The Role and the Effect of Virtual Tourism on Culture and Economy

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Abstract
The increasing number of domestic and international tourists and the steady increase in the revenue generated by them have led to establishment of tourism as one the most important and dynamic activities in today's world. Numerous nations, with an increasing number, are realizing the fact that in order to improve their economic situation must become creative and come up with innovative solutions. Such innovation, which has gained importance and attracted attention of majority of the nations during the past two decades, is Virtual Tourism. Hence, due to the importance of the above facts majority of nations are attempting to promote their tourism by applying the necessary tools in the fields of computer and computer software to promote and propagate their assets in the best manner, across the globe.

Introduction

The word tourism was first brought up in The Sports Magazine in 1881. The word then applied to travelling with the leisurely intent of visiting the historical sites and the natural sceneries. Thus in the past, the word "tourism", more or less referred to leisure and enjoyment. The word "tourist" has gained its common definition since the 19th century. It was then that the French nobilities embarked on trips in order to complete their higher education and gain the necessary life experiences. Such youth were called "tourists" at the time. Later on, the term was also applied to the individuals travelling to France for spending time or site seeing. With the passage of time the definition of the term was modified further, referring to individuals travelling with the leisurely intent, only.

As time passed, the word found its place in the other languages across the world and the word "tourism" was coined. In 1925, the survey committee of The League of Nations defined the following individuals as tourists:

1- The people who travel for leisure or medical purposes,

2- The people who travel to the other countries for attending conventions, exhibitions, religious ceremonies, sports events and such,

3- The individuals on board ship that stay at a certain port for up to 24 hours.

Over all "tourism" does not have a unique satisfactory clear cut definition approved by everyone. However, Bole states that everyone agrees travelling and "tourism" should be defined in a way to include "the needs and incentives of tourism, behavior of the tourists in selecting the type of tourism and its corresponding limitations, travelling to a location far from one's home, the mutual relation between the tourist and the suppliers of his/her needed goods in the market, the effects of "tourism" and travelling on the tourist, the host nation, economy and the environment (Bole 22:2000).

The importance and the urgency of this research: This research attempts to discover the role and impact of "virtual tourism" on culture and economy. Furthermore, the research attempts to define in detail the implications of "virtual tourism".

This research attempts to clarify: whether the "virtual tourism" can serve as a tool for developing economy of a nation.

The research hypothesis: It seems that **"**virtual tourism" can serve as a contributing tool to economic and cultural development of nations.

Virtual Tourism

In a broad sense virtual tourism refers to the same aforementioned tourism activities; never the less, it has embedded in it adopting innovative means such as application of the field of IT, computer sciences and particularly the internet. Besides, most of the "virtual tourism" activities take place via electronic means.

At this point and based on the definitions presented regarding "virtual" and "tourism" it is easier to grasp what "virtual tourism" applies to. However, the majority of exports associate their definitions of "virtual tourism" with economic activities. Bow Halice, a renowned figure in the field, states that "virtual tourism is defined as a kind of tourism in which all the corresponding processes such as the valuable chains in the tourism industry, travelling, hosting and the food industry have been digitalized. At the tactical level "virtual tourism" also includes e-commerce, IT and the means of communication adopted for optimizing the efficiency and effectiveness of the organizations active in the field of tourism." (Bow Halice 238:2004)

Papoli Yazdi believes that e-tourism can be defined as such: "e-tourism is applying new technologies, especially those of the field of IT and communications, to the two dimensions of supply and demand of the tourists. It also includes the services needed by the tourists as well as marketing and laying out the platform of the road maps for destination of the tourists."(Papoli and Saghaee, 240-241:2006)

There are other definitions in this regard all of which have the objective of highlighting the facts that by adopting IT technologies, the services demanded by the tourists can be at their disposal at a higher quality, easier, and cheaper. The services provided by e-tourism are listed below:

1- Providing clear, precise and valid information,

2- Managing all the formalities and due processes of obtaining visas,

3- Providing booking for accommodations such as hotels, inns etc. as well as the proper reservations for places of interest for site seeing or leisure,

4- Car rental services,

5- Purchasing plane, bus or train tickets,

6- Purchasing variety of tours offered for site seeing,

7- Many other services that are created daily.(Fayazee, 80-81:2007)

At this point with regard to the information gained about e-tourism, we attempt to find answers to the following points:

1- What can be reached and visited by e-tourism,

2- Locations that have priority for an attractive visit,

3- The best time for visiting a certain place,

4- Conducting an efficient management for travelling and visiting certain places of interest.

