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***prof. Barbara Pabian, Ph. D.*^{A B C D E}**

University of Economics in Katowice

Faculty of Management

Department of Marketing Management and Tourism

ORCID 0000-0003-3059-6733

VIRTUAL TOURISM IN THE ERA OF CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC – CHALLENGES AND HOPES

TURYSTYKA WIRTUALNA W CZASIE PANDEMII KORONAWIRUSA – WYZWANIA I NADZIEJE

Abstract: The role of the Internet as a culture-forming factor cannot be underestimated. In the modern world characterized by the domination of new technologies, this medium is developing dynamically, because it combines the potential of audio-visual messages with the possibility of creating diverse virtual reality. The computer network has already appropriated various professional, cultural and private spheres, becoming a full, but at the same time

artificial space of human life. Thanks to the development of social networking sites and an unlimited number of users (interactors), social and collective needs are met through the internet. It comes to the so-called: "wikification" of knowledge and culture understood as the effect of collective intelligence actions and arrangements as well as restrictions on the sphere of privacy. This phenomenon is assessed by researchers in an ambivalent way.

We learned about the importance of the internet in the age of the coronavirus pandemic. At that time, virtual tourism was included in the era of virtual dimension, gaining in this situation new opportunities and a spatio-temporal context. In view of this innovative form of tourism there is a need for a scientific view of this phenomenon and to pay attention to both positive aspects and threats that may occur to people moving in cyberspace. There is also a need for terminological clarification of the place, meaning and concept of virtual tourism. The purpose of the article, which uses the desk research critical analysis method is to pre-consider these problems and in this aspect try to propose an original definition of virtual tourism.

Keywords: virtual tourism, tourism during pandemic period, new trends in tourism

Streszczenie: Nie można nie doceniać roli internetu jako czynnika kulturotwórczego. We współczesnym świecie dominacji nowych technologii medium to dynamicznie się rozwija, ponieważ łączy w sobie potencjał przekazów audiowizualnych z możliwością kreowania różnorodnej wirtualnej rzeczywistości. Sieć komputerowa zawłaszczyła już różne sfery zawodowe, kulturowe i prywatne, stając się pełną, ale sztuczną przestrzenią ludzkiego życia. Dzięki rozwojowi portali społecznościowych i nieograniczonej liczbie użytkowników (interaktorów) potrzeby społeczne i zbiorowe są zaspokajane za pośrednictwem internetu. Dochodzi przy tym do tzw. wikifikacji wiedzy i kultury rozumianej jako efekt działania i uzgodnień zbiorowej inteligencji oraz ograniczenia sfery prywatności. Zjawisko to oceniane jest przez badaczy w sposób ambiwalentny. O znaczeniu internetu przekonaaliśmy się w dobie pandemii koronawirusa. W tym czasie w erę wymiaru wirtualnego włączona została turystyka wirtualna, zyskująca w tej sytuacji nowe możliwości i kontekst czasowo-przestrzenny. Wobec tej innowacyjnej formy turystyki pojawia się potrzeba naukowego oglądu tegoż zjawiska oraz zwrócenia uwagi zarówno na aspekty pozytywne, jak i zagrożenia, które mogą stać się udziałem człowieka poruszającego się w cyberprzestrzeni. Pojawia się również potrzeba terminologicznego doprecyzowania miejsca, znaczenia oraz samego pojęcia turystyki wirtualnej.

Celem artykułu, przy którym posłużono się metodą analizy krytycznej desk research, jest wstępne rozważenie tych problemów i w tym aspekcie próba zaproponowania autorskiej definicji turystyki wirtualnej.

Słowa kluczowe: turystyka wirtualna, turystyka w okresie pandemii, nowe trendy w turystyce

Introduction

We can currently observe a clear increase in citizens' digital competences and an expansion of the scope of e-services and resources in virtual space. "The disconnection of the virtual and physical world is losing acuity"¹, and more and more us-

¹ A. Bentkowska-Kafel, *Virtual museum - museum without borders?*, „Museology” 2013, No 54, p. 164.

ers start feeling, so-called: FOMO (Fears of Missing out) syndrome, i.e. the fear of losing information. Thanks to the use of the Internet, we can work remotely, plan various tasks and carry out education. People around the world have learned about the advantages of cyberspace during the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic. Many people, for whom cultural tourism is one of the basic activities of life, switched from traditional traveling to a virtual sightseeing of the world.

