



Journal of Consumer Research, Inc.

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (June 2002), pp. 146-151

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/339927>

Accessed: 03/01/2013 13:50

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Reflections and Reviews

The Ego Factor in Tourism

DEAN MACCANNELL*

Tourists travel the entire globe to be in the presence of peoples, places, and objects they cannot buy or otherwise take possession of except in a spiritual sense. This essay explores the noneconomic relation at the heart of tourism, which is now said to be the largest economic sector in the world. The dominant way commercially successful destinations have organized touristic experience has been to model themselves as closely as possible on the ego. Other commodities sold on the basis of their intangible qualities may be implicated in the same narcissistic ego structure. Some questions are raised about the sustainability of ego-based consumption.

The collective behavior that fuels the global tourist economy is grounded in symbolic and psychic structures that remain mainly unexamined. Here is an interesting question. Why do people spend billions of dollars to get close to something they can never possess, which very often they are not allowed to touch or to breathe on? Factors that motivate tourist desire are mysterious and illusive, even to the tourists themselves. We know little about what it is that tourists consume. Answers that have been given in response to this question are fairly amorphous: for example, places and landscapes, (Sherry 1998), cultures (Greenwood 1977; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Sherry 1987), cities (Judd and Fainstein 1999), history (Boyer 1992), tradition (MacCannell 1994), and racialized difference (Rodriguez 2001). Sherry states that the "commodification of cultural forms" for tourists is implicit in the process of economic globalization: "the conversion of authentic, efficacious cultural forms into 'local color' over which tourists have rights occurs worldwide from Haight Ashbury to Harajuku, from Baffin to Bali." (Sherry 1987, p. 184)

This "commodification of cultural forms" implies a new

set of analytical problems for consumer researchers. Previous research on commodities and their consumption has mainly been focused on understanding the type of commodity proposed by Marx in *Capital* ([1887] 1965). Marx's examples were iron, corn, wheat, diamonds, gold, silver, bolts of linen, needles, yarn, coats, trousers, houses, cakes, coffee, and so forth. The tourist commodities named above (local color, tradition, racialized differences, history, etc.) are evidently different from the classical form of the commodity. The commodification of cultural forms and touristic experience reflects important historical changes in markets and consumer behavior that have taken place in the last 150 years. While my focus in this article is on what motivates tourists, the mutation of the commodity is spreading to other types of consumption. Thus, these comments may also potentially apply to experiential dimensions of lifestyle consumption, brand identification, hedonistic decisions, and other nontouristic patterns of consumption behavior. I am about to argue that the tourist commodity is different enough from the earlier forms to suggest the need for new analytic models. I will propose a psychoanalytic model as one approach to the tourist commodity and its relatives.

TOURIST CONSUMPTION AND OLDER FORMS OF THE COMMODITY

The main differences between the classical form of the commodity and the new, touristic-experiential commodity involve questions of ownership. Classic commodities may be individually owned. Ownership means they can be passed from a buyer to a seller in exchange for something of equiv-

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alent value. As Marx succinctly put it, “to become a commodity a product must be transferred to another, whom it will serve as a use value, by means of exchange” (Marx 1965, p. 41). It is precisely characteristic of tourist destinations, for example, famous natural landscapes, cities, cultures, heritage, tradition, ethnic and racial differences, that they are not subject to exchange. Tourists may visit these things, but they cannot buy them and take them home or resell them. The great attractions are looked upon, trod upon, commented upon, read about, wandered through, slept in, photographed, and sketched, but they remain in place and continuously available for other tourists to visit.

Tourist destinations may be treated as classic commodities up to a point; that is, they can be manufactured, as at Disneyland, and they can be marketed. They must be maintained, often at great cost. But they cannot be sold to tourists, at least not literally. The tourists are never permitted to possess them, in the sense of “to own” them. The rose window at Chartres is not for sale. Tourists cannot buy Minnie Mouse’s house at Toontown, the Mona Lisa, the Indianapolis Speedway, the Karakorum mountain range, New York City, or any of the other famous objects that motivate their travels. Tourism is widely acknowledged to be the basis for the world’s most rapidly expanding system of economic exchanges. Yet the attractions that motivate touristic travel are found in gaps in the economic system, in spaces that are protected from buying and selling.

