



Souvenir sellers and perceptions of authenticity – The retailers of Hoi An, Vietnam



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Reports on perceptions of souvenir sellers of authenticity.
- Research undertaken at UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- Micro-ethnographic and case study approach adopted.
- Analysis using textual analysis software.
- One of a few studies on souvenir retailers.

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ABSTRACT

Authenticity has long been a theme within the tourism literature, but relatively little has been written about the attitudes of souvenir retailers. This paper, based on a combination of case study and micro-ethnographic approaches, reports findings derived from interviews with 25 souvenir retailers in the UNESCO World Heritage site of Hoi An, Vietnam. It uses a thematic and content analysis aided by the use of textual analysis software to identify dichotomous yet holistic perceptions on the part of the retailers. They seek to sell souvenirs perceived as authentic of Hoi An, yet source both nationally and locally. The items are thus representative of Hoi An and Vietnam, and these attitudes can be justified by an appeal to the past trading heritage of the ancient city. The retailers also perceive tourists as potential 'prosumers' who create their own experiential authenticity.

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1. Introduction

Research into souvenirs has been a minor but consistent sub-theme within the tourism literature for several decades. At one level this is not surprising because physical, tangible prompts of memories of travel have been purchased almost since the time when humans commenced travelling. As Redfield. (2013, p. 270) comments about Herodotus's *Histories* 'Like any collector, Herodotus likes his *nomoi*, rare, gaudy and curious.' In terms of one of the antecedents of modern tourism, namely the Grand Tours of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, any current visit to the mansions and stately homes of the aristocracy of North-western Europe provides evidence of how the aristocracy purchased and purloined Roman and Greek artefacts as souvenirs of their travel

(Hibbert, 1969). Historically souvenirs have taken many forms, from the marble statues of the aristocracy to the UK's Donald McGill 'saucy' post-cards of the mid-twentieth century and now the digital photographs of the twenty-first century.

Among these different forms of souvenirs a consistent favourite has been items that represent some aspect of the culture and heritage of the visited place. There are many reasons for this. Among these is the desire to acquire mementos of a visit that differ from the familiar items of home and thereby are demarcated as being 'different'. This 'difference' is therefore based on something specific to the visited destination, and destinations often seek to differentiate themselves from others through the use of traditions, handicrafts and artefacts derived from the past. Souvenirs thus become a means of reinforcement of not simply difference but extension of place image and brand. For MacCannell (1976) that search was partly premised on a belief that tourists seek to escape from a daily world where they felt alienated, having lost touch with what is 'real' and 'natural'. Hence the purchase of a souvenir becomes not

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simply a memory of place but also a finding of something real if based upon tradition and heritage (Swanson & Tomothy, 2012). Utilising Goffman's (1959) concepts of self-presentation and the staging of self, MacCannell (1976) argued the tourist sought the 'authentic'.

This perception initiated a long and continuing debate about the authenticity of objects and experiences, and such debates have informed understandings of tourism. The issues have been varied, and include for example Urry and Larsen's (2011) concepts of gazes, romantic and otherwise, and ludic playing tourists to debates about just how serious is the search for understanding in heritage, cultural and indigenous tourism (McKercher & du Cros, 2002).

This paper continues these debates with reference to souvenirs purchased in the Vietnamese World Heritage site of Hôi An. The research question is: how do the souvenir sellers themselves perceive the authenticity of what they sell? Much of the past literature on souvenirs has had the emphasis placed on the tourists as consumers of interpretations and authenticity (Wang, 1999; Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011). Equally it has been recognized that tourists come with past patterns of experience and varying sources of information. These shape expectations (Li, Lai, Harrill, Kline, & Wang, 2011), and tourists then engage in their acts of interpretation, emotions and dissonance when on site (Hosany, 2012). It is suggested that they act as prosumers, that is as consumers engaging in acts of production as they consume (Pappalepore, Maitland, & Smith, 2014).

Yet within this discussion there are relative areas of silence, and one such silence is the voice of the retailers. To what extent do they shape productive processes to create 'traditional' artefacts that they feel will sell, and to what extent do they intentionally act a role in a presentation of local authenticities when they may equally knowingly source product from outside the region in which they are based? Hôi An was chosen as the area within which to ask these types of questions for various reasons. First, it is a UNESCO inscribed World Heritage site, and is marketed strongly within Vietnam as a place of heritage. To that extent it has created commercial festivals based on selected traditions – the most notable being the Lantern Festivals held each Lunar month (Di Giovine, 2009a, 2009b). Second there were the pragmatic and convenience reasons of the site being easily accessed by the first author. The nature of Hôi An is described in a little more detail below.

The next question was how to initiate the research process. Hôi An has been the subject of past research and that literature is reviewed below. However, very little attention has been directed toward the retailers of souvenirs and their use of local facilities for design and sourcing, and thus it was decided to undertake this project as a case study.

