



ENHANCING OMAN'S TOURISM LANDSCAPE: THE POTENTIAL OF VIRTUAL TOURISM FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH

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Abstract

Virtual tourism, enabled by digital technologies, has become a major breakthrough that provides immersive travel experiences without the need for actual tourism. This research paper explores the phenomenon of virtual tourism within the context of Sultanate of Oman, investigating its implementation, economic advantages and future prospects. By leveraging virtual platforms, Oman aims to enhance its tourism landscape, attract visitors and contribute to economic diversification. In this paper, the phenomenon of virtual tourism within the context of Oman is investigated. It examines the economic benefits of virtual tourism for Oman, including revenue generation, employment opportunities and sectoral growth. It investigates the country's potential to establish itself as a leading destination in the global tourism market through virtual tourism initiatives. Government policies, private sector investments and collaborative partnerships play crucial roles in driving the adoption and success of virtual tourism in Oman.

Sultanate of Oman's rich cultural heritage and natural landscapes make it an ideal candidate for promotion of virtual tourism. By showcasing its attractions through virtual platforms, Oman can reach a wider tourists and compete effectively. Virtual tourism also serves as a valuable marketing tool, inspiring travelers to visit Oman in Person. Despite challenges such as technological infrastructure and cultural preservations, Oman's virtual tourism sector shows promising growth potential. Technological advancements, coupled with increasing internet accessibility, are expected to drive the popularity of virtual tourism in the country.

To sum up, Virtual tourism offers new opportunities for Oman to diversify its tourism revenue streams, promote cultural heritage and stimulate economic growth. By embracing virtual tourism alongside traditional methods, Sultanate of Oman can position itself as a leading destination for immersive travel experiences, meeting the changing needs of tourists from throughout the world.

Keywords: *Economy, Oman, Virtual tourism.*

Introduction

One of the biggest innovations brought about by the advent of digital technologies is virtual tourism. The use of ever developing technology in virtual tourism allows for the artificial enhancement and creation of an immersive virtual travel experience. Virtual tourism helps to increase tourist flows. It lowers a barrier to travel for potential tourists. Oman is famous for its enormous dunes, multicolored sands, Bedouin and Camels. There

are old castles and beautiful beaches. The phenomenon of virtual tourism within the context of Oman is investigated Implementation within the country's tourism landscape and to explore and analyze the economic advantages that virtual tourism offers to Oman, Examining its potential impact on the country's economy, including revenue generation, employment opportunities and sectoral growth. Evaluate the future potential and opportunities for virtual tourism in Oman, considering factors such as technological advancements evolving consumer preferences and emerging market trends, to determine its long term viability and sustainability within the country's tourism sector.

Oman, the ancient sultanate of the Middle East is one of the important tourist attraction around the world. The Goal of Oman Tourism strategy is to be a top of mind destination for vacations, discovery and meetings so as to contribute to economic diversification. Virtual Tourism helps to experience essential background of tourism sites. The people at home can enjoy a realistic and immersive virtual tourism experience using an online app. To Market these attractions Government of Oman has implemented various virtual tourism projects. In the year 2018, Ministry of tourism made a strategic partnership with Omantel to support tourists to enjoy their visit to Sultanate of Oman so they have provided big data based application that will offer a complete travel experience, including WiFi in various popular forts in Oman.(Oman Observer, 2018)

Virtual Tourism was the only access to the people during COVID -19 pandemic as the people were recommended to stay at home and reduced unnecessary trips. Virtual tourism industry showed a promising future even after the pandemic is over, around 90% of the people showed their willingness to use virtual tourism. 56% of the respondents want to use virtual tourism so that they can able to save time and money where they cannot go because of various constraints like time, finance, distance etc. 52% of the respondents wanted to use virtual tourism for an experience of new technology and 15% of the respondents use virtual tourism for an entertainment purpose (Lu, Junyu & Xu, Zixuan, 2021).

Virtual reality tours of famous sites, museums and natural wonders, 360 degree travel videos and online courses or workshops that impart knowledge about regional cuisine or handicrafts are examples of virtual tourist experiences.

The role of government initiatives – Policy support, funding and grants, promotion and marketing. Private sector investments – Technology infrastructure, content creation and Platform development and partnership and collaborations for public and private partnerships, industry collaboration and international partnerships. Oman can position itself as a leading destination for virtual tourism, offering immersive and engaging experiences that showcase its rich cultural heritage and natural beauty.

Literature Review

According to Acosta, K.K. et al. (2022), perceived benefit factors like perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and sustainability have a positive impact on the viability of virtual tourism in the Philippines. Perceived challenges related to security and navigation, on the other hand, have a significant positive impact. These factors were assessed using a quantitative research design, and the hypotheses were tested using the PLS-SEM method.

In 2022, Muthurman, S., investigated the smart applications used at the tourist attraction and how they relate to Oman's sustainable tourism development. The 6As of tourism destinations—attractions, accessibility, amenities, available packages, activities, and ancillary services that will support a dynamic cocreation process to increase destination competitiveness—were used to gather data in order to understand the tourists' holistic insights regarding the fundamental elements of smartness. The smart application and the six a's will enhance the tourist experience. The research's goal is to comprehend what travelers anticipate from smart technology, which will improve their trip to Oman.