Albert Borgmann has remarked, “what . . . consumption displaces . . . are things that have a life and dignity of their own—mountains, works of art, playing fields, and sacred places” (Borgmann 2000, p. 421). Touristic consumption may indeed displace things that have dignity, but I will argue that it does so at peril to itself. The tourist economy is fully dependent on the preservation of these things that have a dignity of their own and are not for sale. As I have already suggested, I suspect that tourism is not necessarily a special case. It would be fascinating to know just how much of our current consumer economy is dependent on social rituals and psychic pleasures and needs that stand outside of economic relations. On this point I agree with Mikita Brottman (1997) who argues that the ultimate object of every consumer’s desire is not the commodity that only seems to satisfy.

The Necessary Absence of an Economic Relation at the Heart of the Tourist Economy. This is an interesting paradox. At the core of the tourist economy there is an absence of economic relations. It is not a mere absence. It is a necessary absence. The attraction is the *X* factor in the tourist economy; it is the goose that lays the golden eggs. If the attractions were not kept outside the economic system, there would be no tourism. Thus, the driving force behind the expansion of the tourist economy (the attractions, the things the tourists come to see) occupies a gap in economic theory. Research on the economic behavior of tourists, tourists as consumers, and marketing for tourists, is potentially embarrassed by a general failure to grasp the implications of this absence of an economic relation at the heart of the

tourist economy. A sociologist who studies tourism and consumerism remarks somewhat spuriously that there is a “globalizing demand to consume as many goods and services as possible. Travel offers a way to expand consumption opportunities” (Mullins 1999, p. 246).

It is certainly true that economic exchange presses against the attractions from all sides. Tourists buy souvenirs; night stays in hotel and motel rooms; travel insurance; meals; luggage; backpacks; wrinkle-resistant clothing; sturdy shoes; bathing suits; waterproof watches; sun cream; insect repellent; cameras; film; film processing; video recorders; magnetic tape; plane, bus, and train tickets; cruises; packaged tours; museum entrance and beach access fees; tickets to sporting events; car rentals; condominium time-shares; recreational vehicles; and so on. This frenzy of purchasing is predicated on the noneconomic relation between the tourist and the attraction. They do not buy, indeed they cannot buy, what they travel to see or to experience.

Some of the people who have given this question the most thought manage to sound simultaneously apodictic and ignorant. Taking a hard look at the city, not from the standpoint of a tourist, but from that of someone seeking to get more money from tourism, an urbanist frets:

Many of the qualities that attract tourists (e.g., “heritage,” the range of accommodations, facilities such as sports stadiums or museums, night life, and culinary offerings) are frequently similar among competing cities. There are, for example, sufficient four-star restaurants in New York, San Francisco, Dallas, and a dozen other U.S. cities to satisfy any gourmet’s palate for two weeks. . . . Florence and St. Petersburg have great art museums, but hundreds of cities have galleries worth visiting. Chartres, Maduri, and Bangkok boast world-famous religious architecture, but many cities have a notable cathedral, temple, or mosque. How, then, does the generic city, one with a range of suitable but not extraordinary attractions, market itself to compete with other similar cities? (Holcomb 1999, p. 56)

So far, the best answer to this question that practical consumer research has given is to hire a generic consultant with a range of suitable but not extraordinary insights. We can do better.

Comments like the one just cited are valuable because they point to the irrationality and the mystery of tourist motivation. There are a number of articles in the recent literature that approach consumer behavior as an “identity project” (Thompson and Tambyah 1999) and even as the work of the “unconscious” (Zaltman 2000). If tourists are perpetually in motion toward something they may not have, we should look for clues in the psyche. I will argue below that commercially successful tourist attractions are those that are modeled on the structure of the ego, those that stage a narcissistic relation between ego and attraction. Let me say in advance there will always be a certain amount of discomfort and resistance to psychoanalytic approaches because our psyches are not something we can all be proud

of. I am not suggesting that the psychoanalytic staging of attractions is necessarily consciously understood or intended by those responsible for the creation and maintenance of successful tourist destinations. It is simply a formula that works and is often copied.