The nature of the case study as a mode of research has long been subjected to criticism, debate and analysis. Key overviews of the subject can be found in texts such as *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* in 1994 by King, Keohane, and Verba and more recently *Field Guide for Case Study Research in Tourism, Hospitality, and Leisure* by Hyde, Ryan, and Woodside (2012). Yin (1994) suggests that the case study approach is appropriate where the researcher has little or no control over contemporary sets of events, while Ryan (2012) also suggests the case study is pertinent where little is known about a subject and hence it is not possible to develop hypotheses for testing. This is not to state that the case study, while atheoretical, is not empirical. George and Bennett (2005) describe various forms of case studies approach noting that these differences reflect the debates between "... rational choice theorists, structuralists, historical institutionalists, social constructionists, cognitive theorists, postmodernists, and others, who at times may see themselves as having a stake in debates over case study or other methods" (p. 9).

Ryan (2012) discusses the role of positivistic and empirical research methods and the nature of causality in cross-case study analysis. In doing so it is noted that model building is itself an abstraction from reality, a simplification of reality. He also reasons that the 'rich description' of the more interpretative approaches often associated with case studies does not preclude observations of directions of causality. Yet in his conclusion he notes the commonplace of irrationality in much of the tourism experience and product and concludes "There is no one way in which the case study can be written and read, other than being transparent as to the modes used and the perspectives taken and being tolerant of those who adopt other methods. Relativism requires comparison, but is accepting of pluralities ..." (Ryan, 2012, p. 556).

The findings reported here emanate from a case study approach which was adopted as the initial part of a wider study. It represents a micro-ethnographic study because it utilised the skills of the first author, not only an academic researcher, but also one who is immersed in the society and culture of not only Vietnam but also of this place near her home town. It is also pragmatic in the sense described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) as being driven by the research questions 'how do souvenir sales people in Hôi An source their product and to what extent do they believe it possesses authenticity?', and was in fact the first stage of a wider mixed methods study.

2. Literature review

As noted above, the subject of authenticity in tourism has been long debated. An evolution in the debate can be observed whereby writers have come to question not only the nature of the authentic, but also the necessity for fusions and hybrid forms to emerge in order that cultures and traditions retain vitality and meaning in a post-modern world (Baudrillard, 1998; Rapaport, 1994). Given the abundance of literature this review will primarily concentrate on two issues, namely the nature of souvenirs and Hôi An as a traditional place.

Littrell, Anderson, and Brown (1993) suggest a series of criteria used by tourists when buying souvenirs. These include uniqueness and originality, workmanship, aesthetics seen as traditional in function and looks, cultural and historic integrity, local craftsmanship and the genuineness of the shopping experience. Swanson and Horridge (2006) also look at the shopper's perspective and link the traveller's motives to the perceptions of the traditional and authentic, the assessments made of the aesthetics of the product, and additionally draw attention to the role of the retailer and the way merchandise are displayed. It also needs to be noted that while souvenirs are seen as possessing meaning for the purchaser, that meaning itself becomes fluid over time. Collins-Kreiner and Zins (2011) provide an example of this in their study of Israeli tourists when one informant commented how a pair of socks purchased as a practical item became a souvenir of a past visit to New York. Equally their study indicates that over time, as more trips occur, souvenirs become marginalized spatially in homes as those from earlier trips make way for those from later trips, and indeed as their purchasers become more experienced as travellers, so too the amount of souvenir purchases become fewer in number.

Akin to this Anderson and Littrell (1995) cite Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), who argued that in that stage of life they characterized as 'pre-retirement adulthood' the human begins to emphasise the self through what a person possesses rather than what they do.

Anderson and Littrell, who compared females of different ages, concluded however that the evidence can only be described as 'patchy'. There appeared to be no differences in terms of a desire for authenticity, and the major difference seemed to be that those of

middle aged tended plan their purchases more than those of younger respondents, implying possibly a greater consideration of how current purchases might fit with other possessions.

Another issue in the literature relates to the degree to which authenticity is manipulated by tourism promoters. [Trinh, Ryan, and Cave \(2014\)](#) also suggest that the shopper's understanding of what is authentic is, however, a manipulated understanding. Using Hôi An as an example they note the selectivity from the past that has been specifically promoted by the tourist authorities in shaping an authorized authenticity, and how tourists buy a souvenir to represent an experiential and not necessarily an objective authenticity.

Such 'staged' authenticity is not unique to Hôi An. As [Chhabra, Healy, and Sills \(2003, p. 715\)](#) comment in their study of the Flora MacDonald Highland Games held in North Carolina, "Staging involves displacement of cultural production from one place to another and modification to fit new conditions of time and place. But it does not necessarily mean superficiality". Yet there remains the point of 'authorisation' ([Ryan & Aicken, 2005](#)). While their point related to the development of product based upon indigenous culture, it is suggested here that it can be extended more generally into heritage tourism, and built upon. The initial argument was premised in the context of non-indigenous exploitation of the culture of a minority, and it was suggested that native people can evolve product, and do not have to be frozen into a portrayal of past years for a tourism product to be authentic. Such processes raise the issue of 'knowingness'. It might be said that tourists do not question the image of tradition and culture that is portrayed to them, and this aids the acceptance of artefacts as being traditional.

