

Tourism in the Era of Immersive Experiences: The Positioning of Romanian Travel Agencies towards VR

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide a current empirical assessment of how Romanian travel agencies relate to virtual reality (VR), analysing the extent to which this technology is understood, evaluated and potentially integrated as an instrument for aligning the national tourism sector with the global growth trend in immersive technologies. The study seeks to capture the organisational positioning of travel agencies in relation to VR, examining their level of familiarity, perceived benefits, perceived barriers and openness to adoption, within a context in which international tourism is increasingly influenced by digitalisation and experiential innovation. The research adopts an exploratory design and is based on a structured questionnaire administered to travel agencies in Romania. The analysis examined both descriptive distributions and comparisons between subgroups of respondents, according to their level of familiarity and the benefits associated with the use of virtual reality (VR). The findings indicate a sector situated in a pre-adoption stage, in which VR is known predominantly at a theoretical level, without current operational use. However, travel agencies acknowledge the potential of the technology, particularly in delivering immersive experiences, attracting customers and improving accessibility. Openness to implementation is moderate and cautious, being conditioned by budgetary constraints and lack of practical experience. The study provides one of the first evaluations of the positioning of Romanian travel agencies in relation to VR, contributing to the expansion of the literature on emerging immersive technologies in tourism. In practical terms, the findings highlight the need for gradual interventions focused on applied exposure and training, aimed at facilitating the transition from awareness to the effective integration and use of VR technology.

Keywords

Virtual reality, travel agencies, technology adoption, organizational readiness, Romania.

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Introduction

Technologies have become an integral part of everyday life, profoundly shaping the ways in which we communicate, work, travel and relate to the world, with direct effects on social dynamics and, in particular, on experience-based industries. Within this ongoing landscape of technological transformation, virtual reality (VR) has gradually established itself as one of the most influential contemporary innovations, largely because of its ability to construct immersive digital environments that reshape how individuals perceive and experience mediated spaces. Unlike more conventional digital formats, such as websites, static images or standard video materials, VR goes beyond the simple transmission of information, placing users within an experience that simultaneously engages cognition and emotion. By means of head-mounted display devices, users are able to enter digitally generated three-dimensional environments, moving through them in real time and interacting with simulated elements capable of stimulating multiple human senses

(Guttentag, 2010). Tourism is among the sectors where VR's influence is particularly visible, as travel decisions are rarely driven by purely functional considerations and are instead shaped by anticipation, imagination and emotional projection. The opportunity to explore destinations through immersive environments during the inspiration and planning stages adds depth to this anticipatory process, fostering curiosity and creating a sense of presence that approximates the feeling of "being there", thereby reinforcing the desire and intention to experience the destination physically (Kieanwatana & Vongvit, 2024; Nguyen, 2025). At the international level, a growing body of scholarship has already documented a wide range of applications and strategic orientations associated with virtual reality (VR) in tourism, encompassing contributions from various countries, such as Italy, Spain and China (Marasco et al., 2018; Martínez Zarzuela et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2022). However, a significant gap can be observed between the extent of international research and the situation in Romania, where academic and professional discussions concerning virtual reality in tourism remain at an early stage of consolidation, and empirical evidence remains scarce.

Within this context, the present study adopts an exploratory approach, aiming to investigate how Romanian travel agencies perceive and position virtual reality within their professional activities. Travel agencies represent key actors within the tourism ecosystem, acting as the primary intermediaries between tourists and destinations. Accordingly, the study seeks to address the following research question: to what extent are travel agencies in Romania familiar with virtual reality, and how do they position this technology within their activities? Explicitly, the study pursues three specific objectives: (1) to assess the current level of familiarity with virtual reality among Romanian travel agencies; (2) to identify the benefits and barriers associated with VR as perceived by agency representatives; and (3) to examine the degree of openness towards VR adoption within the sector. The article is structured as follows: the theoretical framework and research context are first outlined; this is followed by a description of the methodology employed; the results are then presented and discussed; and the article concludes with a synthesis of the main findings, together with a discussion of the study's implications and limitations.