EGO

After Freud and Lacan, we know that ego is the part of the human subject responsible for its integration. It is the source of objectivity, or belief in the possibility of objectivity. The ego is the bedrock of every identity project. If the subject were merely subjective, if it was free of ego, it would melt into air as millions of disconnected thoughts and impressions. Ego is the site of authority, mastery, and control. The ego is what pins everything and everyone, including itself, down, pronouncing, "there, that's the way it is!" It defends its pronouncements with logic, demonstrations, and proofs. It is the producer of all formal unities. It can take a bewildering array of sense impressions and make something of them. Leaving home and one's immediate circle of family and friends, then coming back, and returning as the same person, even an improved version of the same person, is perhaps the best standardized test the ego has devised for itself.

The ego claims to have an identity, and it demands of others that they respect its claim. With its every gesture, the ego is saying, in effect, "Look at me. Look up to me." This is very easy in the narcissistic relation when it is only the self talking to the self. It can get dicey in actual interaction. One of the great advantages of tourist contexts for the ego is that local people have indulgently predicated their relations with tourists on the assumption that tourists are egomaniacs. Even small egos may benefit from this arrangement.

Language cuts the ego. Grammatically, "I" is subject not predicate, so the ego, which is most likely prelinguistic in origin, defends itself in advance against the operations of language. Its domain is not language but consciousness in a kind of hardened state, thought made corporeal, the body. The ego prefers visual signs and cues similar to the communication strategies of advertising. The ego tries to stand outside of language. Words can only build it up or tear it down. It reduces everything, even language, to a centralizing, unifying, self-exaltation. The subtext of every utterance and gesture is "Are you for me or against me?" A setting composed of universal visual symbols but no common language is enormously comforting to the ego, a true vacation.

The singular drive of the ego is to keep itself whole. Its greatest fear is dismemberment or dissolution. Why? Because the ego is nothing but a reflexive mental construct. It is pure lack so it can never admit lack.

Even in its relatively peaceful, secure state, even when it thinks it is winning and in charge, it is a bit paranoid, a bit jealous, a bit aggressive, and a bit self-aggrandizing in its affairs. When it is threatened, its rages are what give ultimate meaning to paranoia, jealousy, and aggression. It protects

itself with silence and by hardening its outer shell. This is a furtive defense. A hardened outer shell always suggests a soft interior.

The ego can enter into real relations only with itself. It sustains itself with fantasies of its own superior dignity and power. When it must join with others for its own survival, that is, for biological or cultural reproduction, its impulses are blocked by a sense of danger. The ego dreads its reproductive responsibilities because sexual relations always involve a risk of loss of its own unique integrity and independence. The ego's sexuality always has an element of aggressivity, aggression being its only means of sexual expression. The ego dreams of asexual reproduction: the erection of monuments and nonconsequential sex, or tourist sex.

THE SUPEREGO AND THE CHANGING SYMBOLIC ORDER

A few parallels between the structure of the ego and the tourist experience have been suggested above. The relationship between the ego, tourism, and consumerism runs much deeper. From the beginning of civilization until recent times, social equilibrium was assured by a series of super-egoic injunctions. These took the form of negative imperatives that functioned at the level of law and as the voice of conscience: thou shalt not kill, steal, covet thy neighbor's wife, and so forth. Each of these imperatives was designed to block the ego's potential for unrestrained excess. The superego opposed itself to the excesses of the ego so as to guard the stability of the sociosymbolic order.

The last 150 years have brought a profound historic change in this arrangement. This historic period not coincidentally corresponds to the mutation of the commodity form discussed in the first sections above. There has been a hostile takeover of the symbolic order by capital, and a consequent transformation of the superego. The old negative ("thou shalt not") imperatives are weakening, and they are being supplanted by a new positive morality: for example, you should be a big player in the dominant economic system; you should be a millionaire by the age of 30; your life should resemble a beer commercial with volleyball at the beach and barbecues; you should rollerblade to work, you should work out at the gym and have a nice day—everyday; and you should retire at 35. A deep structural change has occurred. There is no longer an opposition between the superego and the ego. Everything the new superego is saying is music to ego's ears. Insofar as these new positive moral injunctions hold sway, the ego and the superego are in alignment. This is the psychic formula for the excesses we are experiencing today in the most economically developed areas of the world.

