



Review Article

When Travel Becomes Impossible: Virtual Tourism as a Sucedaneum for the Tourist Experience

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Abstract

Tourism has traditionally been defined by travel to a destination outside one's usual environment. The development of immersive technologies 360-degree video, virtual reality, and telepresence devices invites a reconsideration of the relationship between tourism, mobility, and experience, particularly when travel is no longer simply avoided by choice but becomes difficult or altogether impossible. What becomes of the tourist relationship when the desire to travel persists while the capacity to travel fades? Drawing on a critical review of the literature on virtual tourism, telepresence, tourist experience, accessibility, and aging, this article proposes the concept of succeededaneous virtual tourism: a mediated tourist experience that preserves certain functions of the relationship to a destination when physical mobility is prevented. The term “sucedaneum” is preferred to “substitute” to signal that the virtual experience does not reproduce the corporeal experience of travel but offers a partial, functional response when that experience is no longer available. The article further introduces the notion of experiential accessibility, understood as the possibility of accessing certain dimensions of the tourist experience despite a strong limitation of physical access to the destination. The analysis shows that virtual tourism should be regarded neither as a simple digital reproduction of travel nor as its announced replacement. Its interest lies instead in its capacity to extend, transform, or maintain the tourist relationship in situations of constrained mobility. Aging constitutes a particularly telling illustration of this phenomenon, without exhausting the concept's field of application. The article concludes with implications for destination management and a research agenda addressing the empirical validation of the proposed framework.

Keywords

Virtual Tourism, Virtual Reality, Impeded Mobility, Aging, Tourist Experience, Experiential Accessibility

1. Introduction

At first glance, tourism appears inseparable from travel. To travel is to temporarily leave one's usual environment, to reach a destination, and to experience elsewhere. This association is so structuring that it occupies a central place in the international statistical definitions of tourism, where the notion of ‘usual environment’ precisely distinguishes visitors from residents and from persons engaged in their everyday activities.

It fulfills an essential methodological function: measuring flows, arrivals, overnight stays, expenditures, and the economic returns of tourism requires the ability to delimit, spatially and temporally, what does and does not belong to the tourism phenomenon.

This statistical self-evidence, however, leaves little room for a question that might elsewhere seem paradoxical: can one

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still speak of tourism when there is no longer any travel? The question takes on a new dimension with the development of immersive digital technologies. Virtual environments, 360-degree videos, virtual reality and, more broadly, telepresence devices now make it possible to explore distant destinations without physically travelling to them. Technology does not merely add one more promotional tool to the arsenal of destinations: it progressively transforms the ways in which tourist places are accessed, represented, imagined, and experienced.

This evolution does not, however, mean that physical travel has become obsolete. The literature on virtual reality in tourism shows, on the contrary, the multiplicity of its uses: inspiration, promotion, trip preparation, experience enrichment, accessibility, heritage mediation, and entertainment [1], without ever presenting corporeal travel as condemned to disappear. Research dealing specifically with the question of substitution points in the same direction: in a recent study based on interviews conducted after viewing 360-degree immersive videos, Yoon [2] concludes that virtual tourism generally continues to be perceived as an experience distinct from corporeal tourism, precisely because certain phases of the tourist experience serendipitous discovery, the unexpected, the physical effort of travel remain absent or greatly reduced in the virtual environment.

This limitation invites a reformulation of the question. It may not be a matter of asking whether virtual reality can replace travel, but rather what the tourist experience can become when physical travel is no longer possible. This reformulation makes it possible to address a situation that remains insufficiently theorized: that of people who continue to desire travel, who feel a lasting attachment to certain destinations, who recognize themselves in a traveler identity, but whose possibilities for travel have become durably reduced.

Aging constitutes, in this respect, a particularly revealing situation, without exhausting the phenomenon it helps to illuminate. It should obviously not be equated with an incapacity to travel: many older people travel, sometimes more than younger generations, and advancing age does not mechanically translate into a withdrawal from tourist mobility. It can nonetheless be accompanied by physical, economic, or social constraints likely to restrict it. A study conducted among older adults living in residential care thus showed that financial and mobility barriers could lead to the cessation of conventional tourism, even as the desire to travel persisted; in that same study, repeated exposure to virtual-reality tourism sessions was associated with reduced anxiety and fatigue, as well as increased social engagement and perceived quality of life [3].

