

Branding tourism destinations in the metaverse: insights from professionals and researchers

Shiva Ezzatian, Mohamad Taghi Toghraee and Neda Torabi Farsani

Abstract

Purpose – Having a brand has a great impact on the success of a destination or tourism business. The metaverse has introduced new opportunities for tourism marketing, playing a key role in destination branding. By offering interactive, immersive, and three-dimensional experiences, it strengthens connections with tourists, enhancing their loyalty to the brand. In the competitive tourism industry, destinations that establish a strong presence in the virtual space are more likely to succeed in the future. Metaverse tourism, with its ability to provide a virtual preview of travel experiences, creates a competitive advantage for destinations that adopt it. This technology increases tourist engagement with the destination, enhancing their satisfaction and loyalty. As a result, tourism destinations that consider the key components of branding in the metaverse will secure a larger share of the market. The major objective of this paper is to explore the branding components of tourism destinations in the metaverse.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative method (triangulation method and themed analysis using MAXQDA software) was used to explore the components of destination branding in the Metaverse. Initially, in this research, related articles and podcasts in the field of the metaverse were applied. In the next step, the data was collected through a semi-structured interview with experts in the field of information and communications technology (ICT), tourism and Metaverse. Purposive sampling was used to gather data. To enhance the richness of the research findings, the netnography method was also employed.

Findings – The findings of this research indicate that destination branding in the metaverse includes 13 main themes such as technology and infrastructure, laws and ethical principles, hyper-personalized, type of experience (Immersion), available attractions for tourists, local community (Avatars), fame and advertising, gamification, innovation, beyond the limits, sustainability, imagination, brand Influence. Utilizing these 13 components resulted in the development of a comprehensive strategy for branding tourism destinations in the metaverse.

Practical implications – In today's highly competitive tourism industry, adapting to technological changes and promoting destinations in digital spaces like the metaverse is essential for success. By focusing on key branding components identified in this study, tourism managers can create a competitive advantage for real-world destinations by offering a demo tour as an advertisement, which serves as one of these components, helping travelers make more informed and lower-risk decisions. This approach enhances customer satisfaction and strengthens brand loyalty. Effective application of these branding components will enable managers to secure a larger share of the virtual market and reinforce their competitive edge in both the virtual and real-world tourism markets.

Originality/value – The originality of this paper is to explore and understand branding components of tourism destinations in the metaverse and can extend the literature review in the field of application of Metaverse in tourism marketing. In addition, this identification provides valuable insights for organizations and tourism authorities on which aspects require special attention when branding their destinations in the metaverse. By paying special attention to the identified components, they can purposefully promote and showcase their tourism destinations in the metaverse, attract more tourists, and increase tourism revenue.

Keywords Metaverse, Metaverse tourism, Destination tourism, Destination branding, Gamification

Paper type Research paper

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1. Introduction

The metaverse is emerging as a new form of online social network and the Next-Generation Internet, offering a unified virtual world that connects multiple 3D environments through the Internet (Cheng *et al.*, 2022). Its goal is to create a digital space that mirrors the real world by integrating technologies like extended reality, digital twins, and blockchain (Sun *et al.*, 2022). The rapid advancement of technologies, especially artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things, has significantly impacted various sectors. To remain competitive, tourism destinations must establish a presence in the digital realm. The metaverse provides significant opportunities for tourism development and brand growth.

According to Buhalis *et al.* (2023), metaverse tourism becomes practical when four key components are fully addressed: network infrastructure, necessary devices, powerful platforms (or virtual worlds), and technology-ready users. By combining Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR), the metaverse empowers users to engage with a superior technological world, allowing them to travel and create unique experiences without physical presence. Yang and Wang (2023) define the metaverse as a combination of physical reality, digital virtuality, and the interactions between them. They propose the “4 I”s framework for metaverse tourism—Imitation, Intensification, Interaction, and Integration—to explore this virtual-physical integration. Koo *et al.* (2023) argue that key metaverse tourism technologies will enhance user experiences, helping tourists form more realistic expectations before their actual travel. Researchers should carefully consider the multiple identity profiles of metaverse tourists.

In the competitive tourism market, destination branding helps create a competitive advantage by highlighting a destination’s unique features and differentiating it from competitors. With the rise of technology and the expansion of the internet into tourism services, the importance of branding and destination branding has grown. Buhalis and Park (2021) highlight that understanding the metaverse’s impact on tourism branding and destination image is crucial for effective branding and marketing. The metaverse enhances branding by increasing interaction between the brand and the customer, creating a three-dimensional and engaging environment that fosters brand loyalty. Dwivedi *et al.* (2023) suggest that the metaverse can serve as either the primary or a supplementary platform for brand development. Buhalis *et al.* (2022) emphasize that virtual hospitality managers should be able to design hotel facilities, aesthetics, and spaces, experimenting with various design styles, colors, and layouts on virtual platforms to refine their offerings. Koohang *et al.* (2023) predict that as collaboration in the metaverse increases, branding will become even more crucial.

This study addresses a critical gap in existing knowledge by exploring the branding components for tourism destinations in the metaverse. While some research has examined the role of branding in the metaverse, a comprehensive understanding of how destinations can leverage the metaverse for effective branding remains limited. Wongkitrungrueng and Suprawan (2023) emphasize the importance of designing branded virtual environments to align virtual merchandise and store ambiance with real-world branding. Arya *et al.* (2024) suggest that enhancing e-commerce products and services in the virtual world adds value to consumer cognition and strengthens brand value. Jafar and Ahmad (2024) found that metaverse cognitive processing positively affects tourist satisfaction and loyalty, with engagement playing a moderating role. Chen (2024) highlights the potential for enhancing the tourist experience through personalized travel options, social interaction, immersive experiences, and visitor feedback.

Despite growing interest in metaverse tourism, few studies have thoroughly investigated the branding components for tourism destinations in the metaverse. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring these components and providing insights for tourism industry professionals and researchers. Understanding branding components for tourism destinations in the metaverse can improve branding strategies and enhance tourism experiences in this evolving digital landscape. In conclusion, the rise of the metaverse presents new opportunities for destination branding and tourism development. This study aims to identify key branding components for tourism

destinations in the metaverse to create a competitive advantage for real-world destinations and improve the destination image in this digital era.

2. Literature review

2.1 Branding tourism destinations: a foundation for the metaverse

Tourism destination branding has developed as a fundamental strategy for strengthening destinations' competitiveness by creating a unique identity and effectively conveying desirable experiences to potential travelers (Babić-Hodović, 2014). Research on destination branding within the Metaverse remains limited, highlighting the need to explore established branding models and their potential applications in this emerging digital environment. Key branding frameworks offer useful insights into how branding can be effectively managed in virtual spaces.

Hanna and Rowley (2011) developed a Strategic Place Brand Management (SPBM) approach, which, though less comprehensive than some, identifies critical elements for branding success. This model focuses on essential components like brand evaluation, stakeholder engagement, brand identity, infrastructure, architecture, brand storytelling, and the overall brand experience. In addition, SPBM emphasizes the importance of marketing communications and word-of-mouth, making it a relevant tool for Metaverse branding. Similarly, the City Brand Management (CBM) framework, introduced by Gaggiotti *et al.* (2008), provides a systematic process for city branding that is adaptable to digital tourism destinations. The CBM model encompasses four main stages of brand strategy development, beginning with situational analysis, which considers key factors such as people, processes, places, and partners. This strategic approach lays a foundation for creating a clear brand direction, setting tasks, and fostering brand development, making it applicable for branding within the Metaverse context.

