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Is Tourism in a State of Disruption or Transformation? A Qualitative Inquiry into Perceptions of Online Tour Experiences

Introduction

COVID-19 and the crises created by the pandemic have transformed society. Disrupted lifestyles have begun to settle into new norms. Historically, the tourism industry has been able to bounce back quickly after shocks from disasters, epidemics, and pandemics (Sharma, Thomas, & Paul, 2021); however, the closure of tourism worldwide during the ongoing pandemic has had devastating impacts on the industry. As the pandemic continues to present challenges to travel and tourism in the new age of disruption, different forms of experience such as digital tourism offer new possibilities. For example, to accommodate social distancing measures put in place by governments, tourist destinations have turned to digital services, including audio-guides, augmented reality (AR) or virtual reality (VR) tours, and online tours. Studies on virtual tours suggest that destination experiences through online platforms prior to on-site visits can shape tourists' perceptions of the destination's authenticity (Mura, Tavakoli, & Pahlevan Sharif, 2017). However, little research has been done on meaningful and authentic experiences in virtual tourism (Bec, Moyle, Schaffer, & Timms, 2021; Tavakoli & Mura, 2015). This research examines the questions of whether online tours offer an authentic experience and how people experience authenticity during an online tour. Understanding what contributes to the perception of an experience as being authentic in an online tour will help strategically design a digital tourism environment.

Literature Review

Virtual tourism takes a variety of forms and offers a diverse range of experiences. According to Zhang, Li, Ruan, and Liu (2022), there are two categories of virtual tourism. Virtual tourism in general includes "any process of obtaining information and knowledge about tourist attractions using a non-immersive way," whereas tours using virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) refer to "a process of experiencing super-real scenes in a three-dimensional virtual environment" (p. 2). Conceivably, these two environments function differently and consequently produce different motivations, expectations, and experiences in participants. For that reason, in this study, a distinction is drawn between online tours and virtual tours represented by VR and AR, while the literature review encompasses both categories. The capacity of virtual tourism to attract people should not be overlooked because it can reach a broad swath of people who would not otherwise participate in travel because of distances, costs, time, and effort. This is particularly true in the face of the ongoing pandemic, during which health issues and psychological concerns present additional barriers to in-person tourism (Lekgau, Harilal, & Feni, 2021).

Authenticity is one of the central factors in tourists' perception of a tourism experience as meaningful. Authenticity takes multiple forms, and its meaning can vary across time, locations, peoples, and cultures. It can be a socially constructed perception that a wide variety of tourism products and services could potentially influence. For example, the production process of a tour or the presentation of a particular object original to or historically associated with a site can influence perceptions of experiences as authentic, as can participation in rituals around the site or learning about particular objects or customs during a tour. External recognition (e.g., designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site) can provide qualitative assurance of authenticity (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Halewood & Hannam, 2001). Tourism researchers have long debated the concept of tourism

authenticity, yet little in the way of consensus has been reached concerning what it is and how it functions.

Authenticity in tourism is not simply an object; rather, it is a feature of interactions between tourists and places visited. Some researchers suggest that authenticity reflects on how tourists perceive their travel experiences (Jiménez-Barreto, Rubio, & Campo, 2020), whereas others claim that authenticity is something inherent in a place or object (Park, Choi, & Lee, 2019). Authenticity refers to individuals' perceptions in evaluating various goods and experiences (Newman, 2019) in terms of socially constructed meanings and processes (Wang, 1999). Perceptions of authenticity can be negotiable and integrated into everyday life (Halewood & Hannam, 2001) or original, interactive, and emotional (Jin, Xiao, & Shen, 2020). The concept of authenticity as it applies to tourism involves various perspectives and has been broadened and developed. It is still evolving.

The question of what causes tourists to experience authenticity is key for the tourism industry because the perception of authenticity can affect tourists' immediate experiences as well as post-tour attitudes and actions (Penrose, 2020). Wang (1999) conceptualized three types of authenticity in tourism: objective, constructed, and existential/experiential. Cohen and Cohen (2012) have examined the nature of tourist experiences and the sources of authentication of tourist attractions. Newman and Smith (2016) offered a framework of the concept of authenticity and proposed four domains of authenticity, including those directed at history, category membership, value authenticity, and self-identity. Lehman, O'Connor, Kovács, and Newman (2019) reconceptualized authenticity and proposed three domains of authenticity (consistency, conformity, and connection). Although authenticity refers to what is real, genuine, and true, its distinct interpretations vary from individual to individual and community to community. Also, authenticity attributions largely reflect the referent. People debate intangible and unstable authenticity and objective versus subjective authenticity. Authenticity can represent anything from an intangible quality to an objective attribute, and thus, identifying particular sources of perceived authenticity in a certain context becomes important for the design of meaningful, quality tourism experiences.