The historic alignment of the ego and the superego under advanced capitalism is classically described by Jacques Lacan in his *Seminar III: The Psychoses* (1993). For elaborations of Lacan's insight, see Juliet MacCannell's *Regime of the Brother* (1991, pp. 9–40) and Slavoj Žižek's *For They*

Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor (1991, pp. 9–31 and 232–241).

Evidence for this change is not merely in the visible abundance of corporate symbols in society and discourse such as Disney, McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Sony, and so forth. It is in the successful creation of entire, new symbolic environments, not just for amusement but for work and everyday domestic life. These environments are no longer found just at Disneyland and Walt Disney World. They are at La Defense in Paris, Times Square, Hong Kong, and Disney's new town, Celebration, Florida. These planned and redesigned environments are "Tomorrowland" today. It is not the land of any actual tomorrow. These are symbolic environments in which an exhaustively detailed version of tomorrow, a nostalgic futurism, effectively prepares both tourists and residents (the distinction is breaking down) for a world in which there are no meaningful differences except brand identities. All local cultures are scheduled to be replaced with reassuringly domesticated false exoticism. In this ideal tomorrow, every identity, even oppositional ones, are market niches and are, in fact, defined only by discrete sets of commodities, including destination decisions. The ultimate goal of this development of civilization is to create new fields of vision and new human subjects whose imaginations are homologous with corporate public relations, advertising, and government spin. In this way, all the peoples and cultures in the world are prepared in advance for the unimpeded, restless movement of capital.

EGO MIMESIS IN CORPORATE TOURISM

The best evidence for the alignment of the ego and the newly corporatized superego is the formula for tourist attractions built by corporations. These attractions precisely mirror the structure of the ego, reflecting back on the tourists their ego ideals and confirming them in their ego self-satisfaction. This has been the secret of Disney's success. Disneyland (Anaheim, Tokyo, and Paris) and Walt Disney World are fictional habitats for tourists that were built on the principle of ego mimesis and on the positive superegoic command to enjoy (MacCannell 1991, pp. 43–72). The X factor in the tourist economy is no longer an unknown. It is the ego-mirroring component of the attraction. Mimesis means to imitate, mimic, or copy. The tourist experience, the tourist destination, increasingly the entire environment built by advanced capitalism, are mimetically modeled on the structure of the ego.

In brief, successful amusement parks are conceptually unified and planned to their last detail. (The ego is the part of the human subject responsible for its integration.) They run smoothly and are administratively controlled to prevent anything from going wrong. (Ego is the site of authority, mastery, and control.) The Disney corporation exercises absolute control over their internal functions and their image in the wider world. The concept on which they are founded can be cloned. New versions are built, regardless of cultural

context, with no loss of the park's essential identity. (The ego is the bedrock of every identity project.) These parks are insistent on getting everyone's love and attention. (With its every gesture, the ego says "Look at me. Look up to me.") They violently suppress any potentially embarrassing or discrediting facts, even minor ones. Their appeal is not via language but to the senses. (Language cuts the ego.) Every human and natural difference is rounded off, domesticated, and made into a reassuring cartoon version of itself. The parks are walled off from the surrounding social context. They make a business of asexual delights.

In short, these parks represent otherness in the mode of harmless fakery, while mirroring all the qualities of the ego. They are well-bounded, organized, entertaining, neat, self-made, self-contained, self-sufficient, and fun. They are everything that a marvelous ego would want to be, and the perfect place for an ego to go on vacation. They reflect back onto the ego nothing that does not confirm it in its self-satisfaction. They constitute an effective field for unrestrained narcissism.