Similarly contributing to this integrated approach, Stephens Balakrishnan's (2009) structured five-stage framework emphasizes a clear sequence: vision, stakeholder management, customer alignment, positioning, communication strategy, and response management. This model is particularly suited for Metaverse branding, as it aligns digital destinations with stakeholder expectations and market demands, supporting the CBM and SPBM frameworks by offering practical steps that ensure both internal and external brand consistency.

To further enhance these branding efforts, Baker's 7A Model (2007) introduces a seven-stage process resembling strategic marketing planning, covering evaluation and auditing, analysis and advantage (positioning), alignment, articulation, activation (market communications), acceptance and attitude (interaction), and action and afterward (experience management). By addressing all critical aspects of branding in both physical and digital contexts, Baker's model integrates well with Balakrishnan's approach and reinforces the structured steps of SPBM and CBM, making it a well-rounded addition to Metaverse tourism branding. In addition, Keller's Brand Equity Model (2001), known as the "customer-based brand equity model," offers insights into creating positive brand experiences. Keller emphasizes that each interaction should evoke positive thoughts, emotions, and beliefs, which strengthen customer relationships and build brand equity. By fostering strong connections with customers, Keller's approach aligns closely with the stakeholder and customer engagement goals found across the previously mentioned models, enhancing brand loyalty through positive word-of-mouth and customer satisfaction—critical for success in Metaverse branding.

Together, these models provide a multidimensional framework that, while initially crafted for physical or city-based branding, is adaptable to the digital Metaverse realm. They emphasize the importance of engaging local communities, establishing robust infrastructure, curating diverse tourist attractions, ensuring unique experience types, and encouraging word-of-mouth—core components essential for effective branding of tourism destinations in the metaverse, which are further explored in Section 3.2.

Adapting and applying these models, the study aims to identify and explain the key components that influence the branding of tourism destinations in the Metaverse. This knowledge helps tourism officials gain a competitive advantage and capture a larger share of the virtual space.

2.2 Branding tourism destinations in the metaverse: overview

The metaverse serves as a channel for tourism branding, offering innovative omnichannel experiences that allow brands to embed themselves in consumers' minds and open new markets (Sánchez-Amboage *et al.*, 2024). It should be noted that limited scientific research has been conducted on destination branding in the metaverse. However, Buhalis *et al.* (2023) predict a transformative shift in travel and tourism management and marketing through digital twins, destination awareness, positioning, and branding, effectively changing consumer behavior. Such advancements align with the research objective by highlighting new branding avenues for competitive positioning within the metaverse. This emerging platform allows businesses to reach a larger audience, and many individuals and companies are currently utilizing it as a brand development tool, making it a unique opportunity (Bushell, 2022).

Overall, the metaverse enables increased accessibility and interaction with audiences. Tourism companies can use this space for customer communication, marketing, branding, and advertising, ensuring they don't miss out on the competitive opportunities it presents. Companies may create parallel economies where metaverse branding and sales complement physical product sales (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2023). Integrating these opportunities into tourism branding strategies can significantly enhance a destination's competitiveness. Thapa (2023) states that travel and tourism will be heavily influenced by the metaverse, where tourists will obtain unique and personalized experiences through VR/AR technology. By leveraging VR/AR to create personalized, immersive branding experiences, destinations can increase their appeal and competitiveness in the metaverse.

Kevin (2022) emphasizes the significant impact that effective metaverse marketing, branding, and advertising can have. Companies can establish a strong presence, engage users meaningfully, and deliver valuable offerings to customers. This potential for meaningful user engagement aligns to utilize branding components to improve destination competitiveness. However, Dwivedi *et al.* (2023) raise a crucial point: successful metaverse branding requires alignment with both the platform itself and the brand's core philosophy. Companies must consider their existing real-world brand reputation and recognition. Ensuring brand consistency across physical and virtual realms is essential for creating a cohesive and effective branding strategy that attracts consumers.

To address challenges related to brand awareness in the metaverse, Dwivedi *et al.* (2023) suggest leveraging established gaming platforms like Fortnite, Roblox, and Minecraft. These platforms can serve as foundational spaces to enhance destination brand awareness, aligning with the objective of enhancing competitiveness through metaverse branding. Bushell (2022) underscores the suitability of the metaverse for effective branding. This three-dimensional environment allows companies to create simulations and presentations of their products and services, enhancing customer understanding. Enhanced customer understanding through immersive experiences can be a vital branding tool to elevate the perceived value and competitiveness of tourism destinations.

Furthermore, the metaverse offers a sustainable platform for maintaining brand presence without the need for constant active advertising. This fosters brand loyalty and cultivates customer communities. The immersive nature of the metaverse facilitates deeper customer engagement, leading to innovative consumer experiences, improved communication, and enhanced customer loyalty. Such immersive engagement fosters brand loyalty, which is crucial for building competitive advantage in tourism branding.

As a result, the metaverse offers companies an opportunity to establish global online connections with customers worldwide. [Helal and Costa \(2022\)](#) also concluded that in the realm of the metaverse, brand strategies can move between different levels of immersion, decentralization, and centralization experience. This flexibility in strategy further supports the goal of creating adaptable and effective branding components to enhance destination competitiveness. [Bautista \(2022\)](#) explores the challenges faced by both real-world cities and virtual Metaverse cities. Users can access entirely new experiences or enrich existing ones through avatars, fostering the creation of a digital community that rivals the significance of traditional city life. This raises questions about the future of physical cities. Enhancing destination branding through digital communities in the metaverse aligns with the goal of offering unique, competitive experiences that attract global audiences.

[Fan et al. \(2022\)](#) offer a compelling perspective on the metaverse's impact on cultural heritage. The digital realm presents a novel platform for exploring digital documents related to cultural heritage and information services for historical figures. Their research presents a metaverse-based digital document framework for historical figures, specifically developing the Ju Shi metaverse system as a step forward in creating the metaverse for historical personalities. Integrating cultural heritage into destination branding enhances destination uniqueness and aligns with the objective of leveraging metaverse branding for competitive differentiation.

[Martins et al. \(2022\)](#) present a case study of Amiais, a small village in Portugal. A project is underway to recreate the village within the game Second Life, allowing visitors to virtually familiarize themselves with the location. Such virtual recreations can be pivotal in branding strategies, enabling destinations to showcase their unique appeal to a global audience and increasing their competitive positioning. [Bautista \(2022\)](#) emphasizes the critical need for parallel technological development, innovation, and digital literacy to accompany the advancement of the metaverse. Failure to address this issue risks exacerbating the social divide, potentially isolating individuals who lack the necessary comprehension of the changes and the benefits offered by the metaverse. Ensuring accessibility and digital literacy can be essential for broadening the reach of destination branding in the metaverse, thus enhancing a destination's competitiveness.

The metaverse is also attracting the attention of celebrities and influencers, not just for brand endorsements but also for personal branding, income generation, and active participation in this new virtual space ([Koohang et al., 2023](#)). Celebrity and influencer involvement in branding campaigns can further enhance destination visibility, supporting the study's objective of creating competitive branding strategies within the metaverse. In the established field of destination branding, marketing programs (such as utilizing the metaverse as a marketing tool) have been designed to enhance the tourist experience, develop destination attractions, select distribution channels (e.g. push versus pull), engage in cooperative advertising, and implement value pricing to elevate brand identity through extended activation ([Cai, 2002](#)). These traditional branding strategies, adapted to the metaverse, can provide a foundation for competitive advantage in tourism destination branding.

