

‘Authentic but not too much’: exploring perceptions of authenticity of virtual tourism

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Abstract Virtual tourism and authenticity are concepts amply discussed by tourism scholars. Yet, limited empirical studies have explored perceptions of authenticity of virtual tourism. This paper attempts to fill this gap existing in the body of knowledge as it provides an insight into perceptions of virtual tourism and authenticity. Driven by an interpretivist paradigm, twenty in-depth, online interviews were conducted with a group of tourism students studying in a Malaysian private university. The findings show that while virtual tourism was not perceived as totally inauthentic, the participants conceived corporeal and sensorial involvements as crucial components to experience authenticity in tourism settings.

Keywords Virtual tourism · Authenticity · Tourist behavior · Qualitative research

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1 Introduction

“But what enhanced for Kublai every event or piece of news reported by his inarticulate informer was the space that remained around it, a void not filled with words. The descriptions of cities Marco Polo visited had this virtue: you could wander through them in thought, become lost, stop and enjoy the cool air, or run off”. (Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 1972, p. 38).

In *The Invisible Cities* the Italian novelist Italo Calvino pictures a scene in which Marco Polo narrates to Kublai Khan fascinating accounts of the several cities he discovered during his journeys in Asia. It does not take too much time for Kublai Khan (and the readers) to realize that the journeys and the cities described by Marco Polo are probably imaginary or pseudo-real. Yet, both Kublai Khan and Marco Polo seem to enjoy these accounts to the fullest as these mesmerizing and evocative narratives allow their minds to travel through a multitude of diverse cities and experiences. In fact, as they ‘wander through them in thought’, Kublai Khan and Marco Polo can be comfortably classified as virtual tourists. But Kublai Khan and Marco Polo are not the first virtual tourists in history as traveling without the body, or virtual tourism, has been part of human history since prehistoric times (Bittarello 2008). Cave paintings created during the Neolithic Era are a typical example of people’s representations of ontologically alternative worlds. Similarly, in ancient literary texts and myths, such as Homer’s *Odyssey*, places and situations portrayed are representing virtual worlds, which cannot be found in non-virtual life (Ward 2000; Wertheim 1999). Religious texts are also among the examples that embody the idea that it is possible to travel without the body. Within Abrahamic religions, for example, death is often conceptualised as a virtual journey in which our souls move to ‘other places’ or ‘dimensions’ without the presence of our ‘physical selves’. Watching a theatrical representation or reading a book are forms of virtual tourism as they allow us to escape from our mundane daily realities and enter different virtual worlds.

While traditionally humans have participated in forms of virtual travel, technology has played a pivotal role in enhancing and multiplying people’s possibilities to travel virtually. As the line between ‘offline’ and ‘online’ is becoming more blurred or almost inexistent (Floridi 2007), virtual digital worlds are more and more omnipresent in our daily and touristy lives. Virtual museums (Lewis 1996), electronic booking systems (Buhalis 2003), online shopping (Nielsen Company 2015) are only among few of the multiple examples showing that parts of our tourist experiences are already digitally virtual. Advanced technological gears already available in the market, such as the ‘Oculus Rift’ and the ‘Google Glass’, are capable of providing very complex multi-sensorial experiences in virtual worlds as well as in virtual tourist destinations. It is thus important to focus on virtual experiences as current technological developments suggest that they may play an important role in tourism in the near future.

Indirectly, the notion of virtual tourism has also been part of the traditional tourism literature as theories on tourist motivation have implicitly contemplated the

idea that bodily travels are often anticipated by 'un-bodied' journeys. Despite this, while corporeal mobilities and 'bodily' tourism have been object of interest within academic circles, less has been written by scholars about virtual tourism.

Interestingly, while in the 2000s technological developments have paved the way to more elaborated virtual tourism experiences, empirical studies focusing on tourists' experiences in virtual environments have been relatively scarce in the last 15 years. Instead, with few exceptions (Tavakoli and Mura 2015), tourism studies have tended to discuss conceptually (in a rather futuristic fashion) the notion of virtual tourism and its implications for the tourism industry without paying attention to virtual tourists' experiences (see Cheong 1995; Guttentag 2010; Hobson and Williams 1995; Williams and Hobson 1995).

