VIRTUAL REALITY TOURISM

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Abstract: *Virtual Reality touristic products blossoming in the post-pandemic era.*

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Introduction

Virtual reality is defined as a computer generated, 3d environment which can be interacted with by the user through electronic equipment [1]. This technology is used mostly for video games and entertainment but has application in multiple domains such as house mapping for 3d presentations. Although 3d touristic products existed before the pandemic period, the technology used to display them was outdated and they were hardly accessible for the general audience. The lockdown had a major impact on the demand for 3d tours, as more people could not experience classical tourism anymore. With a high demand on the rise, technology became cheaper, with Virtual Reality glasses available almost anywhere now at a low price and platforms like Oculus, virtual travel was born.

Classical touristic products always come in packages, including accommodation, travel opportunities, food and beverages, entertainment and local culture in a combination of one or more of this elements. Virtual Reality Tourism is stripped of most theoretical components pertaining to a touristic product, being only able to offer visual and sometimes aural stimulation. Thus virtual products come at a lower price and a wide accessibility range.

This paper will discuss the applicability of virtual reality touristic products in the real world and the feedback from a group of general audience.

Virtual Tour Offers and advantages

During the pandemic times, traveling abroad had been restricted or completely closed for different countries thus a lot of them developed an online traveling experience in order to help tourists explore the destination anyways. A great example of this is Singapore where, in October 2020, a collaboration between Airbnb Experiences and the Singapore Tourism Board offered the project "Experience Singapore now, Travel Later" (virtual local tours). As a result of this collaboration, entrepreneurs had the opportunity to leverage their economic benefits while travelers retain their ability to experience Singapore. Furthermore this ensured that the city benefits from exposure, touristic branding and priority on the market. During 2020-2021 the virtual experiences were a great success, especially the SingapoReimagine MICE Virtual Show (3-4 March 2021) which contained cultural and leisure tours, culinary masterclass, live discussion and one-on-one virtual meetings [2]

In Asia, similar alternatives have arisen such as online sight-seeing tours in Japan through Zoom conferences, 19 of them in total. Following this example, Indonesia launched the Virtual Tour from Online Experience in October 2020, featuring local and overseas destinations. Furthermore, Maldives offered in December 2020 a collection of over 2000 virtual tours from more than 150 islands. Maldivian tourist products are presented at a virtual consumer fair, held quarterly. In the early 2021, Hong Kong Tourism Board launched it's first global event based on fan-engagement with a Chinese New-year themed tour around the most popular touristic attractions. Other destinations that offer virtual touristic products include Australia, Thailand, India, South Korea and Vietnam.

The most advertised types of Virtual Reality tourism are Cultural, Nature Exploration and Adventure tourism. In most of these categories are offered two alternative approaches, Augmented Reality (offers user the possibility to interact with the objects in the simulation) and Virtual Reality (has a predetermined path for the user to follow). Also, there is a third way of exploration based on videos or Zoom meetings, which offer interactive activities from none to the possibility to interact with the guide.

In order to have a better understanding of this new phenomenon, some main ideas have been extracted from the survey presented at [2]. The main reasons for choosing online experiences were gaining a first impression of the traveling destination in a hassle-free manner and the accessibility factor (both monetary and travel-wise). Moreover the lack of physical touristic presence can lead to a reduction of seasonal pollution due to the low strain on local resources and no production of waste/consumption of resources. This lack of physical tourism can also affect the crowding factor, reducing the population density during peak seasons. Virtual tourism on it's own is a great resource from the perishability point of view. It maintains it's qualities even if the touristic attraction in real life is closed, damaged or too polluted to visit. Another important point is that the virtual touristic product is accessible on the World Wide Web so it can be delivered anywhere, anytime and to anyone with access to internet. To conclude, the virtual touristic product is a great alternative or addition to classical tourism, having a group of important benefits and only few down-sides such as the limitation to only visual and aural senses, accessibility only through online paths and devices and not feeling authentic.

Survey regarding the new virtual touristic product

For this case study a survey was held on a group of 34 individuals, mostly students and the results from this analysis can help understand the position of virtual touristic products on the market and their future application in the industry.

To begin the study, demographic question were used to clarify what audience did respond and the ages are :

- 64,7% - 18-25 years old people
- 20,6% - 25-35 years old people
- 8,8% - 35-45 years old people
- 5,9% - people over 45 years old

Most case responders were female, at a staggering 70,6% percent and only 29,4% male responders. Following the two first questions it can be noticed that mostly young females are interested in the Virtual Touristic Industry. The following question was regarding the occupation type of the responders, a key element in order to determine the availability of time, money and the educational status. Most responders said that they were unemployed (38,2%), followed by master's students (20,6%), employed responders (20,6%),PhD students (14,7%) and only 5,9% entrepreneurs. Summarizing the last 3 questions, it can be observed that young, female people with a higher education, low income and a lot of free time are interested in virtual products.

Taking into consideration the key elements of virtual tourism : free to inexpensive products, great availability, safe and intimate and reduced time consumption it can be noticed that the target audience has been reached.

