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'Journeys in Second Life' – Iranian Muslim women's behaviour in virtual tourist destinations

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HIGHLIGHTS

- For Iranian women the choice of the avatar involves a complex decision process.
- In the virtual environment Iranian women express themselves hedonistically.
- In virtual tourist spaces Iranian women reject 'subordinated' gendered stereotypes.
- Women accept other 'subordinated' stereotypical representations of femininity.

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ABSTRACT

While corporeal patterns of mobility continue to increase, virtual tourism has become a widespread social practice in contemporary society. Despite this, tourists' experiences in virtual tourist destinations remain relatively unexplored. This is particularly true if Iranian women's gendered identities and patterns of behaviour in virtual tourist destinations are referred to. In order to fill this gap, this paper explores Iranian female tourists' patterns of behaviour travelling in *Second Life*. Driven by an interpretivist approach, this study employs virtual ethnography, also known as netnography. The findings show that in virtual tourist spaces the participants reject 'subordinated' gender-based stereotypes concerning Muslim women's bodily representations in Iran. However, their gendered performances also accept other 'subordinated' stereotypical representations of femininity, mostly reiterated by the media in many Western societies. Overall, this paper provides a more in-depth understanding of Iranian women's tourist behaviour in virtual tourist destinations, a topic neglected by tourism academics.

1. Introduction

While corporeal patterns of mobility continue to increase, virtual tourism has become a widespread social practice in contemporary society. Virtual tours have been widely used in the promotion and selling of tourist sites and experiences, especially within the context of governmental touristic websites. While some of the virtual tours are image-based photographic representations of sites with descriptions or 2D panoramic images, others are videos of actual places. A new version of these virtual tours exists, based mainly on virtual reality technology that simulates 3D models of actual or imaginary places. Virtual environments have been providing a powerful tool for tourism-related enterprises. Museums, for example, have been the leaders in the use of 3D virtual environments as they represent and simulate physical places and historical sites that individuals can visit through the internet (Arnold, 2005). Similarly, virtual experiences have been used in theme parks and amusement parks (Hobson & Williams, 1995). Virtual tours have also been employed for many years as marketing tools in travel agencies' and tour operators' websites. In doing so, they have played a crucial role in influencing tourists' motivations and desires (Urry, 2002). More specifically, the influential role of virtual tours has been pivotal in satisfying the needs and expectations of 'Generation V' (Prentice & Sarner, 2008), namely a virtual generation interested in virtual experiences and virtual destinations.

Generation V is well acquainted with virtual experiences through digital games. Digital games were originally text based and did not provide players the opportunity to control their environment and their positions in the games. However, technological

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development has gradually offered more choices for players to situate themselves in the virtual environment and play different roles. In actual 3D virtual interactive environments there are no barriers for creativity as players are the ones who design the rules and roles of the game. Moreover, actual digital games should not be categorised as mere entertainment as they are also what Zyda (2005, p. 26) refers to as a 'serious game', namely 'a mental contest, played with a computer in accordance with specific rules, that uses entertainment to further government or corporate training, education, health, public policy, and strategic communication objectives'. Overall, virtual worlds have become international centres for serious social interactions and commercial activities.

While the implications and applications of virtual reality within the tourism sector have been documented in the literature (see Arnold, 2005; Cheong, 1995; Guttentag, 2010; Williams & Hobson, 1995), tourists' experiences in virtual tourist destinations remain relatively unexplored. As Hine (2000, p. 2) states, '[to] date, far more effort has been expended on predicting the revolutionary futures of the Internet than has been put into finding out in detail how it is being used and the ways in which it is being incorporated into people's daily lives'. In an attempt to fill in this gap in knowledge, this paper aims to explore tourists' patterns of behaviour in virtual tourist destinations. More specifically, the target population of this study is Iranian women. The choice of focussing on Iranian women is driven by three main considerations. The first is the relative paucity of empirical material on Muslim patterns of behaviour during the tourism experience, especially Iranians. The second is that within the Iranian context women have played an important socio-political role since ancient times; yet, their gendered identities on holiday have been neglected by scholars. The third is that the country's internet user population is growing faster than in its neighbouring countries (The World Bank, 2013); yet, little is known about Iranian women's patterns of behaviour in virtual tourist destinations. Focussing on Iranian women's experiences in the virtual environment may provide important information on the marketability and profitability of Internet services.

Overall, this paper's contribution is twofold. First, this work provides a more in-depth understanding of the notions of 'virtual tourism', a concept highly debated and contested within academic circles. Second, it casts light on Iranian women's gendered identities and patterns of behaviour in virtual tourism destinations, which have not received much attention by tourism academics.

2. Literature review

2.1. Reality, hyperreality, and virtual reality

Ontological studies concerning the nature and meaning of reality have been the object of philosophical disputes since antiquity. From Plato's and Aristotle's ideas of 'universals' to Kant's and Hegel's idealist thought, traditional philosophical studies have produced diverse epistemological stances concerning the relationship between reality and our knowledge of/what is thought of as reality. In this respect, various branches of contemporary philosophical realism contend that reality transcends the realm of our physical experience (Rescher, 2010). In other words, reality is conceived as a metaphysical – rather than a mere physical – concept, which exists beyond our experience. In contrast, idealist thought, embodied by the seminal works of Hegel (1998), Kant (1998) and Schopenhauer (1957) can only conceive reality as existing within the realm of our mental schemes and sensorial experience.