Penrose (2020) views the state of being authentic as the belief and sensation that one has experienced something genuine, real or original; this belief matters to people because of the importance of personal connection to (Lehman et al., 2019), presence in (Kim, So, Mihalik, & Lopes, 2021), attachment to (Shang, Yuan, & Chen, 2020), or self-realization through the object or site (Newman & Smith, 2016). Penrose (2020) assessed perceptions of museum visitors in relation to the presentation formats of exhibits and found important interrelationships between authenticity, personal identification, and storytelling. She argues that the accuracy of the stories being told impacts visitors' experiential authenticity (Penrose, 2020). Penrose further suggests that the value in investigating the process of visitors authenticating the object or experience goes beyond merely identifying the type of authenticity that visitors experience. The present study takes a similar approach in posing its process question: How do online tourists authenticate objects or settings? The findings will potentially provide insights into how to design meaningful, quality online tourism experiences.

Virtual reality applied in tourism settings influence perceptions of authenticity, and the perception of authenticity impacts whether or not users accept VR tourism (Guttentag, 2010). In general, the literature has found that the sense of presence tourists experience through VR technology has a

positive influence on their travel experience and satisfaction (Tussyadiah, Wang, Jung, & tom Dieck, 2018; Zhang et al., 2022). Studies have supported the argument that virtual tourism can create necessary engagement that influences the experience of authenticity. Examples include emotional engagement through AR (Harley, Lajoie, Tressel, & Jarrell, 2020); sensory, intellectual, behavioral, and affective engagement through online platforms using a video website or social media (Jiménez-Barreto et al., (2020); and physical and sensory participation (Kim et al., 2021). While virtual tourism appears to potentially produce authentic experiences, some aspects remain unclear: What contributes to authentic experience in virtual tourism and how tourists authenticate their experiences in a virtual tourism environment.

Although a number of scholars have argued the concept of authenticity and authentic experiences in tourism contexts, little knowledge is available on authentic experiences and authenticating process in virtual tourism. Examining the experiences of participants in online tours can potentially lead to a better understanding of how to produce meaningful and authentic experiences in a virtual environment. This research was aimed at exploring a range of perceptions of online tour participants and identifying contributors to the perceived authenticity in a virtual environment.

Methodology

For this study, the authors first reviewed online tours that were produced in Japan and targeted English-speaking audiences to assess the tours for quality, length, and content. Virtual tours offering VR or AR experiences (Zhang et al., 2022) were not taken into consideration in the study's selection process since the purpose was to explore a range of perceptions that audiences gained through online tours. Four independent online tours met the selection criteria and were used for this research. Differences among the four, such as the guide, subject area, length, and technology used, were not considered to be an issue because this research was not aimed at assessing the tour quality; rather, it aimed at understanding what perceptions were produced in those taking part in the experiences and what contributed to those perceptions.

The participants were recruited to participate in one of four tour sessions held in August or October 2021. Using purposeful sampling, the authors invited English-speaking individuals who had no or little experience of online tours in the past and were interested in a tourist attraction in Japan. In total, 18 individuals participated in one of the four tours and agreed to be interviewed afterward. The participants (7 women and 11 men) ranged in age from their 20s (n = 10) or 30s (n = 3) to their 40s (n = 4) or 60s (n = 1). Semi-structured interviews comprising six questions were conducted via Zoom immediately after the tour: 1) What was good in the online tour? 2) What experiences or items made you perceive that it is an online tour? 3) Did you feel that you were actually visiting the site? 4) Did you get interested to actually visit the site? 5) How do you rate this online tour? and 6) Do you want to participate in another on-line tour? The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The transcripts were reviewed by two researchers independently. After all codes were explored by the first coder, the second coder verified whether the codes were properly applied. The codes represented a feature of the data, including semantic and latent contents. Having two coders compare the consistency of the codes' application allowed for the generation and organization of themes into meaningful categories. The majority of the themes matched previously reported concepts in virtual tourism and authenticity research, which will be described below.

Results and Discussion

The interview respondents described the feelings and thoughts they experienced during the tours, pointing out features unique to their tours and gaps between their experiences and expectations. Overall, the respondents perceived their experiences positively and recognized the benefits that a virtual environment had offered, while some respondents pointed out negative perceptions of the tour experience.

The respondents positively assessed their online tour experiences using the following criteria: spatiotemporal presence was not required to experience the destination; physical effort was not needed to experience the activity in the tour; actual travel was not needed to see the destination; and online tours offered accessibility and diverse experiences. Regarding accessibility, one respondent clearly mentioned that the tour enabled him to “climb up” a mountain, giving him access to an experience that was normally unavailable to him because of a physical disability. This finding is consistent with other studies that report the accessibility of virtual tourism (Lu et al., 2021). Another respondent valued the fact that an online tour allowed for nonlinear experiences that, because of spatiotemporal constraints, would not otherwise be possible in an actual tour. The simultaneous experience of nonlinear actions and events, such as viewing the same scenery in different seasons or seeing the sunrise from the perspective of multiple locations and days, enabled participants to appreciate diverse aspects of the site.