It is a situation of this kind that gave rise to the reflection developed here. Its starting point is concrete: a French couple, accustomed for years to planning regular stays in Senegal, comes to doubt whether it can continue to travel, as the wife seventy years old sees her mobility strongly reduced following knee surgery. This case does not constitute an empirical inquiry and makes no claim to represent older tourists as a whole. It plays a heuristic role here: it renders visible a tension between two terms usually thought together but which can now

become dissociated the desire to travel and the capacity to move.

From this situation emerges a more general question, which structures the article as a whole: to what extent can a virtual tourist experience preserve certain functions of the relationship to a destination when physical travel becomes impossible? To answer it, we propose the concept of *succedaneous* virtual tourism. The choice of the term ‘*succedaneum*’ rather than ‘*substitute*’ is deliberate: it is not a matter of treating the virtual experience as equivalent to physical travel a virtual environment does not fully restore the corporeal, sensory, social, and unpredictable dimensions of travel but of recognizing that it can fulfil certain functions of travel once travel itself ceases to be accessible.

The article pursues three objectives: to clarify the relationships between tourism, mobility, and experience in an era of virtualization; to define the concept of *succedaneous* virtual tourism; and to introduce the notion of experiential accessibility, which makes it possible to think through the forms of access to a destination that remain possible when physical access is strongly limited. The article is organized in seven parts. The first sets out the conceptual approach adopted. The second revisits the relationships between tourism, mobility, and experience. The third analyzes the contributions and limitations of virtual tourism, notably through the notion of telepresence. The fourth discusses the question of substitution in light of the most recent research. The fifth develops the concept of *succedaneous* virtual tourism and that of experiential accessibility. The sixth draws out the implications for tourist destinations and for reflection on senior tourism. The seventh, finally, examines the limitations of the proposal and outlines a research agenda.

2. A Conceptual Approach Based on a Critical Review of the Literature

This article follows a conceptual rather than an empirical approach, a choice directly linked to the nature of the question raised. It is not a matter of statistically measuring the use of virtual tourism by people prevented from travelling, nor of experimentally evaluating the effectiveness of virtual reality among a given population: such an undertaking would require a dedicated survey of several groups facing different mobility constraints, which remains to be conducted. The objective pursued here is different: starting from existing research, to identify the conditions under which a virtual tourist experience is likely to fulfil certain functions of physical travel, and to construct a conceptual framework for thinking through this situation.

This methodological choice is also justified by the emerging character of the problem. Research on virtual tourism lies at the intersection of several fields: tourism studies, marketing, geography, the psychology of experience, immersive technologies, accessibility, and aging that do not always engage in direct dialogue with one another. The ambition of this article is precisely to bring these bodies of work into relation, rather

than to offer yet another inventory of them.

The literature review was structured around four thematic clusters: work on virtual tourism and virtual reality applied to tourism; work on tourist experience and the related notions of presence, telepresence, immersion, and engagement; work questioning the substitution and complementarity between virtual experience and physical travel; and, finally, work relating to tourism accessibility, constrained mobility, and aging. The corpus privileges peer-reviewed scientific publications, setting aside strictly technical works with no bearing on tourist experience. The selected texts were examined through four cross-cutting questions: What place does physical travel occupy in the definition of tourism? Which dimensions of experience can be produced virtually? Is the virtual conceived as a complement, a substitute, or an alternative to travel? What happens when physical mobility itself becomes a constraint? This reading grid allows the review to move from a descriptive survey to a problematized reading of the literature, on which the following sections build.

3. Tourism, Mobility and Experience: The Centrality of Travel

3.1. Travel as the Statistical Foundation of Tourism

Travel has historically constituted one of the main criteria distinguishing tourism from other leisure practices. International statistical definitions apprehend tourism through the activities of people travelling to places outside their usual environment, for a limited duration and for varied motivations; the notion of usual environment plays a decisive role here. This conception has an undeniable methodological function: without it, it would be impossible to seriously measure flows, overnight stays, or the economic impact of the sector. It nonetheless presents a limitation once one seeks to understand contemporary transformations of the tourist experience, since it leads to a very close equation of tourism with travel, leaving little room for the idea that travel enables the experience without, on its own, exhausting its substance.