It is evident that virtual reality has the potentialities to provide experiences beyond those that individuals can manage in person that is the ability to travel from the real world to the world of imagination and virtual reality. Technology creates virtual reality, virtual geography and virtual spaces which collectively and ultimately give birth to virtual tourism, engulfing the experience of virtual reality. (Halison V. Williams, 1995)

Archeological and Historical +Attractions of Tourism

  Archeological and historical sites are accounted as the most attractive locations among tourist, especially the foreign ones. Even the countries that do not obey the international laws and mandates and have such assets attract tourists. Historical and archeological sites have always bore great attraction for the tourists. One can witness the great attractiveness of variety of architecture, decoration and fashion of such places for the tourists. The tourist could be interested in a certain style of architecture, custom or clothing of the people. Such outlooks make archeological and historical sites as pillars of tourism.

Of such one can name religious and sacred sites, mosques, museums, cultural artifacts and etc.

Information Technology (IT)

  IT is a collection of concepts, thoughts and information tools that accompany individuals. Over all the information and communication

technology, which has a special stand among the exports in different scientific and technological fields, is known as ICT. In fact, humans intend to create a great leap in various scientific fields, using this innovative technology (www.fa.wikipedia.org).

Challenges of Virtual Tourism

It is an undeniable fact that many nations, especially those of Southern Asia have managed to increase their potentialities in the field of tourism and establish their position in this industry by the means of digital marketing and advertising, leading to proper introduction of their countries and their tourism assets. Hence, the trend in digital advertising and digital marketing has enabled them to attract a large number of tourists who can comfortably and confidently visit the tourist attractions via virtual reality and satisfy all their needs and desires relating to a certain location on the globe.

At present we are faced with the question that how we can introduce our countries potentialities as the leading nations in the field of tourism have managed to achieve and prepare a large number of the interested parties for travelling to our country. In order to achieve this goal we must pay attention to the following outline:

1- Training the expert and knowledgeable personnel in management and long term planning familiar with today's tourism,

2- Identifying and studying the problems in different fields that serve as the obstacles in expansion and advancement of tourism,

3- Drawing up the twenty year long term cultural, economic, social and …road map for reaching a steady long lasting tourism,

4- Taking advantage of the experiences of other countries successful in the field of tourism and localizing the experiences,

5- Identify and rank tourist attractions based on their cultural and historical values and aspects and placing them within the reach of the tourists,

6- Allocation of the proper budget to this industry in the country so as to all potentialities and obstacles can be identified.

By paying attention to the aforementioned and having in mind similar related aspects, one can propose that the tourist industry combined with IT can play a leading role in increasing the national income (NI) as well as improving production, thus leading to an increase in the Gross National Product (GNP).

Therefore, in this country, which is so gifted and rich in tourist attractions, it is the responsibility of the government and the legislative branch or the parliament to mobilize ICT for the expansion of tourism. Hence, by organizing tourism and providing tourists with the necessary assurances via ICT, one can easily encourage the interested tourists to travel to the Islamic Republic of Iran, a country which is filled with potentialities for such.

Status of the Virtual Tourism in nations

The careful examination of the growing trend of tourism in the globe, especially after 1970's makes it visible that majority of nations are spending their best efforts to exhibit the cultural, historical, sport and … potentialities of their nations by the means of high quality images and attractive films in the world of virtual spaces so as to encourage tourists to travel to their countries. Emersion of the virtual spaces in combination with the support of the new information and communication technology and the corresponding hardware have disturbed the conventional trends and created the chance of entering this world free of race prejudices, economic power or military might for all the humans. Wilson and Peterson constantly refer to virtual space as "virtual reality" in which humans can engage in free of psychological and physical limitations. (Wilson and Peterson, 2002, 450).