In view of this innovative form of on-line travel, there is a need for its scientific review and paying attention to the both positive aspects as well threats that can happen to people moving in cyberspace. There is also a need to clarify the concept of virtual tourism in terms of its terminology. The aim of the article is to initially consider these problems and in this aspect making an attempt to define the concept and scope of virtual tourism. In the course of the research procedure, non-reactive methods were used – literature analysis with the elements of a case study as well as internet query.

1. Is this the fourth system of a culture?

Technological and social changes at the end of the 20th century have determined the dynamic development of the information age, the basic resources of which are information and knowledge. As late as in 1973, Daniel Bell² wrote about the ongoing process of changes from an industrial to a post-industrial (service) society. In 1980, Alvin Toffler³ introduced a new concept of three periods (waves) of civilization development, ranging from agrarian through industrial to the so-called: the third wave, the essence of which is information. Similarly, Peter Drucker⁴ and Manuel Castells⁵, by questioning the value of labour, capital or natural resources, attributed the dominant role in the development of the modern world to information technologies. In 1994, the Bangemann Report was published with recommendations for the member states of the European Union regarding the development of the information society⁶.

In the 20th century, Antonina Kłoskowska⁷ made an attempt to develop a social synthesis. Taking into account the interactions between the creator and the recipient of messages, she drew attention to the functioning of three systems of culture in the societies of the modern world. The first of them, so-called: primary one is based on informal and direct “face to face” contacts. It assumes the interchangeability of

² D. Bell, *The Coming of Post-industrial Society: A Venture In Social Forecasting*, New York 1973, p. 507.

³ A. Toffler, *The Third Wave*, William Morrow, New York 1980, p. 544.

⁴ P.F. Drucker, *The Post-Capitalist Society*, PWN, Warszawa 1999.

⁵ M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age, “Economy, Society and Culture”* Vol. I. Oxford 1996.

⁶ See more: *The essence of the information society and knowledge-based economy*, [in:] C.M. Olszak, E. Ziemia (ed.), *Directions of development of the information society and knowledge-based economy in the light of Silesian regional conditions*, Publishing House of the University of Economics in Katowice, Katowice 2010, p. 18.

⁷ A. Kłoskowska, *Cultural Sociology*, PWN, Warszawa 1983, p. 327.

roles between the sender and the recipient of statements and concerns traditional local communities in which there is a similar fate and life experiences.

The second system of culture has an institutional dimension. Like the first one, it is based on direct contact, but differs in the formal and institutionalized nature of the contact. The sender is, for example: a speaker, actor, doctor, while the recipient is respectively: a listener, viewer, or patient.

The third system of culture, unlike the previous ones, consists of mass media that generate an automatic message for a wider audience. So it has a character of mass media. The role of the message sender is strictly formalized, while the role of the recipient, i.e. viewer, internet user, radio listener or reader – informal⁸. Than in contrast to the previous ones, the third system of culture is characterized by an indirect type of interpersonal contact.

In today's society of information technology, the communication situation is changing again. Thanks to the appearance of modern technologies, a new configuration based on interactive media has emerged. I refer to it as the fourth system of culture. Interlocutors, using appropriate Internet connection means, see each other on the computer screen and have the possibility of direct and immediate feedback, even if in reality they are separated by a great distance. They can, for example use a group chat, talk or discuss a particular topic, exchange photos, express their opinions or set plans for the future. What's more, they can also activate the function of direct text information exchange, using manually typed messages or file transfer. Thus, the contact between the sender and the recipient of the message takes a direct form. The message itself, however, is indirect as it is possible only via internet communicators. In this case, the Internet becomes a platform for communication that changes the traditional way of people functioning in the world. It is an artificial space in which people "live", "using resources created by the others, taking into account their variability"⁹.

IT changes translate into an improvement in the quality of communication and the speed of information flow. They also influence cultural phenomena, including the scope and forms of everyday behaviour of individuals and groups. They shape a new lifestyle, especially among young people, for whom computers and mobile phones have become indispensable tools of work and entertainment. Internet is also important in interpersonal relations. As it turns out, people who use Internet also have more lively relationships in real life¹⁰. Due to the development of social networks and an unlimited number of users (interactions), social and collective needs are met thanks to the web. However, it is accomplished by the phenomenon of so-

⁸ See more: ibidem.

⁹ J. Bach-Głowińska, *Smart space. The third dimension of innovation*, a Wolters Kluwer Business, Warszawa 2014, p. 176.

¹⁰ See more: M. Castells, *The galaxy of the Internet. Reflections on the Internet, business and society*, Rebis, Poznań 2003, p. 141.

called wikification of knowledge and culture, that manifests itself in certain effects, i.e. activities of collective intelligence and the limitation of the privacy sphere. Researchers evaluate this phenomenon in an ambivalent manner.