While realism has traditionally emphasised the objective character of social phenomena, sociologists and anthropologists (Armon-Jones, 1986; Averill, 1986; Berger & Luckmann, 2011) have conceived reality as culturally and socially constructed. In this respect, a number of views standardly clustered under the terms 'constructionism' or 'social constructionism' have argued that the apparent objectivity of social phenomena is explicable in terms of social practices of 'reality construction' (Hester & Francis, 1997). The theoretical implications of socially constructed notions of reality establish the plurality of this concept. In another words, constructionists do not believe in the existence of 'just one reality'. Rather, they contemplate the existence of multiple realities according to specific socio-cultural environments.

Ontological discussions concerning the existence of multiple realities have not been ignored by tourism scholars. Studies on constructive authenticity, for example, have directly and indirectly contemplated the perceived nature of reality and tourist experiences (see for example Wang, 1999). While ontological and epistemological stances concerning 'reality' and 'non-reality' or 'authentic' and 'non-authentic' have sparked ubiquitous debates within academic circles, postmodern-related conceptualizations of 'hyperreality' have gone beyond the 'real-non-real' and 'authentic-non-authentic' binary argument. According to Baudrillard (1994), the notion of hyperreality encapsulates the existence of a discrepancy between representation and simulation. While representation is grounded on the principle of equivalence, namely the Utopian assumption that signs can be equivalent to the 'real', simulation is based on the idea that signs and the real are non-equal constructs. As Baudrillard (1994) explains, simulation is a process in which representations of things come to replace them being represented. The representations become more important than the real thing. Hyperreality, thus, continues Baudrillard (1994), refers to the 'generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal' (p. 1). It is a simulation that symbolises the denial of what he refers to in allegorical terms as 'coextensivity of map and territory'. The hyperreal is neither real nor non-real, it is 'sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary' (p. 2). In Umberto Eco's (1986, p. 4) words, hyperreality is a 'diorama [that] aims to establish itself as a substitute for reality, as something even more real'. It is not a 'fac-simile' but a 'fac-different' (Eco, 1986, p. 5). In discussing the different types of simulations, Baudrillard (1994) introduces the notion of 'simulacra', namely signs that do not pretend to have any sort of relation to reality but are 'true' by themselves.

Authors like Baudrillard (1994) and Nietzsche (1998) perceived simulacra as negative signs; yet, Deleuze (2004, p. 372) describes them as 'those systems in which different relates to different by means of difference itself. What is essential is that we find in these systems no prior identity, no internal resemblance'. Jameson (1993) argues that late capitalism has contributed to the mass (re)production of simulacra, which have created a world without referents. As Isaacs (2008, p. 72) points out, 'certain historical contingencies allow for the wide scale reproduction of simulacra so that the simulations of reality replace the real, producing a giant simulacrum completely disconnected from an earlier reality; this simulacrum is hyperreality'. From this perspective, the development of technology has contributed to the amplification of the (re)production and (re)consumption of simulacra.

As Poster (in Baudrillard, 2001) notes, in *The Perfect Crime*, Baudrillard (1996) employs the words 'virtual', 'virtual reality' and 'hyperreality' interchangeably. However, virtual reality is not just referred to as another way to produce simulacra but as the ultimate triumph of simulacra. According to Baudrillard (1996), we are not living in a world characterized by virtual reality technology. Rather, we are immersed in it; we breathe and live in virtual reality (Ryan, 2001). Lévy (1998) seems to agree with Baudrillard's (1996) prophecy. Nevertheless, he also contends that the illusory, false

or imaginary have little to share with virtuality. 'Virtuality' and 'reality' should not be conceptualised as a dichotomy as virtuality is a powerful source of creation that transcends but does not necessarily match the non-virtual (Lévy, 1998).

As a technology based tool, virtual reality provides an ultimate, real-time, three-dimensional interface (Stone, 1996). Computer experts define 'the virtual world' as a technology-based environment that is constructed digitally and provides an interaction between users. To consider the 'virtual world' as a mere outcome of technology-based developments would be misleading. Based on the idea that important aspects of virtuality are imagination and the visual aspect, some authors maintain that aspects of virtuality have existed since ancient times in religious texts and arts (Bittarello, 2008). Literary texts and myths, for example, include descriptions of places and situations that represent virtual worlds, namely realities existing outside actual life (Bittarello, 2008). However, within the context of this paper the notion of 'virtual environment' excludes pre-internet theorisations of virtual worlds. Rather, the virtual environment is defined based on Bell's (2008, p. 2) conceptualisation of the 'virtual world', namely, 'a synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers'. This definition emphasises that virtual worlds are populated by people sharing common space in common time (synchronism). Moreover, in contrast to video games, virtual worlds continue to exist even after people log off (persistency). Importantly, what distinguishes virtual worlds from ancient texts and arts is that the former can only be accessed through appropriate software on networked hardware devices (networked computers).

2.2. The virtual environment: humans and avatars

In 3D virtual worlds people can create their digital representations, known as 'avatars' (Bell, 2008). This term stems from a Sanskrit word, '*avatara*', which means '*incarnation*'. In the virtual world this term represents the graphical object representing the user. It became popular since Neal Stehenson (1994) used this term in his fiction novel '*Snow Crash*'. An avatar is a mediator for user interaction in the virtual environment (Messinger, Ge, Stroulia, Lyons, & Smirnov, 2008). Messinger et al. (2008) define avatars as human-like creatures, with human face and capable of performing human-like activities. However, different types of avatars, such as animals, vehicles, and robots also populate the virtual environment.

