

Introducing Amazon Explore: a digital giant's exploration of the virtual tourism experiences

Tjaša Alegro, Maja Turnšek, Tomi Špindler and Vita Petek

Abstract

Purpose – Amazon Explore is a new online experience product from Amazon, which offers live stream sightseeing of destinations around the world. This paper aims to provide a first insight into how exactly Amazon Explore enters the virtual experience (VE) industry, and discuss the possible implications of its business model for the future of virtual and offline travel experiences.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative and quantitative methods of content analysis methods were employed in this study. The sample of this research consisted of 175 Amazon Explore products. Firstly, the authors analysed the content of each product, and then quantitative method were used to present the data. With this analysis, the authors presented how Amazon Explore is testing the foundations for new business models, and discuss the possible implications for the future of tourism. One year later, those same Amazon Explore products were reviewed again to check development progress. The following were the main questions regarding VE: How interactive are Amazon Explore products? How does Amazon Explore aim to ensure the monetisation of these products in an economically sustainable way in order to go beyond the “freemium” business model, often associated with VE as just another destination marketing tool?

Findings – This article presents the discussions of VE and virtual reality (VR). The authors determined the level of interactivity of the diverse VE offered themes with a model of four levels of interactivity. The results show that the analysed products achieve mostly only low levels of interaction. Regarding monetisation, Amazon Explore shows three possible future directions in the development of VE: as a marketing tool, as an extension of the offline experience and as potentially someday replacing real travel as part of the future monetisation scenario.

Originality/value – The article offers the first insights into Amazon's extension into the realm of VE in two time periods in 2020 and 2021, and, based on these preliminary results, discusses four possible scenarios for the future development of VE monetisation.

Keywords Virtual experiences (VE), Digital platforms, Live stream sightseeing, Interactivity, Monetisation

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic arguably accelerated the digitalisation of tourism. For example, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2020) discusses technology as one of the pillars of the “new normal” following the pandemic. Companies were forced to come up with innovative strategies to generate income and minimise job losses. A specific niche sought during the COVID-19 pandemic by both destinations and tour guides is the shift towards online, virtual experiences (VEs; Jarratt, 2020; Itani and Hollebeek, 2021). The fast development of technology and its effectiveness in the simulation of real-life experiences is believed to be an opportunity for virtual holiday-making, especially when actual travel is not possible (Sarkady et al., 2021). Schioppa et al. (2021) argued that virtual reality (VR) will become a contributor to the sector's transformation, might mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 crisis and, more importantly, help the tourism industry transform itself into a more resilient form. Perez (2020) perceived this trend as an opportunity aiding

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especially small businesses that had been impacted the most by the pandemic: local shop owners, guides, chefs, stylists, artists and artisans.

Furthermore, it is expected that norms such as social distancing and lower mobility are going to be followed even after COVID-19. Tourism organisations will try to find new ways of offering safe tours to visitors (Itani and Hollebeek, 2021). Therefore, Mohanty *et al.* (2020) predicted a growth in the demand for VEs, not only to ensure tourist safety but also to create unique, accessible, personalised, context-specific, deep and memorable experiences (Mohanty *et al.*, 2020). Finally, VEs are believed to aid in an increased likelihood to visit these sites physically in the future (Jarratt, 2020).

By now, several platforms offer VEs, and their main value propositions seem to be offering insights into the local environment via the possibility of tour guiding by locals, as, for example, advertised by Urban Adventures: “From hands-on cooking classes to virtual city walks to interactive trivia. All experiences are held over Zoom, and hosted by expert local guides in cities around the world” (Urban Adventures, 2021). A similar offer could be found at Withlocals (2021), Viator (2021), Expedia (2021), TripAdvisor (2021), Getyourguide (2021) and Airbnb (2020). Most of these are specialised travel/media companies, whereby some originate from areas of tour guiding, while others extended their previous offer, for example by adding experiences to accommodation distribution, as was the case with Airbnb (2020) even before the pandemic.

VEs, however, are not offered by travel specialised players only, but have become the arena of further market expansion of digital giants that are trying to tap into the travel industry. The focus here is on one such giant specifically – Amazon.com, Inc. It is an American multinational technology company based in Seattle, Washington. The company operates in the field of online retail, selling different types of products, also distributing movies and music. Together with Apple, Microsoft and Google, Amazon is one of the biggest in the United States’ information technology industry (Amazon, 2022). Amazon’s primary business model has been online sales of goods which, eventually, via processes of both in-house development and mergers and acquisitions, grew to the extreme conglomerate as we know it today. As Amazon (2022) pointed out, Amazon distribution can include several options next to its traditional classic sales platform: Amazon Prime Video (a movies and series platform), Kindle (books to read), Audible (audiobooks), Amazon Music (a music listening platform). In the year 2020, Amazon launched a new service called Amazon Explore (Amazon Explore, 2021), available only for the USA residents. Amazon Explore (2021) allows customers to book live, VEs led by local experts – operating thus as a digital platform for live streaming of tour guiding, amongst other experiences. The goal of this paper is to provide the first insights into how exactly Amazon Explore enters the VE industry, and discuss the potential meanings of its business model for the virtual and offline travel experience futures.

The most challenging issue of VEs is their monetisation (O’Neill, 2020). Specifically, VE providers are looking for ways of going beyond the “freemium” business models and are testing different options. One of such potential options is interconnecting VEs with online retail – the field where Amazon Explore (2021) excels, and might just find new ways of monetisation of VEs via finding new modes of interactivity. The users/VE guests can interact with a tour guide, so they can ask questions; express wishes about what else they would like to see in the area; learn how to cook and dance; learn the language and so forth. A specific advantage afforded by Amazon Explore (2021) is the fact that a tourist has the option to buy the local products he sees in the live stream. For example, if a VE tourist guide live streams his/her visit of a shop with local products within the programme, the tourist can choose to pay extra for the products to be delivered. Shopping is, therefore, a form of both monetisation and interactivity in Amazon products, which provides added value and potentially stimulates the growth of the local economy.

Second, Amazon Explore might be trying to monetise the products by extending the interactivity of VEs to the highest possible extent, making them thus as “real” as possible – blurring media content with a virtual travel experience. The main issues of developing value within VE are the questions of the sense of presence, spontaneity, users’ control and interaction with the tour guides – concepts

which we broadly understand here as elements or dimensions of interactivity. As a primarily digital company with a historic footing in blurring of different digital formats aimed at interconnecting media production with retail, Amazon Explore might provide specific directions towards extending the interactivity of VEs.

The approach taken in this paper is primarily from the field of the Political Economy of New Media, with the focus on digitalisation in tourism. We approach Amazon Explore as Amazon's testing ground for extending its market power into the field of experience provision and focus on two main research questions from the point of view of the tourism experience futures, building on [O'Connors \(2019\)](#) thesis regarding the "blurring" of the travel distribution space:

RQ1. To what extent do the first provided virtual experiences on Amazon Explore exploit the Amazon's retail business via offering a shopping option?