1. Literature review

Industry insight reports indicate that, looking towards 2030, tourism, already one of the world's largest economic sectors, is expected to be progressively shaped by the advancement of immersive technologies, with projected economic gains exceeding 20 billion US dollars (McKinsey and Company, 2023). Within this evolving environment, virtual reality (VR) is more and more positioned as a catalyst for innovation, with direct implications for the ways in which tourism services and experiences are designed, communicated and delivered. The boundaries of travel are gradually expanding, giving rise to hybrid forms of engagement in which physical mobility is complemented by virtual encounters with destinations. Immersive digital environments, including interactive 3D tours and spatial simulations, now enable users to observe, navigate and access contextual information in ways that extend across the entire travel journey, from initial inspiration to post-visit reflection. Concurrently, EU-funded programmes support the integration of virtual reality as it is considered not only a means of diversifying products and services but also for advancing a more refined comprehension of the affective dimensions of tourist behaviour (European Commission, 2025; Euro-emotur, n.d.).

This direction is further supported by academic research, which outlines that virtual reality, owing to its distinctive features and progressively greater affordability, has the potential to fundamentally transform the way in which tourists' experiences and expectations are shaped and managed, even emerging as a new form of tourism service in its own right (Pestek & Sarvan, 2021). Over the past decade, a growing body of scholarship has examined VR as a marketing instrument, emphasising its ability to positively influence tourists' perceptions, attitudes and behavioural intentions towards destinations (Guttentag 2010; Kumar & Kushwaha, 2025; Tussyadiah et al., 2018). More recent contributions have situated VR within the broader process of tourism digitalisation, highlighting its role in business model innovation and in supporting the sector's adjustment to evolving patterns of consumer behaviour. For instance, Zhang and Huang (2025) emphasize VR's role in digital innovation strategies that influence both tourism experiences and sustainability-driven business transformations. At the organisational level, the literature further indicates that virtual reality can enhance customer attraction by offering more engaging forms of experiences, thereby generating strategic benefits (Subawa et al., 2021). In contrast to the developments documented at the international level, the Romanian context remains modestly represented in research on the use of virtual reality (VR) in tourism. The few existing contributions focus on the application of VR in cultural heritage promotion and museum settings, as well as on virtual tourism as a complement to physical travel and, in certain cases, as a decision-support tool for tourists, particularly in the selection of accommodation options (Caciora et al., 2021; Surugiu et al., 2024; Țicău, 2023). Although these studies emphasize the potential of

the technology, the business dimension of the Romanian tourism sector, particularly the organizational integration of VR at travel agency level, remains largely unaddressed. There is a lack of empirical analyses that capture how tourism economic actors perceive, evaluate, and eventually adopt VR in their professional practices. This lack of empirical evidence is significant not only from an academic perspective, but also at a practical and strategic level. In a context marked by the accelerated development of digital technologies and intensifying global competition, the absence of evidence regarding the organizational adoption of virtual reality (VR), in particular, and of other emerging immersive or deep-tech technologies more broadly, raises concerns about strategic readiness. In the medium and long term, this gap may affect the capacity of Romanian tourism to adapt to an increasingly dynamic and demanding international market, whose transformations are driven precisely by the integration of these technologies.

In response to these observations, the development of datasets becomes a necessary undertaking that could provide a basis for stakeholder analysis and for informing appropriate interventions, such as public policies or technological solutions tailored to the Romanian tourism sector. The present study contributes to this endeavour by providing an initial empirical insight into the positioning of Romanian travel agencies in relation to virtual reality.

2. Research methodology

This study adopts an exploratory survey-based research design aimed at examining how travel agencies in Romania perceive and position virtual reality (VR) within their professional activities. The research was conducted at the end of 2024 through an online questionnaire developed using Google Forms. Contact details were identified through the public registry of licensed tourism operators available on the official website of the Romanian Ministry of Economy, Digitalization, Entrepreneurship and Tourism (2024). Invitations to participate were distributed via email to agencies for which valid contact information was available in the registry. Given that participation depended on voluntary response and that some contact details may have been inactive or duplicated, the study employed a census-attempted outreach strategy, while the final sample remained non-probabilistic and self-selected. In addition, a limited number of responses were collected through direct interaction with travel agencies participating in the 2024 Romanian Tourism Fair held at Romexpo Bucharest between 21–24 November 2024, with voluntary participation. The questionnaire comprised 15 items organised around four thematic areas: familiarity with and current positioning toward VR (4 items), perceived benefits and utility (2 items), openness to VR adoption (2 items) and challenges and perspectives (2 items), complemented by three general agency profile items and two open-ended questions. The instrument was developed with reference to constructs established in the technology adoption literature, especially perceived usefulness, perceived barriers and behavioural intention. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and descriptive comparisons between respondent categories. The open-ended responses were examined through inductive thematic grouping of recurring patterns. A total of 54 responses were collected, of which 53 were validated, with one excluded due to inappropriate content. Among the validated respondents, 13 (24.5%) indicated that they were not at all familiar with virtual reality. Since several questionnaire items addressing perceived benefits, barriers and openness to adoption presupposed at least a minimal degree of familiarity with the technology, these responses were excluded from the subsequent stages of analysis. While this decision was methodologically justified in relation to the objectives of the study, it also introduces a limitation regarding representativeness, as the findings primarily reflect the perceptions of agencies possessing at least a basic awareness of VR technology and should therefore not be generalised to the entire population of Romanian travel agencies. Consequently, the results presented in this study are based on a final analytical sample of 40 respondents.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Organizational familiarity with virtual reality (VR)

