Consuming Our Heritage: Consumption Benefits and Heritage Associations At a Civil War Landscape

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In recent days, we are witnessing an increasing popularity of the past that directly involves marketing, selling, and consumption of various heritage-related products and experiences. The purpose of the present research is to study the various consumption benefits tourists experience when visiting heritage sites. Ethnographic research conducted at Gettysburg classifies the benefits of cultural heritage into six categories: knowledge, escape, aesthetics, values, collective identity, and connection. The insights provided in the present study can benefit future research in investigating the different ways in which heritage managers can stage their experiential product in both physical and communicative ways.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Contemporary consumption life increasingly involves products, services, and experiences that are linked to the past. This trend has been identified as a “contemporary quest for history” (Goulding 1999) and employs various consumption practices that result in the “commodification of history” (Barthel 1996). Past-related consumption includes retro-style objects, collectibles, past narratives, historical societies, family histories, one-of-a-kind artifacts, heirlooms, genealogies, heritage events, and heritage sites (Retroscapes).

In the most laconic sense, the “Past Industry” is a fertile area to expand consumption research and it seems to offer tremendous marketing opportunities. Notwithstanding the importance and multiplicity of the consumption categories described above, the field of past-related activities and consumption phenomena are lacking a theoretical viewpoint that will assist in better understanding and facilitating the experience of the past. The present study uses heritage sites as the research context for the investigation of consumption phenomena related with the past. More specifically, the purpose of the present research is to study the various consumption benefits tourists experience when visiting heritage sites.

Ethnographic research was conducted at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, one of the most significant and popular heritage sites in the United States. Data collection was accomplished primarily through in-depth personal interviews with visitors at Gettysburg during September 2002. This method was supported by photo-elicitation and personal observation, both participant and non-participant. Overall, fieldwork at Gettysburg lasted two weeks and resulted in a total of 75 interviews, 238 photographs, and hundreds of hours of observation. Data analysis and interpretation provide insight for the potential benefits of heritage. Findings are classified into six categories.

A major benefit consumers derive at heritage sites is knowledge. Heritage plays an educative role that becomes apparent for both adults and children. A large number of consumers are motivated by learning, even prior to their visit.

Heritage functions as an escape route and, in this sense, expresses its inherent property of anachronism (Baudrillard 1968) that assists consumers to escape in the past. As other escape routes, Gettysburg too is a free area where consumers can act out their fantasies (Cohen and Taylor 1976).

As already acknowledged by the World Heritage Convention (2005), one of the values associated with heritage monuments, buildings, or places is their aesthetic value. The aesthetic benefit as part of the Gettysburg experience is evidenced in two ways. In a concrete sense, cannons, monuments, statues, and museum artifacts provide an aesthetically pleasing manifestation of the past. In a broader sense, the surrounding natural environment is an aesthetically appealing aspect of visitors’ experience that cannot be separated from the artifactual evidence.

Values of the past emerge in multiple ways throughout a visit at Gettysburg. Tourists admire the heroes of the past and their achievements. They feel that the values of peace, freedom, patriotism, bravery, courage, and sacrifice become our heritage and enrich the present.

A symbolic meaning inherent in the past is the “myth of origin” (Baudrillard 1968). Valuation of origins is present in many historic sites and it is crucial for a sense of identity (Lowenthal 1985). One way this benefit is expressed is through the visitors’ search for ancestors. In addition to the search for family ancestry, the myth of origin encompasses visitors’ concerns for a group identity. Gettysburg becomes the origin of the American nation and an anchoring point for national unity.

During their presence at the Gettysburg storyscape, tourists connect to the past. What is very characteristic about this experiential condition is that during certain moments the past becomes “alive.” Visitors use their imagination in order to “see” a lively picture, to personally travel in the past, and to emotionally connect with those people who gave their lives for a cause.

The lessons to be learned from our exercise in the past are manifold. First, there are multiple and often overlapping, benefits of the past. Second, these benefits are embedded on a cultural narrative that is formed by the information provided in the heritage site and is enriched and completed by the consumers’ historical knowledge and their personal struggle to follow this narrative. Third, the beneficial consumption outcomes of the past are mediated by imagination.

The insight provided in the present study can benefit future research in investigating the different ways in which heritage managers can stage their experiential product in both physical and communicative ways (Arnould, Price, and Tierney 1998), so that they will facilitate the consumption payoff experienced by tourists at a heritage site.

REFERENCES