Virtual world's visitors can participate in a number in different activities through their avatars, such as visiting sites, buying objects (virtual and non-virtual), walking, driving, flying, constructing buildings, studying, and attending conferences or exhibitions. Some studies (e.g. Yee, 2006; Yee & Bailenson, 2007) have been conducted to explore whether and how individuals carry out their social norms and social behaviours from the 'non-virtual' to the virtual environment. Others (e.g. Dehn & Van Mulken, 2000; Nowak, 2004) have focused on whether and how the choice of avatars influences an individual's judgement of other avatars in the virtual environment. Schroeder (2002), for example, found that people desire to have control over the design of their avatars. Moreover, he also reported that avatars are designed and chosen very carefully by people venturing in the virtual environment in order to be representative of their perceived personas. Despite this, limited empirical material exists on how virtual world users craft their avatars. Similarly, the avatars' patterns of behaviour remain relatively unexplored. The paucity of information on individual choices of avatars and avatar behaviour is particularly true if virtual tourist destinations are referred to.

2.3. Virtual tourism

Despite the importance of corporeal mobility in (post)modern society, virtual tourism has become an important phenomenon of contemporary society (Hobson & Williams, 1995; Williams & Hobson, 1995). One of the most important virtual internet-based environments, Second Life (SL), allows people to participate in a number of activities, including virtual tourism. In SL people can travel to different destinations which are designed, built and promoted by individuals and companies. Virtual destinations are either simulated versions of non-virtual destinations or totally imaginary places. Virtual tourists can visit famous cities such as Venice, Paris or London, or other sites categorized as 'romantic places', 'beaches', 'artistic places', 'places for adult visitors', 'bars' 'natural parks'. There are no limitations for virtual residents in the creation and visit of destinations. As there are no limitations to creating similar places, replicas are quite common. There are, for example, at least seven sites named 'Eiffel Tower'. An interesting aspect of SL is that destinations can 'expire', namely disappear if the owner does not pay the rent, if the contract expires, if the land is sold, or if the land access is terminated due to criminal activities.

Urry (2002) contends that even before the existence of modern media communication tools, such as the internet and mobile phones, people geographically distant were able to interact through various forms of communication. As he points out, 'the letter, the postcard, the telegram, the telephone, the fax, print media, film and the TV, each of these communications can in different ways substitute for physical transportation' (Urry, 2002, p. 256). However, Urry (2000) conceptualises different forms of 'travel', such as the physical movement of *objects, imaginative* travel, and *virtual* travel. More specifically, he defines virtual travel as 'to travel often in real time on the internet with many others, so transcending geographical and often social distance' (Urry, 2002, p. 256). According to this definition, what is known as virtual tourism is mainly based on computer technology. The purpose of creating virtual tourist environments is to allow people to explore physical places and spaces in synchronous or asynchronous time without being physically *in situ*. Virtual tourist sites are not just mere representations of existing tourist physical places and spaces. Rather, in Baudrillard's terms they are also simulations of imaginary places. Virtual tourist destinations, for example, also contain simulated and imaginary new cultural and heritage sites (Styliaras, Koukopoulos, & Lazarinis, 2010).

Attractiveness and affordability are two important key elements in promoting a tourist destination (Hummelbrunner & Miglbauer, 1994) and new communication technologies can play a crucial role in influencing these elements (Styliaras et al., 2010). At the moment, software and hardware limitations do not allow surfers to have full sensorial immersion in virtual worlds. However, these virtual worlds are becoming more attractive to young tourists compared to physical travel due to their affordability (Prentice & Sarner, 2008). Moreover, they provide collaborative immersive environments that create a lot of opportunities to meet people and explore new realities. Accessibility is also an important component in tourism destination competitiveness studies (Mazanec, Wober, & Zins, 2007). A destination may not be accessible to tourists due to geographical, physical, political and historical reasons. For example, there are still many tourist sites that are inaccessible to disabled people (Hobson & Williams, 1995). Furthermore, political issues, which consequently involve visa issues, represent one of the main barriers for certain tourists.

Previous studies have discussed the negative implications of virtual reality to the tourism industry. Williams and Hobson (1995, p. 425), for example, point out that virtual tourism may compete with, rather than complement, more traditional forms of tourism.

More specifically, the question arises as to whether and how the development of virtual tourism may represent a threat for the tourism industry as people may replace their travel plans with virtual tours.

Whether and how virtual tourism will replace corporeal travel is an ongoing debate within academic circles. While some scholars argue that virtual tourism can be regarded as a potential substitute for corporeal travel (Hobson & Williams, 1995), others maintain that social life cannot transcend the density of meanings produced by intermittent co-presence (Boden & Molotch, 1994; Urry, 2002). Advocates of virtual tourism emphasise the positive impact of non-corporeal travel on the environment. In this respect, discussions concerning virtual tourism have been often interwoven with debates on sustainability (Dewailly, 1999; Hobson & Williams, 1995). One may argue that the corporeal non-presence of virtual tourists in virtual tourist destinations may lead to forms of tourism more sustainable for the environmental and socio-cultural context (Cheong, 1995). Since virtual worlds can provide an experience for the tourists who want to visit archaeological sites that do not exist anymore, the simulation of heritage sites could help to preserve ancient sites and pave the way to more sustainable tourist experiences (Arnold, 2005; Stanco, Battiato, & Gallo, 2011).

However, the question arises as to whether the absence of 'tourist bodies' in tourist sites may eventually compromise tourists' quests for 'authentic' experiences (Guttentag, 2010). As current technological limitations do not allow virtual tourists to have complex and multidimensional sensorial experiences yet, the process of 'stripping the material form of social significance' (Hine, 2000, p. 3) and the contemplation of virtual substitutes may negatively affect perceived authentic tourist experiences (Cheong, 1995; Paquet & Viktor, 2005). Moreover, Dewailly (1999, p. 41) points out that the development of virtual tourism may lead to 'a dual tourism, leaving the 'rich' with reality – ever more costly in terms of time and money, but also more gratifying – and the 'poor' with an easily accessible and reproducible virtual reality, but which does not provide a full sense of place'. Overall, the debates concerning the nature and meanings of virtual tourism indicate the necessity to explore virtual tourist experiences and practices in greater detail.