[Yoon and Nam \(2024\)](#) posit that the metaverse, with its potential for increased destination awareness, improved positioning and branding strategies, and enhanced coordination and management processes, will significantly impact consumer behavior. Leveraging the metaverse's potential to reshape branding efforts aligns directly with this study's objective of enhancing destination competitiveness.

Therefore, the primary objective of this research is to provide insights into the development of branding components for tourism destinations in the Metaverse. To achieve this, the study aims to answer the following question: How can the metaverse be leveraged to enhance the competitiveness of tourism destinations through effective branding components?

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection and respondents

Based on the exploratory approach of this research, the initial phase involved reviewing the literature review, including recent articles on the metaverse, and utilizing the Metaverse Podcast. The podcast, hosted by a well-known science journalist and including experts in the field, offers a reliable and insightful perspective on Metaverse-related topics. The podcast's meticulous fact-checking and emphasis on expert analysis make it a valuable source of information for academic research.

In this study, data collection was carried out based on the nature and process of work using a triangulation method. Denzin defines triangulation as “the combination of methods in studying an identical phenomenon”. In scientific research, the use of two or more research methods is employed to enhance the interpretive capacity of findings (Campbell and Fiske, 1959; Denzin, 1970). Therefore, triangulation refers to the combination of multiple sources of information, researchers, cognitive approaches, theoretical perspectives (Denzin, 1970; Kimchi *et al.*, 1991), or analytical methods (Kimchi *et al.*, 1991) within a single research study. These combinations contribute to data triangulation, researcher triangulation, cognitive triangulation, theoretical triangulation (Denzin, 1970), and environmental triangulation (Kimchi *et al.*, 1991).

Moreover, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with experts and specialists in the field of information and communications technology (ICT), tourism and Metaverse to identify the branding components of tourism destinations in the metaverse. It is worth mentioning that a form reliability formula (CVR 0.75) was used to determine the validity of the interview form, and the calculations illustrated that the interview form had a high validity. The purposive sampling method was used to gather data. We selected the elites and experts through Google Scholar and LinkedIn social media platforms. The interview with some experts abroad was conducted through the Google Meet platform and all conversations were recorded. Furthermore, the face-to-face interview to a deeper understanding the components of destination branding in the Metaverse was used with experts in Iran. The average time spent on each interview was approximately forty minutes. The interviews and coding process continued until reaching saturation point, with a total of 20 interviews conducted (Table 1).

Immediately after each interview, the process of transcribing the text began to ensure a more accurate understanding of the interview. All 20 interviews were transcribed and then subjected to analysis. Phrases, sentences, and significant quotations that identified participants' main responses regarding the specific research component were extracted from the interview texts. Equal value was assigned to all participants' statements, and the researcher eliminated any repetitive expressions or instances unrelated to the research questions. Moustakas (1994) referred to this stage as “horizontalization” (p. 97).

Subsequently, the data was coded and conceptual codes were extracted using MAXQDA software after each interview. The main themes were extracted, and sub-themes were placed under their respective components of destination branding in the metaverse. Moreover, the opinions of experts were sought to determine the reliability of the coding using the Simple Percent Agreement method. The coding results were shared with two coders, and the agreement percentage was calculated to be 90%. Lastly, a topic model was designed through MAXQDA software.

To enhance the richness of research findings, the netnography method was also employed. As Heinonen and Medberg (2018, p. 669) state, “Netnography is a flexible method that can be applied to market and service research in most virtual domains.”

In the first phase, this study selected two platforms, Decentraland and Roblox, as sources of information. The selection was based on their unique characteristics. Roblox was chosen for its experience-based nature and virtual tours offered by tourism companies, such as trips to ancient Egypt or US national parks. Decentraland, as a pioneer in the metaverse tourism sector, was

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of interviewees

<i>Interviewees</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Education/Position</i>	<i>Finding through</i>
P1	Male	PhD in ICT/K. N. Toosi University of Technology, Tehran, Iran	LinkedIn
P2	Female	PhD in tourism/Germany	Published a paper regarding Metaverse/Google Scholar
P3	Male	Master in Tourism/Iran	Doing a thesis regarding Metaverse/Google Scholar
P4	Male	Researcher in machine learning/PhD in Computer Sciences/Iran	LinkedIn
P5	Female	PhD in tourism and travel services/University of Novi Sad, Serbia	Published papers/LinkedIn
P6	Female	Digital marketing consultant/Iran	Published a book regarding digital marketing/Google Scholar
P7	Male	Researcher at University of Luxembourg, Luxembourg	LinkedIn
P8	Male	Master student in tourism/Shiraz University, Iran	Doing a thesis regarding smart tourism/Google Scholar
P9	Female	Master in Tourism Management at Bournemouth University/England	LinkedIn
P10	Male	Master student in tourism/Allameh Tabataba'i University, Iran	Published a paper regarding Metaverse/Google Scholar
P11	Male	PhD in Tourism/University of Karachi, Pakistan	Published papers/LinkedIn
P12	Female	PhD in Digital marketing Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran	LinkedIn
P13	Male	A Strategic Management and Marketing expert with specialization in ICT, Smart Environments and Interactive Marketing/ Bournemouth University Business School, UK	Published papers and books regarding smart tourism/ Google Scholar
P14	Male	Mechanical Sciences and Engineering PhD/ K. N. Toosi University of Technology, Tehran, Iran	LinkedIn
P15	Female	Master in Artificial Intelligence Sadjad University/Mashhad, Iran	LinkedIn
P16	Male	Master in Digital Marketing University of London, UK	LinkedIn
P17	Male	Associate Professor at Amirkabir University of Technology, Iran	Published a paper regarding Metaverse/Google Scholar
P18	Male	PhD student in tourism/Iran	Published a paper regarding smart tourism/Google Scholar
P19	Male	PhD in tourism/University of Aegean/Greece	LinkedIn
P20	Male	PhD in Computer Sciences/Assistant Professor at Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran	LinkedIn

Source(s): Own construction

selected for its virtual locations, including museums, galleries, and immersive spaces, as well as metaverse tourism communities and events.

Rageh *et al.* (2013) argue that due to the specific characteristics of tourism experiences and experiential values, these aspects are not directly accessible to researchers. Instead, the only available sources are researchers' interpretations of tourists' reflective narratives about their experiences and perceived value. Since netnography can be integrated with a wide range of research techniques and approaches (Kozinets, 2010, p. 42), and it is compatible with other research methods, including qualitative interviews, it can be used alongside other techniques (Walther and Sandlin, 2013). Given the emerging nature of "branding tourism destinations in the

metaverse” and the limited content available on these platforms, alternative data collection methods were necessary, so interviews were incorporated into the research methodology.