Regarding sample composition, the 53 validated respondents were predominantly well-established micro-enterprises, with 58.5% reporting over 10 years of activity and 83.0% employing between 1 and 5 staff members. The subsequent analyses are based on the 40 respondents who indicated at least a basic level of VR familiarity.

The findings present a sector found in a pre-adoption stage, in which the level of familiarity with virtual reality (VR) among travel agencies in Romania is predominantly theoretical. As illustrated in Figure no. 1, the dominant category corresponds to level 2 basic familiarity, which entails an elementary understanding of the technology without practical experience of testing or use. This profile indicates that, at present, virtual

reality is not part of the current operational practices of the agencies participating in the study, a fact further confirmed by the result that only one agency reported using VR, exclusively in the context of participating in B2B tourism fairs.

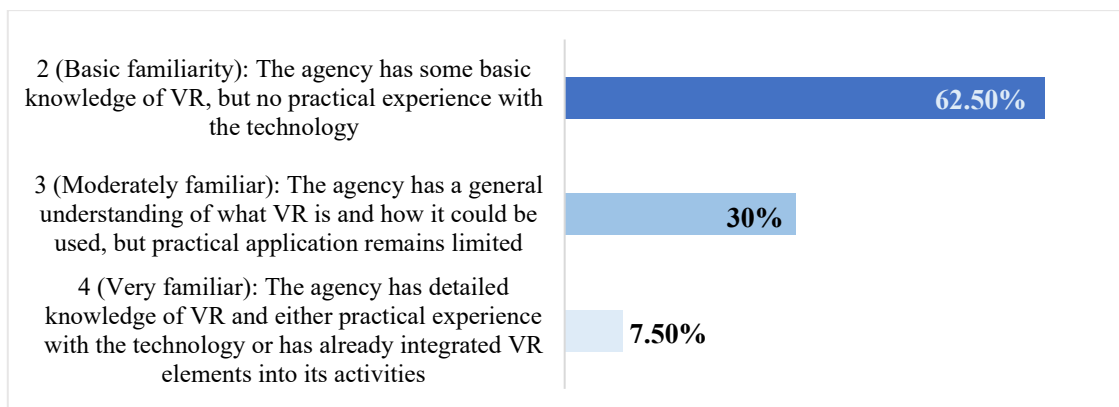


Figure no. 1. Degree of VR familiarity in Romanian travel agencies

From the viewpoint of the innovation-decision process, this configuration corresponds to the “knowledge” stage described by Rogers (1983), defined as the phase in which organisations become aware of the existence of a technology and acquire a general understanding of its functions, without yet possessing practical experience or undertaking applied evaluations that would lead to implementation (Rogers, 1983). This result is consistent with previous research conducted in other national contexts, which shows that virtual reality (VR) adoption in tourism firms remains narrow. Despite the recognised capability of the technology to enhance the tourism experience, adoption is frequently constrained by low levels of technological familiarity and lack of practical experience (Sousa et al., 2024a). In the Romanian context, this situation can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that the predominant orientation of digitalisation strategies adopted by travel agencies is directed towards basic IT infrastructure, such as online booking systems and social media presence, rather than towards emerging and immersive technologies (Ionci  et al., 2015; Tutunea, 2023). Similar trends are also reported in the case of online agencies, where the effective implementation of virtual reality solutions remains marginal (Tutunea, 2023).

Given the predominance of a basic level of familiarity, the analysis was subsequently extended to examine how travel agencies perceive the role of virtual reality (VR) over a five-year horizon in relation to their current level of knowledge (Figure no. 2).