2.4. Realities and virtual realities of Iranian female tourists

Women have played an important role in Iranian society since pre-historical times. It is reported that during the Neolithic period they controlled the tribe and had spiritual and religious influences (Ghirshman, 1954). The history of Iran narrates the glory of women before and after the pre-Islamic era. Women have always held key positions in society, such as judges in courts, officers, ministers, and other governmental positions (Esfandiari, 1997). Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian society has been characterized by a double set of urf and sharia laws, which have tended to restrict women's personal freedoms in the private and public spheres. Today women in Iran are part of a patriarchal system that primarily sees them as mothers and wives in the domestic realm (Shirazi, 2012).

However, partial transgressions of urf and sharia laws by young Iranian women are also common and represent a sign of modernity and resistance (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008). When they are acknowledged, these forms of resistance are referred to as 'generation gaps', namely behavioural forms of opposition not only initiated by the so-called 'misveiled' girls (also referred to as 'badhijab' to indicate those who wear hijab in order to obey Iranian legal requirements but do not believe in the dogmas of Islam) but also by the 'veiled' girls (often referred to as chadori to indicate those who may or may not wear the chador but admit to believe in the dogmas of Islam). In this respect, Sadeghi (2008) maintains that young urban Iranian women do not hold strong beliefs on traditional norms as compared to previous generations; yet, they can hardly be considered as 'radically modern' as they do not totally disregard more traditional social conventions.

The way religion is interpreted (and misinterpreted) may play a role in creating barriers to Middle Eastern women's participation in leisure and tourism activities (Okhovat, 2010). However, there are women who believe that a proper textual interpretation of religious texts protects their rights (Allcock, 1988). Within this discourse, veiling is not seen as a symbol of female oppression and cultural identity. Despite the various religious, ideological and political stances embraced by Iranian women, Okhovat (2010) claims that overall women in Iran face significant obstacles and restrictions in participating in tourism-related activities.

According to Islamic law, women cannot travel without their guardian's permission if they are single. If married, the husband's permission is required for women to travel. Moreover, until a few years ago hotels could refuse to provide accommodation for women travelling without a letter issued by their employers indicating the purpose of travel (Mirza, 2006). Sharing a room with 'non-mahrams', namely those who are not parents and siblings (Tremayne, 2009), is still not allowed and although young Iranian tourists sometimes share apartments and rooms with non-mahrams, they risk arrest and punishment. When they travel within the country, Iranian women must cover themselves and cannot show any form of hedonistic behaviour under the eye of Islamic police. To wear hijab is compulsory even on the beach, and swimming in the sea is only allowed in areas specifically designated for women (Ghadami, 2012).

These restrictions also influence women's activities in the virtual environment. The internet first entered the lives of urban middle-class Iranians in the late 1990s (Rahimi, 2003). It expanded only after 2001, when the Unicode system made typing in Persian possible, and when owning a computer and connecting to the Internet became economically and technically more affordable for most of the middle class. Since then, hundreds of internet cafés have opened in Tehran and in other Iranian cities, and dozens of Internet service providers offer prepaid connection cards to surf the web. As a consequence, the number of Internet users has grown rapidly, from almost 1 million users in 2001 to 42 million in 2012, a figure that represents 53.3% of Iran's population (Internet users in Middle East and the World, 2012).

The internet and its content are often filtered and censored by the Iranian government, which perceives the empowering role of ICTs as a threat. Despite this, it represents an important tool for Iranian women's socio-political participation in public discourse, for emancipation, promotion of social justice, and resistance of discriminatory laws (Shirazi, 2012). In this respect, Shirazi (2012, p. 49) claims that '[F]or many women's rights activists, the Internet offers open lines of communication and a means to reach like-minded individuals, particularly when traditional print media serve as a blockade to the freedom of speech in Iran'.

3. Methodology

This research employs virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), also known as netnography (Kozinets, 2010). Kozinets (2010, p. 60) defines netnography as 'participant-observational research based in online fieldwork'. Like ethnography, netnography is a research approach that incorporates different data collection methods and techniques, such as participant observation and in-depth interviews. However, in contrast to traditional ethnographic fieldwork, which contemplates the ethnographer's physical presence in the field (Van Maanen, 1988), netnography problematizes the

researcher's bodily travel to the field. As Hine (2000: 45) points out, '[v]isiting the Internet focuses on experiential rather than physical displacement'. Importantly, virtual ethnography neglects the corporeal presence in the field; yet, it does not transcend other important aspects of traditional ethnographic fieldwork, including interaction and involvement (Hine, 2000).

As virtual tourist experiences are complex phenomena that require an in-depth understanding of multifaceted relationships, a qualitative research approach, driven by an interpretivist social sciences paradigm, was chosen to conduct this research. The interpretivist paradigm is grounded on the ontological assumption that social realities are multiple and socially constructed. Moreover, epistemologically it contemplates the idea that researchers and participants are both subjectively embedded in the construction and reconstruction of meanings (Kuhn, 2012). Overall, the rationale for this choice lies in the recognition of the qualitative approach as the most appropriate methodology for understanding the complexity of tourist experiences (Jennings, 2010).