The respondents also reported negative perceptions around such things as experiences that fell short of expectations, the poor quality of photos and technologies used in the tours, and their inability to engage in physical movement, or a lack of physical fatigue that would be felt in an actual tour. These negative perceptions interfered with the respondents’ perception of physical presence and the tours as “real.” These findings suggest that the sense of presence is one of elements that create meaningful experiences in a virtual tourism, which is in line with previous research (Tussyadiah et al., 2018; Wu & Lai, 2022).

Tour guides were generally singled out as a source of positive impressions among the participants. The ability of tour guides to offer diverse opportunities to engage with the tours appeared to influence the participants’ perceptions. For example, respondents mentioned their guides’ effectiveness in answering questions, providing knowledge and interpretations regarding local cultures and rituals, relating authentic stories, and communicating with participants. They positively evaluated their guides’ personalities and skill in leading tours. Online tour guides appeared to function as partners in co-creating tourism experiences with the participants. This finding supports previous research (Irimiás, Mitev, & Michalkó, 2020). Thanks to new technologies, people can take trips from home while enjoying the benefits of a tour guide at the destination (Fennell, 2021).

Four main themes emerged from the interviews as potential keys to understanding online tour experiences. The respondents perceived the online tours as 1) substitutes for real tours, 2) pre-visit experiences, 3) a new genre of travel, or 4) an alternative form of entertainment. For the first theme, some respondents perceived their tour as a substitute for a real tour (Adachi, Cramer, & Song, 2020) that enabled them to “see and feel” the site without physically being there. The responses along this theme corresponded with other research on different indications of perceived

authenticity: a feeling of being present (Kim et al., 2021; Tussyadiah et al., 2018), the use of multiple senses (Harley et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2020), exposure to authentic stories (Penrose, 2020), and interactions with local people (Shang et al., 2020). For the second theme, the interviewees viewed the tour as an information source for their future travels and considered it a pre-visit experience; this finding is consistent with previous research (Mura et al., 2017). The information obtained in the tour helped participants to decide about future travel destinations, gain motivation to visit those locations, prepare for actual visits, and simulate travel to those places; this result was also congruent with previous findings (Lekgau et al., 2021). For the third theme, the participants referred to online tours as a new travel genre. They recognized the convenience of online tours that allowed them to visit different locations and attractions from home, experience ideal conditions at a destination regardless of the actual weather and crowds, and access other associated information over the Internet during the tour. Consequently, these conveniences allowed them to select sustainable tourism (Lekgau et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2021). For the fourth theme, the participants considered online tours as a form of alternative entertainment. Supporting the findings of other studies (Akhtar et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2021), these respondents reported that they regarded online tours as an enjoyable activity to engage in at home rather than a tourism experience. As these findings illustrate, online tours have the potential to help the tourism industry not only recover from the disruption because of the pandemic but also to serve as an alternative form of entertainment or way to advance the tourism experience for people with diverse demands and needs.

Conclusion

Tourism in the new age of disruption must be open to transformation, and technological innovation is a key to the industry's resiliency (Sharma et al., 2021). Fennel (2021) has argued that new technologies can change how we consume tourism experiences and can offer attractive alternatives for people with physical disabilities or insufficient financial means for travel. Tourism based on new technologies can potentially allow tourists to stay at home but still obtain the benefits of a tour guide at the destination. The findings of this research demonstrate the capability of online tours to transform the tourism experience. The participants did not always express a desire for authenticity in online tours, but they did note that their tour experiences were different from conventional in-person tourism practices. The study's participants talked about their virtual tourism environments in terms of physical and sensorial involvements, which they perceived as an important component of experiencing authenticity (Mura et al., 2017). The memorable experiences they recalled were the result of the participatory atmosphere provided in the virtual environment (Irimiás et al., 2020).

Future research could involve a larger number of interview respondents to ascertain the depth and breadth of the perceived authenticity in virtual environments and integrate a more comprehensive view of authenticity into an assessment of online tour experiences. Longitudinal memories and the influence of online tours over time should be assessed to understand any transformations in participants' evaluations. Previous experience of online tours may also need to be taken into consideration in future analyses of meaningful experiences connected to online tours as past experiences may influence expectations of online tours.

Virtual tourism offers the potential to create alternative experiences that influence accessibility, education, entertainment, and marketing (Guttentag, 2010) and may help alleviate the overtourism

problem (Bec et al., 2021). As the tourism industry continues to encounter challenges, demand for and acceptance of virtual tourism may remain high. Transforming tourism experiences expands tourism markets themselves, resulting in a more diverse and inclusive tourist population. As the crisis throughout the industry has accelerated the development and application of new means of experiencing tourism, the potential for virtual tourism will continue to grow in both number and importance.

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