



# Evaluation of the Metaverse: Perspectives of Travel Agency Employees

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**Abstract.** The metaverse constitutes a notable facet of the digital transformation underway in the tourism sector. The interplay of this process and consumer activity substantially impacts the global disposition and practices of industry personnel. Although much of the attention centres on the potential changes to the tourism industry's services and customer inclinations engendered by the metaverse, the stakeholder position on this concept is seldom acknowledged. Within the context of this study, the objective is to determine travel agency employees' views on the metaverse and its potential impact on the sector. In the study, which utilised descriptive and content analysis through qualitative research methods, it was found that employees have limited understanding of the metaverse. They acknowledge that there may be challenges with its implementation due to technological and financial obstacles, and they view the metaverse as being most advantageous for marketing purposes. Considering the progression of technology and the speed with which businesses have adapted, it has been determined that travel agencies will be significantly impacted by these innovations. The metaverse and digital transformation are expected to provide striking opportunities, particularly in the field of marketing for travel agencies. Although it is uncertain what changes the technology will bring in the future, it should not be forgotten that failing to keep up with technology can have catastrophic consequences for travel agencies.

**Keywords:** Metaverse · Meta-tourism · Travel agencies

## 1 Introduction

The transformative information technologies (He et al. 2018) have become one of the most significant tools of modern times, reshaping practically every aspect of life. The recent crises have increased the demand for virtual travel and tourism experiences (Gursoy et al. 2022; Manhal et al. 2023). Subjected to numerous global changes - technological, political, demographic, and social (Guduraš 2014; Alnoor et al. 2022) - in the tourism industry, a range of opportunities and risks lead to the emergence of new paradigms. The competitive edge of tourism organisations and destinations is highlighted, and the industry is supported by globalisation (Buhalis and O'Connor 2005). Discovering, understanding, and purchasing tourism services have undergone significant changes as a result of the latest advancements in information technologies (Cranmer et al. 2020).

Virtual, augmented, mixed reality and metaverse can all describe changes in the tourism industry. In this context, virtual reality is a type of human-computer interface that is partially controlled by the user (Helsel 1992) and simulates a real environment (Zheng et al. 1998; Yuviler-Gavish, et al. 2013). Virtual reality is increasingly used in various industries, including tourism (Kim and Hall 2019). Using tools that provide a sensory experience in sight, hearing, touch, and smell, the user can engage with the environment as if it were part of the tangible world (Coelho et al. 2006). Virtual reality enables users to feel immersed in the activity (Pantelidis 1993), while the principal aspect is to give the user the sensation of being in another place (Hoffman 2004).

Applications of augmented reality, which are computer-generated and predominantly supported by graphical content (Han et al. 2014), can be defined as the technology that enables the display of the real environment in the real world (Saragih and Suyoto, 2020) typically require travelling to the destination (Lu et al. 2021). Examples of mixed reality include integrating computer graphics into a real, three-dimensional scene or transforming physical objects into a virtual setting. The initial scenario is often designated as augmented reality, while the latter is termed augmented virtuality (Pan et al. 2006). The outcome of amalgamating the physical and digital worlds is mixed reality, a fusion of augmented and virtual reality (Morimoto et al. 2022). With the use of extended reality, which includes virtual, augmented, and mixed reality, technology can produce entirely or partly synthetic digital environments enabling people to interact (Mystakidis 2022; Aymen et al. 2019). Virtual reality, augmented reality, and mixed reality are only a few emerging technologies that make up the Metaverse (Trunfio and Rossi 2022). The Metaverse offers a service with deeper content and social meaning, unlike virtual and augmented reality which focuses on the physical approach and processing. Additionally, although augmented reality and virtual reality may be used in the Metaverse, they do not always do so (Muhsen et al. 2023; Al-Hchaimi et al. 2023; Chew et al. 2023). Although the platform lacks support for these reality types, it has the potential of becoming a metaverse application. Ultimately, an environment that can accommodate a significant number of people is vital for the Metaverse's social relevance (Park and Kim 2022).

In the gaming industry, metaverses such as Roblox ([www.roblox.com](http://www.roblox.com)), Sandbox ([www.sandbox.game](http://www.sandbox.game)), and Fortnite ([epicgames.com/fortnite](http://epicgames.com/fortnite)) are increasingly prevalent. The recent announcement by Marc Zuckerberg that his company would change its name to Meta has generated curiosity among a wider audience (Narin 2021). Indeed, according to the 2022 report by McKinsey & Company titled "Value creation in the metaverse," the metaverse is projected to generate a value of £5 trillion by 2030. Additionally, sectors that were early adopters of the metaverse aim to allocate a significant proportion of their digital investment budgets towards its development. Tourism is among the identified sectors, and virtual travel is deemed one of the top five phenomena that customers aspire to witness, based on the 2022 report by McKinsey & Company (Abbas et al. 2023; Bozanic et al. 2023).