Moreover, little has been written about the role of virtual experiences on tourists' perceptions of authenticity. Previous studies (Dewailly 1999; Guttentag 2010; Hobson and Williams 1995) acknowledge the existence of a link between virtual tourism and authenticity. Yet, despite the prolific literature on authenticity in tourism (Cohen 1988; MacCannell 1976; Wang 1999) there are no in-depth empirical studies discussing perceptions of authenticity of virtual tourism. As both perceptions of authenticity and virtual experiences are part of tourists' experiences, a better understanding of the relationship between the two is crucial to further advance our understanding of tourist behaviour and experiences.

The study of the relationship between virtual tourism and authenticity raises a number of questions: What is the relationship between virtuality and authenticity? Is virtual tourism a possible way to achieve forms of tourism perceived as authentic? How are tourists' perceptions of authenticity influenced by non-corporeal travel patterns? Are tourists ready to replace or combine their corporeal travels with virtual forms of tourism? What is the relationship between virtual and non-virtual tourist experiences? This paper aims to answer these questions and attempts to fill a gap existing in the tourism literature concerning the relationship between virtual tourism and authenticity.

2 Literature review

2.1 Virtual tourism

There is no consensus about a universally accepted definition of 'virtual tourism' as definitions of 'virtual reality' are multiple and often discordant. Hobson and Williams (1995, p. 128) refer to virtual reality as 'the computer-generated medium that gives people the feeling that they are being transported from a physical world to a world of imagination'. Following Burdea and Coiffet (2003), Gutiérrez et al. (2008) and Vince (2004), Guttentag (2010, p. 638) defines virtual reality as 'the use of a computer-generated 3D environment—called a 'virtual environment' (VE)—that one can navigate and possibly interact with, resulting in real-time simulation of one or more of the user's five senses'. Likewise, Tavakoli and Mura (2015) employ Bell's (2008, p. 2) notion as of 'virtual world', namely, 'a synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers'.

Overall, past research has tended to place emphasis on the importance of online and digital tools to denote virtual reality. This seems to be aligned with lay understandings and interpretations of the term ‘virtual’, which links virtuality to technological hardware and software.

However, within the context of this paper we would like to propose a broader definition of virtual tourism, namely one that contemplates the existence of alternative realities or worlds (both digital and non-digital) in which tourists can travel without their bodies. In this regard, Tavakoli and Mura (2015, p. 400) argue that ‘to consider the ‘virtual world’ as a mere outcome of technology-based developments would be misleading’. In this respect, they support Bittarello’s (2008) idea that virtual experiences have existed since ancient times propelled by people’s imagination and fantasies (religious texts, novels and paintings are examples of representations of virtual worlds). This rather broad definition of ‘virtual tourism’ does not want to deny the role of technology-based devices in providing virtual experiences. Indeed, one cannot deny that the development of technology is increasingly facilitating the possibility of experiencing immersive environments in which human senses (e.g. vision, taste, smell, etc.) are stimulated. However, our definition contemplates the idea that forms of travel that do not involve the physical movement of the body can also be propelled by human fantasy and imagination without the use of technological devices.

Also, in this paper the word ‘real’ is not employed to indicate non-virtual experiences as the virtual/real dichotomy is ontologically problematic. Notwithstanding the conceptual issues concerning what is reality, to label virtual experiences as non-real and non-virtual experiences as real would be misleading. Indeed, what is real and not-real cannot be defined based on the corporeality of the experience. Considering that perceptions play an important role in defining what is real and non-real, virtual experiences can be considered as ‘real’ if perceived as such by an individual. Therefore, to avoid banal oversimplifications, we will employ the term ‘non-virtual’ to indicate physical patterns of mobilities as opposed to non-corporeal virtual tourism.

