



Full Length Article

Post-holiday memory work: Everyday encounters with fridge magnets

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 March 2023

Received in revised form 22 December 2023

Accepted 26 December 2023

Available online xxx

Associate editor: Noga Collins-Kreiner

Keywords:

Fridge magnets

Souvenirs

Memory work

Forgetting

Place

Tourist experience

ABSTRACT

While souvenirs have generated considerable interest within tourism research, less attention has been paid to their post-holiday 'afterlife'. Utilising perspectives from memory research and more-than-representational theory, this paper focuses on interactions with a ubiquitous souvenir: the fridge magnet. Drawing on semi-structured interviews we illustrate how, because of their embeddedness within everyday domestic rhythms, magnets are active agents in the stimulation of post-holiday memory work. We show how magnets work to generate and protect memories, triggering a diversity of (usually positive) emotional and affective responses. They can also be associated with ambivalent memories; with their role sometimes being more about forgetting. Although being seemingly banal objects, fridge magnets have a complex capacity to affect everyday life long after a holiday ends.

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Introduction

Souvenirs are mobile objects acquired when on holiday (Swanson, 2014) and subsequently transported into the tourist's home. Although frequently derided (Haldrup & Larsen, 2009), they can be important objects. Acting as a "symbolic materialisation of tourist experience" (Kuhn, 2020, p. 486), souvenirs provide a tangible (Swanson & Timothy, 2012) and imaginative connection with another time and place (Haldrup, 2017). As metonyms for the holiday itself (Morgan & Pritchard, 2005), they can bring the extraordinary into the ordinary through their positioning in the everyday space of the home (Collins-Kreiner & Zins, 2011; Gordon, 1986). Of particular significance to this paper, souvenirs are also intimately linked with practices of post-holiday remembering and are invariably acquired with this very purpose in mind (Peters, 2011; Sthapit & Björk, 2019). They ensure that the holiday is not forgotten by acting as a reminder and evidence of a holiday experience (Wilkins, 2011). Once displayed in the home, souvenirs are mobilised within projects of self-presentation and identity formation and can confer status and prestige upon their owners (Kuhn, 2020; Morgan & Pritchard, 2005).

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However, while the significance of souvenirs for tourists has attracted considerable scrutiny, the main focus has been on the role of souvenirs within the holiday experience itself (e.g., Amaro, Ferreira, & Henriques, 2020; Shtudiner, Klein, Zwilling, & Kantor, 2019; Sthapit & Björk, 2019; Sthapit, Björk, & Rasoolimanesh, 2022). The issue of what happens to souvenirs *after* the holiday has received less attention (Masset & Decrop, 2021; Sthapit & Björk, 2019). Some research has examined the placement, positioning, and display of souvenirs in the home (Kuhn, 2020; Masset & Decrop, 2021; Peters, 2011) which has established that tourists give considerable attention to the display of their souvenirs. Other research has focused on how the meanings of souvenirs change within the home, sometimes gaining significance and at other times losing importance (Collins-Kreiner & Zins, 2011; Haldrup, 2017). However, the ‘afterlife’ of souvenirs, that is, the interactions with them in everyday domestic settings (Haldrup & Larsen, 2009) is still poorly understood.

Yet souvenirs can be powerful actants in the home environment, particularly if they are conceived not as neutral and passive but instead as “engaged, active, and fraught with possibilities” (Love & Kohn, 2001, p. 50). In such a conceptualisation, souvenirs become significant and powerful performative objects with the potential to ‘do’ what Haldrup and Larsen (2009, p. 154) term “souvenir work” after the holiday. Thus they possess the capacity to ‘enchant’ and disrupt the home through their incorporation into everyday habits and routines (Ramsay, 2009), thereby allowing “the rendering of the ordinary into something special” (Hartmann & Brunk, 2019, p. 669). This is particularly significant in the context of remembering. Souvenirs are purposefully acquired for mnemonic purposes, due to their capacity to both store and prompt memories of past holidays. Through their placement in domestic settings, souvenirs are the nexus of myriad emotional and imaginative interactions which constitute memory work (Haldrup & Larsen, 2009). However, the nature of this remembering has received only limited attention within souvenir research (Sthapit & Björk, 2019).

In this paper we focus on post-holiday remembering with reference to one of the most ubiquitous and seemingly banal of tourist souvenirs: the fridge magnet. Kitchens of the Western world invariably contain a fridge which, as a sheet of polished metal, forms a blank canvas ready to be adorned, personalised, and made unique by a household’s incumbents. A popular means of doing this is through fridge magnets, which are widely available at tourist destinations throughout the world. At first sight the fridge magnet may epitomise cheap, mass-produced, tourist ‘kitsch’; whose popularity remains undimmed despite the rise of digital media and the demise of other traditional souvenirs such as the postcard. Millions are purchased every year (for personal use or as gifts) and subsequently displayed in the home. They may be viewed, ‘read’ and interpreted in a variety of ways by both the fridge’s owners, but also by visitors, workers or guests passing through the home.

Fridge magnets are unusual among souvenirs in being intended for a single and specific destination within the home: the fridge. Such emplacement in a functional but much-frequented location puts them at the very centre of domestic life. Fridge magnets’ distinctive materiality, aesthetics (particularly their gaudy iconography), size and visibility distinguish them from other souvenirs (such as mugs, tea towels and bottle-openers) that may also be placed or displayed in the kitchen. Moreover, along with being decorative, fridge magnets (unlike many other souvenirs) also have a functional role (Sthapit & Björk, 2019) since they can be used for holding things (shopping lists, reminders and photographs) to a fridge. Consequently, they can become embedded within (and intrude into) everyday domestic routines. This, in turn, gives fridge magnets an especially powerful potential as souvenirs (Peters, 2011) to trigger memories of previous times and distant places, making them worthy of study. Despite this, academic research into tourist souvenirs has yet to unpack the role and significance of the humble fridge magnet.

