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Virtual reality facilitated travel inspiration: the role of pleasure and arousal

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates how Virtual Reality (VR)-facilitated travel inspiration increases visit intention through pleasure and arousal. The research rationale is based on our conceptual framework suggesting that the transmission model of inspiration (from the state of inspiration-by to the state of inspiration-to) and the model of emotional states of pleasure and arousal go in tandem. Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was used to test the hypotheses with data from 290 participants recruited through Prolific Academic who had visited a destination via a 360° VR activity. Our findings demonstrate that VR inspired-by has significant relationships with pleasure and arousal. Pleasure is a complementary partial mediator of the relationship between inspired-by and inspired-to. Similarly, our findings demonstrate that there is a positive effect of pleasure on visiting intention through inspired-to. Arousal neither appears to mediate the relationship between inspired-by and inspired-to nor has any significant relationship with visiting intention.

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Travel inspiration; pleasure; arousal; visit intentions; virtual reality

1. Introduction

The travelling process starts at the prospective stage where tourists daydream and seek new ideas about future travelling. Being critical in travellers' customer journey, inspiration is a moment of unexpected discovery of new ideas about travelling to a destination, thereby urging them to pursue these new travelling goals (Dai et al., 2022; Khoi et al., 2020). Cutting-edge technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and the anticipated advancement of metaverse, create an abundance of vivid and immersive content that stimulates prospective tourists' daydreaming about travelling (Buhalis et al., 2022; Buhalis et al., 2023; Lu et al., 2022). VR experiences in the pre-purchase phase increase travellers' urge to experience the destination and its activities in person (Kang, 2020); that is to say, urge is fundamental for an episode of travel inspiration.

Literature has mainly focused on tourist inspiration during the visiting stage to a destination. Destination characteristics such as attractiveness, uniqueness, creative atmosphere and sincere social interaction at a destination, increase tourists' inspiration (Chen et al., 2024; He et al., 2021; Tsaour et al., 2022; Wei et al., 2023; Xue et al., 2022). Tourists characteristics such as openness to experience

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and their place attachment, increase their inspiration as well (Khoi et al., 2020). Goal congruence during a stay in a wellness resort leads also to inspiration (Liu et al., 2022). Tourist inspiration on the spot has also positive consequences such as place attachment, engagement, well-being, delight, transcendence, pro-environmental intention, WOM and revisit intentions (He et al., 2021; Khoi et al., 2021; Kwon & Boger, 2021; Tsaur et al., 2022; Wei et al., 2023). However, there is little research exploring the travel inspiration during pre-purchase daydreaming, arguing that inspiration is positively related to Word-of-Mouth (WOM), video-sharing and travel intentions (Cheng et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2023).

Our paper investigates how VR-facilitated travel inspiration increases visit intention, an issue that has yet to receive considerable research attention. Only anecdotal arguments exist in the literature postulating that VR-facilitated inspiration is critical in the pre-purchase daydreaming travel stage (Beck et al., 2019; Dai et al., 2022). This is surprising because VR is highly relevant to imagination (Lin & Yeh, 2023). Our conceptual model is based on the transmission model of inspiration (Thrash et al., 2014; Thrash & Elliot, 2003), along with the theoretical model of the emotional states of pleasure and arousal (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Travellers' emotions such as pleasure and arousal are critical even in pre-travelling encounters (Wang & Beise-Zee, 2013); as the main emotional responses, they stimulate an approach or avoidance motivation towards a physical environment (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

The VR-related literature has demonstrated the important role of pleasure and arousal but without paying the necessary attention to travel inspiration (Cheng & Huang, 2022; Skard et al., 2021; Yung et al., 2021a; Yung et al., 2021b). Delving into the underlying mechanism of travel inspiration, we argue that the psychological state of VR-facilitated travel inspiration leads to the motivational state of travel inspiration through tourists' emotions of pleasure and arousal. We also posit that the positive relationship between tourists' emotions and visit intention is mediated by the motivational state of travel inspiration.

Travel inspiration calls for further research, still being in its infancy in the tourism literature (Dai et al., 2022; Kim & Chung, 2023). Especially, in the context of VR technology there is a need for a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms increasing travel and visit intentions after using VR technologies. The adoption of VR technology for destination marketing has increased due the COVID-19 (Lu et al., 2022) and its importance is further growing, considering the integration of tourism and travelling in the metaverse era (Buhalis et al., 2022; Buhalis et al., 2023). This study attempts to answer the calls for a thorough investigation of consumer inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017), especially in the context of tourism (Dai et al., 2022). The present research may add considerable value to the literature of inspiration by integrating further its relationship with emotions (Thrash et al., 2014).

