

Chapter 9

Exploring the Strategic Integration of the Metaverse in Religious Tourism: Reimagining Tourist Experience and Engagement at the Sanctuary of Fátima


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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation through emerging technologies is reshaping business operations, influencing products, processes, value chains, networks, and business models. Within this context, the Metaverse introduces innovative ways for businesses and consumers to interact with each other in virtual and interconnected shared spaces. While organizations across industries are increasingly adopting Metaverse technol-

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ogies, research in this field remains in its early stages, with limited understanding of its implications and opportunities. To address this gap, this study employs a case study approach based on secondary data to conduct a strategic assessment of the Metaverse's application in religious tourism. The Sanctuary of Fátima in Portugal was selected as the focal case. The findings highlight the Metaverse's potential to facilitate new forms of value creation, delivery, and capture, particularly through stakeholder engagement and digital pilgrimage experiences beyond physical destinations

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, our society has presented a variety of technological advancements that have transformed and innovated the landscape, notably the Metaverse. Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) are some of the key components of the ongoing wave of technological advancements, revolutionizing user experiences like never before. The Metaverse is described as a mix of Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, and the Real World (Aburbeian et al., 2022). This technology is seen as the next disruptive technology that will impact society in the coming years, by enabling immersive experiences converging the physical and digital universe (Buhalis et al., 2023). In line with this, investments in the metaverse are shaping the technology of the future. According to research conducted by McKinsey and Company (2022), the Metaverse could create up to \$5 trillion in value by 2030 – an opportunity too significant to overlook. This technology is having an impact on multiple sectors and has significant business potential, with companies in different industries starting to benefit from it (Shin & Kang, 2024).

Tourism is one of the key areas that can benefit from the Metaverse (World Economic Forum, 2022). In recent years, tourism has been increasingly recognized for its vital role in boosting the local economy by creating jobs, stimulating economic growth, and generating wealth (Budovich, 2023). Many tourism companies currently feel the need to incorporate Metaverse technologies into their products and services to meet consumers' demand (Chen, 2024). As Metaverse technology advances, it will become indispensable to the tourism industry, going beyond tourists' horizons (Go & Kang, 2023). As a result, a growing number of companies in the tourism industry are embracing the metaverse to maintain a competitive edge (Chi et al., 2024). Additionally, Metaverse tourism enables visitors to explore the world from their homes (Dwivedi et al., 2022). It eliminates time, space, and physics constraints, allowing users to explore new places without traveling and addressing issues such as mobility restrictions, high costs, and environmental concerns (Chen, 2024). Users can visit famous tourist destinations and attractions, and attend events such as

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