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**Toward a New Perspective of Producing Tourist Art: The Native American Artists' View**

The purpose of this study was to understand the experience of producing tourist art from the indigenous artists' perspective. An exploratory qualitative research method was employed. In-depth, individual interviews were conducted with nine Native American artists in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Phenomenological analyses of the interviews revealed that the artists acknowledged tourist art production as an activity of cultural maintenance. However, the artists also expressed their discomfort with a stereotype of their art as import bargaining merchandise. The findings suggest a need for educating tourists in regard to honor the indigenous tourist art.

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## **Introduction**

Tourist art refers to “ethnic art and craft products, produced for an ‘external’ audience, namely an audience that is typically unfamiliar with the culture and authentic criteria of the producer’s society” (Cohen, 1993, p. 1). Along with the boom of ethnic tourism in which tourists enjoy indigenous culture and purchasing local items as tangible reminders of their unordinary experience (Littrell, Anerson, &, Brown, 1993; Rosetta, 1984), tourist art is currently a major component of the tourism industry.

On one hand, the promotion of tourist art can serve as an opportunity for indigenous artists to maintain their culture because they can present the art to external world as an image of their cultural identity (Graburn, 1976; McKean, 1989). On the other hand, the artists may encounter tourists who merely seek inexpensive and portable items and do not understand the cultural meanings of the art (Rosetta, 1984; Smith, 1996).

The recent global growth of ethnic tourism and the Internet has extended the indigenous art market from a local one, to nationwide, or even a global market. This expansion is anticipated to have tremendous impact on the nature of indigenous art and artist communities. In fact, studies of tourist art have been conducted from different focal points; for example, the economic impact (Hall, 1996), and the transformation process of art’s appearance and functions (Cohen, 1993; Graburn, 1976). However, less study has been conducted from the artists’ perspective. An investigation of the artists’ experience in producing tourist art may offer some insight of the artistic transformation process. Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore the experience of producing tourist art from the artists’ point of view.

## **Method**

Because not much was known about the experiences of tourist artists, an exploratory qualitative approach was utilized. Phenomenology provided the theoretical background of the adopted research method. Creswell (1998) explained that phenomenology addresses the meanings and the essence of experience of the phenomenon for people from their own perspectives.

Nine Native American artists in New Mexico were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The sample consisted of six males and three females. Their ages ranged from 43-64 with a median age of 62. The number of years in the business ranged from 17 to 53 years. They display their works at the Palace of the Governors, a well-known tourist site in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and at various art shows across the country.

Individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted with each artist. The interviews were followed with semi-structured, open-ended questions. The artists were asked to portray their satisfying and dissatisfying experiences in producing art for tourists. The verbatim transcripts from the interviews were analyzed by a constant comparison approach to identify emerged meanings and themes.

## **Result**

### *Role of Cultural Promotion*

All of the artists interviewed acknowledged the tourist art production as a means of cultural maintenance. They commented, “it is an educational process to make the public aware of our culture.” The artists attempted to explain the meanings of the symbols on their art to their customers. One stated, “I give [my customers] meaning of my piece, and they like it because it

becomes something that has meaning to them.” The artists also utilized other approaches, such as offering demonstrations and showing videos, to enhance the understanding of the traditional production processes.

### *Tourists' Perceptions of Art*

Although the artists maintained positive attitudes toward producing art for tourists, they were disappointed by not being able to render enough information to their customers. The common barrier identified was tourists' lack of desire and time to listen to them. They noted, “Tourists just don't listen” and “tourists only meet you once. It's hard to get real exchange of ideas.”

Moreover, all of the artists stated that they had been displeased with tourists who complained about the prices of their art. According to the artists, the majority of tourists have a stereotype of tourist art as mass-produced or imported imitations despite the fact that the artists produce each piece themselves by hand. Consequently, the tourists devalue the quality of the art and disagree with the prices offered. One described his experience:

“They pick it up and see the price, and they put it down. In a way, it really insults me because they thought they could have bought that with 25 dollars but they're paying 100 dollars. They perhaps may feel that those are something imported...mass-produced”.

Similarly, tourists often judge the art according to its appearance and do not appreciate the craftsmanship. One said, “They ask me, ‘how come is this so small and expensive?’ It makes me a little mad because they depend on the size and not the difficulty of making it.”

## **Discussion**

Findings of this study indicated that the artists considered producing art for tourists as one method of cultural maintenance. They, however, also suffered from a misconception about the value of their art among tourists. This finding correlated with Rosetta's (1984) study that warned ethnic art was challenged by imported items that were inexpensive and of low quality.

The results suggest a need to improve the approaches to educate tourists in order to make the best use of tourist art as a promotional strategy and as a sustainable activity for indigenous cultures. The artists pointed out that although they attempted to educate tourists the value of their art, tourists tended to have insufficient time and were unwilling to learn. With recent development in Internet and information technology, it is possible to provide information about local art to tourists during their pre-trip planning stages. Materials for planning a trip, i.e., travel brochures, magazines, and websites, might be effective tools to use in disseminating detailed information regarding functions, significance, production processes, and authenticity of the art. Moreover, if explanatory documents are provided along with purchases, it may help to and reinforce knowledge about the art after the trip.

This study revealed the artists' experiences of encountering tourists. Future studies might concentrate on tourists' perceptions of tourist art to understand the dynamics of ethnic tourism as a whole. Moreover, question regarding artists' experience with their peer needs to be investigated to examine the changing dynamics caused by tourism.

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