

Enhancing Traditional Tourism with Virtual Experiences: A Comparative Study of China, the United States, and France

تعزيز السياحة التقليدية بالتجارب الافتراضية: دراسة مقارنة بين الصين والولايات المتحدة

وفرنسا

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Abstract:

This study examines the potential of utilizing virtual tourism to revitalize traditional tourism. This study comparatively assessed the implementation of virtual tourism, employing VR and AR for immersive travel experiences, in China, the United States, and France. The findings indicate that China boasts about 400 million users of virtual tourism, followed by the United States with 200 million, and France with 50 million. The results emphasize the need for fostering investments in VR and AR technologies and encouraging the development of engaging digital tourism content to support the growth of this industry.

Keywords : Engaging experiences, Technological advancement, Growth in tourism, Customer involvement, Advancements in technology.

Jel Classification Codes : L84; L86; Q56

ملخص :

تبحث هذه الدراسة في إمكانات توظيف السياحة الافتراضية لتنشيط السياحة التقليدية. قيمت هذه الدراسة بشكل مقارن تطبيق السياحة الافتراضية، باستخدام الواقع الافتراضي (VR) والواقع المعزز (AR) لتوفير تجارب سفر غامرة، في ثلاث دول بارزة: الصين والولايات المتحدة وفرنسا. تشير النتائج إلى أن الصين تتصدر المشهد بحوالي 400 مليون مستخدم للسياحة الافتراضية، تليها الولايات المتحدة بـ 200 مليون، وفرنسا بـ 50 مليونًا. تؤكد النتائج على الحاجة إلى تعزيز الاستثمارات في تقنيات الواقع الافتراضي والواقع المعزز وتشجيع تطوير محتوى سياحي رقمي جذاب لدعم نمو هذه الصناعة.

الكلمات المفتاحية : تجارب جذابة، تقدم تكنولوجي، نمو في السياحة، مشاركة العملاء، تطورات في التكنولوجيا.

تصنيف JEL : L84; L86; Q56

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a significant cultural and economic catalyst for countries globally, As Ammam (2025) observes, tourism serves as a crucial cultural and economic catalyst for nations globally, generating employment, fostering trade, and attracting foreign currency. Given the background of accelerating technological advancement and sharpening global competition, Lee, Hunter, and Chung (2020) note that most governments currently view tourism sector development and promotion as an essential strategy.

Modern tourism is undergoing redefinition, driven by influential forces such as digital technologies. Mishra, Das, and Patnaik (2024) assert that these technologies have fundamentally restructured both destination marketing and the nature of tourist interaction. By offering engaging and interactive media such as AR and VR, digital technologies improve visitor experiences and enable more efficient tourism management.

Stressing the contribution of such tools, Bretos, Ibáñez-Sánchez, and Orús (2024) point out the unique capability of AR and VR to offer prospective tourists rich, immersive experiences that are the equivalent of actual visits. As per Shamim, Gupta, and Shin (2025), the benefits of these technologies include broadened access to remote or underdeveloped destinations and enhanced interaction within highly interactive virtual environments. Therefore, countries across the globe have begun to use AR and VR in their tourism promotional strategies.

For instance, Smal (2016) reports on how prominent nations such as China, the United States, and France have adopted immersive technologies as a part of their highly developed tourism infrastructures. The nations utilized their technological capabilities to craft high-end virtual experiences that enhance their real-world tourism sites.

However, The adoption of virtual tourism within national tourism policies presents a multifaceted challenge in terms of both policy formulation and investment. As El-Said and Aziz (2022) highlight, virtual tourism necessitates significant technological and collaborative investment from government and private entities, functioning as an innovative augmentation to conventional tourism, not a substitute. Their research suggests that virtual tourism can enhance and expand the scope of classic tourist activities, particularly under crisis or mobility-constraint conditions.

Overall, these results address the importance of exploring different nations' approaches to virtual tourism uptake, the amount of investment, and how they influence the general tourism sector. Knowing about these variations is useful for understanding how digital transformation is changing tourism worldwide.

