Generation Y, Virtual Reality and Tourism

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Introduction

Virtual Reality (VR) is a rapidly growing industry that is predicted to become a part of more people’s personal and professional lives at an ever increasing rate. It has already made an impact in a variety of fields, from surgery to the military (Robison, Liu, and Apuzzo, 2011; Hodgson, Bachmann, Waller, Bair and Oberlin, 2012) and as the technology becomes more widely accessible (Ulrich 2015), applications for the tourism sector continue to develop (Guttentag 2010).

An area in which VR can substantially impact the tourism industry is in destination marketing and promotion, specifically, the ability for VR videos to positively differentiate a destination, influencing travel choice. As travel marketers are faced with the promoting intangible characteristics of tourism experiences, it means the use of visual imagery when promoting destinations is key to translating messaging and influencing consumer decision making (Dann 1996; Mackay and Smith, 2006; Aziz and Zainol, 2011). As technology develops, travel marketers are developing new and innovative ways to use visual representation to promote an attractive and positive destination image, leading to increased tourist arrivals, economic development and influence consumer decision making in an increasingly complex and competitive global marketplace (Baker and Cameron, 2008; Echtner and Ritchie, 1991). However, there is a current lack of knowledge on the impact of VR in tourism. As academics have pondered the possible threat VR can pose as becoming a substitute for travel (Cheong 1995), it is unclear whether VR will act as a replacement for travel experiences, offer an experience one would normally never partake in, or actually encourage a real life visit.

A particular demographic tourism marketers should pay increasing attention to are those in Generation Y (Gen Y), or the Millennial Generation, which can be defined as the cohort born between 1980 and 2000, at a current age range of 17-37 (Hopkins and Stephenson, 2014). This demographic has recently overtaken Baby Boomers as the as the largest living generation (Hopkins and Stephenson, 2014; Dillon 2016). They have been described as digital natives, “fluent in acquiring and using technological tools and learning this technology quickly with an intuitive understanding” (Black 2010, p. 95). As this generation is likely to use VR more often than any other cohort, it is critical that tourism marketers understand how they can utilize technological innovations, like VR, to influence decision making within this niche market.

The overall purpose of this working abstract is therefore to explore to what extent, when given the opportunity to explore tourism related experiences within VR, Gen Y’s seek experiences they feel are actually attainable in real life (aspirational etc.), or whether they seek experiences that are unattainable due to various reasons including personal fears and limitations (e.g. rollercoasters, uncomfortable traveling to underdeveloped countries etc.), physical capabilities (mountain climbing etc.), or financial and time limitations (helicopter skiing etc.). Simply put, are Gen Y more interested in using VR to experience a destination or activities that are reflective of their real life interests, or to gain experiences they would otherwise not have.

This abstract provides a review of literature on Gen Y travel motivations and adoption of technology, as well as the implications that VR technology has in affecting destination choice. A methodology is proposed for an exploratory qualitative study to capture insight on Gen Y’s
travel motivations when given the opportunity to choose a virtual travel experience using the head mounted display (HMD), Samsung Gear VR. This research is important for travel marketers as it will help them better understand the types of VR experiences that millennials are interested in when building targeted promotional plans.

**Literature Review**

**Generation Y Travel Motivations**

In examining the ability for VR advertisements to influence destination choice among Gen Y, we must first examine the primary motivations for travel within this cohort. Gen Y has been characterized as more interested in spending over saving (Treloar, Hall, and Mitchell, 2004) and in purchasing experiences, including travel, over products (Dillon 2016). The types of travel experiences that interest millennials have been widely studied. Richards (2007) identifies social and cultural experiences as a primary motivator. Additional studies have centered around Gen Y travel motivators including business (Van Dyck 2008), sports and adventure (Demeter and Bratucu, 2014). After reviewing multiple studies and samples, Moscardo and Benckendorff (2010) have identified three primary themes in Gen Y travel habits. First, the use of digital-media, including the opportunity to share experiences online and manage social interactions while travelling. Second, the seeking of diversity and interest in social issues, including volunteer tourism (Nisbett and Strzelecka, 2016), interest in sustainable travel and wanting to experience local culture, and third, family and social orientation, which include a strong desire for social interaction when travelling.

