ONLINE GUIDED TOURS: TERMINOLOGY AND NEW WAYS OF CULTURAL HERITAGE INTERPRETATION BY TOURIST GUIDES

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Abstract: This paper proposes a definition for the tours that are provided through the Internet by tourist guides. We consider that the term "virtual tour" widely used up to now in tourism industry, does not actually correspond to a virtual experience and that the appropriate term to describe the majority of these different types of tours is the term "Online Guided Tour".

The new term suggests that for these tours, three are the essential elements:
- The internet as the means used to provide the tour (online);
- The tourist guide as the professional conducting the tour (guided);
- The tour as a prepared and structured narration by a tourist guide-interpreter of the cultural heritage (tour).

In the first part of the article, we went through the literature to investigate the different definitions given by scholars for the term "virtual experience" since a virtual tour is considered as a kind of virtual experience. In the second part of the article, we aimed at verifying practically what kind of tour is described under the term "virtual tour". For this purpose, we gathered data from four countries (Greece, Slovenia, Moldavia and Romania) building up a corpus consisting of websites. More specifically, we collected websites where the term "virtual tour" is used in order to describe the main type of product sold or offered to potential customers. We then proceeded to the treatment of the collected data setting up a typology of the different products that are described under the term "virtual tour" based on four criteria. Based on this typology, in the last part of the article, we explained why the term "virtual tour" is not properly used since it doesn't actually meet the requirements of a virtual experience. Therefore, our goal is to contribute to the creation of a new terminology by suggesting the term "Online Guided Tour" in order to explain more appropriately most of these types of tours conducted by a tourist guide through the internet.

Keywords: heritage interpretation, online guided tours, virtual experience, definition.

VIRTUAL REALITY AND COVID

Virtual reality is a technology that has been used in many sectors for a long time before the appearance of the COVID pandemic: real estate, gaming industry and journalism are just some of them. Virtual reality has been used also in the service of cultural tourism and education. With the aid of virtual reality, students and visitors can relive and experience the history with their senses and its benefits have been incontestably argued. Virtual reality has also much potentials in the tourism industry at all levels of travel planning.

Thus, planning and management, marketing, entertainment, education, accessibility and heritage preservation are the areas of tourism where virtual reality can have a great impact.[1]

Nevertheless, the year 2020 marked a radical change in the use of virtual reality. The COVID-19 crisis imposed physical restrictions to tourism. Due to the confinement, many museums and archaeological sites all around the world closed literally their doors in order to avoid the contamination.[2] Thus, tourism was the most affected sector. Reacting in this new situation and trying to find a way to stay in contact with their public, many cultural institutions and travel agencies increased their online presence and searched for alternative ways to maintain a link with their audience. Digitalization came as the answer to the demand for resilience in times of crisis. In the context of the digitalization, virtual reality became one branch of this process aiming at making easy the access to the original material. Many cultural institutions and travel agencies transformed their activities to digital in order to increase their online presence and to stay connected with their audience: digital museums, digital collections, and virtual tours are some of the new products that appeared in the new era.

The most popular product offered by cultural institutions during the COVID era was the so-called "virtual tour". According to Colosante, a virtual tour is a simulation of an ancient location, generally consisting of video sequences or collections of photos.[3] Daud defines virtual tour as a technology that allows the user to increase situational awareness and the viewing point.[4] So, even though, scholars have not achieved yet an agreement on a proper definition of a virtual tour,[5] the term implies on its own that it is a type of a virtual experience. Consequently, the definition of the virtual tour is tightly connected with the definition of the virtual experience.

