

## Personal experiences as a determining factor in choosing souvenir

Maria Manola

University of West Attica

mmanola@uniwa.gr



*Figure 1: Souvenirs from around the world. (GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO, 2020)*

### Abstract

This study deals with the meaning travellers attach to souvenirs, rather than the typology of souvenirs which has been analysed more thoroughly in existing research studies. When identifying the reasons why the domestic and foreign tourists decide to buy souvenirs and the factors that determine their purchase decision, the question raised is how and why this connection between the tourist and the souvenir is established. The conceptual construction of the Self and the Other assists in this quest to delve deeper into the complex meanings assigned to souvenirs and gain an understanding that will challenge the common superficial conception of the purpose of souvenirs. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore in depth the reasons why people acquire souvenirs and to investigate the meanings tourists assign to them.

**Keywords:** experiential approaches, cultural composition, emerging meanings, souvenirs, travel experience, personal experience.

## 1. Definition And Significance of Souvenirs

First and foremost, the word ‘souvenirs’ comes from the French word ‘*souvenir*’ which translates to ‘memory’ or ‘reminiscence’ and refers to items we purchase from a country or a new place we visit in order to remember it. According to Field (1970:29) “the souvenir equates the process of art with the function of memory by relatively simple, but personal means.”

Souvenirs typically refer to small items that tourists acquire when travelling on vacation, and they represent the place they have visited. According to Gordon (2004), who analysed their typology and function, they can include pictorial images, such as postcards, snapshots, books etc., things gathered or hunted from the natural environment or taken from the built environment, symbolic shorthand, i.e. manufactured miniatures, and markers, i.e. souvenirs that in themselves have no reference to a place or event, but are inscribed with words that locate them in place and time. Many people think of them in this way, yet souvenirs can also include food, drinks and photos. As we reflect upon souvenir purchases, we begin to think that common conceptions of what qualifies as a souvenir might be incomplete (Love and Sheldon, 1998).

Souvenirs are integral to the economy of many destinations and the identity and image of a culture are often represented by souvenirs as evidence of history, heritage, or geography. They “have become part of an international language without words” (Kapéra, 1987, Love and Sheldon, 1998) and serve as tangible symbols to signify or commemorate travel experiences.

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. Published research may be lacking depth, since 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. Research suggests that while souvenirs can be perceived as simply functional or decorative objects, close inspection reveals tangible expressions of meaning and its representational experience (Love and Sheldon, 1998).

## 2. Traditional Notions Of Souvenirs And Complexity

While scholars acknowledge the importance of souvenirs, they are often subsumed in a discussion of tourism. Researchers, such as Stewart (1992) recognize the depth of meanings

found in souvenirs, but either their critique is conceptual and of limited research, or their approaches are largely functional (Love and Sheldon, 1998).

This functional approach, while helpful, does not offer insight into understanding souvenirs and the meanings they hold. Gordon (2004) characterizes souvenirs as “messengers” but neglects to inform us about what those messages might entail. This perspective divorces objects from their meaning, and subsequently separates production and acquisition from the many forms of consumption.

The work of Anderson and Littrell (1996) adds an empirical perspective to Gordon’s (2004) and (Love and Sheldon, 1998) descriptive approach to souvenirs, while Love and Sheldon approach the research with a much broader treatment of souvenirs. In her examination of the utility of souvenirs, Littrell (1990) reports that tourists use souvenirs to differentiate themselves from others and build relationships. John Taylor (2016:368), using the example of ‘child native’ doll souvenirs in Vanuatu, claims that an effective souvenir often needs to “signify a generalised sense of place and/or recall some aspect of the relationship between their new possessors and the perceived sense of otherness from which they are extracted”. After all, tourism depends on souvenirs to facilitate interactions between and among local people and tourists, since materiality acts as a medium of communication (Zhang and Crang, 2016).

Following Littrell’s report (1990) of tourists using souvenirs to remember and reminisce among other things, Anderson and Littrell (cited in Love and Sheldon, 1998) examined the souvenir purchase behavior of women tourists. Their findings suggested that women purchase souvenirs to serve as reminders and to authenticate the destination either through personal use or by gifting them.

According to Littrell (1990), tourists use souvenirs to strengthen self-confidence, and in a similar study she explores the role of souvenirs in authenticating destinations and experiences. Experiences are often considered as possessions that require a marker signifying ownership. For the tourists and their acquaintances, souvenirs provide evidence of their encounter with various countries, places, monuments, and sites (Kapéra, 1987).

