

Metaverse in the tourism domain - introduction to the special issue

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In times of technological innovation and digital transformation, the convergence of Metaverse and tourism emerges as a compelling and revolutionary intersection. As we stand on the edge of a new frontier in information technology, we introduce this special issue of the Journal of Information Technology and Tourism, dedicated to the multifaceted exploration of the Metaverse's impact on the tourism industry.

The Metaverse comprises interconnected digital spaces where users can engage through computer-generated environments. This convergence of cutting-edge technologies, including artificial Intelligence systems (AI), digital twins, augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), blockchain, non-fungible tokens (NFTs), 3D modelling and simulation, cloud computing, and edge computing, defines the Metaverse's potential.

Today's central question is: Is the Metaverse merely hype or a pivotal moment ushering in a new era? Uncertainties surround its future but the coming years promise significant developments in this space. While the hype surrounding the Metaverse in the last couple of years has declined in popular attention, the fundamental concepts, underlying technologies, potential advancements, and associated challenges remain as relevant as ever. As some maintain, the reduced media spotlight on the Metaverse may pave the way for a more fertile ground for future opportunities to flourish. This holds particularly true within tourism, where the connection between the virtual world and the industry is deep and significant. Despite the current shift in media focus, the synergy between the Metaverse and tourism suggests the possibility of a rich array of applications in the near future.

Given the wide response to the call for papers, this special issue has been split into two parts. The papers chosen for this part are briefly described in what follows. The second set of papers will be published in the journal's next issue.

The paper *A user experience perspective on heritage tourism in the metaverse: empirical evidence and design dilemmas for VR* discusses multiple heritage tourism virtual reality (VR) applications and the hardware in a wide-ranging and structured analysis from the user experience perspective.

Tourism in the digital frontier: A study on user continuance intention in the metaverse explores the key factors that influence users' intention to use this emerging platform in the context of tourism, showing that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the perceived ease of use does not significantly affect utilitarian benefits.

In many situations, talent shortages in the hospitality and tourism sectors have shown to be a critical issue for providing organizations with a competitive advantage. *Metaverse in the tourism sector for talent management: a technology in practice lens* discusses how hospitality and tourism human resources management practices can leverage Metaverse technologies for increasing engagement with the distributed workforce.

The following paper analyses the Metaverse's implications on mental health, overall well-being, and disability, focusing on tourism. *Exploring the psychological effects of metaverse on mental health and well-being* uncovers a bivalent impact, maintaining that the nature of the engaged activity controls whether the effects on mental health and well-being, including those specific to disability, are beneficial or detrimental.

Implementing Metaverse technologies in virtual emersion of the ocean can benefit people desiring to explore these marine environments. It can have great potential for tourism and an appealing interactive user experience. *Deepsea: a meta-ocean prototype for undersea exploration* discusses these issues and presents a method to model undersea scenes and marine creatures, proposing an optimized path algorithm for modelling the movements of marine life.

Understanding and improving customers' continued usage intention, which is how users are retained and engaged, becomes crucial for researchers and practitioners in the tourism sector in this digital domain. The paper *An empirical study of the impact of metaverse storytelling on intentions to visit* presents an empirical study showing how Metaverse storytelling can enhance consumers' immersion and presence, improve destination image and increase real-world visit intentions, contributing to tourism management theory and practice.

The Metaverse's profound influence on the tourism domain is well attested by the rigorous examinations, insightful analyses, and innovative research contributions in this issue. As we embark on this exploration, we encourage researchers, scholars, and industry experts to contribute their expertise and insights, forging a path toward a deeper understanding of the Metaverse's implications for the future of tourism.