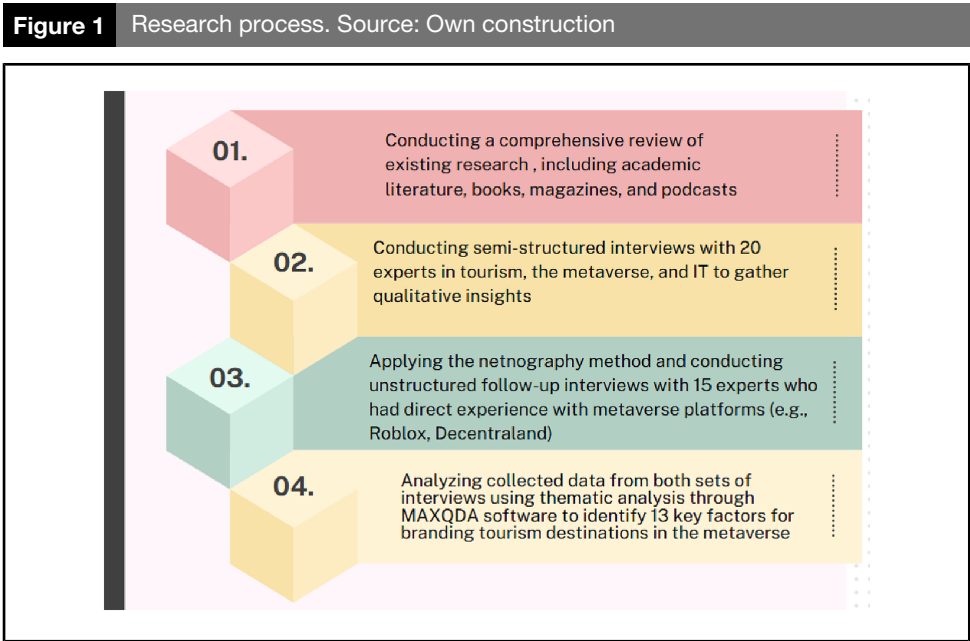
To collect data, 15 participants who took part in the initial semi-structured interviews were re-interviewed. These interviews aimed to gain deeper insights into their experiences of engaging with the metaverse platforms Roblox and Decentraland and visiting virtual tourist attractions. This phase contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of how tourism brands are experienced in the metaverse and validated the findings from the previous stage.

The interviews were conducted in an unstructured format. Due to its qualitative nature, unstructured interviewing allows for exploring broader aspects of the topic compared to other interview types (Fontana and Frey, 1994). The interviews were conducted online via Google Meet and LinkedIn to engage with relevant and purposefully selected participants based on their experience and presence in metaverse platforms. To ensure research responsibility, ethical considerations were integrated into the netnography; participant data were anonymized, securely stored, and transparency was maintained throughout the process (Costello et al., 2017). These measures safeguarded privacy and enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings.

After data collection, interview analysis was conducted using Thematic Analysis in MaxQDA software. In the first step, themes derived from the semi-structured interviews were identified and categorized. Then, findings from the unstructured interviews were analyzed independently. Finally, comparing both datasets revealed similarities, differences, and new insights, contributing to a more precise interpretation of branding tourism destinations in the metaverse. Figure 1 illustrates the steps of the current research methodology.

3.2 Conceptual foundation and component derivation

Given the novelty of the topic of metaverse and its application in tourism, there is a lack of theoretical foundations and research background. Consequently, components for destination branding in the metaverse, which is the subject of the present research, have not been proposed. However, in this study, destination branding models in the real environment were examined to derive and investigate the branding components of tourism destinations in the metaverse based



on the foundation and principles of these models and their commonalities. The five derived components of destination branding in the metaverse are presented in [Figure 2](#).

(1) Available Attractions for Tourists:

The Baker model and SPBM emphasize the element of Brand Expression, encompassing all the elements that convey the brand's personality like its visual identity. In the metaverse, unique and new attractions can be created that do not exist in the real world.

(2) Type of experience:

The “Brand Experience” element in the SPBM model emphasizes the importance of creating a consistent and memorable customer experience. In the metaverse, creating hyper-real and immersive experiences through new technologies is the key component of branding.

(3) Infrastructure:

The SPBM model emphasizes infrastructure as a key component of branding. In the metaverse, virtual platforms and innovative technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and artificial intelligence serve as the foundation for creating experiences and delivering services.

(4) Word-of-Mouth:

The element of “Word-of-Mouth” in the SPBM Model and the element of “Response Management” in the Strategic Destination Branding Model by Balachandran emphasize the importance of advertising in the branding process. In the metaverse, advertising can also be presented interactively and extensively in the virtual space.

(5) Local community:

The SPBM and CBM models emphasize the importance of stakeholder engagement and people. In the metaverse, local communities are recognized by their avatars and virtual identities.

These components were derived from the literature on destination branding in real-world contexts. Identifying commonalities with the metaverse environment provides a conceptual foundation for branding tourism destinations in the metaverse.

Figure 2 Selected destination branding components for the metaverse environment derived from research background. Source: Own construction



4. Result

The researchers built their work on previous studies and utilized specialized podcast content about the Metaverse. They also conducted semi-structured interviews with experts in the Metaverse, tourism, and information technology. To enhance the richness of the research findings, the netnographic method was also utilized. Using MaxQDA software and the thematic analysis method, they identified 13 key components of tourism destinations in the Metaverse and 42 sub-themes (see [Table 2](#)).

[Figure 3](#) illustrates the 13 destination branding components in the metaverse, with dark circles representing components specific to metaverse branding (derived from the current study), and dual-colored circles representing components used in both destination branding models in the physical and metaverse environments. These common components were drawn from the

Table 2 The components of destination branding in the Metaverse

Main theme	Sub-theme
Technology and infrastructure	Quality and speed The quality of the selected platform cognition of Web 3.0 (Economic Dimension) Extended Reality (XR) and Internet of Things (IoT)
Laws and ethical principles	Data security in the metaverse Legislation in the metaverse
Hyper-personalized	Extrasensory experiences Decentralized narrator
Type of experience (immersion)	Rich Interactive Experience Interoperability Sense of co-presence co-creation (value) Hedonism Continuity Transformative experiences Simultaneous Different Experiences Hyper-Automated experience
Metaverse attractions	Twin digitals Visual and cognitive attractions Digital souvenirs Tourists' Right to Intervention in the Metaverse Environment
Local community (avatars)	Sociological avatar Avatars as smart tour guides
Advertising	Having a competitive advantage in pre-designed options The presence of celebrities on a metaverse platform Customized advertisements tailored to the target market A demo tour as an advertisement Organizing metaverse events Creating an identity for the Metaverse destination Using brand reputation and real environment elements
Gamification	Purposeful entertainment Being tourist-oriented
Innovation in search	Travel preview
Beyond the limits	Location limitation Time limitation Cognitive limitation
Sustainability	In line with the UN's SDGs Preservation of heritage
Imagination	In line with nostalgic tourism Imaginative tourism A different reimagining of the world
Brand influence	Communications
Source(s): Own construction	

Figure 3 The components of destination branding in the Metaverse. Source: Own construction



research background (see [Figure 2](#)) and were chosen based on the nature of experience and interaction within the Metaverse environment. They were also selected considering the fundamental Commonalities between real-world and metaverse tourism. These 13 key components will be discussed in more detail in [Section 5](#).

To assess the reliability of coding for the extracted components, two independent coders were asked to code the data separately based on precise definitions provided for each component. Holsti's reliability formula ([Holsti, 1969](#)) was used to calculate the level of agreement between the coders.

Holsti's formula is as follows: $\text{Reliability} = 2 M / (N1 + N2)$.

In this formula:

M refers to the number of units where both coders agreed on the assigned code.

N1 is the total number of units coded by the first coder.

N2 is the total number of units coded by the second coder.

The results of this calculation showed that the reliability between the two coders was 0.9. This value, which exceeds the acceptable threshold of 0.80 in many qualitative studies, indicates a high level of agreement and confidence in the coding process and consistency in the interpretation of the extracted components. This strengthens the validity of the study's findings and demonstrates that the coding was conducted systematically and accurately.

The components of destination branding in the Metaverse are outlined in [Table 3](#) according to the selected source.