In this paper we treat magnets not as mere tourist ephemera but as material objects with a distinctive “thing-power” (Bennett, 2004, p. 348) that merit serious consideration (Haldrup, 2017). In particular, we examine the ‘work’ of fridge magnets in post-holiday remembering within everyday settings. We employ in-depth interviews with a range of magnet owners/collectors to focus on the research question of what these magnets ‘do’ within in the home, using memory work as the key theoretical lens. Our findings examine how fridge magnets are acquired specifically with the intent of remembering and, as such, are carefully curated to act as “memory pointers” (Zauberman, Ratner, & Kim, 2009, p. 715). We then focus on the relationship between fridge magnets and remembering, highlighting the emotional and affective responses that magnets provoke (which sometimes include negative memories). As such, the contribution of this paper is in highlighting the complex entanglements between souvenirs, materiality, memory work, emotion and quotidian practice, using fridge magnets as the focus of enquiry. Further, we argue that far from being banal ‘tat’, fridge magnets are powerful actants that through their everyday domestic emplacement have the potential to bring a past holiday experience to life more powerfully than many other types of tourist souvenir.

The work souvenirs do

Souvenirs have attracted considerable interdisciplinary attention from tourism scholars (Swanson, 2014; Swanson & Timothy, 2012). Issues of commodification and authenticity (particularly relating to traditional art and crafts) have long been prominent topics (e.g., Elomba & Yun, 2017). Other studies focus on the purchasers of souvenirs and their behaviour (e.g., Amaro et al., 2020; Sthapit & Björk, 2019; Wilkins, 2011), along with related practices of souvenir shopping (e.g., Sthapit, 2018; Sthapit et al., 2022) and gender differences (e.g., Anderson & Littrell, 1995). Three common purchase motivations are noted: souvenirs as gifts to others, as evidence of travel, and to remember a travel experience (Wilkins, 2011). Research has also considered the perspectives of producers and suppliers (Soukhathammavong & Park, 2019). An emerging body of work focuses on the significance and meaning of souvenirs for those who purchase them (e.g., Haldrup, 2017; Haldrup & Larsen, 2006, 2009; Masset & Decrop, 2021). This brief overview of previous research highlights the range of different perspectives and empirical contexts that have been considered hitherto. We now look to build on this by considering the linkages between souvenirs and memory, before exploring more-than-representational aspects of magnets.

Souvenirs and memory work

The term 'souvenir' is intrinsically linked to notions of memory, as reflected in the word's origins, which stem from the French verb *souvenir* ('to remember'). It is unsurprising, therefore, that the purchase of souvenirs has been identified as a form of "strategic memory protection" (Zauberman et al., 2009), which, in a tourism context, can "freeze intangible moments of travel into a tangible object" (Zare, 2019a, p. 336). There is an increasing body of literature in tourism studies that explores the importance of memory (Pearce & Packer, 2013), including its impact on motivations to travel (Marschall, 2014), tourist experiences (Ballantyne, Packer, & Sutherland, 2011), and intentions to revisit destinations of which tourists have memorable experiences (Zhang, Wu, & Buhalis, 2018).

The relationship between souvenirs and remembering is widely acknowledged in the literature. For example, recent work (Sthapit et al., 2022; Sthapit & Björk, 2019) has examined the memorability of souvenir shopping, although the focus of these authors is on what happens during the holiday experience, rather than after it. Other research indicates that souvenirs are purchased with the intention of remembering (Paraskevaidis & Andriotis, 2015; Peters, 2011; Sthapit, 2018; Sthapit & Björk, 2019; Wilkins, 2011). Zare (2019a) summarises some of the key interplays, arguing that, unlike photographs (a well-established means of recording tourism memories that are usually hidden away in physical or digital albums) tourist souvenirs are invariably 'on display', meaning they "offer better opportunities to evoke memories with little effort" (p. 336).

This attribute is especially true of those "banal" souvenirs (Peters, 2011, p. 234), such as fridge magnets that are placed on a household appliance in constant use, thereby maximising the opportunities for frequent interactions. Moreover, Morgan and Pritchard (2005) suggest that work examining the absorption of souvenirs into the realm of such everyday and domestic spatial settings is required – a call to which our investigation into fridge magnets responds. The banality of fridge magnets as materialities of tat is an important distinction from those tourist souvenirs that are regarded as *objets d'art* (e.g., pictorial images, pieces of rock – see Gordon, 1986) or "hand-crafted unique items" (Peters, 2011, p. 254), which may assume a more careful, curated and less utilitarian placement in the home.

One aspect of memory which is also important is its antonym, forgetting, which Farmaki (2021) argues is under-researched in tourism. In some cases, this involves an exploration of the role forgetting might play in the resumption of tourist travel to previously crisis-afflicted destinations (Farmaki, 2013). In relation to souvenirs, objects acquired on holiday may be forgotten once the traveller has returned home (Lean, 2012; Masset & Decrop, 2021). Furthermore, forgetting may be central to the work of souvenir-objects. For example, Marcoux (2017) examines how souvenirs are used by New Yorkers struggling with 9/11 memories to help them forget. This shows how souvenirs have an important role "in memory practices that involve obliterating and/or compartmentalizing aspects of past experiences" (Marcoux, 2017, p. 967).

More-than-representation and 'souvenir-objects'

As a development of earlier non-representation theories from the 1990s (Thrift, 2008), more-than-representation theory (Lorimer, 2005) has evolved over the last two decades as a means of revealing how ongoing, embodied and relational interactions between the human and non-human worlds create a myriad of ever emergent understandings, feelings and emotions connected to spaces and times. As Barron (2021) notes, this perspective contests "the efficacy of representational understandings of the world, whose ontology is rooted in the idea that there is something total, certain and real" (p. 609). Critically, more-than-representation does not dismiss the importance of representation; rather it indicates what representations can 'do' (Waterton, 2013). Within a tourism context this understanding has led to a renewed focus on objects and materiality. In this regard, items that might ordinarily be seen as static and inert in representational terms, such as tourist souvenirs, are conceptualised as having a form of agency (Hoskins, 2006), or what Bennett (2004, p. 348) terms "thing-power". This approach views objects as being active, performative and constitutive (Haldrup & Larsen, 2006; Waterton, 2013).