Another misconception would be that of considering virtual tourist experiences as ‘mirrors’ of corporeal experiences. Indeed, to minimise virtuality to a ‘mirror’ of corporeal experience can be misleading as virtual reality may only be based on some features of corporeal reality (see augmented reality). Hyperreality not only (re)produces ‘facsimile’ scenarios but also ‘fac-different’ realities (Eco 1986). In this respect, virtual tourism acts as a catalyst for both the (re)production of non-virtual tourist destinations and the (re)production of tourist spaces and experiences that do not have a referent or original in the non-virtual world.

Virtual tourism re-conceptualises the idea of space. Notwithstanding astronomers’ and cosmologists’ debates concerning the finite or infinite nature of space (see Levin et al. 1998), virtual tourist spaces can be considered as infinite as everybody can create digital or non-digital tourist spaces. For example, in *Second Life* multiple (and potentially infinite) versions of historical and natural sites, such as Paris and Las Vegas, exist as all netizens can (re)produce their own tourist destinations. From this perspective, hyperreality should be regarded as an

expression of pure capitalism and its related excessive consumption patterns as it fulfils human desire to have, produce, and consume 'more' (Eco 1986).

Virtual tourism not only problematizes the spatial nature of the tourism experience. It also challenges its temporal dimension as it contests the traditional idea that tourism is a temporal and temporary escape from work and the mundane routines of everyday life. People's temporary virtual escapes can be multiple even during one single day or hour. Overall, virtual tourism challenges the traditional dichotomies between home and tourism and/or work and leisure. Indeed, virtuality leads to conceptualize work, leisure and tourism as one whole 'hybrid' dimension in which individuals are allowed to escape from one experience to another anytime they want it. Adding to Umberto Eco's idea that human attitude is often 'past-izing' (p. 9) events with nostalgic eyes, hyperreality allows individuals to consume both 'past-izing' and 'future-izing' re-presentations of tourist realities.

2.2 Virtual tourism: issues and opportunities

Previous studies on virtual tourism (Dewailly 1999; Hobson and Williams 1995; Williams and Hobson 1995) have highlighted the implications of virtual reality for the future development of the tourism industry. Dewailly (1999), for example, argues that combined forms of virtual and non-virtual tourism may lead to more sustainable forms of mass tourism as travelling without the body may reduce the impacts of corporeal presence. This may be particularly appealing within a discourse of heritage preservation, especially with regard to tangible heritage. As tourists' consumption of heritage is based on the meanings people associate to it through an active and subjectively laden process (Nuryanti 1996), do we need physical presence for the creation and sharing of these meanings? However, the non-presence of tourist 'bodies' in a destination could also lead to unsustainable practices from an economic perspective. Not travelling to a tourist destination can be detrimental for those communities that rely on tourists' money for their existence. It is also true that tourists do not need to be in situ to spend money. In *Second Life*, many virtual spaces and services are chargeable and generate revenue of millions annually without tourists' corporeal mobility (Mitchell 2011).

Within this complex scenario, Dewailly (1999, p. 51) poses an interesting question concerning the development of virtual tourism: 'Are we then heading towards a dual tourism, where the 'wealthy' (in terms of both time and money) are offered the opportunity of using the virtual to refine their choice, before going to the field to experience it, while the poor have to be satisfied with just the virtual?'. The possibility of widening the gap between the rich and the poor through virtual tourism should not be underestimated. Yet, it is also true that virtual tourism 'democratizes' the possibility of travelling as it may lead to more accessible experiences for certain groups, such as the diversely abled. Travelling without the body can be easier and less frustrating for a paraplegic, especially if we take into account that at the moment many heritage and natural sites worldwide are not easily accessible. In this respect, Hobson and Williams (1995, p. 133) claim that 'VR [virtual reality] could offer alternatives for those who are disabled but who want a tourism experience'.