Applications that restrict communication and mobility during the pandemic are one of the key factors leading to increased interest in the metaverse. In fact, Kye et al. (2021) suggest that Covid-19 restrictions are mainly responsible for the rapid growth of the metaverse in various fields, including education, healthcare, fashion, and tourism. According to Zhong et al. (2021), the pandemic may lead to a completely new phase

of virtual tourist activities in the tourism industry. As noted by Mohanty et al. (2020), promoting virtual experiences is crucial for developing a sustainable tourism model, considering the pandemic's negative impact on mobility levels for tourists. Donthu (2020) argued that the post-pandemic era will give rise to a new world, one that witnesses the unprecedented emergence of online communication, shopping, and entertainment. According to Shubtsova et al. (2020), there is potential for new and innovative business models to replace old models in the tourism industry.

As mentioned previously, the world is undergoing a significant transformation. This adaptation is particularly highlighted. Major global crises, technological progress, and global trends have a significant impact on progress. In terms of sustainability and competitiveness, companies must adapt to these changing circumstances. Being outdated, not keeping up with evolving technologies, and failing to adapt to changing consumer behaviours can have disastrous consequences for tourism companies. According to Ercan (2022), it is crucial to identify the metaverses that will affect tourism, understand how they will manifest, and anticipate the kind of changes that are likely to happen. Learning the opinions of executives in the travel and tourism industry - the key players - on the metaverse is now crucial. In this research, it is aimed to determine how employees of travel agencies interpret the metaverse and its possible implications (Atiyah 2020). As a key proponent of the metaverse, it is anticipated that it will aid in gathering the perspectives of travel agency employees on the metaverse, propagating the metaverse's usage, identifying potential issues and implementing preventative measures.

## 2 The Metaverse Concept

Based on etymology, the Latin roots of the term "verse" literally translate to "in chorus," meaning all as one and as a whole. The Greek prefix "meta" typically signifies beyond or above. In this regard, the metaverse may contain related and overlapping content. It can refer to something beyond the confines of temporal and spatially defined physical reality, potentially denoting a universe outside the physical realm. It is possible that one or more hypothetical universes exist beyond the one humans currently inhabit (Dolata and Schwabe 2023; Atiyah, 2023). Neal Stephenson's 1992 novel *Snow Crash* popularised the notion of the "Metaverse" (Gursoy et al. 2022), which took on a commercial identity as *Second Life*, a social virtual world game, in 2003 (Um et al. 2022). According to Dwivedi et al. (2002), the term "metaverse" refers to a shared online space where individuals collaborate to create value using intelligent virtual environments that generate physical products and services.

The real-world metaverse can be differentiated from the virtual-based metaverse depending on the world that is given more prominence. The metaverse demonstrates the idea of integration between the real and virtual worlds. A reality-based metaverse concentrates on enhancing the real world through virtual technology (Ane et al. 2019; Alnoor et al. 2020). As per the definition provided by Lee et al. (2021), the metaverse represents a virtual environment where physical and digital components coexist, enabled by the merger of extended reality and internet and web technologies. Conversely, a metaverse that operates solely virtually offers a novel encounter occurring within virtual surroundings, distinct from the physical realm. Users can utilise augmented or virtual reality to

access all experiences and material available on the metaverse from any location, blurring the distinction between the physical and virtual domains. As users reside in both environments simultaneously, thanks to their digital avatars, their actions on either side impact the other in real time (Yemenici 2022).

When examining the early formations of the metaverse, it is evident that network infrastructure based on 2G, 3G, and 4G is provided, while 2D images are produced using mobile phones and mouse/keyboard controls (Jung and Jeon 2022; Atshan et al. 2022). Then, it is evident that the avatars acting as representatives of users in the metadata warehouse, virtual reality, augmented reality, social media, virtual economy, and virtual reality trade support the three-dimensional virtual worlds accessed through specialized devices (Ramadhan et al., 2023; Gatea 2016). Davis et al. (2009) state the metaverse components consist of the metaverse itself, human/avatars, metaverse technology capabilities, behaviours, and outputs. In the metaverse, behaviour arises from avatar interaction and conversation. The outcomes include sub-dimensions such as support from others, perception of quality, self-image, and fear of reconnection. Wang et al. (2021) subdivided the metaverse into five components. These encompass network infrastructure, cyber-reality interfaces, data methods and applications, authentication mechanisms, and content creation. According to Park and Kim (2022), the three key elements of a considerable metaverse are the development of hardware (including GPU memory and 5G), recognition and expression models that leverage hardware parallelism, and the accessibility of intriguing and participatory content.