Research Problem

In light of the substantial impact of digital technology on the tourism industry, virtual tourism has surfaced as a vital instrument for reshaping destination marketing and the travel experience. The effective implementation of virtual tourism, however, demands robust digital infrastructure and significant government support. This research endeavors to tackle the following primary inquiry:

What are the key differences in the development and application of virtual tourism in France, the United States, and China, and to what extent does virtual tourism serve as a substitute or complement to traditional tourism?

To comprehensively answer this question, the research will also seek to address the following subsidiary queries:

- How is virtual tourism defined, and what are its primary forms and technologies used?
- How is virtual tourism established in China, the United States, and France, and what specific actions have been taken by these nations?
- In what ways have advancements in digital technology impacted the growth of virtual tourism in these countries?
- To what extent has virtual tourism enhanced and promoted traditional tourism in these nations?

Research Hypothesis

- To guide the study's direction, the following hypothesis is proposed:
- The greater the alignment between the concepts and applications of virtual tourism, the more significant their role in supporting and advancing traditional tourism.

Aims and Objectives

This research is designed to achieve the following aims and objectives:

- To define virtual tourism and evaluate its role in the advancement of conventional tourism.
- To investigate the role, processes, and technological underpinnings of virtual tourism.
- To identify and analyze successful virtual tourism models in China, the United States, and France.
- To assess the impact of digital technology on the transformation and facilitation of virtual tourism initiatives.

Significance of the Study

Thus, this research aims to illuminate the fundamental causes behind the rise and expansion of virtual tourism through a comparative analysis of effective global practices. By identifying the success factors of China, the United States, and France, this study aspires to offer valuable insights for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and researchers interested in harnessing digital technology to enhance the tourism sector.

1. Virtual tourism

Virtual tourism has emerged as a novel experience in the tourism sector, leveraging advanced digital technologies to allow individuals to explore destinations without physically relocating(Qiao & Abdramanov, 2024). This concept of virtual tourism is substantially influenced by:

- 1.1.Virtual Reality (VR):** A technology that immerses users in a three-dimensional environment, creating an illusionary world that resembles reality and allows sensory interaction through commonly used VR headsets(Ammam,2024).
- 1.2.Augmented Reality (AR):** This technology merges virtual elements with the user's actual surroundings, enhancing the scene with additional information (such as images and sounds), often accessed via mobile applications (Huang et al., 2018).
- 1.3.Mixed Reality (MR):** An innovative technology that fuses real and virtual reality, enabling users to engage with virtual elements in real-time (Bec et al., 2021).
- 1.4.Extended Reality (XR):** A broad term encompassing VR, AR, and MR, signifying a category of technologies that connect real-world experiences through human engagement and wearable smart devices. Virtual tourism constitutes a simulated exploration of appealing destinations through electronic devices and the internet, typically presented in the form of 3D video tours (3D) accompanied by audio and visual effects that replicate authentic locations (Silva & Teixeira, 2021).

Table 1. The distinction between virtual tourism and traditional tourism.

Criterion	Traditional Tourism	Virtual Tourism
Movement	Physical travel to the destination	Mental travel to the destination
Means of Transport	Airplane, train, car, etc.	Electronic means
Costs	High (travel, hotels, etc.)	Limited
Interaction Level	High	Limited
Revenue for Host Country	Significant	Limited
Fame	Popular among tourists	Not very well known despite its early emergence

Source: Prepared by Researchers

2. Virtual tourism as a marketing tool within e-tourism

Virtual tourism is a significant marketing tool within the wider context of e-tourism. While e-tourism includes activities like planning, booking, and promoting travel, virtual tourism enhances these functions by offering an immersive visual experience (Vinnakota et al., 2023). This virtual glimpse increases tourists' eagerness to visit the destination in actuality.

2.1. Elements and Foundations of Developing Virtual Tourism Applications:

There are three fundamental elements contribute to effective virtual tourism:

2.1.1. Creativity: This element involves the creation of innovative products and services within tourism, the introduction of cutting-edge technologies, and the establishment of formal management systems for efficiency (Vinnakota et al., 2023).

2.1.2. Virtual Reality: This focuses on simulating real-life environments using advanced technologies such as CAVE systems or 3D glasses to create a realistic sense of being present (Walsh & Pawlowski, 2002).