The choice of conducting a virtual ethnography influenced the selection of the target population. Indeed, the idea of studying Iranian women rather than other Middle Eastern women was also based on the fact that the main researcher of this study is an Iranian woman. As ethnography contemplates the researcher's situatedness in the field (Pink, 2013, p. 248), the main author of the study believed that being an Iranian woman would have provided a deeper understanding of Iranian women's virtual experiences as compared to other Middle Eastern's virtual journeys.

Although it is focused on Iranian women, this study was not conducted in Iran. As social media websites are controlled and filtered by the government in Iran (Zittrain & Palfrey, 2008), the researchers conducted the study among postgraduate Iranian female students in Malaysia. Malaysia was chosen as research site as the researchers both reside in this country. The participants were selected among Iranian women in Malaysia through the interpersonal network recruitment method (Browne, 2005). Since one of the researchers conducting this study is an Iranian female student, this approach was perceived as the best way to reach potential respondents. Importantly, the employment of this strategy helped to establish a relationship of trust between researchers and participants, which is crucial in obtaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The other researcher of this study is not an Iranian female. This was perceived as a point of strength within the context of this research as the two authors believe that the composition of the research team (an Iranian female and a non-Iranian male) contributed to provide both an insider and outsider's perspective.

Participant observation, online interviews via Yahoo messenger, and on-line chats were the methods selected for this study, which took place between February and May 2012. Second Life (SL), a 3D virtual environment with different categories of activities and destinations, was chosen as the study site as it is one of the first virtual worlds on the Internet and very popular among web surfers. As the Tyche Shepherd Company reports, the number of residents in SL in March 2012 was around 30 million and more than 35 million in October 2013 (Second Life Grid Survey – Region Database, 2013). More than 126 real-life brands advertise and promote their products and conduct their market research in SL (Barnes, 2007). Several businesses, stores, clubs, management companies, well-known brands like Adidas, Coke, Dell, IBM, Nissan, Pontiac have shops in SL. Over 150 universities, hotels and resorts are part of SL (Graves, 2008). Moreover, various organizations and cultural groups hold their conferences, meetings, and exhibitions in SL.

The idea behind SL is to give people a chance to create a free space without limitations. However, limitations to freedom do exist as surfers must follow various rules and regulations, which vary according to the different virtual regions and spaces. For example, in certain virtual spaces avatars are not allowed to push or bite other avatars. Also, flying, being naked or having sexual intercourse is restricted in some cyberspaces. The need for these rules is justified by the fact that intolerance, harassment, assault, disclosure of information, indecency, and disturbing others seem to be the six main patterns of deviant behaviour people commit in SL (See Second Life Grid Survey – Region Database, 2013).

The participants were asked to enter SL and experience it with one of the researchers, who also played a tour guide role in case virtual surfers had questions or problems. A web page was created to provide an explanation of the research aims and objectives. Moreover, the necessary information on how to access SL (for those people who had never experienced it) was provided. The guidelines also made the participants aware of the different activities available in SL. An on-line tutorial was given by one of the researchers on how to create an avatar. Those who agreed to participate in the study were requested to sign an electronic consent form. Although the main researcher closely monitored Iranians' experiences in SL, any attempt was made to give participants enough freedom to explore virtual destinations. In order to minimise participants' inhibitions, the researcher did not interfere with Iranian women's virtual experiences and provided guidance only if requested by the interviewees. The Iranian women were asked to visit at least five different virtual tourist destinations. One of the researchers actively participated in their experiences and activities, and took notes and memos during the whole process. After visiting various tourist destinations (an experience which lasted on average 3–4 h for each participant) an online in-depth interview was carried out.

A pilot study was conducted with three participants. Each interview took between 2 and 3 h and aimed to identify the key themes and categories relating to how participants experience the virtual environment. The semi-structured questions were asked to encourage the interviewees to share their feelings and thoughts freely. Based on the pilot observations and interviews, the interview guide was modified and revised before the main empirical data collection was conducted, as suggested by Sampson (2004).

The online interviews were conducted in one or more sessions to further explore women's experiences and patterns of behaviour in virtual tourist destinations. A total of 10 individual in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out. All interviews were conducted in English and each interview lasted 2–3 h. Notes and memos were taken during the interviews by the researchers. This enabled the researchers to collect rich empirical material and thick descriptions of participant experiences (Geertz, 1973). The empirical material collection was conducted until a 'qualitative informational isomorph' was achieved (Ford, 1975), namely when theoretical saturation was achieved (Jennings, 2010). The interviews were digitally recorded as text and transcribed verbatim for the empirical material analysis.

The empirical material analysis was an ongoing and iterative process conducted during and after the interviews and observations. Indeed, it needs to be emphasized that the processes of data collection and analysis occur simultaneously in qualitative research (Lofland & Lofland, 1994). This process led to the identification of codes and emerging themes. Firstly, the empirical material was read several times by the researchers to achieve a general understanding of the information collected. Secondly, the empirical material was reviewed and divided into meaningful units to create homogeneous categories (Jennings, 2010). Thirdly, the inductive codes and themes were developed and refined based on existing literature on the topic. Finally, the researchers decided to share and discuss parts of the preliminary findings with the respondents, who provided their views on the themes identified by the researchers. Based on the comments provided by the participants, the themes

were further analysed and finalised. As qualitative research is based on an epistemological subjective stance, the researchers perceived this process as useful to further validate the findings (Bowen, 2009).