Following up on the questions, most responders said that they were indeed familiar to the virtual tourism concept, with 61,8% of participants knowing the basic idea behind the product. For a better understanding, a stimulant had been added to the study comprised of a virtual tour of Luxor. After having the audience aware of how easy and pleasurable is to enjoy virtual touristic products in the comfort of their own home, they were asked how often do they travel in real life and most of them answered that only once or twice per year (61,8%).

Considering that virtual tourism is very time efficient in comparison to real life tourism, 97% of the responders believe that the duration of the stay is very important in order to achieve a good touristic experience.

Virtual tourism has a great palette of destinations to choose from, creating a wide range of alternatives and being custom made for every client's preferences. With this in mind, the responders were asked where do they enjoy to travel the most:

1. 32,4% - Seaside
2. 29,4% - Cities
3. 17,6 % - Unexplored locations
4. 14,7% - Mountains
5. 2.9 % - Villages
6. 2,9% - Exotic destinations
7. 0 % - Classic destinations
8. 0% - Emerging destinations

As it is shown in the list, the majority choose the Seaside and different cities. Unexplored locations being a very interesting third choice because of the safety risks and the possibility of not ideal conditions of accommodation, food and service. Mountains, villages and exotic destinations are on the last places but not out of reach, but two categories stand out with 0. To go in depth more on the last chosen categories, it is almost unbelievable that no one choose the classic destinations with a great monotony on the market. Also the emerging destinations did not attract any responder. The two are exactly at the ends of the touristic scale, classic destination being too well known and emerging destinations being not known enough. These two categories could be engulfed by Virtual Touristic Products, maintaining the beauty of classic destinations and showing new sides of the location and for emerging destination showing the potential of a new and exciting destination.

As every destination has to offer 4 main elements : architecture, flora and fauna , scenery and culture, the responders choose scenery with an astonishing 70,6%. The most important after this was the architecture (20,6%), culture (5,9%) and flora/fauna (2.9%). This shows that the visual factor is one of the most important in tourism, with strong accent on the natural and man-made environment. Furthermore, to confirm the idea that the sight is one of the most important senses to experience tourism, the responders were asked what are the top 3 senses that help them enjoy tourism to it's real value. The majority choose sight, hearing and taste as their top 3. To further confirm the idea that an enjoyable touristic experience can be achieved through only sight and hearing, the responders answerer with a confirmation of 78,8% to this question.

Having a clear idea about virtual touristic products and the level of enjoyment by only two senses , responders were asked what is their opinion on the matter. The most common answers were related to touristic sustainability, means of comfort, time efficiency, the novelty element, the attractiveness during the pandemic situation, using virtual products as a trailer for visiting the destination later and the wish of trying something different. Although some believe that the authenticity of these experiences can be doubtful, they would not hesitate to try it at least once.

Continuing down the survey, the responders did not have a virtual touristic experience (67,6%) but all of them wanted to try one. Reasoning for trying this experience were mostly based on the novelty factor (72,7%), comfort and efficiency (15,2%) and the low/free price of virtual products (12,1%). Although 64,7% consider that this alternative to tourism does not feel authentic they believe (32,4%) that is should be treated as a bonus for the touristic package, as an alternative (32,4%) or even as a self existing product (26,5%). Only a small percentage of 8,8% consider that there is no reason for virtual tourism to exist as another industry . The responders believe that virtual touristic products can be an enriching experience (91,2%) and that it is important for the touristic domain (88,2%). When asked about the price, most responders would pay 100-200 Romanian lei (55,9%), would want the product for free (29,4%) and 200-500 Romanian lei (14,7%). When the responders were asked how classical tourism relates to virtual tourism they said that they enjoy the real experience more (44,1%), that it's a touristic supplement to chose from time to time (26,5%) and the virtual product is intimate and relaxing (23,5%). As a final question they were asked if this product can become a part of the standard offer in the touristic industry and they said yes (73,5%).

Conclusion

This study has been focused on the effects of virtual tourism on the post-pandemic audience and after conducting the survey , the following main ideas had arisen :

- Virtual tourism is seen by the public as a supplement or trailer for the real-world experience and cannot exist on its own.
- People enjoy virtual touristic experiences at a reduced price, increased comfort and intimacy. Safety is valued between consumers of virtual tourism.
- The audience believe that this is not an authentic experience and is most suitable during times when real traveling is not available.

In my opinion virtual touristic products can have a new market dedicated to them and through education of the public a new touristic sector can be born in the new 10 to 20 years. The beneficial character includes the reduction in pollution, the acculturalization of a bigger population segment and the only down-side is that the experience doesn't feel authentic. These products can be a great bonus in touristic packages and also can be used to customize traveler's memories in the real destination. The non-perishable factor creates an ever blooming product, that can also be used to commemorate the touristic attractions that are no longer accessible in real life. Also considering the augmented reality sector, new touristic attractions can be created and the old wonders of the world can be brought back to life. Virtual reality tourism is a breakthrough in its domain and can become a new , harmless, entertainment method .

References

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