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Customer inspiration

As 'a customer's temporary motivational state that facilitates the transition from the reception of a marketing-induced idea to the intrinsic pursuit of a consumption-related goal' Böttger et al. (2017, p. 117), inspiration involves emotion but is not itself an emotion (Thrash et al., 2014). In accordance with the latter research (Thrash et al., 2014), the motivational concept of inspiration has been used in various fields to explain how humans move from the mundane toward the extraordinary or transcendent; the same researchers highlighted the very nature of customer inspiration, being not only a state, but also a trait. Inspiration as a state is evoked by external stimuli, whereas inspiration as a trait is related to the frequency and power of experiencing inspiration. For the purpose of the study, we adopt the notion of inspiration as a state. And as discussed earlier, tourist inspiration has received only some attention mainly during the visit at the destination. The role of VR in stimulating travel inspiration whilst being at home, has not received considerable attention (Assiouras et al., 2024).

2.2. VR and tourists' emotions

The positive role of VR in the try-before-you-buy experience has been illustrated in the tourism literature (Jiang et al., 2023). VR has been characterised as an emotional medium that enhances the intensity of the emotions elicited (Mancuso et al., 2023). Stimulating emotional reactions to visual stimuli, is a key objective in numerous immersive interactive applications (Flavián et al., 2021). Findings (see Table 1) suggest that VR evokes more positive emotional responses than traditional media (Cheng & Huang, 2022; Flavián et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2020; Yung et al., 2021a; Yung et al., 2021b). VR characteristics such as ease of use, usefulness, ubiquity, telepresence, vividness, interactivity, perceived knowledge, hypothetical distance influence pleasure and arousal (Cheng & Huang, 2022; Kang, 2020; Li & Chen, 2019; Tussyadiah et al., 2018; Yung et al., 2021a). Emotions after using VR have been found to positively influence engagement, attachment, time distortion, and focused attention to VR as well as impulsive desire and visit intentions (Flavián et al., 2021; Kang, 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Liu & Huang, 2023; Skard et al., 2021; Yung et al., 2021b).

Table 1. Selected literature related to tourists' emotions while using virtual reality.

Authors	Method	Main findings	Previous research in relation to our study
Cheng and Huang (2022)	Survey	Interactivity, telepresence, vividness, ubiquity and background music–environment congruency of virtual tourism atmospheres influence pleasure, arousal and dominance. These emotions influence WOM and continuous usage intention.	We investigate the role of travel inspiration.
Flavián et al. (2021)	Experiment	VR stimulate more positive emotional reactions (aggregate scale of pleasure and arousal) and higher psychological and behavioural engagement than computers and mobile phones.	No investigation of travel inspiration.
Kang (2020)	Experiment	VR increases perceived knowledge, telepresence, hypothetical distance which consequently influence affect and impulsive desire.	No investigation of travel inspiration.
Kim et al. (2020)	Survey	Authentic VR experience increases affective (emotional involvement, enjoyment, flow state) and cognitive response and consequently users' VR attachment and intention to visit the destination.	No investigation of travel inspiration.
Li and Chen (2019)	Survey	Enjoyment of VR mediates the relationships between ease of use and usefulness and visit intention. Higher enjoyment of VR actually leads to lower visit intention if the expected enjoyment of a destination is low.	No investigation of travel inspiration. The emotions are measured only from the perspective of perceived enjoyment (pleasure).
Liu and Huang (2023)	Experiment	VR-stimulated Arousal influences enjoyment, time distortion, and focused attention. User satisfaction is influenced by enjoyment and control.	No investigation of travel inspiration. No investigation of pleasure.
Skard et al. (2021)	Experiment	VR exposure increases mental imagery and happiness, which in turn increase travel intention and purchasing decision. VR effects were moderated by prior experience with that destination.	No investigation of travel inspiration. A general measure of happiness is used.
Tussyadiah et al. (2018)	Experiment	Sense of presence in VR experiences increases enjoyment and preference towards the destination.	No investigation of travel inspiration. The emotions are measured only as perceived enjoyment.
Yung et al. (2021a)	Conceptual	VR (vs traditional media) leads to higher presence, positive emotional responses, visiting intentions.	No investigation of travel inspiration.
Yung et al. (2021b)	Experiment	VR evokes more positive emotional responses than traditional media.	No investigation of travel inspiration.