4. Findings

4.1. Choosing avatars: playing with new virtual identities

As *Second Life* provides opportunities for people to create 'customized' avatars before they enter the virtual world, part of the findings of this study unveils how the women interviewed chose their avatars before they travelled to virtual tourist destinations. For all the respondents the choice of the avatar involved a long and complex decisional process. One woman, for example, spent 5 h selecting her avatar and finding the 'proper' dress for it. In general, the choice of the avatar was more time consuming than the selection of the virtual tourist destination to visit. Indeed, the respondents emphasized the importance of choosing the right avatar before visiting virtual destinations. As the findings show, 8 of the 10 women interviewed explained that they wanted their avatars to resemble their appearance in the non-virtual environment as much as possible:

> I like it to be similar to my appearance; I feel it closer to me in this way (Nina)
>
> My avatar is me! (Nona)
>
> I sympathize with the avatar. To be honest I believed that it was me (Leila)

As the excerpts from the interviews show, some Muslim women wanted to be similar to their avatars as they believed that the avatars represented their 'selves' in the virtual environment. Interestingly, despite the respondents' claims, the researchers observed that the chosen avatars did not resemble women's physical appearances at all. This was also proven by the fact that different people (with different physical appearances) chose the same avatar. Only one woman was conscious of the fact that her avatar did not resemble her physical appearance:

> She [her avatar] is so sexy with dark skin long hair, sexy breast, brown eyes, big lips… she was far from my appearance… you know… it is a psychological matter… It doesn't mean I don't like my appearance but I'm not satisfied with myself, because I'm a little bit fat… this reduces my confidence (Leila)

Several women expressed the desire 'to look attractive' and 'sexually appealing', as the descriptions of their avatars show:

> [My avatar] is a beautiful, sexy girl, with pony tail hair, brown hair and eyes, yeah…she is slim...and I think she is fit... and polite but a little timid. I love her appearance...it is good, stylish... I love it. She is not weird...she is like a human being...a normal one... (Nona)
>
> I wasn't really fussy about my avatar, I just wanted it to be a girl, and slim…hahahaaaa and attractive…if you want to have a 'girl' experience in travel, you need to be a 'girl'…girl attracts 'men' (Maryam)
>
> I am not satisfied with my avatar yet… still I want to change its appearance and dress… I like it to be similar to my appearance but wearing a beautiful top and skirt… short skirt…I feel it closer to me in this way, I can imagine myself exactly there (Nina)

Interestingly, the women interviewed employed a repertoire of feminine stereotypical images to explain their ideas of 'sexually appealing', such as slim and fit bodies, polite manners, and stylish clothes.

As appearance is the main criterion based on which avatar was perceived as 'good' or 'bad' in the virtual environment, the interviewees regarded the choice of non-human avatars, such as vampires and animals, as not appropriate. Indeed, non-human avatars were regarded as 'negative' characters:

> If someone chooses a vampire as avatar, maybe he is not a good guy. According to me a person who chooses an animal as avatar wants to hide himself or herself…there should be something wrong with him or her…why should he choose an animal as avatar? (Sara)
>
> The appearance of people is the first thing that I consider to start a conversation in the virtual world because I believe that a person's appearance shows his mindset, his lifestyle, and his way of thinking… (Nona)

Apart from the appearance, there were other factors that the participants employed to judge other avatars, including the way they talked to other avatars, how they behaved in the virtual environment and the virtual destinations they decided to visit:

> Maybe through the destination he chooses, through the conversation he carries out with other people... following his changes...I mean appearance changes during his stay in Second Life, his friends… I think the type of avatar the person chooses shows at least 50% of a person's desires and habits… but the first think which comes to my mind when I see a weird appearance or vampire avatar is that I cannot trust that person… (Sara)
>
> I hate vampires and such ridiculous things and I never enjoy being a vampire even in my imagination. It was very fearful, a horrifying feeling, when I found it [that there are vampires as avatars]. I don't want to interact with them because they are strange (Parisa)
>
> They might think differently, I do not know, maybe they want to have fun or they want to do evil things...I don't really think the avatar you choose shows your personality, maybe after I talk to them I can judge them (Maryam)

Furthermore, ethnicity, nationality, and age were also important factors that influenced participant choice of the avatars to interact with, as the observations and the chat times recorded during the empirical material collection showed. Overall, the findings reveal that the women's choice of the avatar was based on two main criteria, namely the perceptions they have of their own 'selves' and the perceptions other avatars may have of their own 'selves'.

4.2. Women's behaviour in virtual tourist destinations

The choice of the virtual tourism destination to visit was not as time-consuming as the choice of the avatars. After entering the virtual environment, all the women observed and interviewed decided to travel to relatively famous mass-tourism destinations, such as Paris, Las Vegas, and Venice. Within the selected destinations, the participants chose to visit beaches, clubs, and sites they labelled as 'romantic'. Interestingly, the interviews and the observations highlight that the choice of the avatar influences women's behaviour in virtual tourist destinations. The women's 'new identity' provides them the opportunity to express themselves hedonistically without the fear of being judged by others. Nona, for example, during one of the interviews claimed:

I want to go to bars and clubs as I never had this experience in actual life.

The observations carried out in the virtual environment show that Nona, like the other participants, did not behave according to the religious dogmas of Islam. For example, one of the fundamental tenets of Islam is that women must cover themselves in public spaces; yet, none of the respondents wore the hijab in public virtual tourist destinations. Nona is Muslim and wears hijab outside the virtual environment. Moreover, she is aware that her religion does not allow her to go to bars and nightclubs. According to her, wearing the hijab would be a 'barrier' to enjoying the experience of a nightclub. Most of the respondents claimed that they do not believe in the idea of wearing hijab but somehow they accept the fact that they have to wear hijab in some places for safety reasons.