RQ2. To what extent are the first provided virtual experiences on Amazon Explore interactive?

By focusing on the blurring of live streaming with shopping and the levels of interactivity provided by Amazon Explore, we analyse how Amazon Explore is testing the grounds for new business models, and discuss what the potential implications for the tourism futures might be.

This research uses qualitative content analysis of the first 175 products offered by [Amazon Explore \(2021\)](#) in order to provide a first overview of the Amazon Explore entrance in the market. We analysed Amazon products again a year later, in December 2021, for possible development and changes. The empirical results were then used as insights for the discussion of future scenarios regarding the impact of Amazon worldwide.

Distinguishing Amazon Explore as virtual experiences (VE) from virtual reality (VR)

[Amazon Explore \(2021\)](#) offered products which involve the presence of a tour guide at the destination and live transmission with a camera or mobile phone, which enables a virtual tour of the selected destination. The term virtual experience (VE) can sometimes be mixed with the meaning of VR, yet the two terms differ, and, as some authors point out, there is a need for the most rigorous distinction and use of the two terms ([Slater and Sanchez-Vives, 2016](#)). VE is understood as a broader concept, and it can be any type of experience offered via the World Wide Web (WWW). VE primarily comes from the subjective view of human experience, and not technological hardware as VR, which refers to an artificial, computer-generated environment ([Hyun et al., 2009](#); [Riva, 2022](#)). The generally accepted definition for VR is the use of a computer-generated 3D environment in which the user can control the movement and interact and show a real-time simulation of one or more human senses ([Yung and Khoo-Lattimore, 2019](#)), give a sense of presence ([Li et al., 2002](#); [Soler-Domínguez et al., 2020](#)) and get an overall immersive experience. [Guttentag \(2022\)](#) claims that the VR experience will compete with the real travel experience over time. It will be about mixing real life with the artificial world, as the comedians present in the sci-fi films *The Matrix*, *Avatar* and *Inception*.

A VE contains features of direct and indirect experience that can be created using 3D or 2D visualisation that provides vividness, direct information, rotations, image zoom and photo-viewing in 2D technology ([Li et al., 2001](#); [Fiore et al., 2005](#); [Hyun et al., 2009](#); [Petit et al., 2022](#)). 3D environments usually trigger positive emotions and a sense of inclusion, resulting in an impact on the purpose of continuing to use VE ([Pestek and Sarvan, 2020](#)). It can be presented through a medium such as a mobile phone ([Heeter, 2000](#)), but does not necessarily include a computer-generated environment and a high level of immersive experience as VR. Therefore, Amazon Explore cannot be defined as VR, since it lacks a computer-generated environment and a high level of immersive experience that is typical for VR, because consumers only watch a 360-degree view of the real environment through the camera. Its primary value proposition is, thus, not the computer-generated 3D environment, but rather various levels of interactivity that aid in the so-called sense of telepresence of "being in a real place".

Virtual experiences and the challenge of monetisation

The discussion on VEs and VR has primarily been divided into one of the three directions that, in essence, differ in their vision regarding the aim and ways of monetisation of VEs: (1) VE as a marketing channel for visitors to visit a destination later physically, whereby the VEs are provided free of charge; (2) VE as an extension of the offline experience, most notably used within the field of interpretation; and (3) VE as, potentially, someday, replacing real travel, and thus sold for its own value, as discussed below.

First, a VE is often hailed as a marketing channel, since it allows the consumer to experience the destination before visiting it physically. The marketing of destinations, hotels and exhibitions is mainly about offering online virtual tours, such as panoramic views, interactive photos, animations and 360° views with non-immersive VR technology. That is how consumers have a direct “pre-lived” experience, even though they are not physically present. Especially now, at a time of pandemic when travel is disabled, virtual tours of destinations have been a popular marketing tool. From this perspective, the VEs are provided mostly free of charge, since they are not perceived as a product to be monetised, but only as a marketing activity that leads to further monetisation (Fang and Lie, 2006; Jayendran and Rejikumar, 2018; Rahimzhanian *et al.*, 2020).

Second, the use of different technology, such as 360° view and augmented reality (AR), is becoming increasingly important for interpretative endeavours, for example, in museums, where the discussion is around concepts such as increasing interactivity for visitors, authenticity, the new museology paradigm of authentic experience that promotes visitor engagement-entertainment and knowledge (Hede and Thyne, 2010; Southall *et al.*, 2019; Lee *et al.*, 2020). In this perspective, VR and VEs are only part of the overall experience. They are sold primarily as a bundle of offline visitations and digital add-ons to the experience, generally purchased via entrance fees.

Third, and perceived historically as the most threatening to the travel industry, is the perception of VE and VR as products that could potentially one day replace travel altogether (e.g. Cheong, 1995). Even before COVID-19, VR technology was recognised as an opportunity for those who may no longer be able to travel, perhaps for health reasons, or because they simply want to experience the world from an armchair and the comfort of their own homes. VR and VE can be a way for people to fulfil their visual desires without direct contact with people or objects (Jayendran and Rejikumar, 2018; Voronkova, 2018). That is why Nanni and Ulqinaku (2021) see hope in virtual tours with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. When tourists cannot travel physically, but want a chance to reach out and connect with a new destination, virtual guided tours are perceived as a way to reduce stress and anxiety (Chen *et al.*, 2016). Hsu (2017) found that VR provides a similar effect as a travel experience and exposure to nature, since it stimulates different senses whose stimulation is triggered by images or sounds.

Currently, the consensus seems to be that VE and VR can only act as a supplement, as an aid to exploring a destination from a rational or cognitive point of view, but not as a proper replacement (Prideaux, 2002; Losada *et al.*, 2020). Twenty years ago, Sussmann and Vanhegan (2000) and Prideaux (2002) analysed the general perception of VR and concluded that the participants almost unanimously rejected VR travel as a substitute for real travel. They cited a lack of opportunities to relax, an inability to buy souvenirs and a lack of spontaneity on the trip as primary reasons. The business model of Amazon Explore might address at least two of the three issues: buying souvenirs via the option of shopping while online travelling, and addressing the lack of spontaneity via the extended interactivity.

The tourism and hospitality industry has been watching the entrance of Amazon into the world of travel with fear, with three scenarios being weighted (Borko, 2018): (1) Amazon as offering its own travel products, and thus competing directly as an online travel agency or metasearch engine, (2) Amazon as having an increasingly larger role in direct marketing by virtue of its growing display ad business and its leading position in voice search and/or (3) Amazon as opening up new avenues for search via an expanding line of smart devices that could place Amazon directly in destination as part of the guest experience.

The first media responses regarding the introduction of Amazon Explore predict that it probably means the first of the three scenarios: that although for now Amazon Explore stays only within the realm of VEs, it will “undoubtedly expand into offline tours and activities and steal a chunk of competitors’ businesses” (Schaal, 2020a). From this perspective, Amazon Explore is perceived as a marketing channel for physical travel. The same reports, however, are quick to point out that Amazon has twice in the past tried to operate a booking business, but abandoned that effort (Schaal, 2020b), and that its current attempts at flight business are limited to the world of the domestic flight business in India (Schaal, 2021).