Although tourism scholars somewhat neglected the importance of materiality (Haldrup & Larsen, 2006; Zhang & Crang, 2016), there has been growing attention to it over the last decade, revealing "how seemingly mundane everyday objects co-constitute tourism in intricate ways" (Cohen & Cohen, 2019, p. 161). As part of the 'stuff' of tourism, objects are central to the ordering of tourism-scapes, and the interactions between objects and tourists produce effects and "afford a range of possibilities and opportunities" (van der Duim, 2007, p. 154). Understood in this way, "souvenir-objects" (Ramsay, 2009, p. 197) are much more than idle, passive tokens, accumulated during a holiday and forgotten about when brought home (Love & Kohn, 2001). Instead, they are potential actants within the home; capturing and defining a fleeting moment of holiday experience within the settings of everyday domestic life (Gordon, 1986; Peters, 2014). In effect, souvenirs become our "co-habitants" (Haldrup, 2017, p. 52) in active conversation with us (Zhang & Crang, 2016).

This actant power of souvenirs also links to the notion of memory work discussed above, which in turn accords with the more-than-representational potentials of memory stimulation and activation in terms of the intertwining of past(s) and present. As Barron (2021) notes: "more-than-representational theories complicate any clear sense of chronological time, instead focusing on how different elements of an individual's life come to the fore both expectedly...and unexpectedly" (p. 610). Similarly, Jones (2011) recognises how "our spatial lives are not merely present relations between body and current space, but a fantastically complex entanglement of self, past spatial relations and memory in current life" (p. 881). Put otherwise, the ability of souvenirs to keep holiday memories "magically alive" (Haldrup & Larsen, 2006, p. 281) means they have the power to enchant current domestic settings with past experiences and feelings, and thereby disrupt and haunt the mundane rhythms of everyday life (Haldrup, 2017; Ramsay, 2009). In this sense, souvenirs are rendered "little things that hold explosive

possibilities” (Love & Kohn, 2001, p. 61). This framing would seem especially apt in the case of fridge magnets, as we seek to establish in our analysis.

Tourist consumers can give considerable thought to the curation and placement of their souvenirs (Collins-Kreiner & Zins, 2011; Kuhn, 2020; Masset & Decrop, 2021), displaying them on shelves, in cabinets, or on walls. Alternatively, they may be stored away to preserve their extraordinariness (Peters, 2011), or sometimes discarded because they are no longer deemed valuable or important. Souvenir fridge magnets, of course, are usually destined for display in the kitchen. This means that they are implicated in a plethora of mundane quotidian interactions, and potentially engaged with every time we open the fridge or even glance towards it.

Among the most important capacities of souvenirs in general (and fridge magnets in particular) is their ability to stimulate emotional responses from their owners. While emotion is an important topic in tourism research (Cohen & Cohen, 2019), with a few exceptions (see Haldrup & Larsen, 2009) this work has rarely embraced souvenirs. Consequently, emotional interactions with souvenirs are poorly understood. It seems self-evident that souvenirs are purchased and placed in the home with the intent of stimulating positive emotions (Swanson, 2014). Indeed, once a holiday is over, interactions with souvenirs can provoke “feelings of remembrance, affection, appreciation and loss” (Haldrup, 2017, p. 52). At the same time, souvenirs “are inherently ambivalent emotional objects” (Haldrup & Larsen, 2009, p. 162), and not all souvenirs provoke happy memories. Instead, they can sometimes be linked with negative emotions (Peters, 2011; Sthapit & Björk, 2019) or a desire to forget (Marcoux, 2017).

Related to emotion is affect, which is central to more-than-representational approaches to understanding everyday practices (Pile, 2010). Affect refers to “instantaneous, spontaneous and pre-cognitive” experiences (Peters, 2014, p. 208) that are not easy to apprehend or identify. This might include “background moods, shared atmospheres, fleeting feelings, emotional grasp, immediate visceral and neurological responses” (Xiao, Jafari, Cloke, & Tribe, 2013, p. 375). One important aspect of the “thing-power” (Bennett, 2004, p. 348) that objects possess is their capacity to elicit such affective responses (Ahmed, 2010; Peters, 2011, 2014; Zhang & Crang, 2016). Souvenirs, therefore, inherently hold this potential to provoke affective responses, as they facilitate the coalescence of home and away, past(s) and present, and ordinary and extraordinary in a fleeting moment (Peters, 2014).

Thus, it is easy to imagine how a glimpsed fridge magnet could trigger momentary nagging sensations, feelings or memories which may, subsequently, be experienced as emotions. In such instances, a domestic kitchen might be fleetingly transformed into a remembered holiday experience – a potential instance of “bare life” affect (Thrift, 2004), where the warmth of the sun on one’s back and the sand between toes is momentarily and almost felt. This accords with Jones’s (2011) contention that “[p]asts persist as virtual fields which may or may not fold into the present” and that “[m]emory is a key form of such ‘timespace travel’, along with materiality and (sensed) embodiment” (p. 880). For souvenir-objects such as fridge magnets, our paper demonstrates how this temporal and spatial interplay between past(s) and present is central to such processes.

Methods

To understand how fridge magnets feature in domestic environments and how they encapsulate and prompt tourism memories, the research design centred on interpretive methods of enquiry. Data were collected via in-depth semi-structured interviewing within participants’ homes. A purposive, snowball sampling approach was adopted, in which the authors’ personal networks were initially drawn upon to identify potential participants who regularly undertook tourism and who had significant fridge magnet collections. Participants were then asked to identify others who might wish to be interviewed. Those with collections of <20 magnets were excluded, given the need for there to be sufficient material for discussion. Participants’ travel behaviours (and concomitant magnet purchasing activity) were heterogeneous, and consisted of overnight trips, longer stays in the UK and abroad, and visiting friends and relatives.