An empirical study was conducted by Zhao, Weiwei, and Huang, Yanling (2022) on the 360-degree virtual tourism of the Li River Scenic Spot in China. SEM was used to evaluate the hypotheses based on data gathered from 520 New Generation respondents using online and offline surveys. To investigate how virtual tourism affects actual tourism from the perspectives of perception, attitude, and behavioral intention, an integrated

model research including the dissemination of TAM, ACSI, and expectancy theory was presented. The applicability of these theories in the tourism sector is further expanded by the suggested model.

The establishment of virtual tourism and its influence on the growth of tourism as a digital economy business were identified by Voronkova, L.P. (2018). The article delineated three primary avenues of inquiry: the proliferation of worldwide booking and reservation networks, the advent of electronic marketing and administration, and the development of virtual tourism experiences. Of particular note was the examination of virtual reality technology, which finds application primarily in the promotion of tourism goods, guided tours, educational and recreational endeavors, and the advancement of social tourism. The digital transformation of tourism with the aim of creating a digital economy.

Xu, Zixuan, and Lu, Junyu (2021) Utilizing a mixed methods approach, with a sample of thirty for qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey of 1,288 people, the study examined the variables and limitations that affect public behaviors and the acceptability of using virtual tourism during the pandemic in China. It also looked at how virtual tourism can help the tourism industry recover during and after the pandemic. Writers have investigated the ways in which virtual tourism can aid in the tourism industry's recuperation both during and after the pandemic.

Luhar,H (2021) Identified how virtual tourism plays an important role in the economic upgradation with generating second sources of revenue for the country. Due to Pandemic tourism sector has been disrupted so the researcher is trying to find out how virtual tourism can reverse the negative impact and can help the economy towards upward directions by collecting a primary data from fifty respondents and secondary data from pertinence sources to understand about the awareness of virtual tourism and their usage.

In 2010, Guttentag, A.D., investigated the main applications of virtual reality in the travel industry, looked into the potential for using VR to offer alternatives to traditional travel experiences, and assessed the difficulties associated with VR's incorporation into the industry. VR may be very useful in six tourism-related domains: planning and administration, marketing, entertainment, education, accessibility, and heritage preservation. Virtual reality (VR) has the ability to produce virtual experiences that tourists would accept as a substitute for actual visits to threatened places, which contributes to its potential utility as a preservation tool. The willingness of tourists to accept such alternatives, however, will depend on their views on authenticity as well as their goals and limitations as travelers.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine the phenomenon of Virtual Tourism in Sultanate of Oman.
2. To explore the economic advantages of virtual Tourism for the country.
3. To determine the potential future developments of Virtual Tourism in Sultanate of Oman.

Virtual Tourism in Sultanate of Oman

Geographically speaking, Sultanate of Oman is the south of the Arabian Peninsula. the Sultanate is thought to be among the most varied nations. In the fall, it consists of a variety of green mountains, rich plains, and sandy deserts in the southern part of the nation. Large swaths of its valley and oasis are also covered. The governorates' varying climates are influenced by this geographic diversity. Furthermore, the Sultanate's political and economic stability boosts its industries and draws in both domestic and foreign investment, all of which boost the economy of the region.

Oman is an Arab Country. Arabic speaking is widespread across the nation. Since English is the second language of Oman, visitors won't have any trouble communicating because signboards in both Arabic and English are written there. In the year 2011 Oman was divided into 11 governorates. The vast, contemporary city of Muscat is known for its beaches, mountains, and vivid beauty. Salalah is a stunning city full of greenery and Lush Mountains that come to life during the monsoon season. It is well-known for its Arabian Peninsula and distinct temperature, as well as its rich history and beaches. Forts and historical landmarks abound in Nizwa. Wadis and souks (Arab markets) are found in Ibri. Musandam, surrounded by breathtaking high mountains

Virtual tourism provides an opportunity for individuals around the world to explore Oman's Cultural heritage, natural landscapes and attractions from the comfort of their homes. This increased access and awareness can attract potential visitors who may not have considered Oman as a travel destination before. It serves as a powerful marketing tool for Oman's tourism industry. By showcasing the country's unique offerings through virtual platforms, Oman can effectively compete with other destinations in the global tourism market. Virtual tourism can capture the attention of travelers and inspire them to visit Oman in person. Virtual tourism emerged as a valuable strategy for destinations to continue engaging with travelers during periods of travel restrictions and uncertainty. Integrating virtual tourism into Oman's tourism strategy enhances the tourism industry by providing alternative ways to attract and engage visitors, regardless of external disruptions. Virtual tourism encourages collaboration and partnerships between various stakeholders in Oman's tourism industry, including government agencies, tourism boards, tour operators and technology companies. Stakeholders may increase Oman's tourism options and competitiveness by pooling their resources and knowledge to develop and promote virtual experiences.