2.1.3. Aesthetic Experience: This aspect captures users' emotional responses such as joy, and discovery, and while they engage with the virtual environment (Loureiro, 2020).

The process of developing virtual tourism applications generally unfolds through three primary stages:

- a. **Creation of Panoramic Images:** This stage includes taking 360-degree images of the location, which are then refined using specialized software (e.g., Photoshop) or dedicated 360-degree cameras (Boukerch et al., 2021).
- b. **Construction of Virtual Tours:** During this phase, panoramic images are incorporated into specialized software to create an interactive pan-and-zoom tour, which can take forms like Flash files, Java applets, or QuickTime videos (Pea, 2006).
- c. **Presentation of Virtual Tours:** The final stage consists of integrating the virtual tour into a website or offering it as a downloadable file to improve user access and engagement (Petousi et al., 2023).

2.2. Immersive Technologies in Tourism and Their Applications:

The tourism sector has adopted immersive technologies, including augmented and virtual reality, across various domains:

- a. **Travel Agencies:** Specifically, virtual reality, particularly 360-degree video, is utilized to create enthusiasm and boost reservations. An instance of this is Thomas Cook, which experienced significant returns. In the initial three months, it resulted in approximately \$15,500 in flight and hotel bookings, achieving a 40% return on investment. (Rezgo, n.d.)

- b. **Hotels:** Numerous hotels already feature virtual tours showcasing their amenities. Marriott introduced VR cabins that provide an experiential stay, while Best Western launched 360-degree video tours for over 2,000 properties (LODGING Staff, 2016).

Image (01). A passerby experiences the virtual reality cabin.



Source: (Robinson, 2014)

- c. **Transportation:** Companies like Voyages-SNCF and Emirates Airlines utilize virtual tours to showcase destinations, seating arrangements, and airplane interiors (Gavois, 2016)

Image (02). Selecting the SNCF headquarters with virtual reality



Source: (Gavois, 2016)

- d. **Museums and Cultural Institutions:** The Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Guggenheim Museum, for instance, offer virtual exhibitions of their collections, often enriched with additional information and interactive components (Google Arts & Culture, n.d.).

Image (03). Virtual display inside the Museum of Modern Art



Source: (Whiddington, 2021)

- e. **Destination Promotion:** Marketers in the tourism sector utilize virtual reality to enhance their promotional efforts. A prominent instance is the Wild Within VR Experience, which presents an interactive, three-dimensional video that immerses travelers in the experience of British Columbia (Ezra, 2015).

3. Methodology

This study utilizes an analytical comparative research methodology to explore the incorporation of virtual tourism (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017) as a supportive measure alongside traditional tourism in China, the United States, and France. The selection of these three countries stand significant positions in the global tourism market, their abundant tourism assets, advanced technological environments, and ongoing investments in the research and development of virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), mixed reality (MR), and extended reality (XR) technologies.

3.1.Study Type and Design

The study is mainly qualitative, using content analysis and secondary data analysis to enable a cross-national comparison of the chosen countries (Moretti et al.,2011). However, the design specifically aims to uncover patterns, trends, similarities, and contrasts in virtual tourism strategies and their influences on the development of traditional tourism.

3.1.1. Data Collection Sources

Information for the research was primarily gathered from reliable and credible secondary sources. These sources include:

- a. Official documents released by global tourism organizations (e.g., the World Tourism Organization), government statistical bodies (e.g., Statista and OECD), and international research firms (e.g., PWC).
- b. Academic and research publications sourced from peer-reviewed journals and periodicals focused on tourism and digital technology.
- c. These sources were chosen for their ability to offer comprehensive and comparable information pertinent to the research questions.

3.1.2. Analysis Tools

The data collected were analyzed thematically to identify the core concepts and patterns related to the adoption of virtual tourism. Additionally, a comparative analysis was performed to reveal the similarities and differences among the three countries regarding:

- a. Conceptual frameworks and interpretations of virtual tourism and associated technologies.
- b. Statistics on virtual tourism, including user counts, revenue figures, and platform adoption rates.
- c. The influence of digital technology on the growth and spread of virtual tourism.
- d. The degree to which virtual tourism efforts enhance the development of traditional tourism.
- e. Moreover, where quantitative data were accessible (e.g., user figures, revenue statistics, and platform information), they were organized into tables and graphs to support effective comparison and trend analysis.