Francophone tourism geography has, moreover, sought for several years to loosen this equivalence. The MIT team (Mobilities, Itineraries, Territories), gathered around Rémy Knafou, proposes to define the tourist not from the supposed attraction of a place, but from the intentionality of the person who travels there: 'one is not born a tourist, one becomes one' [4] meaning that it is the traveler's project, the search for otherness, the desire for re-creation through travel, that institutes a place as touristic, rather than the reverse. This inversion of perspective, starting from the subject rather than the place, is valuable for our purposes: if it is intention and the relationship to otherness that define the tourist relationship more than the mere material fact of travel, then the question of whether this intention can be exercised, at least partially, in the absence of

travel becomes a legitimate question rather than a contradiction in terms. It is precisely this intentionality that will be found further on as a constitutive condition of succedaneous virtual tourism, allowing a continuity to be conceived between the tourist in the full sense and the one whose mobility fades without the underlying project disappearing.

3.2. Tourism as Experience and as Gaze

Tourism indeed involves a particular way of looking at, feeling, and interpreting places. The work of Urry and Larsen [5] has shown how inseparable it is from the production of images, gazes, and social performances. The notion of the 'tourist gaze' has nonetheless been criticized for its overly exclusive visual dimension: extensions of this approach have emphasized the bodily, sensory, and performative dimensions of experience, recalling that travelling is never reducible to seeing. This dual reading matters for our purposes: if tourism is not only travel to a place but also a way of entering into relation with that place, then at least part of this relationship can potentially be mediated inviting the question of which components of the tourist experience depend closely on travel, and which can be partially transposed at a distance.

3.3. A Profoundly Embodied Experience

It would nonetheless be hazardous to reduce tourist experience to a mere consumption of images. Travelling engages the body: one walks, one tires, one feels the heat, one hears the sounds of a market or a street, one tastes unfamiliar dishes, one perceives smells, one meets people sometimes by chance, one adapts to local constraints, one confronts the unexpected. This bodily dimension constitutes precisely one of the structural limitations of virtual tourism. A virtual visit to Dakar or Saly may restore a landscape, an architecture, the movement of a crowd; it does not, however, reproduce the heat of the air, the smells, the textures, the spontaneous interactions with residents, the concrete constraints of travel, or the sensations that the traveler's body experiences in spite of itself. It is precisely for this reason that this article refuses to consider virtual reality as an equivalent of travel: physical tourism moves the body toward the destination, whereas virtual tourism moves the experience toward the user. This asymmetry constitutes, as will be seen, the keystone of the entire proposal developed here.

4. Virtual Tourism: From Representation to Telepresence

4.1. An Old Aspiration in a New Technological Form

The idea of travelling without moving is not, in itself, radically new. Before the advent of virtual reality, travelers could

already discover territories through photographs, maps, narratives, films, or television documentaries. What changes with contemporary digital technologies is the degree of interactivity and immersion they make possible. Virtual reality allows the user to enter a simulated digital environment and to develop a sense of presence, or telepresence [6]. Since the foundational work of Guttentag [1], the literature has emphasized the potential of these devices for promotion, trip planning, education, heritage conservation, and the enrichment of the tourist experience itself, without concealing their limitations, notably linked to technological constraints, the perceived artificiality of the simulated environment, and the necessarily bounded duration of the experience.

4.2. Telepresence, or Being Here While Feeling Elsewhere

The notion of telepresence is particularly useful for thinking through this apparently paradoxical situation: being physically here while experiencing the feeling of being elsewhere. Technology does not actually move the body; it moves, instead, part of one's attention, perception, and experience toward another environment. This distinction is decisive for our argument: virtual tourism does not produce a physical presence at the destination, but it can produce a mediated presence. We consider this mediated presence to be one of the necessary, though not sufficient, conditions as will be seen further on for the virtual to fulfil certain functions usually associated with tourism. A recent systematic review of telepresence research across hospitality, tourism and other fields confirms that the concept remains unevenly operationalized between industries, and calls for tourism-specific models capable of accounting for its psychological and behavioural effects rather than treating it as a purely technical property of a device [7].

4.3. A Gradation of Virtual Experiences

Not all digital experiences, however, sit on the same plane, and it is important to distinguish them by their degree of mediation. Four levels can thus be identified, from the most elementary to the most fully developed: an information level, where the destination is evoked through photographs, texts, or maps; a representation level, where videos or virtual tours show it more continuously; an immersion level, proper to 360-degree environments and virtual reality as such; and an interactive telepresence level, where the experience becomes immersive, interactive, and potentially social. This gradation matters because the potential for continuity of the tourist experience probably does not depend on the mere existence of a digital device, but on the quality of the mediation it offers.