From a different angle, virtual and corporeal tourism should not be regarded as exclusive phenomena. Rather, it may be argued that virtual tourism can complement, instead of replace, corporeal patterns of mobility. As Dewailly (1999, p. 41) points out, ‘virtual reality seems to promote tourism, rather than discourage it’. The idea that a combination of both virtual and non-virtual tourism may lead to more sustainable practices should be contemplated. Virtual journeys, for example, may be used to educate the public to destinations’ different cultural practices. Also, travels in virtual realities could be used to experience fragile parts of the destination while physical mobility could be employed for less disruptive travel patterns. Among the various issues concerning the development of virtual tourism, it also needs to take into account how authentic tourists would perceive forms of travel without the body.

2.3 Virtual tourism and authenticity

The quest for authenticity, almost an obsession for tourists, has been widely documented in the tourism literature. Indeed, the term ‘authenticity’ has been studied and explored since the 1970s from so many different perspectives that some commentators have questioned the meaning of this term. Seminal work on the topic conducted by MacCannell (1976), Cohen (1988), and Wang (1999) has dissected the role of authenticity in the tourism experience. MacCannell, for example, claims that tourists (mainly modern Western tourists) seek authentic experience when they travel. However, most of the times tourists experience contrived experiences, namely staged representations of events and cultures fabricated by the tourism industry to accommodate desires and expectations (MacCannell 1976; Pearce and Moscardo 1986). Authenticity is a problematic term as it involves politically charged discussions concerning the ‘Other’ and socially-constructed representations of past events and cultures, which are often informed by colonial and postcolonial discourses (Tucker 2009). Importantly, it has been highly recognised that the nature of authentic experiences cannot be regarded as objective as tourists’ perceptions of authenticity are the result of negotiated experiences between tourist selves and toured objects (Wang 2007). Although some scholars have questioned the importance of authenticity for tourists (Boorstin 1964; McKercher 1993), the interest and subsequent body of knowledge on authenticity has grown substantially within tourism studies in the last 20 years.

Interestingly, the bodily dimension of authenticity has been implicitly assumed by tourism scholars as the corporeal interaction between tourists and toured objects (objective and constructive authenticity) or tourist activities (existential authenticity; see Wang 1999) is often assumed. In discussing the notion of existential authenticity, Wang (1999) refers to the notion of ‘intra-personal authenticity’ to describe the corporeal aspect of authenticity. More specifically, Wang’s (1999) intra-personal authenticity involves a physical dimension that only bodily experiences can produce. Indirectly, the visual dimension of authenticity has also been reiterated within the tourism literature. Building on Urry’s (1990) concept of ‘tourist gaze’, tourists’ experiences in general, and of authenticity in particular, have been traditionally based on tourists’ desires to ‘gaze upon’ the toured objects.

Despite this, the multi-sensorial bodily experience of authenticity has been partially overlooked. In their study of tourists' and residents' perceptions of authenticity in Sydney's Little Italy, Mura and Lovelock (2009) identify several critical components that may trigger perceptions of authenticity, such as architecture (visual aspect), food (sense of taste and smell) and music (hearing). This suggests that perceptions of authenticity may be activated by experiences that involve all the different senses of the body. Indeed, the visual dimension is important in the experience of authenticity; yet, other senses, such as taste and smell, are equally important.

Without denying the importance of the body in tourism experiences (Veijola and Jokinen 1994), the question arises as to whether the same multi-sensorial experience can be reproduced and consumed by the tourists without their corporeal selves. Although there are still limitations in the technology simulating virtual experiences, there exist gadgets capable of providing multi-sensorial virtual experiences. Digital scent technology, for example, focuses on the reproduction of olfactory experiences in the virtual environment through olfactometers, such as the 'Nasal Ranger'. Similarly, digital taste simulators, such as the 'Digital Taste Interface', allow users to experience simulated taste sensations. Overall, the body still seems to be the most advanced 'machine' to stimulate our senses; yet, recent technological developments have enhanced virtual sensorial experiences. Due to financial constraints, this paper cannot be focused on tourists' multi-sensorial digital experiences as the machines mentioned above are not available to consumers yet and, if available, are too expensive to be purchased. Despite this, it needs to be remembered that both mono-sensorial (based on the visual aspect) and multi-sensorial (based on the stimulation of several senses) perceptions of authenticity in virtual tourism destinations are still unknown.