4. Methodological Limitations

However, this study relies mainly on secondary data sources, which may limit some aspects of the analysis and the availability of detailed quantitative data, especially regarding the direct effects of virtual tourism on increasing traditional tourist numbers or their expenditure. The comparative nature of the study also prohibits an in-depth investigation of every single project within each country. Therefore, while the findings offer information, they should be understood within the context of these limitations.

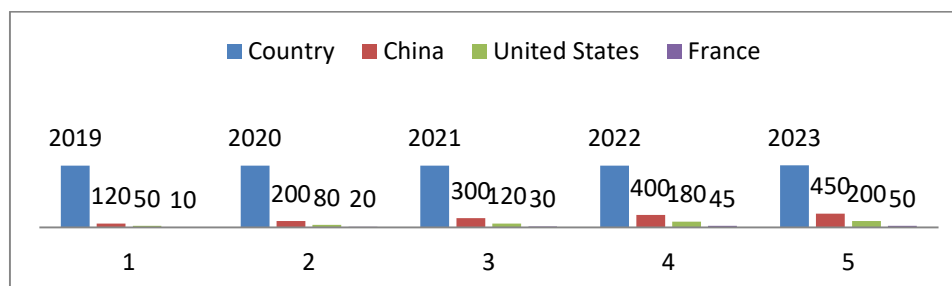
5. Results

To demonstrate the significance of virtual tourism in rejuvenating conventional tourism, we provide a comparison of three countries that have shown considerable interest in virtual tourism, as indicated in the table below:

5.1. Comparative Analysis of Virtual Tourism Strength in China, the United States, and France

A comparison among the three countries reveals China's clear leadership in virtual tourism adoption indicators.

Fig.1. Number of Virtual Tourism Users (in millions), 2019–2023

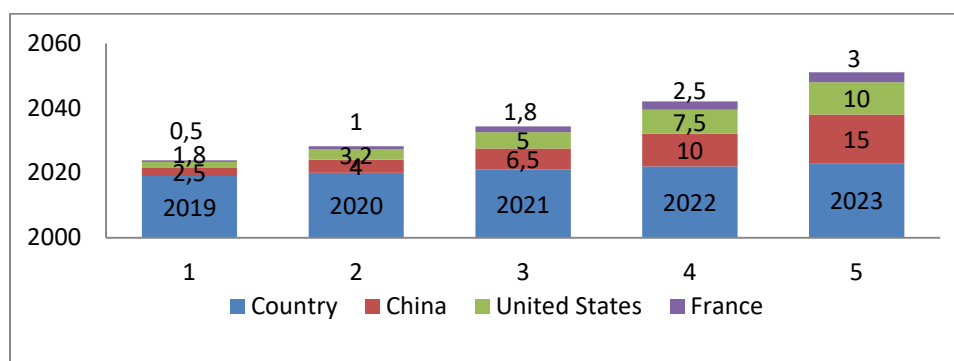


Source: Compiled by the researchers based on Statista, UNWTO, OECD

The data indicates that China is at the forefront of virtual tourism user expansion, gaining 80–100 million users each year due to its robust technological governance, support for innovation, and utilization of virtual platforms to enhance real-world tourism and discover its extensive landscape. The United States comes in second with consistent growth, attributed to its emphasis on cutting-edge AR/VR/MR/XR technologies and the launch of multiple virtual tourism platforms. In contrast, France experiences only modest growth, adding approximately 10 million users annually, suggesting a lower level of engagement with virtual tourism technology compared to the two other countries.

5.2. Trends in virtual tourism earnings across three nations (2019-2023)

The data below illustrates the progression of virtual tourism revenues, measured in billions of dollars, in China, the United States, and France from 2019 to 2023. This table offers an in-depth look at the expansion of this sector in major economies, highlighting the increasing significance of virtual reality within the global tourism market.

