

Virtual reality and its effect on brand image in hospitality sector

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Received: 10/08/2025

Accepted: 20/11/2025

Abstract:

Virtual reality (VR) is a technology that has been adopted in many fields since its emergence, and its application in the hospitality sector appears to be beneficial for hotels. The aim of this study is to examine the influence of virtual reality-based experiential marketing approach determinants on hotel brand image. For this purpose, a virtual reality experience was created for an hotel in Algeria, and a quantitative study was conducted subsequently. The results obtained after analyzing the data using the structural equation modelling method (PLS-PM), demonstrate that (sense, think, and act) determinants have a significative influence on brand image, and virtual reality technology positively affects and strengthens the brand image of hotels.

Key Words : *Virtual reality (VR), experiential marketing, brand image*

JEL Classification: *M31 +M37*

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1. Introduction

The way in which customers search for information, choose products or services, and make purchasing decisions has been significantly reshaped lately through the use of advanced digital technology, making the field of marketing one of the areas most affected. And when discussing this technological development, it's inevitable to mention "virtual reality" VR, which is steadily gaining in popularity on the part of companies, as well as on customers in various sectors, including education, tourism, military training, games and sports, advertising and media, and more (Victor Chen, Ha, & Tam Vu, 2022). Simultaneously, the popularity and excitement of this technology in the early days frequently surpassed the delivery of VR experiences, especially for users with limited access to expensive hardware. This situation was particularly painful in the early 1990s, at a time when virtual reality seemed on its way to becoming widely used by the general public, but failed to catch on (LaValle, 2019).

Nowadays, we are witnessing an exciting rebirth. New technological components, principally from the smartphone industry, have enabled low-cost and high-resolution portable VR headsets to deliver engaging VR experiences, allowing customers to explore and interact within the virtual environment either by using a mouse (computer) or a touch screen (smartphone and tablet). This means that customers have the ability to move around and explore the virtual retail environment, also, they have the possibility of choosing and arranging objects, all via navigation and interactive functions. Since virtual reality enables customers to navigate and interact with the virtual environment, it provides the sensation of a real-world experience, called telepresence, enhancing the active engagement of participants in all the functions available in the given settings (Guttentag D. A., 2010). These advancements in hardware provide users with various choices to experience virtual reality. VR technology has made significant strides to deliver enhanced immersive experiences, in all the sectors we mentioned previously, and the hospitality sector could really benefit from this technology, particularly in Algeria, where we can clearly observe the negligence of such an opportunity.

The adoption of virtual reality technology by hotels allows hotel customers to make a pre-booked visit from their comfort, using any compatible device. These virtual tours can be displayed on hotel websites, allowing customers or potential customers to visualize their hotel room or other parts of the hotel before making a reservation or checking in. Such marketing practices are likely to have a considerable effect on the hotel business and on consumer behavior. Especially, with the intensity of competitiveness of tourism marketing, and the need for effective and efficient marketing strategies that assist the imagination of tourism industry in this modern world (Wasib Bin Latif, 2016).

When it comes to integrating virtual reality technology into marketing, it's essential to refer to the term "virtual experiential marketing" mentioned by (Shmitt B. , 1999). This researcher has proposed five strategic experiential determinants that managers can use to create experiences for customers. Sense, feel, think, act and relate components are essential modules in the creation of the experience, and each component has a distinct role, structure and function.

Brand image, that has long been recognized as an important concept in marketing, and although marketers have not always agreed about how to measure it, one generally accepted view is that brand image is consumers' perceptions about a brand (Keller, 2008). According to (Wasib Bin Latif, 2016), the concept of brand image creates competitive advantage of tourism products in

the tourism marketplace and enhances overall tourism industry goodwill, trust and credibility into the mind of customer. To this end, the aim of this article is to demonstrate the potential influence that the use of virtual reality technology in promotion can have on hotels brand image. For this purpose, a virtual reality experience for an hotel (MSuite) located in Algiers has been created, and presented to a sample in order to collect quantitative data for analyzing the results.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Virtual experiential marketing

While experiences in the physical world appeal to the senses, virtual experiential marketing is based on web interfaces and atmospheres that replace real-world experiences, which are defined by (Liu & Chen, 2006) as: "the conscious design of web environments to create positive user effects in order to increase favorable consumer responses (e.g. revisiting the website, browsing, etc.)". When marketers design web interfaces to elicit positive consumer responses, they use web atmospheres. Virtual experiential marketing aims to create a sense of presence and immersion for the consumer, even if the experience takes place in a virtual environment. It can take many forms, such as virtual reality (VR) experiences, augmented reality (AR) experiences and interactive online experiences.

