

New Zealand's future: the potential for knitting tourism

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to gain an understanding of why the phenomena of knitting is important in society and an explanation of the underlying currents for tourism.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The paper presents a futurist's observations and reflections.*

Findings – *Why is knitting making a comeback? Consumers are shutting the door on the world and cocooning thus returning to the world of crafts and hobbies as a way to seek enjoyment. An interest in authenticity and the past as an escape from the present. Single people looking for something to do in an urban world, thus some consumers have turned to knitting. Today, the authors are seeing niche holiday providers offering knitting cruises, knitting escapes and knitting adventures. For New Zealand the home Merino wool knitting tourism has the potential to be bigger than bungee jumping (some would say).*

Originality/value – *The trends paper provides an insight of the key trends from a societal perspective of what knitting means and its manifestation as a tourism experience. The value to operators is understanding those trends in context of why the phenomena is occurring.*

Keywords *Tourism, New Zealand, Trends, Hobbies, Knitting, Niche*

Paper type *General review*

Searching for an explanation

I (Ian Yeoman) was in the gent's toilet the other day and I saw an advert for a Knitting Club over the urinals. Is this something odd or a representation of a new trend? Why the gent's toilet? New Zealand is full of sheep, therefore knitting seems to be the obvious hobby? Could this be the future, I pondered? Looking for an explanation I searched through a range of databases to find an answer. So, what is the answer I found? This paper is a personal reflection of the trends shaping the niche market of knitting tourism. Although knitting tourism is a relatively small market, the value of the paper lies in understanding the motivations and trends behind a niche market as future tourism focusing on activities or short breaks need to understand those trends and motivations. As tourists are travelling more often and have greater choice, destinations need to find reasons to attract visitors for repeat visitation. These are my observations

Observation 1: authenticity

According to Faith Popcorn (2007) consumers are shutting the door on the world and cocooning. For example, interest in interior design means a renewed interest in heritage and tradition as an active reaction to uncertainty about the future. This uncertainty is a representation of anxiety amongst consumers with high levels of debt, job insecurity and increasing everyday pressures of consumers living a complicated life. A shift in fashion is occurring. There is a renewed interest in vintage and authenticity rather than designer labels. As much as global consumers continue to embrace the convenience and reliability delivered by

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globalised mass production, they also aspire to an alternative to the perceived homogenisation of contemporary culture, food and leisure experiences. The consumer's search for the "real" – which we define as Authentic-seeking (Yeoman, 2012; Future Foundation, 2012) – has a number of implications for consumer-facing sectors: from the way companies package and market their offers to how they interact with their customer base. Products with a clearly communicated hinterland – be it cultural, historical, environmental or geographical – can hold significant appeal for global consumers. Many enjoy understanding more about a product's heritage – from its cultural and historical provenance to the detail of where, how and by whom it was created and the ingredients it comprises. Considerable status is also bestowed upon those owning the original (and therefore more authentic therefore more authentic) version of a particular product. Authentic-seeking has also become associated with the accumulation of knowledge. The holiday trip, for example, has become so much more than an excuse to simply laze in the sun. Instead, modern holidaymakers wish to experience different cultures and to sample local foods and leisure activities particular to a region or country; they wish to immerse themselves in the local vernacular. Such collectible experiences in turn become rich sources of social and cultural capital and an important means of differentiating ourselves.

Observation 2: urban tribes

According to trend spotter, William Higham (2009) Aristo Chic has replaced Boho Chic. Wool sales are on the increase in shops. Crafts and old fashioned skills are in demand. The knitting club is the new book club. Guerrilla knitting (sessions are happening on public transport and knit-ins are being organised across the world. Books like *Stitch 'n Bitch SuperStar* (Stoller, 2010), *Son of Stitch 'n Bitch* (Stoller, 2007) (which is allegedly written for men) and the *Happy Hooker* (Stoller, 2006) are iconic cultural master pieces which have changed the image of knitting. Stitch 'n Bitch clubs (<http://stitchnbitch.org/>) are where knitters and crocheters get together on a regular basis to stitch and, well, you know. These clubs can be found all over the world from Waitotemarama Gorge to Abu Dhabi. It was Ethan Watters (2004) coined the term "urban tribes" in the 1990s, where friends are your new family. The 1990s TV show *Friends* is a representation of this, where friends get together to talk in the local coffee shop. These friends are highly educated, want to learn and acquire new skills. These people are also single, urban and like Bridgette Jones need a social network (Yeoman, 2008). We are seeing an increased interest and participation in natural well being rather than going to the gym. Pastimes like knitting and dancing are being reborn. From New York to Wellington there are umpteen dance classes for Tango, Ceroc and Salsa. All single people looking for something to do in an urban world. Today's consumer is more about inconspicuous consumption rather than flashy, in your face stuff. To a certain extent, bungee jumping is going out of fashion as an unnecessary evil. Consumers are saying (especially Americans); do not flaunt your wealth in front of me. For example, in the "meetings industry", if your facility has the title "resort" in it, it must be about fun and in contradiction to pharmaceutical industry regulations on hospitality and entertainment (Yeoman, 2008).

Observation 3: shared experiences

We are getting back to basics. Marriage is back in vogue and divorce rates are in decline. Family relationships and values are perceived by consumers the most important things in their lives. The nuclear family is stretching out as debt levels amongst student's forces them to stay at home and grand parent's coming back into the family home as caregivers and being cared for (Yeoman, 2008). We are doing more hobbies such as knitting because of a general increase in leisure time amongst elderly baby boomers. Bridgette Jones is looking for a boyfriend or friend, hence why not join a club or society. Today's consumers want new and shared experiences, hence the rise of the knitting club. Grannies and knitting are in vogue, whether it is GrannyBags (www.trendhunter.com/trends/circular-yarn-bags-by-high-quality-grandmother) or designer socks from Netgranny (www.netgranny.ch/sockenshop/).

Observation 4: we are sensible

You would think that teenagers were all alcoholics, having sex all the time, on drugs and having a disruptive influence in society. Especially, if you listened to the media. In fact, a trend is emerging in which some teenagers and those in their 20s seek a traditional moral framework. In fact, teenagers are taking a more adult approach to life just like Saffy in *Absolutely Fabulous*. As a result, there is greater interest in the environment and being green. When I was at school, the social-educational issues were racism and equality; today those issues are the environment and climate change. So, a shift is occurring that is important for the future.

Observation 5: a female social network

According to Yeoman (2008) single women in their 30s and 40s have a well-developed social network and confidence that men lack. Men define themselves more by their work, and relax with too much unhealthy food and drink – a recipe for isolation and loneliness. Single women by contrast, are more likely to see friends, explore their spiritual side and relax with yoga. Yes, the knitting club will probably have more female members but the club concept is stretching out to men to overcome this weak trend.

Concluding thoughts

Many people read books on holiday, others pass the time away knitting. The internet is full of holiday knitting patterns and ideas and there are even knitting holiday blogs. Whilst on holiday, advice about knitting is only a touch away (or should I say a stitch). In the world of the *Long Tail* (Anderson, 2008), knitting holidays have come to fruition, why not take part in a knitting retreat with in France (www.knittingholidaysinfrance.com/) where ladies can relax and knit in a seaside town away from their busy lives or cruising the Mediterranean.

Today's society is changing. It is a world of micro trends and segmented markets like the knitting club. Anyway, the knitting club meets on a Monday night at the Southern Cross Bar, Wellington. If anyone is interested, see www.eventfinder.co.nz/2014/stitch-and-bitch-knitting-circle/wellington for further details.

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