The results of this study highlight the evolving role of the metaverse in the tourism industry. By identifying key branding components for tourism destinations in the Metaverse, this research emphasizes the increasing influence of digital spaces on tourist experiences and choices. [Table 4](#) describes the components of destination branding in the Metaverse.

[Figure 4](#) also illustrates the thematic network of the components of branding metaverse tourism destinations.

5. Discussion

Integrating virtual elements with traditional tourism enhances brand engagement while aligning with global trends in sustainable tourism. Additionally, the metaverse serves as a testing ground for new destination strategies, providing a cost-effective and low-risk platform to assess visitor interest before implementing real-world changes. The findings of this study suggest that to effectively brand tourism destinations in the metaverse and create a competitive advantage for real-world destinations, key components must be considered. Therefore, the 13 main branding components of Tourism Destinations in the metaverse are defined and outlined below by comparing the results to the literature review.

The first component, “technology and infrastructure”, is supported by [Al-kfairy et al. \(2024\)](#), highlighting that the metaverse is not just a new technology, but an innovation frontier that blends advanced technologies such as virtual and augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and blockchain. The second component, “Laws and Ethical Principles” aligns with the findings of ([Nagirikandalage et al., 2025](#)) and states that creating clear ethical guidelines and data privacy regulations is vital for building trust and mitigating potential risks in the metaverse. The third component, “Hyper-Personalized Experience”, is consistent with ([Buhalis et al., 2022](#)) study, underscoring the significance of enhancing tourists’ satisfaction.

The fourth component, “Type of experience (immersion)”, resonates with [Adel’s \(2023\)](#) findings, Emphasizing the effectiveness of these experiences. The fifth component, “Metaverse Attractions”, introduces a novel contribution, as it has not been addressed in previous studies. This originality underscores the importance of features, such as technical aspects of the metaverse, personalized avatars, and perceived service quality. The sixth component, “local community (avatars)”, supports the findings of [Jia et al. \(2023\)](#), who highlight the role of avatars in

Table 3 Components of destination branding in the metaverse			
Branding components of tourism destinations in the metaverse	Derived from the background research	Derived from the interviews	Derived from metaverse podcast
Technology and infrastructure	Al-kfairy et al. (2024)	*	
Laws and ethical principles	Nagirikandalage et al. (2025)		Episode 12
Hyper-personalized	Buhalis et al. (2022)	*	
Type of experience (Immersion)	Adel (2023)	*	Episode 13
Metaverse attractions		*	Episode 13
Local community (Avatars)	Jia et al. (2023)	*	Episode 13
Advertising	Dwivedi et al. (2023)	*	
Gamification	Jo (2023)	*	
Innovation in search		*	
Beyond the limits	Yang and Wang (2023)	*	Episode 11, 12
Sustainability	Adel (2023)	*	
Imagination		*	Episode 20
Brand influence		*	
Source(s): Derived from the adopted source			

Table 4 Description of components for destination branding in the metaverse

<i>Component</i>	<i>Description</i>
Technology and Infrastructure	Utilizing Artificial Intelligence, Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality, Digital Currencies, Blockchain, and other infrastructural elements to create immersive and interactive experiences in the Metaverse
Laws and ethical principles	Establishing rules and ethical guidelines on the Metaverse platform, preserving user data security, and setting ethical boundaries
Hyper-personalized	Providing Metaverse services tailored to users' preferences, expectations, values, and catering to the needs and personalities of tourists
Type of experience (Immersion)	Comprehensive interaction of tourists with the Metaverse environment, providing a complete sense of immersion
Metaverse attractions	Existence of attractions such as digital twins, digital souvenirs and visual and cognitive attractions.
Local community (Avatars)	3D digital representation of individuals as avatars in the Metaverse environment for establishing connections with others
Advertising	Digital marketing methods, specifically tailored to the nature of the Metaverse environment, offer customized advertisements that align with the preferences and target market
Gamification	Utilizing gamification techniques to create excitement, entertainment, and immersive experiences for users in the Metaverse environment
Innovation in search	Seeking destination exploration and discovery using the Metaverse
Beyond the limits	The philosophy of the Metaverse aims to eliminate various limitations, including Location, Time, and Cognitive limitations
Sustainability	Metaverse tourism aligns with global sustainable development goals, striving to reduce non-renewable energy consumption, promote environmental friendliness, and safeguard heritage
Imagination	Leveraging user imagination and mental visualization to recreate the Metaverse tourism destinations
Brand influence	The influence of a Metaverse brand or the evaluation of a Metaverse brand to improve the performance of digital marketing strategies for destinations
Source(s): Own construction	

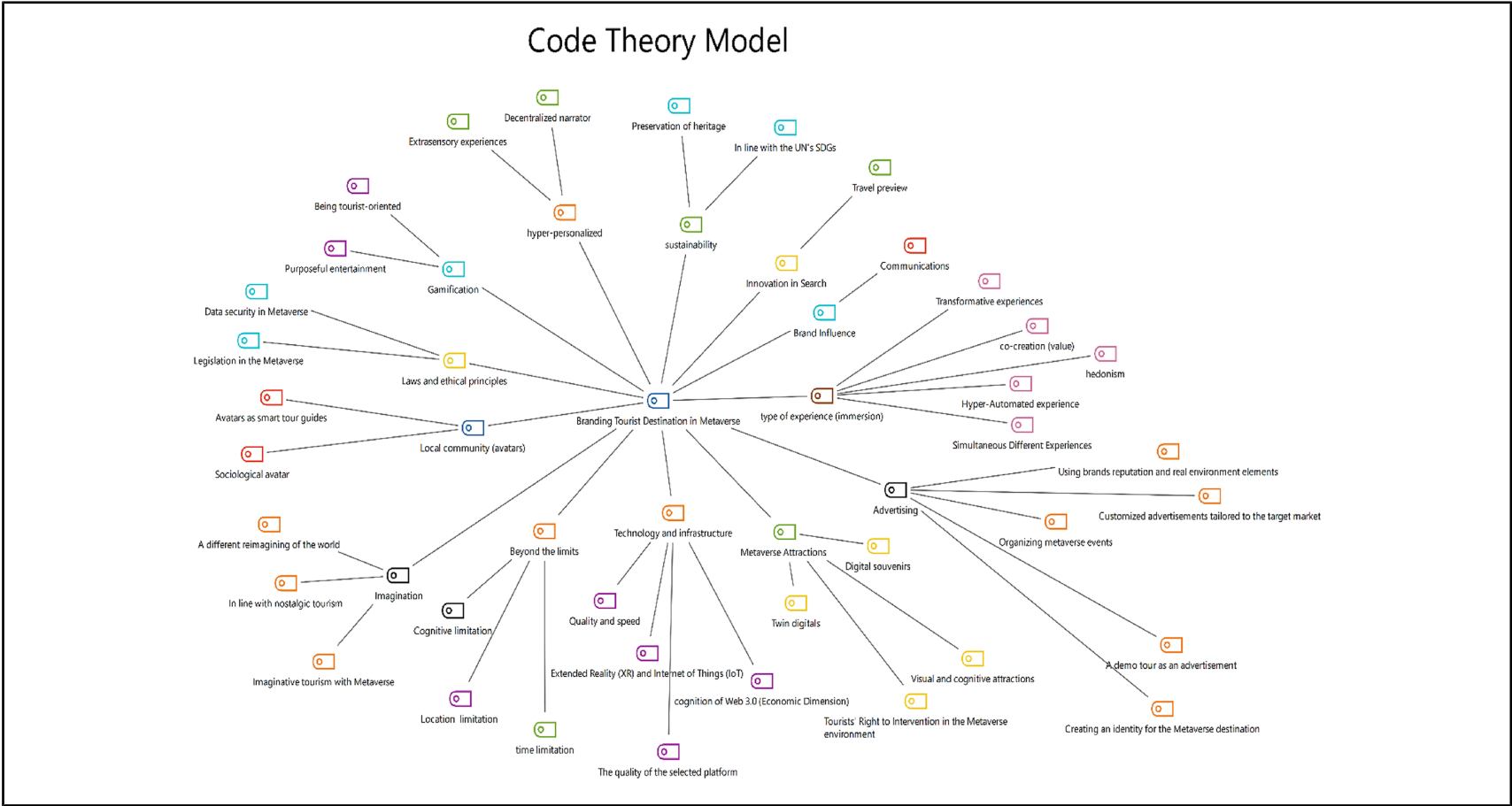
fostering interaction. The seventh component, “Advertising”, aligns with [Dwivedi et al. \(2023\)](#), emphasizing the need for innovative marketing strategies tailored to the metaverse.