Shopping for “souvenirs” via virtual experiences (VE)

According to O’Connor (2019), Amazon is one of the global conglomerates that are highly likely to lead the trend of “substitution”, a dramatic disruption from outside the traditional travel sector: “Given these companies’ innovative mindsets and easy access to millions of consumers, if and when they decide to commit to perturbing travel distribution, the rules of the game will again change fundamentally” (O’Connor, 2019, p. 292). Amazon Explore positions itself not in the world of travel, but as a media provider. The words it uses to describe its offer are: “An interactive live streaming service that allows you to learn, shop and discover new places right from your computer” (Amazon Explore, 2021). As such, Amazon Explore positions online travel experiences within the world of live streaming, intertwined with what it does best: provide online retail. Amazon Explore might be the next stage in the trend named by O’Connor (2019) as “blurring”: The travel distribution space is mutating, traditional boundaries and value chains are collapsing and differences between players are becoming less well defined. Amazon is now one of the handful of major companies that have managed to secure extreme market concentration in the digital markets. Oskam and Zandberg (2016) term these companies the “Scary Five” (the other four being Alphabet’s Google and YouTube, Facebook including Instagram, and eBay, while some also include Apple and Microsoft here). Their oligopoly is “scary” for the travel and hospitality industries, since they not only take up almost all digital travel advertising budgets, but are also a major competitive threat to digital travel and hospitality players. These companies can offer a similar service as part of a larger bundle within their aim to monopolise users’ digital experiences in their own enclosed world. The same companies are currently under high regulative pressures regarding the fact that they operate marketplaces in which they also compete, thus allowing themselves unfair advantages (Lowry, 2020).

In the offline world, tour guides have generally been well recognised as affecting tourist shopping behaviour importantly (Chang, 2014), as they often encourage tourists to participate in shopping activities (Wang *et al.*, 2000). Compared to independent travellers, package tourists may have more shopping information and more opportunities to spend their time at places to shop, which are commonly provided and encouraged by tour guides (Wu *et al.*, 2014). With shopping as the element of digital experiences, Amazon Explore might be tapping into this traditional revenue source. However, although this option is afforded by Amazon Explore as a platform, the VE hosts might not necessarily use the option. It is, therefore, important to see to what extent the first Amazon Explore products exploit the Amazon’s retail business operations by allowing to buy “non-virtual” souvenirs from the VEs. In the future, in VR tourism, the purchase of souvenirs could be made possible with 3D printers, with which the tourists could recreate the souvenir they saw in the VR (Guttentag, 2022).

What we argue here is that the combination of Amazon’s size and its past experience in the provision and monetisation of media content might just be its primary advantage compared to travel rivals trying to dominate the field of VE distribution. It is in a position to do so by building on its previously developed video streaming (Amazon Prime) and TV shopping with its core business of Amazon online retail. The fact that it provides shopping as one of the main value propositions might differentiate its business model and provide us with a glimpse into the future blurring of the travel and media industries – one where physical visitation might no longer be the “holy grail”, but the VE becomes an end in itself – and being much more a media product than a travel distribution

product – the direction that might jump to the final extreme of [O’Connors \(2019\)](#) “blurring” thesis of the travel distribution space.

Interactivity of virtual experiences (VE)

[Yang et al. \(2021\)](#) introduced a four-layer research model to examine how a 360° virtual tour can reduce people’s psychological stress through two types of presence: (1) the sense of presence, which is the feeling that we are present at a virtual environment, for example, with the use of VR glasses, we are able to get a highly immersive experience, and (2) telepresence, which refers to interaction with another real environment through computer-generated media (e.g. an online video conference) and affective-motivational states (enjoyment and involvement) in this extraordinary period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their results show that people were more satisfied with telepresence, because they found it equivalent to a real experience, similar to “being in a real place”. Virtual tour guiding as offered by Amazon Explore allows the consumer a certain level of telepresence, since not only is the presented destination showed synchronously, but users can navigate the experience to a certain extent and direct and interact with the tour guide.

Interactivity is generally defined as the level of interaction with the guests. [Moscardo \(1996, 1998\)](#), for example, highlighted two of the primary principles of successful interpretation: (1) control over the receipt of information so that the visitors have a choice of what to see, listen to, and (2) stimulating interest in what is presented to the visitor by asking them questions. Throughout history, interactivity has been defined in different ways. Interactivity may represent communication between a person and a device, or communication between people, regardless of distance or time ([Blattberg and Deighton, 1991](#)). At the earlier stages of the Internet [Liu and Shrum \(2002\)](#) specified the three main dimensions of (online) interactivity: active control, two-way communication and synchronicity. These three dimensions are also nowadays understood as the main defining elements of interactivity. Active control is characterised by voluntary and instrumental action that influences the controller’s experience directly. Two-way communication refers to the ability for reciprocal communication between companies-users and users-users. Synchronicity refers to the degree to which users’ input into a communication and the responses they receive from the communication are simultaneous. According to [Liu and Shrum \(2002\)](#), a highly interactive online experience requires users’ closer attention and more cognitive processing than is needed for traditional media or low interactive online experiences.

In this paper, we analyse the level of interactivity of Amazon Explore products via a model of stages of interactivity within Amazon Explore, based on [Liu and Shrum’s \(2002\)](#) three dimensions of interactivity. First; (1) synchronicity refers to the degree to which users’ input into communication and their response from the communication are simultaneous. Since it is a live broadcast, participants receive an answer immediately. It is also live visual communication via a camera, which means that the user can observe what is happening at the destination at that moment. Since all the products at this point are of the same type of live guided tours, Amazon Explore provides a relatively constant, high level of synchronicity. We, therefore, focus in our analysis on two other dimensions of interactivity: (2) active control when users have the possibility to navigate and direct activities at the destination, and (3) two-way communication as a possible interaction, a conversation between a tour guide, locals and “virtual tourists”. Here, the shopping option is also one of the elements of interactivity, since the users can also buy local products, which the tour guide sends through the post office.

Research method

In this study, quantitative content analysis was used as a systematic examination of written descriptions of Amazon Explore products. The analysis was done in two steps, with one year of time-difference between the two data sets. The first analysis sampled all the product descriptions published on the Amazon Explore website from its “premiere” 10.11.2020 to 23.12.2020 (n = 175 product descriptions). One year later (December 2021), the same Amazon Explore products were

reviewed again, with the original aim of analysing the differences within the same products and analysing additionally published products. However, the second analysis revealed that there were no additional new products to analyse, and that the original set of published products decreased by 95% ($n = 8$ product descriptions). Additionally, the offer was still available only for the US residents.

