The flying Kiwi: travel as a cultural icon

Jude Wilson
PhD candidate, Lincoln University

Dr David Fisher
Senior Lecturer in Tourism, Lincoln University

Dr Kevin Moore
Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Lincoln University

Social Science, Parks, Recreation and Tourism Group
Environment, Society and Design Division
PO Box 84
Lincoln University
Canterbury
New Zealand
Phone: 64 3 325 3838 extn 8811
Fax: 64 3 325 3857
Email: wilsonj2@lincoln.ac.nz
www.lincoln.ac.nz

ABSTRACT

In international tourism studies little attention has been paid to how different types of travel are portrayed in tourists’ home countries, despite the fact that travel experiences are often culturally determined. Tourism and travel are embedded in the popular culture of many countries; media and cultural representations of travel can dictate which destinations are popular and influence many characteristics of the travel experience. One such travel experience is the ‘OE’ (overseas experience) of young New Zealanders. An OE is an extended overseas travel experience undertaken by young New Zealanders. Commonly, participants stay away for several years and, from a base in London, engage in periods of work interspersed with travel. With annual departures of around 15-20,000 people the OE has significant economic and social impacts on New Zealand. Over five decades a cultural tradition has become established and, despite the OE being a travel experience that occurs outside New Zealand, it has become a cultural icon in New Zealand.

The role and importance of the OE as a cultural icon can be understood from a variety of perspectives. Key to its importance is that the acronym ‘OE’ is used as a noun. This ‘naming’ process is a significant linguistic development which gives the OE institutional status in New Zealand culture. Through processes of lexicalization the OE has acquired an accretion of descriptors and gained conceptual integrity. Put simply, the OE was a concept for which a new word was needed. The OE appears across a wide array of cultural forms as it features in the news, in advertising, in the arts and in literature. Common themes emerge in these expressions of the OE, themes that absorb both perceptions of national identity and personal challenges as a form of cultural ‘rite of passage’ tourism. New Zealanders ‘fly up’ from ‘down-under’ to be part of the larger world; how this ‘flight’ is practised is also determined to a large extent by the expressions of OE that appear in New Zealand. Continual
reinforcement of London as the OE ‘destination’, along with descriptions of other OE characteristics, ensures the continuation of the OE in its understood form. Less concrete, but equally important is the way in which this representation of a cultural icon reinforces New Zealanders’ national identity and sense of belonging through overseas travel.

Keywords: nationality, Hofstede, societal norms, overseas experience (OE), culturally determined travel

INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the way popular culture incorporates travel through an examination of a type of international travel popular with young New Zealanders. The OE, or overseas experience, is an extended overseas backpacking experience combined with a working holiday. The OE has been likened to a secular pilgrimage and described as “... a quest or pilgrimage from one of the world's most remote countries, to the places familiar in national and family histories, popular media, and in tales from previous OE travellers” (Bell, 2002: 143). Going on an OE is a societal norm in New Zealand and the OE features prominently in popular culture despite being an ‘overseas’ travel experience. The OE is so established within New Zealand society that it has become a cultural icon. Representations of the OE in popular culture reinforce the destinations and practices of the OE and ensure the continuation of the experience in its current form. Further, representation of the OE as a cultural icon serves to reinforce New Zealanders’ national identity and sense of belonging through overseas travel.

Here, the OE experience is conceptualised as a form of culturally determined travel. While this paper is part of a wider study that collected empirical data on the OE experiences of 70 participants from across five decades, the focus here is on the OE as it appears in popular culture within New Zealand. Cultural aspects of the OE are explored using “The Stabilizing of Culture Patterns” model suggested by Hofstede (1980; 2001). This provides a framework that allows for investigation of the origins of the OE, the extent to which it has become a societal norm, and the consequences of this.

CULTURALLY DETERMINED TRAVEL

Tourism is well-established as a form of leisure in modern societies and has attracted academic attention across a range of disciplines. Often, however, tourism research has focused on either the micro level as researchers have sought to understand individual tourist’s behaviour, or at the macro level where the role of travel in respect of all societies has been investigated. The individual does not exist in isolation and will be influenced by the societal norms and values of the various sub-groups to which they belong. Tourist activity as a cultural expression of particular social groups has attracted attention in the destinations to which tourists travel; cultural expressions of tourism within tourist’s home cultures have been paid little specific attention.