Representative businesses, typical products, and their development strategies also change due to the various policies of the Metaverse's multiple nations. For example, the United States, the Metaverse's forerunner, has a sizable Metaverse layout that is used in various contexts, including business, gaming, the arts, and social affairs. China has a considerable market, along with successful internet enterprises and applications. While the system in South Korea is administered by the government, in Japan the focus is on applications in animation and video games. German and Italian luxury companies are endeavoring to expand their market share through virtual goods (Ning et al. 2023). Table 1 presents a list of companies that are investing in the metaverse in various countries.

(Ning et al. 2023).

Despite the recognition of Metaverse as the next-generation internet paradigm that allows users to engage in virtual world play, work, and communication, the internet, a fundamental piece of infrastructure in many countries, is wholly or partially unusable (Dahan et al. 2022). Security and privacy pose additional challenges for metaverse enterprises, developers, and users given the potential for privacy violations, identity theft, and fraud. For example, numerous personal assets within the metaverse, such as digital possessions, virtual item identities, cryptocurrency transaction records, and other confidential user data, are lacking protection (Yang et al. 2022). Ethical issues related to the emergence of technology were brought to light by Kwok and Koh (2021). These include concerns over cybersecurity, the right to privacy, as well as negative effects on cognitive and behavioural aspects like technology addiction, antisocial behaviour, and illusory experiences. At this stage, objective assessments of the metaverse topic, which has received some criticism, are thought to be useful in directing developers and key users.

**Table 1.** Enterprises Investing in Metaverse in Different Countries.

USA	Amazon, Roblox, Facebook, Epic Games, Disney, Snapchat, Nvidia, Microsoft, Dcentraland
China	Tencent, Alibaba, ByteDance, NetEase, Shenzhen Zqgame Co.Ltd, Wondershare Technology Group Co.,Ltd
Japan	Sony-Hassilas, GREE, Avex Business Development-Digital Motion
South Korea	SAMSUNG, SK Telecom, Urbanbase, Metaverse Alliance
England	Sotheby's, Maze Theory
United Arab Emirates	MetaDubai, Ripple
France	Stage11
Germany	RIMOWA
Italy	Gucci

### 3 Metaverse and Tourism

The term “metaverse” in the context of the tourism industry refers to a 3D virtual environment that facilitates social interactions between travellers, travel agencies, and a range of stakeholders. This offers opportunities to establish novel means of delivering services by connecting the virtual and physical realms of the metaverse and the real world (Koo et al. 2022). A lasting network of communal virtual spaces, known as the metaverse, offers individuals a full sense of existence by means of avatars and harmonises mental and physical processes during concurrent interaction with other entities and objects. It is suggested that metaverse excursions are a new development that the travel and leisure sector must fully understand (Tsai 2022). It allows individuals to participate in such an experience as an avatar and share their journey adventures in a virtual setting via social media (Um et al. 2022). The tourism sector’s metaverse combines real-life with mixed reality to unify all requirements and stakeholders in a three-dimensional virtual realm. It alters tangible spaces into mixed reality spaces, creating a parallel virtual universe on the internet (Buhalis and Karatay 2022).

In the travel industry, technological advancements have significantly impacted customer behaviour (Wei 2022; Atiyah, 2023). Like other sectors, the travel and tourism industry has been influenced by technology over time. For example, virtual reality - which is expected to become increasingly commonplace in the future - can provide a range of experiences through computer - generated visual and graphic applications (Çolakoğlu et al. 2023; AL-Fatlawey et al. 2021). In this context, the tourism industry has implemented concepts such as "Metatourism" and "Metahotels" with the use of metaverse technology. Meta tourism, as an umbrella term, enables people to experience overseas travel without actually leaving their homes (Arasa 2022). Conversely, Metahotels refer to digital hotels that provide personalized experiences to individuals through avatars at their homes (Demir 2022). As travel agencies facilitate the sale of products or services via virtual platforms, the concept of metagencies or metaoperators can be easily

applied in this context. This notion is reinforced by Babur's (2022) assertion that the metaverse will transform the tourism and travel industry in the upcoming years. From this perspective, it is crucial to understand how people respond to the emergence of new technology (Ketikidis et al. 2012).