In the first step, each product was analysed – the title and description under the subtitle “About your experience”. In the analysis, the coding scheme was determined *a priori*, that is, before coding began. The coding scheme establishes relevant and valid categories with regard to answering the research questions (White and Marsh, 2006). The following subtopics of tourism products were identified: “gastronomy”, “culture”, “history”, “art”, “architecture”, “photography”, “landmark”, “wellbeing”, “people”, “fashion”, “religion”, “nature”, “language”, “animals”, “dark tourism”, “sport”, “music”, “industry”, “politics”, “dance” and “housing”. Also, the following verbs (activity codes) were defined: learning, watching demonstrations, sightseeing, learning new skills-highest level, shopping and visiting. The number of products that included shopping was then compared within the different subtopics, in order to analyse the level to which the hosts of VE use the Amazon Explore’s enmeshing with Amazon’s retail business.

Four activity codes of the products were identified to analyse the products’ interactivity. Activity codes reflect the activity of guests in VE products via the verbs used to describe exactly what the guests will do/experience in the VE. In one product, we were able to identify several activity codes related to different activities that a tourist does. Interactivity was judged based on the dimensions of the level of control and level of two-way communication. Table 1 represents the coding process and product examples for each of the four levels of interactivity.

The lowest value of interactivity (value 1) was judged to be present with activities including the activity codes “learning/sightseeing/visiting”, since the level of control here is minimal, and two-way communication includes only questions to the tour guide/presenter at any time during the experience. The most typical tour guiding products fell in this category, where the users were invited to follow the tour guides via a destination, similarly to the “old” genre of travel TV, with the exception of adding the possibility of questions and answers from the audience at the end of the presentation.

The second level of interactivity (value 2) included the activities of “learning” and “watching a demonstration” at the same time. Here, the level of control is minimal, because participants only learn by listening to what is presented and watching what the tour guide/presenters show. The level of two-way communication is, however, higher than in value 1, since participants can ask questions at any given time; for example, in the process of making food, the participant can ask questions simultaneously.

We assumed activities that include “shopping” to represent the third level of interactivity (value 3). Here, the level of control is high, because you choose for yourself what would you like to see and buy in the presented shop. Two-way communication is present because you must communicate to the tourist guide what would you like to buy from the local shop. These types of products re-enact the experience of shopping in real-life. Building on Amazon’s retail and distribution business, the participants receive the products they buy via a delivery.

Finally, level four represents the highest form of interactivity. Here, a product was coded with value 4 if it simultaneously included the activities of “learning” and “watching a demonstration” and “learning new skills-highest level”. These types of products were characterised by a high extent of individual tailoring and interactivity, for example, a “one-on-one mindfulness session” with a local meditation expert.

Finally, the data were used for the scenario thinking approach. Scenarios are predictions based on specific research findings. Schwartz (1991) defined scenarios as “a tool for ordering one’s perceptions about alternative future environments, in which one’s decisions might be played out”. Yeoman *et al.* (2011) defined them as a “tool for ordering one’s perception about alternative future

Table 1 Activity codes and the level of interactivity

<i>Interactivity level</i>	<i>Activity codes</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Product example</i>
1	Learning/Sightseeing/ Visiting	Level of control is minimal, because participants only learn by listening to the interpretation of what they see at the moment, for example historical facts about some cultural heritage. Two-way communication is accessible only via questions to the tour guide/presenter	<i>Scandals and legends: stories from the New Orleans</i> (virtual tour of French Quarter, visiting pirate alley, St. Louis Cathedral and Jackson Square, learning about the history of New Orleans and about a legendary voodoo practitioner) (Amazon Explore, 2021)
2	Learning + watching demonstration	Level of control is minimum because participants only learn by listening what is presented and watch what providers show. The level of two-way communication is higher; for example, in the process of making food, the participant can simultaneously ask questions	<i>The scrumptious art of bean-to-bar chocolate making in Costa Rica</i> (learning about history and cultural relevance of chocolate and watching demonstration how chocolate is made using hand tools) (Amazon Explore, 2021)
3	Shopping	Level of control is high because you choose for yourself what would you like to see in the shop and buy. Two-way communication is present because you must communicate to the tourist guide what would you like to buy from the local shop	<i>Virtually shop the tropical woodworking gallery of a master craftsman in Costa Rica</i> (shop in the gallery of local craftsman, pick the art piece which will be sent to you by tourist guide) (Amazon Explore, 2021)
4	Learning new skills, highest level	Both level of control and two-way communication are high since participants can actively imitate the presented skills and receive direct feedback	<i>Improve your attitude with gratitude: a virtual meditation coaching session</i> (one-on-one mindfulness session where you learn and simultaneously try a few simple gratitude exercises that you can easily incorporate into your day-to-day routine) (Amazon Explore, 2021)

Source(s): Own elaboration

environments". As Wright (2021) pointed out, scenario planning is seen as characteristically unlike traditional research methodologies. Scenarios have been used in futures studies since the 1960s (Khan, 1972; Godet, 1987). They have been applied in tourism for destination planning purposes for over 30 years (De Kadt, 1979; Krippendorf, 1982), and, more recently, because of increased interest in "futures research" (Van Doorn, 1982). Scenarios can expand trends and give possible answers to what can happen with destinations or some trend in the long term (Formica and Kothari, 2008). For example, Wright (2021), who researched the development of the Forks film destination where the Twilight film saga takes place, suggested several different scenarios for the further development of the destination, where the development of tourist products at the destination can be directed and how to achieve diversification of visitors and attractions in the long run, and not just get up numbers of visitors who visit Forks just because of the movie destination. Data that they used in the analysis served as a basis on which four potential future scenarios regarding VE development in the future and the role of the digital media giant's role in the disrupt of the online tourism field.

Results

There were 175 offered and reviewed products within the selected time frame. Of these, 55 were located in Europe, 28 in Asia, 8 in Australia, 58 in North America, 8 in Central America and 18 in South America. Figure 1, made with s [Datawrapper \(n.d.\)](#) software, shows the number of Amazon Explore products offered globally. The sample thus shows a high level of “Western” focus in the first products offered. The analysis made a year later, on 1 December 2021, confirmed that they changed the visual form of the offer on their website. The novelty they added was that the products were divided thematically into seven topics: [Personal Shopping](#), [Culture and Landmarks](#), [Food and Drink](#), [Learning and Creativity](#), [Wellness and Beauty](#), [Events and Entertainment](#) and [Nature and Outdoors](#). Products were still divided by continents, although the number of products had decreased drastically. For comparison, in December 2020, under the continent Australia, 8 products were found, and Asia contained 28. In December 2021, there were no products from either of the two continents. For the continent Europe, the number of products decreased from 55 to 11. Similarly, the Americas (North, Central, South) also witnessed a drop in the number of products. In 2020, North America was represented by 58, Central America by 8 and South America by 18 products, which was 84 together. In December 2021, this fell to only 8 products. The contents of the products remained the same, with previously identified topics and low interactivity. Overall, judging by the number of products, it seems that customers are losing interest for Amazon Explore, and that it might in the future be categorised as yet another unsuccessful attempt of Amazon to enter the (online) travel business. However, the case might provide important insights for the future of VE.