These studies consider the importance of souvenirs in signifying the travel experience, but their efforts are largely descriptive. For an economic purpose, it is useful to consider souvenirs from a functional perspective, but negligible progress has been made toward an understanding of souvenirs and the meanings they communicate (Love and Sheldon, 1998).

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. The conceptual constructs of the Self and Other provide us with this understanding. The Self is defined by that to which it is compared and thus, the Other is a dynamic, fluid notion, and can be operationalized as any point of comparison or contrast (Love and Sheldon, 1998).

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. More specifically, he notes that the attachment to possessions that evoke memories grows with age as one accumulates past experiences and the amount of pleasurable experiences which are likely to happen in the future reduces. Therefore, the symbolic charge of possessions, such as souvenirs, increases rather than diminishes over time, and the meanings change with respect to the object, the Self, and the Other. As symbols of change, tourist objects boldly assert new cultural syntheses and meanings (Jules-Rosette, 1986). Thus, we explore the Self by examining souvenirs and their meanings.

### **3. Findings**

Firstly, and most importantly, the findings from the consumer research *Souvenirs: Messengers of Meaning* suggested that there seems to be a relationship between the degree of travel experience and the types of meanings assigned to souvenirs. Specifically, in this research, Love and Sheldon (1998) asserted that informants with minimal travel experience or those who visited unfamiliar or exotic destinations seem to assign meanings that represent the travel destinations. Therefore, they attach meanings to souvenirs that signify conspicuous authenticity, and are generally transparent, public, or evident to the casual observer. They usually emanate from external sources, such as a producer or an artisan, through handcrafted souvenirs, and locally produced or sourced products.

In contrast, Love and Sheldon (1998) claim, in an elaboration on Littrel's report (1990) about tourists using souvenirs to engage in hedonic or aesthetic pleasures, that informants with moderate or extensive travel experience, or those who were familiar with the destination, assign meanings more generally and through hedonic representation, focusing more abstractly on relationships, events and people. Souvenirs are 'representations of hedonics' for more seasoned travellers as well, who relate them to friends, family, or other experiences. This group tends to focus on the symbolic, intangible elements of the souvenir, which are not often evident to an outsider, emphasizing private meanings that originate from within and are, therefore, more

abstract and signify idiosyncratic authenticity. For example, a less experienced traveller would potentially relate the meaning of a Rumanian handmade wooden spoon (Fig. 2) with a pattern of a rooster to the artisan, while a more experienced traveller would potentially emphasize that the rooster symbolizes hope and, therefore, encapsulates a private and circumstantial meaning. As a result, meanings assigned to souvenirs vary according to travel experience.



*Figure 2: Handmade wooden spoons from Romania with many patterns. (iArt, 2017).*

On another note, Richins' (1994:530) research on high-materialism and low-materialism consumers, compares their possessions according to object-type categories and the value the consumers ascribe to them. Souvenirs are associated with the "extension of self" object-type, and according to her study, they are more commonly possessions of low-materialism consumers. These consumers are "more hedonically orientated than their high-materialism counterparts" (p. 530), hence they value possessions such as souvenirs. Dominguez (1986) suggests that "things 'cultivate' the Self by affirming or extending the boundaries of the Self" (p. 554). In a way, according to Belk, "we are what we have and possess" (p.139), and since our past is also integral to our identity, the objects which conveniently store our memories become part of our extended self. As a result, not only do souvenirs authenticate our experience, but they also reconstitute and transcend our past.

Finally, we noticed that meanings assigned to souvenirs are often fluid, regardless of the gender, age, travel experience and consumerism level of the purchaser. The layers of experiential and



*Figure 3: 'Child Native' dolls from Vanuatu. (John Taylor, 2007)*

emergent meanings are intertwined with the notions of the Self. In that specific moment of time when a traveller purchases or collects the souvenir this intertwining manifests itself in the souvenir in many forms, such as the form of childhood nostalgia in the 'child native' dolls from Vanuatu (Fig. 3), or the evolving narrative about the traveller's growth or independence in the boomerang charm from Australia (Taylor 2016) Love and Sheldon, 1998), where the

meaning given to the boomerang is part and parcel of the meaning given to the traveller's life.