According to Go and Kang (2023), tourists' experiences with a tourism destination or product can be enhanced through interaction with virtual reality environments. Considering the potential versatility of the metaverse (for instance, booking, decision-making, transformative consumption, co-creation), it is projected to become a powerful technological foundation for the travel industry (Wei 2023; Khaw et al., 2022). According to a study conducted by Monaco and Sacchi (2023), many digital solutions were commonly adopted in the tourism sector prior to the pandemic, but the metaverse might introduce new dimensions that can enhance tourism opportunities beyond physical locations. Lockdowns have prompted individuals to seek out unconventional and alternative transportation methods, inspiring players within the travel and tourism industry to offer distinctive experiences. These cater to tourists' desire for activities promoting safety and sustainability, enabling them to travel virtually across the globe without physically journeying there. Besides, tourists have the option to leave their identities in the physical realm, thus enabling the construction of a multi-identity experience in the virtual world (Koo et al. 2022).

When metaverse studies are examined, it is observed that a conceptual framework about the metaverse is attempted to be created (Murti et al. 2023; Çolakoğlu et al. 2023; Rather 2023; Wei 2023; Chen et al. 2023; Buhalis et al. 2023; Gursoy et al. 2022; Volchek and Brysch 2022), the relationship between the metaverse and tourism is evaluated, particularly in terms of global crises and sustainability (Monaco and Sacchi 2023, Go and Kang 2023; Wei 2022; Zaman et al. 2022; Suanpang et al. 2022), and possible changes in the industry's future, consumer behaviour, decision process, and consumer habits are emphasized rather than tourism suppliers (Murti et al. 2023; Huang et al. 2023; Koo et al. 2022; Choi and Kim 2017; Navarro 2013; Gomes and Araujo 2012). Indeed, Chen et al. (2023) state that most research on the topic has concentrated on the theoretical framework of metaverse tourism and its impact on tourist behaviour, tourism operations, and tourism management, despite its essential function in tourist experiences and tourism management. Therefore, exploring the perspectives of industry professionals is considered necessary for understanding the industry implications of the metaverse. Although the system adapts to meet customer needs, it is important to consider the opinions of employees involved in the system. Travel agencies, which act as a bridge between producers and customers, are the foundational components of this industry and create products within this structure. As emerging tourism technologies are implemented, these agencies become key players in the development process. Based on the findings, this study offers guidance for travel agency employees to seize the opportunity to develop the metaverse and fully exploit its potential.

## 4 Method

Research on the consequences and contributing features of metaverse tourism is limited due to the unprecedented impact the metaverse has on various dimensions, including tourism (Chen et al. 2023). Qualitative research within this context can reveal new perspectives and integrations, aiding in surpassing the conceptions and frameworks developed in the early stages of the research (Miles and Huberman 1994). For this reason, qualitative research methods were utilised to investigate a novel field as a research methodology and to interpret the research from a holistic viewpoint based on the perspectives of the participants. This approach facilitated a comprehensive exploration of subjective situations rather than seeking a singular truth and aimed to capture multiple perspectives in a particular context (Çolakoğlu et al. 2023).

The objective of this research is to investigate the perceptions of Metaverse among travel agency employees and its potential impact on the enterprises. While the tourism industry primarily considers the impact of the metaverse on services and consumers, the views of tourism stakeholders are frequently overlooked. The relevant literature has been thoroughly reviewed, incorporating sample studies about Metaverse and tourism. To develop the research questions, previous studies from the literature were referenced (Álvarez et al. 2007; Buhalis and Law 2008; Dionisio et al. 2013; Tayfun et al. 2022). The interview questionnaire, consisting of two sections and eleven questions, was developed with expert assistance and administered to the participants. The initial section contained questions to measure travel agency employees' perceptions of the metaverse, while the following section examined the potential impact on the travel industry. Focus groups were surveyed using the interview method, a qualitative data collection method. Descriptive and content analysis were employed to analyse the data obtained.

The interviews were recorded without any personal questioning or time restrictions. The average interview duration was 45 min. Before the actual interview, the participants were given a brief on the topic. The study's sample consisted of nine managers and staff from travel agencies operating in Istanbul and was selected using the convenience sampling method. The participants work in various business departments: 1 company owner, 4 managers, 1 reservation specialist, 1 customer relations representative, 1 sales marketing coordinator, and 1 product development manager.

### 4.1 Research Questions

#### *Part One: Metaverse*

- What major technological advances have occurred in the travel and tourism industry over the past ten years? What impact have technological advances had on tourism?
- Are you familiar with metaverse? If so, can you describe it as you would see it?
- Would you think about investing personally in Metaverse? Have you made a Bitcoin investment?
- Do you follow companies that finance Metaverse? Are investments in this field wise in your opinion?
- What do you think about the connection between the metaverse and tourism?