Figure 2 shows us the number of subtopics of all Amazon Explore products. Out of the 22 different subtopics identified, the most commonly present were culture (61; 35%), history (53; 30%) and gastronomy (46; 26%). Within the second most common group were “art” (22; 13%), architecture (12; 7%), people (10; 6%), well-being (5; 3%) and religion (5; 3%). Many other topics appeared, which were, however, rare (less than 3 times per subtopics): “good cause”, “photography”, “fashion”, “nature” and so forth (see Graph 1 for details).

In the next step, we combined all 22 subtopics into 4 main themes based on similar characteristics: cultural heritage, natural heritage, recreation and “other”. Almost all subtopics belonged to the main theme cultural heritage (90%), including “culture”, “history”, “gastronomy”, “art”,

Figure 1 Geographical dispersal of the sample of the first Amazon Explore products (published from 10th of November to 23rd of December 2020)

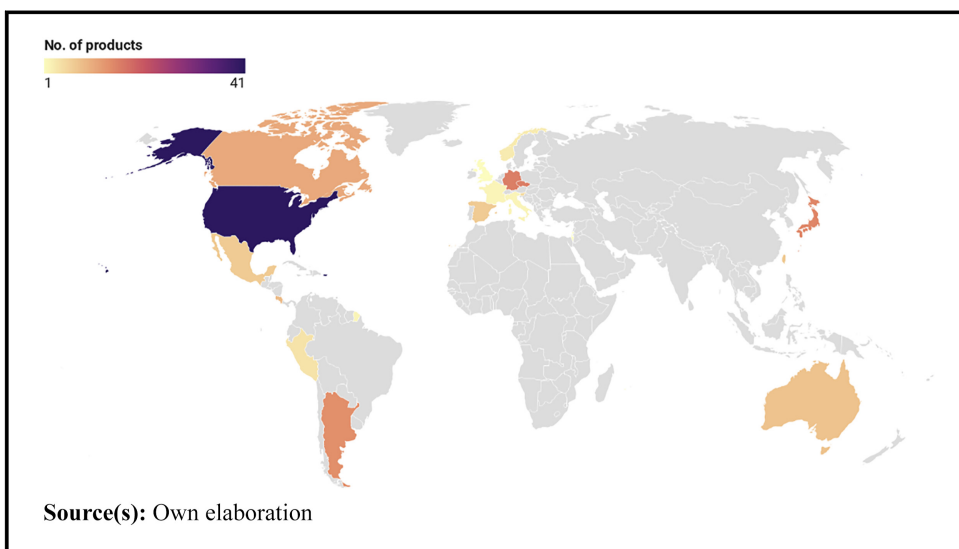
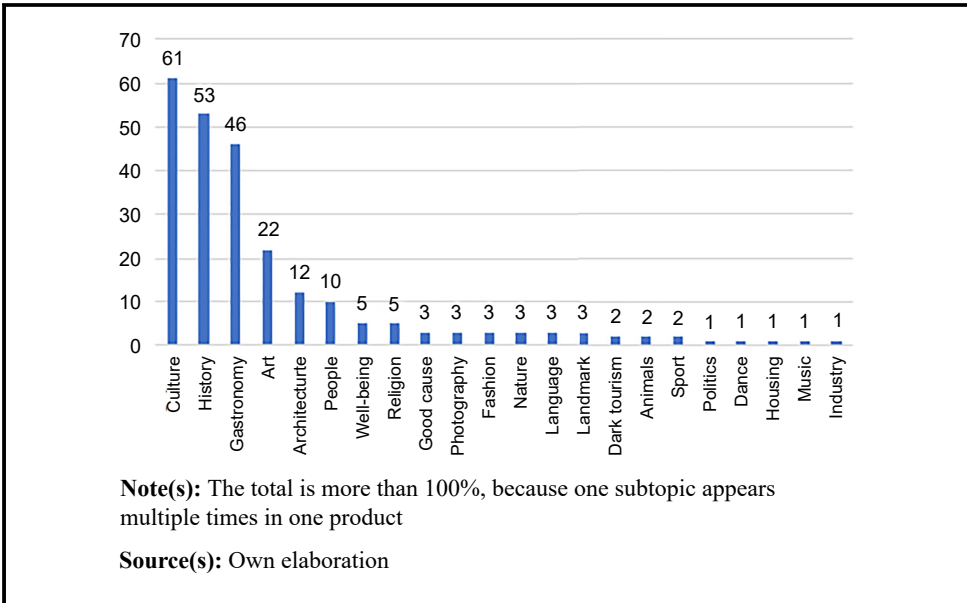


Figure 2 Subtopics of Amazon Explore products (N = 175 products, one product could include more subtopics)



“architecture”, “people”, “religion”, “landmark”, “language”, “dark tourism” and “music”. This was followed by the net main topic “other” (only 4%), including the subtopics “photography”, “fashion”, “industry”, “housing” and “politics”. The main theme, natural heritage, was present in only 3%, and included the subtopics “good cause”, “nature” and “animals”. The last main theme was “recreation”, and included the subtopics of well-being, sport and dance, and again appeared in only 3% of cases.

We assume that the main topic cultural heritage was included most often because it attracts more tourists than other tourist attractions in the destination, as was found by [Yang et al. \(2010\)](#) and [Rodzi et al. \(2013\)](#). The interpretation of cultural heritage can now be presented more interactively and interestingly for tourists, because of the development of digital technology. Our results support [Liu \(2020\)](#) in concluding that the communication of cultural heritage has changed from a static and monotonous way to a more interactive one. The domain of cultural heritage is on the verge of adopting immersive technologies, not only to enhance user experience and interpretation but also to satisfy the more enthusiastic and tech-savvy visitors and audiences ([Rahaman et al., 2019](#)) (see [Figure 3](#)).

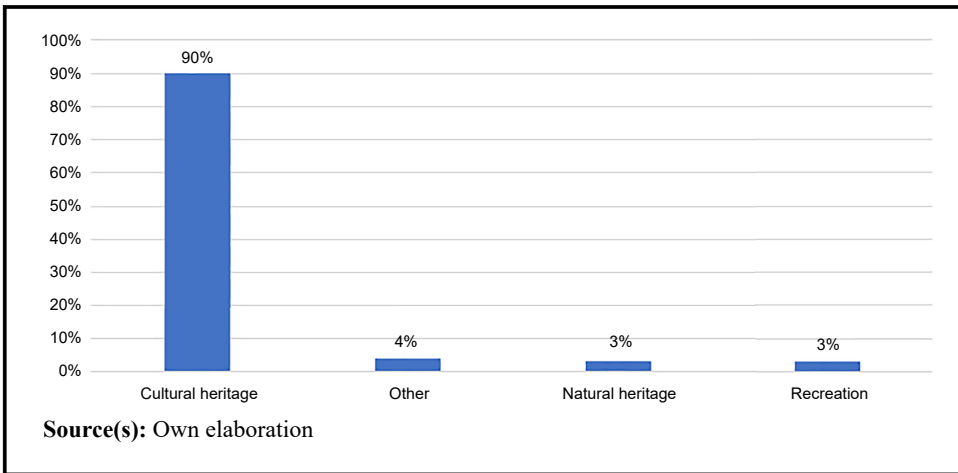
RQ1. To what extent do the first provided virtual experiences on Amazon Explore exploit Amazon’s retail business via offering a shopping option?