Virtual experience

The definition of the virtual reality has been discussed by different scientific sectors since a long time ago. One of the oldest definitions had been already given back in the 80's by Lanier who defined the virtual reality as an interactive environment produced by a computer where somebody can immerse.[6] With this definition, Lanier had set the foundations of the virtual reality pointing out the importance of the immersion. The notion of immersion was elaborated many years later by Guttiérez et al.[7] who considered that the virtual experience can be defined in terms of physical immersion and psychological presence, making the difference between a "fully" and "semi" immersive system. The feeling of immersion is connected with the feeling of "presence" that has been considered as a component of the virtual reality since the concepts of "presence" and "telepresence" refer to the sense of being in an environment, generated by natural or mediated means.[8] From this point of view, the concept of presence describes a behavior where people act in a virtual environment the same way they would act if they had been in a real environment. Guttentag defined 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 on real-time simulation of one of the user's five senses".[9] With this term, navigation and interactivity are proposed as essential elements of virtual reality.

Therefore, there seems to be a discrepancy regarding a proper definition, since scholars seem to disagree on the necessary features that constitute a virtual experience. In this paper, we used a combination of the different definitions of the virtual experience, choosing to define as the necessary elements that constitute a virtual experience the following features:

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[1]   Guttentag 2010, 637-651.
[2]   UNESCO REPORT, May 2020.
[3]   Colosante 2011.
[4]   Daud 2016 cited by Abidin, Satiyatun 2020.
[5]   Argyriou, Economou, Bouki 2020.
[6]   Lanier 1980.
[7]   Guttiérez et al. 2008.
[8]   Steuer 1992.
[9]   Guttentag 2010.

1) The use of specific technological hardware

We consider as a necessary feature of the virtual reality the use of specific technological equipment like VR headsets, motion sense gloves, glasses, goggles that would stimulate the senses of the user. Thus, the use of hardware is not important on its own, but it is important as long as it has an impact on the perceived experience.

2) The sense of immersion

The sense of immersion refers to the feeling created to the user of the virtual experience that he is present in the mediated environment rather than in his physical environment. To achieve this result, the user must be isolated from his physical world and dive into a new reality, the virtual reality, which can be either an imaginary simulated environment or a remote physical world.

3) The interactivity

This term refers to the ability of the user to interact with the virtual environment, by choosing what to see or moving objects.

Since a virtual experience should comply with the requirements mentioned above, we assume that a virtual tour, as a kind of a virtual experience, should inevitably meet these requirements. Our hypothesis is that even though the virtual tour should be a kind of virtual experience, it is not. Actually, the term "virtual tour" is conventionally used to define a variety of tours that are offered through the Internet and which do not comply with the requirements of a virtual experience.

METHODOLOGY

Web as a Data Source

In order to verify what kind of tour is practically described with the term virtual tour we decided to form a corpus of websites in which a virtual tour is offered. The Web is being used as a source for data mainly by language scientists and technologists who are interested in collecting corpora to study linguistic and discourse phenomena. Nevertheless, the Web can be used as a data source for a wide range of research activities, like tourism and marketing, which use the web in order to promote and publish their services.

In this context of tourism industry, virtual tours are not only promoted but also conducted using as a means the Web. As a result, we chose to build up a corpus from the Web since the nature of the virtual tours (and their close relation with the Web) turns the Web into the main source of data.

Nevertheless, building a corpus from Web imposes several constraints. This is why many researchers, and especially those coming from the Linguistic Sciences, do not use the common search machines, but they use specific tools to retrieve in an efficient and reliable way their corpus (like Web Corp). Since our corpus is not merely linguistic, we chose to build up our corpus using a common search machine, and more specifically its advanced search. Our choice is dictated by the fact that, unlike linguistic studies, in our study:

- the search machine presents enough occurrences that can support our case;
- our main concern is to build up a corpus from websites, and not specific fragments of a text, thus the context for each occurrence, which can be useful and interesting in linguistic studies, does not present an interest in our case.

