

Virtual Reality in Tourism : A Research Note

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Abstract

Technology inclusions have been deriving disruptive changes in the tourism industry. The most sought-after digital tool – virtual reality (VR) – has been highly preferred by destination marketers in formulating their marketing strategies and executions and branding their destinations. Though VR inclusion started early, the pandemic crisis has added effectiveness to the vibrance of the industry's offerings. However, the research of VR inclusions in tourism marketing needs wider evidence that would eventually facilitate the thereof in identifying and understanding of the emerging tourists' micro-segments based on their motives, duality of destination management and branding, and the relevance for conceiving memorable experiences. This research note indicated three such critical aspects – VR in upscaling tourism, VR as a marketing strategy for sustainability, and VR as reality or reality for tourists. The note also indicated the major areas that can be researched from the given perspectives of VR for tourism marketing and destination branding.

Keywords : virtual reality, tourism marketing, destination branding, research note, sustainability

JEL Classification Codes : M1, M3, L1, L8, O2

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Disruptive technology inclusions have enhanced the world tourism industry with greater benefits by not only integrating the allied industries such as travel, hospitality, and food but also conceived conversion of colossal prospects to actual customers. The emerging information and communication technology (ICT) tools have brought tourists and marketers closer through the effective exchange of information. Most of the tourists' information search begins with online sources (Shankar et al., 2022), and their behavior towards the e - sources of information before, during, and post the destination visit reflects on the online sources (Shankar, 2020). A plethora of research evidence exists in the literature on the significance of online information sources and tourists' perceptions and behavior. Similarly, virtual reality (VR), a cutting-edge immersive technology, has adverted the industry, marketers and market offerings, tourists, and other stakeholders with lucrative attention

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(Guttentag, 2010). The research explored distinct findings and recommendations to thereof on the blend of VR and tourism marketing and destination branding, however, most of the literary indications are conceptual and limited to empirical or data-analyzed outcomes (Guttentag, 2010; Tom Dieck et al., 2018). This indicates that there is an impeccable commitment to exploring the in-depth perspectives of VR in tourism. There are various horizontal extensions of research, such as augmented reality (AR) and mixed reality (MR), however, the founding contexts could be frontierized by understanding how well VR facilitates tourism marketing and destination branding from a strategic perspective. Could it be another form of tourism globally, and does it create value addition in tourists' experience? This research note focuses on these three predominant perspectives through the lens of academic research. This research note intends to explore the probabilities of opening research avenues in the virtual reality arena in the context of tourism marketing and destination branding.

Virtual Reality (VR) in Upscaling Tourism

The inclusion of virtual reality in tourism is not static in execution; the dynamic clout has been mainly on promoting the tourism offerings (Rauscher et al., 2021). The research also lacks further investigation on the development of sophisticated promotional tools. However, destination marketers have witnessed that the criticality of 'destination recovery' in the post-pandemic landscape is highly required through vanguard technologies to position their destinations with multifaceted values (Yung et al., 2021). This is highly probable with the applications of VR. Though the strategy would provide a consistent marketing message to the tourists about the destination's attractions and attributes, the viability of using the technology for conceiving the market size with greater numbers and converting the potential to actual tourists is yet to be looked in. Being digital sources of information, the integration of allied tourism services such as transport and hospitality do ease tourists' decision-making (Shankar et al., 2022), especially through the applications of VR, however, to deliver a fully engaging experience, the research needs further application-based inferences (Loureiro et al., 2020). One of the decisive reasons is that the majority of the tourists engage on VR platforms to acquire a pre-visit destination experience and make decisions (Buhalis & Law, 2008). This indicates that there is a huge potential for researchers to interrogate the tourists' generations (X, Y, and Z, including millennials). However, the literature is not bestowed with such approaches. The destination marketers, including allied businesses like hotels, have strategically enlarged their brand portfolios (Bogicevic et al., 2019) and formulating marketing strategies that not only communicate to the market about the offerings but also maximize their experiences at each touch point in the tourist's entire touring journey (Bogicevic et al., 2019). Hence, a void exists in the research perspective on the inculcation of VR in this context. Having a clear understanding of the requirement of VR in the tourism marketing arena, the most narrowed question is what marketing efforts have to be probed, either on marketing communication, marketing strategy, or destination branding. Eventually, marketing communication has seen reflective outcomes through VR, and research paradigms have been drawn. However, the later aspects, such as marketing strategy and branding, are yet to be explored in detail.