Fig.2. Virtual Tourism Revenues (in billions of dollars), 2019–2023

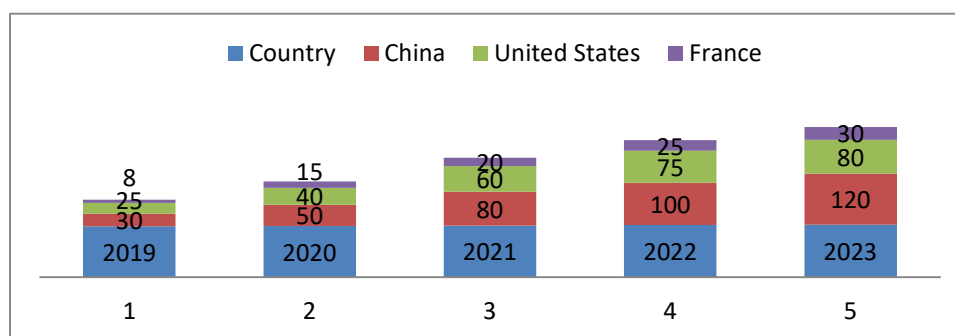
Source: (Statista, 2023; PWC, 2020)

The data indicates that China leads as the largest country in revenue, attributed to its advanced technological progress and significant enthusiasm for this form of tourism. The United States holds the second position, thanks to its promotion of innovation in this sector, which boosts the number of users seeking entertainment. France ranks lowest, as it promotes this type of tourism from a cultural viewpoint while emphasizing traditional (real) tourism. The close similarity in revenues between China and the United States, despite a higher number of virtual tourism users in China, is due to China's reliance on lower pricing compared to the United States. In addition, China's virtual tourism income primarily comes from domestic users, whereas most of the United States' revenue is generated from international visitors.

6. Expansion of Virtual Tourism Platforms in Three Nations (2019-2023)

The table below illustrates the increase in the number of platforms facilitating virtual tourism in China, the United States, and France between 2019 and 2023. This information showcases the swift advancement of technological infrastructure backing the virtual tourism industry, underscoring the rising enthusiasm for virtual reality as a crucial element in the tourism experience.

Fig.3. Growth in Virtual Tourism Platforms (2019–2023)



Source: (UNWTO, 2021; TechCrunch, 2023)

The Figure above indicates that the growth of platforms in China has outpaced that of the United States and, to a lesser extent, France. In China, the growth rates range from 20 to 30 platforms, whereas the United States has seen an increase of 15 to 20 platforms, with a notable decline in 2023, where only five platforms showed growth. In France, the development of platforms has been much lower, predicted at five platforms each year. The substantial rise in the number of platforms is primarily attributed to the surge in virtual tourism users and corresponding revenue in China, followed by the United States. Conversely, France is lagging in platform growth, indicating a decline in virtual tourism users and weak revenue from virtual tourism.

7. Discussion

The findings of this research distinctly indicate that the implementation of virtual tourism for rejuvenating traditional tourism differs considerably among China, the United States, and France, with China positioned as a frontrunner in this area. These variations support the hypothesis that the successful integration of virtual tourism strategies results in increased demand and bolsters traditional tourism.

8. Interpretation of results

The figures clearly illustrate considerable variations in the performance of virtual tourism by China, the United States, and France between the years 2019 and 2023, with China taking a dominating position across all parameters measured. China increased its user base from 120 million in 2019 to 450 million in 2023, This reflects a future-oriented strategy and considerable investment in digital connectivity and an immersive tourist experience. This remarkable expansion corroborates findings from Lee et al. (2020) and Loureiro (2020) regarding the innovative use of VR/AR technology in intelligent tourist cities. In addition, Mishra et al.

(2024) argue that the marriage of AI with immersive digital platforms accelerates the race to intelligent tourism systems a path China has too willingly taken.

China's success is not just due to its technological superiority but to its early recognition of virtual tourism as a way to promote major and minor destinations. The development of low-cost panoramic virtual tour systems and technologies, such as those detailed by Boukerch et al. (2021), have given vast population access to virtual content, confirming the link between platform availability and user engagement. In addition, China's cultural digitization efforts like the Miao's traditional patterns smartphone app analyzed by Qiao & Abdramanov (2024) demonstrate how embedding digital heritage into the tourism value chain can propel domestic tourism demand and engagement.