In total, 16 interviews were undertaken with 19 participants in the UK (including three couples), based in five regions (London, Northwest, Southeast, Southwest and West Midlands). Participants ranged in age from 25 to 85 and most (13) were female. All authors participated in data collection. To ensure consistency and fidelity in the collection and interpretation of data, the researchers met regularly to debrief, share experiences and determine subsequent activities. Interviews usually took place in kitchens, directly adjacent to the fridge; although in two cases interviews were carried out elsewhere (a garage and a living room). The authors drew inspiration from Haldrup and Larsen’s (2009), p. 154) approach to “souvenir work” which involved active object-centred conversations; thereby recognising the dynamic, quotidian, and highly personalised nature of souvenir display and interaction. This has parallels with the ‘go along’ method of interviewing (Burns, Gallant, Litwiler, White, & Hamilton-Hinch, 2020) in that the data were collected in spaces of importance to those taking part. With participants’ permission, interviews were audio-recorded then subsequently transcribed; with pseudonyms assigned to ensure anonymity. Interviews averaged one hour.

Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, which commenced with a ‘grand tour’ question (Fox, Edwards, & Wilkes, 2010) inviting participants to provide an overview of their collections. Subsequent discussion focussed on fridge magnet acquisition, display, meaning and memories, among other topics. This was complemented by discussion of related travel and tourism behaviours. Participants’ tangible interactions (pointing to, holding, repositioning) their own fridge magnet collections helped facilitate a materially-enabled approach which “enrich[ed] the interviews” (Kuhn, 2020, p. 491) and accorded with Barron’s (2021), p. 610) “researching with” (as opposed to “researching on”) approach. With the permission of participants, photographs were taken of all collections, so that visual records could be generated for post-interview analysis and reflection. This recognises that tourism and pictorial imagery are “inextricably intertwined” (Volo & Irimiás, 2021, pp. 1–2). Data collection ceased when saturation had been reached, with few new insights being generated.

Data analysis began with familiarisation with the interview transcripts and referring to supporting photographs of participants' fridge magnet collections. Open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) was then undertaken. This involved each author independently identifying perceived themes within the data collected. Acknowledging the importance of quality and reflexivity checks and confirmability testing in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1982), the authors subsequently met on three occasions and reviewed, negotiated and, as was considered appropriate, collapsed and merged their independent thematic interpretations. This could be deemed a form of iterative axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) which allowed for an agreed understanding of three core thematic areas. These core thematic areas are centred on memory protection, memory work, and emotion and affect; and are unpacked in detail below.

Findings

Curating fridge magnets and protecting memories

The power of fridge magnets lies in their ability to evoke memories of past experiences (Marcoux, 2017; Sthapit & Björk, 2019; Wilkins, 2011). Swanson and Timothy (2012) argue that one of the unique characteristics of souvenirs "is the immediate function of memory holder at the moment of acquisition" (p. 493). Fridge magnets can therefore act as the tourist's mechanism for both the recollection and safeguarding of important moments (Zare, 2019a). In this context, purchasing fridge magnets appears to be reflexive, repeated and even habitual behaviour (see Sthapit & Björk, 2019). As Briony stated: "We always buy magnets when we go anywhere so we've got a memory of a holiday...that's what it is isn't it, it's all memories?" In addition, the critical role of fridge magnets in stimulating memory work can potentially lead to stress and anxiety if their purchase is forgotten or time pressured:

It wasn't until I got to the airport that I remembered that I hadn't got my magnet and then I was in a bit of a panic, a massive panic because I hadn't got one. So I had to get the best one I could at the airport, which I wasn't pleased about (Stella).

Moreover, where fridge magnets have proved effective memory pointers in the past it appears likely that they will be purchased again (particularly since they are lightweight, inexpensive, and widely available). Stella exemplified: "I have remembered every year to get one. There isn't a place that we've been to that I've come back and thought, 'Oh I didn't get a magnet'". This suggests post-holiday remembering is anticipated during the holiday itself and that the purchase of a fridge magnet is a deliberate and pre-planned act of "strategic memory protection" (Zauberman et al., 2009) intended to futureproof memory preservation. In this way, fridge magnets are valued for their ability to act as "memory pointers" (Zauberman et al., 2009, p. 715) helping safeguard holiday memories in the future. In effect, tourists are attempting to manage their future remembering of a holiday experience.

Swanson and Timothy (2012) argue that holiday souvenirs stand "in proxy for the extraordinary" (p. 492) and accordingly, exceptional tourist experiences are more likely to warrant a fridge magnet purchase as a memory pointer. As Sazza notes: "If we did something on holiday that was really special...that'll be the magnet that we take back. That represents the holiday". This indicates a concern to preserve a special memory that is part of the holiday experience itself. This issue of wanting to preserve 'exceptional' memories perhaps explains why few participants owned magnets of those places where they currently live:

Interviewer: Would you put a [name of home-town] fridge magnet on your fridge?

John: I don't think so because I know about [name of home-town].

Interviewer: OK. Does that mean you only buy them when you go on holiday to somewhere different?

John: Yes, as memories. And to help trigger your memory.

Similarly, Clodagh contended that a magnet from where she lived "wouldn't really be something I would be bothered with". While a place of residence is clearly imbued with multiple memories, many of these will be quotidian and familiar in nature.

As holidaymakers return home and unpack their luggage, sort out washing, turn on the heating, and collect pets from kennels and catteries, attention will at some point turn to those trinkets, souvenirs and fridge magnets, often tucked away in the corner of a suitcase. In most cases it seems logical that fridge magnets would end up displayed on fridges; this was often the case, but by no means inevitable. In some instances, the fridge was an integrated appliance without a metal front; or perhaps a brand-new household item that was still too fresh to adorn with tat:

Well, the funny thing about the fridge magnets is, when we got the new fridge, I went, right, I'm not going to put them on anymore, that's ridiculous, far too many. But over time, I felt I need to put them on there. So, as you can see, there's hardly any space left for magnets, or anything else come to that (Marie).