3 Methodology

A qualitative approach, driven by an interpretivist paradigm, was selected to conduct this study due to the complexity and multifaceted aspects of virtual experiences. Bamberger (2000) and also Rao and Woolcock (2004) suggest that to understand development issues adequately (and to offer meaningful policy recommendations) it is necessary to obtain context-specific "depth" through qualitative approaches. Besides the researchers' ontological and epistemological beliefs, virtual tourism is a concept that has not been studied in detail by tourism scholars. As such, it has many unexplored aspects that only qualitative research can unveil. Moreover, Jennings (2010) believes that qualitative approaches are more appropriate than quantitative methods for an in-depth understanding of tourist behaviour.

The participants of this study were tourism students (specializing in tourism, hospitality, recreation and event management) from a private university in Malaysia. Despite the criticism raised by scholars on students' involvement in research projects (see Clark and McCann 2005), the researchers believe in the importance of exploring this target market's perceptions. Students can be regarded

as potential tourists. Moreover, as tourism students will be the leaders, administrators, marketers and managers of future tourism developments in Malaysia and overseas, it was regarded as important to understand their perceptions of authenticity and whether virtual tourism was conceived as a possible tool to achieve alternative forms of mobility.

The students participating in the study, who are from Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Taiwan, and Vietnam, provide a multicultural and interesting insight into the topic under investigation. All participants attended tourism-related courses and have a basic understanding of matters related to authenticity and virtual tourism. One of the researchers conducted a class on authenticity, which covered basic notions and theories about this topic, and a class on virtual tourism, which gave students an overview of the different forms of virtual tourism (as discussed earlier in Sect. 2). Participants were asked to express their views about their experiences and perceptions in different virtual worlds, such as Second Life. The students were selected from a group of people who had never experienced virtual worlds or virtual reality through the most recent gear available in the market (e.g. the Oculus Rift) before the interviews. The students were approached after they replied to an invitation posted on Facebook by the researchers.

In-depth, online, semi-structured interviews via online tools were the data collection methods selected to explore perceptions of the authenticity of virtual tourism. There were two reasons behind this choice. First, online interviews reduce participants' vulnerability and decrease the tension related to the relationship of power between instructors and students (although the interviewer was not the main lecturer). Although Shapka et al. (2016) believe that online interviews require longer time and reduce the depth of the empirical materials, Markham (2005) finds this approach as crucial in breaking barriers between interviewer and participants. Indeed, some of the participants reported to be more comfortable during the online interviews rather than in face-to-face interactions. Second, online interviews were perceived by the participants as part of virtual communication experiences as virtual tourists interact via online textual or vocal chats in virtual worlds.

During the recruitment process, the researchers provided an overview of the aims of the project and answered all the questions students had about their involvement. The interviewers followed ethical guidelines for online interviews, such as the guarantee of anonymity and the provision of online and offline consent forms, as suggested by Markham (2005). Before the interviews, it was emphasized that students' participation was entirely voluntary. Also, during this stage the researchers reiterated that non-participation (or withdrawal from the study after accepting to participate) would have not led to any disadvantage for them. An information sheet was circulated among the students and those who agreed to participate in the study were asked to sign a consent form (or acknowledge their participation online). The participants were assured that pseudonyms would have been assigned to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. A total of twenty students were interviewed in the study.

A list of questions was designed before the interviews and follow-up questions were asked during the interviews to obtain rich data. These questions tried to explore the notion of mobility in tourism, the barriers to travel (such as financial

issues, visa, disability, etc.), the future of tourism, and the authenticity of virtual and corporeal tourism. Each online interview lasted 60–90 min. Transcribing was not required since the interviews were text-based. The empirical data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved (Jennings 2010).

The analysis of the empirical materials started after conducting the first interview. Each interview was read immediately after the interview by the main researcher and by the interviewers, who started to reflect upon the responses obtained. Codes and theme were generated progressively. This process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, as Lofland and Lofland (1994) suggest. More specifically, the phases of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed. First, the empirical material was read several times to identify initial codes and to allow researchers to familiarize themselves with the data. Second, related codes were grouped to identify emergent themes. Third, the themes were named and reviewed by the researchers. Finally, the themes were discussed in relation to the existing literature on the topic and the research questions of the study.