Ironically, the very lack of authenticity can be an attraction when buying souvenirs. For example [Wu, Wall, and Pearce \(2014\)](#) draw attention to the role of genuine fakes in the purchasing of items, some of which may be souvenirs. They suggest that the fun of bargaining and the sense of getting a bargain when purchasing items in Beijing's Silk Market is a significant part of the experience, even though the goods are known to be counterfeit. For their part [Cohen and Cohen \(2012\)](#) suggested two sources of authentication that they term 'cool' (the more objective associated with external validation of sites as being authentic based on some objective, usually historic criteria) and 'hot' (the more experiential based upon public participation and belief). It appears from their paper that these are separate modes of analysis for the paper implies it is possible for a site to be both 'hot' and 'cool' and the paper discusses how 'cool' may become 'hot'. Essentially, particularly with its request that there needs to be further research into the process of authentication, the paper completes a circle by reiterating the call by [Xie \(2011\)](#) to look into processes of authentication and the authorization of sites as being authentic. This paper looks into this process and adds to the literature by looking at a more common example, namely souvenir sales, as against the religious examples used by [Cohen and Cohen \(2012\)](#) that are used to describe 'hot' authentication.

As noted from the above references, the issue of authenticity is often been discussed from the perspective of the tourist, rather than that of the provider, or in this case the seller of the souvenir. As an aside however, it would seem naïve to believe that the seller has little concept of how the tourist imagines a future holiday experience, and thereby shapes expectations of encounters. [Salazar \(2012\)](#) writes of imaginaries, which are defined as "complex systems of presumption - patterns of forgetfulness and attentiveness - that enter subjective experience as the expectation that things will make sense generally" ([Vogler, 2002, p. 625](#)). Although Salazar is concerned with myth making in tourism, he does show that the purveyor of the tourism imaginary is well able to develop a myth of appeal to the tourist when he describes the harem. Equally, if an

'imaginary' is matter of attentiveness that addresses forgetfulness – then the 'imaginary' of the souvenir can fulfil that function. The temporality of the holiday comprises the expectation, reality and recall of the holiday ([Ryan, 2002](#)). Given this, as [Richards \(2011\)](#) argues, the tourist space possesses the potential to be a creative space, and the sellers of Hôi An, it is suggested below, possess the creativity of selection and myth creation.

3. The research

Certainly Hôi An itself has been a subject of research. Conducting further research in Hôi An can be justified on a number of grounds. First, as an UNESCO inscribed World Heritage site the town possesses importance as a tourism, cultural and heritage centre. It is a major tourism location in Vietnam, and tourism in Vietnam has been growing as elsewhere. Domestic tourism in Vietnam in 2000 involved some 11.2 million trips. By 2013 it was 35 million. Equally international visitation climbed from 3.4 million in 2006 to 7.5 million for 2013. In February 2014 Hôi An itself greeted its 6 millionth visitor since 1995 ([Hôi An World Heritage, 2014](#))

The town is approximately 30 km from Danang and 812 km from Hanoi to the north and 845 km from Ho Chi Minh City to the south. It occupies a central coastal location, and it was as a port that its fame initially depended. It was cited by UNESCO as "an exceptionally well-preserved example of a traditional Asian trading port" with a fusion of cultures that notably includes those of Vietnam, Japan and Portugal. Today it hosts a range of hotels including 5 star luxury hotels and modern shopping malls, but the old city is preserved as a non-traffic zone, with a mix of small retail outlets in a traditional Asian manner.

Past tourism research includes that of [Ha \(2006\)](#), [Di Giovine \(2009a, 2009b\)](#), and [James \(2010\)](#) and of course UNESCO (1999) in its documentation prior to the town being inscribed as a World Heritage Site. The touristic nature of Hôi An is caught by [Ha \(2006, p. 50\)](#) who writes:

In 2006, Hôi An had 71 restaurants and bars, 751 cloth shops, 202 galleries-souvenir-handicraft shops, 91 shoe-bag-lantern shops and about 207 others and hundreds vendors which were all to serve the demand of tourists in Hôi An ([Ha, 2006, p. 4](#)). Through observation in April of 2008, there are about 113 shops, which are cloth shops, shoes/bags shops, souvenir and craft shops and other kind of shops accompanied with many vendors along Tran Phu street.

In terms of this study the main souvenirs that were being sold were lanterns, clothing that ranged from t-shirts to traditional silk *ao dai* (long dress), local cakes made to traditional recipes, ceramics, and Japanese and Chinese themed items related to festivals, paintings and drawings.

[Di Giovine \(2009a\)](#) and [James \(2010\)](#) trace the antecedents of the development of Hôi An as a tourist destination. They describe the old town and the manner in which it has evolved as a protected area based upon (a) its seventeenth century architecture, (b) the efforts of the municipal and tourism authorities in limiting the forms of retail operations to be found in the core of the tourism quarter and (c) the policies of developing festivals based on selective readings of past traditions. Both authors agree that the policy has been an economic success, turning a sleepy town facing several issues such as retaining young people into a bustling, busy myriad of streets that recreate the trading buzz of old. [Trinh, Ryan, and Cave \(2014\)](#) provide a description of the town, highlighting the ways in which tourists not only buy souvenirs that they believe are authentic but are also buying into a selective 'traditionality' of Hôi

An in that, as they point out, many aspects of the past are 'conveniently' silenced by the current promotion of the town whilst other areas are equally selectively promoted through various festivals such as the Japanese festival.