4.4. A Rapidly Expanding Research Field

This gradation finds an echo in the most recent literature. In a systematic review devoted to virtual reality in tourism and

hospitality, Calisto and Sarkar [8] propose organizing the identified uses around the nine stages of the tourist consumer journey, from initial inspiration to the sharing of the experience after the stay, passing through information search, booking, anticipation, the stay itself, and its evaluation. This stage-based reading confirms that virtual reality does not play a single, homogeneous role in the tourist experience: its contribution differs depending on whether it intervenes upstream of the trip, as a tool for inspiration or preparation, during the stay, as a complement to interpretation, or afterward, as a memorial extension. The authors further note that research on the subject remains largely centered on the technological aspects of these devices, to the detriment of a finer understanding of their effects on lived experience and on travelers' actual behavior, a gap that the notion of *succedaneous* virtual tourism, developed further on, seeks precisely to address for the specific case of impeded mobility. The rapid diffusion of related technologies, such as the metaverse, further accentuates this expansion of the field: Buhalis, Leung, and Lin [9] show that these convergent environments, in which the physical and digital worlds communicate continuously, open new possibilities for tourist experience at a distance, without their effects on the relationship between travelers and destinations having yet been fully explored. Empirical work on non-immersive virtual reality points in a similar direction: at a World Heritage site, mental imagery and the vividness of the simulated environment were found to predict telepresence, which in turn shaped satisfaction and visit intention, suggesting that even comparatively simple virtual formats can generate a meaningful sense of presence [10].

5. The Problem of Substitution

5.1. The question of Replacing Travel

The literature on virtual tourism frequently raises the question of substitution, following an apparently simple line of reasoning: if a destination can be visited virtually, why continue to travel there physically? This question is only legitimate on the assumption that the two experiences are equivalent yet the most recent research shows precisely that this equivalence remains far from established. In a study based on interviews conducted after viewing 360-degree immersive videos, Yoon [2] shows that virtual tourism is generally not perceived as a complete substitute for corporeal tourism, notably because certain phases of the tourist experience embodied anticipation, serendipitous discovery, the return and the retelling of the trip remain absent or greatly attenuated in the virtual environment.

This conclusion echoes and extends the earlier work of Guttentag [11], who from the outset rejects the idea of a generalized replacement of conventional tourism by virtual reality, preferring instead a substitution acceptance model. This model organizes the determinants of such acceptance into three families of factors: user characteristics age, resources,

familiarity with the technology, but also the constraints specific to their situation; the characteristics of the sought experience certain experiences, more contemplative or cognitive, lend themselves better to mediation than others, more sensory or social; and the intrinsic quality of the virtual reality device used. The value of this reading, for our purposes, is that it shifts the question from a binary plane (does the virtual replace travel, or not?) to a gradual and contextual one (under what conditions, for whom, and for what type of experience can the virtual be accepted as a sufficient response?). It is precisely on this gradual and contextual plane that the proposal developed in this article is situated: we add to it the variable, absent from Guttentag's model, of the chosen or constrained character of the substitution situation itself.

5.2. Chosen Substitution and Constrained Substitution

This conclusion nonetheless invites the introduction of a distinction that the existing literature does not explicitly formalize, and which constitutes one of this article's contributions: that which separates chosen substitution from constrained substitution. In the first case, the traveler could materially travel but nonetheless chooses a virtual experience out of preference, environmental sensitivity, or simple curiosity about the technology. In the second, the traveler would like to travel but no longer can. These two situations must not be conflated: in the first, the virtual competes with the physical; in the second, it comes to compensate, partially, for the impossibility of the physical. It is this second situation, constrained substitution, that lies at the heart of the reflection developed in this article.

5.3. When the Desire to Travel Outlives Mobility

The case of older adults makes this distinction particularly visible. In the study already mentioned, conducted among eighteen older adults living in residential care, Fiocco et al. [3] show that most participants had ceased travelling because of health, mobility, or financial constraints, while retaining a marked interest in travel. The authors observe positive effects associated with repeated virtual-reality tourism sessions on several well-being indicators: anxiety, fatigue, social engagement, and perceived quality of life. A related line of work on the well-being of institutionalized older adults similarly stresses that the psychological value of travel does not disappear when physical mobility declines, but instead calls for mediated arrangements capable of sustaining it [12]. This finding does not, of course, mean that virtual reality replaces physical travel; it indicates something more subtle, and more important for our purposes: tourist experience can retain real value for individuals who are no longer able to access physical tourism. It is on this observation that the conceptual proposal developed in the following section is built.