The determinants of virtual experiential marketing are practically the same as those proposed by (Shmitt, 1999) in the experiential marketing modules (SEM'S). These determinants provide a guideline for the design of a virtual experience, and must be implemented in each experience conceived.

- **Sense:** This determinant appeals to the five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. Its main objective is to differentiate companies and products, motivate customers and add value to product campaigns by providing aesthetic pleasure, excitement, beauty and satisfaction through sensory stimulation.
- **Feel:** This second determinant appeals to customers' inner feelings, including moods and emotions, with the aim of creating an effective experience that moves from a slight positive mood attached to a brand to strong emotions of joy and satisfaction. Feelings are most powerful when they occur during consumption. Strong feelings are the result of contact and interaction, and develop gradually (Alkilani, Ling, & Abzakh, 2013).
- **Think:** According to (Shmitt, 1999), this determinant appeals to the intellect, the thought experience is a creative and theoretical practice, which requires methods of intelligence in order to create a cognitive experience and solve problems through the creative involvement of consumers. The aim is therefore to encourage consumers to think and to be attracted in a creative way, so that they can produce a re-evaluative return for the company and its brand.
- **Act:** We refer to the definition given by the pioneer of the experiential approach (Shmitt, 1999), where he states that this determinant represents action to promote customers' lives by targeting their physical experiences, showing them other ways of doing things, other lifestyles and other interactions.
- **Relate:** It's about connecting the individual to a wider social system (a different culture, a country). In other words, it's about connecting the individual to other individuals and

entities through personal experience, rather than through individual personality and feelings, using a certain product or being part of a sub-culture.

2.2 Virtual reality

Since its appearance in the 1960s, virtual reality has gone through several phases of development before reaching its present interactive level. This process has been inspired by the objective of creating virtual environments that closely imitate physical properties in the world we live in, and thus make the VR experience look and feel realistic (Blascovich, et al., 2002; Farah, Ramadan, & Harb, 2019).

Virtual reality technology allows customers to experience virtual tours from any location in the world, with realistic displays of cities, hotels, restaurants, stores, or any other spaces. By detecting the user's reactions and movements, the virtual environment is adapted in real time, which allows him/her to visualize a vivid mental representation of the environment, creating the illusion of interacting with and being immersed in the virtual world.

Virtual reality (VR) has gained significant attention and application in various industries, including travels. The tourism & hospitality sector is continuously developing and seeking novel ways to enhance the unique experience of visitors globally. The emergence of technology has introduced virtual reality as an advanced mechanism that holds the potential to transform the tourism industry (Bilotta, 2021). The incorporation of virtual reality technology within the travel industry can alter how individuals engage with destinations. It is a technology that creates an immersive and interactive simulated environment using headsets and motion-tracking sensors. This has the potential to revolutionize the travel industry significantly. Virtual reality experiences enable tourists to submerge themselves in virtual surroundings that precisely replicate real locations, thus providing a realistic and immersive experience (Craig, 2022).

Thus, virtual reality is revolutionizing all travel industry and transforming how tourists explore and experience destinations (Huang, 2013). These experiences offer a sense of presence and immersion, providing unique and unforgettable adventures. In addition to virtual tours and travel experiences, VR has become a powerful tool for the travel industry to create immersive marketing campaigns (An, 2021).

2.3 Brand image

According to (Aaker, 1996), branding creates value in a variety of ways, by helping consumers process information, differentiating the brand, generating reasons to buy, giving positive feelings and providing a basis for extensions.

Brand image is the key driver of brand equity, which refers to consumer's general perception and feeling about a brand and has an influence on consumer behaviour (Zhang, 2015). (Rio & Vazquez, 2001) describe brand image as being the perception of a brand as reflected by the set of associations that consumers associate in memory with the name of the brand.

One of the most recent definitions of brand image we can find that one proposed by (Kotler & Keller, 2012) : "Brand image is a combination of multiple tangible and intangible elements that evoke emotions and associations in consumers, allowing them to differentiate themselves from competitors."