This research project was therefore designed as a case study based upon Yin's (1994) designation of case studies being pertinent where little is known about the issues. As noted above it adopted the mini-ethnographic approach suggested by Kennell and Sitz (2010) in their study of the Bonnaroo Music Festival as a method of observation and data collection (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001). The research was undertaken with a sample of 25 vendors known to the first author through previous contacts, and who therefore were willing to discuss issues of supply and authenticity. The number of 25 respondents was selected on two bases. First, a quasi-phenomenographic approach was adopted wherein the researcher attempts not to dictate the research agenda by overly pointed questioning, but rather probes by asking non-directive questioning by asking for examples of what the respondent states. This differs from the wholly phenomenographic approach cited by Marton (1986, 1994) because a semi-structured questionnaire was used as the basis of the discussion. Others such as Ryan, Ninov, and Aziz (2012) propose a much more open discursive approach. From social construction theory associated with psychologists such as Kelly (1963) and tourism scholars such as Pike (2012), it is generally recognized that repetition and saturation of responses tends to occur with approximately 15–25 respondents. The second reason was that using Ha's (2006) data on the structure of retailing in Hoi An 25 respondents would represent about 10% of the gallery-souvenir retail outlets, and hence replies might be representative of a larger number of respondents.

The answers given by respondents were recorded with their permission and additionally as the conversation proceeded notes were taken. The taking of notes was prompted by two reasons. First it was thought to signal to the respondent that their answers were significant, and second the notes could aid memory recall should there be a lack of clarity in the recordings. In the majority of instances the interviews were conducted at the place of business, and in those cases where no or insufficient help was available for the respondent, the interview would be interrupted by the retailer serving a client. The notes and recordings were in Vietnamese. The tapes were transcribed and then translated into English for analysis and subsequent writing. Given the interview material comprised over 34 h, the transcribing and translation work involved more than roughly 150 h of additional work.

The analysis involved three stages. First the text was read and reread several times by the authors. The second author initiated an analysis using textual software packages to help generate themes. This involves various 'cleaning' of the text in terms of tenses of verbs, the use of the singular and plural and the need to demarcate between words to sign their use of labels. Meanwhile the first author generated themes from the text. The third stage entailed obtaining agreement between the two forms of analysis.

The process of deriving meaning from the text was based on the principles noted by Miles and Huberman (1994). This is essentially a six-staged process following a sequence of:

- a) Noting patterns and themes. This is primarily conducted at a gestalt level, seeking the holistic patterns rather than subordinate details;
- b) Seeking plausibility – in this case this was done by seeking confirmation of ideas through the repetition of themes perceived in respondents' replies. This effectively is seeking confirmation through saturation, yet in doing this there is a need to value the 'tail' of responses as the outsider or idiosyncratic comment can possess value;

- c) The next stage is one of clustering – that is articulating the 'plausibility'; through processes of labelling themes, thereby creating a homogeneity within a cluster of comments, but a heterogeneity between such clusters;
- d) Observing relationships between clusters – this is where the analysis moves from an identification of themes toward a structuring of content with primary and sub-ordinate themes;
- e) Beginning to structure theory from the nature of the clusters of themes and their relationships.

4. The findings

The findings are broadly divided into two. The first section simply provides some information about the background of the respondents while the second discusses in more detail issues of perceived authenticity and source of supply.

4.1. Background and motives for the business

One of the first questions that was posed was 'what was it that attracted you to Hoi An?' Of the 25 retailers 12 had been born in the town and hence had family roots in the place. The primary motivation for those who had come from outside to establish their business in Hoi An was economic. This was perhaps at its clearest with respondent 5, who was originally from Danang and well into the conversation then admitted "Actually, I am a tour agent. At the moment, I am working with a tour company and the souvenir shop is my 'second' job, they are supplementing/helping each other to help me earn some more money. Having the souvenir shop is of course generating more income but it depends on what kinds of souvenirs you are doing as business because I have changed a lot of the souvenirs here ...".

However, while for such retailers the draw to Hoi An was the opportunity to take advantage of the growing numbers of tourists, this did not preclude them from possessing strong attachment to their adopted hometown. Respondent 7 had previously come from a coastal resort town and retained a souvenir shop at that location, something that was of use to him as it permitted various comparisons when selling souvenirs. But he went on to add "I like this place. I like the food, the people here, the atmosphere with its many many festivals." Respondent number 9 also commented about the ambience of Hoi An stating "No, I was not born here but I love this place. It is a place of cultural exchange where I can experience the unique heritage town with its friendly and hardworking people and nice culture, and yummy food!" Those born in Hoi An reinforced their liking for the town, its atmosphere, the friendliness of people and often spoke with pride of Hoi An.

4.2. Sources of supply

In terms of sourcing their supply there existed a ratio of about 3:2:2 between companies primarily sourcing supply locally, those sourcing about 50:50 between local and outside region supply and finally those primarily sourcing supply from outside the region. This represents a more diffuse picture than that suggested by Bui and Jolliffe (2013) who identify Kim Bong as a local source of crafts for sale in Hoi An. However the position is slightly more complex than these figures indicate and depend to a degree on the nature of the products being sold. For example, in the case of suits and dresses, while these may have been tailored by local people, the fabrics being used will generally have been imported from other parts of Vietnam, or even from overseas suppliers.