6. Succedaneous Virtual Tourism and Experiential Accessibility

6.1. Complement, Substitute, Succedaneum: Three Notions to Distinguish

Three notions must be carefully distinguished. The complement designates a situation in which the virtual enriches physical travel without replacing it: the case, for example, of an augmented-reality application consulted during a site visit. The substitute designates a situation in which the virtual takes the place of physical travel, whether this replacement is occasional or lasting. The succedaneum, finally, designates a different situation, activated precisely because physical travel is no longer accessible. This third term seems to us the most appropriate to characterize the situation at hand. A succedaneum, by definition, is not a perfect equivalent; it is an imperfect but functional solution, mobilized once the original solution has ceased to be available a nuance that French renders more finely than the English 'substitute,' often used without this gradation.

We therefore define succedaneous virtual tourism as a modality of tourist experience mediated by immersive digital technologies, mobilized when a person wishes to maintain a relationship with a destination but encounters a lasting or significant constraint on physical mobility, in order to preserve certain functions of the tourist experience without claiming to fully reproduce corporeal travel. This definition rests on four conditions, which must be met simultaneously for one to legitimately speak of succedaneous virtual tourism rather than an ordinary consumption of digital content.

6.2. Four Constitutive Conditions

A tourist intention. Randomly watching a video of Senegal online is not sufficient to characterize a virtual tourist experience. Such an experience presupposes an explicit intention: to discover, to rediscover, to explore, to learn, to remember, or simply to maintain a relationship with a destination. It is this intention that distinguishes an ordinary consumption of digital content from a genuine mediated tourist experience.

A mobility constraint. The second constitutive element is the existence of a genuine constraint on physical mobility—medical, age-related, economic, social, environmental, or institutional. Aging constitutes a particularly visible case, but by no means an exclusive one: a person with a disability, a resident of an area subject to movement restrictions, or an individual facing lasting financial difficulties may equally legitimately find themselves in a situation of constrained substitution.

A maintained tourist function. Finally, the experience must fulfil at least one of the following five tourist functions: discovery, to access places no longer physically reachable;

memory, to revisit places already seen; attachment, to maintain an affective relationship with a destination; learning, to discover a culture, a history, or a heritage; and sociability, to share an experience with others. These five functions are unlikely to be substitutable with equal efficiency by the virtual, which constitutes a research avenue in its own right. We return to this in the final part of the article.

6.3. A Typology of Physical/Virtual Relationships

These distinctions can be synthesized in a typology crossing two criteria: the effective possibility of physical travel, on the one hand, and recourse or not to virtual mediation, on the other (Table 1). This typology constitutes one of the article's main conceptual contributions: it avoids treating all uses of virtual tourism as a homogeneous phenomenon, whereas they cover very different logics and functions depending on whether physical travel remains possible, chosen, or definitively prevented.

Table 1. *Typology of configurations between physical travel and virtual mediation.*

Configuration	Resulting situation
Travel possible, no virtual mediation	Conventional physical tourism
Travel possible, with virtual mediation	Substitutive virtual tourism (chosen substitution)
Travel prevented, no virtual mediation	Absence of tourist relationship (dormant relationship)
Travel prevented, with virtual mediation	Succedaneous virtual tourism (constrained substitution)

The distinction between substitute and succedaneum, already introduced above, finds here its clearest translation: in substitutive virtual tourism, travel remains possible but is not undertaken by choice; in succedaneous virtual tourism, it is prevented or strongly constrained, and recourse to the virtual then responds to necessity rather than preference.

6.4. Experiential Accessibility: A Complementary Concept

The concept of succedaneous virtual tourism leads to a second proposal. Tourism accessibility is generally conceived in physical terms: accessible transport, adapted accommodation, infrastructure, equipment, signage, a dimension that remains obviously indispensable and that no digital mediation could replace. It does not, however, address every situation: what

can be offered to a person who, despite continual improvements in infrastructure, can no longer genuinely undertake a long journey? It is to answer this question that we propose the notion of experiential accessibility, defined as the possibility, for an individual, of accessing certain dimensions of the tourist experience of a destination despite the impossibility or strong limitation of their physical access to it. This notion does not replace physical accessibility; it complements it, opening a space for reflection on situations where physical accessibility, despite every effort, remains insufficient. Recent work on accessible tourism technology reaches a comparable conclusion from a disability-studies perspective, arguing that digital tools can widen the range of tourist experiences available to people with disabilities without thereby resolving the underlying question of physical access [13]. A case study of virtual-reality applications developed for elderly and disabled residents of a mid-sized city similarly found that virtual exposure to destinations could support a sense of participation in tourism among people for whom physical travel remained largely out of reach, while cautioning that such tools work best as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, broader accessibility efforts [14].

