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Souvenir Purchase - Intentional or Incidental: A Case of the United Arab Emirates

International Journal of Excellence in Tourism, Hospitality & Catering

ISSN: 1993-8683

Vol. 7, Issue 1 & 2

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Abstract

The present study is divided into two parts and explores the significance of souvenir purchase in a travel trip. The first part is drawn from extensive review of literature to understand souvenirs; their meaning, issues of authenticity and category. The first part completes with a suggested classification of souvenirs. The second part of the study is a case-study of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) from the point of view of it being a shopping destination and the role played by souvenir purchase in the activity of shopping. Also to seek evidence, whether souvenir purchase is an intentional or incidental activity during a tour.

Keywords: Souvenir, Authenticity, Tourist, Classification, Craft, Art, Arab

Part I

Introduction

Getting away from the quotidian remains the most convincing motivation for travel while shopping for souvenirs is the archetypal activity at the destination. A travel trip is considered incomplete without buying anything. This purchase mostly is, for a local produce that reminds the traveler of the place and the experience, essentially for keepsake. This is typically buying of a souvenir which is a planned activity in an organized tour and is intentional. It may happen, though incidentally just as a spontaneous impulse for buying a memorabilia. This souvenir buying activity denotes the ‘tangibilisation’ of tour experience and acquisition of evidence of the vacation. The type of evidence will vary from person to person and from experience to experience and can range from exquisite to the garish (Wilkins 2011; Littrell et al. 1994; Gordon 1986). The origin of the word souvenir, as per the ‘Online Etymology Dictionary’, can be traced to old French and Latin; in both these languages, the meaning is ‘remembrance’ and ‘memory’ and sometimes even ‘a token of remembrance’. Its usage does not seem to have changed since it was first recorded in 1782 (dictionary.com). One of the commonly used synonym of the word is ‘memento’ and as Cheever puts it ‘mementos serve to bring back the moment’ (2011). Souvenirs may also be part of a tradition for travelers belonging to certain cultures such as in Japan, bringing back souvenirs that are “omiyage” from trips, for near and dear ones, is a social obligation, and is considered a form of apology for the traveler’s absence. In the Philippines a similar tradition of bringing souvenirs as a gift to family members, friends, and coworkers is called “pasalubong”. Souvenirs, thus, are a clever means of sharing the travel experience.

Sufficient research has gone into souvenir purchase and its significance to travel and holidaying. Available literature on souvenir can be traced to domains of anthropology, art history, culture, heritage,

geography and economics (Graburn 1976; Love and Sheldon 1998; Ispas, Untaru & Leşanu 2014) besides marketing, management and destination promotion (Jansen-Verbeke, 1991). Souvenirs have never been found, in existing literature, to be the sole reason for travel to a holiday destination. It also means that souvenir purchase is either an intentional activity at the destination by having been included in a tour itinerary or an incidental activity as part of tourist experience and as a memory-bank that will remind the moments so spent during the holiday. In both the cases there is a possibility of preferences for the purchase. These preferences provide the basis for categorizing souvenir's in various types of which there are evidence in literature. Tourism literature has spent considerable attention on the issue of authenticity from the point of view of experiencing, especially cultural and heritage products at the destination, though not much attention has been given to authenticity of souvenirs. Reference of 'commercial exploitation' of the local produce too finds mention in literature simultaneously.

Issue of Authenticity

There is plenty of available literature on authenticity in tourism which extends to and delves in, many a dimensions, making it quite an intricate trove of knowledge. Authenticity related debates have mainly focused on experiences of tourists in regard to historical and cultural tourism products. Authenticity concept finds mention mainly in works of Cohen (1988), Pearce & Moscardo (1985), Wang (1999), and Reisinger (2005) besides several others. A closer examination of this literature finds extension of the concept leading to a suggested typology of authenticity as in Objective, Constructive and Existential (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006; Wang, 1999). Interestingly though, the literature on authenticity of souvenirs, is not as rich. Gleaning through this available literature on the authenticity of souvenirs it is noticed that souvenirs do play an important role in a tourist activity day-plan. Major studies on souvenir authenticity are found in the writings of Littrell, Anderson & Brown (1993), Hughes (1995) and Hitchcock (2000) besides others. In a 2011 study Ming Shen concludes that 'different types of tourists choose different levels of authenticity for different kinds of souvenirs'. Ming further argues that there are comparable levels of such authenticity as high, intermediate and low. Cohen (1988) held somewhat similar opinion about tourists differing in their perceptions about authenticity of cultural souvenirs. Pooneh & Arai (2013) however, describe authenticity thematically based on (1) usage of local materials, (2) hand crafted and produced by artists locally, (3) authenticated by signature or hallmark of the artist, and (4) having unique and high level of quality. Another interesting view put forward by Lisa Love and Peter Sheldon (1998) considers that there exists a relationship 'between the degree of experience and type of authenticity assigned to the souvenir'. Here the authors term the two as 'conspicuous' and 'idiosyncratic' authenticity. The meanings are generally transparent, public, or evident to the casual observer in conspicuous authenticity and in contrast, idiosyncratic authenticity emphasizes private meanings that tend to focus on the symbolic, intangible elements of the souvenir, which are not often evident to an outsider.