The eighth component, “Gamification,” aligns with the findings of [Jo \(2023\)](#), who emphasizes that metaverse gamification can elevate tourist experiences. The ninth component, “Innovation in search”, presents another key contribution of this research, as it has not been explored in prior studies and refers to the use of the metaverse in destination search. The tenth component highlights “Beyond the Limits”, a perspective also discussed in [Yang and Wang \(2023\)](#), showcasing the metaverse’s role in eliminating barriers, and geographical boundaries. The eleventh component, “sustainability”, aligns with [Adel's \(2023\)](#) findings, underlining the need for adopting the metaverse in the tourism industry.

The twelfth component, “Imagination”, represents a novel insight of this study, as it has not been addressed in the existing literature. It refers to the mental visualization of tourists in the metaverse. Finally, the thirteenth component, “Brand Influence”, focuses on the continuous evaluation of brands. While [Karabacak and Gungor \(2023\)](#) discuss “brand evaluation”, “brand influence” refers to the brand’s power to impact consumer behavior, the market, and even society. It goes beyond evaluation and focuses on the changes driven by the brand. In summary, evaluation focuses on the brand’s status and performance, while influence emphasizes its power and impact on individuals and the environment. So, this component is another innovative contribution of this research.

These findings enhance the understanding of metaverse tourism by integrating both established concepts and emerging dimensions, offering valuable contributions to both theory and practice. The 13 key branding components of tourism destinations in the metaverse, along with their sub-components, are further examined below based on insights from the literature.

Figure 4 Theme network: branding components of tourism destinations in the metaverse. Output from MAXQDA software



5.1 Technology and infrastructure

This component examines the role of technology and infrastructure in enhancing the branding of tourism destinations within the metaverse, particularly through high-speed and high-bandwidth 5G mobile networks, where remote real-time presence can be improved (Buhalis *et al.*, 2022). The metaverse, considered part of the new generation of the internet known as Web 3.0 (Monaco and Sacchi, 2023) and according to Rosen (2021) offers opportunities to create, buy, and sell virtual land, properties, and digital assets through the decentralized platform supported by the Ethereum blockchain showcases the potential for new business models and widespread virtual experiences. Additionally, virtual reality technology creates an artificial environment where users are fully immersed in virtual surroundings (Steffen *et al.*, 2019). According to the references above, all four sub-components align with previous findings.

5.2 Laws and ethical principles

Like any society, the metaverse needs established laws and ethical principles to ensure a safe and secure environment. The primary concerns of the metaverse are data privacy preservation, cybercrime, and security (Buhalis *et al.*, 2023). However, according to Koohang *et al.* (2023), the metaverse, like other technologies, faces challenges in maintaining privacy, security, regulations, governance, infrastructure, and ethics. Both sub-components are consistent with past research.

5.3 Hyper-personalized experience

Metaverse tourism can provide services based on the preferences, expectations, and values of customers and can gather relevant data regarding the needs and personalities of tourists. As a result, the metaverse can utilize this collected data to offer hyper-personalized recommendations, and instant services, and ultimately enhance the satisfaction of tourists (Buhalis *et al.*, 2022). This feature is referred to as hyper-personalized. Another type of experience that falls under this component is the direct sensory experience that the mind receives from the metaverse environment and space, which is called the Extrasensory experience. Buhalis *et al.* (2022) define it as the reflection of enhanced sensory experiences made possible through the use of virtual and augmented technologies.

According to Ampountolas *et al.* (2024), the transformation of virtual travel with the metaverse requires more flexible travel options, personalized services, and enhanced entertainment. Koohang *et al.* (2023) suggest that virtual customer service representatives can further personalize the experience within the metaverse and provide a more tailored and contextualized informational reservation experience for each traveler. The sub-component “Decentralized narrator” refers to the ability of tourists in the metaverse to personalize their journey, take ownership of the environment, and craft their own story, becoming both the narrator and guide of their experience. This sub-component was derived from the interviews and represents the innovation of this study.

5.4 Type of experience (immersion)

Immersive experiences within the metaverse can significantly boost tourist satisfaction and their desire to revisit destinations (Tsai, 2022). Several components influence the effectiveness of these experiences, including interactivity, personalization, authenticity, and of course, immersion itself (Adel, 2023). This convergence of virtual and real elements within the metaverse changes the rules, norms, paradigms, and definitions of experiences, enhancing customer experiences (Prodinger and Neuhofer, 2023). One of the key features that distinguishes the metaverse from the current internet is its interoperability. This means that users in the metaverse can not only move from one space to another but also carry things like avatars with them. According to Al-fairy *et al.* (2024), while interoperability presents a technological challenge, it also represents an opportunity. User-generated content (UGC) also plays a significant role in the metaverse, enabling

individuals to be active creators and contributors rather than passive consumers. So, what fuels the metaverse is collaboration and co-creation.

According to [Buhalis and Sinarta \(2019\)](#), brands use technology, social media, and constant connectivity to enhance interaction and the co-creation of personalized customer services. Tourism and hospitality brands use technology to enhance consumer experiences through co-creation in environments like the metaverse, offering an innovative approach to creating shared value with consumers on platforms. [Tsai \(2022\)](#) also alludes to the notion of “Hedonism”, stating that in the metaverse, the presence of a personal presence alongside the hedonic total view contributes to enhancing the intention to visit a real tourist destination by providing enjoyment and happiness.

The first five sub-components align with findings from previous studies, while the latter four sub-components represent the innovations of this research. An innovative component is “Hyper-Automated experience”, which builds upon the findings of [Buhalis et al. \(2022\)](#), stating that it emphasizes the unique and personalized nature of experiences in metaverse tourism that cannot be replicated solely through automated services. In this research, we have termed it a “Hyper-Automated” experience, identifying it as one of the key contributions. For “Simultaneous Different Experiences”, individuals in the metaverse can have simultaneous different experiences.

Another sub-component is “continuity”. This unique capability is enhanced by the continuity and connectivity of the metaverse, where individuals can traverse seamlessly through interconnected digital spaces, moving from one space to another and cohesively interacting with each other. These components, derived from interviews and metaverse-related podcasts, represent the originality of this research.

