



Virtual tours as a solidarity tourism product?

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1. Introduction

In the wake of COVID-19, various sectors, including tourism, have heavily invested in technological innovations such as virtual tours. Virtual tours not only play a critical role in curbing the pause of travel-related activities during the pandemic (Lu et al., 2022) but may also have great potential to help rebuild the industry in a post-pandemic world. Moreover, virtual tours are progressively developing as tools for creating and raising awareness of crises, promoting solidarity and supporting humanitarian relief (Bystrom & Mosse, 2020; Dore, Ehrlich, Malfara, & Ungerman, 2020; The Natural Adventure Company, 2022). A percentage of the profit is donated to humanitarian agencies to aid the humanitarian efforts. In this regard, as opposed to just making a profit, virtual tours promote peace and cultural exchanges.

Online platforms have long been of great interest in humanitarian relief operations. However, virtual tours as a medium of humanitarian efforts is a relatively new approach. Nevertheless, this is a great example of how, in the digital age, people can find creative ways to support humanitarian efforts and stand in solidarity with all those affected by conflicts and growing humanitarian crises. Through virtual tours, ordinary people can work with tourism businesses to help those in need and rebuild the tourism industry post-crises. Thus, this approach raises a fundamental question: How do virtual tours foster solidarity? In recognition of the question, this research note offers a chance to understand how a virtual tour illuminates our understanding of tourism in terms of its potential for solidarity.

2. Solidarity tourism

Solidarity has been focused on moral values and/or obligations (Spicker, 2006). It is a collective responsibility that binds people together through feelings and/or actions (Durkheim, 1995). Though “solidarity includes issues of the common good, reciprocity and social responsibility”, it is said to be “most attractive when it is applied to the idea of social inclusion” (Spicker, 2006, p.142). However, the whole concept of solidarity as a human value was weakened when solidarity was showcased in various political/religious gains as it obliterated the idea of individuality and “moral obligation” (Spicker, 2006, p.136).

A countering force to this narrow-minded dualism may be achieved through tourism by enhancing “intercultural learning” and other related feelings/actions (Tucker, 2016, p. 35) through immersive “solidarity tours and exchanges” (Higgins-Desbiolles & Russell-Mundine, 2008, p.188). Solidarity tours/exchanges can “foster social and environmental transformations” (Higgins-Desbiolles & Russell-Mundine, 2008, p.188; Tucker, 2016). Tourism scholars have explored solidarity (in/for) tourism to both residents and tourists, mainly through the theory of emotion(nal) solidarity (Doğan, 2019; Woosnam, Norman, & Ying, 2009), leading solidarity to a “humanistic vision of tourism” (Doğan, 2019, p. 540).

However, a significant challenge is in defining the term solidarity tourism, which the existing literature fails to explain. Higgins-Desbiolles (2009, p. 338) has described solidarity (in) tourism as part of the justice tourism spectrum. Kassis, Solomon, and Higgins-Desbiolles (2015) description of solidarity tourism is focused majorly on political/religious instability. Additionally, Dogan (2019, p. 547) described solidarity tourism as a reciprocal sensitive and appreciative relationship between

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host and tourist for “the host communities’ economic and social necessities.” On this note, Dolnicar & McCabe (2022, p. 1) described solidarity tourism as a “tourism-related action ... to help people suffering during and after crises, driven by empathy towards people, a sense of unity, and a shared understanding of societal standards and responsibilities.” This definition covers the limitations of previous descriptions of solidarity tourism, where the focus was on political/religious/economic benefits. Widely, though solidarity is reinvigorated, tourism product development in/around solidarity tourism needs to be explored further.

3. Virtual tours

Since its first application in archaeology in 1994 (Higgins, Main, & Lang, 1996), a virtual tour has increasingly been used as a digital space within and/or around tourism destinations. Virtual tours use virtual reality “either synthetically generated or real-captured images” (Lu et al., 2022, p. 442) of a pre-defined destination with possibilities of navigation and interactions (Yung & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019). Its application in tourism includes “planning and management, marketing, entertainment, education, accessibility, and heritage preservation” (Guttentag, 2010, p. 637). Out of all the advantages of virtual tours, accessibility is probably the most crucial factor where an in-person visit is not possible or preferably avoided due to atrocities, disasters, instability or perceived insecurity (Guttentag, 2010). For instance, due to COVID-19, attractions such as museums have opened virtual doors to their exhibitions (Gretzel et al., 2020). Recent tourism research has also helped to understand this application of virtual tours “in the context of education, marketing, cultural heritage, or sustainability” (Yung & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019, p. 2075). However, how virtual tours can work beyond commercial means is underresearched. Therefore, it brings an important question: how can virtual tours be used to showcase solidarity beyond the commercial perspectives of tourism?

4. The possibilities of virtual tours as solidarity tourism?

This paper seeks to explain the possibilities of virtual tours as solidarity tourism using the three interrelated elements of Doğan (2019) touristic solidarity: equality, empathy and sensitivity. Doğan’s concept of touristic solidarity emphasised that the “relationship between the tourist and those visited” is probably the most important and yet most difficult to be achieved in virtual tours due to the absence of ‘being there’.