What is the impact of authenticity of souvenirs on the intention of buying souvenirs is not well researched. It is also not clear from the available literature if a tourist will resist the buying impulse in absence of perceived authenticity of the souvenirs on sale. Indications though can be drawn that the degree of authenticity has a bearing on usage of the souvenir for personal or gifting purposes. It is though quite evident from the literature that tourists do buy souvenirs and it remains a single common activity in all holiday travels irrespective of the place and duration of the visit.

Classification of Tourist Souvenirs

Souvenirs have been categorized in tourism literature based on the theme of the study and do not present a universal typology. The much diversified nature of souvenirs on offer at various destinations makes any classification a complex exercise. Graburn (1976) grouped tourist souvenir-art into 'Traditional' and 'Commercial', which is arguably the earliest such attempt. He maintained that traditional-art souvenir retains its artistic and cultural characteristics and is not produced, essentially, for trade while commercial art is mass produced for sale to visitors. The artistic features of commercial-art souvenirs remain confined to the popular demand and are modified from time to time.

An interesting first, in classifying souvenirs, was presented by Gordon (1986) wherein the functional value of souvenirs is taken as the criterion. Under this classification souvenirs could be 'Pictorial Images' such as postcards, snapshots, books, etc. or they are 'Pieces-of-the-Rock' such as things saved from the nature, gathered, hunted, or taken from a built environment, also they could be 'Symbolic Shorthand' as in, manufactured miniatures or oversized objects. Souvenirs can also be 'Markers' that in themselves have no reference to a particular place or event, but are inscribed with words that locate them in place and time and finally souvenirs that are 'Local Products' for example indigenous foods, food paraphernalia, liquor, local clothing, and local crafts.

Another classification of souvenirs can be traced in literature from Zauberman, Ratner & Kim (2009) who interestingly termed souvenirs as 'strategic memory protection' further reiterating the memento value of a tourist purchase for long-term remembrance. And taking a clue from Gordon (1986), Kim & Littrell (2001), and Wilkins (2011) souvenirs can also be classified for their great gift value. Under these studies souvenirs have been seen as gift items of a variety of hues, as such, souvenirs could also be categorized as 'Gifts' and 'Evidences'.

A third classification can be traced from a recent study by Pavlos & Konstantinos (2015) who believe that 'souvenirs, being either trinkets or luxury goods, vary on quality and cost, and have always been commodities'. As commodities, souvenirs are typified for their value which may be determined monetarily or by its utility. In describing the value perspective of souvenir purchase Pavlos & Konstantinos categorize souvenirs into the following four types: use-value, exchange-value, sign-value and spiritual value. Use-value souvenirs have dual functionality for tourists, as reminders of the tourism experience as well as products for use in daily life for example a souvenir-cup purchased at the destination is also used for drinking coffee (Thompson et al., 2012).

Exchange-value souvenirs are defined in relation to other commodities as an objective value of all commodities (Shepherd, 2002). Thus the exchange-value of souvenirs is identified in the consumers' mind as the amount of money they pay to purchase them and mostly they are perceived as low priced and mass produced. From a different perspective though, exchange-value may have higher perceived value mainly in the case of antiquities, or hand-made objects, when they are purchased with the expectation that they may increase their exchange-value over time or when they are collected for investment (Anderson & Littrell, 1995; Corrigan, 1997). The third in the list is 'sign-value' where souvenir-as-commodities are not merely characterized by use-value and exchange-value but by style, prestige, luxury, power, and so on (Kellner, 2006). This argument has taken its theoretical background from Baudrillard (1981) wherein commodities are produced, traded (exchanged) and consumed as signs and therefore consumers are more fascinated by their sign-value than their other two values. Rare pieces of crafts such as a Buddha statuette of Burma Jade

purchased in Hong Kong or Collection of coins from countries visited, can be cited as examples of sign-value souvenirs. Finally, the fourth in this classification is 'spiritual-value' souvenirs that are perceived to have superhuman powers and are usually purchased during pilgrimage. These supposedly blessed souvenirs seem to be a special category of souvenirs with healing and miraculous attributes and researchers like Swanson and Timothy (2012) consider that these religious souvenirs purchased during pilgrimages are the true origins of modern souvenirs.