Much attention, in particular, has been paid in tourism studies to the cultural interactions that arise through tourism, often with an emphasis on the (negative) impacts of these interactions on both the tourists and the host populations. A number of studies, however, have also sought to understand how patterns of tourist behaviour might be explained by culture, or more specifically by national cultural
characteristics. Direct methods have sought to empirically measure whether any differences actually exist in the behaviour of tourists of various nationalities. Pizam and Sussmann (1995) reviewed numerous studies where significant differences were found among selected nationalities on their vacation preferences and the importance of different factors in choosing a destination (Ritter, 1987; Yiannakis, Leivadi, & Apostolopoulos, 1991). In other work Shono, Fisher and McIntosh (In press) investigated Urry’s (1990) tourist gaze in respect of the experiences of Japanese tourists.

Indirectly, the perceptions held by residents and entrepreneurs in various tourism communities have been described and catalogued (see, for example, Brewer, 1984; Pi-Sunyer, 1977). Tourism marketers recognise that tourists from different countries differ in their expectations and behaviour. A series of “Tourism tips for cultural differences”, identified to assist those involved in tourism in New Zealand, for example, reported that the “Japanese are strictly time conscious, Indians are usually surprised by the western ‘obsession’ with time, the French are more formal in their conduct than New Zealanders, Swedes are generally less formal, and South Americans do not like early starts” (Tourism New Zealand, 2005: 26 & 27).

The assumption underlying these studies is that there are cultural differences between groups of people. The pioneering work in this field was by Geert Hofstede (1980; 2001) who empirically tested differences in national culture among more than 50 nations. In Culture’s Consequences Hofstede (2001: 9) defined culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another”. Culture, according to Hofstede (2001), includes values, which are invisible until they become evident in behaviour, along with visible manifestations of culture in the form of symbols, heroes and rituals. Symbols include words, gestures, pictures and meanings, recognized by those that share a particular culture. Heroes are persons who possess those characteristics that are highly prized in a culture whilst rituals are collective activities that keep the individual bound within the norms of the collectivity. Symbols, heroes and rituals are subsumed under the term practices: “As such they are visible to an outside observer; their cultural meanings however, are invisible and lie precisely and only in the ways these practices are interpreted by insiders” (Hofstede, 2001: 10).

Hofstede (2001) proposed that mechanisms within societies serve to maintain culture patterns across many generations, as shown in Figure 1. This model implies that understanding cultural differences is impossible without the study of history. The value system shared by major groups in the population is in the centre as a system of societal norms. The origins of these norms are what Hofstede termed ‘ecological factors’, those factors affecting both the physical and social environment. According to Hofstede (2001: 11), “The societal norms have led to the development and pattern maintenance of institutions in society with particular structures and ways of functioning... These institutions, once established, reinforce the societal norms and the ecological conditions that led to their establishment”. Any changes to the system will come from outside and will impact on the origins rather than the norms themselves, although the norms may change gradually as a result of shifts in the origin conditions. Hofstede (2001) argued that the system is in “a homeostatic (self-regulating) quasi-equilibrium”. In all but extreme cases, where the self-regulating system is disturbed by strong outside forces, cultural norms remain stable.
The cultural dimensions used by Hofstede were designed to measure work-related values and the indices he used have been criticised for being overly broad and for not truly representing the national cultures in which they were derived (Chapman (1996/97, cited in Litvin, Crotts, & Hefner, 2004). Numerous tourism studies, especially in the area of consumer behaviour research, have applied Hofstede’s work (Litvin et al., 2004; Pizam & Jeong, 1996; Pizam & Sussmann, 1995). Dann (1993), however, criticised the use of ‘nationality’ or ‘country of residence’ in tourism studies, particularly when employed as the sole criterion in segregating tourists according to behaviour. While Pizam and Jeong (1996) agreed with Dann (1993) they thought that national cultures have an important intervening effect on tourist behaviour. This was found to be especially true when perceived national differences based on stereotypes are held by residents or tourist entrepreneurs. According to Hofstede (2001) the study of ‘national culture’ was preceded by the study of ‘national character’, a field in which the study of stereotypes featured prominently.