5.5 Metaverse attractions

Available attractions not only encompass technical features of the metaverse environment such as aesthetics and sound quality but also refer to the right of tourist involvement in personalizing profiles (or avatars) and the quality of services perceived by tourists, leading to a sense of satisfaction and winning in the metaverse environment. According to [Gursoy et al. \(2022\)](#), the metaverse offers the feature of “try before you buy” by allowing customers to virtually visit hotels or restaurants, allowing them to experience and explore the interior spaces of hotels and restaurants, tourist attractions, flights, and other services they are interested in from the comfort of their homes without leaving their homes. [Shin and Kang \(2024\)](#) claimed, that the metaverse allows potential travelers to have virtual destination experiences before deciding to visit, so professionals in the destination field should pay attention to managing these platforms.

Digital twins also play a significant role in enhancing the attractions of metaverse tourism. [Luther et al. \(2023\)](#) also mention that digital twins in the metaverse provide an interactive virtual environment that reflects the real world and facilitates better decision-making in preventive destination maintenance, heritage management, and interpretation. [Buhalis et al. \(2022\)](#) express the need for designers to create maps in the metaverse that do not exist in the real world but are fully compatible and similar to a digital twin.

Here, the first sub-component was derived from previous research, while other three ones were innovations of this study. Among them is “Visual and cognitive attractions”, where the presence of realistic 3D images, high-quality graphics, aesthetics, interactive and immersive environments, and interactions with other entities and objects create visual and cognitive attractions in metaverse tourism. “Digital souvenirs”, one of the features of the metaverse is the use of NFTs, where for example, NFTs of artworks or handicrafts from the destination can be sold to metaverse tourists as souvenirs.

5.6 Local community (avatars)

Avatars serve as a digital representation of individuals within the metaverse, allowing them to interact with others, objects, and environments ([Jia et al., 2023](#)). [Dwivedi et al. \(2023\)](#) highlight the

potential of the metaverse to expand the physical world through augmented and virtual reality technologies. Avatars and holograms become the tools for seamless interaction in real and simulated environments. Research by [Shin and Kang \(2024\)](#) suggests that highly identifiable avatars can increase the appeal of both real and virtual travel experiences, even for those participating remotely.

Both sub-components were derived from interviews and represent the innovations of this study, including the “Sociological Avatar”. Avatars can be customized to reflect the sociocultural traits of a tourist destination. They can wear local clothing and accessories. This allows them to embody the characteristics of the location. Additionally, they can showcase regional dances, local games, and customs.

5.7 Advertising

The metaverse revolutionizes how destinations attract tourists. Customized advertisements are presented following the tastes and preferences of the target market, and showcasing demo tours of the Metaverse destination is used for advertising and attracting tourists. [Gursoy et al. \(2022\)](#) state that the Metaverse influences tourist experiences and consumer behavior, leading to the development of marketing strategies and operations. So, tourism marketing requires a shift in advertising methods and presenting a product and brand ([Rancati and d'Agata, 2022](#)). Traditional advertising methods no longer suffice; presenting products and brands requires a fresh approach.

[Buhalis et al. \(2022\)](#) believe that hospitality managers in the virtual world should develop their marketing strategies to expand service offerings, pricing strategies, and distribution mechanisms to attract and retain virtual users. According to [Dwivedi et al. \(2023\)](#), traditional marketing strategies may not perform similarly in the metaverse. Therefore, marketers need to plan, design, and adapt hybrid marketing strategies to better align with these two worlds. Since the metaverse creates a higher level of interaction, virtual influencers may surpass human influencers, and this increased interaction helps brands have more control over the personalities of their audience and provide values ([Koohang et al., 2023](#)). As a result, the use of the metaverse to create competitive differentiation and organize new consumer experiences will lead to the emergence of new business models ([Koohang et al., 2023](#)).

The first sub-component aligns with the findings of previous research, but the subsequent sub-components represent innovations from this study, including “customized advertisements tailored to the target market, organizing metaverse events, creating an identity for the Metaverse destination, and using brand reputation and real environment elements”.

Another sub-component is “A demo tour as an advertisement”, one of the best advertising methods possible in the metaverse. According to [Yoon and Nam \(2024\)](#), metaverse tourism significantly influences consumer behavior by facilitating travel planning, encouraging participation, and enhancing interaction. Therefore, the “demo tour”, which is original to this research and based on interviews, has the potential to enhance the genuine intention of visiting a tourist destination.

5.8 Gamification

Leveraging the unique features of the metaverse, gamified systems can empower tourists to act as immersive storytellers. [Baker et al. \(2023\)](#) suggest that tourists can not only immerse themselves in the visual, auditory, and tactile experiences of traditional tourism but also enhance their engagement through virtual avatars and gamification elements, gaining new interactive experiences and emotional satisfaction. According to [Xu et al. \(2021\)](#), developing gamification in the tourism industry, the growth of mobile gamers, and utilizing serious games in some recreational and professional activities have collectively created a sufficient market for the metaverse.

Both sub-components were derived from interviews and represent key innovations of this research, including “Being Tourist-Oriented” and “Purposeful Entertainment.” Given that individuals today engage in various forms of online gaming for entertainment, metaverse tourism leverages gamification to guide users toward purposeful entertainment. For example, they can virtually explore a metaverse destination.

5.9 Innovation in search

Here, innovation refers to the use of metaverse in destination search. According to [Buhalis et al. \(2023\)](#), the metaverse transforms travelers’ travel planning behavior and tourism management methods for suppliers in the coming decades, and it can drive tourists toward more purposeful destination selection. Although the metaverse will not replace real hospitality and tourism experiences, it will certainly change the ways of consuming hospitality and tourism products and services. With its innovative feature in destination search, the metaverse potentially changes travelers’ patterns toward purposeful and cost-effective tourism ([Gursoy et al., 2022](#)). [Koochang et al. \(2023\)](#) claimed as travelers in the metaverse can customize their experiences in the metaverse environment instead of relying on social media reviews, the metaverse is an ideal platform to assist in pre-trip planning.

The sub-component “Travel Preview” is based on previous research. According to [Rancati and d’Agata \(2022\)](#), the essence of the metaverse is demonstrated by providing tourists with opportunities such as previews of accommodation facilities and routes before purchase, enhancing the overall travel experience. However, the term “Travel Preview” is original to this study. Metaverse tourism reinforces this concept, as individuals may hesitate to commit to actual travel without first experiencing the destination through metaverse travel and obtaining accurate information.

5.10 Beyond the limits

The metaverse creates an endless virtual geographical space for users to choose and explore ([Buhalis et al., 2022](#)). Traditionally, tourism planning has been constrained by four components: location, time, cognitive limitations, and information access. However, the metaverse eliminates these barriers, geographical boundaries fade away, and current tourism planning models may become obsolete ([Yang and Wang, 2023](#)). Except for the first sub-component “Location limitation” mentioned in previous research, it includes travel to difficult destinations, the ability to repeat the real journey in the Metaverse, and travel to destinations that have changed their nature. The remaining components represent innovations of this study. For example, “Time limitation”, One of the features of virtual reality is that it allows tourists to embark on a journey at any convenient time without experiencing jet lag or disrupting their sleep schedule. In addition, in metaverse tourism, one can travel to Africa and visit indigenous tribes that no longer exist in that region.

Another sub-component is “Cognitive limitation”, which allows individuals to travel to a historical site and immerse themselves in the architectural changes and historical transformations of that place over generations in an evolutionary and immersive manner called “Evolutionary tours”, or to travel to impossible locations like the Himalayan Mountains.