Virtual Reality (VR) as a Marketing Strategy for Sustainability

Enormous studies have been done on sustainability perspectives in tourism marketing and destination branding context. Being an integral part of corporate social responsibility where the ultimacy lies in protecting the environment (Batham, 2013), sustainability has been looked upon from various perspectives of destination marketing (Shankar, 2021). One of the research notes that focused on sustainability paradigms indicated the need for intensive research on destinations' sustainable behavior (Shankar, 2021). For example, Yu and Hwang (2019) inferred that those destinations' responsible behavior had significance to tourists' loyalty. However, there is no

empirical evidence that adds value to the fact that destinations' sustainable behavior would alter tourists' behavior as well. There exists a void in researching the differences in responsibility and sustainability of destinations.

Nevertheless, these research inculcations would have a significant jolt on marketing strategies; should the marketing strategies be to promote the centrality of sustainability, or the marketers and policymakers should focus on sustainability initiatives that, in turn, pay back through marketing efforts? Research lacks evidence on this perspective of strategy. Also, research by Ng et al. (2007) indicated four approaches to culture in the tourism context, and one of them was the culture of destinations. Eventually, studies are limited in this context, and this conceives an opportunity to examine whether the destination's culture of sustainability can be formalized as a marketing strategy to cater to various micro-market segments. Overall, research inferences show the trivial aspects of sustainability for destination marketing and management. Here, it evokes a note that if virtual reality also serves the tourists to experience the tourism offerings, would it be a strategy for marketers to position and promote the destinations in global markets? Also, virtual reality induces the attributes that tourists can visualize the spatial environments. In this case, would VR be a strategy for destination sustainability? Research on this perspective would significantly contribute to tourism policy-making and also for lucrative destination marketing (Guttentag, 2010).

Virtual Reality (VR) as a Form of Tourism

The above note indicates the duality of virtual reality as a strategy for sustainability and as marketing for the sustainability of destinations. Considering the scenario of the pandemic and post-pandemic era, would virtual reality be a platform that can emphasize sustainability and form a market segment that serves the tourists' motive for a digital tour? Though research indicates that tourists prefer to travel to satisfy their different motives physically (Wall & Mathieson, 2006), a micro-segment entails acquiring destination experiences virtually and more memorably. The pandemic (COVID - 19) has added significance to the viability of digital touring forms. Though research in this perspective is at the emerging stage, the existing adequacy of evidence on transposing the destination's offerings to the virtual world is not parallel to the growing technology users. This indicates a void that has to be highly looked upon, as the marketing world is witnessing a change in the frame of population demographics, perhaps mainly in the social cum digital revolution era. Research specifying the motives generated due to crises such as pandemics has not been explored to a greater extent through the lens of virtual reality.

There exist many research opportunities to explore. For example, research can focus on how virtual reality contributes to tourists' motives and decisions in post-pandemic times? Even though the probability of transposing the destinations' imagery to the virtual world would attract tourists, perhaps mainly technology users, not all destination marketers can afford to strategize and position their destinations accordingly. Digital inclusions are always associated with the cost of codes, and such investments are determined by the tourists' inflow; tourists' perception, intention, loyalty, and engagement; local economies; allied businesses and their revenue models, etc. The destinations with low tourist visits or those without great brand power would not attract potential tourists. Though this debate has been highly seen at the marketer's outset, the research contribution to produce insights for overcoming this challenge remains unattended. However, there is an opportunity for the researchers to focus on how well VR can influence the cognitive and affective image of the destinations.

