

The Souvenir: What is Purchased and Is the Purchaser a Collector of Art?

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the acquisition of goods for the purpose of building collections. Specifically, when do the purchase of travel remembrances, i.e. souvenirs, transition from onetime purchases into collections of multiple items of the same type, theme, or purpose? Undergraduate students at a mid-sized comprehensive university in the Midwest were surveyed concerning their vacation behavior and travel purchases along with whether or not they considered themselves collectors.

The literature surrounding the acquisition of goods and when that acquisition behavior becomes collecting is well documented across a broad spectrum of academic literature (e.g., Belk (1982), Belk et. al, (1991), Christ (1965), Formanek (1991), Hillier (1981), Long and Schiffman (1997), Muensterberger (1994), and McIntosh and Schmeichel (2004)). However, very little has been written about what people choose to collect and whether or not the collectables are considered art.

Travelers desire a means to both remember and share their experiences with others. Upon their return, travelers use souvenirs as a way to stop time so as to effectively remember their experiences, to allow for sharing of those experiences, and to prove the experience occurred (Gordon, 1986). Souvenirs offer one way to transform these intangible experiences into a tangible artifact. When individuals desire to identify with a place, they will keep artifacts from that place.

The truth is that few people will take a trip without acquiring some form of evidence to tangibilize their experience (Littrell et.al., 1994). These remembrances take on special value for the purchaser. To the purchaser, the souvenirs are not simply relics, mementos, keepsakes or curios. The souvenir provides the consumer with “a connection with an actual person, place or event – in short it is an association object” according to Bird, (2013). Simply put, we all like to collect stuff -- “the impulse to collect, to accumulate, even to hoard has been with us for a long time” according to Conn, (2015).

A survey was administered to a sample of 300 undergraduate students at a Midwestern comprehensive university to ascertain their travel behaviors and their travel-related purchases. In addition to information concerning their travel and related purchases, the students were asked whether or not they were collectors and about the spending patterns related to their collections. How do undergraduate students view the purchase of souvenirs and do they like to collect stuff? The results indicate a strong connection between collecting and souvenir purchases.

Finally, the authors argue whether or not the collection of “tourist art” can truly be considered art collections? Based on a less commonly used definition that defines a souvenir as “tourist art” (Lasusa, 2007). The authors suggest that souvenirs from trips are art based on the fact that these “travel trinkets” adhere to traditional definitions of art. As noted in many places, the market for visual/fine arts is a multi-billion dollar world-wide market (Velthuis, 2007). If, as suggested, that souvenirs really part of this market what are some of the parallels that can be drawn between the motivations to collect art and other collectables?

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Keywords: Souvenirs, Collections and Collecting, the Arts, and Marketing.

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:

This study discusses the acquisition of souvenirs and the similarities between the collecting of souvenirs and fine arts. How viewing the souvenirs as fine art provide insights into the behavior of collectors.

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