6.5. A New Reading of the Tourist: The Impeded Tourist

This proposal gives rise to an analytical category that could be termed the impeded tourist. This is not a person who does not wish to travel, but one who wishes to travel, maintains a lasting relationship with a destination, but can no longer physically access it. This figure has the merit of breaking with a binary representation, tourist or non-tourist, to open an intermediate space in which different forms of relationship to a destination can exist, more or less mediated, more or less substitutive of earlier forms of mobility.

6.6. The Temporalities of Virtual Tourism

Succedaneous virtual tourism does not constitute an isolated category: it takes its place within a broader chronology of digital uses surrounding travel, which needs to be clearly distinguished. Before departure, preparatory virtual tourism helps in choosing, anticipating, and projecting oneself into a still-unknown destination. During the stay, complementary virtual tourism can enrich the physical experience, an augmented-reality application at a heritage site, interpretive content consulted on the spot. After the return, memorial virtual tourism allows the memory to be extended, shared, and revived. When the return itself becomes impossible, finally, this ordinary chronology reaches its limit: it is at precisely this moment that succedaneous virtual tourism can be activated, no longer as one stage among others in the tourist journey, but as what takes over when the physical journey can no longer continue (Table 2).

Table 2. *The temporalities of virtual tourism, from prepared travel to travel become impossible.*

Moment	Type	Function
Before departure	Preparatory	Choosing and anticipating the destination
During the stay	Complementary	Enriching the on-site experience
After the return	Memorial	Extending and sharing the memory
Travel becomes impossible	Succedaneous	Taking over from physical travel

This sequencing has implications beyond mere classification: it shows that succedaneous virtual tourism does not introduce a practice radically foreign to ordinary tourist experience, but rather extends, in a context of constraint, uses of digital technology already widely normalized at other moments of travel. This also helps explain why a person who has already, in the past, used preparatory or memorial virtual content for a given destination might be more inclined to accept, when the time comes, a form of succedaneous virtual tourism for that same destination, a hypothesis that connects to the third proposition formulated further on, concerning the role of prior attachment.

7. Implications for Destinations and Senior Tourism

7.1. From Promotion to Relationship

Traditionally, a destination seeks above all to attract new visitors. Virtualization opens a complementary perspective: that of maintaining a relationship with those who can no longer come. A destination would then no longer be limited to saying ‘come and visit us’; it could also say ‘stay in touch with us.’ This evolution seems particularly relevant for destinations that host, over time, regular visitors or aging seasonal residents, a situation found notably in certain Senegalese seaside destinations long frequented by a European clientele.

7.2. The Remote Visitor and the Second Life of Places

A former tourist can thus become what might be called a remote visitor. They no longer necessarily consume accommodation, transport, catering, or excursions; they can nonetheless continue to consume heritage, culture, images, narratives, experiences, and interactions. The value produced by this relationship is then no longer necessarily economic in the classical sense: it becomes affective, memorial, cultural, and

relational. A person who spent several years travelling regularly to the same region could thus mobilize a virtual experience not to discover an unfamiliar territory, but to reconnect with a territory to which they remain attached. Research on place attachment recalls that the relationship to a destination is never purely functional: it is also affective and identity-related, and is built over time [15]. Research on virtual reality is also beginning to show that immersive experiences can help build or reinforce this type of relationship. This observation suggests that succedaneous virtual tourism can play, for some individuals, a role of biographical continuity, allowing memories and attachments built over a life trajectory to be reactivated through digital mediation.

7.3. Aging as Transformation, Not Disappearance, of Tourism

At this stage, it is important not to fall into a strictly deficit-based view of aging. Growing older does not mechanically mean traveling less; it can mean transforming the modalities of one's relationship to travel. A person may thus move, gradually and without abrupt rupture, from conventional physical travel to more accommodated travel, and then, eventually, to a relationship with a destination maintained at a distance. This transition deserves to be studied not as the disappearance of the tourist, but as the transformation of their relationship to mobility, a transformation in which succedaneous virtual tourism can find its place, without ever fully substituting for physical travel.

7.4. An Ethical Dimension: The Virtual Must Not Become an Imposed Substitute

This reflection also carries an ethical dimension that would be imprudent to underestimate. It would be problematic to consider that older, disabled, or mobility-impaired people no longer need physical accessibility once they can ‘travel’ virtually. Such a reading would insidiously turn the virtual into an imposed replacement solution, whereas our proposal moves in the opposite direction: succedaneous virtual tourism should be conceived as an additional possibility when physical travel is no longer accessible, never as a justification for the absence of accessibility at destinations themselves.