Examples of practice include the following:

We source from some areas nearby, not from factories but small businesses (for example, the clothes are sourced from the local tailors who buy materials and make them), or the lanterns are made by local people. Other goods are sourced from Hôi An and mainly the local areas but also Ho Chi Minh or Hanoi. ... No – (we do not source) from overseas.

There is a consistency from suppliers because there are a lot of suppliers, and 80% is from the local wholesalers or retailers.

The supply here is good, you only need to make efforts to sell. Even if (I run out of stock) I can run to other shops nearby to borrow and sell them because shops here are similar and use the same of suppliers, so you don't need to stock up too much.

Respondent Number 1

And again:

I don't have a factory or any workshops. There are some craft people here, and then I buy from Ho Chi Minh. The proportions from local sources is small, it depends much on what kinds of products. For example, tie or shirts, ... can be from local supply but other types like buffalo horn, ... it cannot be mainly from here because there are not many good craftspeople here.

Respondent Number 2

Consequently while recognizing that overall perhaps about 50% of the souvenirs are immediately sourced from local supplies that include local craftsmen, by the same token an equal percentage were emanating from outside the immediate Hôi An vicinity.

This finding supports the observation made by [Bui and Jolliffe \(2013\)](#), while in addition noting that imports from overseas also play a role. However, this paper differs a little in their findings in that (a) based on anecdotal evidence it is suggested that perhaps as much as 50% of the souvenirs are sourced from outside Hôi An, and (b) there was evidence of souvenirs being sourced from wider afield in Vietnam including Hanoi, while (c) it appears that overseas sourcing includes materials such as fabrics which are then fashioned into garments both in the immediate vicinity and elsewhere in Vietnam. Other specific materials being mentioned as being sourced from overseas included rhino horn, but it was not possible to trace the supplies in this study.

4.3. Seller perception of authenticity

Given the findings about supply, the question emerges as to what degree the sellers perceived themselves to be involved in selling artefacts possessing specificity to Hôi An? The responses evoked a series of detailed and often carefully considered responses. Two such examples are:

... (initial silence, then): .From my thoughts, I think that in order to answer this question, it depends on each buyers, their thoughts and whether they can judge if it (the souvenir) reflects the nature of this place or not. You can see that majority of souvenir shops here look very similar and I want to make my souvenir shops to be different from others via my dominant products (which are produced from buffalo) horn. Not many shops do business with these horn objects. With these products, from my own thoughts as a seller, I do think that my souvenirs here can reflect the nature of the local because souvenirs here are made from locals here, the labour and workers are from the local area, the material is from the local, too. They are all from local, not imported from outside. That is the nature of the

souvenirs and how they reflect this place. I am not quite sure about how much the souvenirs can reflect the culture but I think that people who have done these souvenirs should have the understanding, good taste and skills in art and culture to create good products of souvenirs to sell to tourists.

Respondent Number 2

This respondent however had previously admitted that few of the items were purchased locally, citing higher costs from local craftsman and uncertainty of supply as reasons as to why factories in Ho Chi Minh were preferred. Hence for this respondent some inconsistencies were noted in the statements being made.

Another seller of dresses also sought to distinguish the dresses as specific to Hôi An (and different from other shops in Hôi An) even though silk is reasonably ubiquitous to this part of Asia by saying:

The silk from Vietnam is different or the design in clothes are also different compared to silk in China or Japan though you see that this place has a shared history with them, We still can 'protect' the own way of silk here. That's why I named my shop XXXXXX (name of shop withheld) which emphasised difference with other shops here and different with other shops at other souvenir shops in Vietnam or Asian countries (respondent smiling while answering).

In short – the difference lay in design. This retailer nonetheless sourced many of the items from different sources and lay within the category of those who sourced approximately 50% locally and 50% from outside including Danang and Hanoi.

Not every respondent had difficulty in identifying the degree to which they considered their product to be authentic. Respondent number 9 simply stated:

Yes, of course. Each product can reflect some culture and the local people here. These are handmade from our staff and you can see that on each of these products will have the photo of the maker. All the products here We aim to reflect the Vietnamese culture from the leaf hats, lantern, dolls, cards ...

Many respondents cited the lanterns as being very traditional and closely associated with Hôi An because of the lunar lantern festivals held throughout the year while others extended this to the retention of past traditions even if not longer locally practised. As Respondent 25 stated:

The history of the Hôi An lantern started three centuries ago, is still continued today on the fourteenth night of each lunar month in this small town. Not only lanterns but other ceramics here are still kept and preserved to reflect the Sa Huynh culture in Hôi An. This Sa Huynh culture specialized in metal wares – especially bronze and iron – and ceramics with articles in terms of the souvenirs like jewelry - though these traditional vocational villages here are not well-developed more, even died-out but it still attracts some people who are still interested in this ware.