3. Conceptual model and research hypotheses

3.1. Overview of the conceptual model

The present conceptual model is based on the transmission model of inspiration (Thrash et al., 2014; Thrash & Elliot, 2003) and the theoretical model of emotional states of pleasure and arousal (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Although research related to emotions offers the opportunity to investigate specific types of positive emotions, the pleasure and arousal states are a parsimonious approach to understanding consumer emotions in numerous environments, particularly useful in marketing and service contexts (Yani-de-Soriano & Foxall, 2006).

The transmission model of inspiration explains that when individuals gain an awareness of new or better possibilities, they feel compelled to bring these new ideas or vision into fruition (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). According to Thrash and Elliot (2004), there are two main states of inspiration: the activation/psychological and the intention/behavioural state. Böttger et al. (2017) calls the activation state as inspiration-by (psychological), whereas the second one is the inspiration-to (behavioural), a terminology adopted in this paper. The activation state of inspiration (inspiration-by) is characterised by epistemic transcendence and evocation (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Transcendence happens when individuals gain an awareness of new or better possibilities (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Evocation signifies that individuals do not attribute to themselves responsibility for becoming inspired, at least not full or direct responsibility (Thrash et al., 2014). Transcendence and evocation are complementary in the sense that one cannot awaken oneself to better possibilities; one must be awoken (Thrash & Elliot, 2003).

Inspiration motivates the transmission of destination qualities, as these have been experienced while using the destinations' VR activity. The level of arousal and pleasure experienced by individuals, determine their approach-avoidance responses towards an object/experience (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). We argue that users' emotions (pleasure and arousal) facilitate the transmission from inspiration-by state to the inspiration-to state. Finally, inspiration-to mediates the well-established positive effect of pleasure and arousal on visiting intentions. The conceptual model under investigation is depicted in Figure 1.

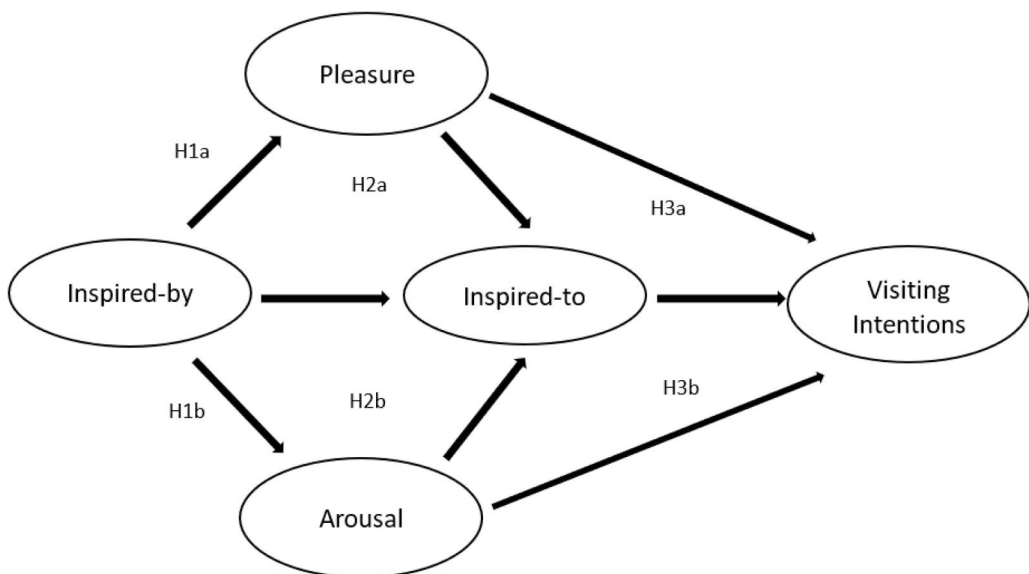


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

3.2. Development of hypotheses

In accordance with the proposed conceptual model (Figure 1), the current body of knowledge in psychology offers a coherent theoretical platform assuming that inspiration and positive affect are strongly correlated (Thrash et al., 2010; Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Elliot and Thrash (2010) argued that inspiration promotes diverse forms of well-being, including hedonic well-being (e.g. activated positive affect). Similarly, customer inspiration triggers a positive affect because sudden realisation of new ideas results in surprise and/or elevation, leading to a sensation of delight (Böttger et al., 2017). However, there is a paucity of studies investigating the relationship between inspiration and consumer emotions in the content of reality-enhancing technologies and tourism. Thanks to the work of Hinsch et al. (2020), it can be assumed that users of augmented reality experience higher inspired-by, which influences nostalgia and the wow effect (awe). Grounded on the discussions above, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: Inspiration-by has a positive relationship with pleasure and arousal

