



Paradox of the spectacle: Western tourists’ simulated experience of Asian cultural performances

Asif Ijaz, Research fellow in business administration
Nord University Business School, Norway

Background and Aim

- Prior research explores that cross-cultural experiences are extremely complex, overwhelming and stressful for different cultured-individuals and they might feel disoriented and anxious (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Zane & Mak, 2003)
- Cross-cultural consumption research is underdeveloped area (Gupta, 2016)
- This study explores Asian wedding-rituals' experience as a set of spectacular consumption for Western tourists and identifies paradoxes between the host and the guest

We explore the following key question:

How Asian weddings become a Western spectacle?

Key arguments

- (1) Asian countries (highly culture- and religion-bound / practicing rituals) might offer spectacular consumption to Western tourists
- (2) Though unfamiliar language, however, symbolic visualization provides deep immersion

Reasons why Western tourists participate

- Desire to meet ‘newness’
- Experience ‘uniqueness’ of other’s culture
- To escape from everyday life and disenchantment

Motivation for Asians having 'Strangers'

- Meeting financial needs of extremely high-cost weddings
- A way to share Asian culture, traditions and rituals with Western world
- To socialize with Western world and making new friends across borders

Theoretical framework

Spectacular consumption

“everyday demonstration of capitalist-driven phenomena through advertisements, TV, films, celebrities that leads to mass consumption as a way of life”
(Debord (2014 [1967]))

Mass consumption replaces use value with sign value (semiotics), fabricated appearance

Cathedrals (and landscapes) of consumption

offers “magical, fantastic, and enchanted settings for consumption such as shopping malls, museums, mega-churches, educational institutions offer ”
(Ritzer, 2010)

Marketplace transformation: from goods & services to spectacles, fantasy worlds

Performance and tourist gaze

Deighton (1992) concept of performance consumption in weddings, funerals and all staged events

Tourist Gaze: “seeing the world from a particular lens of ideas, skills, desire and expectations”
(Urry and Larsen, 2011)

Methodology

Context of this study is Asian wedding-rituals' consumption because of its cultural richness and complexity. We refer it complex due to five reasons; varying culture- and religion-bound rituals’ performance, distinct roles of the individuals, conspicuous consumption, various processes, too many objects and huge number of guests.

This study is based on narrative research approach and we conducted 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Western tourists who participated (paid/unpaid) in Asian weddings.

Sampling criteria: (1) Western tourists who participated in Asian weddings (within Norway or abroad) within past 10 years (2) traveled physically to the place of event (3) were unfamiliar with the visiting culture and rituals (4) had unguided tour of the place they visited

Data has been analyzed through hermeneutics framework using meaning condensation approach by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) to identify meaning units i.e. (part vs. whole contextualizing).

Findings

- We find a disagreement and unsettled conflict between the host and the guest where Western tourists perceive Asian wedding's rituals and cultural performances as an experience, however, for host it is a pure religious event that should not be perceived in any case as an experience
- Despite unfamiliar host language limits understanding, however, fascinating symbolic visualization of cultural performances in Asian weddings still provide deep immersion, magical, fantastic and enchanted experience to Western tourists
- Rich-cultural settings such as Asian weddings can be considered as cathedrals of consumption that provide consumers several consumption opportunities at one place
- Western tourists negate that cross-cultural experiences are stressful and overwhelming, rather they see it as once-in-a-lifetime opportunity

Conclusion and implications

Asian weddings offer series of spectacular and fascinating experiences to the Western tourists since Asians are highly culture- and religion-bound, therefore, they perform distinct rituals in their weddings that attract interest of Western tourists.

In post-modern times where Asian weddings are being marketed to the Western tourists as a product , nonetheless, host and guest interaction can end in a way of disagreement and conflict even it is a paid-experience.

Our findings suggest that fascinating symbolic visualization of cultural performances in Asian weddings can provide deep immersion, magical, fantastic and enchanted experience to the Western tourists.

This research focuses on Asian-Western context, therefore, further research is needed in other settings for example in African and other geographical settings to determine whether our findings apply outside the Asian-Western context.



Contact

Asif Ijaz, Research fellow in business administration
Nord University Business School, Norway
asif.ijaz@nord.no