**Gen Y, Technology and Travel**

This cohort have grown up in an era in which technology has and continues to be prevalent and therefore can be more digitally savvy than others (Treloar et. al., 2004; Garikapati, Pendyala, Morris, Mokhtarian and McDonald, 2016; Hopkins and Stephenson, 2014). They are also known to seek diversity in promotional messaging, are more active and engaged in travel planning than previous generations and are interested in using a variety of tools to seek travel information (Xiang, Magnini and Fesenmaier, 2015). As a result, it is likely that Gen Y will be quick to adopt new and innovative promotional technologies, including Virtual Reality, when planning travel.

**Virtual Reality and Tourism**

Many definitions of Virtual Reality exist, however for the context for this study, it can be defined as a method of transporting a person to a new environment in which they are not physically present but feel as if they are present and immersed through the stimulation of multiple senses (Guttentag 2010; Bordnick, Carter and Traylor, 2011). Virtual Reality can take many forms, from watching a 360 video on a desktop computer, using a mobile VR application to the use of a HMD, which offers a higher level of immersion, such as the Samsung Gear VR.

Though many promoters of travel have already adopted VR technology to provide travelers with a ‘preview experience’ of hotel properties, cruise ships and travel experiences (Samuely 2016; Vitaliev 2016) and additional research has been conducted by academics on the ability of VR as a promotional tool to encourage real life tourism visits (Balogun, Thompson and Sarumi, 2010; Fauzi and Gozali, 2015; Tussyadiah, Wang and Jia, 2016), there is little known on the motivations of consumers using VR for travel and its impact on destination choice and
intent to visit. This is increasingly important with the consumerization of VR, as it has been predicted the technology will be consumer mainstream within five years (Barnes 2016).

With VR anticipated to become a bigger part of people’s personal and professional lives, understanding the interests of this technologically-advanced generation in using VR for travel related experiences will help destination marketers shape their content creation and distribution.

**Methodology**

The proposed study will assess the motivations behind VR video selection through an exploratory qualitative study using 15 undergraduate students from an urban university. Qualitative studies are particularly useful in understanding the meaning and context of participants actions and behaviour (Maxwell, 2008). Various VR travel videos will reviewed, and 10-15 will be selected based on their relevance to primary Gen Y travel motivators as identified through literature review. For example, videos offering experiences which demonstrate cultural diversity, adventure, social interaction, social issues, etc. The selected videos will form a menu, including destination name and a brief video description written by the researcher. The description will be void of overly emotional language and superlatives in order to keep focus on the activity and destination, and not on the effect of marketing language. Students will be asked to review the menu and rank the top 5 videos they would like to view through the HMD, Samsung Gear VR. They will be informed that they will be able to watch only their top ranked selection through the HMD, where they will be able to look up, down, and all around, portraying a 360 view of varying landscapes and activities.

Interviews will take place following participation in the study. A semi-structured approach will be taken, with flexibility to digress based on participant prompts (Turner III, 2010). A pilot test will assist in the refinement of research questions. Interviews will likely begin with a standard open-ended question “Why did you select destination X”. Follow up questions will capture additional motivation for destination selection, “Why did you select X destination over the other choices available?”, “Were there any destinations that you did not want to select at all?” Additionally, attitude toward the technology and implications on destination image and intent to visit will be covered. Interviews will be transcribed, and then coded using thematic open and then axial coding. General themes will be identified around Gen Y’s motivations in using VR for travel purposes.

**Expected Outcomes**

This proposed study hopes to provide a better understanding as to how Gen Y’s will use VR relating to tourism experiences. It will additionally provide destinations and marketers of travel who seek to engage Gen Y’s through VR technology, insight into the type of content to use that will match Gen Y’s interests in virtual worlds and possibly convert that to actual behavior in the real world.
References


Dillon, B. (2016). MARKETING TRAVEL TO MILLENNIALS.