Brand is a unique blend of functional and emotional characteristic perceived by consumers as an additional value, unique experience and fulfilled promise. It has a symbolic value different from everything that is available in reality, and ability to represent interests that

go beyond the brand itself. For the company, it is the core strategic resource and most powerful invaluable asset (Grubor, 2017). Based on user-generated data, social networks can improve the feasibility, operability, and flexibility of brand image assessment. Analysing the sentiment tendency of texts through natural language processing techniques for user-topic texts is a new trend in brand image assessment and has a very practical application value.

2.4 The relationship between virtual reality experiential marketing and brand image

In a virtual reality experience, a person interacts with a simulated surrounding environment in a virtual space with a high level of immersion. In other words, virtual reality is delivered through the interface between a programmer who can create a virtual experience and the technology. This is an innovative technology that extends the five human senses through virtual space (Chirico, et al., 2020).

According to (Jang, 2019), virtual reality offers an environment where the perceiver can experience a sense of being physically present, and thus could be an effective means of providing shopping experiences that are consistent across online and offline channels. The application of VR technology alongside the physical elements of the sales process has been a subject of numerous studies. Modern researchers are largely focused on the analyses of the impact of virtual reality upon customer behaviour and the associated customer experience (purchasing experience) (Lau, 2012).

The virtual reality solutions provide digital content users with unique, highly immersive experiences of both an informative and entertainment value. The new technology plays an important role in the design of highly involving customer experience, which can be directly translated into other benefits, such as company image or product reception (Lysik & Lopaciński, 2019).

(Gretzel, 2003) promoted the benefits of using immersive virtual reality technologies to build a sensory experience into marketing communication strategies, with a particular aim of supporting the information-searching and decision-making process for the consumer.