For Marie, the need to display her collection became more pressing over time. Sometimes, alternative display placements were sought to align with the aesthetics of modern interior design, creating a dilemma for those who did not want fridge magnets spoiling the clean lines of a newly-appointed kitchen. Conversely, other participants perceived this attitude as a form of inauthentic snobbery: "I mean some people get a bit snotty about fridge magnets don't they, and they're like 'I've just had my kitchen remodelled and I don't want to ruin the look of my fridge'. Well sod that" (Lucy). Here, Lucy presents any perceived 'naffness' in fridge magnet collections as a suggested resistance to an imagined brigade of 'house beautiful' acolytes.



Fig. 1. Stella's fridge magnet collection.

A challenge for fridge magnets not displayed on a fridge door is that their potential as effective memory objects or actants still requires visible and meaningful location elsewhere. Consequently, we found fridge magnets displayed on cooker hoods and boiler covers, on freezers in garages or utility rooms, or even on metal boards in bathrooms. Choosing the display surface for magnets that could not be on a fridge always required careful thought:

Initially, when we moved, and we knew that we were coming to a house where we didn't have the fridge in the kitchen it was... I mean to say, you know, I didn't spend hours awake at the thought, but I did think, 'Oh, I can't put my magnets up'... For a long while they just sat in the bag from the move... It wasn't until recently that I missed them and I did want to get them out (Stella).

Ultimately, Stella ended up with her magnets on a second fridge in her garage (see Fig. 1): not having them displayed was not an option.

While tourists may give careful thought to where they place their souvenirs, some participants said that magnets were positioned randomly on their fridge. However, in other cases the placing of magnets was directly connected to memories of the holidays they evoked, with holidays regarded most fondly taking a prominent position. As Gertrude stated: "Well if I like 'em they, kind of, go top half, and if I don't like 'em they, um, go down to the bottom half". Jane said something similar: "I probably put my favourite magnets more on show". For others, the ordering of magnets became a more fluid means of editing, curating and, in some cases, revisiting a variety of holiday memories:

Marie: Well...sometimes I look at them and I think, 'Oh, yeah, they're nice'. And I've got a load more in the drawer, so I can swap them around if I need to...I couldn't have thrown them away. I put them in the drawer.

Interviewer: Why do you think you couldn't throw them away?

Marie: Because they're memories, I think. And a lot of them, now I'm talking about them, are important, [and] have got things... they're relevant.

However, fridge magnets can be unpredictable objects. Their placement on a fridge is not always permanent (see [Haldrup & Larsen, 2009](#)): magnets can be spontaneously mobile in ways which can both distract their owners and disrupt familiar everyday routines. Gravity can cause heavy magnets to migrate down a fridge. As Patricia stated: "they tend to slip down on their own don't they?" (observing that this disrupted the careful efforts of her husband to curate their collection). More dramatically, magnets can fly off when a fridge door is opened, suddenly demanding the attention of their owners. Clodagh summarised the problem:

[Y]ou have to be careful, if they're beside the door and the door's flung open, and somebody's sitting adjacent to the table, sometimes they [magnets] break off. You know, they're not indestructible and the older ones are made of quite porous material.

Indeed, many interviewees spoke of magnets that had broken through falling off the fridge. The problem was most acute with heavier objects, where the magnet itself lacked sufficient strength to hold the weight of the whole object. Some owners had their own strategies for dealing with such "lively matter" ([Bennett, 2004](#), p. 347; see also [Zhang & Crang, 2016](#)). Anthony deliberately positioned his heavier magnets to avoid them falling and breaking:

When we initially had them, they were quite near the top of the fridge, but because of the weight they tend to get knocked off... being at the bottom of the fridge, they don't get knocked at all there for some reason.

Magnets can move around for other reasons. Younger children are irresistibly drawn to fridge magnets, often taking them down, playing with them, and rearranging them. As Jane mentioned:

Poppy [her daughter], when she was little she was obsessed with my mum's – my mum's got more than me – and she used to take them down. She would play with them for ages, and then put them all up; sit on the floor in the kitchen for ages.

Furthermore, some owners enjoyed rearranging their collections. As Marie recounted: "just when the mood takes me. Probably when I'm having a glass of wine and the tunes are on, I'm like, 'Right, I'm going to change all this round'. And I change things". This echoes other research ([Collins-Kreiner & Zins, 2011](#); [Haldrup & Larsen, 2009](#); [Peters, 2011](#)) which notes that souvenirs often move around the home as their value in remembering a holiday changes. Fridge magnets are similarly mobile objects, and collections can be easily re-worked and reassembled to reconfigure the process of remembering. This illustrates the potentially playful nature of nostalgia ([Hartmann & Brunk, 2019](#)), as well as the manner in which consumers' identities can be purposefully and performatively assembled or (re)authored through their possessions ([Ahuvia, 2005](#)).

In summary, the display, placement and positioning of fridge magnets from holidays within domestic settings is rarely done without thought and attention. Indeed, these efforts are sometimes elevated to the level of curation and editorship. We contend that this reflects the critical role fridge magnets play at the intersection between their mundane, everyday materiality and the memory work they evoke. In the next section we seek to further untangle some of these complexities.