Dann (1993) did not view nationality and culture as synonymous and his criticisms were based on what he saw as increased globalisation (and the mobility of populations under globalisation) and de-differentiation of national populations. According to Dann (1993), for example, the numbers of those for whom nationality and country of residence differs is increasing, challenging the value of basing research on this criteria. Further, Dann (1993) argued that because of a new political order, with increased factionalism in many countries, the importance of nationality was dwindling. He suggested that problems arise in many tourist generating countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia which were built on waves of immigrants and “therefore can no longer be realistically viewed as a single national entity” (Dann, 1993: 100).
Dann’s (1993) macro approach did not allow for the special characteristics of those newer settled countries that, despite multiple immigrations, have developed cultures of their own. This latter group of countries include those Armstrong (1978) labelled “dominion capitalist societies” – comprising New Zealand, Argentina, Canada, Australia and Uruguay – countries which occupy an intermediate position between the world centres and peripheries and which exhibit characteristics of both. In New Zealand at least, a considerable volume of literature has addressed issues of both national culture and national character (Bluck, 1999; R. Brown, 1997; Cleveland, 1978; Easthope, 1993; Gould, 1997; King, 1999, 1991; Laidlaw, 1999; Reeves, 1992; Sinclair, 1986, 1961b; Spoonley, 1991; Taylor, 1996; Taylor & Wetherell, 1995). Cleveland (1978) argued that it is cultural inadequacy (a measure of immaturity and incompleteness) that has driven this search for identity within New Zealand.

Culture and tourism are closely linked in much tourism literature. Graburn (1983: 22), for example, suggested “the choice of tourist style stems from the culture and social structure of the home situation. The values chosen for the change, the reversal of the norm that is the “magic” of tourism, are symbolic in the sense that they are meaningful in the context of the cultural structure of the tourist’s society”. Yet within tourism literature the ‘connection’ between culture and tourist behaviour has primarily been theorised from outside, rather than empirically explored from within any particular tourist generating society. Bell and Lyall (2002: 167) suggested that a modern nation-state is best understood through what Benedict Anderson called the “style” in which it is imagined: “His concept of nation as an “imagined community” is grounded in material fictions that are produced and reproduced through various cultural instruments, institutions and practices: for instance, popular culture and nationally shared events”. According to Bell and Lyall (2002) nations globally communicate versions of themselves that enhance their image. Symbols are important in shaping identity but need to be firmly anchored in a familiar positive shared base. The longer the history of a valorised symbol, the more firmly the claim is fixed as a permanent feature of national identity, and the more consensus the individual nationals will have with such a national identity construct. This fits closely with Hofstede’s culture stabilisation model and can be demonstrated by the many expressions of the OE that appear in New Zealand.

