

The role of VR in influencing tourism consumers' attitudes towards a tourist destination: An Abstract

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Virtual reality (VR) has been outlined as one of the most important technological developments to influence the tourism industry due to its ability to engage consumers and to market tourism destinations. The use of VR has spread across the entire tourism industry with the presence of VR in hotel previews, destination branding, tourism experiences including museums, theme parks, and cultural heritage sites (see: Bogicevic et al., 2019; Wei et al., 2019; Griffin et al, 2017). The application of VR in each of these sectors is based on the premise that the technology can transform experiences and positively influence behaviour (Zeng et al., 2020).

Despite the growing interest in VR by both tourism consumers and tourism marketers, both largely rely on the presentation of destinations through a computer-mediated website displaying basic non-dynamic images of the destination or venue (Israel et al., 2019). While basic non-dynamic images can present vivid non-verbal information to tourism consumers, VR has the capability to provide numerous verbal and non-verbal sensory information including visual, haptic, gustatory, auditory or olfactory cues (Miller and Stoica, 2004). The depth of immersion and presence experienced within VR distinguish it from any other technology (Wei et al., 2019). Thus, VR provides a fundamentally different experience to consuming destination information in comparison to basic non-verbal images due to the sensory and media rich content (Wei et al., 2019). The purpose of this research is to understand the role of VR in influencing tourism consumers' attitudes towards a tourist destination.

Through a lab-based experiment with 204 tourism consumers this research found that following a VR preview experience of a tourist destination consumers will have more positive attitudes towards the tourist destination than prior to the VR experience. Interestingly, in comparison, a website preview has no significant effect on influencing tourism consumers' previously held attitudes towards the destination. More so, the results indicate that tourism consumers have more positive attitudes towards a tourist destination in a VR preview in comparison to a less immersive website preview. Thus, the inherent interactive, immersive, and sensory rich attributes of VR have a positive effect on tourism consumers' attitudes towards a destination.

Hence, for managers, the use of pop-up VR stations in shopping malls or other entertainment venues would be an advantageous marketing strategy, while also providing VR previews to download from relevant stores such as the Oculus store for consumers to use on their own devices within the comfort of their own home.

Keywords: Virtual Reality, Consumer Attitude Change, Tourism, Tourism Virtual Reality

References Available Upon Request