However, once the souvenirs are moved beyond their original setting, physically, temporally, or socially, the constellation of meaning they conjure also changes. Their meanings are always in a state of flux or emergence, rather than fixed and inscribed forever. Thus, it is important to appreciate the trajectory of souvenirs, interrogate and capture their materiality in action (Zhang and Crang, 2016).

#### 4. Conclusions

Whatever the meanings assigned to souvenirs are, what is apparent is that they communicate meanings beyond form and function. They are so personal and complex, that there is a demand to rethink souvenirs and evolutionize their creation through new, original designs. Not only do souvenirs help understand, compare and link the Self to the Other, but they also change over time as the Self is redefined. As an international language without words, souvenirs serve as much of a connection between different countries and cultures as between the present and the past. This continuous reciprocation of meaning between the traveller and the souvenir confirms that the ongoing research on souvenirs has yet to reveal many unknown aspects of this relationship.

#### References

1. Anderson, L.F. and Littrell, M.A. (1996). Group profiles of women as tourists and purchases of souvenirs. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal* 25(1) 28-57.
2. Anon, Visit Greece: Monuments of Global Cultural Heritage. Visit Greece. The Official website of the Greek Tourism Organisation. Available at: Belk, R.W. (1988). Possessions and the Extended Self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 25(2), 139-168.
3. Field R. S.(1970). THE MAKING OF THE 'SOUVENIR'. *The Print Collector's Newsletter* [online] May-June. Available at: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/44129799?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3A88dec01455d0ddb3e1c21fd5b53150e2&seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/44129799?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3A88dec01455d0ddb3e1c21fd5b53150e2&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) [Accessed April 26, 2020].
4. Gordon, B. (2004). The Souvenir: Messenger of the Extraordinary. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 20(3): 135-146.
5. Jules-Rosette, B. (1986). Aesthetics and Market Demand: The Structure of the Tourist Art Market in Three African Settings. *African Studies Review*, 29(1): 41-59.

6. Kapera, J. (1987). *Aesthetics of Communication: Newspaper Art and Travel Art*. Leonardo, 20(3): 17-224.
7. Littrell, M. (1990). Symbolic significance of textile crafts for tourist. *Annals of Tourism Research* 17(2): 228-245.
8. Littrell, M.A., Anderson, LF, and Brown, PJ. (1993). What Makes A Craft Souvenir Authentic? *Annals of Tourism Research*, 20(1): 197-215.
9. Love, L.L. and Sheldon, P.S. (1998). Souvenirs: Messengers of Meaning, in *NA - Advances in Consumer Research*, 25, eds. Joseph W. Alba & J. Wesley Hutchinson, Provo, UT : Association for Consumer Research: 170-175.
10. Lunyai, J., and de Run E.C. (2008). Why tourists purchase souvenirs? *Proceedings of Applied International Business Conference*. Labuan International Campus.
11. Richins, M.L. (1994). Special Possessions and the Expression of Material Values. *Journal of Consumer Research* 21(3), 522-533.
12. Stewart, S. (1992). *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Duke University Press Books; 6th edition.
13. Taylor, J. (2016). Pikinini in Paradise: Photography, Souvenirs and the ‘Child Native’ in Tourism. In Alexeyeff, K, and Taylor, J. (eds) “Touring Pacific Cultures”, 361-379
14. Zhang, J.J., and Crang, M. (2016). Making material memories: Kinmen’s bridging objects and fractured places between China and Taiwan. *Cultural Geographies* 23(3), 421-439.

### **Image Reference List**

1. Chang, E., and Sachs, A., (2019). The best souvenirs to bring home from 10 countries. *The Washington Post*. Available at: <https://www.stripes.com/lifestyle/the-best-souvenirs-to-bring-home-from-10-countries-1.588055> [Accessed April 26, 2020].
2. iArt, (2017). The best souvenirs from European cities. iART. Available at: [http://www.iart.gr/ta-kalitera-souvenir-apo-evropaikes-polis/?fbclid=IwAR2iyRXZhnNb932RpznkILf1yhZLOqtR6yu4\\_n95hGcVPKkV02Ue6TRQq0U](http://www.iart.gr/ta-kalitera-souvenir-apo-evropaikes-polis/?fbclid=IwAR2iyRXZhnNb932RpznkILf1yhZLOqtR6yu4_n95hGcVPKkV02Ue6TRQq0U) [Accessed April 26, 2020].
3. Karsten, A. (2020). Travel Resources. Anna Everywhere. Available at: <https://annaeverywhere.com/travel-resources/> [Accessed June 15, 2020].