In line with the spirit of the information age, tourism has also been incorporated into virtual space, gaining new opportunities and contexts: spatial as well as temporal. All people need is a computer and some free time to travel without leaving home. The benefits of such travel became fully apparent with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. I am writing about it below.

2. Cyberspace as a place of tourists' experiences

Since the 1980s, mass tourism has been one of the most dynamically developing areas of the modern economy. It is sometimes perceived as an economic phenomenon. Its development brings specific economic benefits (e.g. additional income and job placements, modern standards and technologies, higher economic status) as well as social benefits (e.g. changes in lifestyle, development of interpersonal contacts, increase in education). According to the definition, it covers the entirety of spatial mobility phenomena related to a voluntary, temporary change of the place of stay, rhythm and environment of life as well as entering into personal contact with the visited environment - natural, cultural and social. According to the definition of the United Nation World Tourism Organization, UNWTO: „tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. These people are called visitors (which may be either tourists or excursionists; residents or non-residents) and tourism has to do with their activities, some of which involve tourism expenditure”¹¹. This is about all activities of people who travel and stay for recreational, professional, entertainment, healing, religious or other purposes, for no longer than one year without interruption¹².

Tourism, however, do not has a petrified form, but is constantly developing and evolving in various forms¹³. For example, take into consideration the latest observed trends, such as: traveling to participate in various events (event tourism, fictional tourism, literary tourism), for charity purposes (philanthropic and charity tourism), in order to improve appearance as a result of plastic surgery (medical tourism), to view the consequences of disasters (dark tourism) or to observe lives of the poorest (slum tourism), return to the roots (ethnic tourism), eventually tourism

¹¹ Official website UNWTO <https://www.unwto.org/glossary-tourism-terms>.

¹² *Management Encyclopedia*: <https://mfiles.pl/pl/index.php/turystyka>.

¹³ See more: B. Pabian, *Continuity and change in the tourist experience of the world*, [in:] G. Golemski, A. Niezgoda (ed.), *Tourism in the face of changes in the contemporary world. Changes, barriers, innovations*, Publishing House of the University of Economics in Poznań, Poznań 2014, p. 107.

following paranormal phenomena. New types of tourist movement faithfully fit into the condition of postmodern culture, and also respond to the changing lifestyle and current social, economic and natural needs (sustainable tourism).

Recently, thanks to modern technologies, virtual tourism (e-tourism) which is realized through the presence of a tourist in cyberspace is gaining more and more importance. Virtual tour of the world is especially useful in times of forced isolation resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. The closure of borders, in addition to the suspension of air traffic gave rise to the need to look for alternative solutions.

Thanks to the development of e-technology, tourists can use mobile guides via mobile phones and smartphones that enable connection to the Internet. For example they can make usage of mobile phone applications installed in operating systems or downloaded directly from online stores. There are audio guides available as applications or MP3 files that can be listened on many devices. In tourism, the Internet is used not only to obtain information, but also to purchase tourism products and services. Thanks to it, tourists can get to know the place of accommodation before booking, choose the best nearby restaurants and tourist attractions and finally learn about the history of a given region. As research shows, travelers value personalized suggestions for assessing accommodation and dining options. Internet also influences the choice of tourist destinations as well as attractions that can be used.

The need for the cultural consumption of Internet users is satisfied by moving with the times, so-called: virtual museums („without walls”), which are „treated primarily as a form of communication”¹⁴. They take the form of a website of a given stationary facility, presenting digitized collections or they take form of units without a permanent headquarter, existing across borders, thanks to the Internet. The latter ones, using a variety of electronic tools and processes, can present exhibits from different parts of the world. The first institution that began to function on a virtual basis was the Louvre in Paris, while in Poland the forerunner in this area was the Warsaw Uprising Museum. In 2006, during the first three months of operation of the Warsaw museum, it was visited by 400,000 internet users¹⁵. Since 2011, thanks to the specialized platform of Google Arts & Culture, it has become possible to observe photos of selected cultural collections of the world, artists, collections, motifs or a virtual tour of the proposed exhibitions¹⁶.

Learning the world via the Internet is also facilitated by live broadcasts. For example, on YouTube on the and BEYOND channel there are broadcasts from South African parks from 06:30 to 09:30 a.m. and from 3:00 to 06:00 p.m.¹⁷ It is also pos-

¹⁴ A. Bentkowska-Kafel, *Virtual museum - museum without borders?*, „Museology” 2013, No 54, p. 164.