4 Findings

4.1 An overview of participants' virtual and non-virtual experiences

In the first part of the interview, the respondents were asked to describe the usual activities and routines carried out in their everyday lives. The empirical material highlights that all the participants' mundane experiences are a combination of both virtual and non-virtual experiences:

As for now...I'm studying...so my daily routine will be like classes, assignments, movies/drama, then Facebook...(Karen, 21 Malaysia)

[during my free time] I usually go online or hang out with my friends. The sites I usually go to are Facebook, Tumblr, or watch drama and movies...YouTube too (Ann, 21 Malaysia)

Usually [...] I would go out with friends, stay home, social media...[in the virtual environment I do] a lot, because nowadays a lot of online games are actually linked with social media like Facebook so sometimes...I need a Facebook account in order to play the games...other than that I also like Instagram, Youtube...(Andrea, 23 Malaysia)

I love playing online games (e.g. World of Warcraft) and I like to eat!! I spend most of my time in my room or in front of my laptop (like a nerd hehe) (Julia, 22 Indonesia).

The excerpts from the interviews highlight that despite the participation in non-digital virtual activities (e.g. reading books and watching dramas on TV) many of the social activities the interviewees participate in during their leisure time are online, mainly in digital virtual social spaces. More specifically, the most common activities include social interactions on Facebook, Instagram and Youtube, in which

conversations are held, friends are met, new people are approached and games are played with other netizens.

However, the responses from the interviews also shed light on the level of immersion of these virtual experiences. The respondents refer to activities with very low sensorial immersion as technological gear capable of more immersive experiences is still not available to the wider public. In this respect, the empirical material shows that while the majority of participants seemed to be relatively knowledgeable about virtual tourism, none of them has ever experienced very immersive forms of virtual reality or virtual tourism (e.g. by using the ‘Oculus Rift’ or more advanced gear present in some laboratories worldwide). As it will be discussed in the following paragraph, respondents’ lack of complex sensorial virtual experiences plays an important role in affecting their perceptions of authenticity concerning virtual tourism.

4.2 Virtual tourism and authenticity

When asked to discuss the perceived differences between virtual and non-virtual experiences, the respondents clearly stated to privilege the latter due to the lack of corporeal and sensorial stimulation of the former:

actual games [non-virtual experiences]...it’s fun...like paintball...online games...it’s fun but a long period of time can be stressful to the eyes...I think I like when I can actually play myself...actually me running around and stuff...it’s tiring but worth the experience (Joey, 22 Maldives)

[I like more non-virtual experiences because of] physical contact...can talk about anything we want...in computer game cannot...I believe no matter how advanced technology is it will not be able to be compared to the actual game of football...[It will miss] physical contact, the possibility to talk to other players...in computer games we cannot do this...there is no touching (Josephine, 28 Maldives).

The participants were also asked to express their ideas about their perceptions of authenticity of virtual tourism experiences:

Virtual tourism is very very close to the real products...but it’s not 100 % authentic...it lacks the sensorial experience (Sam, 24 Maldives)

I cannot get to feel the atmosphere, I don’t get to eat... all this in the virtual environment is unavailable (Karla, 21 Malaysia)

I want to go there and feel the place fully...The weather...Listen to the people passing by me as I walk...Those little details are very important, that makes everything real (Ann, 21 Malaysia).

As the actual technology does not allow people to have a full sensorial stimulation in the virtual environment, virtual tourism is perceived as ‘less authentic’ than corporeal mobility due to the impossibility of ‘feeling’, ‘smelling’ and ‘tasting’ in the experience.