#### *Part Two: Potential Effects of Metaverse*

- Do you consider the idea of the metaverse to be a tool for marketing? How does it fit into marketing?
- What kinds of improvements do you anticipate occurring in the metaverse in terms of marketing initiatives for your company?
- What alterations do you expect the Metaverse to bring about regarding the tourist experience?
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of the application of the metaverse idea to the travel industry?
- What advantages and disadvantages do tourists stand to reap from the development of the metaverse concept?
- What do you believe will happen to the idea of the metaverse? As a company, are you prepared for these changes and innovations?

**4.2 Findings**

Findings According to the Demographic Characteristics of the Participants.

The demographic and occupational details of the nine participants in the study are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Demographic and Occupational Characteristics of the Participants.

Demographic Characteristic		f	Occupational Characteristics	f
<b>Gender</b>	Female	4	<b>Work Experience</b>	
	Male	5	6–10 years	2
<b>Age</b>	26–35	2	11–15 years	1
	36–45	5	16–20 years	2
	46–55	2	20 years and above	4
			<b>Graduated University Department</b>	
		Travel Management	5	
		Tourism and Hospitality Management	4	

Upon examination of the demographic data presented in Table 2, it becomes evident that the sample consists of 4 male and 5 female participants, with the majority falling within the age range of 36 to 45. It can be noticed from the participants’ educational backgrounds that they were all travel and tourism department graduates. The participants’ experience period is at least 6 years, according to the findings regarding the participants’ professional characteristics.

**4.3 Findings of the Part One: Metaverse**

In the initial phase of the study, inquiries were made to ascertain the sentiments of the participants regarding the concept of the metaverse. “What major technological advances

have taken place in the travel and tourism industry over the past ten years? What impact have technological advances had on tourism?" responses to the question below:

P3: *"Things were quite different when I started my first job. For instance, we were faxing hotel reservations. Then, of course, it was sent to the mail. As reservation systems evolved, the data we manually entered became available through these systems. Every piece of equipment at my current job is linked to the system. My reservation goes directly to the hotel when I do so. Furthermore, the guest and I both receive confirmations once the reservation is complete. The system can simply provide transactions for payments and invoices. Also, tourists have online access to all of this data. In other words, whereas initially only 50 reservations could be made, it is now quite simple to make 150 or more reservations. The workload is reduced as a result, and transactions move along more quickly. Additionally, visitors can now use our system to make their own reservations."*

P7: *"New products did not, in reality, start to exist with technology. There were innovations in promotion and marketing. Vendors can now directly contact consumers, as opposed to previously having to find consumer vendors. For instance, communication and reservation systems used to be conducted manually over the phone and fax. The mutual error rates were higher, as expected. Consumer mistrust was a result of these errors. Thanks to new technology, digitalisation has accelerated processes, reduced margins for error, and increased satisfaction."*

P9: *"First of all, I don't think we can effectively integrate technological advancements into travel or tourism as a country. We observe that in other countries like the Far East, people use technology better. I do, however, notice the attempts made by agencies, hoteliers, or other businesses to innovate and use technology more effectively, particularly in the wake of the pandemic process."*

P1: *"Middle Eastern in origin, the company I work for still lags behind in some technological areas. While other agencies use data to communicate, we continue to use WhatsApp. In other words, no matter how much technology advances, it won't make any sense if people and the market don't adapt to it."*

Second, "Are you familiar with metaverse? If so, can you describe it as you would see it?" was the query. According to the findings, each participant had heard of the Metaverse concept before but did not have extensive knowledge. The participants mainly focused on the notions of "virtual world" (f = 16), "imaginary world" (f = 4), and "virtual state of the existing world" (f = 2). Figure 1 depicts the participants' Metaverse definitions as a word cloud and concepts.

In order to measure the perceptions of the participants regarding metaverse investments, "Would you think about investing personally in Metaverse? Have you made a Bitcoin investment? Do you follow companies that finance Metaverse? Are investments in this field wise in your opinion?" questions were posed. Table 3 represents the participants' virtual investment status and investment plans.

Upon examination of the participants' reactions to the metaverse investment, it becomes evident that a majority of them exhibit enthusiasm towards the situation, albeit with a subset lacking sufficient knowledge on the subject matter. Currently, the number of people investing in Bitcoin, one of the virtual currency types, is 4.

P3: *"I'm not very interested due to my age, but if someone from the younger generation informs and guides me, why not?"*



*about it. Only in the field of marketing and advertising in global corporations do I believe there are applications to this extent."*

The first part's final question, "What do you think about the connection between the metaverse and tourism?" has been determined. The responses to the question were coded using the themes "experience" and "marketing." Accordingly, participants in the Metaverse and tourism relationship generally express this relationship through marketing ( $f = 7$ ), with only two persons explaining it through experience.

