Questing For Capital: Tourism As Acculturation Practice

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While consumer acculturation theorists have largely treated tourism as a distinct type of mobility, this paper reconceptualizes tourism as an acculturation practice. Informed by theories of capital consumption, this paper empirically demonstrates how questing for capital in long-term migration drives touristic practices which are iconic rather than singular.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Within the converging literature streams of consumer acculturation and mobility in consumer culture theory, tourism has been conceptualized as a form of temporary mobility which is distinct from more extended forms of mobility such as long-term migration. While scholars have discussed the role of acculturation practices in the context of tourist journeys (Bardhi, Ostberg, and Bengtsson 2010; Bengtsson, Bardhi, and Venkatraman 2010), there is currently limited understanding of the role of touristic practices in the context of acculturation journeys. An important exception is Thompson and Tambahy’s (1999) study, which showed how cosmopolitan consumers use touristic practices to consume authentic alterity and self-transformation. Thompson and Tambahy’s (1999) interpretation echoes dominant understandings of tourism in consumer culture theory as the “consumption of […] local culture, nature, history, or otherness” (Gotham 2007, 305). Moving beyond the context of highly mobile cosmopolitans and beyond theories of tourism which emphasize authentic alterity and self-formation (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1995; MacCannell 1973; Rodriguez 2001; Sherry 1987; Urry 2002), this paper poses the following question: in the context of long-term migration, how and why might acculturating consumers perform touristic practices?

This paper draws on theories of capital consumption (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Allen 2002; Bourdieu 1984; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Henry 2005; Holt 1998) in which consumers are seen to draw on multiple types of resources – economic, social, and cultural – to accrue symbolic capital and establish their social status vis-à-vis other members of society in a “multidimensional status game” (Holt 1998, 3). The consumption practices associated with the quest for capital have been shown to intersect with multiple, and at times competing, identity myths which are circulated and shaped by wider socio-cultural and marketplace discourses (Dong and Tian 2007; Izbik-Bilgin 2012; Thompson and Tian 2008; Üstünier and Holt 2010). Within consumer acculturation theory, the importance of capital is also widely recognized, with levels of economic, social, and cultural capital understood to structure and delimit acculturation outcomes (Luedicke 2011; Üçok-Hughes 2012; Üstünier and Holt 2007). For acculturating consumers, capital therefore provides an important means of gaining and enhancing inclusion within their new cultural contexts.

This paper is empirically grounded in a hermeneutic analysis (Thompson 1997) of depth interviews with 26 Southeast Asian immigrant consumers in New Zealand. To enrich and deepen the consumer narratives, visual and reflexive methods were deployed. First, each participant was asked to select objects and photographs which represent their experiences of migration (Zaltman and Coulter 1995) and use drawings to represent their social networks and social identities (Bagnoli 2009). Second, each participant was interviewed twice in line with open narrative reflexivity (Thompson, Stern, and Arnould 1998). In their second interview, participants were presented with the researchers’ emerging interpretations and provided an opportunity to correct, qualify, or further deepen their initial responses.

Participants conveyed a range of iconic domestic touristic practices in New Zealand as part of their acculturation journey. Given the centrality of the myth of ‘100% Pure New Zealand’ (Ateljevic and Doorne 2002), it was unsurprising that participants’ touristic practices largely centred on the natural landscape, including visits to iconic landscape attractions and iconic outdoor experiences. These touristic practices involved high degrees of ritualization and social display.

In contrast to previous studies which have framed touristic practices as the consumption of otherness (Rodriguez 2001) or a quest for self-transformation (Arnould and Price 1993), the participants in this study enacted touristic practices in a quest for economic, social, and cultural capital. On one level, the performance of touristic practices served as an index of sufficient levels of economic capital, enabling participants to perform the identity of an economically established migrant in New Zealand. On another level, the performance of domestic touristic practices provided participants with linking value (Cova 1997), thereby facilitating the process of building social ties and accruing social capital in New Zealand. On yet another level, domestic touristic practices functioned as an index of local cultural capital in New Zealand, enabling participants to demonstrate their knowledge of and ability to competently enact New Zealand cultural values and practices.

Additionally, because participants were primarily motivated by capital consumption rather than the consumption of cultural authenticity, their practices of domestic tourism tended to emphasize iconic rather than singular experiences. Despite the relative prominence of indigenous Maori myths in the construction of contemporary New Zealand tourism discourses (Amoamo and Thompson 2010), there was a remarkable lack of Maori-related or heritage-based touristic practices. Also notable was the lack of practices relating to adventure-based adrenaline (Ateljevic and Doorne 2002). This is because in order for touristic practices to be translatable into economic, social, and cultural capital, they must be recognizable by the local and transnational family and friendship networks who form the implicit audience for these practices. Therefore, in contrast to Thompson and Tambahy’s (1999) cosmopolitan consumers who emphasized local attractions which were ‘off the beaten track’ and Arnould and Price’s (1993) river-rafting participants who emphasized peak experiences, participants’ touristic performances largely involved the repetition of highly commodified tourist tropes.

This paper contributes to the converging literature streams of consumer acculturation and mobility in several ways. First, while scholars have largely treated tourism as a specific form of mobility (Bengtsson et al. 2010; Bardhi et al. 2010), this paper reconceptualizes and explores tourism as a key acculturation practice. Second, this paper demonstrates that touristic practices are key acculturation practices not only for expatriates (Thompson and Tambahy 1999), but also for long-term migrants. Third, while previous studies have focused on how capital constrains acculturation outcomes, this paper explores how a consumption practice enables the expression and accumulation of capital. Finally, this paper demonstrates how questing for capital in long-term migration drives touristic practices which are iconic rather than singular.

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