Reciprocal benefits for both hosts and tourists are the key to Doğan (2019) equality. Although the notion of reciprocity is often inferred as the mutual interchange of tangible benefits such as financial, we approach it here beyond simple economic-related benefits. Reciprocity is a harmonious and mutual-care relationship between hosts and tourists for each other’s well-being (Höckert, 2018). The concept of emotional solidarity is best to describe this relationship. Emotional solidarity is the sense of connections that an individual experiences with one another, embodied by the feeling of welcome, the degree of closeness and sympathetic understanding (Woosnam et al., 2009). Sabourin (2013, p. 306) noted, “reciprocity implies a concern for the others and creates a relationship which produces affective or ethical values, like friendship, trust and mutual understanding”. For example, the use of interactive virtual reality and realistic destination graphics in online games has proved can stimulate emotional solidarity not only between gamers but also between gamer and non-player characters (represented as the locals in tourist destinations), leading to a willingness to visit associated real-world destinations (Sharma, Styliadis, & Woosnam, 2022). This relationship is best described by Dolnicar & McCabe (2022, p. 2) as “... a genuine win-win situation”, a form of reciprocal benefits.

Empathy may play an important role in cultivating emotional solidarity and perhaps the key notion in solidarity tourism. Empathy, in lay terms, is an awareness of other’s people feelings and emotions. In the context of tourism, Tucker (2016, p.37) noted, “the idea that the

experience of ‘being there’ which tourism allows...is precisely what promotes empathy among tourists towards ‘others’.” It is understood that emotional solidarity is often affected by multiple factors, one of which is the interaction between hosts and tourists (Woosnam et al., 2009). As such, the idea of proximity is the fundamental element for both empathy and solidarity in tourism. In the context of virtual tours, where there is the absence of ‘being there’, it is probably difficult to see how virtual tours can stimulate the feeling of empathy. However, with the advancement of technology such as virtual/augmented reality, a realistic and immersive experience is possible as creative simulations may offer similar experiences to the physical version. In this regard, storytelling is a potent communication tool for a virtual tour. For instance, within Indigenous tourism settings, Kramvig and Førde (2020, p. 40) have investigated the role of storytelling in creating relationships between storytellers and tourists to “offer moments of hope”. Storytelling enables connection between hosts and tourists and potentially cultivates personally transformative travel experiences (Kramvig & Førde, 2020). Hence, with proper narration and interpretation, virtual tours may have the power to bring out different types of emotions, including empathy among the tourists (Gretzel et al., 2020; Kramvig & Førde, 2020). For instance, previous research has shown that virtual reality can evoke different emotions, including empathy and compassion, and serves as an effective tool to promote dark tourism sites (Fisher & Schoemann, 2018).

Sensitivity to people and the environment is another key element of solidarity tourism (Doğan, 2019). Sensitivity is the capacity to sense, engage and interact with a difference (Bennett, 1986). As it relates to tourism, sensitivity to people is “an awareness of personal cultural beliefs and practices and sharing non-judgmental and respectful interactions with people of other cultures... engaging in mutuality, identifying similarities and sharing likeness from one’s own world to effectively build connections...” (Anonson et al., 2014, p. 12). In other words, sensitivity is an awareness of the cultural differences through recognition, respect and reciprocity. Also, Doğan (2019), p. 540) noted, “tourists who share this solidarity perspective are expected not only to experience local conditions but also to help local people improve them.” In this vein, expressing sensitivity to the environment through “minimiz [ing] impacts to the natural and cultural environments, foster intercultural awareness and respect, contribute to the protection of built and living cultural heritage...” (Donohoe, 2011, p. 37) is a form of solidarity. Virtual tours can be among the most potentially effective means of attaining this purpose. There is an increased utilisation of digital technologies in the preservation and enhancement of local heritage and cultural landscape. For example, within the space of cultural sites, Mah et al. (2019) have illuminated the value of creating virtual tours as ways to preserve the (in)tangible elements of historical, social and cultural heritage. Apart from providing a sensory experience, virtual tours provide a platform for cultures to be accessible to the general public, thus enhancing cultural sensitivity. Importantly, in this way, virtual tours not only contribute to the efforts to support the sustainability of heritage sites but also, to some extent, serve as an option to fulfil the strong desirability of people to visit destinations that is inaccessible due to crises or threatened by and vulnerable to climate change.

5. Conclusion

This research note demonstrates that virtual tours provide a novel platform for people around the world to show solidarity with and support humanitarian efforts. Virtual tours serve not only as a useful operating way for the tourism industry during the current time of pandemics and crises but also may prove necessary when dealing with future similar crises and greater conflict and instability. Also, virtual tours seem to be a great platform for environmentally and socially conscious travellers and anyone with a disability or condition that prevents or inhibits travel to gain access to touring and solidarity with others. We argue that virtual tours may never replace actual travel

experiences, but they can stimulate a “shared understanding of societal standards and responsibilities” (Dolnicar & McCabe, 2022, p. 1).

Whilst designing virtual tours, tourism product developers must focus on the natural/neutral narrative/storytelling of the destination rather than concentrating on the political/religious divide. Similarly, tourists (and society) can be compassionate by participating in virtual tours focusing on humanity irrespective of the labels (e.g. nationality, religion, or gender). Future studies may examine donating behaviour of tourism/humanitarian agencies, which uses equality, empathy and sensitivity for their solidarity (tourism) products and those who avail of them. However, our understanding human-centric definition of solidarity tourism needs expansion by including eastern and non-western philosophies (to an extent) that believe non-human animals and nature as part of greater solidarity.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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