OE ORIGINS

New Zealanders are credited by many as having a propensity to travel (see, for example, Graham, 1963; McCarter, 2001; McGill, 1989; Mulgan, 1984; Sinclair, 1961a). Much of the literature attributes this to the colonial history of settlement – as an immigrant nation New Zealand was populated by those with a history of mobility. A mobility survey conducted in the 1980s by the US Census Bureau found that New Zealanders move more than any other nationality (Lidgard, 1994). On a global scale, an OECD report, released in 2005, showed that 14 percent of the New Zealand-born population live overseas (after Ireland the second highest ratio of any developed country). Further, these expatriates include 24.2 percent of New Zealanders with tertiary education – the highest level of ‘brain drain’ of any OECD nation (Collins, 2005). While for most countries outbound tourism statistics do not normally include departures by long-term expatriates, in the New Zealand case, a significant proportion of the population departs annually on long-term working holidays known as the OE. Available figures suggest that around 15-20,000 New Zealanders have departed annually on OE since the 1970s (Lidgard, 1992, 1994, 2001; Statistics New Zealand, 2004).
New Zealand, the last settled of the Dominion colonies, has historically demonstrated close links to Britain; most migrants to New Zealand were British and up until Britain’s entry into the EEC in 1973, New Zealand’s economy was almost totally dependent on Britain (Patman, 1997). Also, in the early days of New Zealand settlement there existed a kind of ‘cultural cringe’\(^1\), and for aspiring New Zealand writers and artists throughout the 1920s and 1930s journeys ‘home’ (to Britain) were a cultural necessity (Ell, 1994). Some sense of going ‘home’ to Britain remained with New Zealanders for a long time. Easthope attributes this, in part, to the fact that, while by the 1880s the majority of New Zealanders were born in New Zealand, they were still being taught British-based subjects at school in the 1950s. English language, culture and history were very familiar to New Zealanders (Easthope, 1993). According to some reports, the cultural cringe associated with being a New Zealander continued until well in to the 1970s (Bell, 2002). Ell (1994) attributes the eventual weakening of cultural cringe to rising national confidence, as well as increasingly cheap and quick air travel and improved mass communications enabling artists to live in New Zealand, while still working internationally. Others debate whether a degree of cultural cringe still exists in the business and economic arenas as the foreigner’s word is taken above all others (Baragwanath, 2003). Also, while by the 1960s the exodus of artists had halted, many New Zealand scientists and scholars were still leaving New Zealand, “…opting for the enlarged platform of opportunities offered by countries with bigger populations and more substantial resources” (King, 2003: 418).

The OE began in the 1960s and really ‘took off’ (in terms of the numbers going) in the 1970s as a result of social and technological changes. The 1970s was a decade characterised by a large volume of emigration from New Zealand as the birth cohort produced by the ‘baby boom’ were passing through the most migratory prone phase of the life span (Heenan, 1979). Social changes, along with delayed marriage and childbearing, also brought increasing freedom for women (McGill, 1989). New Zealand at this time had a high standard of living and this, coupled with the advent of more frequent air services, made overseas travel more affordable (McCarter, 2001). Most accounts agree that the generation travelling to Britain in the 1970s had less cultural attachment to Britain and continental Europe (see, for example, Bell, 2002; Easthope, 1993; King, 1999; Laidlaw, 1999; McCarter, 2001).

Geographical isolation is cited as a determinant of travel for most young New Zealanders going on an OE. New Zealand’s remoteness has, for many years, engendered a need in its population to see the ‘rest of the world’ (see, for example, Mulgan, 1984; Sinclair, 1961b; Stead, 1961). This remoteness also makes travel more difficult; the distance that needs to be travelled to ‘get away’ from New Zealand is much further than for the majority of the world’s population, making it more expensive. This, when coupled with a traditionally weak currency (by western standards), makes long-term travel viable only if one can live and work overseas. The availability of working holiday visas facilitates this, and New Zealand’s historical and ancestral links to Britain are important. Over time a tradition of travel to London became established. The association of the OE with London has survived for over five decades despite numerous other countries now offering working holiday visas to New Zealanders.

\(^1\)“Cultural (colonial) cringe: This Australian expression encapsulates a similar problem which used to trouble sensitive New Zealanders. The principle is that things done or achieved overseas are necessarily better than those done here” (Ell, 1994: 53).
THE OE – A SOCIETAL NORM

The importance of the OE within New Zealand society is cemented by its place within the New Zealand vernacular. Despite its familiarity and common usage, however, ‘OE’ is not clearly defined. According the dictionary of New Zealand English ‘OE’, an acronym in use since the 1970s, is “a familiar abbreviation for overseas experience” (Orsman, 1997: 547). It is commonly used both as a noun – one does an ‘OE’ – and as an adjective – one can have an ‘OE’ experience. Bell imbues the acronym with more meaning than simply ‘overseas experience’ when she describes the ‘term’ OE as a “young adult’s rite of passage or a ‘coming of age’ ritual” (2002: 143). Linguistically, through processes of lexicalization, the OE has acquired an accretion of descriptors and gained status in the layman’s lexeme (Pawley, 1986). In New Zealand the OE was a concept for which a new word was needed. This ‘naming’ process is a significant linguistic development which gives the OE institutional status in New Zealand culture. Interestingly, while young Australians engage in very similar travel experiences they do not ‘name’ theirs in the same way.

