Tourism, Place and Narrative: Local Interpretations of Santorini

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This paper explores the local perspective in making and consuming (tourism) place. Diverging from the traditional distinction between tourist as consumer and local as service provider it addresses the need to explore the local within the consumption of place (Sherlock 2001). In so doing, it relies on the recognition that narratives play a central role in the construction and consumption of place. Based on the analysis of in-depth interviews with local residents of the island of Santorini, Greece, three interwoven, but also conflicting narratives and senses of place are presented.

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The aim of this research is to explore the production and consumption of tourism place from the local residents’ point of view. The local’s role within the sphere of place consumption is not explored at the same length as the tourist, because of the guest/host binary that has been a traditional distinction in the tourism theory (see Smith 1978). Historically there has been a focus on the tourist as the one who consumes whereas the host is rarely defined (Sherlock 2001) and has been seen as performing for the tourist. In the developed world this distinction is changing and contested (Sherlock 2001), which calls for an exploration of the local element’s perspective in making and consuming tourism place.

In exploring the local point of view, we rely on the idea that narratives play an important role in the construction of place (Meethan 1996, Voase 1999, Stokowski 2002, Santos 2004). Following this notion, people make sense and thus construct their experiences of place through narrative. Jerome Bruner (2004) argues that the main mode through which people make sense of their life experiences is the narrative form and as a result, it is by narrative means that they also structure their experiences. The narrative is therefore a structure of meaning through which individuals understand their world. Individuals construct social reality through their narratives, but this process is mediated by the socio-cultural context in which they are embedded, because this limits the possibilities of the personal narratives (Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott 2001). By looking at the narratives of local residents of a tourism destination, we are hoping to reach an understanding of how a sense of place is formed and how locals negotiate the meanings involved in this process.

The research involved 22 semi-structured “conversational” (Kvale 1996) interviews with local residents of the island of Santorini, Greece. The aim was to elicit the participants’ stories, which is why the topics of conversation revolved around a temporal context, i.e. their earlier memories, their experience of change, the current situation and their hopes for the future. The interviews were fully transcribed and their analysis following Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber’s (1998) holistic-content approach, which seeks to identify narrative themes by looking at the narrative as a whole and focusing on its content. The initial emerging themes form three senses of Santorini as a tourism space. These are Santorini as “harsh beauty”, Santorini as “business” and Santorini as “homeland”.

The notion of Santorini as “harsh beauty” evokes associations of nature as a feminine force, generous but also violent, which “gave birth” to the island. It has “endowed” the place with beauty, but as this was the product of extreme phenomena (volcanic eruptions), this is a peculiar kind of beauty, involving harshness, aridity and steepness. In this sense landscape is almost a synonym of nature, as it is nature’s product. This also evoked the notion of timelessness. Interestingly, traditional culture is also described as being “natural”, as embedded in the landscape, in contrast to the modern culture. Viticulture, for instance, is considered an inextricable feature of the landscape. The notion of beauty emphasises the visual aspect of place, Santorini seen as a spectacle for visual consumption.

Santorini as “Homeland” involves an emotional attachment to the place, as the place where one belongs. This involves notions of origin, of relations and childhood memories. It also revolved around the theme of actualisation, in the case of returning to Santorini after having immigrated to Athens. Furthermore, this also involved making Santorini one’s home, as some of the residents were not originally locals. They are also in pursuit of signs of community and the rural.

Finally, the notion of Santorini as “Business” demonstrates the centrality of tourism in the island’s life. In this sense, Santorini is a brand, with a “celebrity” status attached to it. This is associated with the discourse about tourism being the “heavy industry” of Greece, and Santorini one of the successful brands within the country’s portfolio of destinations. Hence, the island was often paralleled to an enterprise that needs to invest in infrastructure and marketing and use carefully its resources. This involves notions of the local as a service provider that has to make sure that he or she contributes to the tourists’ experience.

These narratives of place are interwoven in the construction of the multifaceted reality of Santorini as a tourism space. They are linked, but also contradictory. Tourism business is seen as the process through which the locals are able to continue making a good living on Santorini. In addition, “harsh beauty” is the core element of its attractiveness as a tourism brand. However, tourism business is also seen as destroying the beauty of the island and corrupting the local community. Furthermore, issues of importance to the local residents (such as health services) are overlooked because priority is given to the developments necessary for the tourist trade.