¹⁵ M. Stefanik, M. Kamel, *Museums and interactive exhibitions in Poland – a contemporary tourist attraction*, „Cultural Tourism” 2013, No 8, p. 12.

¹⁶ <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/?hl=pl>.

¹⁷ www.youtube.com/user/And-BeyondAfrica.

sible to watch panoramic presentations of the world's most famous monuments, such as the Sagrada Família basilic in Barcelona. When visiting, one can choose the language option that suits him best¹⁸. Thanks to the appropriate tabs, one can get to know the history of the object, read the news and current affairs regarding (for example timetable of worship), find information about the life of the architect Antoni Gaudí himself, also the Junta Constructor Foundation of the Sagrada Família Expiatory Temple, which aims to promote the life and work of the architect as well as is taking care of the Gaudi House Museum. A truly new quality in tourism, however, is introduced by both VR (Virtual Reality) and AR (Augmented Reality) technologies, which allow to move to a given location and to get to know its offer through a virtual world. Users can feel the atmosphere of the place and learn about its advantages and disadvantages. After putting on special goggles on the head, which are connected to a computer, console or smartphone, the human mind begins to perceive a reality other than the surrounding one. The main elements in the VR goggles are two screens or one, divided into two parts, which project similar images, curved through special lenses. Images being showcased are perceived by human brain as three-dimensional. VR goggles can have their own, permanently integrated display or allow a user to place a smartphone in them, which then serves as a display.

Thanks to VR technology, and more specifically thanks to special sensors, such as accelerometers, gyroscopes, magnetometers and various types of controllers, user has also the ability to perform specific actions inside the world being watched. VR technology is becoming more and more popular. "VR Ascape offices report that from January this year, the download number of virtual travel application has doubled. What's more, there are already many enterprises on the market that focus on VR tourism. For example, Sygic company offers over 5 thousands travel variants. During the pandemic period, as much as 24 percent of the respondents opted for a virtual tour of, among others museums, with the help of VR technology"¹⁹.

The AR (augmented reality) technology has also an undoubted future, as it mixes digital reality with the world in which we are physically present. Real world images are captured by the camera and synchronized with the usage of computer graphics as well as 3D animations. Unlike virtual reality which immerses us in a three-dimensional simulation, augmented reality smoothly connects two parallel orders.

¹⁸ [Sagradafamilia.org/visita-virtual](https://sagradafamilia.org/visita-virtual).

¹⁹ B. Wojnowski, *Tourism of the future. Safer, but is it still just as interesting? How the pandemic changed traveling*, <https://turysci.pl/vr-050620-bw-turystyka-przyszlosci>.

3. Virtual tourism – the essence and scope of the concept

Virtual tourism is a relatively new phenomenon of human activity, therefore there have not been published many studies about it yet. In Poland, the work of Adam Pawlicz deserves attention, in which the author discussed, inter alia, the impact and main problems of the use of information technology in the activities of tourism enterprises. What is more, he has also discussed the history of IT solutions in the aviation, hotel and tour operators' sectors²⁰. Bogdan Włodarczyk made an attempt to define the distinguishing features of e-tourism. Among others, he drew attention to the fact that it provides a set of ideas that are constituted by the e-tourist about the areas of potential tourism activity, which are created on the basis of secondary, external sources, which are not the tourist's direct experience²¹. According to the researchers, virtual tourism relates to "all activities of people who, for the sake of learning or entertainment purposes, immerse themselves in virtual reality in order to experience the illusion of changing the place of their everyday, real surrounding in time and space. This way understood tourism allows not only to move almost anywhere without leaving home, but also to visit areas and facilities that in fact cannot be visited"²².

It should be added to the above mentioned findings that e-tourism is implemented similarly to traditional tourism during one's free time and it is particularly clearly connected with the functions: cognitive as well as emotional. In other words, e-travel combines motivations typical for traditional tourism, except for physical exertion and physical movement through geographical space. Moreover, the tourist experience in cyberspace, in contrast to traditional tourism, is marked by an illusion.

As can be seen from the above considerations, virtual tourism shows features common to traditional tourism as well as features clearly distinguishing from it. The features common to the both traditional tourism and e-tourism one can include:

- a) voluntary participation in tourism activity,
- b) undertaking tourism activity in free time, i.e. during holidays and on public holidays for recreational, cognitive and entertainment purposes, practicing certain hobbies or religious activities (e.g. virtual pilgrimages),
- c) limitation of tourism activity (travel duration no longer than one year without a break),
- d) activity most often undertaken by the so-called: strangers, in order to satisfy intangible needs,
- e) activity is not related to earning money or settling permanently,

²⁰ A. Pawlicz, *E-tourism. Economic problems of implementing digital technologies in the tourism sector*, PWN, Warszawa 2012.

