

Embodied Presence in Virtual Tourism Experiences and the Construction of Chengdu's Cultural Brand

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of embodied presence in virtual tourism and its impact on Chengdu's city branding. By leveraging advanced digital technologies, Chengdu enhances cultural immersion and sensory engagement, showcasing its historical, modern, and natural aspects. Despite successes, challenges such as incomplete sensory experiences and fragmented content integration persist. The research provides a framework for improving virtual tourism and suggests future work on advancing sensory technologies and exploring their effects on real-world tourism behaviors and brand perception.

KEYWORDS

Embodied Presence; Virtual Tourism; City Brand

1 Introduction

In the digital age, virtual tourism has emerged as a transformative tool for cultural dissemination and urban branding. By leveraging advanced technologies like virtual reality (VR), cities can offer immersive experiences that transcend traditional tourism, allowing global audiences to engage deeply with their cultural heritage and identity. This paper examines the role of embodied presence—a critical factor in creating authentic and emotionally resonant virtual experiences—in the construction of Chengdu's city brand. The study seeks to analyze the current state of Chengdu's virtual tourism initiatives, identifying gaps in sensory engagement and proposing innovative approaches to enhance comprehensive presence. The research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how virtual tourism can be optimized to strengthen urban cultural identity, offering new insights into the integration of digital and physical tourism experiences.

2 Embodied Presence and Urban Cultural Experience in Virtual Tourism

2.1 Virtual Tourism and Embodied Presence

Virtual tourism utilizes digital technology to enable users to experience cultural tourism within virtual environments. Zheng, Zhang and Wen (2022) note that virtual tourism offers unique experiences and sensations that cannot be achieved through traditional tourism. The application of virtual reality (VR) technology in this field includes panoramic presentations of cultural exhibitions, digital restoration of cultural heritage, and immersive interactive experiences. Through virtual technology, tourists can attain a sense of reality while interacting with virtual content, thus providing a new pathway for cultural dissemination.

In virtual tourism, emotional resonance and immersive sensations—referred to as "embodied

presence"—directly influence the effectiveness of content transmission. Although participants are cognitively aware that they are in a virtual environment, the direct stimulation of their senses often generates a strong sense of presence. This experience highlights the importance of embodied perception in interpersonal communication, which remains a critical factor even in virtual settings.

VR technology, through the recreation of scenes and the orchestration of sound, allows participants to experience the intersection of reality and virtuality. The rise of virtual technology has made embodied interaction a prevailing trend. The environments crafted by media technologies often surpass physical environments, blending real and mediated experiences to facilitate empathy. In this process, the simulation of objective environments by media technology is crucial, but the emotional and psychological factors of the participants must also be considered (Cao, Luo and Wang, 2018). This technological environment not only simulates physical spaces but also reshapes the interaction between humans, technology, and the world, surpassing traditional physical experiences and enhancing the potential for empathy. In the fusion of virtual and physical tourism, tourists experience dual immersion through "real-world corporeal presence" and "remote virtual presence," perceiving not only technological advancements but also the cultural symbols behind them.

2.2 Cultural Experience and Communication in Embodied Presence

In communication studies, particularly within the media environment school of thought, the concept of "scene" is not merely constrained by physical space but is also a mode of information flow deeply influenced by media forms. The development of media technology has given rise to new communication scenarios, leading to shifts in social behaviors and values. In essence, electronic media has liberated social interactions from being anchored in physical locations, with locations becoming backgrounds and content and its receivers becoming the focal points (Gordon, 2010). The body, as an intermediary between individuals and the world, serves as the foundation for perceiving the world, as well as the core means for expressing emotions and disseminating information.

Drawing from virtual reality technology, some scholars view the body as a medium of interaction, emphasizing its value in expressing emotions and conveying information within virtual contexts (Liu and Shu, 2019). In virtual tourism, embodied presence is crucial for cultural experience and communication. Virtual reality technology extends the sensory domain of the body, allowing tourists to transcend singular temporal and spatial limitations and achieve broader cultural exchange. The interaction between the body and virtual environments transforms mechanical virtual spaces into cultural spaces that intertwine local culture, bodily culture, and urban culture. This cultural space plays a significant role in shaping and disseminating values, guiding tourists from physical structures to cultural understanding (Ye, 2010). Individual tourists, through their unique bodily cultural spaces, interact with urban cultural spaces, attracting visitors with similar cultural values and forming distinctive body-city cultural space clusters. Ultimately, the realization of embodied experiences depends on the synergy of body, scene, and technology, and only with deep cognitive engagement and purposeful tourism can this experience achieve true cultural dissemination and meaningful construction.

2.3 Virtual Tourism and Urban Identity

The advancement of technology has transformed the way humans interact with their environments, and virtual tourism, as an emerging form of travel, has redefined the relationship between tourists and destinations. In virtual tourism, visitors use virtual devices to explore attractions, understand history, and experience culture, thereby establishing a deep connection

with the city (Zheng and Zhang, 2022). This virtual attachment fosters urban cultural identity through three key aspects. Firstly, active engagement in virtual tourism allows visitors to deeply explore and understand the city's culture and history. Utilizing virtual technology, tourists can not only observe attractions in detail but also experience the city's unique ambiance in a virtual setting, providing a foundation for cultural identity. Secondly, virtual tourism creates new forms of social relationships. Through virtual interactions, tourists engage with other visitors and the city itself, further strengthening their sense of urban identity. Lastly, cultural identity primarily stems from experiences related to the place. In virtual tourism, tourists engage in immersive experiences, relax, and appreciate the unique cultural spirit of the city, thereby forming cultural identity (Oleksy, 2017). Moreover, virtual tourism extends traditional people-place relationships by expanding from two-dimensional to three-dimensional space, creating new interaction forms between real people and virtual people, virtual people and virtual places, and real places and virtual places. This new mode of interaction enriches people's sense of urban identity, and the integration of virtual and physical spaces broadens and deepens the dissemination of urban culture, enhancing cultural identity in both virtual and real contexts.