Analysing the responses with the aid of the textual analysis software program, Leximancer 3.5, it appears that the retailers are making a distinction between 'objective' and 'experiential' authenticities. Such a finding simply reinforces past research findings and commentaries such as those of [Cohen \(2012\)](#) and [Zhu \(2012\)](#), but this study contributes to the literature by indicating the bases of these perceptions on the part of the souvenir retailers. These are indicated in [Fig. 1](#). The Figure shows a linkage between the labels 'authenticity', 'souvenir' 'Hoian' which are linked to 'local', 'styles;

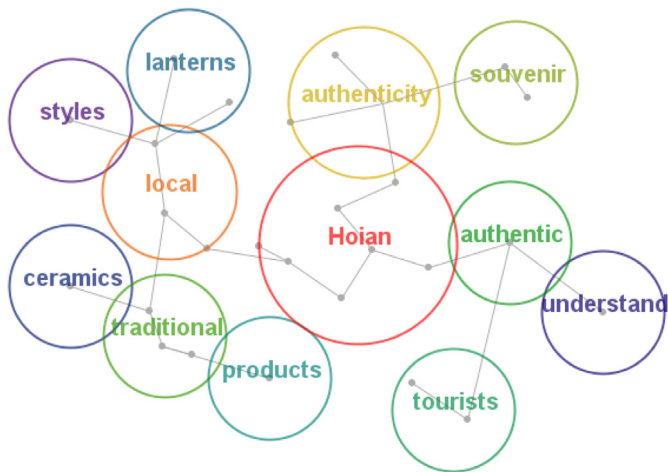


Fig. 1. Perceptual map of souvenir authenticity.

and 'lanterns'. Examining the text indicates that the retailers associate 'objective authenticity' with manufacture by local craftspeople, and the most common example of this arose in the case of lanterns. The promotion of regular lunar month lantern festivals has generated a steady demand from both final consumers (tourists) and intermediaries (retailers) for lanterns that can be readily supplied locally, and local manufacture is identified as the basis of 'authenticity' – especially if linked with a local heritage or cultural event. The 'experiential authenticity' is identified by the retailers as being generated by the tourists' perceptions when shopping. In Fig. 1 this is indicated by the separate but inter-linked labels of 'tourists', 'understand', and 'authentic' through 'Hoian' with souvenirs such as ceramics. Ceramics are the most common example of a generic representation of Vietnamese culture, and as noted above, are often sourced from outside of Hoi An, often from Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh (Saigon). Tourists impute authenticity to these items as they are purchased within the ambience of Hoi An as a representation of a local Vietnamese cultural and heritage centre. The finding is consistent with that of Di Giovine (2009a, 2009b), James (2010) and Trinh, Ryan and Cave (2014). James (2010, p17), for example, comments that: 'Crafting this image (of authenticity) is one of the primary balancing acts of preservation and economics. In making these decisions, officials are faced with the possible conflict between what is "authentic," what is a marketable cultural image, and what, if anything, should be "preserved" simply for posterity'. All three studies note the acts of selection of representation that promote Hoi An to the tourists, and thus an interactive symbiotic relationship is being suggested by the retailers whereby, although externally sourced, the items they sell are 'authentic' because they are perceived by the purchasers as representative of the ambience of Hoi An.

This issue of souvenirs representative of specific places is not new in the literature. It is discussed by Swanson and Tomothy (2012) and Light (2013) in a wider context, and with reference to Hoi An, by Di Giovine (2009a). It formed the subject of an open-ended question in this study, namely 'To what extent do the souvenirs you sell represent Hoi An?'

Among the responses this elicited were:

I don't know how to answer this question fully but you can see that Hoi An is famous for temples, people visit here mainly because they are interested in temples with the heritage and cultural values and my souvenirs are typical ones can reflect the traditional art and work of pottery and terracotta, which is good. I mean, it is not easy to find these cute and cultural products in

tourist cities or places but I think these products are quite meaningful and relevant to be sold at this heritage typical town. Especially, it is not too expensive for tourists to buy, it cost the same as a candy

Respondent 7

I think that it depends how you judge the nature of this place the products can reflect. For example, today is the Japan- Hoi An cultural exchange festival and I exhibit a lot of products that reflect not only this place but also this festival. I mean, you can see my stall is full of toys or products that have the symbols of Japan's culture like clever Doraemon Cat, Robot, some toys made by paper that are based on famous characters in famous Japanese swashbuckling films and tourists like observing and buying these as these cute souvenirs reflect this festival event, and this role of Japan in Hoi An history.

Respondent 13

These two responses indicate the complexity of the role of souvenirs as representations of place. Respondent 13's replies are based on the popularity of contemporary Japanese *anime* television characters and thus has seemingly little to do with the heritage identified by UNESCO (1999) that obtained Hoi An's inscription as a World Heritage Site. Yet the retailer refers to the Japanese connection in Hoi An's promoted history and the stock is being sold because it is popular with the tourists. It has been observed that 'cuteness' of characters is much appreciated by Asian cultures (for example the use of such characters as mascots of sporting events like the Beijing 2008 Olympics), although little appears about this in the tourism literature (but see Knight, Freeman, Stuart, Griggs, & O'Reilly, 2014). Nonetheless in this context of the Hoi An Japanese festival the Doraemon Cat can be perceived as a legitimate representation of a tourist's experience of a World Heritage site.

Not surprisingly the perceptual maps and other output from the textual software programs used to help analyse these responses are complex since the statements made by retailers were found to be nuanced in many different directions. The frequency analysis of word counts found that not only were the words 'souvenirs', 'authenticity' etc high on the list as might be expected, but more generic words such as 'ancient', 'traditional', 'Vietnam' frequently appeared (each being about 7% of case frequencies as defined by CatPac (Woelfl & Richards, 1989) while emotive and affective words such as 'experience', 'famous' and 'different' all had a role to play. Fig. 2 indicates one of the program outputs – this being from CatPac.