Ultimately, researching the consumption of tourism spaces has the potential to contribute to the discussion on the nature of (post)modern consumption. In the postmodern era people are increasingly spending their everyday lives in tourism spaces. This is because as places are experiencing the economy of signs, they are shifting from spaces of production to spaces of consumption (Lash and Urry 1994). This involves a de-differentiation of tourism (Urry 1990) from everyday life and the pluralization of the tourist experience (Urieley 2005). Tourism is not clearly distinct from other leisure activities and tourist space and time are less distinct from normal, everyday space and time. One does not need to leave home anymore in order to have a tourist experience. A trip to the themed shopping mall offers a touristic experience to local residents and visitors alike. Because of “its particular combination of the visual, the aesthetic, and the popular” the consumption of tourism is a prototype of the contemporary condition of the aesthetisisation of consumption (Urry 1990: 87). The tourist is seen as a visual hyper-consumer (Hughes 1998) or as a metaphor of the (post)modern individual (Bauman 1996). A tourism destination like Santorini, serves as an opportunity for the investigation of the interpretations of place in the course of the shifting distinctions of host/guest as well as place of production/place of consumption and of the ways in which the inherent contradictions are negotiated.

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Self-Gift Behaviours of British Ethnic Minority Consumers
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Conceptualisation
The increasing size of ethnic minority groups has attracted researchers and marketers to target these groups to gain a better understanding of how their consumption behaviour might vary from the host markets (McCullough, Tan, and Wong, 1986; Cui, 2001). Much of ethnic consumer research was conducted to see the impact of acculturation on food consumption/preference (e.g., Jamal, 1998; Wallendorf and Reilly, 1983; Xu, Shim, Lotz and Almeida, 2004), on purchasing behaviour (e.g., Donthu and Cherian, 1994; Kim and Kang, 2001; Mulhern and Williams, 1994) and on media consumption (e.g., Khairullah and Khairullah, 1999; Lee and Tse, 1994). However, very few studies have explored the ethnicity and acculturation on self-gifting (e.g., Rucker et al., 1994). Some previous studies suggest that people engage in authentic self-gift behaviour as a means to communicate with one’s self, and to influence one’s self-concept and self-esteem (Mick and DeMoss, 1990b). Thus, studying the ethnic minority groups’ self-gift behaviour may lead to a more refined understanding of ethnic consumer behaviour.

Mick and DeMoss (1990b:328) define self-gifts as “products, services or experiences that are (1) personally symbolic self-communication through (2) special indulgences that tend to be (3) premeditated and (4) highly context-bound.” Self-gifts are partly differentiated from other personal acquisitions by their situational and motivational contexts (Mick and DeMoss, 1990a). People may give a gift to themselves as a reward for the accomplishment of a task, to reassure the self, to cheer up from feeling down or to celebrate public or private holidays (Mick, 1991).

In the study of self-gift and ethnic identity, Rucker et al. (1994) found that Asian Americans prefer to choose self-gifts rather than to receive gifts from others. Their result also showed that this group is more likely than Whites to favour experiences as self-gifts (e.g., watching TV or listening to music) over buying products or services. This finding runs contrary to suggestions by Mick and DeMoss (1990b), Olshavsky and Lee (1993) and Sherry et al. (1995) who indicate that consumers from non-Western societies, such as a group self-identified with Asian cultures, might be less accepting of self-gifts.

While self-gifting is clearly prevalent in western consumer behaviour, particularly in the United States, the question remains whether the propensity to self-gift is a widespread phenomenon among ethnic minority consumers. Moreover, very little is known as to how and why immigrants may choose specific goods, services, or experiences when acquiring gifts for themselves. Very few research has explored ethnic minority groups’ self-gift behaviour in a non-North American context. We, therefore, propose to examine self-gift behaviour of British ethnic minority groups. The study attempts to investigate why these groups may or may not engage in self-gifting and how ethnicity has an impact on their self-gift behaviour in different motivational situations.

Research Method
To comprehensively understand self-gift, Mick and DeMoss (1990a) suggest that it is necessary to apply various types of research methods. Open-ended questionnaire and diary methods were used to conduct this study.

The survey examined the ethnic group’s self-gift behaviour during the Christmas holiday. Forty-four responses were collected from a convenience sample of British ethnic groups, ages 15 to 50, in the North-West area, the UK. These students and non-student adults were asked whether they would buy gifts for themselves, what they would like to buy, how they feel when they buy themselves gifts, and in which occasions they would buy themselves gifts. The demographic characteristics: gender, age, nationality and religion were used to assess the results.

Diary method was deployed to get a picture of the sorts of self-gift activities the ethnic groups are engaged in on a daily basis. The sample consisted of six men and nine women between 21 and 41 years old whose spent between six months and ten years in the UK. The sample limits to educated participants who possess a proficiency in English written communication. In this study, participants completed the measurements of ethnic identity in both objective and subjective approaches and the acculturation level. The respondents were then asked to describe their major activities in relation to reward, for example, to be nice to themselves or to cheer them up with self-gifts during

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