Virtual Reality (VR) – Reel or Real for Tourists?

Even though destination marketers believe that VR can be a digital tool for conceiving a new tourist market segment and can even enhance the destination's brand experiences (Tom Dieck et al., 2018), their ultimacy of the tourist's experience is not only based on the mental imagery, but the physical presence is highly considerate in

tourists' experience. This indicates a void in understanding how well the collusion of VR in tourism evokes differences in tourists' experience (as tourist space) and so as in tourists' places. Also, it is decisive to ponder that the majority of the tourist population have the motives of escaping from routine, adventure, spirituality, religious exposure, etc., and all of these are aligned with physical encounters of destinations (Guttentag, 2010; Shankar, 2020, 2021; Shankar et al., 2022). Research and industry need rigorous attempts to address these issues. For example, how can VR tourism satisfy tourists' motive of 'escape' as the orientation is more physical than the imagery? How could the marketers strategically modulate the tourism offerings and inculcate the VR tools to deliver value to the market? These aspects are yet to be worked on academically and at the corporate outset as well. This applies to the motives such as excitement, adventure rides, and other multifaceted motives. Though VR emphasizes the edge of interacting with the family, spouse, friends, and others (Guttentag, 2010), tourists' experience is found to be significant with whom they travel (Shankar & John Paul Raj, 2022), and that, in turn, is significant on the affective experience in the destinations.

This void requires careful conceptual frameworks and materialistic investments by the destination marketing organizations on how well virtual experiences can override the physical presence. Though the sensory simulation technologies can qualify the real-world senses, the greater extent of delivering the seamless experience hasn't been inferred. Here exists the opportunity for the interdisciplinary research avenues of robotics, artificial intelligence, and augmented reality for destination branding and positioning, and eventually delivering a delightful and memorable tourist experience. Also, the most concern in the VR inclusion is the quickness of changeover of tourists' mental environment. Tourists not only derive their memories while touring, but are also on the verge of ending their tours (from leaving the destinations and back to their homes), where the marketers still hold the possibility of elevating the tourists' experiences and engagement levels. However, VR may not have the viability of using such space effectively as the 'return-back-after tour' quickness is high. Here also exists a research gap on how these challenges could be eradicated with digital tools.

Conclusion

Revenge tourism has been highlighted in recent times, as tourists break the mundaneness of being through the pandemic and restrictions of movement trauma. Though the world is getting back to the new normal, still, the tourism industry's growth and business avenues have not recovered. Destination marketing organizations (DMOs), marketers, and policymakers have the strategies to address the challenges, and there exists an opportunity to bring back the industry's vibrance through digital inclusions. Though VR is a known and evolving concept, the research attempting to contribute to the industry implications is yet to be widened. VR inclusion on tourism offerings could be strategically accommodative in positioning and promoting the destinations; whereas, delivering delightful experiences and conceiving values to the market segments still needs colossal research efforts. Also, when the destinations are branded at a global level, there is a need for digitalized communication that includes visual representations through VR tools, and this approach perhaps contributes to building strong destination brands and attracting world tourism market segments. However, while exploring the varied tourist motives that include the virtual world seekers, there is a need to foster a lucrative blend of VR and tourism models for effective marketing and branding. This research note has highlighted the three major paradigms that are highly imperative in research perspectives.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

This research note has been prepared based on our readings and collaborative research ideologies. The notes developed are solely based on the readings listed in the references and the inferences drawn based on those. This

research note has indicated the various aspects of VR in tourism marketing and destination branding that can be further researched empirically, conceptually, and experimentally. The outcomes may produce distinct results, however, these would derive a stringent theory for further research developments for marketers and the industry.

Authors' Contribution

Dr. Sabari Shankar R. is the leading author of this research work. Dr. Koshy and Dr. Mathew contributed to the literary sources' research. However, all three authors were integrated into all the aspects of producing this research note.

Conflict of Interest

The authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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