3 Embodied Presence and the Construction of Chengdu's City Brand

3.1 Chengdu's City Brand Image in the Context of Embodied Presence

In the digital age, city branding is undergoing a transformation, characterized by new dynamics and trends. The construction and dissemination of city images are no longer limited to a single entity; with the help of digital technologies, audiences have become active participants and are increasingly integral to the process of city brand formation (Wang, 2021). The contributions of virtual tourism experiences to city brand construction can be seen in several key areas: Firstly, Chengdu, as a historic and cultural city, offers immersive historical experiences to visitors. By utilizing virtual reality technology to recreate historical scenes and cultural events, such as the virtual tours of Wuhou Shrine and Du Fu's Thatched Cottage, Chengdu provides global users with the opportunity to deeply engage with its historical and cultural heritage. Secondly, as a fashion capital, Chengdu presents its modern creativity and fashion through virtualization. Through virtual tours and online exhibitions, Chengdu's modern fashion and creative industries are showcased globally, exemplified by the virtual tours of Kuanzhai Alley and online exhibitions of Chengdu's art scenes. Lastly, the digital promotion of Chengdu's natural ecology and culinary culture has further enhanced its city brand globally. Chengdu's natural attractions and culinary culture have been brought to a global audience through virtual tourism products, such as virtual tours of Mount Qingcheng and virtual experiences of Sichuan hotpot preparation. These efforts have effectively disseminated Chengdu's city brand image on a global scale.

Despite these achievements in virtual tourism brand construction, there remain certain issues and challenges concerning embodied presence within virtual experiences. These issues may hinder the effective transmission of the city brand image and the depth of user experience. The primary concerns revolve around incomplete sensory engagement and the lack of an integrated approach to the city's cultural content. While visual and auditory experiences in virtual environments have become relatively mature, the application of other senses, such as touch and smell, is still in the exploratory stage. This lack of comprehensive sensory experiences limits users' ability to fully perceive Chengdu's culinary offerings or natural landscapes (Wu, 2023). Additionally, the content of these experiences is often generated by specific venues, and key themes such as food, nature, markets, and history lack a sustained and systematic communication strategy. This makes it difficult for tourists to develop a cohesive and linear brand identity during their experiences (Lei, 2021).

3.2 Enhancing Comprehensive Presence in Virtual Spaces

In the evolving landscape of virtual tourism, the concept of "comprehensive presence" is crucial for enhancing user engagement and fostering a more profound connection with the destination's brand. Chengdu's tourism projects offer an illustrative case for examining how virtual technologies can be upgraded to strengthen immersive experiences and provide a holistic understanding of the city.

To achieve comprehensive presence, virtual tourism must go beyond basic visual and auditory stimuli. Upgrading virtual technologies to include haptic feedback, olfactory stimulation, and dynamic environmental factors can significantly enhance the sensory richness of virtual experiences. For instance, integrating weather simulations and seasonal variations into virtual tours of Chengdu's famous attractions, such as Mount Qingcheng, can evoke a more realistic and engaging experience. Visitors could virtually feel the crisp mountain air in winter or experience the subtropical humidity in summer, which would deepen their connection to the site.

Moreover, the inclusion of extended content, such as detailed information about the best visiting times, real-time weather updates, and optimized route planning, can bridge the gap between virtual and physical tourism. This approach not only enhances the utility of virtual tours but also builds anticipation for an in-person visit. Chengdu's culinary tours could benefit from such integrations, where virtual experiences are enriched with the sounds, sights, and even scents of local markets, alongside practical information on how to navigate these vibrant spaces.

Critically, the success of these enhancements hinges on the seamless integration of these elements to form a cohesive and immersive narrative. Fragmented or disjointed experiences risk diminishing the overall presence and, consequently, the effectiveness of the city's brand image. Therefore, a strategic and user-centered approach is essential in the design and implementation of these virtual tourism projects, ensuring that they do not merely replicate physical experiences but also leverage the unique affordances of virtual spaces to create something that is both familiar and novel. This balance is key to advancing Chengdu's virtual tourism initiatives and solidifying its global city brand.

4 Summary

This study explores the impact of embodied presence in virtual tourism on Chengdu's city branding. It highlights how immersive technologies, such as virtual reality (VR), enhance users' emotional and sensory engagement, contributing to a more profound cultural experience. The research reveals that while Chengdu's virtual tourism effectively showcases its cultural, historical, and modern aspects, challenges remain in achieving complete sensory immersion and integrating diverse cultural content. The study's impact lies in offering a framework for enhancing virtual tourism experiences, thus strengthening urban branding. However, it is limited by the current technological constraints and the need for more comprehensive sensory elements. Future research should focus on developing advanced sensory technologies and integrating them into virtual tourism, as well as exploring the long-term effects of virtual experiences on actual tourism behavior and city brand perception.

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