a short paragraph even though the blog entry for the day may spread over several pages. What first came as a surprise could be explained at a later stage of the research project, particularly in connection with the kitsch theme as outlined above. In principle, blog entries are primarily carried out for friends and loved ones that remain at home. A blog is a medium which allows you to describe the world as you see it (it is YOUR blog) and this stance is equally expected by the readers. In a similar vein, a blog is a reflection of you, i.e. the blogger presents him/herself in exactly the way in which he wants to be seen. Hence, with souvenir buying often equated with displaying a propensity to kitsch, and kitsch being socially unacceptable, a blogger has basically three ways of going about describing his souvenir shopping

habits: a) not mentioning anything; b) presenting souvenir shopping as an ordinary pastime while on a vacation and at the same time winking at the idea of kitsch; c) describing an act of buying in meticulous detail and substantiating a choice against existing personal knowledge about the object or location. Option b summarizes a point which appeared very prominently across many of the analysed blogs. There is absolutely no glitter and no glamour involved in the act of souvenir shopping. Whereas shopping for souvenirs is often seen to be on a par with shopping for groceries back home, the presence of souvenir selling facilities is presupposed as an integral part of the tourism infrastructure. Indeed, souvenir shopping is often described as a time filler or an activity to choose when there is really nothing more intellectually demanding to do. The following excerpts illustrate the ambiguous attitudes involved. Like buying groceries, one needs to do this once in a while. *“Next stop was the cute city of Lucerne where we stocked up on our Swiss souvenirs ...”*.

Buying souvenirs entails costs of the same type as food or bike tubes.

*“May 21, Day 37 ... Postage 3.6 CHF, Bike tubes 10 CHF, Souvenir mug 11.50 CHF, Camping 23.00 CHF ...”*.

Souvenir shopping as a convenient time filler.

*“After 10 minutes of frustration (our train was leaving in about 30 minutes), I sent Heather to look at the souvenir shops while I hung out to wait for someone”*.

#### F) Expert tourist

The notion of ‘Expert tourist’ emerged as an overriding theme in this study. In view of the blog passages analysed with reference to souvenir consumption, the level of travel sophistication seems to strongly influence the way tourists perceive their souvenir shopping behaviour. It is suggested that we should not view the expert tourist as one entity, but should create a taxonomy which allows the attribution of observed behavioural patterns to a specific level of expertise, going from low to medium to high. It is hypothesized that the ‘Expert tourist’ with a relatively low level of sophistication is likely to use stereotypical expressions when describing his souvenir shopping experiences. This person is a follower, his involvement is rather superficial and the souvenir buying pattern is best placed in the ‘No glitter, no glamour’ category. In contrast, the individual at the medium level of the taxonomy system has more experience as a traveller and, therefore, tends to take a closer look at things and starts voicing an opinion. In many cases the expression of opinion lacks nuance and it often culminates in binary decision making: black or white with no shades of grey or, in reference to the ‘Kitsch’ category: kitsch or non-kitsch. This type of buyer experiences souvenir shopping as ‘No glitter, no glamour’ although some buyers have a propensity to go for the more specific, and they articulate an independent vision. The ‘Expert tourist’ at the top of the scale is a seasoned traveller, and experience has equipped him with a finely grained vocabulary which allows for a much nuanced distinction between impressions and objects. He is likely to be highly involved and pleased to show his outstanding knowledge about places, people and objects. This kind of tourist is very clear about what is and is not an appropriate souvenir. He very much reacts based on personal preferences and is not afraid of displaying the choices made and to raise these to de facto standards.

The following excerpt summarizes an expert tourist’s stance in a concise fashion.

*“The harbour’s ‘captain’ was so nice with us, I really liked him so much that I asked him if I could get a picture of him and me as a souvenir. He was so typical, and his accent either in German, well ‘schwizer dütsch’ or French was the cherry on the*

*cake. I can tell you, my German is quite good and I could not understand a word! A lovely man, however, and so friendly”.*

In formal terms, the findings lead to the following proposition:

Souvenir buyers who see themselves as expert tourists are more likely to be interested in souvenirs which help them to document their expertise.

#### Practical implications

Based on the findings of this study, the actual buying behaviour of souvenir buyers cannot be predicted. However, it is possible to advance a hypothesis in this respect. Kim and Littrell (2001) for instance suggest that the more experienced the traveller is, the less likely it is that he will buy souvenirs. By extension this would mean that the well-travelled tourist does not buy souvenirs, and this finding appears inappropriate in the light of the outcomes of this study. Smith and Olson (2001) present a much more pragmatic proposition by which tourists' shopping behaviour becomes more discriminating over time. This, in turn, would be consistent with the basic findings of this study in that apparently seasoned travellers definitely continue buying souvenirs but they tend to be more often in the 'Sooo typical' category which represents nuanced distinctions made at a considerably higher level of involvement.

In terms of practical implications and added value to the industry, it is pivotal to acknowledge, first of all, that the vast majority of souvenir offerings in Swiss destinations cater for the tastes of the longest standing tourist class: the novice tourist. They typically travel in groups, are on a tight schedule, and can primarily be attributed to the group of 'stereotype' (C) buyers who consider souvenir buying as a duty with 'No glitter, no glamour' (E) effect attached to it. The more experienced, more demanding and more discriminating traveller, the higher level 'Expert tourist' (F), has received surprisingly little attention in the configuration of target-oriented souvenir assortments. In order to appeal to this growing tourist segment, souvenir offerings need to reflect the imminent aspiration of this target group to set themselves apart from the masses by opting for a product which is clearly more sophisticated and whose authenticity and uniqueness can only be judged by an experienced traveller. In practice, this would point in the direction of a souvenir shop that would address this promising group of tourists on three distinctive levels: 1) display; 2) branding; 3) price differentiation.

Firstly, in order to give the high level expert tourist a platform to show his superior knowledge and insight and, at the same time, to set himself apart from the masses, it is suggested that a spatially separated section should be created within the souvenir shop where more sophisticated items are on display. This section could be in a back room which is less easy to find and, therefore, requires both cultural familiarity and determination to access it. Secondly, a niche branding strategy could effectively raise certain souvenir products above the level of commodity-like items. The brands should reflect exclusivity and a degree of intimacy which could be achieved by supplying background information about production, manufacturing location or people involved in the creation of the object. Thirdly, a smart price differentiation strategy would allow the most prominent needs of the high level expert tourist to be efficiently addressed in terms of exclusivity and nuanced distinction and, at the same time, to generate additional income.



## Conclusion

This study is based on the rationale that tourism shopping in general and souvenir shopping in particular has become a major contributor to revenue for local businesses in tourism areas. An in-depth analysis of travel blogs of tourists that recently visited Switzerland was carried out in order to detect how tourists reflect on their own souvenir shopping behaviour. The proposed model depicts the major themes involved and the overarching concept of the 'Expert tourist'. It is proposed that depending on the tourists' own perceptions of how strong they are at being experts (from low to high), they show very distinctive souvenir buying behaviour. This leads to the suggestion that the souvenir trade should address proactively the expert tourist, especially the higher level type, by providing solutions at three different levels: merchandise display, branding of products, and price differentiation. It is argued that by placing the high level expert tourist more centre stage when designing souvenir shops and product assortments, the satisfaction level of this segment could be raised considerably, and this would seamlessly translate into financial benefits for the operator of the souvenir business.

The present study limits itself to the analysis of English speaking travellers in Switzerland. In terms of further research it is suggested that this investigation should be replicated in other countries and/or with tourists from other cultural backgrounds.

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