CatPac permits various modes of clustering technique. Basically the program allocates positions to the words in the text and uses clustering methods based on neighbourhood analysis. The default option is to use Ward's method, but as indicated above there were distinct weightings towards key conceptual words in the text such as 'souvenir', 'authenticity' and the names of various types of souvenirs, e.g. 'ceramics'. Given this a weighted complete linkage method was used. Complete linkage measures clusters from the furthest distance, while weighting is permitted where there is evidence of responsiveness to 'weight' – in this instance frequency of mention. The details of modes of analysis in clustering can be found in Everitt (1993). Compared to the use of Ward's method this approach reinforced an interpretation of the text as possessing a hierarchical nature from retailers considering two meanings of 'authenticity' to then subsequently providing examples to support their contentions.

Consequently in this analysis the singular word 'souvenir' was retained when used with reference to a particular item (e.g. lanterns) while the plural was retained when discussing a more general meaning. Similarly distinctions were retained for the words

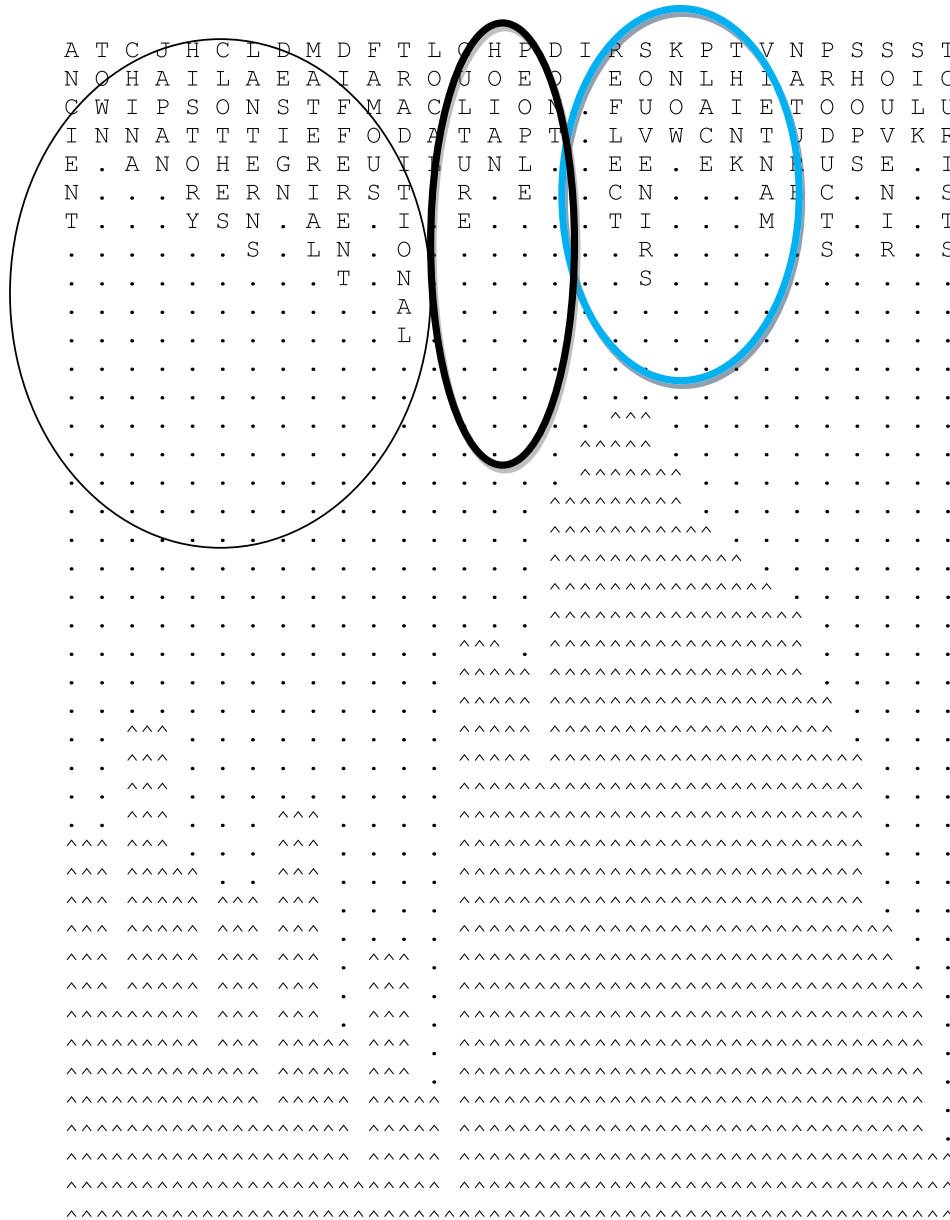


Fig. 2. Dendrogram generated from textual analysis program – CatPac – souvenirs reflecting.

