

**From an online journey to a physical presence in a destination: digital strategies for the recovery of the industry post-COVID19
The case of the Van Gogh Sites Foundation**

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Introduction

The tourism industry has been the most relevant sectors in terms of growth over the past decades, impacting socio-economic development, increasing employment, improving infrastructure, and generating revenue (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019). When Covid-19 hit in early 2020, however, the tourism industry was faced with an unprecedented crisis. Global tourism has suffered from the impact of COVID-19 generating a context of global recession by having around 100 to 120 million direct jobs at risk (UNWTO 2020). With international arrivals dropping by 74% (UNWTO, 2021), UNWTO is currently investigating a variety of possible scenarios and actions for the revival of the industry. According to Urbact (2020) it is the time and the opportunity to build a more resilient future for tourism.

The present paper is the outcome of a master dissertation research at the Van Gogh Sites Foundation and investigated digital strategies and customer journeys to engage and attract potential audiences to visit physical locations. The research explored the link between online and offline spheres, investigating connections among channels as platforms, customer journeys, and elements of attraction.

The research was conducted right before the pandemic, so the focus was not on the recovery of tourism specifically, but on encouraging visitors to go to less known and crowded areas, creating a more conscious and sustainable means of travelling by expanding the possibilities of places to be visited. In turn that also creates better opportunities for destinations by avoiding overcrowded places and by better distributing the revenues generated by tourism.

Taking into account the present context, this paper can also join in the efforts to contribute to the recovery of the industry by sharing the digital strategies designed in this research, creating inspiring online journeys to promote physical attractions.

The context of the research

The most well-known and visited location related to Vincent Van Gogh is the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam with a record 2,260,000 visitors in 2017, 75% of them being international visitors (Paap & Mitas, 2017). However, in the South of the Netherlands there are also important, but much less well known, locations connected with Van Gogh. The Van Gogh Sites is a foundation located in the south of the country which is guided by the vision of promoting his artistic life and footsteps across the landscape. The foundation is committed to spread appreciation and recognition of the artist beyond the museum in Amsterdam. For that, it is important to inspire potential visitors to include in their trip plan to travel to the South of the country. Thus, the leading focus of the research was to strategize by designing digital journeys to engage and inspire the public to visit other Van Gogh sites.

Designing the research process

The research was conducted using the Imagineering Design Methodology (Nijs, 2015) and embraced the concept of research as intervention, meaning that researchers and participants can jointly find ways of designing research based on what is determined to be most useful for the local contexts (Camargo-Borges & McNamee, 2020; McNamee & Hosking, 2012).

Data was collected through interviews with stakeholders from various positions involved with the topic: four interviewees were with participants/employees at Van Gogh's heritage venues, and seven interviewees were with general experts on the topic of tourism and the arts.

Additionally, a survey was conducted inside the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam focused on gathering visitors' profiles, investigating what most interests them regarding the artist. The questionnaire was answered by 53 visitors in the main hall of the museum. Statistical data enabled the research to map out the customer journey of the interviewees (Babbie, 2010).

Lastly, two creative sessions were organized with Van Gogh's Foundation's employees to share the previous collected data and to co-create possibilities for strategies.

Findings

Through the analysis of the case study of Van Gogh's heritage locations, appealing elements were identified and became unique material to be used in digital strategies to attract visitors to physically visit a place. The three core themes were formed and are described below:

1. Platforms as channels of engagement

Platforms as channels of engagement proved to be effective ways to animate the customer journey from digital to physical. Understanding a customer journey is a fundamental element to support the digital strategic thinking, the experiential features of a journey seen through the client's point of view. The customer journey is summarized by Meroni and Sangiorgi (2011) as repeated interactions between a customer and an organization that is providing the service.

The results showed that digital platforms such as tourism websites and travel blogs as well as friends' recommendations and social media were the main ways in which visitors were attracted. Thus, these elements represent the most relevant platforms for the beginning of an online customer journey to drive potential visitors to physical locations.

The figure bellow illustrates the main platforms mentioned by research participants. The most common answers appear in larger boldface.



It was intriguing to notice that even in the digital era, visitors tended to start their journey by searching on offline platforms, mostly through friends, and just after that by moving to digital platforms. This type of behavior opens a lot of room for reflection and opportunity to rethink strategies of audience attraction. For instance, with the survey question, "How did you learn about the Van Gogh Museum?", 32% of respondents said by friends, followed by 21% that answered tourism and travel websites.

2. Elements that motivate conversion

The second theme is associated with core elements alongside the digital journey that motivate conversion: factors that play an important role in the tourist's decision to visit the physical location.

The most common element mentioned was other visitor's reviews and testimony: potential visitors first look at previous visitors' experiences and reviews before deciding whether the experience is worth seeking. The second main element that motivates conversion was customized content such as videos revealing a hint about the place and professional photos with clear information and descriptions. As illustrated in the figure below, the purple print highlighted elements emphasize how potential audiences might become actual visitors.