I feel safe, comfortable…and feel that my privacy is just for me… also this hijab should be for men too…they also should take care of their appearance in society… (Sara)

Well, according to Islam you are supposed to cover yourself to prevent men to sexually attack you. In some places, in Iran or Arabic countries, if you go out without hijab you are in big trouble and danger, but no one looks at you when you go to Europe or the US, because this is something normal for them. So you do feel safe if you cover yourself in some places… I am not here supporting "Hijab". My point is that if you cover yourself in some places like Iran, you can decrease the possibility of being in danger (Maryam)

The women interviewed felt more comfortable in the virtual world without hijab as they perceived higher levels of safety in Second Life. There are several cases of violence reported in the virtual worlds; yet, as they do not involve physical violence they do not influence women's perceptions of safety.

The different representation of the 'self' in the virtual environment increased women's levels of perceived freedom as well. Indeed, all the interviewees mentioned that in the virtual environment they felt freer than in the non-virtual environment. Freedom is discussed by the participants from different perspectives. One aspect of freedom involves the possibility of travelling everywhere without visa barriers. As Iranians have many restrictions for obtaining visas for travelling abroad, especially to Western countries, Muslim women valued highly the idea of travelling without visa barriers:

Well… in terms of going to different places, no barriers, no Visa (Maryam)

I like visiting USA, Canada, Egypt and European countries but as Iranians need visa I cannot go there but here I could go wherever I wanted… (Leila)

Freedom is also discussed in relation to patterns of behaviour. The Iranian females who participated in this study performed patterns of behaviour in the virtual environment that are neither allowed in their homeland nor approved by their religion, such as wearing sexy dresses and having sex with strangers. Despite premarital sex being totally forbidden in Islam, many of the women interviewed wanted to experience premarital sex in the virtual environment. Nona, for example, a married woman wearing hijab, explains that she has no problems in having sex with unknown people in *Second Life*, especially if she is in a romantic tourist destination with an unknown virtual partner (who would not be her husband). She also did not mind becoming pregnant. Rather she would like to experience birth delivery:

uhmmm…what should I say…for example I would like to go with him [virtual partner] to different destinations, to sea shores, to experience new things with him, sitting on the beach and I want to hug him and kiss him like in romantic stories… about sex… maybe I need a little bit of time to get familiar with him… as I told you before for me the future of sex and may avatar's baby is important…Having sex is a little bit difficult; sometimes my real religious' belief gives me the impression that I am cheating my husband [Laughing]... I mean sometimes reality and virtuality are mixed in a way that you feel that you are alive and doing real sex... I don't know, now I want just to experience it, but maybe in the real world I would change my mind... I don't know (Nona)

Although even other respondents claimed that virginity is a value, they did not discard the possibility of having a sexual affair in the virtual environment:

I asked a Portuguese guy to have sex with me! I did like him… (Big smile) I'm curious about having sex… (Leila)

How am I supposed to enjoy sex in virtual world? I sometimes don't even enjoy it in real world! [It is something like tele-sex researcher explained] yes I experienced sex chat, but this seems different, isn't it? I mean you can see your avatar having sex with another avatar? Wow! Ok! In VE (Virtual Environment) maybe just out of curiosity I might do that [having sex with stranger]. But in real world I won't have sex with strangers… (Maryam)

The interviews and observations seem to portray an image of the virtual environment as a religion-free place. However, religious values were not totally rejected or forgotten by the interviewees:

I know I shouldn't consider religion [in the virtual environment], but in real life it is important for you, it influences your whole life, even in the virtual environment… (Nona)

No! I don't like [having affair in SL] break the rule and taboo even in SL in my opinion it is not good… to have sex is a BIG SIN! (Sara)

…[religion provides] guidelines to co-live with other human beings…the type of guidelines I mentioned here are not the ones that are applied in Islamic countries… I believe that they [religious guidelines] should just provide opportunities for people to think… through them people should read, discuss, and understand the consequences of their behaviour in their social life… if you tell people 'do this' and 'don't do that' they will go to the wrong direction…the government should just provide the context in which people can think and let the people find their own way...just supervising them (Nona)

I don't believe in wearing hijab at all because I have a brain and a mind and I am mature enough to choose what is good to wear in different places (Sara)

Overall, the results seem to suggest that even in the virtual environment religion plays a role in constraining Muslim women's perceived freedom. Despite this, Second Life provides a context in which religious values – and those governments that coercively impose religious values on their citizens – are critically discussed, (re)interpreted and sometimes challenged. As most of the respondents highlighted, Second Life is a place that allows Muslim women to embrace 'personal religions', namely religions based on a reinterpretation and amalgamation of both Islamic dogmas and personal beliefs concerning what is right or wrong.

5. Discussion

One of the themes emerging from the empirical material concerns Iranian Muslim women's choice of avatar. The lengthy process for selecting the 'proper' avatar was perceived as extremely important by the participants. According to Goffman (1959), first appearances play a crucial role in people's judgements of other individuals during social encounters. Iranian women attempted to avoid imperfections in the representations of their selves and refused to select non-human avatars as they did not want to be perceived as what Goffman (1959) refers to as 'stigmatised individuals', namely individuals who are not often accepted in the social context.

Interestingly, in most of the cases the selected avatars were not accurate representations of women's non-virtual bodily appearances. While in some cases women slightly changed their appearances to mask what were perceived as 'physical imperfections', in others they decided to represent themselves with avatars that mismatched totally their 'corporeal selves'. Despite the non-corporeality of the virtual environment experience, the avatars' appearance seemed to be a very important element for Iranian Muslim women when travelling in the virtual environment.