P7: *"I look at it from a marketing standpoint. Hotels started making 360-degree videos to sell themselves over a decade ago. They started with Instagram, and now they're employing drones. They will begin implementing Metaverse in the next phase. This will be the definitive meeting of the metaverse and tourism."*

P1: *"It's something I'm actually interested in. I've been thinking about the manner in which the metaverse can be used in tourism for a long time. I even saw certain developments, such as the opening of virtual stores. In my perspective, it could be used for more activities. It can be quite handy for congress tourism, for example. Chat rooms with speakers can be found and participants can attend these events with an online ticket."*

#### **4.4 Findings of the Part Two: Potential Effects of Metaverse**

In the second part of the research, participants were initially asked questions regarding the metaverse and marketing. The questions are "Do you consider the idea of the metaverse to be a tool for marketing? How does it fit into marketing? What kinds of improvements do you anticipate occurring in the metaverse in terms of marketing initiatives for your company?" was directed to the participants in accordance with the march of interview. According to the responses, all participants consider metaverse as a marketing tool. However, some participants claim this is a process and only progresses slowly. According to one participant who has used metaverse for marketing objectives, this technology is an innovation that will take time due to budgetary constraints and infrastructure issues.

P6: *"It can be used in marketing, of course. Information can be supported by digital devices. If a seller in the agency shows the places for children from the computer and delivers an experience to the child while wearing VR glasses, it will boost the conversion of this information into sales."*

P8: *"It will undoubtedly be used in the future. We are now solely promoting it in Dubai. We let people experience it firsthand. Of course, the response was overwhelmingly positive. I'm also among those who rated it positively because I used it for the first time as well. It was very realistic indeed. People are passing by you at that moment, you feel. I'm quite impressed, yet it's just too costly right now. Shooting those videos, for example, requires time and is fairly technical. But, as it becomes more popular, I believe the costs will fall and more people will use it."*

Another question posed to participants was, "what alterations do you expect the Metaverse will bring about in terms of the tourist experience?". Most of the responses ( $f = 7$ ) indicate that Metaverse technology will impact marketing rather than experience. Two participants believe that this technology will be used in tourist experiences in the future, particularly for individuals concerned about time and financial loss. They also point out that it may allow individuals with disabilities to engage in tourism activities.

P3: "I look at it from a marketing perspective as opposed to experience. Because people should taste and smell the food they see, I believe it is difficult for them to feel it. Of course, we have no idea how it will evolve in the future. So I don't think it will have an immediate impact on the experiences anytime soon."

P5: "There is a true experience when we talk about tourism. Interaction, living, experiencing reality, I don't know, touching, tasting should be all. When visiting Spain, you must smell the flavour of the cuisine you eat. If you do this virtually, it seems like you will not have the same experience or be able to taste the same. Tourism fulfils people in terms of travelling and seeing, but it is not sufficient; you must also live with the conditions of that destination. Tourism is more than just places to visit. In my opinion, getting on a bus from that country and eating the food from that country should be experienced. You can achieve that to a limited extent with technology."

P1: "I believe we can visit plenty of places from our house. Virtual reality glasses can help with this. We may not be able to experience, but young people will be able to."

In the next stage, the participants were then asked to assess the metaverse technology in terms of tourists and travel agencies. Table 4 summarizes the positive and negative aspects of metaverse technology as mentioned by participants.

**Table 4.** Advantages and Disadvantages of Metaverse Technology

<b>Advantages of Metaverse for Tourists</b>	<b>Advantages of Metaverse for Travel Agencies</b>
Opportunity to access the service without consuming	Opportunity to reach more people
Reduction of pecuniary loss and intangible damages	Realistic and efficient marketing
Elimination of time and cost constraints	Increasing seller motivation
Encouraging tourists	Reduced complaints as a result of pre-experience
A viable experience option for the disabled tourists	
<b>Disadvantages of Metaverse for Tourists</b>	<b>Disadvantages of Metaverse for Travel Agencies</b>
Pre-experience and experience do not overlap	Pre-experience and experience do not overlap
	Direct access of tourists to service providers

Finally, the question, "What do you believe will happen to the idea of the metaverse? As a company, are you prepared for these changes and innovations?" was posed. All participants agree that the metaverse is a developing technology that will take time to mature. Furthermore, some participants believe that this technology, like the internet, will become widely used in the future. According to the responses gathered, no investment in the issue has yet been made in any travel agencies. However, based on the interviews,

travel agencies are open to fresh ideas and are willing to invest in the right moment and situation.