As discussed earlier, inspiration has two states (inspiration-by and inspiration-to), which according to Böttger et al. (2017) are causally linked. Previous studies demonstrated the positive relationship between the two stages of inspiration (Hinsch et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2022; Wei et al., 2023; Xue et al., 2022). However, there isn't enough research on possible mediators between the two states of inspiration, beyond the contribution of Hinsch et al. (2020), who proposed nostalgia in this direction. In our study, we argue that emotional states (pleasure and arousal), can be mediators between the two states of inspiration.

Specifically, inspiration-to is the urge or the motivation to actualise the new idea, which involves an approach motivation (Thrash et al., 2014). According to this research, the transmission from inspiration-by to inspiration-to comes more naturally among approach-oriented individuals. Individuals who experience pleasure and arousal thanks to new inspiring ideas about a destination, may demonstrate an approach behaviour towards this destination that generates more inspiration-to. Pleasure and desire are emotions which have a strong motivational character (Gnoth, 1997; Goossens, 2000). Especially in leisure and tourism services, the sensation about the anticipated hedonistic experience (how one would feel), is a very important part of consumer's choices (Maclnnis & Price, 1987). Individuals embracing emotions facilitated by VR activities, experience a strong feeling for how they would feel should they be in the destination. Thus, the stronger the emotions experienced during a VR, the higher the impulse desire to experience further this destination (Kang, 2020). Goossens (2000) also showed that an 'affective choice mode' occurs in the pleasure travel destination choice process, because something of interest has been experienced and a desire for change and actualisation of this idea has emerged. Hence, approach motivation is activated, facilitating the transmission of inspiration-by towards an inspiration-to. Pleasure and arousal increase individuals' urge to actualise the ideas gained using VR by experiencing this destination more (inspiration-to). So, we postulate:

H2: Inspiration-by has a positive effect on inspiration-to, through pleasure (a) and arousal (b).

Prior studies reveal that tourists' emotions (e.g. pleasure), are associated with several positive outcomes i.e. engagement and intentions to visit or recommend (Miniero et al., 2014). It has been well discussed that the level of arousal and pleasure experienced by individuals will determine their approach-avoidance responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Previous studies in the tourism context also showed that emotions are particularly important for decision making (Goossens, 2000). Indeed, emotions reduce the time between the consideration and the actual behaviour (Maclnnis & Price, 1987). In the VR context, it has been demonstrated that affective responses generated by VR activities, lead to visit intention (Kim et al., 2020). In a similar vein, predicted happiness and perceived enjoyment lead to travel intention (Li & Chen, 2019; Skard et al., 2021). We postulate that the higher their emotional responses after experiencing a VR-facilitated mental

imagery, the higher the intention to visit this destination (considering the motivational urge formulated in the inspiration-to state). From a behavioural perspective, inspiration results in an enduring motivational impact to bring the new idea into reality (Thrash et al., 2010; Thrash & Elliot, 2003). In the marketing context, inspiration has several possible behavioural consequences, such as impulsive purchases and exploration of the offering (Böttger et al., 2017). The following hypothesis is then formulated:

H3: Pleasure (a) and arousal (b) have a positive effect on visiting intentions directly and indirectly through inspiration-to.

4. Methodology

An online survey was used, employing a structured questionnaire and a non-probabilistic convenience sample. These methodological choices are aligned with the primary goal of this study to explore the proposed theoretical effects (Hulland et al., 2018). The methodological approach is in line also with the argument of Thrash et al. (2014, p. 505) 'it is impossible to manipulate inspiration experimentally, because inspiration is a response and not a stimulus'. For the questionnaire we adopted consumer inspiration scales from Böttger et al. (2017). Pleasure and arousal were measured by adopting the scale of Russell (1980). Visit intention was also assessed against the relevant scale previously used by Rasoolimanesh et al.