7.5. Operational Avenues for Destination Management Organizations

Without claiming to transform this conceptual reflection into an operational manual, a few concrete avenues can be sketched for destination management organizations (tourist offices, national promotion agencies, site managers). A first avenue would consist of explicitly distinguishing, within the immersive content offered by a destination, between content aimed at short, spectacular promotion oriented toward commercial conversion, and content that could constitute an offer

of continuity-longer, more narrative, designed specifically for regular or former visitors whose mobility has diminished. These two registers follow different production logics and would benefit from not being conflated within a single piece of content.

A second avenue concerns the identification of this public. The databases held by many tourist destinations: former hotel client files, tourist office mailing lists, networks of former seasonal residents, could be mobilized, with all necessary precautions regarding personal data protection, to offer aging former visitors content designed specifically for them, rather than the same promotional content aimed at new prospects. A third avenue concerns the design of this content itself: rather than reproducing the most conventional images of a destination (beaches, hotels, iconic landscapes), an offer of *succedaneous* virtual tourism would benefit from favoring longer, more contemplative formats, giving the remote visitor time to recapture an atmosphere rather than simply reviewing attractions. A fourth avenue, finally, would involve destinations more closely engaging local communities in the production of this content, if only to avoid the pitfall of standardization mentioned above, and to ensure that the relationship maintained at a distance remains faithful to the complexity of the territory rather than to its merely touristic image.

These avenues remain, at this stage, working hypotheses rather than validated recommendations: they would benefit from being discussed with practitioners themselves, and tested with the relevant publics, before claiming any normative reach.

8. Limitations of the Model and Research Agenda

8.1. Practical Limitations of the Concept

Several limitations must be taken seriously. The digital divide constitutes the first of these: the people most likely to directly benefit from these experiences, because of their age or mobility constraints, are sometimes those with the least familiarity with digital tools, risking the creation of a new form of exclusion rather than its resorption. The cost of immersive equipment constitutes a second limitation: experiential accessibility presupposes both economic and technical accessibility, without which it remains a theoretical horizon. The quality of the experience itself constitutes a third: a mediocre, poorly designed, or weakly interactive virtual experience risks producing low engagement, or even reinforcing the sense of loss rather than compensating for it. The risk of frustration, a fourth limitation, deserves particular attention: the virtual can remind the user of what they can no longer do. A person ardently wishing to return to Senegal might feel genuine satisfaction upon virtually discovering Saly, while simultaneously experiencing heightened frustration at the impossibility of actually going there an ambivalence that would deserve empirical study. The risk of standardized representation, finally, should

not be neglected: a virtual experience of Saly might privilege beaches, hotels, landscapes, and the most photogenic attractions, to the detriment of residents, ordinary neighborhoods, daily activities, and the contradictions specific to the territory, raising, for virtual tourism, the same question of representation that has long run through physical tourism.

8.2. Limitations of the Article and Research Avenues

This contribution is deliberately conceptual and presents, as such, several limitations that must be explicitly acknowledged. The concept of *succedaneous* virtual tourism has not yet been subjected to systematic empirical validation. The case of the French couple mobilized in the introduction is only a heuristic vignette and cannot in any way be considered representative of a broader population. The literature on immersive technologies is, moreover, evolving rapidly: the technical capabilities of virtual reality, augmented reality, so-called ‘metaverse’ environments, and haptic devices could, in the coming years, substantially transform the very conditions of substitution [9]. The psychological effects of virtual tourism, finally, likely vary considerably depending on individuals, their personal history, and their relationship to technology.

These limitations open several research avenues. A first study could survey older adults who have ceased or greatly reduced their travel, in order to measure their actual interest in different forms of virtual experience. A second could compare the reactions of former tourists of a destination with those of non-visitors when faced with the same virtual experience, in order to empirically test the biographical continuity hypothesis raised above. A third could compare a virtual experience undertaken alone with one undertaken accompanied and socially shared. A fourth could focus directly on tourist destinations themselves, and on their actual capacity to produce immersive experiences that are both accessible and faithful to the complexity of the territories they represent. A fifth, finally, could seek to more precisely measure the relationship between immersion, sense of presence, attachment to the destination, and continuity of the tourist relationship over time.