Various tourist places to visit in Oman are Jebel Al Akhdar, Green Mountain in English, Jebel Shams, Wadi Bani Khalid, The village of Balad Sayt, situated near wadi, a canyon.

Lots of Mosques, Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Royal Opera House Muscat, Mutrah Souq
Wadis stream valleys, Wadi darbat, Musandam, Bahla, Khasab, Wadi shab, Wahiba sands, Masirah Island, Misfat Al Abriyeen, Al Hoota caves etc.

Oman is ranked seventh in the world for tourism, according to US bases skift, a news and market research business for the travel industry. Based on BMI's estimate, there is an expected 7.4% growth in the average annual visitor influx over the forecast period of 2023 to 2027. BMI predicts that Oman's tourist industry will continue to grow steadily through 2027 and beyond. This is in line with Oman Vision 2040's directions and the country's economic diversification policy. (Muscat Daily, August 6, 2023)

Benefits of Virtual Tourism to the Economy of a Country

Virtual tourism can benefit the economy of a country in several ways such as generating the revenue, promoting local businesses, safeguarding of cultural heritage, increasing the tourist reach, job opportunities etc. revenue can be generated through advertisements, pay per view models, sponsorships etc. with the help of virtual tourism tourist pay for virtual tours and experience the destinations by contributing to the economy without physically visiting the tourist places. Through virtual tourism local business can able to advertise their products and can increase their sales. The Sultanate of Oman is globally renowned for its unique culture and rich heritages, its authentic Omani traditions. By preserving and promoting cultural heritages like historical forts, museums, archeological sites etc can attract more tourist in turn increase tourism revenue. The development and maintenance of virtual tourism platforms require several abilities like programming, content creation and marketing. Therefore virtual tourism initiatives can create employment opportunities in these sectors, contributing to economic growth and development.

Virtual tours is constantly growing. Virtual tourism can be rewarding and act as a means to ease the adverse consequences of tourism. With the help of virtual tourism, tourism industry in sultanate of Oman can be transformed into a people oriented digital economy.

Virtual tourism has the potential to diversify revenue streams, promote cultural heritage, create employment opportunities and attract tourist all of which can contribute to the economic growth and development of a country. Tourism industry contributes significantly to GDP and generate employment in the tourism sector.

The goal of Oman's 2040 economic vision is to boost tourism-related income. In 2021, the tourist sector's share of the GDP was 2.4%; by 2030, the country hopes to raise that percentage to 5%, and by 2040, to 10%. By 2040, the target number of visitors is expected to reach 11.7 million with \$51 billion in investments. By 2040, this investment would bring in over 9 billion Omani rials (\$22.5 billion) annually from tourism. (October 2022: Oman Tourism Summary Report)

Oman tourism industry can boost its visibility, approachability to travelers worldwide, ultimately driving visitor's growth and economic development of the growth.

Prospects of Virtual Tourism in Sultanate of Oman

The Prospects of virtual tourism can depend on various factors like technological infrastructure, cultural heritage, economic conditions and societal preferences.

Technological advancements has enabled the creation of immersive virtual tourism experience, with the help of these technologies people can explore destinations in Oman from the comfort of their homes. Oman tourism authorities has recognized the potential of virtual tourism in promoting the country's attractions to a global audience they have collaborated with content creators, VR developers to produce high quality virtual experience showcasing Oman's cultural and natural wonders. Virtual tourism in Oman is predicted to become more and more popular as long as technology keeps developing and internet access becomes more widespread. The development of VR infrastructure and content will play an important role for the growth of Virtual tourism sector in the country.

Virtual tourism have real life applications especially to the old aged people and disabled. Virtual tourism help people to introduce them to the culture, traditions and heritage sites of other cities by providing various opportunities to learn about history, geography and culture of a country by eliminating various expenses on transportation, accommodation and food etc.

The development of technical capabilities for creating virtual tours, creating content etc. will determine the direction of virtual tourism in the future. Revenue can be generated through subscription fees, advertisements etc. Promotion of tourism can be done through virtual tourism through various attractions and landmarks encouraging potential tourist to plan future trips.

Conclusion

Oman can establish itself as a leading destination in the global tourism landscape by embracing virtual tourism as an adjunct to traditional tourist methods. Relevant and useful information should be made available to tourists using virtual tourism so they can make decisions more readily before or during their travels. There should be greater public promotion and advertising for virtual tourism. The utility, usability, security, viability, and other factors should be taken into account by tourism planners when preparing for the use of virtual tourism to assure its success. Virtual tourism holds promise as a supplement to traditional tourism, enhancing travelers' global travel experiences overall. According to *zawya.com*, the tourism industry generated \$4.9 billion in income in 2022. Due to its crucial function in supporting tourism, creating business models, and offering a range of opportunities for diverse individuals in the tourism industry, virtual tourism has fundamentally altered the roles that are played in the sector. Oman's virtual tourism sector is expanding, offering new opportunities to showcase the nation's natural beauty and cultural heritage to a worldwide audience. Virtual tourism offers new opportunities for development, interaction and sustainability.

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