The OE appears across a wide range of cultural forms in New Zealand. There are numerous stories about, and references to, the OE presented in the news media. These include newspaper and magazine reports, as well as radio and television coverage. The OE moniker has also been appropriated by many organisations and businesses (often with tangential interests to the OE) that use the OE concept to advertise their products. Explicit searching for ‘OE’ items reveals a wealth of OE ‘material’ across a range of literature and visual media. There have been plays (Ewing, 1981; Hall, 2004; Quigan & Gumbley, 2002), television documentaries and reality shows (Flightmate Films, 1994; MF Films, 2000), a feature length movie (Lahood, 2003) and a number of short films made about the OE (Brough, 1996; Butler, 2003, 2004). OE has also appeared in the lyrics of popular songs (Finn & Split Enz, 1982; Hay & Strykert, 1982). In literature the OE appears in many accounts of New Zealand history, in autobiographies and anecdotal collections (D. Brown, 2004; Calder, 2003; Clark, 1992; Harris, 1971; McCarter, 2001; Rianne, 1992), fictional novels and anthologies of short stories (Gifkins, 1993; Ovenden, 1986; Sarkies, 1999; Shaw, 1998) as well as numerous travel guide books (McCullum, 1996, 2000; Sell, 2004; YHA, 1990). Internet searching of New Zealand sites also leads to numerous OE pages – these offer OE information and advice, tell stories of individual OEs and provide access to a variety of services that facilitate the OE.

CONSEQUENCES AND REINFORCEMENT OF THE OE

A review of those distributing OE information attests to its institutionalisation within New Zealand society. It is possible, for example, to find information on the OE in the promotional material of banks, government departments (such as the Inland Revenue), education providers, and numerous other public service providers. In recent years the numbers returning post-OE are perceived to have fallen, leading to fears of a brain-drain in New Zealand. In 2005 the New Zealand government initiated an $856,000 campaign to lure “Kiwi expatriates back to New Zealand” (Bennetts, 2005: A17). An interesting tension appears in media reporting of the OE as issues such as the brain-drain are viewed negatively for New Zealand, yet for participants, overseas work, life and travel experiences are seen positively. For most New Zealand employers, for example, a career ‘gap’ caused by an OE is not viewed negatively (Inkson, 2003; Inkson et al., 2004; Inkson, Thomas, & Barry, 1999). For many years employers permitted employees a one-year leave of absence, without pay, at no penalty to their future work prospects. Amongst the less tangible, but no less valued,
aspects of the OE experience are the benefits it brings for the individuals going. Bell (2002: 145) suggested that the OE facilitates the collection of cultural capital, and that it has become so accepted within society that “not taking an OE is now unusual, and almost requires justification”.

The frequency of OE appearances within in New Zealand culture has also reinforced its position as a societal norm through the continual reiteration of the ‘value’ of the OE. Various icons and values associated with national identity – and with being a New Zealander – are exhibited and reaffirmed by the OE. Chief amongst these is the geographical remoteness that engenders the need for the population to travel; reaffirmed by literature entitled “The Fly Away People” (Harris, 1971) and “Distance Looks Our Way”(Sinclair, 1961b), and by song lyrics that refer to “The tyranny of distance” (Finn & Split Enz, 1982), or report that “out here on the edge, the empire is fading by the day” (Dobbyn, 2005). Associated with this are conceptions of personal challenge and self-testing that come with ‘rite of passage’ types of travel like the OE. According to Bell (2002: 143), “Their [OE participants] low budgets test the acclaimed national characteristics of independence and initiative. National difference is reflected on from a distance: myths of place – home – intensify”. Images of the OE in New Zealand advertising also reinforce mythical images of home; from posters that ask “Kiwis, remember what it’s like to be at home” while showing images of sunny beaches (Bennetts, 2005) to numerous television advertisements that portray life in New Zealand as simple with eternal sunshine, in direct opposition to images of London – cold, wet and challenging – shown in the same advertisements.