Three general propositions can, at this stage, be formulated as hypotheses for future research. First, the stronger the physical mobility constraint and the more vivid the desire to maintain a relationship with a destination, the more likely a virtual experience is to take on a *succedaneous* rather than merely complementary function, this relationship itself depending on attachment to the destination, prior tourist experience, the degree of technical immersion, digital accessibility, and the social dimension of the sought experience. Second, the potential for partial substitution by virtual tourism probably depends less on the sophistication of the technology itself than on the tourist function sought: contemplative, cognitive, and memorial functions might be more readily mediated than experiences strongly dependent on corporeality, physical sensation,

or spontaneous interaction with others. Third, prior attachment to a destination could reinforce the value of succedaneous virtual tourism, transforming the virtual experience from a simple discovery into a form of memorial and affective reactivation opening a specific research avenue on former tourists and regular visitors of the same destination.

8.3. A Note on the Epistemological Status of the Proposed Concept

It remains, in closing, to clarify the epistemological status of the proposal defended in this article. Succedaneous virtual tourism is not presented here as an already stabilized empirical category, but as an ideal type in the Weberian sense: a construct that accentuates certain features of a more diffuse reality in order to render it thinkable and comparable. Few concrete situations will correspond exactly to the four conditions set out above; most will approach or depart from them to varying degrees, depending on individuals, destinations, and moments in a biographical trajectory. It is precisely the function of a concept of this kind to provide a point of reference from which such variations can be described and discussed, rather than to claim to exhaust from the outset the diversity of real situations. This methodological caution does not weaken the scope of the proposal; on the contrary, it clarifies its conditions of use, and invites future empirical research to treat succedaneous virtual tourism as a working hypothesis to be tested, rather than as an already established fact.

9. Conclusions

Tourism remains historically associated with travel, and this association remains essential for understanding tourist flows and distinguishing tourism from other forms of leisure. The development of immersive technologies nonetheless compels a reconsideration of what becomes of the relationship to a destination when physical travel ceases to be possible. The stake is not to claim that virtual reality will one day replace travel: available research shows, on the contrary, that virtual tourism does not fully reproduce corporeal experience, and that its capacity for complete substitution remains, to date, limited.

The stake lies elsewhere: in the still insufficiently theorized situation of individuals who wish to continue travelling, or to maintain a relationship with a destination, but whose capacities for travel have become strongly reduced. In this specific situation, the virtual can acquire a new function: it is no longer merely a promotional tool, nor even a simple complement to travel; it can become a modality of continuity for the tourist experience. It is to characterize this situation that we have proposed the concept of succedaneous virtual tourism, a term that preserves an essential distinction, namely that a virtual experience is not physical travel, that it reproduces neither its materiality, nor the full range of bodily sensations, nor the spontaneity of encounters, but that it can nonetheless maintain certain of its functions: discovery, memory, attachment, learning,

sociability, when travel is no longer accessible.

This proposal has led to the introduction of the notion of experiential accessibility, which does not replace physical accessibility but adds to it a further possibility: that of accessing certain dimensions of the experience of a destination, even when physical access becomes difficult or impossible. Aging constitutes a particularly revealing terrain for this transformation, without needing to be equated with an announced disappearance of tourism: it is, rather, a situation in which the modalities of mobility and tourist experience gradually transform, rather than fade away.

The real stake of virtual tourism may therefore not be whether it will one day replace travel, but how a person can remain in relation with a destination when they can no longer go there. This question invites a move beyond the opposition between real and virtual tourism, toward a continuum of relationships to the destination in which the digital can prepare, complement, extend, memorialize, and, in certain situations of impeded mobility, partially succeed physical travel. The tourism of tomorrow will probably be neither entirely physical nor entirely virtual: it could be more hybrid, relational, and inclusive. Travel would then not disappear when movement becomes impossible; it would simply change form.

Abbreviations

VR	Virtual Reality
MIT	Mobilities, Itineraries, Territories

Author Contributions

Mohamadou Lamine Bara Samb: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



Mohamadou Lamine Bara Samb is a tourism scholar and lecturer whose research focuses on the intersections of tourism, migration, health, and territorial development. His work examines European retirement migration, residentialisation in tourist destinations, and the transformation of tourism territories in West Africa. His doctoral research explores the links between tourism development, ageing European migrants, and access to healthcare in Saly, Senegal. His research interests also include health geography, tourism planning, tourism marketing, heritage development, and event management. His research draws primarily on qualitative approaches, including semi-structured interviews, field observation, mapping, and thematic analysis. He also teaches tourism, communication, marketing, and hospitality management at university level.

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