The various essays in the recent book *The Tourist City* are unified by their advocacy of an ego-mimetic approach to urban planning for tourism. One of the editors, Dennis Judd, specifically recommends, in "Constructing the Tourist Bubble," the creation of a protected space for tourists within the city (Judd and Fainstein 1999, pp. 35–53). In the same volume, Saskia Sassen and Frank Roost argue that for the city to function as a tourist attraction, it must be rebuilt as a kind of soft-core exotica made safe for suburbanites. Judd and Fainstein recommend that the troubling aspects of urban life be excluded from the tourist bubble. Specifically, any sign of poverty or of manual labor should be excluded. This discussion should serve to indicate the size of the investment in transforming tourist destinations into enormous copies of the ego.

The tourist bubble approach to the manufacture and marketing of tourist experience is safe and unimaginative. It is based on the fact that everybody has an ego, and, therefore, the appeal of ego-mimetic approaches to creating destinations for tourists should be universal. Russell Belk (Belk 1993; Belk and Costa 1995) has provided helpful critiques of the tourist bubble as well as an overview of tourism in a global market perspective.

The same ego logic is not lost on those who manufacture and sell other commodities. The ego also goes shopping for itself. And the ego actually believes that it is enhanced by all the wonderful things it surrounds itself with. The ego pauses over every item of attire, cosmetic, and accessory that builds up surface appearances while effectively obscuring anything that might be happening within. It will snap up anything that has an aura of power and aggressivity. It especially identifies with the automobile with its steel skin and soft interior, with its ideal synthesis of power, control, and silence, perhaps the most ego mimetic of all commodities.

SOME PROBLEMS WITH EGO-MIMETIC STRATEGIES

As safe as ego-mimetic strategies might seem, there are clouds on the horizon. There are three problems with the ego-mimetic approach to the construction of corporate tourist attractions and other commodities.

1. In spite of corporate efforts to calibrate the collective superego to the (consumer) ego, a perfect alignment is not possible. Traditional constraints (i.e., concerns about the future, children, sustainability, and matters of human character) continue to provide resistance to the unrestrained excesses off the ego in partnership with the newly permissive superego. There remains a deep opposition of interests between producer and consumer that can only be covered up, and never gotten rid of, by cultural engineering. This is excruciatingly evident in brand-choice decisions, such as between Bounty, Brawny, Scott, and Viva. For the consumer, which towel they choose is an utterly meaningless decision. It is not a part of their identity quest. None are more or less likely to gratify their ego needs. But a small shift in market share can mean life or death to the producer. Hence, the frenzy of research around these decisions. The shoe is on the other foot in product-harm crises. A trivial corporate decision not to provide a three dollar metal protective collar around the gasoline fill tube in a Ford Pinto can literally mean life or death to consumers.

In the tourist economy, there is always an undertow of skepticism about corporate attractions, no matter how successfully they deliver narcissistic ego satisfaction. On entering Disneyland, who has not thought, even if for only a moment, one of the following: I am being ripped off; the hype oversells the actual experience; I was blackmailed by my kids to bring them here; or it is like an assembly line, and I am the product.

2. The new superegoic injunctions to get rich quick and to enjoy the good life are also met with increasing skepticism. Millions of people who got this message and tried their best to obey it have found themselves saddled with several lifetimes of credit card debt. Entry-level jobs are increasingly low-paying, dead-end, service-sector work with no benefits. To the vast majority of those trapped in such positions, the new superegoic imperatives sound like cruel taunts. In the current economic context, even the ubiquitous "have a nice day" can sound like it comes from the lips of a perverted sadist as he administers yet another torture.

The potential effect of this on tourism is to produce a desire to flee from corporate environments. This is certainly evident in the migrations of millions of young Europeans who spend the year between college and work bumming around the world. They assiduously avoid corporately controlled tourism as much as possible.