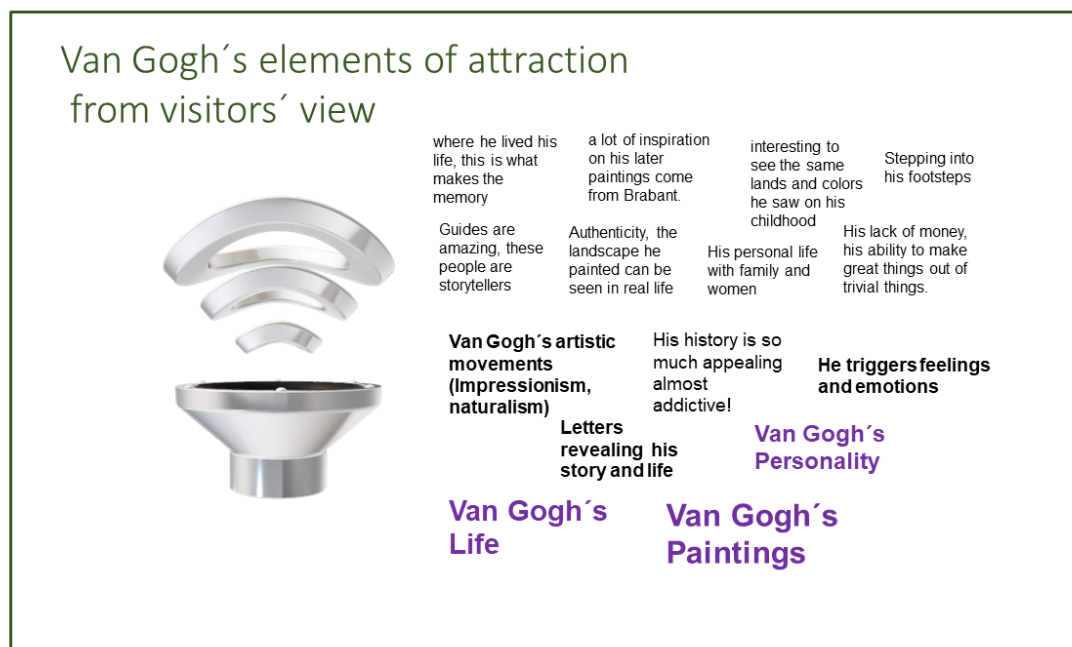
It seemed significant to highlight that the visitors' decision seemed to be based on whether all the information was clear, structured, and displayed in one single place. Approaching audiences in this more structured manner fosters more positive decision making and at the same time enables customers to access different kinds of information in one location. In addition, these findings also revealed how important it is for the potential visitor to be engaged along the digital journey with small tastes of the experience and some glimpses of what it is possible to encounter at the physical places.

3. Van Gogh's elements of attraction – the uniqueness of a place

The third and last theme is related to the aspects of Van Gogh's elements of attraction that appeal the most to the public. Elements of attraction are unique features that differentiate one place from another. Recognizing such elements enables the creation of a customer journey that is more appealing and inviting. In this present case study, data showed that the main elements of attraction are Van Gogh's paintings, followed by his life story and his eccentric personality.

In addition to Van Gogh's life and personality, there are the letters he exchanged with his family and friends, and these reveal numerous details that further entice the public. The artistic movements he belonged to (Naturalism and Impressionism) were also mentioned as important elements.

The figure below shows the most cited elements of attraction.



Many research participants who actually visited the places where Van Gogh's lived and worked in the South of the Netherlands, described the depth of their feelings and observations when faced with Van Gogh's life struggles. By learning about his life full of challenges, visitors described feeling inspired by his persistence. The poignancy of his life story, the quality of his artistic achievement, and the physical location combined contributed to a rich historical context in which visitors highly appreciated.

All of these 3 themes combined represent the biggest draw for visitors. And these elements led many visitors to personally identify themselves with the painter. One interviewee said, for example, “I see some things in him that say something about myself”.

Discussion and Recommendations

In terms of tourism recovery, new perspectives on what might be called “new tourism” are emerging (Bhuiyan et. al, 2020). There is a growing demand for creative and cultural tourism as well as for open-air and nature-based tourism events. By creating and understanding the customer journey, elements of a destination can be offered to encourage these visitors to shift from online to offline.

The research showed that online decision-making leading to physical presence is influenced by a wide range of elements. According to Hall, Towers and Shaw (2017) the “back and forth approach”, meaning the shift between online and offline searches, reflects the importance of highly emotional elements in decision-making over rationality. Thus, some important elements need to be taken into account and are mentioned below.

Partnering with digital platforms and acknowledging visitors as channels that spread awareness to a broader public appeared as effective indicators of audience attraction. Visitors are also seen as potential platforms and channels, since they are ‘ambassadors’ sharing their experience on social media as authentic personal marketing, sometimes making news and opinions that go viral through their own networks. Encouraging tourists to use their friends’ networks as channels to spread information about the locations seems a useful strategy. Research participants mentioned friends as their greatest influencers. Despite living in times of high technology, people still rely first on friends’ experiences.

As expected, digital platforms and especially social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn) proved to be another important element in adding value to attempts to reach targeted consumers via a digital marketing strategy. However, just having a great platform is not good enough. There must also be elements that motivate conversion. In the specific case of Van Gogh, for example, data has shown that research participants were attracted by his turbulent life and personality. Thus, profiling his personal struggle can serve as a powerful asset of attraction and can motivate conversion. Details of his family and friends’ relationships can draw the public to relate to his story and invite them to follow his footsteps through heritage and cultural tours, physically visiting the sites.

Although the research was developed through a case study, these recommendations can be applied to any destination/organization that would like to develop a digital strategy for physical attraction and/or to re-direct visitors to other appealing places in a destination.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates how a strategic digital approach can lead audiences to physical experiences. Furthermore, it can also be used as a manner to deal with the recovery of tourism as well as to make destinations more sustainable, by spreading visitors to less known places that are interesting and worth discovering.

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