Also, the corporeal experience allows them to obtain tangible signs of the tourism experience, which are important in the recollection phase during the post-tourism experience:

[referring to corporeal tourism] I like to take pictures to show on Facebook...just wanna show all my friends...I just like the feeling when they say "omg!! The place is so nice"...hahaahahah..."I am so envious u can go to those places"...other reason...it is part of my record or diary on Facebook...it helps me memorize...when I review my photos I can remember the time...and feel I am there a second time throughout my memory...I like the feeling...it brings me back to the travel situation...every time I remember, it makes my memory strong, and can make me feel that those things seem just happened yesterday (Karen, 21 Taiwan).

However, the responses show that virtual tourism plays an important role in encouraging corporeal mobility as the interviewees admitted that some of their fantasies and desires about tourist destinations arose after their virtual journeys. One of the respondents, for example, pointed out that her desire to visit the Vatican City was triggered by her previous virtual trips to this destination. Likewise, the same point was elaborated by other participants:

The real experience is only when u really go there and experience it...but it [virtual tourism] really creates a kind of wanting feeling to really experience it (Sharif, 24 Maldives)

[virtual tourism] makes me more wanna go there see and feel for myself (Nick, 21 Nepal).

Moreover, all the participants acknowledged the importance of digital virtual tourism as technological improvements may be able to provide more sophisticated sensorial experiences in the near future, which in turn may lead to more complex and 'authentic' virtual tourist experiences. In this respect, six of the respondents do not exclude the possibility that in the future virtual tourism may become as 'authentic' as non-virtual tourism. Despite this, all the respondents pointed out that virtual tourism could only complement, rather than replace, corporeal travel as the latter is perceived as essential to experience authenticity.

5 Discussion

While the respondents did not deny that authenticity can also be experienced in virtual environments, they regarded virtual travel as less authentic than corporeal mobility. In this regard, one of the main points emerging from the empirical material is that the physical presence of the body was perceived by the participants as important to experience authenticity. Indeed, the findings of this study support Veijola and Jokinen (1994) on the importance of the tourist body in the provision of meaningful tourism experiences. As such, the responses obtained from the interviews seem to privilege Wang's (1999) theorisations of authenticity. In discussing the notion of 'existential authenticity', Wang (1999) refers to two

dimensions of authenticity, namely intra-personal and inter-personal. Importantly, Wang's (1999, p. 362) intra-personal authenticity reasserts the importance of the body and bodily feelings to experience personal authenticity due to the fact that 'In tourism, sensual pleasures, feelings, and other bodily impulses are to a relatively large extent released and consumed and the bodily desires (for natural amenities, sexual freedom, and spontaneity) are gratified intensively'. Moreover, Wang (1999) also discusses the importance of inter-personal relationships in the experience of authenticity. From this perspective, authenticity cannot transcend the physical and emotional bonds created by physical travel.

The presence of the body in situ was perceived by the participants as important to provide complex sensorial experiences. Indeed, the participants indicated that an authentic tourism experience involves sightseeing, trying new food and interacting with other bodies. The transcripts from the interviews seem to support Mura and Lovelock (2009), who point out that perceptions of authenticity can be influenced by different elements, such as architecture, food, music and fragrances. The respondents did not deny that in the future virtual experiences could become more complex. However, as the virtual experiences and technological gadgets available to the public at the moment only provide the stimulation of two senses, namely sight and hearing, the participants perceived virtual tourism as incapable of offering more realistic multisensorial experiences (e.g. experiences involving taste and smell). Within this scenario, while the tourism literature has placed much emphasis on the visual aspect of tourist experiences (see Urry 1990), this study highlights that tourism experiences not only are opportunities for tourists to gaze upon the toured objects. Rather, travelling includes activities in which tourists consume places using all their senses.

Some of the participants also mentioned that even when technology will provide complex sensorial experiences they will still prefer corporal travel over virtual forms of tourism. This preference was supported by the idea that tourism is not just experiencing people and toured objects at the destination. Rather, the participants referred to tourism as an experience that triggers emotions before and after travelling to the destination. Some of the interviewees, for example, emphasised the importance of physical travel to collect tangible evidence of the trip, such as photos and souvenirs, and 'consume' them during the recollection stage at home. Similarly, other respondents described their excitement and anxieties before travelling to a destination as well as the rituals performed (e.g. preparing the baggage) in preparation of the trip. Importantly, some responses seem to suggest that not only are perceptions of authenticity triggered by experiences at the destination, as assumed by much tourism literature on authenticity. Rather, authenticity is a complex experience that is activated and influenced by tourists' experiences and emotions before, during and after the trip.