4.1. Data collection

The online platform of Prolific Academic (www.prolific.ac) was used to recruit participants. Prolific offers several strengths for research; for instance, it recruits participants only for academic research, it has high quality standards for recruitment and it is reasonably priced (Peer et al., 2017). Participants were located in the United Kingdom and had visited a destination using a 360° VR activity within the last 3 months. The decision to focus only on 360° VR videos stems from the consideration that mainly this type of technology is more available and easier to use not only from content creators but also for the final users (Yung & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019). The data collection process was stopped in Prolific when 290 completed surveys were reached. Participants who failed attention checks or filled out the survey too quickly were removed from the sample. A total of 270 questionnaires were kept for data analysis. The sample was deemed adequate, following Hair et al.'s (2017) recommendations. Similarly, the sample is adequate based on the results of G*Power. Following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2017) a parameter effect size of 0.15, 5% significance level, and power of 0.95 show that the minimum sample size for this study would be 129.

4.2. Study sample characteristics

In terms of gender 43.7% were male, 53.7% female and the rest non-binary or prefer to self-describe. In terms of age, the respondents' profile can be described as follows: 18.8% between 18 and 24 years old, 41.3% between 25 and 34 years old, 19.2% between 35 and 44 years old, 14% between 45 and 54 years old, 6.3% between 55 and 64 years old, and the rest was 65 years old or above. The majority of the respondents (66.8%) work full-time, whilst 14.4% are part-timers and 8.9% are students.

4.3. Analysis plan

Partial least squares (PLS) was used, given that it is most appropriate when multivariate normality cannot be assumed, the sample is small and the conceptual model is complex (Hair et al., 2017). The use of PLS-SEM has been increased in tourism research (Assiouras et al., 2023; Kim & Hall, 2019).

5. Results

5.1. Measurement model

Harman's single-factor test was used to verify if common method bias exists, revealing that the unique unrotated factor explained 38.67% of the data variance. This is below the threshold of 50%, confirming that common method bias is not critical issue for our study (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Moreover, all inner model VIF values were below 3.3 which is an indication that the model isn't influenced by common method bias (Kock, 2015).

The assessment of composite reliability was conducted by evaluating the internal consistency, whereas the convergent validity by measuring the average variance extracted (AVE) (Assiouras et al., 2023; Hair et al., 2017). The discriminant validity was evaluated with Fornell–Larcker criterion, cross-loadings, and particularly the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations. Composite reliability of arousal scale was 0.54 which is below the recommended cut-off value of .70 (Hair et al., 2017). By investigating further, the measurement items of arousal, we identified that measures of Quiet-Anxious and Relaxed-Nervous had negative loadings of -0.265 and -0.435 , respectively. Similar low reliability has been observed in previous studies leading researchers to eliminate these items (Oliver et al., 1997). After dropping the two measures from the arousal scale, internal consistency was established (see Table 2). AVE ranged from .531 to .811, exceeding the threshold of .50, revealing adequate convergent validity.

Besides, the investigation of the cross-loadings demonstrates that none exceed the outer loadings of indicators. All constructs measure unique concepts given that the square roots of the AVEs for the reflective constructs were all higher than the correlations of these constructs with other latent variables in the path model (see Table 3). The HTMT of the correlations were also assessed. All HTMT values were lower than the threshold of 0.90 (Hair et al., 2017). Moreover, discriminant validity has also been established from HTMT analysis (see Table 4). The measurement model assessment shows satisfactory reliability and validity, allowing for the evaluation of the structural model hereinafter.

Table 2. Measurement model evaluation.

Variables	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Pleasure	Angry – Content	0.759	0.913	0.933	0.699
	Unhappy – Happy	0.861			
	Displeased – Pleased	0.878			
	Sad – Joyful	0.832			
	Disappointed – Delighted	0.868			
Arousal	Bored – Entertained	0.813	0.704	0.818	0.531
	Depressed – Cheerful	0.689			
	Calm – Enthusiastic	0.652			
	Passive – Active	0.763			
Inspired-by	Indifferent – Surprised	0.801	0.879	0.911	0.674
	My imagination was stimulated.	0.836			
	I was intrigued by a new idea.	0.822			
	I unexpectedly and spontaneously got new ideas.	0.723			
	My horizon was broadened.	0.883			
Inspired-to	I discovered something new.	0.833	0.942	0.955	0.699
	I was inspired to experience this destination more.	0.901			
	I felt a desire to experience this destination more.	0.905			
	My interest in experiencing this destination was increased.	0.887			
	I was motivated to experience this destination more.	0.911			
Visit intention	I felt an urge to experience this destination more.	0.897	0.871	0.913	0.779
	I intend to travel to this destination in the near future.	0.914			
	I want to visit this destination in the near future.	0.922			
	It is likely to travel to this destination in the near future.	0.806			

Table 3. Discriminant validity assessment – the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion.