Corpus

To gather our data, we used as a search machine Google, which is the most popular and widely used search machine. We searched in the Google Search Machine the term "virtual tour" in English language, since the translation in other languages is not always literal, and thus several times it turns to be misleading (ie. in Greek the term "virtual" is often translated as "digital"). The specific steps followed to construct our corpus are the followings:

1) In the Search settings section, we chose the advanced search in order to be able to use specific filters for the extraction of the corpus;

2) In the section "Find pages with…" we chose "this exact word or phrase" and we filled it in with the terms "virtual tour" "virtual tours";
3) In the section "region" we chose the country of each one of the researchers: Greece, Slovenia, Moldavia, Romania;
4) In the section "language" we chose "any language";
5) In the section "terms appearing" we chose "anywhere in the webpage" since the purpose is to collect webpages where the term is mentioned.

We collected the results in the form of URL webpages. Our search aims at finding and collecting original webpages where the term "virtual tour" is used in order to describe a product which is either sold or offered to potential customers willing to use it. Thus, we discarded webpages that constitute secondary sources of reference for virtual tours (ie. news webpages, promotional pages).

Period of research

The period of research is imposed by a very crucial event that brought into the tourism actuality the virtual reality. Virtual reality had been already in use in the gaming industry and journalism before 2020. It was nevertheless only after the coronavirus breakout that virtual reality became globally a hot topic in tourism as well, since tourism was one of the sectors most affected by the pandemic. As a result, in many countries, the measures that were taken in order to minimize the effects of the pandemic crisis (like the closure of museums and archaeological sites) obliged travel agencies and cultural institutions to find a way to reach their public remotely. The answer to this demand came with the digitization and the virtual reality. It was in this context that a prolification of the so-called "virtual tours" in tourism raised the issue of their scientific definition.

Thus, we chose as a period of research the last two years, starting conventionally from 01/01/2020 up until 31/12/2021. Taking into account that in every country the coronavirus evolved in a different way, we decided to start our research some months before the appearance of the pandemic and end it two years later. Considering that under the pressure of the confinement in many countries, the production of virtual tours augmented, the period of this two-year research can be considered as a condensed regarding the research results.

Criteria of Typology

Our data collected was categorized into a typology of the different types of virtual tours based on the criteria mentioned below:
   a) The nature of the projection of the tour in **live** or **recorded** (L=Live/R=Recorded);
      The tour can be either streamed live or it can be recorded.
   b) The presence of the person conducting the tour (if there is one) **on site** or **off site.**
      This criterion describes whether the person conducting the tour is physically present on the site he is guiding, or he is physically present in another place and he is guiding the site through the use of appropriate material. In the first case the tour is described as "on site" in the second case as "off-site";
   c) The projection of the image either in **2Dimensions** or in **3Dimensions** (2D/3D).
      The site can be presented either through a 2D technology allowing the viewer to watch images on a screen, or via 3D technology allowing the viewer to navigate into a 3D world with the help of a 3D helmet or the help of a joystick that would allow him to explore the site in three dimensions;
   d) The presence of a professional **tourist guide** or not (TG=With tourist guide/SG=Self-guided). Some of the tours described under the term "virtual" are guided by a professional licensed tourist guide who uses different types of technology in order to guide in a specific site, museum or area, while other tours are described as "self-guided" since there is no presence of tourist guide, but the user uses on his own technology in order to visit digitally a site, a museum or an area.

RESULTS-DATA

The analysis of the data showed that during the period of research, 103 websites were found in all four countries that contained the term "virtual tour". The country with the biggest number of appearances is Slovenia with 49 websites, then Greece with 28 websites, Romania with 16 websites and last Moldavia with 10 websites.