These mementoes are different from the ordinary ones because of the qualities that they may have, and "pilgrims buy them as sacred relics, endowed, in their imaginations, with some miraculous or magic power" (Nance, 2007). Spiritual-value souvenirs then, could be mass produced rosaries, crosses and blessed icons purchased by pilgrims and even 'holidayers' who may not be believers but happen to be at the place. All souvenirs in this category may not carry superpowers and may actually be just mementoes because to have superpowers the souvenirs are made thru a specific religious process and blessed by priests and monks; it is so believed.

Combining the criteria discussed above, of various types of souvenirs, an interesting classification emerges that is more contemporary and comprehensive. This also, may prove to be more useful to future researchers in area of souvenir purchase behavior and pattern. Souvenirs are purchased by tourists to either keep it for themselves as a remembrance of the vacation or for gifting it to a near-and-dear one with an attached pride of having experienced the holiday. Thus the primary classification attributes, as already mentioned earlier, are "Gift" and "Evidence". A Gift-souvenir is for someone predetermined at the time of purchase or part of a collection for future assignment to a dear one; Evidence-souvenir on the other hand actually is self-gifting for preserving the memory.

Further, both the evidence and gift souvenirs are divided into the following four categories:

- (1) **Trinkets**- that have remembrance and recall element as the feature. This type of souvenir, just being a token reminder of the place, is actually a log item. These are mass produced and low-priced. Interestingly, these may not always be produced locally. An example of such a souvenir is a 'fridge magnet' that may just bear the name of the destination and or show an iconic attraction of the destination. The same category will also include items purchased with some 'utility-value' such as T-Shirts or Coffee Mugs. These souvenirs are worth both, keep-sake evidence or gift to family & friends and serve as a record of the vacation.
- (2) **Figurine**- This second type will have memory value of the vacation experience as a primary attribute. These are pleasant memories of visiting a monument, a museum, an amusement park, a mountain, a lake or a beach and may include a mass produced miniature of the monument or an image in a mold or any locally produced model and are some sort of craft forms. These are higher-priced as compared to the trinkets. An example of such a souvenir could be a scaled-down marble model of the Taj Mahal. Some of these type of souvenirs too, may have utility-value such as Blue-Pottery from Jaipur. These are excellent gift-souvenirs because of their perceived craft value that may draw appreciation and vanity.
- (3) **Local-Craft**: The third type of souvenirs in our classification are the so called 'tangibilisers' that add feature to the holiday experience. These may be slightly expensive and would be representative crafts, typical of the destination. As a norm, these are not mass produced either locally or in a factory

somewhere else (away from the destination). Generally these are handicrafts but some modern technical tools may have entered the production process. The regional identity and authenticity of these crafts make them not only sought-after tourist purchases, but valuable gifts to impress the receiver. A good example would be an African hand crafted wooden ‘Mask’ purchased in Masai Mara, Kenya. There also are utility value local crafts, such as ‘Helle Knives’ from the Nordic region in Scandinavia or a handmade ‘Drinking Horn’ from Iceland. Some of these souvenirs may also have religious significance such as Jade Prayer Beads.

- (4) **Value-Art:** Fourth in this classification are the valuable art or craft that is typical of the visited place and works as a status symbol for the possessor. These are genuinely authentic and would be best represented by the Buddhist ‘Thanka’ paintings of Tibetan or Nepali origin using organic dyes, purchased in Kathmandu. Another example could be the 4,000 years old brilliant art form depicted on ‘China Porcelain’ purchased at Jingdezhen in Jiangxi province of China. Also, there could be genuine antiques or exquisite pieces of art, purchased as a reward of the vacation; these items are expensive and may even be seen as ‘art investment’ since their exchange value may appreciate over time depending upon the exclusivity, authenticity and artistic characteristic of the piece.