With the emergence of the internet, idea of McLuhan regarding the world as a village has converted from a metaphor to reality. According to Kornaglid (2001), internet has replaced all the other traditional conventional media in the virtual world and affected all of them. The reason is that in the world of internet the human experiences are more diversified and more numerous making it possible for humans to gain experiences of faraway lands (Datan 2005). Based on this outlook, we must look forward to replacement of traditional ways of tourism with the new ones. In the World Village, travelling and tourism, along with development of the other industries, are facing new challenges which have led to appearance of variety of innovations in online information and new ways of tourism which bears many advantages for the country and the "virtual tourism".

Following are some of these advantages.

Advantages of the Virtual Tourism for the Tourists

1- Travelling to the desired country without expenses,

2- The tourists being able to fulfill all their needs and desires in culture, costume, type of clothing, language, food, places of leisure, historical and archeological sites, religious locations and etc. of the place without wasting of time,

3- Increasing the common knowledge regarding a place by introducing different geographical, historical, medical and etc. aspects of the location,

4- Providing the opportunity for choosing the best and most desired means of transport for travelling to a certain location,

5- Gaining variety of experiences during travelling to the desired country,

6- Providing opportunity for visiting the attractions of the country according to the income level of the tourists.

Advantages of the Virtual Tourism for the Country Providing the Service

1- Using the tourists opinions in order to provide better services,

2- Attracting maximum number of tourists for visiting the countries attractions,

3- Encouraging tourists to visit their country,

4- The creation of economic boom and the increase in the import of foreign currency by the tourists interested in travelling to the country,

5- Selling of physical and virtual visiting tours to the interested parties,

6- Encouraging tourists to invest in variety of fields in the country,

7- Spending effort regarding updating standards of direct and indirect tourism,

8- Possibility of establishing communicative marketing with the customers.

Electronic Tourism: The New Need of Tourism Industry in Iran

One must pay attention to the fact that the World Tourism and Tourist Organization has announced that electronic tourism is at the verge of universalization and it can assist the developing countries to take advantage of tourism industry. The study of the trend and indices of this industry shows that most of the poor nations lack the proper facilities to take advantage of tourism. At the moment the experts in the field of long term planning of tourism industry are concerned with

providing the tourists with the best services in the shortest time span possible. The technological advances, especially in the field of IT, have led to rise in expectation of the tourists regarding the services provided to them. This fact has created complications regarding the choice of destination and due to the increase in competition the successful countries are those that create fundamental modifications with regard to the e-tourism. Advances in the tourism industry has necessitated the Islamic Republic of Iran spend the full effort regarding e-tourism. Virtual tourism is the new technology for providing tourists with their needs. Adaptation of e-tourism places the services demanded by the tourists within their reach easier, faster and cheaper at a higher quality.

Glancing at the twenty year long term plan regarding attracting international tourists highlights the fact that e-tourism plays a major role in attracting the majority share of this market, or simply put obtaining the largest piece of the pie.

Anyhow avoiding the usual prejudice, one can state that electronic tourism is the new need of tourism industry in the Islamic Republic of Iran and we must seriously spend our best effort to establish it.

Conclusion

Base on the aforementioned one can conclude that the new knowledge in the field of IT leading to entering the world of virtual reality and in general information technology, which can assist numerous industries and services, is an integral part of the new sciences. This new technology bears the potentiality to assist various industries and services; hence, assisting individuals. ICT can prove beneficial especially in the tourist industry. Based on the needs, this technology can be useful in advertising, economic matters, cultural issues and etc. For taking advantage of this innovation one must become fluent in its knowledge and technology (know how) and take upon the quest of applying them to optimize the objectives and the research in the tourism industry.

Since the existence of tourism is a must for a healthy economy, the government should create the needed infrastructure and parameters required for its stable development. Furthermore, this industry must be strengthened via virtual space as the countries that do not have such potentials as those of the Islamic Republic of Iran have done so and by

making the proper investment have changed tourism into one of their most successful industries. Having done so, these countries have taken advantage of pouring a great sum of foreign currency and capital into their economy.

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