Fridge magnets and memory work

Participants identified that they purchase fridge magnets because of their ability to evoke and recall memories. As Gertrude noted, when she has enjoyed a holiday she "want[s] a memory". However, the interaction between fridge magnets as

souvenir-objects and memory work is complex, multi-layered, and moves far beyond a recall of past vacation experiences. At the most straightforward level, a key reason why people wish to remember holidays is because they link them to pleasurable experiences within their lives. Souvenirs can set in motion “memory stories” (Haldrup, 2017, p. 57) through the practice of “savouring” (Zare, 2019b, p. 338); that is, attending to, and reflecting upon, positive experiences. As Gertrude explained:

That one [a steam train magnet] just says, like, an enjoyable holiday sitting on the steam train. And fantastic scenery. And that was with my sister so just three days away...I just get the memory of that instantly by looking at it.

Many participants identified that particular magnets in their collections recalled memories of place-specific and unique routines and actions that might not have been easily experienced on another holiday, typically because they were closely woven into the natural or built environment of the destination in question. Jane and her husband, for example, picked out their fridge magnet of a Budapest bridge as especially memorable, linking it to their nightly ritual of crossing one of the city's landmarks: “Every night our hotel was one side so we had to walk across the bridge; that's why we wanted that one wasn't it? Because we did have such a lovely time”. This illustrates how magnets are highly present objects, quietly activating memories and ensuring that a holiday remains alive within the home (Haldrup & Larsen, 2006; Peters, 2014), sometimes for many years.

For most participants, collections of fridge magnets had been gradually amassed to form autobiographical material assemblages within the home, collectively documenting a whole series of holiday memories over, in many cases, years:

So there are so many days out here, you know, like the time up the Shard...or a day out in Beaulieu Motor Museum, or a trip to the House of Commons that I would have forgotten. So they are great as an *aide-memoire* (Lucy).

One might therefore see magnets as an alternative to the traditional hard copy photo album; not directly showing actual images of particular holidays, but still signifying these occurrences in ways that were meaningful to those who had assembled collections.

Husband and wife Anthony and Patricia reinforced this view, suggesting that fridge magnets were more important than photographs as a way of remembering a holiday:

If you go to any place, obviously in a day you could take 50 to 100 photos...Whereas now I don't tend to take a picture of anything...I'll just get a fridge magnet at the end, and I can remember it all from [that]...How many people flick through their old photos on their phone? You couldn't. Unless you've got an electronic, sort of photo thing you can have on the side constantly changing the images on a daily basis or whatever. It's a fridge magnet for me (Anthony).

Here, the materiality of fridge magnets – compared to the immaterialities of digital photographs (Haldrup & Larsen, 2009) – allows them to work as memory triggers. Magnets have a physical presence and visibility within everyday space which enhances their capacity as instruments of memory work: they trigger memory retrieval more frequently and with less effort than (digital) photographs (Zare, 2019b).

Since most people do not go on holiday alone, the memories evoked by magnets were frequently those of experiences shared with significant others, whether friends or family members:

You're looking at the hovercraft one. I'll remember going away, and seeing Mary. You go from a childhood friend who you see an awful lot, to somebody who you don't see an awful lot. So she is there, embodied in a hovercraft magnet (Erica).

Similarly, Anthony and Patricia note that:

All the memories on that fridge are of us, as a three or four, as a family. There's not many two person memories, obviously the honeymoon stuff. Pretty much all of it's with the three or, with the mother-in-law, the four of us (Anthony).

These responses indicate how the strategic protection of holiday memories is as much about other people as about other places (see Zauberman et al., 2009).

As Haldrup and Larsen (2009) argue, memory work takes place through complex interactions between humans and objects. It was clear from our interviews that fridge magnets were more than passive objects which stored holiday memories. Although several participants suggested that magnets became “wallpaper” and were paid little attention once in place (see Peters, 2014), for others, they were objects with a performative capacity to stimulate remembering (Peters, 2014; Ramsay, 2009). What makes them so effective as memory triggers is their placement on the fridge, meaning they are embedded within (and intrude into) the routines of everyday life. This was illustrated by Erica:

They're very present in the kitchen so you see them daily. They are happy. When you look at something, they instantly take you back to a moment, they instantly take you back to the place where you were and the things that you did.

Another aspect of this distinctive “thing-power” (Bennett, 2004, p. 348) is that magnets are encountered on a frequent basis, potentially being noticed every time the fridge door is opened. As Anthony stated: “you're in and out of your fridge 40 times, maybe more, I don't know. You're constantly looking at it”. Similarly, Briony recalled a now lost magnet that had once held up a newspaper cutting about boats that were available for rental in Croatia, noting: “Each time I opened the fridge door, I used



Fig. 2. Anthony and Patricia's fridge magnet collection.

to think about being on that boat". This also illustrates the wider functionality that fridge magnets possess (see [Sthapit & Björk, 2019](#)), in particular their ability to hold other holiday mementos onto the fridge. In such cases, the role of fridge magnets as agents of memory work is amplified.

Remembering, emotion and affect

Remembering and emotion are closely linked, and emotional memory enhancement is a well-documented mechanism ([Kensinger, 2009](#)) which recognises that affective experiences are more likely to be remembered. A positive holiday experience can itself shape the nature of what is remembered ([Zare, 2019b](#)) and post-holiday remembering is also associated with particular emotional states. For many participants, fridge magnets brought to mind holiday memories that were aligned with positive emotions. Erica, for example, noted how "they [her magnets] make me smile". Similarly, Stella explained how her magnets connect to joyous holiday experiences:

Escapism. Good times...Yeah, fun times really. I have not had a holiday that I haven't enjoyed. You know, it's like lots of holidays, so there aren't any bad memories there; everything there is a good memory. Everything represents a good thing that I've done in my life.

These responses illustrate how memories, emotions and objects are connected, echoing [Ahmed's \(2010\)](#) contention that objects can make us happy, but happiness also orientates us towards objects.

Anthony and Patricia went further, suggesting that magnets would only appear on their fridge if they were linked to good memories. Furthermore, Anthony would carefully organise the collection in order to edit out anything that stimulated a "nasty memory" (see [Fig. 2](#)) or not even buy such a magnet in the first place:

Because the whole point of having things that you're going to see every day, it's something to give you a positive memory, isn't it? You don't want to be reminded of, 'We went to there one day and it was just a nightmare from start to finish'. The whole point is you don't want to remember negatives, you want to focus on the positives, don't you? (Anthony).

