

Chapter 11

Virtual Tourism and the Virtual Tourist Experience: Implications for Destination Marketing

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ABSTRACT

Destination marketing organisations, due to the constant increase of competition, are implementing innovative methods of attracting demand, and technologies are now paramount for destinations. Among the technological advances provided by destinations are the virtual reality tours, which can be enjoyed by users by a variety of reasons, but all impacting destinations' tourism development. One debates how the tourist experience can be improved through the use of virtual reality as a destination marketing tool, drawing upon experiential marketing conceptualisations. With that intent, a semi-systematic literature review was conducted, allowing us to introduce rigour and objectivity into the analysis and discussion. However, conducting an exploratory study also have its disadvantages, as it is an interpretive exercise and therefore, heavily dependent on the researcher's own perspective. We provide a new framework,

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that addresses the interrelationship between virtual reality, virtual reality experiences and destination marketing. At the end, possible future research avenues are outlined.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Lee and Kim (2021), the global market size of Virtual Reality (VR) in the tourism sector reached a staggering amount of 7.46 billion USD in 2018 and was estimated to reach USD 30.44 billion by 2023, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 32.5%. A more recent update from Fortune Business Insights (2024) showed that the global virtual VR market size was valued at USD 25.11 billion in 2023 (less than predicted by Lee & Kim, 2021), and the projected growth is now from USD 32.64 billion in 2024 to USD 244.84 billion by 2032, representing a CAGR of 28.6% during the forecast period (2024-2032). These numbers regarding the market size and its potential growth have then contributed to turning VR into tourism as one of the most interesting and challenging topics of research. Consequently, the use of modern technologies is now imperative for destinations to capture and retain the tourist demand. The evolution of information and communication technologies in our century has significantly affected the way destination marketing organisations develop strategies and take advantage of these unprecedented tools and opportunities (Chamboko-Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2021; Li et al., 2017).

In this chapter, we aim to understand what immersive VR tourism experiences are really about, along the way exploring its pros and cons and, most importantly, the impact that they can have on destination marketing organisations strategies. Bearing that in mind and given the lack of studies on the role of VR experiences and its importance in the promotion of tourism destinations, in this chapter, one also explores the conceptual basis of virtual experiential marketing (VEM), a term derived from the application of experiential marketing in the virtual world. As a systematic literature review by Calisto and Sarkar (2024) on VR in tourism and hospitality shows us, immersive digital environments based on VR technologies are presently employed to improve the travellers' experiences during the customer's journey, i.e., before, during, and after their trip. Besides, the role that this branch of marketing can play in improving user's tourism experiences is also addressed. VEM is perhaps the best tool available to destination marketing organisations when thinking about and dealing with the virtual experience economy. Through VEM, users can willingly contribute to the marketing process by helping to develop better sensory stimulation for users (Hsiao & Yang, 2011). In fact, experience marketing, when applied to VR, can provide information that will help customers and potential customers to make purchase decisions, while transferring the generated experience value during the marketing process directly into intangible brand value (Huang & Wei, 2015). What falls under the idea that impulsive purchase behaviours will be more probable to occur if the users perceive the existence of a higher value during their immersive experience (Liang, 2011; Zhu & Wang, 2022). To answer the proposed problem, this chapter has been divided into ten sections. After the introduction, the chosen methodology and the main reasons for its choice in the present context are presented. Afterwards, one addresses the notion of VR, followed by a section where one discusses its dark side. Then, one delivers an insight regarding the notions of touristic space and VR touristic space. In the following section, we examine and debate the meaning of virtual tourism. Subsequently, the notion of experiential marketing in VR and why it is so important to apply it in the virtual world, especially when one considers virtual tourism experiences and the virtual customer journey. The following chapter is characterised by the author's insights on the terms of virtual Tourism, virtual tourist experience and destination's marketing, culminating in the proposal of a framework, and

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