5.11 Sustainability

The adoption of the metaverse in tourism has the potential to promote sustainable practices within the industry. According to [Adel \(2023\)](#), the adoption of the metaverse in the tourism industry promotes sustainable tourism and creates new revenue streams and global accessibility. Both sub-components align with the findings of previous research. According to [Koochang et al. \(2023\)](#), in the metaverse, tourists can sample various locations, especially when it comes to cultural heritage sites that can be visited through metaverse time travel, making it particularly significant.

5.12 Imagination

Imagination, or mental visualization, is a key feature in metaverse tourism. It empowers tourists to leverage their imagination and mental processing to envision and create vivid mental images of their desired travel destinations. This fosters a diversity of experiences even within the same metaverse destination, as individual tourists can have unique encounters.

All three sub-components are innovations of the current research. According to [Rancati and d'Agata \(2022\)](#), most people use technology to revive past experiences rather than living in the present moment. In addition, in the metaverse, users can explore their ancestral cities for ancestral tourism or revisit childhood locations for “nostalgic tourism”, especially benefiting migrants unable to return physically.

5.13 Brand influence

Continuous evaluation and refinement are crucial for brand success in any domain, and metaverse tourism is no exception. Brand evaluation in metaverse tourism involves assessing the influence of influencers in marketing activities, exploring new marketing strategies, and leveraging the creative potential of the virtual world ([Karabacak and Güngör, 2023](#)). Brands can create parallel marketing strategies, organize effective advertising campaigns, and address challenges such as online payment issues and fraud using blockchain technology, based on conducted research ([Aygün et al., 2022](#)).

The first sub-component “communication” aligns with the findings of previous research. The metaverse is considered a shared space where individuals can engage in various activities such as socializing, gaming, and commerce ([Lee et al., 2024](#)). The metaverse expands communications and offers brands opportunities to develop their market and participate in interactive marketing campaigns ([Mert Mentés, 2023](#)).

In conclusion, this comprehensive analysis of the 13 core components and their sub-components provides a foundational framework for understanding tourism destination branding within the metaverse. By addressing these components effectively, tourism destinations can enhance their competitiveness and secure a greater presence in the virtual. By bridging the gap between traditional tourism marketing strategies and the cutting-edge possibilities of the metaverse, this research opens up new avenues for enhancing tourist experiences and promoting destinations in an increasingly digital future.

6. Conclusions

In this study, a review of the existing literature and semi-structured interviews with 20 experts in the fields of tourism, the metaverse, and IT were conducted, along with the application of the netnography method. Since netnography can be combined with a wide range of techniques and research approaches ([Kozinets, 2010](#)), and due to the novel nature of “destination branding in the metaverse” and the lack of sufficient information on metaverse platforms, an additional data collection method was necessary. Consequently, follow-up unstructured interviews were conducted with 15 of the previous experts who had experience with metaverse platforms such as Roblox and Decentraland.

Using thematic analysis via MAXQDA software, 13 key factors for destination branding in the metaverse were identified. The findings of this study suggest that in order to brand tourism destinations in the metaverse and create a competitive advantage for real-world destinations, the following components should be considered:

- (1) Defined metaverse technologies and infrastructure, including high bandwidth, extended reality, the Internet of Things, and more.
- (2) Compliance with metaverse regulations and ethical principles.

- (3) Provision of hyper-personalized experiences for tourists by leveraging virtual and augmented reality technologies in the metaverse. This offers tourists a direct sensory experience, referred to as an “extrasensory experience”, where they act as decentralized narrators, personalizing their journeys, creating their own stories, and simultaneously serving as both narrators and guides of their experiences.
- (4) Immersive experiences utilizing the interactive capabilities of the metaverse. This involves co-creation of value by tourists, fostering interactive and engaging experiences, enhancing interoperability, and promoting a shared presence, continuity, and hedonism in the metaverse. These elements contribute to highly automated, transformative, and multi-layered experiences for tourists.
- (5) The presence of metaverse attractions, where digital twins play a crucial role in enhancing their appeal. Additionally, digital souvenirs, visual and cognitive attractions, and the ability for tourists to personalize attractions and avatars are key elements.
- (6) The use of avatars as intelligent tour guides and socio-cognitive avatars that aid in introducing and preserving the cultural and intangible heritage of metaverse tourism destinations.
- (7) Strategic advertising through customized advertisements, demo tours of tourism destinations, influencer marketing, hosting events on metaverse platforms, leveraging the reputation of real-world brands, and showcasing pre-designed options and facilities to establish an identity for metaverse destinations.
- (8) Gamification elements centered around tourists, leading to purposeful entertainment.
- (9) Branding that fosters innovation in search processes by offering previews of tourism destinations. This shapes tourists’ expectations in a targeted manner, introduces a novel travel pattern, allows for an alternative travel experience, facilitates informed destination selection, and ultimately reduces travel risks.
- (10) Consideration of overcoming limitations by presenting destinations in a way that minimizes spatial, temporal, and cognitive constraints for metaverse tourists.
- (11) Emphasis on sustainability in line with the United Nations’ sustainable tourism goals, ensuring the protection of cultural heritage.
- (12) Incorporation of imagination and re-imagining elements to create imaginative tourism experiences. This also enables the development of nostalgic metaverse tourism.
- (13) Continuous evaluation of branding effectiveness, referred to as “brand impact” in the metaverse context. Destination branding in the metaverse enhances brand impact by fostering connections among individuals in virtual environments and providing opportunities for brands to expand their interactive markets within the metaverse.

7. Implications

7.1 Theoretical implications

This study expands the theoretical understanding of how digital environments, like the metaverse, influence tourist behavior and destination branding. Identifying key components for branding tourism destinations within the metaverse integrates virtual and physical tourism strategies, reshaping how tourists perceive and engage with destinations. The research suggests that immersive digital experiences can enhance destination loyalty and brand equity, offering a new theoretical perspective on tourism marketing.

Additionally, the findings highlight the metaverse’s potential to support sustainable tourism by promoting local cultures and reducing the environmental footprint of traditional tourism. This

research paves the way for future studies on the integration of digital and physical tourism, contributing to a holistic understanding of tourism dynamics in a technology-driven era.

7.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide actionable insights for tourism authorities, destination marketers, and digital platform developers. By incorporating metaverse branding components, tourism officials can enhance destination visibility, attract a broader audience, and offer immersive pre-travel experiences. This approach enables destinations to differentiate themselves in a competitive market, test new tourism strategies in a low-risk environment, and create hybrid tourism models that integrate virtual and real-world experiences. Additionally, considering metaverse branding components can help policymakers address accessibility challenges, promote sustainable tourism, and engage tourists through interactive and personalized experiences. The dual focus on virtual and real-world tourism presents opportunities for tourism planners to target diverse audiences, customize experiences, and strengthen brand loyalty.

7.3 Future research

While this research provides a foundational framework for destination branding in the Metaverse, acknowledging its limitations opens pathways for future research. The study's reliance on a modest sample of experts. Exploring the impact of destination branding in the Metaverse on tourist behaviors and destination competitiveness would offer invaluable insights into the effectiveness of these strategies. Moreover, delving into the cultural nuances of branding in the Metaverse presents an opportunity to tailor experiences that resonate on a global scale, acknowledging the vast cultural diversity of potential users. Ethical considerations, such as data privacy and the authenticity of user experiences, need to be critically examined to ensure that the advancement of Metaverse branding remains user-centric and respects individual rights. Addressing these limitations and exploring the suggested areas for future research will solidify the proposed components and expand the understanding of Metaverse tourism's potential to revolutionize the tourism industry.

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