However, fridge magnets are not always 'friendly reminders' and may not always be associated with happy memories ([Haldrup, 2017](#), p. 58). A holiday may be recalled in a way which provokes negative emotions ([Sthapit & Björk, 2019](#)) and ambivalent memories. For example, Mickey stated "some of them are a bit poignant as well when I actually think about some of the things that have happened in relation to the places where they were picked up". Such magnets may be thrown away; but some of our participants retained fridge magnets that were associated with unpleasant experiences. For Marie this appeared to be a purposeful act, first to remind her not to be pressurised into doing things she did not want to, and second to reassure her that her health was better now than previously. Thus, Marie used a fridge magnet to help reframe a very negative holiday experience and thereby provide an ongoing positive lesson for conducting her life:

I'd been quite poorly [unwell], everyone was saying, 'Go on holiday, go on holiday'. So we went to Spain and I have to say it's the worst holiday I've ever had, because I didn't want to go...I was kind of pressurised into it, I think, by people who thought it would be the right thing to do, but I wasn't ready for it...for me, it was the worst holiday I've ever had...I think it's just there as a sort of, you know, 'Things were bad then and maybe they're not so bad now'.

For others, particular magnets had acquired a more poignant memory connection whilst attached to the fridge, as they recalled a holiday on which an accompanying friend or member of the family had since died. Sazza's response illustrated this:

And actually this [Lisbon] fridge magnet now probably almost has more special memories because it was the last holiday I did before my friend Julia died. And that was the last time we were all together.

This recalls [Marcoux's \(2017\)](#) study of how souvenirs linked to the World Trade Centre disaster can occupy an important role in the interface between remembering and forgetting in memory work. In this case, Sazza's magnet is a cue that helps her to remember to not forget her friend by recalling a fun time they had on holiday together.

However, the emotions associated with fridge magnets were not always about memory. Magnets could sometimes be a source of annoyance or frustration in the present, due to their active "thing-power" ([Bennett, 2004](#), p. 348) and unpredictable mobility. Lucy's response illustrated this:

[A] lot of the 3D ones will be my husband's. And I find them a bit more annoying just because when you open the fridge door they have more tendency to fall off. And that's the only reason...they just tend to weigh a bit more and so they're more likely to fall off.

Briony's husband disliked fridge magnets for a similar reason:

[W]hen he opens the door, he claims they fall off or they're holding on pieces of paper which aren't magnetised properly or held in place properly so the pieces of paper fall off...I think angry is probably a bit strong, but irritated.

Clearly, fridge magnets are sometimes a cause of inconvenience with the potential to disrupt everyday life within a household: they are not always happy objects ([Ahmed, 2010](#)).

In other instances, magnets can elicit different types of responses. This was illustrated by Erica:

Joe doesn't live here anymore, my eldest son. So I'll see one of the ones [magnets] he's bought me, and it'll just make me think about him; it might even make me phone him. So it's like a prompt isn't it in, in your mind (Erica).

Erica's response points to another aspect of the capacity of fridge magnets: their ability to produce affective responses (see [Haldrup, 2017](#); [Peters, 2014](#)). Souvenir-objects such as magnets can trigger spontaneous, subconscious responses, and nagging sensations in their owners. They can unite distant people and places in the here and now in a way to induce remembering and, in some cases, action (such as Erica phoning her son).

Mickey also explicitly drew attention to these affective properties of fridge magnets, recognising how this is heightened by his frequency of encounter with them in domestic routines:

It's a very unconscious thing...It's a very subconscious collection of artefacts for me...Only when I look at them and start thinking about them do I realise what might be happening when I look at them all the time. But I don't *know* that I look at them all the time. You know, I must go in and out of that fridge ten times a day, probably. And do I actually see what's on there?

Mickey thus illustrates how fridge magnets have a quiet but potentially powerful 'afterlife' – a concept developed by [Haldrup and Larsen \(2009\)](#) to capture what can happen with holiday souvenirs when they are brought home. While they may blend into the background, at certain times they may be activated in unexpected ways when different times and places become fleetingly and tantalisingly awakened. Through such processes magnets can allow the past to haunt the present ([Haldrup, 2017](#)). This is perhaps why many of our participants said that they would be upset if their fridge magnet collection was stolen or destroyed. As Stella mused: "If I lost them, any of them, or the whole lot was to go (I wouldn't get rid of them), I'd feel very sad about the whole thing".

Conclusion

While souvenirs have attracted considerable attention from tourism scholars, their 'afterlife' ([Haldrup & Larsen, 2009](#)) has received much less scrutiny. In this paper we have focused on the post-holiday context of one of the most commonplace – but also least-studied – types of souvenir: the fridge magnet. Although it is tempting to dismiss fridge magnets as trivial tourist ephemera, our findings reveal how they are positioned at the core of a complex web of interactions within the rhythms of everyday life. We have unpacked these interactions, focusing on the central role that fridge magnets play in post-holiday memory work. Central to our analysis has been a conceptualisation of fridge magnets as potentially powerful performative objects which can both enchant and disrupt the home long after the holiday is over ([Bennett, 2004](#); [Love & Kohn, 2001](#); [Peters, 2014](#); [Ramsay, 2009](#)).

Remembering is central to souvenir work ([Haldrup & Larsen, 2009](#)). We have demonstrated that the salience of memory associations begins from the moment of fridge magnet purchase, where our participants revealed how they often buy these items strategically as future memory cues (see [Sthapit & Björk, 2019](#); [Swanson & Timothy, 2012](#); [Zauberman et al., 2009](#)). Conversely, aesthetic value seems less important: unlike other souvenirs (see [Collins-Kreiner & Zins, 2011](#); [Kuhn, 2020](#)) fridge magnets bestow little prestige or kudos upon their owners yet are purchased in the millions, and as a tourism phenomenon, have had remarkable longevity ([Dandy, 2023](#)). In this sense, the use value of a fridge magnet ([Paraskevidis & Andriotis, 2015](#)) lies in what it can do, rather than how it looks. This is something that differentiates them from many other forms of souvenir.