	Arousal	Inspired- by	Inspired- to	Pleasure	Visit intention
Arousal	0.729				
Inspired-by	0.557	0.821			
Inspired-to	0.492	0.692	0.900		
Pleasure	0.723	0.572	0.597	0.836	
Visit intention	0.219	0.350	0.446	0.257	0.882

Table 4. Discriminant validity assessment – Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT).

	Arousal	Inspired-by	Inspired-to	Pleasure	Visit intention
Arousal					
Inspired-by	0.689 [0.577; 0.787]				
Inspired-to	0.595 [0.463; 0.707]	0.747 [0.652; 0.819]			
Pleasure	0.887 [0.820; 0.945]	0.617 [0.501; 0.721]	0.639 [0.537; 0.729]		
Visit intention	0.257 [0.139; 0.387]	0.365 [0.210; 0.501]	0.439 [0.299; 0.560]	0.260 [0.148; 0.376]	

5.2. Structural model

All VIF values were significantly below 5, demonstrating low risk of collinearity between the predictor constructs (Hair et al., 2017). In addition, we measured the R^2 values of pleasure (0.325), arousal (0.308), visit intention (0.190) and inspired-to (0.534).

A bootstrap procedure of 10,000 resamples was employed (see Table 5), following the recommendation of Hair et al. (2017). Inspired-by has significant relationships with pleasure ($\beta = 0.578$) and arousal ($\beta = 0.562$). Thus, H1 is confirmed. To test the mediation hypotheses, we adopted the steps proposed in the PLS-SEM literature (Hair et al., 2017), investigating first the specific indirect effects in the model and then the direct effects (see Table 6). Regarding H2 we discovered that the specific indirect effect of inspired-by on inspired-to, through pleasure is significant ($\beta = 0.182$), since the 95% confidence interval does not include zero. The direct effect is also significant (see Table 6). However, the specific indirect effect of inspired-by on inspired-to, through arousal is not significant ($\beta = -0.018$). Thus, H2 is confirmed only for pleasure which is a complementary partial mediator of the relationship between inspired-by and inspired-to. Concerning H3, only the positive effect of pleasure on visiting intention through inspired-to has been empirically supported ($\beta = 0.117$). Arousal does not seem to have a significant relationship with inspired-to and visiting intention (Table 7);, consequently the specific indirect effect is not considered significant. Following the same process for the mediation analysis, inspiration-by fully mediates the relationship between

Table 5. Significance testing results of the total effects.

	Path Coefficient	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	Confidence Intervals ^a [2.5%; 97.5%]
Arousal ->InspTo	-0.034	0.071	0.467	0.641	[-0.178; 0.101]
Arousal-> VI	-0.003	0.089	0.036	0.971	[-0.181; 0.170]
InspBy ->Arousal	0.562	0.043	12.886	0.000	[0.463; 0.633]
InspBy ->InspTo	0.693	0.039	17.908	0.000	[0.603; 0.758]
InspBy ->Pleasure	0.578	0.047	12.055	0.000	[0.471; 0.659]
InspBy -> VI	0.310	0.046	6.654	0.000	[0.214; 0.393]
InspTo-> VI	0.456	0.063	7.218	0.000	[0.321; 0.568]
Pleasure->InspTo	0.323	0.068	4.662	0.000	[0.184; 0.451]
Pleasure ->VI	0.125	0.084	1.451	0.147	[-0.054; 0.283]

InspBy: Inspired-by; InspTo: Inspired-to; VI: Visit intentions.

Table 6. Mediation analyses.

	Direct effect		Specific indirect effects	
	Path Coefficient	Confidence Intervals ^a [2.5%; 97.5%]	Path Coefficients	Confidence intervals ^a [2.5%; 97.5%]
INSPB→INSPT	0.525	[0.415; 0.631]	INSPB→Pleasure→INSPT	0.182 [0.106;0.285]
Arousal→VI	0.012	[-0.146; 0.175]	INSPB→Arousal→INSPT	-0.018 [-0.100;0.058]
Pleasure→VI	-0.022	[-0.193; 0.139]	Arousal→INSPT→VI	-0.015 [-0.081; 0.048]
			Pleasure→INSPT→VI	0.144 [0.082; 0.224]

^arefers to the bootstrap confidence intervals for significance testing.; INSPB: Inspired-by; INSPT: Inspired-to; VI: Visit intentions.

Table 7. Significance testing results of the structural model path coefficients.