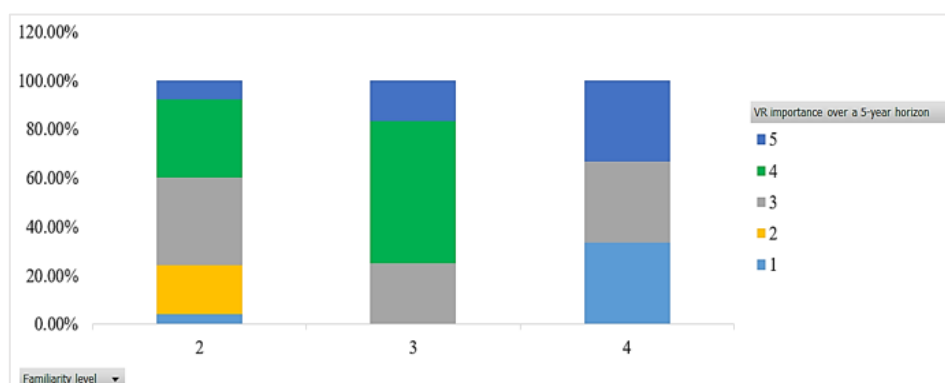


Figure no. 2. Expected future importance of VR in tourism (5-year outlook)

Figure no.2 presents the distribution of responses regarding the expected importance of VR in tourism over a five-year horizon, grouped by familiarity level (Level 2 = Basic, Level 3 = Moderately familiar, Level 4 = Very familiar). Responses were recorded on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 = “Not at all important” (VR will have no impact or relevance to tourism in the next 5 years); 2 = “Not very important” (VR will have minimal relevance and selective interest in the industry); 3 = “Moderately important” (VR might have medium impact, but it will not be a significant factor in tourism); 4 = “Very important” (VR will become an important element in tourism, attracting significant interest and investment); and 5 = “Extremely important” (VR will play a key role in tourism, changing the way the industry works and providing new experiences and business opportunities). The distribution analysis indicates that the ratings “very important” and “extremely important” prevail, reflecting the opinion that VR could become an important

element, capable of influencing the functioning of the tourism industry and generate new types of experiences and business opportunities. In contrast, the group corresponding to the basic familiarity level (Level 2) exhibits more heterogeneous perceptions, suggesting that their evaluation of the future role of this technology remains insufficiently consolidated. This response pattern is consistent with participants' assessments of the current impact of VR on tourism, according to which the majority of respondents consider VR useful for the sector, though not yet essential. This perceived usefulness is central to the Technology Acceptance Model, where it constitutes one of the primary determinants of technology adoption (Davis, 1989). This is particularly relevant here, as the subsequent findings indicate a degree of openness towards the implementation of virtual reality (VR), albeit under specific conditions.

3.2. Benefits associated with the use of VR

As shown in Figure 3, the distribution of benefits indicates an orientation towards customer experience and enhanced access to destinations, rather than towards competitive strategic positioning. Such an orientation overlaps with the principal areas of VR application identified in the literature, where “Tourist Experience & Engagement”, alongside “Destination Marketing & Promotion”, are highlighted as dominant fields of study for this technology (Rifqi, 2025).

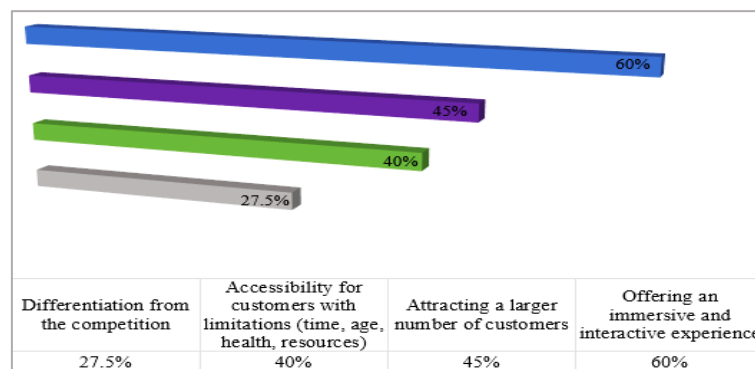


Figure no. 3. Distribution of the benefits associated with the use of VR

An important point to emphasise in this sense is that respondents associated the use of virtual reality (VR) with improved accessibility at almost the same level of importance as attracting a larger number of customers. Accessibility refers to clients facing constraints like health-related limitations, a segment that is steadily expanding within the tourism market. Tourism literature indicates that VR can help reduce physical and psychological barriers to travel, fostering more inclusive tourism experience (Pestek, Banda, Pilav-Velić et al., 2024), a perspective consistent with respondents' perceptions.

