

## Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 9 - How museums can use interactive virtual tours to engage with the public and increase donations

Speakers: Dr Aulona Ulqinaku and Anastasia Nanni

Aulona: Hi, hello everyone, I'm Aulona Ulqinaku.

Anastasia: And I am Anastasia Nanni.

Aulona: And today, on Leeds University Business School's Research and Innovation Podcast, we're going to be talking about COVID-19 effects on the museum industry and the effects of mortality threats on tourism. So, basically what is the reason for this research? We've been experiencing something unexpected for our generation. We are in the middle of a pandemic, mainly since the beginning of this year, and that has, so far, affected over, at least over 50 million people around the globe. So, this has called for serious measures from the governments in order to slow down the contagion rates, and to reduce the damages that this has been causing, and could still cause on people.

So, one of the most severe measures that these governments have taken was that of the lockdown. It was so weird, we were asked to stay at home, to limit all our social interactions, not to go to work, if possible. So, work remotely from home. And the guidance for most of this activity... guidance was for most of the activities to close down, and for people to stay at home as much as possible, and this is why we're also recording this podcast from home and not from the university studio, for instance. So, what we know so far from this pandemic is that people, those affected and those not affected, fortunately, are still experiencing a situation of fear that is related to their wellbeing.

So, let's face it, we're all reminded of death all the time, every day. Basically, you switch on the TV, or you open your app for the news, and you are reminded of how many victims there were yesterday, how many victims there were overall, the total number of victims that COVID-19 has caused so far. All these reminders that our life is finite, that we are not immortal. All of this, they create this sense of fear of death. So, just a reminder

of it is enough for people to be experiencing what research calls mortality threats. So, this is the first part of the paper, basically the first part where we focus on. Then, the other thing that we know is related to the lockdown. So, we know that this has deeply affected tourism, this is the sector that we focus on, for example. Especially at this time, at the time when the research was conducted, so we started, basically, in the beginning of March 2020. It was mostly when Italy started going into lockdown and then the UK followed. But it was such a weird situation, it was impossible for tourists to visit museums, parks, other tourist destinations because of the COVID-19 lockdown policies, and this obviously was causing so many monetary consequences for the tourism sector.

So, what we did in this research was try to match this to things. So, the mortality threat research and the tourism sector and put a very important ingredient there, the technology and the effects of technology. So, we will explain that more in detail. Basically we matched the fields where Anastasia is an expert on, so technology and services, and the field where I'm more experienced on, mortality threats and psychological threats, and we said "let's see, what are the effects of mortality threats on consumer behaviour when we are focussing on the tourism sector and when you put in the ingredient of technology?" Okay?

This all started because one of my colleagues who was mentioning that she had planned to go to the museum for her husband's birthday, but then COVID happened and they ended up spending his birthday at home and instead of going and having an actual tour of the museum, they took a virtual tour of the museum. So, it was quite interesting, and I was reminded of this when talking to Anastasia, and saying, "Why don't we look at this further, okay?" So, this is how it, basically started, these are the two main streams of research that we've combined together, and Anastasia, if you'd like to explain to us, for example, how we ran the study, how we conducted the study, the sample that we used, that would be great, thank you.

Anastasia:

Yes. In order to understand whether different types of virtual tours can mitigate customer's levels of threat, and whether they affect their attitude, we conducted an online experiment. We had almost 300 participants from the US. Participants were assigned to three different groups, and all participants watched virtual

tours of the Temple of Dendur, that is a part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Met, in New York. The first group watched a non-interactive virtual tour. The format was the standard format, the focus in the centre of the scene and it is similar to video film with a common camera. The second group was exposed to a non-interactive virtual tour with 360-degree view, allowing for a broader visual scope. And the last group, the third one, watched an interactive tour with a 360-degree view, similar to what happens in virtual reality. What do we mean by interactive? Interactive means that participants could use the mouse to actively scroll in all directions, deciding where they want to focus. So, it's not only on the centre of the scene, but you can decide whether to watch during the video.

Then we asked the respondents to write how they felt about their life-threatening situation relating to the spread of COVID-19 and how they were living in this situation. We asked about how much they felt their lives are threatened and the importance of the technology for their self-esteem. Our results are pretty interesting because we found that consumers feel that their lives are threatened and use the technology for their self-esteem are more willing to pay for an interactive virtual tour. So, not for the ticket, but... physical visit to the museum, but for a virtual tour of the museum, and are also more willing to donate to the museums. Another interesting part is that we did not find an effect of interactive tours on consumers' intention to visit the museum once the COVID-19 lockdown policies are relaxed. We think that a possible explanation for this is that consumers could be scared to enter touristic places just after the end of the emergency. So, what are our take homes, Aulona?

Aulona:

Yes. I would like to add... thanks a lot for the explanation of the study. I would like to add just one piece that I did not emphasise in the beginning, the effect of self-esteem, right? So, you mentioned that we found that, for respondents whose levels of... for respondents that care more about technology, so adoption of technology is important for their self-esteem, for this group, the effects were even stronger. So, the more they feel threatened, the more they were willing to donate to the museum, and the more they were willing to pay for a virtual tour.

So, why is that? That is because, previous research shows that when something is important for your self-esteem, during times

of mortality threat, then that is going to help you to mitigate the effect of threat. So, for example, if going to the gym is very important for your self-esteem, then when someone is feeling threatened from reminders of death, then going to the gym, because it's important for his or her self-esteem is going to help mitigate, so to provide some relief from the threat. And, in line with that, we found also here, we replicated it, but in a different context. So, the technology and the museums context, we found that, for those people that care about technology adoption, they are going to... the effects will be even stronger.

So, basically, what we take home from this is that technology can be a way to make consumers feel better when they are experiencing mortality threats. Very important. When consumers feel better, they also hold more positive attitudes towards the company or the brand, or the institution that made them feel better. And when they have more positive attitudes, that translates into greater willingness to pay, for example, into choosing one company or one brand over the other. So, in this case, we saw this effect translating into greater donations and higher willingness to pay for the ticket, right? So, I'm sure you can add a couple of more important contributions of our research?

Anastasia:

Yes. Our research opens the door to future research on what can tourism do help people when they are faced by mortality fears. So, they have fears; they feel threatened. And this can happen due to a series of events, pandemics, terrorist attacks or natural disasters. And while we hope that these events do not happen in the future, people can be reminded of the fear of death in very large random situations by reading the newspaper or by watching the news, or simply by reading a book. Given that, the fear of death can affect such a broad array of human behaviour and it can also affect consumer behaviour, we believe it is important to understand this kind of research in tourism, offering some initial insights on the relationship between mortality fear and other kinds of research, such as the research on technologies, the use of technologies.

Aulona:

Well thank you so much for listening to us today. So, if you're interested in finding out more about this research, both Anastasia and myself will be happy to take your questions. You

will find our contact information in the episode description. So, thanks so much for listening to us, and bye from me, from Aulona.

Anastasia: And bye from Anastasia.