

Chapter 13

Cultural Tourism: Use of Virtual Visits to Museums

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to know the experience of the public in the use of virtual visits to museums. For that, the authors developed a survey and gave it, through social media, between December 22, 2020 and January 5, 2021. Ninety-one valid responses were obtained. The results indicate that although most respondents say that they are aware of the possibility of carrying out virtual visits to museums, very few carry out this type of visit. One of the advantages most mentioned by respondents was the fact that it is not necessary to leave the house for the visit.

INTRODUCTION

The present-day impact that technology has caused on society is evident, changing the daily life of people and organizations. The new technologies shape our minds and lifestyle, as well as the type of services we have become accustomed to over time, transforming them, gaining new dynamics and images and adapting them to the public's taste.

Tourism is an important economic activity for any country and world economy and, due to its specific characteristics and strong dependence on information, this sector has been strongly affected by technological developments. Organizations have been incorporating technological advances, using them

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to optimize their activity (Hassan, 2011). Buhalis (2003, p. 16) states that “the tourism industry uses information communication technologies (ICTs) for various functions, such as improving the efficiency of communication and management, improving the quality of services and differentiating products, providing new services and creating new products, reinventing and innovating new business practices, creating integrated experiences through partnerships with other suppliers and improving the distribution of tourism to the electronic market”.

From the consumer’s point of view, ICTs are revolutionizing the means and speed of access to information and the level of demand in terms of its quality. Currently, tourism consumers look for relevant information at all stages of the travel cycle and the Internet has been used as one of the main sources of information for the selection, planning and organization of their trips. In addition, the Internet, particularly social networks, has also been the stage for sharing the experiences of consumers, allowing for a beneficial level of involvement between consumers and between them and companies (Roque, Fernandes & Raposo, 2012).

VR is assumed by Barnes (2016) as one of the most important and popular technologies, but the adoption of virtual reality for the provision of tourism experiences has long been pointed out by Williams & Hobson (1995) as a technology that will have a significant impact on tourism and revolutionize the promotion and selling of the sector. The development of VR is comparable in importance with that of social media (Morris 2016) and is seen as an increasingly prominent tool for consumer marketing, mainly for tourism advertisers, because they can provide potential consumers, wherever they are located, with virtual experiences that allow them to have a realistic view in advance of their travel experience or product (Lo & Cheng, 2020). VR has evolved significantly in recent years and is no longer just a niche technology used only by gaming communities (Tussyadiah et al., 2018).

The beginning of 2020 proved to be troubled and full of challenges with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of it, the world was forced to adapt to this new reality (Frade, 2020). Museums worldwide have been particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with nearly 90% of them having been forced to close their doors in March 2020. Considering this world panorama, companies were advised to prepare their business for the digital age (Ferrão, 2020). According to a study developed by UNESCO (2020), the museum sector reacted very quickly to the COVID-19 crisis, developing its presence on the Internet, with a transformation being observed of many of the face-to-face museum activities planned for that year into the digital world. The same study reveals that virtual visits and the social networks were initiatives used by museums to keep in contact with their public, especially the “big museums” located in countries with better Internet access, but which can serve as inspiration for other museums (UNESCO, 2020). Given this pandemic context, with closed museums and restrictions on the movement of people inside and outside their countries, the public started to choose other alternatives to access cultural destinations and attractions, such as VR (Chen, 2020).

The theme of VR in tourism has been object of study in recent decades by some authors (e.g. Williams & Hobson, 1995; Guttentag, 2020; Huang et al., 2016; Tussyadiah et al., 2017). However, there have been rapid advances in this area and constraints imposed by certain contexts, such as the pandemic caused by COVID-19, which forced the population to stay at home and attractions, such as museums, to remain closed for long periods of time and adopt different strategies to reach the public, so this justifies the need to conduct new studies. In addition, museums face financial difficulties, accentuated by the pandemic, which makes it necessary to carry out studies to better understand the attitudes and behaviour of their audiences, so that they can make more informed and correct decisions. VR technology is

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