²¹ B. Włodarczyk, *Space in tourism, tourism in space – about the need for definition, delimitation and classification*, „Tourism” 2014, No 24/1, p. 31.

²² J. Polechoński, R. Tomik, *Can tourism in immersed virtual reality replace real travelling*, „Folia Turistica” 2019, No 52, p. 11.

- f) obtaining ordeals and experiences (aesthetic, recreational, intellectual), the source of which are regions, facilities and environments.
- g) satisfying cognitive needs and related personality development and enriching the knowledge of e-tourist.

4. The features of virtual tourism that distinguish it from traditional one include:

- a) undertaking tourist activity in one's everyday environment, without the need to travel remotely,
- b) tourist experience of the world acquired through illusion,
- c) no need to use tourism infrastructure and transform geographical environment for the aim of tourism development,
- d) making tourism activity dependent on modern technologies, the necessity to have at least basic IT knowledge and appropriate equipment,
- e) anti-sectoral nature of e-tourism, meaning no need to use sectors necessary for traditional tourism, i.e. those that deal with the tourist during his stay at the destination (accommodation facilities, tourist attractions, etc.), as well as providing access (carriers, tour operators, travel agencies),
- f) lack of motion and exercise,
- g) lack of curative motivations and health prophylaxis (excluding pro-health functions of e-tourism related to the improvement of mental well-being in the period of forced isolation, e.g. during pandemic).

Virtual tourism is governed by the laws of cyberspace and real reality at the same time. It gives to the tourist experience of the world in an artificial way, as an illusion, because it is without the need to leave home. It is also a part of the true reality, because enables acquisition of knowledge about tourist attractions, cultural and natural values of various destinations in the world. Virtual journeys do not require any somatic effort, or the effort of overcoming physical space, but require emotional involvement and internal effort related to finding relevant information. They allow to save money and, at the same time, move to places of interest in the world. Thanks to virtual tourism, one can learn about the world's tourist attractions, including dangerous places and those that are closed to visitors as was the case, for example, in the growth phase of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Summary

In the modern world characterized by the domination of new technologies, Internet which combines the potential of audio-visual broadcasts with the possibility of creating a diverse virtual reality is developing particularly dynamic. The computer

network has already taken over various professional, cultural and private spheres, becoming a fully-fledged, though artificial space of human life. It still fulfils empty fields, entering the domain of innovative applications and enabling collection of information in a selective, personalized and individualized manner. This also applies to tourism. As it can be assessed, virtual tourism will show a development tendency. People want to travel, they are hungry for knowledge about the world, but not always can get to know the world personally. Real travel in the real world may be prevented by illness, state of health, lack of time or other unforeseen limitations, such as a pandemic. The role of the Internet as a culture-forming factor cannot be underestimated. It should be emphasized, however, that under conditions of emerging threats and even internet crimes, its use will require reasonable actions from the current and future interactors, taking care of the safety of its use and systemic actions in the field of IT education.

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Author's resume:

Dr hab. Barbara Pabian, prof. UE works as a professor at the Department of Marketing Management and Tourism, Faculty of Management, University of Economics in Katowice in Poland. An author of approximately 90 scientific publications, including books and articles, published in Polish, English as well as Russian. Co-organizer and participant of national and international scientific conferences. She has been the Dean of the Faculty of Tourism in the High School of Hospitality and Tourism in Częstochowa. She has received City of Częstochowa Award in the field of culture for 2018 in the literature and history category for her overall research and popularization activities. Decorated with the National Education Committee's Medal.

Nota o Autorze:

Dr hab. Barbara Pabian, prof. UE pracuje w Katedrze Zarządzania Marketingowego i Turystyki Wydziału Zarządzania Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego w Katowicach. Autorka ponad 90 publikacji naukowych, w tym książek i artykułów, publikowanych w języku polskim, angielskim i rosyjskim. Współorganizatorka i uczestniczka krajowych i międzynarodowych konferencji naukowych. Były dziekan Wydziału Turystyki Wyższej Szkoły Hotelarstwa i Turystyki w Częstochowie. Za całokształt działalności naukowej i popularyzatorskiej otrzymała Nagrodę Miasta Częstochowy w dziedzinie kultury za 2018 rok w kategorii: Literatura i historia. Odznaczona Medalem Komisji Edukacji Narodowej.

Contact/Kontakt:

e-mail: barbara.pabian@ue.katowice.pl