‘authenticity’ (general) and ‘authentic’ (specific item). In the centre can be seen the point where retailers consider the questions and it can be noted that references are made to souvenirs reflecting Vietnam as the retailers spoke of the need for souvenirs to reflect a place, and then as one moves to the left, Hôi An appears as a label. The tendency within the conversations was to begin at the top of a hierarchy of concepts beginning with general observations about the importance of souvenirs reflecting place and then to move to the subsequently more detailed. Thus the left hand side of the dendrogram begins to identify the reasons for the comments. The themes that emerge are the souvenirs reflect Hôi An as an ancient town, it is location within which one can understand culture and Vietnam, and the lanterns and ceramics sold in the shops reflect these motifs.

5. Discussion

It was initially noted that within the tourism literature ‘authenticity’ has been a long established theme within the

literature and while Olsen (2002, p. 163) has described the concept as a ‘heteroglot’ and Bruner (2005) has provided evidence of its many meanings, it has nonetheless sustained a healthy discussion in the literature. Yet its many nuances have led some such as Reisinger and Steiner (2006, p. 66) to call for the concept to abandoned because it is ‘too unstable to claim the paradigmatic status of a concept’, while others like Ryan and Aicken (2005) have claimed the term misleads and the issue is one of who authorizes portrayals and for what purpose. For their part post-modernists have spoken of new fusions and hybrid forms of culture or understandings of heritage that emerge from the interactions of different actors at the place (Meethan, 1998), and indeed in this process the original disappears from sight (Baudrillard, 1998). Others have distinguished between objective and experiential authenticities (Wang, 1999) while Cohen (2012, p. 261) suggests that one needs to ask ‘how is authenticity possible?’ and ‘who makes it possible?’

Despite these different approaches and degrees of ‘slipperiness’ as a concept, authenticity has retained a central place in the

discussions of souvenirs as evidenced by Cave, Baum, and Jolliffe (2013) in their book on souvenirs. Hence, in the final chapter of their book they comment:

Theorising culture, place and identity examined the socio-cultural processes in play in the production of souvenirs delving into the roles of producers and retailers. Authenticity is central to these discussions, as the souvenirs produced and then marketed in a glocal encounter are subject to forces that marginalise the original, authentic and real, as the objects produced are compromised by the pressures of production, as material culture such artefacts are even marginalised by the cultures that produce them. A critical turn on the examination of souvenir encounters, exposes the role of retailers in the portrayal of place and identity.

Jolliffe, Cave, and Baum (2013, p. 195)

It is suggested that this study both meets the call made by Jolliffe, Cave, and Baum (2013) in studying the role of retailers in souvenir as items of authenticity, and equally indicates the relativity of the concept.

Entmann (1993) suggests that framework analysis is based upon selection and salience to define problems, diagnose causes, to judge and to suggest remedies. Using a framing approach the findings indicate that the retailers of Hôi An possess an attachment to Hôi An as a place and feel part of a tradition and culture of that place. That attachment has a two-fold pattern in terms of their businesses. They seek to sell things that holistically represent Hôi An as not simply a specific place with its own traditions (and thus they will supply from local suppliers) but also as a location within Vietnam. Their souvenirs reinforce an experience of Vietnam: in their eyes it may be said that Hôi An possesses it values, history and storytelling as a port within its country. They therefore see little issue in additionally sourcing and selling souvenirs that come from other parts of the country. They see themselves as contributing to a tourist's experience of both Hôi An and Vietnam, and, in seeing the tourist experience as being important, implicitly reinforce the notion of the tourist as prosumer, that is as some-one who both consumes an experience, but is also involved proactively in the creation of that experience (Ritzer, Dean, & Jurgenson, 2012). The attitudes shown reinforce the observation made by Wu et al. (2014) that souvenir purchasing can be a fun experience, especially perhaps when a bargaining process is engaged upon.

They are able to justify the sale of non-traditional items as in the example of *anime* characters or Japanese initiated designs on fans by reference to past history (Hôi An's links with Japan) – a selective act that is also commercial. They may be seen as inheritors of a trading tradition – the hustle and bustle of crowded streets is a contemporary enactment of past trading successes being born again since the designation of the city as a World Heritage site (Trinh, Ryan & Cave, 2014). They are knowingly part of a selective reconstruction of past traditions, creating new hybridities pertinent to the first part of the twenty-first century, and aiding the economic progress of the community of which they are part. Being in a state of 'knowing' is thought important because while attached to Hôi An, the retailers remain commercially motivated. This orientation toward shoppers' tastes may partly explain the examples of inconsistency found in the text above. The retailers do not question or seek to establish alternative stories of Hôi An, but rather celebrate a profile that emerged from the inscription of Hôi An as a World Heritage site. Yet they 'nuance' that site – Hôi An is not only a traditional seventeenth century setting – the businesses draw on an image of being Vietnamese, and yet willingly are also Asian in their roles of sellers of Chinese ware and Japanese *anime*. Colour,

bustle, life and commerce erode the carefully coded documentation that formed the basis of UNESCO inscribed historical status – and yet in process perhaps Hôi An becomes even truer to its past trading heyday when goods from all over Asia were sold, bargained and bartered. From old traditions new fusions of old and new may emerge, yet, paradoxically these new reinventions in their colour, busyness and noise come closer to the original than the museum-like objectivity of the inscribed city.

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