P4: *'The metaverse evolves with its users, and it has the potential to become as widespread as the internet. I don't have an adverse assessment, especially because we adapt swiftly to emerging technologies as a country. When I was in college, there were push-button phones. Then we shifted to touch phones, and we were able to react quickly to these alterations.'*

P2: *"Metaverse is a futuristic technology. I believe it will be used more frequently and widely. I am aware that some multinational hotel chains (such as Hilton) are interested. To be honest, I believe the first ones, those without a cost issue; will receive far more positive feedback. But, of course, it will be a lengthy process."*

P9: *"I believe it is a world with a future. Because, like it or not, we need to keep up with technology. We are in that circle, and do not have the luxury of getting out of it. We are not financially prepared as a company. I would definitely take the initiative if it was a grant or a joint project. It is on our agenda, and we are following it."*

P7: *"I believe it will fail numerous times. It will be centred on constant progress, and the intended outcome will be realized eventually. I'm optimistic that it will expand significantly. At the moment, there is no substantial investment in our company, but I think that in the future, other businesses will follow in the footsteps of large corporations such as Google."*

## 5 Discussion

The metaverse concept, whose effects began to be observed more clearly in 2022, is recognised as an invention that could impact several industries (Dwivedi et al., 2023; AL-Abrow et al., 2023). According to the World Economic Forum, tourism is one of the significant industries that may benefit from the metaverse (Buhalis et al., 2023). In the marketing domain, the ideas of metaverse and tourism are often combined (eMarketer, 2021; Hollensen et al., 2022; Buhalis et al., 2023). Accordingly, the second stage of the research included investigations into marketing.

In the initial phase of the study, the goal was to assess the participants' perceptions of the metaverse. The results indicate that although the participants had heard of the term before, they had not explored it due to a lack of comprehensive information. Duran et al. (2022) elucidate this situation using the "Gray Rhino" metaphor in their investigation. As per the study, the "metaverse" concept is akin to an "unidentified gray rhino". The unidentified grey rhino appears to be hesitant and indecisive in taking action, despite being aware of the situation.

The aim of the second section of this research is to determine the influence and potential benefits of the concept of a metaverse in tourism marketing. Based on the responses of the participants, the results demonstrate that the advantages of the metaverse exceed its disadvantages. This outcome is in line with previous research conducted on the topic. The advantages of the metaverse on the tourism sector, as per the findings of Kaya et al.'s (2023) research, comprise of events that are virtual or a blend of virtual and physical ones, virtual voyages to far-off and novel destinations, business trips and meetings that are virtually attended, virtual tours to hotels, memorable tourist experiences

that are immersive, sustainability, augmented reality-based experiences for shopping and menus, and employee experiences. Employee experience, cyber security and law, accessibility, and sustainability were all cited as drawbacks in a single study. Conversely, another study focused exclusively on the potential benefits and prospects of the metaverse. Potential advantages of the metaverse for the travel and tourism industry are stated as being sales-oriented, such as promoting travel-related buying patterns, enhancing the booking experience, and boosting booking volume (Revfine 2022).

However, only a portion of the metaverse tourism ecosystem has yet to be implemented thus far. There are many restrictions, such as improper technology (such HMDs), inadequate integration, and limited affectivity (such as taste, touch, and smell). To create immersive experiences, to manipulate travel behaviour, sensory-rich environments are required (Koo et al. 2022). The metaverse, on the other hand, is anticipated to encourage travel behaviour more. Individuals who engage in virtual travel experiences and tourism-related activities may also be more likely to utilize physical travel-related products and visit the destination. After virtual visits, users can share content on platforms and continue interacting with other individuals they meet (Buhalis et al. 2023). Notably, alternative digital or virtual tourism platforms can be provided, especially to tech-savvy tourists or those concerned about travel (Zaman et al. 2022). Participants have expressed concerns about the transformation of both experiences and services within the tourism industry. While it is uncertain how the future will take shape, the experiential nature of tourism services is seen as a potential issue.

The metaverse is widely regarded as the next major development. Developing countries face several obstacles to reap full benefits from the metaverse (Kshetri 2022). If tourism professionals are not familiar with technology and digital platforms, it may be challenging to attain success (Yemenici 2022). Furthermore, the uncertain development direction, technological barriers, and resistance to change pose significant obstacles for travel agencies to adopt the metaverse in the tourism industry. Marketing through the Metaverse is experimental and presents multiple challenges for suppliers, including technological and infrastructure considerations, socio-cultural issues, and development strategies (Chen et al. 2023). Despite the challenges faced, the participants hold the belief that the metaverse represents the future technology. The lag behind evolving technologies poses an issue, particularly impeded by inadequate infrastructure and financing. Although the participants have positive viewpoints regarding the metaverse, they hold reservations about its suitability to the tourism industry. This extends beyond the country; both the market and business structure may influence the perception of the metaverse.

