FROM ATTENTION TO MEMORABILITY: THE COGNITIVE APPRAISAL IN MEMORABLE TOURIST EXPERIENCES OF VR TOURISM

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Virtual reality (VR) has revolutionized the tourist experience. VR tourism is blurring the boundaries between the actual and virtual environments, with the potential to boost tourists' immersion within memorable tourist experiences (MTEs). However, the dynamic nature of MTEs in VR tourism poses substantial obstacles for academics and industry to understand the underlying formation process and to optimize experiences design. In response, this thesis draws on Cognitive Appraisal Theory with using eye-tracking technique, to explore the interconnections between visual attention, cognitive appraisals and memorability by employing VR technique at an iconic natural attraction (i.e., Great Barrier Reef). In addition, MTEs will be tracked by adopting a longitudinal design, and the field experiment research design will be implemented to measure and compare the VR experience and in-situ experience. Therefore, this thesis makes a range of contributions. Theoretically, the study adds value to the body of literature in cognitive psychology by examining the role of cognitive appraisals in explaining the formation of MTEs. This research is also novel in exploring both the in-situ MTEs and long-term MTEs by designing a longitudinal study, ensuring a sound basis for causal inference. Methodologically, this study adds to the tourism literature through adopting novel physiological tools – eye-tracking technology – to analyse visual attention elicited in response to actual and VR tourism stimuli. This technology can complement self-report methods, ensuring more objective visual data can be collected. From a practical perspective, by comparing MTEs between the VR and in-situ context, this thesis will offer insights on the MTEs-based design not only for DMOs under the evolving COVID-19, but also for destinations and sites that have succumbed to over-tourism.

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