	Path coefficient	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	Confidence intervals ^a [2.5%; 97.5%]
Arousal ->InspTo	-0.034	0.071	0.467	0.641	[0.178; 0.101]
Arousal-> VI	0.012	0.082	0.144	0.886	[-0.146; 0.175]
InspBy ->Arousal	0.562	0.043	12.886	0.000	[0.463; 0.633]
InspBy ->InspTo	0.525	0.056	9.452	0.000	[0.415; 0.631]
InspBy ->Pleasure	0.578	0.047	12.055	0.000	[0.471; 0.659]
InspTo-> VI	0.456	0.063	7.218	0.000	[0.321; 0.568]
Pleasure->InspTo	0.323	0.068	4.662	0.000	[0.184; 0.451]
Pleasure -> VI	-0.022	0.086	0.252	0.801	[-0.193; 0.139]

Note: InspBy: Inspired-by; InspTo: Inspired-to; VI: Visit intentions.

pleasure and visiting intention. The specific indirect effect of pleasure on visiting intention, through inspiration-to is significant ($\beta = 0.144$), since the 95% confidence interval does not include zero, notwithstanding the non-significant direct effect of pleasure on visiting intentions (-0.022) $[-0.193; 0.139]$.

Finally, the Q^2 values for endogenous constructs are considerably above zero i.e. arousal (0.299), pleasure (0.317), visit intention (0.114) and inspired-to (0.473), demonstrating clear support for the model's predictive relevance.

6. Discussion

6.1. Conclusions

This research examines the role of pleasure and arousal as part of the mechanism that engenders VR-facilitated travel inspiration. VR raises new opportunities for niche marketing, sustainable tourism and economic growth (Subawa et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the role of travel inspiration has not received much attention in the tourism literature (Dai et al., 2022), especially in the context of pre-travelling VR experiences. Previous studies have investigated the positive effect of VR-stimulated affective responses on visit intentions (e.g. Kim et al., 2020; Liu & Huang, 2023; Skard et al., 2021), without taking the role of travel inspiration into consideration. This study empirically validates the positive role of VR-travel inspiration for travel intentions through the emotional state of pleasure, thereby addressing the calls for research that would shed more light on customer inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017), especially in the tourism context (Dai et al., 2022). It also offers particular insight in the possible interconnections between the notions of inspiration and emotion (Thrash et al., 2014).

6.2. Theoretical implications

The research broadens the extant knowledge in tourism management by testing the role of VR-facilitated travel inspiration on the intention to visit this destination. It supports the idea of travel inspiration as a fundamental construct in a field where VR not only instigates inspiration-by, but also

transforms inspiration into travelling intention. Pleasure acts as a complementary partial mediator in the relationship between inspired-by and inspired-to, and has a positive effect on visiting intention through inspired-to. Previous studies have investigated the positive role of VR-stimulated affective responses on satisfaction with VR and visit intentions (e.g. Kim et al., 2020; Liu & Huang, 2023; Skard et al., 2021), largely neglecting the possible role of travel inspiration. Our study demonstrates that pleasure is a VR-facilitated emotion that plays a significant role in the transmission of destination qualities (as experienced by potential travellers through VR technology) to such an extent that it also affects visit intention.

This paper demonstrates a strong positive relationship between inspiration-by and arousal. However, the arousal does not mediate the full episode of inspiration, nor the visiting intentions. Contrary to our research focusing on the pre-travelling phase, previous studies that also examined VR-instigated arousal have mainly focused on the outcomes related either to the behaviour during the use of the VR application, such as engagement, enjoyment, time distortion, and focused attention (Flavián et al., 2021; Liu & Huang, 2023), or to the behavioural intentions mainly related to the VR application per se, such as WOM and VR usage intentions (Cheng & Huang, 2022). Following this line of reasoning, the relevant non-significant findings of the study may be in essence interpreted as a logical assumption; in fact, when arousal is viewed as part of the travel inspiration mechanism, it does not exert any significant influence on it (i.e. arousal is not examined here as an emotion stemming from the VR-process and the use of the equipment).

Regarding the travel intentions and the role of arousal, existing literature demonstrates not only a positive but also a negative relationship between arousal and travel intentions. For instance, Lehto et al. (2008) pinpointed that arousal after hearing the news about crises may lead to lower travel intentions not only to the affected destination but also to similar destinations. Other studies demonstrated positive relationships with post-experience intentions, using thought measurement scales, including various items such as inspiration, excitement, enjoyment, interest (Güzel et al., 2020). The lack of a significant relationship between arousal and both inspiration-to and travel intentions, might not preclude the possibility of a positive and significant correlation in different tourism contexts, such as adventure tourism.