## 6 Conclusion and Recommendation

The study's findings reveal that employees in the industry assess the Metaverse idea and its potential repercussions for the tourism industry from various approaches. The subject still needs to be solved, highlighted by the absence of agreement on the definition and the appropriate field to be used. Nevertheless, enterprises that embrace and adjust to advancements in a perpetually evolving world consistently possess a competitive edge over their competitors. Investments in the metaverse and related technologies are growing in this setting. One of the tangible steps achieved for the metaverse technology

may be seen in the glasses that Apple unveiled as the three-dimensional Vision Pro. One of the fundamental instruments for the metaverse, which fuses the real and virtual worlds, is anticipated to be these glasses, which keep both of them together. This technology seems far off and is gradually beginning to materialize in the real world. Based on this, stakeholders in the industry must decide where they fit into this technology.

A completely new commerce industry might be generated due to the metaverse and the possibilities of virtual travel. Therefore, in order to keep up with new technologies, conventional online travel agencies might require modifying their business strategies. Expanded possibilities for flexible travel, customized consumer services, and entertainment might all be a part of the metaverse's virtual evolution. The metaverse can offer seamless interaction and immersive experiences between users in real and simulated environments by applying augmented and virtual reality technology. Tourists can bypass the retailers and contact the supplier directly for real-time price changes, availability and promotions. At this point, the focus should be on leveraging sensory signals to affect visitors' purchasing decisions and product preferences in a virtual environment. Emotional and sensory signals are required in virtual formations, just as physical cues are in actual tourism activities. The conventional tourism marketing mix could shift entirely as a result of this. Encouraging the participation of disadvantaged individuals, such as the physically challenged, in tourism-related activities may establish new market segments.

The metaverse will change tourism in the future, and travel agencies must be prepared for both the good and bad repercussions. This continuum may bring both opportunities and difficulties for them. In this context, the metaverse may not only improve tourist experiences, but the merging of reality and virtuality may also alter definition of the paradigms, ethics, values, norms, standards, experiences, and business practices ways of doing.

Research on this topic is groundbreaking, as studying the metaverse in tourism is a novel area. To encourage increased investment in the metaverse, it is vital that industry professionals possess a thorough comprehension of the topic. Thus, it may be beneficial to create various tools to evaluate employees' attitudes within the industry. While qualitative research offers beneficial and all-inclusive perspectives, it is limited by certain constraints that restrict the applicability of its findings. Additionally, this study's limited scope only encompasses one particular region, meaning the opinions of tourism professionals from differing regions and countries on the metaverse may differ. In addition, it is important to consider the varying levels of technological advancement between developing nations and technologically developed countries that produce, implement and market technology, as this may affect their opinions on the metaverse. The study is restricted in its scope to only cover travel agencies; hence other tourism stakeholders may have different degrees of technological integration. To remedy this, further investigations should be conducted using a diverse range of sample groups.

## 6.1 Theoretical Implications

Research into the metaverse is generally considered to be an assessment of theoretical concepts (Murthi et al. 2023; Çolakoğlu et al. 2023; Rather 2023; Wei 2023; Chen et al. 2023; Buhalis et al. 2023; Gursoy et al. 2022; Volchek and Brysch, 2022). The initial theoretical contribution of this investigation is to broaden research on metaverse tourism

beyond the conceptual stage to practical exploration. Buhalis et al. (2023) argue that comprehending the metaverse and creating practicable and beneficial platforms, procedures, and services can enhance the co-creation of value for all interested parties. The second contribution of this study is to investigate metaverse perspectives, based on opinions from travel agency employees who are key stakeholders in tourism. It is important to balance their views to ensure successful development of Metaverse tourism. The study concludes by providing a theoretical foundation for future research.

## 6.2 Practical Implications

Stakeholders' views can offer insight into the utilization, expansion, possibilities and risks of the metaverse in the tourism industry. In this context, the need for various regulations is apparent. The government, as the primary stakeholder in metaverse tourism, has the potential to engage all stakeholders in the development of this sector. In this context, soliciting opinions from multiple parties and understanding their needs is crucial to promote meta-tourism in an effective and efficient way, while also taking necessary precautions (Nyanjom et al. 2018).

A stable economic and social environment is essential for the existence of tourism-related activities. However, crises such as epidemics undermine the confidence of consumers who make travel decisions and discretionary purchases (Page and Yeoman, 2006). The recent Covid-19 crisis serves as a significant example of this. Within this context, individuals who are disadvantaged and unable to travel for various reasons, or who are fearful of doing so, can still engage in tourism activities without the need for physical mobility. In this context, the successful implementation of the metaverse will make a substantial contribution to the tourism industry. New tourism offerings and adventures can be fashioned with the backing of technology (Şahin and Güven 2022). Thus, both the tourist experience can be enhanced and the product range of the enterprises can be broadened.

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