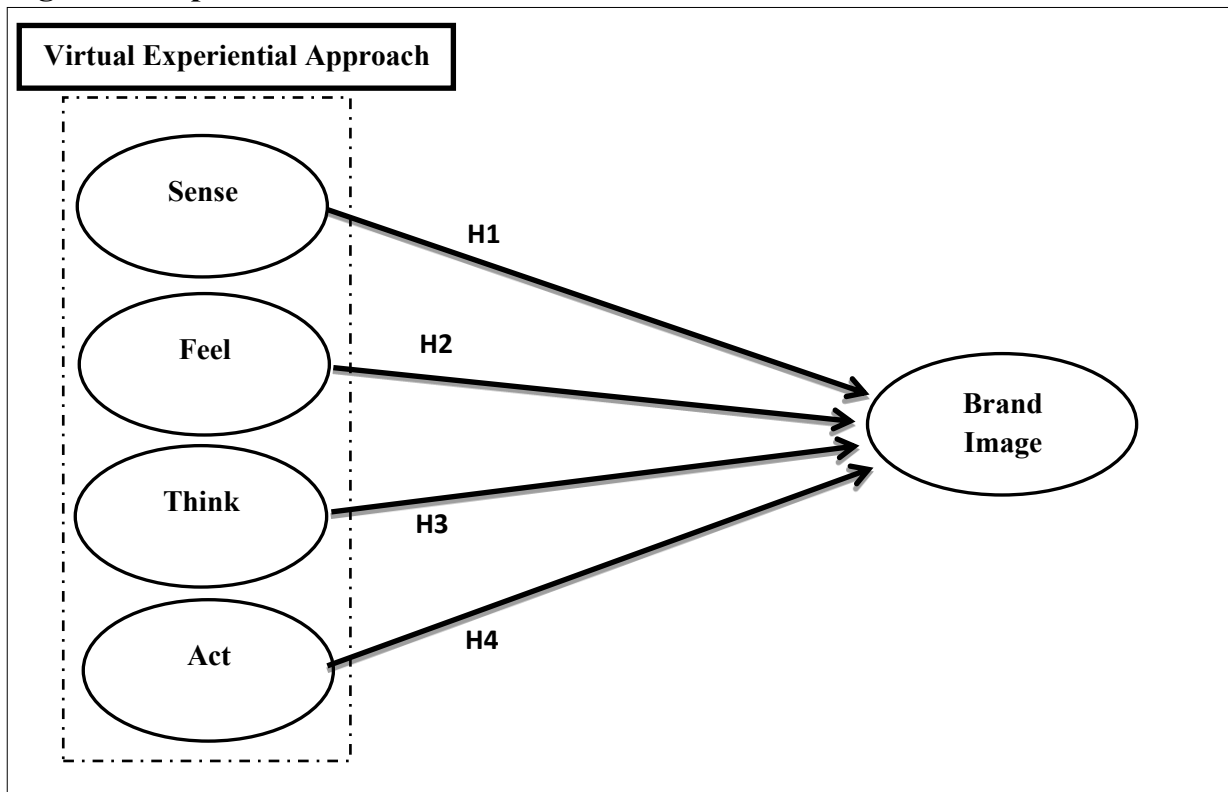
3. Research model and hypothesis

The main objective of our study is to investigate the relationship between the virtual experiential approach determinants, used to measure the proposed virtual reality experience, and the brand image of the hotel. In other words, this work aims to demonstrate the potential of using the virtual experiential approach by creating an immersive experience for customers to strengthen the brand image of hotels in Algeria.

Therefore, there are four (4) independent variables in the present study, namely: sense, feel, think, and act.

The dependent variable is brand image.

The relationships between these variables are illustrated in the figure below, which represents the conceptual model of our study.

Fig.1. Conceptual model

In accordance with the research purpose and based on the literature review as well as the conceptual model, we can announce the hypotheses of our study as follows:

H1: Sense has a significant and positive influence on the hotel's brand image.

H2: Feel has a significant and positive influence on the hotel's brand image.

H3: Think has a significant and positive influence on the hotel's brand image.

H4: Act has a significant and positive influence on the hotel's brand image.

4. Methodology

4.1 Questionnaire design and data collection

First of all, a virtual reality experience allowing respondents to visit the MSuite hotel located in Algiers was created. This experience was then sent to participants using a link accessible on computers, smartphones and tablets. For data collection, an online questionnaire, conceived using Googleforms, was sent to all the participants in order to collect quantitative data after using the virtual reality experience. The operationalization of the constructs was based on the use of measurement scales (items) tested in the marketing literature.

The questionnaire is composed of (15) items designed to evaluate the constructs of the study. Concerning the independent variable of the virtual experiential approach and its determinants, three (3) items were used to measure the "SENSE", three (3) items to measure "FEEL", three (3) items to measure "THINK", and three (3) items also to measure "ACT". The items were adapted from (Shmitt, 1999), (Yuan & Wu, 2008), (Pura, 2005), and (Indrawati & Fatharani, 2016).

Three (3) items were also used to measure the dependent variable, "brand image". The items were adapted from (Davis, Golicic, & Marquardt, 2009) and (Cho & Sagynov, 2015). The measurement scale used is the Likert scale. This is a widely used scale that requires respondents to rate their agreement or disagreement with each statement about the subject of the

stimulus. Each of these constructs was measured using seven-point Likert scales, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree.

The questionnaire contains a total of 18 questions, including those designed to collect relevant personal data from respondents, such as gender, age and activity. At the end, 90 usable questionnaires were collected and used for statistical data analysis and hypothesis testing.

4.2 Data analysis

PLS-SEM version 3.4 was used for data analysis. Validity and reliability tests were applied to the measurement model, and hypothesis testing to the structural model. Two-step analytical procedures were carried out for the SEM. Firstly, the measurement model was tested (validity and reliability of measurements) and secondly, the structural model.

5. Findings

5.1 Demographic profile of respondents

The sample size for this study is 90 participants. These respondents include mainly people who often visit Algiers to do business. The sample is composed mainly of men (57) respondents with a percentage of 63%, and (33) respondents 37% are therefore women. By age, the dominant age range is between 18 and 36, with a percentage of around 65%. Finally, the majority of these respondents are employees with a percentage of 58%, the rest are government employees and professionals.

5.2 Evaluation of measurement model

- **Reliability**

All constructs were assessed for reliability and validity in order to evaluate the measurement model used in our study. We use the threshold of (Hair, Sarstedt, Hopkins, & Kuppelwieser, 2014), which according to these authors, a “Cronbach's alpha” and “composite reliability” (CR) above 0.7 are acceptable and represent good reliability.

The Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) scores obtained after analyzing the measurement model using the PLS algorithm are shown in the following table:

Table 1. Reliability of constructs

Variables	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability
	>0.7	>0.7
Act	0.817	0.891
Brand image	0.728	0.848
Feel	0.736	0.850
Sense	0.722	0.843
Think	0.811	0.887

Source: Results on Smart Pls 3.4

From the results obtained, it can be seen that Cronbach's alpha and the composite reliability (CR) of all the constructs are greater than 0.7. As a result, the reliability of our measures has been verified.

- **Convergent validity**

The purpose of this analysis is to check whether the manifest variables are accurately measuring their constructs. We applied the strong convergence criterion described by (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Indeed, an AVE (Average Variance Extracted) greater than or equal to 0.5 reflects good convergent validity.

Table 2. Convergent validity

Variables	Average Variance (AVE)
	>0.5
Act	0.731
Brand image	0.653
Feel	0.655
Sense	0.643
Think	0.723

Source: Results on Smart Pls 3.4

These findings show that the "AVE" of all constructs is above 0.5, indicating adequate convergent validity.

- **Discriminant validity**

This assessment allows us to confirm that manifest variables are more closely related to their constructs than to other latent variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As the following table illustrates, the AVE of each construct was compared to the squared correlation of that construct with other constructs, and the AVE was found to be greater.

Table 3. Discriminant validity

	Act	Brand image	Feel	Sense	Think
Condition	$\sqrt{AVE(X)} > COR(X, Y)$				
Act	0.855				
Brand image	0.725	0.808			
Feel	0.719	0.731	0.809		
Sense	0.706	0.737	0.716	0.802	
Think	0.613	0.699	0.698	0.617	0.850

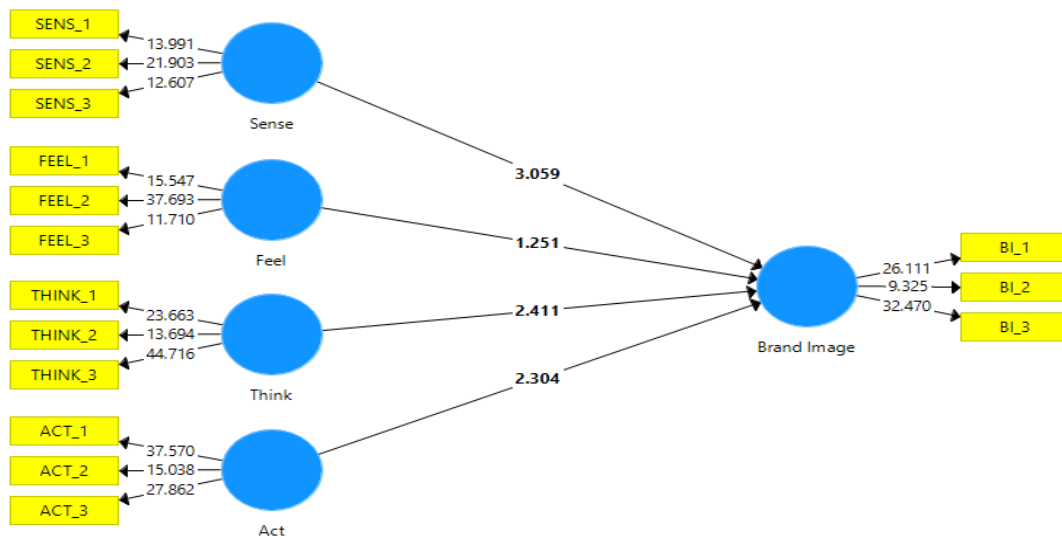
Source: Results on Smart Pls 3.4

5.3 Evaluation of structural model

In this hypothesis-testing stage of our study, the bootstrap method on smart pls is used to assess the predictive relevance of latent variables, by obtaining the necessary results concerning: the size and significance of path coefficients; the coefficient of determination (R^2); and finally, the goodness-of-fit index (GoF).

The results are presented in the following section. Acceptance of the significance of the relationship is according to the condition "t-values must be greater than 1.96, and the p-value must be less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$)". T-values are shown on the links between exogenous and endogenous latent variables in the figure (Hair, Sarstedt, Hopkins, & Kuppelwieser, 2014).