The results show that the hosts and/or guests of Amazon VE did not exploit Amazon’s retail position. The most often used activity code in the whole sample was “learning” (62%), followed by “sightseeing/visiting” (58%), “learning new skills-highest level” (27%) and “shopping” (21%), and, finally, the least common was the use of the activity code “watching a demonstration” (9%).

Only 21% of all activity codes included the value proposition of “shopping”. This was most common in connection with products on cultural heritage.

Most importantly, the analysis performed one year later revealed that, at the time of writing, there were no more virtual tours left with the shopping option. If we hypothesised that this just might be

Figure 3 Main themes of Amazon Explore products by percentage points (N = 175 products)



the way in which Amazon Explore can build on Amazon's large online retail business and in this way gain a foothold before its competitors, the results show an opposite picture. Combining VE with shopping, at least for Amazon Explore, does not yet seem to be a viable direction of monetisation of VE (see Figure 4).

RQ2. To what extent are the first provided virtual experiences on Amazon Explore interactive?

The results have furthermore shown that the analysed Amazon Explore products are generally very low on interactivity.

Figure 5 shows the most interactive activity codes "shopping" and "learning new skills" per general theme and a Figure 6 level of interactivity within all products. Most commonly (69%), the products stayed at the minimal level of interactivity. "Learning", "sightseeing", "visiting" were the most common activities describing the products, thus positioning VE primarily into the realm of synchronous sightseeing. The highest level of interactivity (level 4 in Figure 6) is represented by 16% in all products. The goal at this level is to learn new skills while also being physically active in the experience.

Figure 7: shows the level of interactivity by themes.

Figure 4 Number of activity codes shopping per theme (N = 175 products)

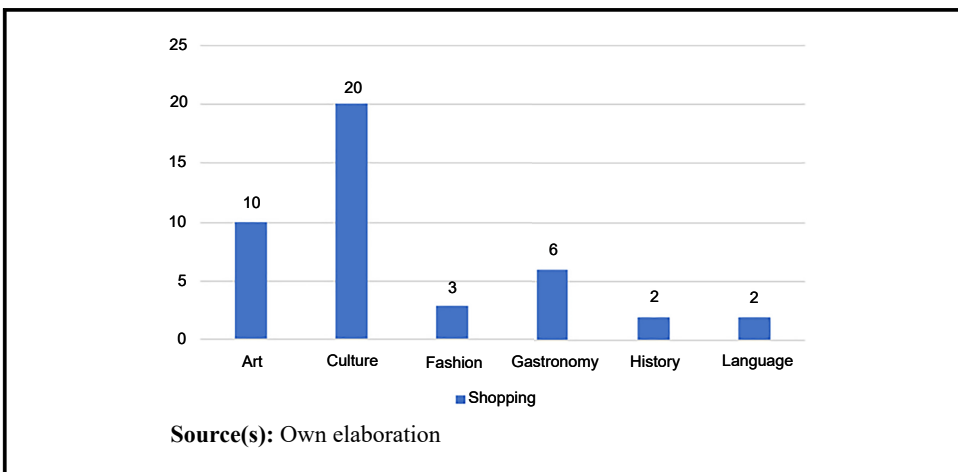


Figure 5 Frequency of activity codes shopping and learning new skills

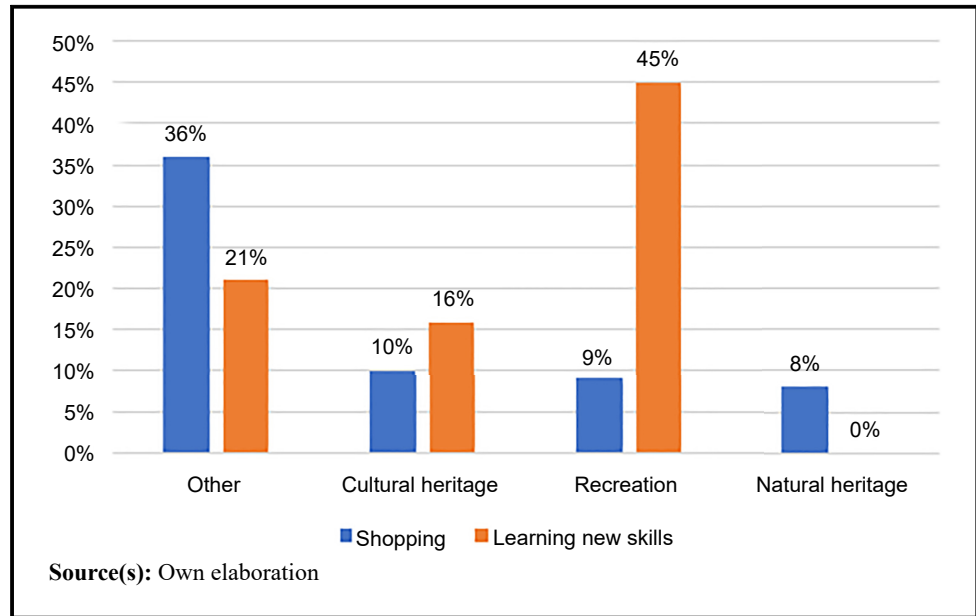
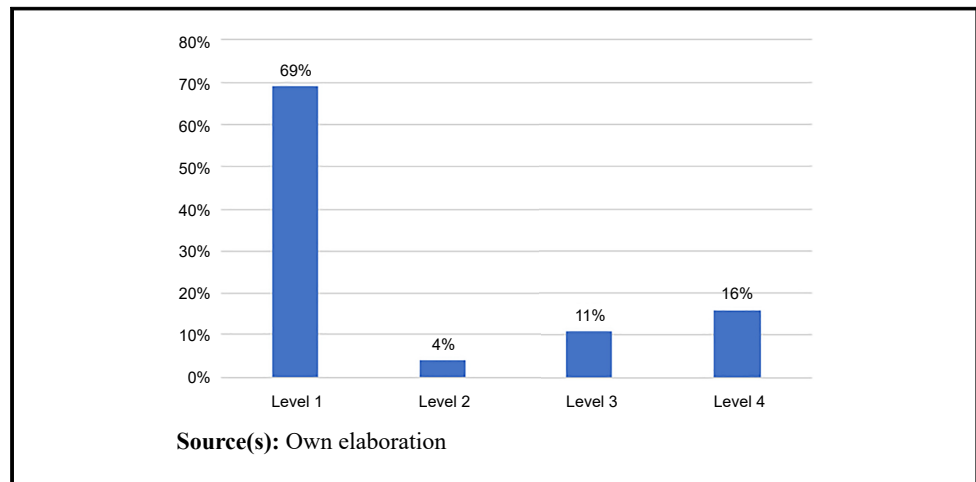