Based on our data, the term "virtual tour" is widely used in order to describe different types of tours. Based on the chosen criteria, we ended up with 4 basic types of tours that are defined as virtual tours:

1) Live- off site-2D-Tourist guided tours
This category refers to the type of tours that are conducted most of the time by a professional tourist guide (sometimes by a journalist or a lecturer) from an indoor space (usually an office) using a specific platform to come in contact live with the attendees (like Zoom). In this case, the tourist guide prepares the material (usually 2D images and videos) and shares it on the platform accompanied by a narration that has the form of a lecture. At the end of the tour, attendees can ask questions to the presenter.
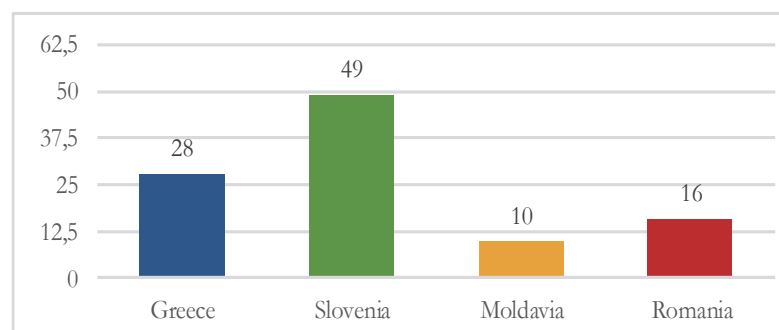
Graphic 1. Websites with appearances of the term "virtual tour".

2) Live-on site-2D-Tourist guided tours
This category refers to tours that are conducted by a professional tourist guide who is located on the site he guides and live streams 2D images using the appropriate technology (gimbal, camera, microphone) and a platform to come in contact with the attendees. Live streamed tour has the characteristics of every live streaming: real person (guide, traveler), real time, real place and the opportunity of two-way communication and reaction, since the attendees can occasionally interrupt the guide to ask questions or to ask him to point out in a specific location or site.

3) Recorded-3D-self guided tours
This category refers to tours that restitute the site through a collection of 3D pictures that allow to the viewer to navigate into the guided site recorded either using a joystick or even a VR headset. The site is brought to life via a collection of 360º rotating images that have been stitched together in order to form a 360º representation of a specific location (building, city, archaeological site, museum…) without the presence of any professional tourist guide that would comment on what the viewer is watching.

*4) Live-On site-3D-tourist guided tours*

This category refers to live streaming tours via a 3D camera that allows the viewer to immerse in a virtual world. In this case, the tourist guide uses specific equipment, a 3D camera that live streams, and a specific platform to get in contact with his audience, while the attendees are using 3D helmets in order to immerse into the real but remote world and get a virtual experience. It is the only case that the term "virtual tour" describes an experience that is close to a virtual experience.

Our data analysis showed that practically, in the 4 countries we researched, the term **virtual tour** is mainly used to describe **Recorded-3D-Self Guided Tours.** Actually, 87% of the occurrences of the term "virtual tour" were used in order to describe a recorded self-guided and 360 tour. Consequently, our research showed that the term "virtual tour" referred practically to a collection of 360º rotating images that have

been stitched together in order to form a 360º representation of a specific location. In this case, the term "virtual tour" is used as identical to the term "360º tour" giving emphasis to the 360º representation of the location.

The second most popular type of virtual tour was the Live Streamed-On site-2D tour conducted by a tourist guide (11%) and only 1% of the Live-Off Site-2D tours were guided by tourist guides.

Nevertheless, our data showed that in all 4 countries, out of 103 occurrences of the term virtual tour in total, only 1 is close to the definition of a virtual experience, and this tour is the Live-On Site-3D-Tourist Guided tour.