Fig.2. Conceptual model after bootstrap



Source: Results on Smart Pls 3.4

Based on the criteria mentioned previously, it can be seen that there are three significant positive relationships in this study, and only one non-significant relationship:

- Sense has a significant positive influence on hotel's brand image, with a value of (t student=3.059 > 1.96) and ($p=0.00 < 0.05$).
- Feel has not a significant influence on hotel's brand image, with a value of (t student=1.251 < 1.96) and ($p=0.212 > 0.05$).
- Think has a significant positive influence on hotel's brand image, with a value of (t student=2.411 > 1.96) and ($p=0.00 < 0.05$).
- Act has a significant positive influence on hotel's brand image, with a value of (t student=2.304 > 1.96) and ($p=0.00 < 0.05$).

The coefficient ($R^2=0.691$). This means that Brand Image variance is explained by 69% of virtual experiential determinants (Sense, feel, think, and act). The following table illustrates the results.

Table 4. Path coefficients and hypothesis testing

	Relationship	Std Beta	Std Error	T value	P value	F ²	Decision
H1	Sense→Brand image	0.244	0.108	3.059	0.000	0.077	Supported
H2	Feel→Brand image	0.177	0.134	1.251	0.212	0.034	Not supported
H3	Think→Brand image	0.284	0.094	2.411	0.000	0.104	Supported
H4	Act→Brand image	0.251	0.104	2.304	0.000	0.097	Supported

Source: Author based on results on Smart Pls 3.4

As a final step for the evaluation of the overall model of our study, we use the Goodness-of-fit (GoF) index proposed by (Tenenhaus, Vinzi, Chatelin, & Lauro, 2005). This global model validation index must be greater than 0.25 to be considered average, and greater than 0.36 to be considered very broad and good. It is calculated using the following equation:

$$GOF = \sqrt{\overline{AVE} * R^2}$$

$$\overline{AVE} = \frac{1}{15} (3 \times 0.731 + 3 \times 0.653 + 3 \times 0.655 + 3 \times 0.643 + 3 \times 0.723)$$

$$\overline{AVE} = 0.81$$

$$R^2 = 0.69$$

$$GOF = 0.74$$

The (GOF) value is greater than 0.36, which means that the model's goodness of fit is high. Our model is valid and very well fitted.

6. CONCLUSION

Through the results obtained in this study, we have demonstrated the significant role that the various determinants of the virtual experiential approach can exert in the Algerian hospitality sector, particularly for hotels. (Shmitt H. , 1999), the pioneer of experiential marketing, developed determinants and considered them as strategic modules that allow a company to move away from traditional marketing based on features and benefits towards the creation of experiences for customers. We created an experience based on virtual reality that integrates four of these determinants: sense, feel, think and act, and then each determinant was linked to a concept recognized as a major one in the field of marketing, which is brand image.

After testing the proposed hypotheses, we obtained a significant direct positive effect of three determinants of the virtual experiential approach, and only one determinant had a non-significant effect on the brand image of the hotel studied.

Sense, think, and act, are the three determinants are the three key determinants that have been found to influence the hotel's brand image. This can be explained by the power of the five human senses when stimulated by an experience. As the experience was lived digitally, the colors, lighting and various aesthetic features were enough to make the experience attractive to customers and to engender a positive image about the hotel. Also, it appears that customers appreciate the way they move around the hotel within the virtual experience, offering them a new, pleasant and memorable way of discovering the property, which is the main objective of the virtual experiential approach. The originality of the experience can allow customers to change their habits, instead of using the website to discover the hotel, they can use this virtual experience. This change in habits affects the brand image generated in the minds of customers, according to the results obtained.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that the integration of virtual reality technology in the promotion of hotelier services appears to be useful and cost-effective, and this can be seen through the considerable influence of the determinants of the virtual experiential approach on brand image. Thus, sense, think and act determinants used in the creation of such a virtual experience, strengthen the brand image and generate positive behavioral responses. A greater focus on information technology, as well as developing and diversifying the way products and services are delivered to customers, is the main recommendation we can provide to hotel managers in Algeria, where we can state that competitive advantage and customer loyalty cannot

be achieved by providing similar products, services and experiences. The virtual experiential approach provides a perfect solution in this regard when it is applied consistently, and most importantly, when it is properly combined with technology.

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