Therefore, when a fridge magnet returns to its owner's home it usually becomes a central part of an ongoing domestic memory project. The placement of magnets within the home is a purposeful act through which tourists order, prioritise and curate their holiday memories of people and places within everyday spaces (see [Peters, 2011](#)). In this way, magnets can reinforce personal life stories and consolidate family narratives. Magnets are usually in the kitchen, but such placement is not always stable or permanent. Like other souvenirs ([Collins-Kreiner & Zins, 2011](#)) magnets can be moved around. They may be purposefully demoted and removed from the fridge to a drawer (perhaps because the memory they evoke is deemed less important or valued, or alternatively too difficult to contemplate). On the other hand, these hidden magnets and memories can be retrieved or reinstated on a fridge, perhaps in a moment of nostalgia or life reflection. The meanings of fridge magnets as objects are always emergent (see [Zhang & Crang, 2016](#)) and remembering through fridge magnets is therefore a dynamic, ongoing, and never-completed project.

However, the interplay between magnets and memory goes beyond the straightforward recall of past events or experiences, and may be a far more complex process. Fridge magnets can recall positive memories of place-specific and unique events, or particular life stages. They can also act as more "ambivalent" objects ([Haldrup & Larsen, 2009](#), p. 162), by stimulating memories of negative events, a bad holiday, or a good holiday with a friend that has since died. In this regard, fridge magnets are material actants operating at the boundary of memory and forgetting (see [Marcoux, 2017](#)). They can remind us not to forget things so that we might learn from them (in the case of the bad holiday); and they may act as a basis of memorialisation by providing a prompt for the recall of a time and place spent with a deceased loved one. These findings emphasise how fridge magnets are not just symbolic of those places visited, but offer boundless potential to convey particular holiday experiences within those places, including recall and reflections about the people those experiences were shared with. This stimulation of memory about others through the souvenir-object is a finding worthy of further investigation.

The theoretical contribution of this paper lies, therefore, in illustrating the potential “entanglements of materiality, memory, time, place and practice” (Jones, 2011, p. 881) in relation to tourism and souvenirs. We have demonstrated how post-holiday remembering can become embedded within everyday life and domestic space through fridge magnets. Unlike other souvenirs, which may be placed in “inert” or peripheral areas where they receive little attention (Masset & Decrop, 2021, p. 728), the ‘natural’ home of fridge magnets in the kitchen means that they regularly interact with our lives by being woven into the rhythms of the home. They potentially enable the past to haunt the present (Ramsay, 2009) and to quietly disrupt the most everyday of routines. Every time a fridge door is passed by or opened it can fleetingly trigger memories of another time and place in unplanned and unanticipated ways. Fridge magnets momentarily transport us back to our holidays, stimulating a range of moods or (usually positive) emotions, all whilst engaged in another task such as preparing a meal. Furthermore, a chance encounter with one’s past through a fridge magnet can provoke barely conscious affective sensations in the moment, which can in turn generate their own forms of action (such as phoning a family member). In this sense, the emergent possibilities of everyday practice are circumscribed by what we bring and fold into the present from the past (Jones, 2011).

More broadly, our analysis of fridge magnets reinforces previous debates within tourism studies about how home and away, holiday and everyday life, are not discrete and separate realms (Cohen, Duncan, & Thulemark, 2015). Instead, the boundaries between them are increasingly blurred and porous (van der Duim, 2007); and through objects such as fridge magnets, a holiday can regularly achieve a fleeting and affective co-presence in the tourist’s home long after it is over. Fridge magnets therefore illustrate powerfully how “one’s travels do not finish upon one’s return, but continue (both intentionally and unintentionally)” (Lean, 2012, p. 279). In a multitude of ways, a holiday can remain tantalisingly alive long after it has finished (Haldrup, 2017); and non-human actants – such as fridge magnets, and souvenirs more generally – can be integral to this process.

As with any research, limitations are apparent. A larger sample size with participants from more locations and involving those of different nationalities would have been beneficial. Future research could explore the unique capacities of fridge magnets in more detail. This analysis has focused on the (memory) effects of fridge magnets on travellers themselves but, as we have noted above, fridge magnets are also purchased as gifts for others who will not relate the same experiences to the object. There is opportunity, therefore, to investigate the effects of such gift-giving (Wilkins, 2011) and analyse what fridge magnets mean for collectors who have not experienced the trip. Deeper emphasis on the psychology of collecting in this context would also be fruitful, as would analyses of their potential for sensuous materiality. Conversely, explorations of the meanings of magnets for those who purchase (or are gifted) them less frequently is also suggested, including ideas regarding how fridge magnets stimulate recall and reflection about other people. We also see value in undertaking research into the dimensions of gender, age and social class (among others) in respect of the behaviours and interactions linked to these souvenirs.

Another focus might entail analysis of fridge magnets from the perspective of place. Magnets frequently present stereotypical, one-dimensional images of a destination. Places, however, are complex and multi-dimensional in their nature (Zenker, Braun, & Petersen, 2017). From a visitor’s perspective, the narrow presentation of a place might make sense, but the ways in which this clashes with the perspective of the internal place stakeholder (Zenker et al., 2017) also warrants further exploration. Future research could also involve using visual methods (Rose, 2022) to analyse fridge magnets. While the focus of this paper lies in the realm of memory work, emotion and affect, such methods could reveal more about tourists’ semiotic interpretations and understandings of magnets, and what this reveals about the representation and imagery of tourist places.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

John Byrom: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Duncan Light:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Dominic Medway:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Cathy Parker:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Sebastian Zenker:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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