Table 1: Souvenir Classification

<i>SOUVENIR TYPE</i>	<i>Evidence Souvenir</i>	<i>Gift Souvenir</i>
	Either for self-keepsake or Gifting to family & friends	
1. Trinket	Low priced small-time items- mass produced	
2. Figurine	Low to mid-priced memorabilia associated to the place - mass produced	
3. Local Craft	Mid to high priced art or craft – authentic and locally produced	
4. Value Art	Expensive genuine work of art- authentic and representative of the place	

Part II

UAE Tourism, Shopping and Souvenir

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of seven emirates comprising of Abu Dhabi, which is the capital city, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Quwain, Ra's al-Khaimah and Fujairah. The federation was formally established in 1971. The UAE is rich with a long coastline, sandy beaches and varied landscape, with a variety of activities to indulge in; the activities range from powerboat races to sand-skiing while manicured golf courses provide delight and for the less active, ample shopping opportunities. Additionally the country's deep-rooted cultural heritage, which is easily accessible at various cultural centers and traditional sports such as falconry, camel- racing and horse-racing, have been a powerful attraction for tourists. The UAE has also become a much sought after venue for conferences, regional and international exhibitions and major sports events such as the Dubai World Cup, the Dubai Desert Classic Golf Tournament, and polo and cricket competitions.

Tourism sector of the UAE remains to be in the forefront of the entire Gulf and the Middle-East. U.A.E.'s tourism industry is among the fastest growing in the world. The direct contribution of Travel & Tourism to UAE GDP was AED64.9bn (4.2% of total GDP) in 2015, and is forecast to rise by 5.7% pa, from 2016-2026. Visitor exports generated AED95.5bn (6.7% of total exports) in 2015. This is forecast to grow by 5.4% pa, from 2016-2026 and Travel & Tourism investment in 2015 was AED27.4bn which is 7.3% of total investment (wtcc.org 2016). It will be appropriate to mention here the tourism competitiveness of the UAE in regard to the rest of the world. The World Economic Forum's Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report

of 2015 ranks the UAE 24th amongst 141 countries on the basis of 14 variables. The UAE's strong points include those of being receptive to foreign travelers and having in place an outstanding air transport infrastructure (weforum.org 2015).

Tourism plays a major role in the socio-economic environment of the UAE. During a visit to the UAE one of the major activities undertaken by a tourist is shopping. Shopping is, very famously, part of the 5 S characteristics of UAE tourism; these five S's are Sun, Sand, Sea, Shopping and Safety.

Further to this, many studies have indicated that shopping during vacations is one of the important activities planned by tourists prior to travel, also that shopping is one of the top-most searched keywords for travel information seekers on destination web-sites (Pan and Fesenmaier 2006). Tourists' sometimes spend more money on shopping than on food, lodging or other entertainment. In some regions of the world shopping ranks at the top in terms of tourist expenditure (Turner & Reisinger, 2001). Shopping, significantly, is one of the major categories of a tourist's expenditure, and has been reported to be about 30% of total cost of a holiday trip (Wong and Law, 2003; Luo, 2008). There aren't many studies that have recorded details of proportionate-spend by a tourist though, a recent Tourism Satellite Account (TSA) published by 'Tourism New Zealand' puts the figure of shopping at 22% (www.stats.govt.nz 2013). In any case it seems to account for about a quarter of the total budget of a vacation.

Shopping during a holiday trip, thus, occupies a significant proportion of not only the expenses but also activity time. If the main purpose of a tourist trip is to shop, which is a case in several travel trips, it is termed as 'shopping tourism' and where shopping is done as a secondary activity during a trip which might be motivated primarily by something other than shopping it is 'tourist shopping' (Timothy, D. J., 2005; Roy B. & Kuri B. C. 2015). In both the cases though, shopping is an essential common activity and a substantial proportion of this shopping activity by a tourist consists of souvenir buying. Also, shopping is an intentional planned activity in case of 'shopping tourism' while it is an incidental activity in 'tourist shopping' undertaken as part of the whole vacation experience. The same is equally true for souvenir shopping also. The UAE is a very popular destination for 'shopping tourism' as well as for tourist's shopping and a substantial proportion of their shopping includes souvenirs.

There are several typically local souvenirs available to tourists in the UAE. Close to twenty five popular travel websites and blogs were reviewed for the purpose of this study to ascertain the most popular souvenirs that are purchased by tourists visiting the UAE and also to note their categories as per the classification suggested above in Table 1. Care has been taken to explore reliable and trustworthy web-sources that will form the basis of this study. Websites such as the Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) and Fodor's Travel (www.fodors.com) were the basic sources to initiate the review, besides several other. A list of reviewed websites is appended at the end of the paper, after the 'references'. It can be observed from most of the available sources that there is a large variety of goods available to a visitor to the UAE. Out of these large variety a good number of products ranging from very costly to pretty cheap are items that can be categorized as souvenirs. The review of these web sources also gave clue about the necessity of the souvenir experience. It is quite evident that visitors to the UAE do purchase souvenirs but it could not be ascertained if it was an intentional or incidental part of their tour activities.