3. The ego is going out of fashion. It should be evident from the outline provided above that the ego is not among the more alluring of human attributes. Everyone must have some ego, or they would cease to exist. But every relationship that can be called human requires attenuation of the

egos involved. The growing popularity of environmental, conservation, simple-living, and other similar movements are all founded on a willingness to curb the ego and its demands. The transformation of the city into a tourist bubble is a disaster for everyone who is attracted to the city because of its sophisticated pleasures that are accessible only to those who keep their egos in check. Tourists and urban residents alike, who are open to being transformed by their encounters with otherness, will find tourist bubbles to be bland and odious (MacCannell 2001). The ego is going out of fashion, or at least some of its more excessive expressions, and ego-mimetic strategies will be repulsive to those who may be interested in the search for authentic otherness, however elusive such a destination may be. Time will tell whether tourists prefer Disney's "California Experience" to the real thing or whether its fate will be to become the Edsel of theme parks.

CONCLUSION

Tourism is touted as the fastest-growing and largest economic sector in the world. It is deeply ironic that this engine of growth for so many local economies is economically nonrational. Traveling internationally for purposes of sight-seeing will not cause your savings to grow, will not result in advancement at work, will not prepare you to switch to a better paying job. It is possible to spend tens of thousands of dollars on an international tour and return home with nothing more than a suitcase full of dirty laundry and some exposed film. There are, of course, many other commodities sold primarily on the basis of their experiential dimensions, where the "goods" are mainly intangible. But there is no case as clear-cut or as developed in this regard as tourism.

In this article, I have proposed a psychoanalytic model to account for some, not all, tourist behavior. My focus here has been on ego projects that are supported by visits to commercialized attractions: for example, theme parks, urban reconstruction for tourists, movie studio tours, and museum and other displays that emulate theme parks. My aim has been to examine a kind of consumer behavior that is technically irrational when it is viewed from a classical economic perspective. I have tried to demonstrate that this kind of tourism makes sense as an ego project when it is viewed from a psychoanalytic perspective.

It is reasonable to assume, given the economic success of tourism, that other commodities and sectors of the economy will become increasingly dependent on psychic factors. Already, savvy corporations are beginning to emphasize the "recreational" and "familial" dimensions of their jobs and workplaces. Membership in exercise spas and sports clubs, break rooms with video games and espresso bars, and so forth, all attempt to cater to the psychic needs of employees. The drive here seems to be to try to make work resemble, as much as possible, recreational travel. The shopping experience is being put through a similar transformation. It is no longer sufficient for a consumer simply to need to buy something. Now they need to be entertained, and the shopping experience must also resemble recreational travel.

It is evident that merely economic factors are no longer capable of pulling the economy. What are the implications of this? Clearly, the viable corporations and governments of the twenty-first century will be those that successfully shape culture and the psyche. In order to survive, governments and corporations will need to take over the ground once occupied by humanistic thought and religion. We are already witnessing this beginning to happen. Early efforts have been mainly clumsy. The human type that has been put forward as a corporate twenty-first century ideal in the West is "hard bodied," shallow, acquisitive, uncritical, hedonistic, chauvinistic, selfish, and mean. This is very different from the Asian ideal of a chief executive officer who also contributes to classical philosophy, poetry, or painting.

The main reason the western corporate psychic ideal is so crude has been an overemphasis on the ego as the primary model for commercial tourist attractions, other commodities, corporate organization, urban design, and the like. The ego is only one of many psychic structures. Other structures include the unconscious, neurosis, psychosis, perversion, and the ethics of pleasure. These other structures are in play whether or not they receive the kind of heavy social and economic subsidies that have been historically granted to the ego. In this essay, I confined my remarks to the operations of the ego and did not touch on the other psychic dimensions that are shaping our twenty-first century economic and consumer behavior.

There is need for a serious collaboration among consumer researchers, economists, and psychoanalytic theorists and critics. Consumer researchers can develop better skill in applying psychoanalytic concepts for stronger analysis of their domain areas. There is some evidence in the literature for a cursory application of concepts like the unconscious, but the full power of psychoanalytic tools has not been tapped. On the psychoanalytic side, clinicians and critics need to take more responsibility for the project of a psychoanalytic cultural analysis so clearly outlined by Freud and Lacan. Overall, there is substantial need for more serious initiatives along these lines for advanced study of tourism or any other commodity that is embedded as much in the psyche as it is in the economy.

[David Glen Mick served as editor for this article.]

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