London as the destination for the OE is also continually reinforced by advertising. Whilst much of the product promotion has obvious and logical links with travel, in many cases the OE is ‘employed’ to advertise products with nothing to do with tourism. The advertisements described above, for example, were selling products as diverse as communications, credit cards, banks and even a brand of bread, with a slogan that proclaimed that, “the world is full of homesick Kiwis”. The ‘Kiwis’ in question were in London. Also, while travel companies advertise specific trips, guidelines on what type of travel the OE involves appear in literature, advertising, television, film and music. The purchase of a kombi van for extended travel around Europe, for example, has appeared in advertising (a Mastercard advertisement), in film (Lahood, 2003) and in the lyrics of popular music (Hay & Strykert, 1982).

Given their propensity to travel it is ironic that one of the most recognised symbols of New Zealand, and the colloquial name for the country’s population, is a flightless bird – the Kiwi. The analogy of the Kiwi has been taken further by some who likened the OE to bird migrations – in these cases the ‘godwit’, a bird that can fly, was employed to describe human flight (Clark, 1992; Graham, 1963). In an interesting reversal of this analogy, bird migrations have been described as OEs (Focamp, 2005). The problem of the flightless Kiwi was dealt with in another way when it appeared on a 1997 postage stamp. This stamp (shown in Figure 2) was one of a series designed by cartoonists invited to interpret the theme ‘Kiwis taking on the world’. According to New Zealand Post (1997: para.2) “It is a stamp issue in which every person in New Zealand can see a little of themselves and their fellow Kiwis. New Zealanders have a real need to see how the rest of the world lives. So much so, in fact, that the great overseas experience (“OE”) is a New Zealand institution. Garrick Tremain has captured this determination using another Kiwi icon, the buzzy bee. Here, the flightless Kiwi flies up from down under to be part of the big, wide world”.
The image of the OE on this postage stamp reinforces the icon of the OE on multiple levels. Bell and Lyall (2002: 171) suggested that postage stamps were a very familiar version of cultural icons and that “these tiny signifiers travel the world as miniature ambassadors of a nation. While their frame size precludes elaborate statements single iconic images work well”. The OE stamp in this case conveys the contrast between ‘small’ New Zealand and the ‘large’ world, and the challenge such a position presents for New Zealanders. It also reinforces the icon of the OE. Postage stamps are designed and selected by governmental agencies; they are images of the issuing nation that are literally sent out into the world. Even if most non-New Zealanders have no idea of the meaning of the initials ‘OE’, for New Zealand Post to issue an OE stamp as part of a series on New Zealand culture is a significant validation of the status of the OE as a cultural icon.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The OE, if conceptualised as a form of culturally determined travel fits well with Hofstede’s (1980; 2001) model. Despite it being a travel experience that occurs overseas the practice of the OE has become a societal norm in New Zealand. The origins of this norm can be seen in the ecological factors that contributed to its development - historical, geographical, economic, technological and demographic factors particular to the New Zealand situation. As Hofstede’s (1980; 2001) model proposes, societal norms influence the structure and functioning of many institutions; in New Zealand family patterns, educational systems, political systems, legislation, economic development and taxation policies are all influenced by the OE. Importantly, these then serve to reinforce both the status of the OE as a societal norm and the ecological factors that led to its establishment (Hofstede, 2001). Through these reflexive processes the OE becomes more concretised within society. While on a simple level the OE describes a type of travel, it has become more than just a way of describing what New Zealanders do when they travel. The OE has developed into an activity that is integral to the culture of New Zealand. A New Zealander is expected to have had some form of overseas experience, to not do so is to have failed an important cultural criterion. Consequently, the OE may used in advertising for products that have nothing to do with travel because it creates for those products a greater sense of being part of New Zealand. For individuals the OE is a cultural marker which reinforces their cultural identity. This examination of the New Zealand OE suggests that cultural aspects of the tourist experience may be more complex than has been considered in tourism research; culture and tourism do not only interact when tourists reach their destinations.
REFERENCES