6 Conclusion

As non-corporeal forms of mobility are progressively becoming more common in people's leisure and tourist experiences, more information is needed about tourists' perceptions of authenticity in virtual tourism environments. By focusing on a group

of tourism students in Malaysia, the work on which this paper is based provides an insight into perceptions of virtual tourism and authenticity. More specifically, this article tries to answer the following questions: What is the relationship between virtuality and authenticity? Is virtual tourism a possible way to achieve forms of tourism perceived as authentic? How are tourists' perceptions of authenticity influenced by non-corporeal travel patterns? Are tourists ready to replace or combine their corporeal travels with virtual forms of tourism? What is the relationship between virtual and non-virtual tourist experiences?

Overall, the findings of this study show that none of the respondents would like to replace corporeal forms of tourism with virtual mobilities. In this regard, the participants conceived corporeal and sensorial involvements (absent in virtual spaces) as crucial components to experience authenticity in the tourism experience. Virtual tourism was only partially perceived as 'authentic'; yet, the participants were open about the possibility of combining (rather than replacing) virtual and non-virtual forms of tourism. This suggests that virtual and non-virtual tourism are related and should not be regarded as exclusive categories.

The results of this study have important implications for both tourism scholars and industry practitioners. For the body of knowledge, the contribution of this study is twofold. First, this paper advances our understanding concerning the notion of virtual tourism. More specifically, this work refers to virtual tourism as travelling in virtual digital worlds (e.g. travelling in Second Life or with the support of technological tools like the Oculus Rift); yet, it also acknowledges that non-digital mental escapes (e.g. reading a book, travelling in ontologically parallel worlds portrayed in ancient paintings and literary texts) could be considered as virtual mobilities. Indeed, if one conceives virtual tourism as a way of travelling without the body, there is no reason for considering digitally induced escapes as 'more virtual' than travelling with the mind while watching a movie or reading a book. As such, this study attempts to broaden the notion of virtual tourism as previous studies tend to embrace more restrictive definitions of virtual tourism. In this respect, this paper is a call for more research capable to unveil whether differences occur between digital (e.g. Second Life, Facebook) and non-digital virtual experiences. Also, future studies should cast additional light on tourists' digital virtual experiences as the responses show that digital mobilities and experiences are becoming very common during young people's leisure and tourist times.

Second, this study contributes to the body of knowledge as it provides additional information on the relationship between virtual tourism and authenticity. In this respect, the results highlight that the two concepts are related. Therefore, the findings should encourage more research on the relationship between virtuality and authenticity as this has not received much attention by scholars.

Besides the above mentioned theoretical implications, the findings of this study also provide important information for tourism practitioners. As participants indicated that many of their leisure and tourist experiences were online escapes, which in some cases were important for encouraging future corporeal mobility, marketers should consolidate their presence in virtual spaces. One way of attracting potential customers, for example, could be the creation of interactive tourist digital spaces in which destinations and tourist products could be actively promoted by

virtual guides or other virtual tourists. Moreover, tourism managers should take into consideration that although the participants of this study would not replace their corporeal journeys with virtual travels they are still exposed to (and familiar with) digital experiences from young age. Therefore, in order to make tourism products more appealing to the young tourist market, tourism practitioners may create new products, or develop already-existing attractions, that have both virtual (digital and non-digital) and non-virtual elements, a characteristic already existing in augmented reality experiences. The combination of both virtual and non-virtual elements may be of help to enhance the authenticity of the tourism experience. For example, future technological devices could be used by tourists to virtually touch or feel sensitive toured objects, which would enhance tourists' perceptions of authenticity and at the same time protect sensitive tourist sites.

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