

VR in destination marketing as strategic communication: Criteria for the effectiveness

Бабына Дарьяна Александровна

Postgraduate

Московский государственный университет имени М.В.Ломоносова, Факультет журналистики, Кафедра теории и экономики СМИ, Москва, Россия

E-mail: daribabyna@gmail.com

The promotion of territories is one of the fast growing areas of strategic communications today. The processes of digitalization and platformization have led to changes in the ways of delivering information to the consumer and have radically affected the working methods of media employees (Vartanova, 2022).

Marketing specialists are ready to apply the latest technical innovations, such as virtual, augmented and extended reality to form an attractive image of tourist sites (Shilina, 2022). During the pandemic, such technological tricks kept tourists interested in cities, resorts and cultural heritage sites, reminding them of places of past travels or allowing them to discover new locations while in isolation (Suhartanto et al., 2021). Subsequently, this experience provoked interest in VR-tourism from environmentalists and supporters of sustainability. Thus, there is a diverse range of applications of VR in the branding of attractions, but studies of such cases do not come to a consensus on the effectiveness of such campaigns and the usage of this new visual technology.

In this regard, the goal was to identify the most frequent characteristics of VR recognized as those leading to success in area promotion campaigns. The key research question of the first phase of the study was to identify the possibility of forming a matrix of this kind of research to conduct a content analysis study of scientific publications on the topic. The research question of the second stage concerned the possibility of identifying universal characteristics of VR when using this technology in the promotion of territories.

To accomplish this task, we formed a sample of scientific publications studying cases of VR application in destination marketing for the period from 2017 to 2023, published in English, Russian, French and Spanish. The sample consisted of 103 publications selected according to keywords and semantic criteria. Next, we analyzed the main characteristics of VR, on which the choice of this technology was based, and grouped the studies according to the purpose of using the new visual technology.

The main approaches identified were the economic and marketing approach based on the ability to generate a tourist interest to visit the territory, the social approach, understood in the context of sustainable tourism, and the approach of analysis of the contribution to the preservation of cultural heritage. Among the psychological characteristics were highlighted such as the effect of presence, brand familiarity construction, subjective attitude construction, consumers' intention construction, unique experience and enjoyment got by a consumer. The main content characteristics were described as scenario, its interactivity and vividness of the visualization. Usability, immersion, innovativeness and technical interactivity were discovered as the crucial technical characteristics. Subsequently, the works in the sample were analyzed for the designation of performance criteria according to the above groups of parameters.

The refusal to demonstrate real changes in critical indicators after the implementation of technology in the promotion can be considered as the most obvious trend. We could often see speculation about the prospects of using VR to promote territories, but no reports of actual measurable achievements. Meanwhile, descriptions of psychological and content characteristics

are quite common, so we might talk about contribution to the very development of VR technologies when using them in marketing, rather than a specific marketing effect of the use of VR. However, the mere existence of such cases and detailed descriptions of their qualities and prospects looks more important than the effect of their use, which makes the authors of publications to draw conclusions about the future success of the technology.

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