Figure 6 Level of interactivity in all products

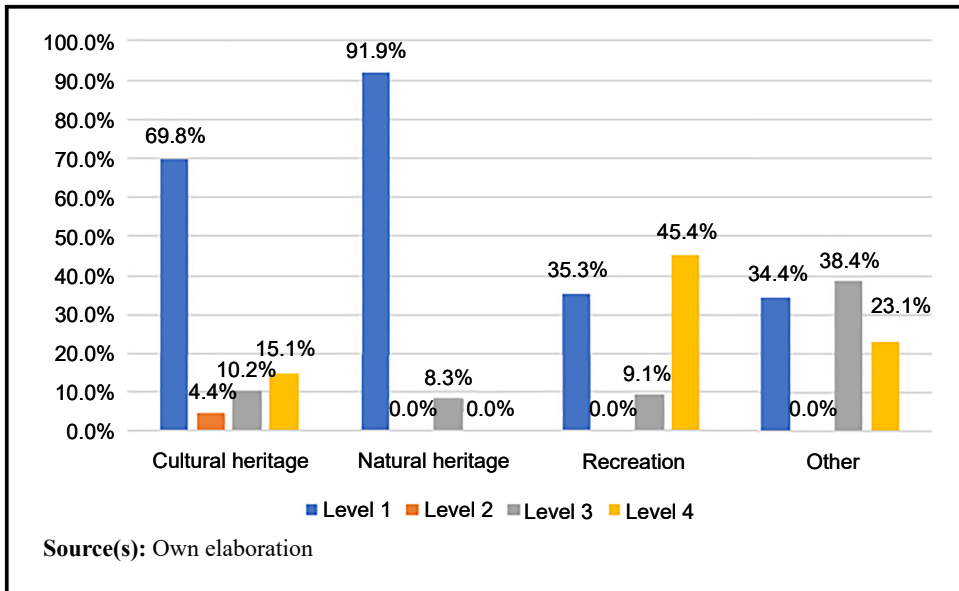


The main theme of Amazon Explore products, “cultural heritage”, is very low on interactivity: 69.8% of the content included the lowest level of interactivity. Examples of Amazon Explore products are sightseeing around a city, for example, Vancouver, Prague, and learning about history, such as the author Franz Kafka.

The next most common theme is natural heritage. The products here are the least interactive of all: 91.9% included the lowest level of interactivity. An example of an Amazon Explore product would be visiting Manly Beach in Australia.

The third main topic is recreation, which is the most interactive because 45.4% of the content was on the highest level of interactivity. An example would be the VE of meditation in North America. The last one is the miscellaneous category “other”, which is medium interactive. The activity code that is most represented is level 3 in 38.4%.

Figure 7 Level of interactivity by themes



The level of interactivity might furthermore explain why some products are the most common: The cultural heritage seems to be “easiest” to represent online via visual material with a low level of interactivity. On the other hand sports and dance activities require higher levels of interactivity. Most of the products are about cultural heritage, where the approach is highly traditional in the sense that the users only follow what the tour guide is presenting; similar to watching a movie, with only the application of the interactivity that the technological features of Amazon Explore are offering. Further research is needed to determine the reasons. One reason might be that the low level of interactivity uptake is only a reflection of the early phase in the innovation adoption: as both VE guides and VE guests will have more experience, the adoption of interactivity might increase on both sides.

Another likely reason hides in the nature of the products. The recreation products such as sport and dance activities require much higher interactivity, since VE guests also participate with their physical movements. However, compared to natural and environmental heritage, they are not the most “stereotypical” type of products in terms of travel experience. Consequently, they seem not to be represented commonly within Amazon Explore, that, according to our results, seems to be more or less about online sightseeing of cultural and/or natural heritage.

Discussion: future scenarios of VE development

The results of the analysis of 175 Amazon Explore products, which were distributed mainly in the Western countries, showed that the products could be sorted into 22 subtopics. We found that these products consist primarily of cultural, historical and gastronomic content, which reflects the general structure of offline tourism experiences. Furthermore, the analysis showed that the cultural heritage theme is represented in 90% of all products; however, these products hardly used the potentials of interactivity and extended monetisation offered by the Amazon Explore platform.

It is important to point out that the least interactive were the products that follow the “typical” form of a travel experience of a “tourist gaze” (e.g. VE tours of cultural heritage of a destination resembling a video presentation, thus only providing gazing). More research is needed in the future on the reasons why the typical products were the least interactive. At this point, we can hypothesise that this might reflect low levels of innovation adoption amongst the VE providers: sticking to the

traditional ways of relatively uninteractive experience (typical destination sightseeing guided tours are generally low on interactivity, also in their physical, offline forms) and not using the interactivity options to their full potential, which was done in other less traditional types of products, such as learning new skills or recreation at a destination.

The low levels of interactivity and low levels of monetisation of Amazon Explore products support the claims of those in the literature who position online and VEs to be just another marketing tool (Fang and Lie, 2006; Jayendran and Rejikumar, 2018; Rahimzhan *et al.*, 2020). The VE products on Amazon Explore are potentially important marketing tools for offline tourism experiences, as they involve communication through visual images or destination icons, such as the main squares of cities and stories of the iconic buildings. Further research is needed to test the effects of such products in the form of variables such as greater awareness, better destination image, dreaming of and planning a visit to a destination, word-of-mouth and, most importantly, actual visits to a destination presented through online experiences. Since the Amazon Explore products mostly did not go beyond interactivity levels of other forms of online video media channels (e.g. YouTube videos), we hypothesise for future research that, at least in the current typical form, they are not comparably any more effective for destination marketing than other online video communication.

What our results show furthermore is that tapping into Amazon's large online retail network and using Amazon Experiences as a new channel for selling "souvenirs" and other destination-specific products did not really succeed. This can potentially be explained by claiming that the market is not yet ready for these types of products. The "flop" of Amazon Explore could mean that the expectations of users' needs for online travel experiences at the time of COVID-19 were largely exaggerated, and were more of a myth or wishful thinking than an actual reflection of tourists' needs. The results, thus, at least at this point in time, show that the claims made twenty years ago (Sussmann and Vanhegan, 2000; Prideaux, 2002) about the lack of opportunities to buy souvenirs and a lack of spontaneity in VE are still not yet addressed sufficiently by the Amazon Explore products, so that we could be able to talk about any real substitution of travel, but rather a supplement, an aid to exploring a destination from a rational or cognitive point of view, but not as a proper replacement (Prideaux, 2002; Losada *et al.*, 2020).