Considering that the expansion and retention of the customer portfolio represent fundamental objectives for travel agencies, the perceptions of respondents who selected customer attraction as a benefit of using virtual reality (VR) were analysed separately (Figure no. 4).

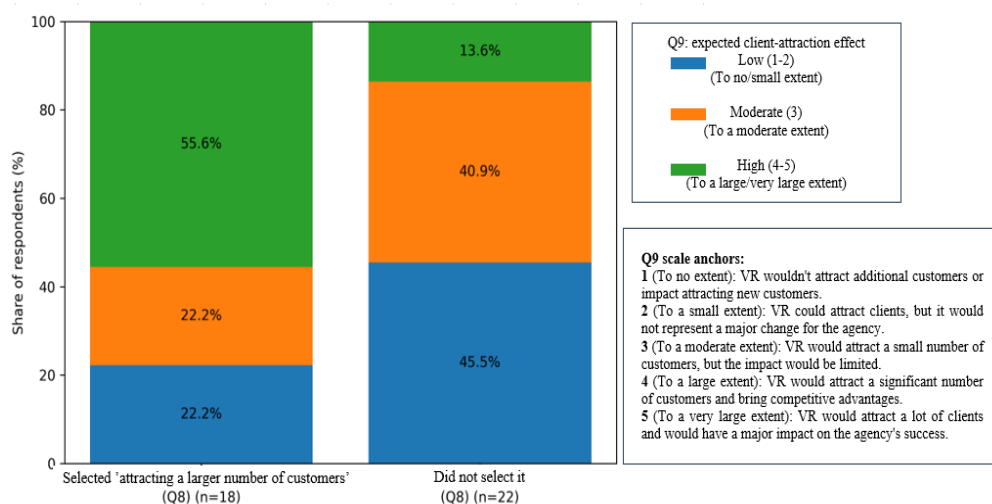


Figure no. 4. VR's projected contribution to client growth in travel agencies

This distinct analysis made it possible to highlight the intensity of the anticipated impact among agencies that explicitly associate VR with the development of their customer base. Within this subgroup, the expected contribution of virtual reality to customer base expansion was predominantly assessed at levels 4 and 5 (“to a large extent” and “to a very large extent”), whereas respondents who did not select this benefit mainly reported moderate or low evaluations (Figure no. 4).

3.3. Openness to the adoption of VR and existing barriers

With regard to openness towards the adoption of virtual reality (VR) within the company, 52.5% of respondents reported intention to implement the technology (Figure no. 5), implying a generally favourable, yet cautious attitude, particularly in light of the 40% who fall within the “Not Sure” category. This cautious stance is also reflected in attitudes towards professional training, where 27.5% of respondents express firm interest in training programmes, while the majority (57%) indicate interest that is conditional upon the possible costs involved (Figure no. 6).

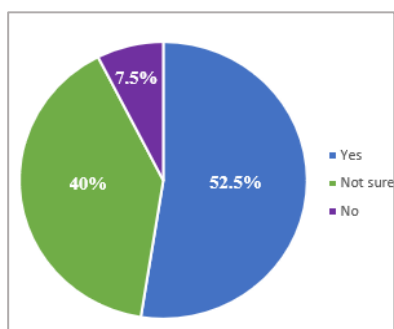


Figure no. 5. Willingness to implement VR

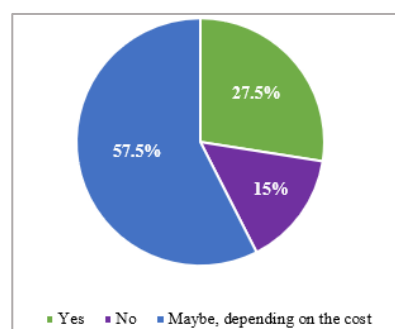


Figure no. 6. Interest in VR trainings

At the same time, budgetary constraints represent the main barrier to VR implementation, as reported by 75% of respondents, followed by insufficient technological knowledge and limited access to VR equipment (Figure no. 7).