The souvenirs of the UAE can be categorized into consumables and non-consumables. The consumable items though have not been conventionally included in souvenir studies and do not also get much mention in the available literature, reviewed for this study. Reasons for these not been included in scholarly studies seems to be that they do not have memory value, which is the major characteristics of a souvenir. As and when these get consumed, the memory value is lost. Despite this lack of souvenir-characteristics it will not be out of place to mention them here because these are part of the cultural identity of not only the UAE but the Arab world and are very significant purchase items for majority of visitors to the UAE. A few of these are, Dates, Chocolates and Sweets that are edible while Arabic Perfumes that may be in form of burning-chips or oils. Dates are part of the cultural identity of the Arab world and is sold as fruit or stuffed with almonds and other dry-fruits. Date is also available in form of syrup, jam, and sweets made of dates. Another popular edible souvenir is Chocolates made of Camel Milk which again is quintessentially an Arab symbol. And then there is 'Oud' the perfume, made of Agarwood tree resin that is a very popular souvenir item purchased by travelers to the region.

Listed below are souvenirs that have been found most popular according to the reviewed websites and blogs, as mentioned earlier. The list below has been grouped according to the classification suggested above and displayed in Table-1. The first category of 'Trinkets' are not included in the list as these are common mass produced items normally available at any tourist destination namely t-shirts, key-chains, refrigerator magnets, book-marks and pen & pencils in various shapes and sizes depicting the destination's icons or symbols. The other three are as follows.

➤ **Figurine**

- *Camel Figurine*: Made of stuffed cotton, metal or crystal.
- *Mini Burj-al Arab/ Burj Khalifa*: Made of metal, wood or crystal.
- *Arabian Coffee Pot and Cups*: A symbol of local hospitality and made of china or metal.
- *Prayer Beads*: Essentially Islamic and available in a multitude of colors.
- *Woodcarvings*: In the form of *dhows* (traditional Arab boats) or traditional Arab *wind towers*.
- *Falconry equipment and Canes*: Traditionally used in Emirati events.
- *Ancient Rifles and Muzzle Loading Guns*: Mostly nonfunctional and decorative.
- *Khanjar*: Short, curved dagger in an elaborate curved sheath functional or decorative.
- *Seven Sands*: One of the most common souvenirs in a frame that holds thin layers of sand in seven colors symbolizing the seven emirates that form the UAE. It is an artistic presentation of free flowing sand forming interesting patterns in the glass frame. It cannot be however, authoritatively confirmed if each emirate has different colored sand as claimed in the frame. It is but, proven that the colors are natural and depend upon the dominance of a particular mineral of which the sand is made of.

➤ **Local Craft**

- *Souha Products*: Hand woven bags, baskets and even carpets. Souha literally means a traveler's gift in Emirati colloquial Arabic, and is a significant part of the Emirate's heritage. The weaving is done with palm leaves, fronds, animal skins and rudimentary textiles.
- *Ghutra Headscarves*: Traditional Arab Head Dress for Males in white or checkered red. This traditional piece of cloth has become a popular fashion accessory worldwide.

➤ Value Art

- *Traditional Wedding Jewelry*: Made of heavy silver and crafted into interesting pieces in a form of historic art. These are collectable items sold on mounted glass box frames.
- *Paintings*: By Arab and local artists sold generally at art galleries in the UAE. Recently these paintings have gained critical appreciation of experts. It is quite a status symbol to possess such art pieces and possible investment for art collectors.

The above list may not be exhaustive but includes a very large and popular share of souvenir purchased by a visitors to the UAE.

Conclusion

In the two parts of the present study, there is ample evidence of the importance ‘souvenirs’ play in a travel trip. Souvenirs are purchased as tangible evidence of a journey and are also, in most categories, a carryback item that preserves the cultural memory of the place visited. It is also observed that souvenirs can be purchased for self or can be purchased to gift it to near and dear ones. There is though, not enough evidence found in reviewed literature of the pattern of souvenir-purchase as an intentional or incidental activity. Since souvenir purchase is almost an essential activity it can either be planned beforehand and sufficient time is allocated during the tour, or time is squeezed into the trip itinerary making the activity intentional or incidental or both. Empirical evidence though, is required to study patterns of souvenir purchase and future research may use the present study as a referring point. This study however, has made a significant contribution by suggesting a pragmatic classification of souvenirs and substantiated this classification with the matching of souvenirs purchased in the UAE. It would not be wrong thus to conclude that a travel trip is inconclusive and tasteless if devoid of the pleasure of souvenir experience.

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WTTC

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List of websites and blogs reviewed for UAE souvenirs in Part II

(Accessed during January to March 2016)

<http://alltravel.ae/travel-blog/page/3/>

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