■ Type1-Live-Off site-2D-TG
■ Type2-Live Streamed-On site-2D-TG
■ Type3- Recorded-3D-SG
■ Type4- Live-On site-3D-TG
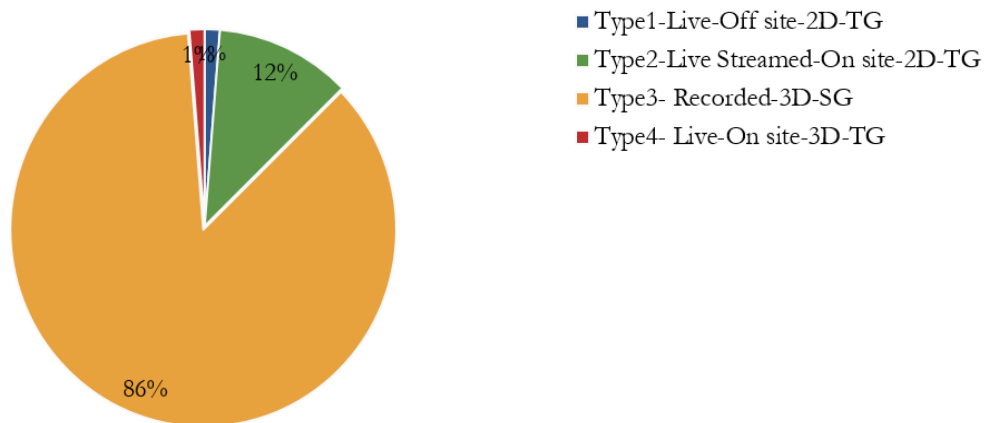
Graphic 2

PROPOSITION OF NEW TERMS AND THE TERM ONLINE GUIDED TOUR

Our data proves that these different types of tours described under the term virtual tour are not actually virtual experiences since they do not correspond to what is a virtual experience and they don't fulfil the requirements of a virtual experience. In other words, the characteristics of a virtual tour, such as it is used in our corpus, do not comply with the definition of a virtual experience.

The first type of tour does not meet any of the requirements of the virtual experience (there is no use of specific technological virtual hardware, no sense of immersion or interactivity). In the second type of tours, there is the use of specific technological hardware (gimbal, microphone), which nevertheless is not VR hardware, and there is a low sense of immersion and interactivity, since the user can interrupt the tourist guide, ask questions or even ask him to point out at a specific direction. In the third type of tour, there is the use of specific technological equipment, a sense of immersion and interactivity, but there isn't any interpretation of cultural heritage since there is no professional tourist guide that would interpret the cultural heritage.

Consequently, we propose a different term for each one of these tours. More precisely, we suggest:
- the term **Online Seminars** for the Live-off site-2D-Tourist Guided tours: this type of tour simulates mostly to what we call up to now Webinar (seminar through the website) but it is conducted by a tourist guide who is online and off-site and interprets the heritage with the help of prepared material (photos, videos);
- The term **Live Streamed Guided Tours** for the Live-On Site-2D-Tourist Guided tours: the tourist guide is online and on-site, and using the technology of live streaming events, is presenting in the real place and real-time (site, attraction, destination) and interprets the heritage of the destination;
- The term **360º tours** for the Recorded-3D-Self Guided Tours;
- The term **Virtual tour** for the Live-On site-3D-Tourist Guided Tours.

Based on all that, we propose the more general term **"Online Guided Tours"** which is the most adequate to describe all these different types of tours provided by tourist guides through the Internet. For these tours, three are the main elements:

- The internet as the means used to provide the tour (online);
- The tourist guide as the professional conducting the tour (guided);
- The tour as a prepared and structured narration by a tourist guide-interpreter of the cultural heritage (tour).

CONCLUSION

This article aims to investigate how the term "virtual tour" was used practically in the internet in the post COVID era. For this reason, we built up a corpus of websites of four different countries where the term virtual term is mentioned and we tried to investigate the specific features of the tours described under this term. We ended up into four different categories of digital experiences described with the term virtual tour but none of these corresponded to a real virtual experience.

This is the reason why instead of using the term "virtual tour" for all these different types of tour, we suggest the use of a more appropriate term, that could incorporate all the different components of these different types of virtual tours. We suggested the term "Online Guided Tour" for every type of tour using the internet as a medium, a professional tourist guide conducting the tour and interpreting the cultural heritage and a structured narration on which the tour would be based. As this paper demonstrated, the practical use of virtual reality has many applications and uses in the tourism sector, thus the research and the use of correct terminology are both significant and useful.

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