

# Chapter 7

## Artificial Intelligence in the Metaverse: Transforming Cultural Expression and Tourism Experiences

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines how artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes cultural mediation and tourism experiences within immersive digital environments, with particular attention to authenticity, empathy, and connection to place. Framed within the evolution of the metaverse as a socio-technical and cultural space, the chapter adopts a qualitative-exploratory approach combining a systematic literature review with an empirical analysis of social media discourse. The empirical phase analyses Instagram hashtag ecosystems related to immersive and digital tourism using Apify, revealing distinct semantic framings across experiential, artistic-cultural, and technological dimensions. The findings demonstrate that AI functions as an active mediator of cultural meaning, fostering experiential authenticity, emotional engagement, and symbolic place attachment.*

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-8337-8.ch007

## INTRODUCTION

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into immersive digital environments has significantly reshaped contemporary forms of cultural expression, interaction, and tourism experiences. Within this context, the metaverse has emerged as a socio-technical space where virtual and augmented realities, intelligent systems, and networked social interaction converge, enabling new modes of cultural mediation and experiential engagement. These developments pose important questions for tourism and cultural heritage, particularly regarding how authenticity, empathy, and connection to place are constructed and experienced when cultural encounters are increasingly mediated by AI-driven technologies.

Tourism has progressively evolved towards an experience-based paradigm, in which emotional engagement, personal meaning, and symbolic value are central to the creation of memorable experiences. Simultaneously, AI-enabled immersive technologies support personalised, adaptive, and interactive forms of engagement, challenging traditional assumptions that cultural authenticity and place attachment depend primarily on physical presence. As a result, cultural and tourism experiences are increasingly shaped through co-creation, narrative adaptation, and digitally mediated interaction, raising critical questions about the role of AI in mediating human-culture relationships.

Against this backdrop, this chapter addresses the following Research Question: How does AI influence cultural mediation and the tourist's relationship with local heritage and identity, particularly in terms of authenticity, empathy, and connection to place? To answer this question, a qualitative-exploratory research design was adopted. The study combines a systematic literature review, supported by bibliometric analysis, with an empirical examination of social media discourse using Instagram hashtag data collected through Apify. This two-phase methodological approach enables the integration of theoretical perspectives with empirical insights into how immersive and AI-mediated cultural experiences are articulated in digital environments.

The chapter is expected to contribute to the existing literature by offering an integrated understanding of AI as a mediator of cultural expression and tourism experience design within the metaverse. By linking conceptual debates on authenticity, empathy, and place with empirical evidence from social media discourse, the study provides insights into how AI reshapes human expression and relationship-building in immersive tourism contexts. In doing so, it aligns with the broader aim of this book to explore the impacts of AI on human interaction, cultural meaning, and experiential engagement.

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