6.3. Managerial implications

This research highlights the practical significance of inspiration in influencing the intention to visit when individuals emotionally engage in VR experiences. Considering the ever-increasing importance of VR in destination marketing after the COVID-19 pandemic (Lu et al., 2022), new forms of travelling have emerged especially while tourists are at home and daydream their future travels. In light of the revolution in travel and tourism in the metaverse era (Buhalis et al., 2022; Buhalis et al., 2023), this study revealed the multifunctional role of hitherto known travel inspiration mechanisms in intentional behaviour towards a destination, stimulated by the power of emotions in the VR context.

In line with studies emphasising that metaverse will provide tools to stimulate travel inspiration (Buhalis et al., 2023; Özdemir Uçgun & Şahin, 2024; Yoon & Zou, 2024), our study focused on the use of VR, as a precious tool for tourism stakeholders i.e. DMOs, marketers, tourism firms, organisations, tourists and locals alike. VR-facilitated travel inspiration can be effectively used in destination pre-views, virtual tours, and immersive travel planning tools, particularly within segments like tech-savvy travellers and younger demographics seeking unique and personalised experiences. But the promise of a highly immersive metaverse is not highly available yet and there are many critics commenting that it will be delayed. Likewise, destinations can invest in applications of 360 videos which, according to our study, can generate inspiration, emotions and consequently travel intentions.

Considering the above and although 3D videos outperform 2D videos in terms of visit intention especially when they meet users' expectations (Lin et al., 2021; Wu & Lai, 2023), priorities should be different in high-immersion and low-immersion VR applications, with the first necessitating more textual information and the last more pictorial cues (Bigné et al., 2024). Simple VR applications

may actually provide a source of pleasure to older adults (Yu et al., 2024). Notwithstanding findings denoting the positive role of VR in the formulation of travel intentional behaviour, high-quality virtual visits at a destination (i.e. by using VR) can lead to lower physical visiting intentions, especially if the risk perception for the destination is high (Geng, 2023; Manchanda & Deb, 2022). Also considering that the potential for paid virtual tourism experiences is limited (Bilynets et al., 2023), destinations should use them with prudence.

6.4. Limitations and further research

While the present study has taken steps forward in this field, some limitations have yet to be addressed in future research efforts. Indicatively, the study employed a survey for data collection, but the results of our study should be coupled in the future with findings from experimental studies. Future research should investigate the interplay between travel inspiration and other factors influencing visiting intention, such as prior knowledge, experience, and attitude toward the destination. For instance, personality traits and the desire to travel to this destination can influence tourists' receptive mechanism to travel inspiration (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Another limitation of this paper is its focus on mainstream tourism, emphasising extended decision-making with a significant daydreaming stage centred on travel inspiration. However, unconventional tourism, such as same-day trips, tends to be shorter (Timothy et al., 2022) and involves more impulsive decision-making. Future studies should examine whether travel inspiration is relevant in these situations and how it unfolds.

Fully interactive synthetic VR is possibly more impactful than 360 VR (Yung et al., 2021b), in stimulating travel inspiration, a notion that requires further investigation. Future studies should also investigate the relationship between arousal and inspiration-to in different contexts. Likewise, a similar study in other types of travelling and forms of tourism such as adventure tourism and dark tourism may probably unveil a stronger relationship between arousal, inspiration-to and travel intentions. Besides, other behavioural intentions or behavioural outcomes should be investigated namely, reuse and sharing the VR application with third parties.

This study investigates VR-facilitated travel inspiration during the pre-purchase phase of the traveller's journey but does not explore VR's use during or after travel. Although this study attempts to interpret aspects of the emerging metaverse, it does not address how the metaverse will encapsulate postmodern travel inspiration. Future studies should address these gaps by examining how VR-facilitated travel inspiration during and after travel can stimulate the desire to return, sustain interest, or redirect attention to nearby, less-visited destinations. Additionally, future research should explore travel inspiration from a postmodernist perspective that blurs the lines between everyday life and tourist experiences (Lash & Urry, 1993). Understanding the role of travel inspiration in spontaneous one-day trips (Timothy et al., 2022) and sophisticated metaverse experiences that blend digital and physical elements is essential (Buhalis et al., 2023).

Disclosure statement

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