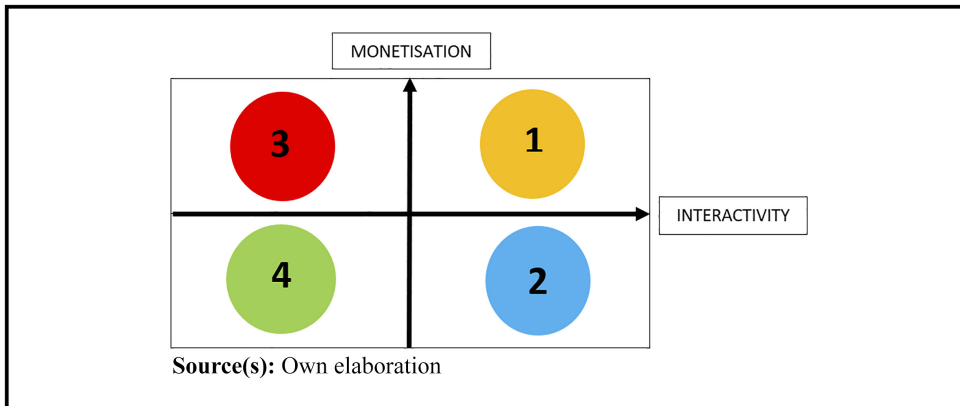
This being said, however, we perceive the fact that there is technological opportunity for a greater interactivity and extension of monetisation via Amazon Explore products positively, even if used by only a small percentage of products. This supports the claim that VEs, when sufficiently interactive, are an extension of the online experience, as they involve a certain degree of personalisation of the product and the interaction or conversation between the virtual tourist and the tour guide, and extend to more interactive areas, such as recreation and learning new skills. While twenty years ago research showed that people had a negative attitude towards VR travel due to the inability to relax (Sussmann and Vanhegan, 2000; Prideaux, 2002), some Amazon Explore products allowed the virtual tourists to participate actively and physically in the content of the product, such as learning yoga or a new language. To a certain degree (e.g., practising yoga), it is, thus, already possible to relax and be spontaneous with VE.

In general, we can conclude that Amazon Explore did not succeed in disturbing the market. However, what are the lessons learned that could provide additional insights for the future development of VE and tourism? In the next section, we focus on discussing the results from the scenario thinking approach.

We suggest four potential future scenarios regarding VE development with regard to monetisation and disruption of the field. Figure 8 serves as a visual representation of the four identified possible scenarios with regard to two analytical dimensions: monetisation and interactivity. We assume here that monetisation and interactivity are the most important factors that drive the success in finding the right cross-selling model that allows for economic sustainability of the VE/VR products.

We represent the dimension "monetisation" with the vertical line and the dimension "interactivity" with the horizontal line. Based on these two dimensions, four possible scenarios were placed in a 2×2 scenario matrix (Figure 8). We have a situation in which technological developments allow for

Figure 8 2 × 2 scenario matrix-virtual experiences future scenarios



high interactivity also to become monetised (scenario 1 – high right quadrant); high interactivity, but not monetisable (scenario 2 – low right quadrant); low interactivity that can be monetised (scenario 3 – high left quadrant) and low interactivity that cannot be monetised (scenario 4 – low left quadrant).

To summarise our findings for future VR/VE scenarios, the main elements are monetisation and interactivity. Based on these two, creating VR/VE business models in tourism is necessary. This can be used as an example for future scenarios to build on.

In an ideal scenario (scenario 1) where you would have a high degree of interactivity and a monetised product, for example, you would need your own VR glasses, on which you could download an application for learning a new foreign language. On this application, you could communicate with a teacher or a native speaker in the virtual world in a selected language. To provide the dimension of monetisation, we could include advertisements in the application, perhaps make the application payable or have the possibility of buying the recordings for further language learning.

The fact that Amazon is abandoning the attempt of highly interactive and monetised products could be seen as an “early warning signal” that the development could turn into one of the scenarios presented in the 2 × 2 scenario matrix. It seems that “low interactivity” is challenging to combine with monetisation and leads to “failure”, as represented in scenario 4. For example, a product where you listen to a cultural heritage interpretation and sightseeing at the destination, without an effective interpretation of the guide, that is, involving the audience, and not the possibility perhaps to buy a souvenir at the destination, means both low levels of interactivity and low levels of monetisation.

Conclusions

The results of this research show that Amazon Explore will probably not disrupt the online tourism field, as the data show a low level of early adoption of both monetisation and interactivity within the Amazon Explore products. Additionally, the analysis furthermore shows that, from the early enthusiasm, Amazon Explore did not grow in the number of products, but rather diminished in the number of products offered one year later. Amazon Explore is still available only for US residents and has not expanded to be available for residents of other countries. Therefore, at the moment, Amazon Explore seems to be only a relatively small-scale experiment of Amazon in targeting the travel businesses, to host VE experiences by blurring its retail and video-streaming with a potential travel distribution business. It seems that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a push towards trying these innovative approaches, yet the problem remains – how to secure a viable business model of VE.

As a further step in developing the business model for VE, we see the potential managerial implications. For Amazon Explore products, we suggest greater integration of shopping on the Amazon website based on the content of the products. With the added interactivity of shopping, we would also achieve more interactive experiences and partially achieve a better degree of feeling of presence at the destination by purchasing local products or souvenirs. Based on the results of the recognised content or product topics, it makes sense to combine these results with Amazon's sales data for the Amazon Explore products, and add and develop content or product topics that are more saleable for the future.

The current results show that this virtual type of "travel" is interesting as an enriching offer or as an additional possibility when travel is limited. The development of virtual products to be more interactive or to enable highly immersive experiences and the possibility of replacing physical travel is possible, and is still developing. The COVID-19 pandemic has indeed accelerated this trend. Even though Amazon Explore will probably not survive in the market in the current form, it is, nevertheless, one experiment more, and thus one building block more in the future development of VE. The development towards VR and highly immersive VE travel experiences could be possible for the future. Yet, based on the current results, we cannot say that they will replace physical travel in the near future. The future development of VE will continue to depend both on the interactivity/immersion of the products and on innovative business models finding new ways to monetise VE beyond the current most common model of a marketing channel for physical travel.

Research limitations and future research suggestions

When analysing Amazon Explore products, we faced the problem of the subjectivity of coding, especially in terms of judging how interactive each main topic of product is. We made a model of four levels of interactivity and analysed products by involving three researchers in the analysis, who compared and adjusted the final results according to the common consensus.

The future will show which of the tourism features will include the positive development of VE. We suggest also repeating the analysis on other VE platforms, since this study was limited only to Amazon Explore. Further analysis should also include other aspects not included in this research, especially price analysis and income flow analysis, in order to analyse further the correlation between product interactivity and their monetisation. One of the main takeaways is the monetisation issue, leading Amazon to abandon the development if it does not seem feasible. We suggest to include the dimension of "monetisation" for future research about extended reality initiatives. Also, for future research of other VE platforms, beyond Amazon Explore, we recommend exploring primarily three directions: (1) the technology used for live streaming (sound and picture quality) and interactivity, including gaming elements, (2) VE tour guides (their education, transformation of traditional tourist guides to VE tourist guides) and (3) users' responses and experiences.

Disclaimer

The Amazon Explore products data used in the research were available publicly. The views and opinions expressed from data analysis are, however, those of the author(s) only, and do not necessarily reflect those of [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), Inc. Neither can [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), Inc. be held responsible for them.

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