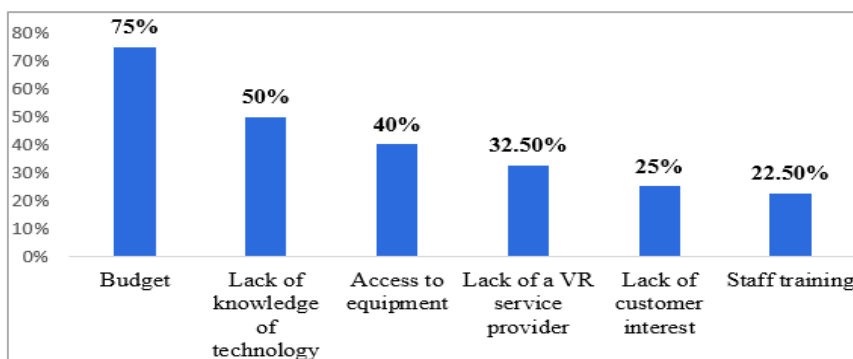


Figure no. 7. Obstacles to VR implementation

Financial barriers and the lack of practical experience tend to reinforce one another. Although the benefits of the technology are understood and positively evaluated at a theoretical level, the absence of applied testing may reduce agencies' ability to assess the feasibility and operational value of virtual reality (VR). This, in turn, may amplify perceptions of investment risk and discourage experimentation (Venkatesh, 2003; Sousa et al., 2024a; Sousa et al., 2024b).

3.4. Open-ended responses

The final two questions of the questionnaire invited participants to reflect more freely on the role that virtual reality (VR) might play in the future of tourism and to provide additional comments regarding its implementation. The responses did not introduce themes significantly different from those captured through the structured items; however, they highlighted two main positions. On the one hand, VR is perceived as a useful promotional tool for clarifying expectations during the pre-travel stage, with one respondent noting that it would allow agencies to "captivate the tourist by offering him a small in-person pre-view of the hotel and destination chosen before leaving for his stay." On the other hand, reservations were expressed regarding authenticity and the risk of substituting physical travel, captured in one participant's view that VR "must remain secondary to normal reality [...] making people really travel, not stay at home and look at a virtual world." These positions suggest that Romanian travel agency representatives perceive VR

primarily as a stimulus for physical travel intention rather than a substitute for it, consistent with academic perspectives on VR's role in shaping tourists' behavioural intentions towards destinations (Pestek & Sarvan, 2021; Tussyadiah et al., 2018), while reflecting longstanding discussions regarding authenticity in tourist experiences (Wang, 1999). Nevertheless, a degree of uncertainty persists among respondents, likely reflecting the absence of hands-on experience with VR technology identified in the quantitative findings.

Conclusions

This study provides an overview of how Romanian travel agencies currently position themselves in relation to virtual reality, revealing a clear distance between the acknowledged relevance of the technology and its absence from everyday organisational practice. Although VR is not presently used operationally within Romanian travel agencies, there is a degree of conceptual openness towards it, and it is increasingly regarded as relevant to the configuration of future tourism experiences. The findings show that VR is predominantly perceived as a tool that can strengthen client relationships, broaden access to destinations and diversify forms of interaction, while its role as an immediate driver of organisational transformation remains secondary. In terms of barriers to the effective integration of VR into daily activities, two of the principal constraints are budgetary limitations and a lack of technological knowledge. The latter is consistent with the results concerning familiarity levels, where the majority of respondents reported only a basic level of awareness, without direct hands-on experience of the technology.

From a practical angle, the findings point to the need for interventions facilitating the gradual integration of VR into travel agency activities. These may include applied demonstrations, hands-on training sessions and sectoral programmes developed in partnership with VR solution providers at affordable rates, allowing agencies to evaluate the feasibility of VR before committing to investments. From an academic perspective, the study provides an empirical foundation for future comparative or longitudinal research on how practical exposure may influence the transition from conceptual familiarity to organisational adoption of VR.

This study presents several limitations. First, it was conducted within a single national context, namely Romania. Second, the small, non-probabilistic sample limits generalisation to the entire sector. Nevertheless, in the context of a technology that remains emergent within Romanian tourism, the sample may be viewed as offering an initial exploratory indication of how travel agencies are beginning to position themselves in relation to virtual reality. Third, the data are based on self-assessments reflecting perceptions and intentions rather than actual adoption behaviour. The cross-sectional design captures a specific point in time and does not allow for an analysis of developments over time.

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Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) usage statement

ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-4o) was used to assist with language editing and the reformulation of selected passages for clarity. The authors critically reviewed all AI-generated suggestions, made necessary adjustments and take full responsibility for the content of this manuscript.

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