Despite its technological advancements, By 2023, the United States had experienced a gradual but noticeable increase in users, growing from 50 million to 200 million before plateauing. This pattern supports observations by Smal (2016) and Bec et al. (2021) regarding the U.S.'s consistent, if unhurried, adoption of VR/AR in tourism. While impressive in American ingenuity in using immersive technologies, particularly in the metaverse space as highlighted by Shamim et al. (2025) is its intention toward global reach and entertainment-type experience, rather than far-reaching national integration of virtual tourism systems.

France, however, is the most indifferent toward virtual tourism development, with users gradually rising to 50 million by 2023. El-Said & Aziz (2022) state that countries that possess traditionalist patterns and are hesitant to adopt digital changes have poor recovery and tourism innovation post-COVID-19. The cultural orientation of France, although densely rich in heritage, has not been fully integrated into rich or accessible virtual experiences. As Petousi et al. (2023) point out, good virtual tours have to generate interest and curiosity things France has failed to capitalize on in its digital campaign.

On the revenue front, China's growth from \$2.5 billion to \$15 billion is as much a function of user base as monetization strategies congruent with digital content and regional user traction. Ammam (2024) highlights China's significant investment in mobile apps and human resource development as crucial for creating innovative tourism services. The United States, on the other hand, reached \$10 billion in 2023, driven by a reduced number of consumers but greater per-consumer spending most likely driven by international demand and high-quality VR experiences. The ending revenue difference between China and the U.S., despite the greater number of users in China, reflects other models of prices, which are analyzed by Vinnakota et al. (2023), It's important to differentiate between mass-access virtual tourism models, which prioritize widespread availability, and premium experience virtual tourism models, which focus on delivering a higher-end, more immersive journey.

France's smaller revenue of \$3 billion is a result of its dependence on traditional tourism and falling behind in digital development. According to Bretos et al. (2024), countries lagging in immersive technology adoption may suffer losses in tourism innovation and economic performance.

The number of platforms enabling virtual tourism also tracks these trends. China expanded from 30 platforms in 2019 to 120 in 2023, with extensive government and private sector coordination once more, by Walsh & Pawlowski's (2002) findings on the ubiquity of infrastructure in virtual communities. The United States followed up from 25 to 80 platforms, largely due to private technology initiatives. Conversely, France increased platforms by just

five annually, reflecting institutional apathy and the absence of policy direction for digital tourism development.

9. Limitations of the study

Although this study presents important findings, it encounters certain limitations. Firstly, the significant dependence on secondary sources may restrict the ability to perform a more thorough analysis of specific phenomena or gather precise information on individual user behavior. Secondly, accurately gauging the direct effects of virtual tourism on traditional tourism is challenging, as numerous other factors (including economic conditions, global events, and different marketing initiatives) may interfere. Lastly, the data from public sources might not encapsulate all the intricacies of technology adoption and the various strategies implemented in each country.

10. Recommendations for Future Research

Considering this study, the following recommendations for future research are proposed:

- Carry out comprehensive case studies on particular virtual tourism initiatives in each nation, gathering primary data (such as interviews with decision-makers and surveys of users) to better evaluate the impact.
- Assess the economic feasibility and long-term viability of virtual tourism and its potential role in fulfilling sustainable development goals within the tourism industry.
- Investigate the influence of artificial intelligence and the metaverse on the evolution of virtual tourism and its effects on tourist behaviors.
- Perform comparative studies that include other countries with diverse contexts to attain a more extensive understanding of the virtual tourism adoption phenomenon.

11. Conclusion

This study highlights the encouraging potential of virtual tourism, emphasizing its vital role and advantages in bolstering the traditional tourism industry. Virtual tourism has demonstrated its capacity to showcase tourism resources, boost interest in real-life encounters, and aid in the promotion of lesser-known travel destinations. It is important to recognize that the success of virtual tourism in these nations is augmented by a diverse array of tourism resources (historical, cultural, and natural), which offer rich and compelling content for virtual reality experiences.

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