With regard to the choice of the avatar, the excerpts from the interviews and observations reveal that Iranian Muslim women challenged Islamic representations of women in public spaces. All the women did not want to wear the hijab, which according to Amir-Ebrahimi (2008, p. 89) 'traditionally symbolizes silence and self-concealment in public'. On the contrary, women's virtual appearances wanted to conform to a certain idea of femininity, mainly based on 'sexualised' gender stereotypical images of 'femaleness'. In this respect, being in virtual tourist destinations encourages women to perform what are in Amir-Ebrahimi's (2008) terms 'transgressions' against Islamic dogmas and its gender-related restrictions.

However, even if these transgressions led women to reject Islamic rules regarding femininity, they did not stop women performing other stereotypical representations of femininity. As the interviews and the observations revealed, the women spent a considerable amount of time making sure that their avatars were 'proper' portrayals of Western stereotypical images of 'femaleness'. According to this stance, mainly embraced and reiterated by media in many Western societies, women need to be 'attractive' to the male gaze, 'sexy', socially constructed as emotional yet timid individuals. Despite the fact that it is forbidden and cannot be performed in public in the non-virtual environment in Iran, this stereotypical image of femininity seems to have been 'acquired' and 'internalised' by Iranian women from a young age. After the strict sanctions imposed by several Western countries against Iran after the 1979 Revolution, which have had severe economic and social impacts on the country, most Iranians have learned how to cope with and bypass attempts to keep the country isolated from the rest of the world. Indeed, non-authorised internet sites and illegal satellite TV systems are widespread in Iranian everyday life and play a crucial role in conveying and reiterating Western-based images of femininity. The narratives emerging from the empirical material show that Iranian women need to cope with dual, often self-contradictory identities concerning their perceptions of Western 'femaleness' and their public representation of Islamic 'femaleness'. Indeed, the empirical material shows that women challenged Islamic dogmas on public display of femininity in virtual tourist destinations; yet, by reiterating other stereotypes of femininity they also refuse to embrace less stereotypical images of femininity. As a result, the multiplicity of femininities contemplated by post-structuralist commentators (Cheng, 1999; Mehta & Bondi, 1999) did not emerge from Iranian women's narratives in virtual tourist destinations. Overall, women in virtual tourist destinations challenge what they perceive as a 'subordinated' portrayal of women in society only to embrace another 'subordinated' representation of femininity.

The question arises as to whether and how the enactment of this new femininity influences women's patterns of behaviour in the virtual tourist experience. The new identity as 'Western' females provides Muslim women the possibility of performing patterns of behaviour not approved by the socio-cultural and political context to which they belong, such as going to bars and nightclubs, drinking alcohol, and having sexual intercourse with strangers. In this respect, the virtual tourist experience seems to present aspects of Turner's (1995) liminality, namely spatial and temporal dimensions in which higher levels of perceived freedom and safety give women the opportunity to reverse and challenge the rules of their ordinary lives. However, these moments of liminality seem to be only momentary as women find themselves trapped in a process in which the 'new' sexy appearances need to be constantly (re)negotiated with their 'old' religious and cultural beliefs. As the empirical material show, religious and cultural beliefs imposed on or acquired by Iranian women throughout the course of life from the socio-cultural context in which they grew up cannot be easily forgotten or reversed in the virtual tourist experience. Rather, women's values and beliefs acquired outside the virtual environment play a role in restraining patterns of behaviour perceived as deviant.

According to Boman (1995), virtual environments influence our leisure and tourist activities. However, the fact that virtual tourists' norms and values are shaped by the virtual environment does not allow us to imply that virtual tourists do not carry their cultural values when they travel to virtual tourist destinations. Rather, they still play a role in influencing the way people behave on holiday. Carr (2002) maintains that patterns of behaviour performed during the tourism experience are related to those performed during leisure activities. More specifically, he claims that tourist behaviour is affected by a number of interrelated components, such as the leisure oriented destination, the culture of the destination, the tourist homeland culture, the physical environment of the tourist destination, personal characteristics, and personal motivations (Carr, 2002). This study adds to Carr (2002) as it shows that virtual tourist behaviour is influenced by non-virtual leisure behaviour. In virtual tourist destinations Iranian women have the possibility to experience what religion barriers do not allow them in their daily routines. However, Iranian women would not totally disregard the norms and values of everyday life. It is easy for women to remove the hijab in virtual tourist destinations; yet, not wearing hijab does not eradicate religious and cultural values kept behind the veil for years.

As the empirical material shows, within the context of virtual tourist destinations tourists perform hidden aspects of their identities which they may not be allowed to exhibit in their non-virtual routines. However, 'prohibited' desires and hedonistic patterns of behaviour are often limited by cultural and religious values, which play an important role in both the non-virtual and virtual journeys of Iranian women. Travelling in virtual tourist destinations, thus, could be regarded as a 'quasi escape', namely an experience in which moments of pure escapism and non-conformity to the rules of everyday life are often mitigated by religious dogmas and pre-acquired cultural values.

In these 'quasi escapist' experiences, women often tend to challenge gender-based stereotypes concerning Muslim women's bodily representations in Iran. As a result, hijabs and veiled bodies are rejected and 'sexy' and 'unveiled selves' become representations of what is perceived as ideal femininity by the respondents. However, by embracing these new identities Iranian women accept another form of stereotypical femininity, one which echoes the desires and expectations of the male gaze and that turns women's selves into objects of men's fantasies. Perhaps unconsciously,

though this process Iranian Muslim women tend to reinforce, rather than challenge, stereotypical images and representations of femininity. As a consequence, the virtual tourism environment becomes a space where hegemonic discourses of masculinity and femininity are apparently resisted but often reiterated, veiled by momentary and elusive moments of perceived freedom.

6. Conclusion

Many studies have been conducted on virtual reality (Abate, Acampora, & Ricciardi, 2011; Cicognani, 1998; Dewailly, 1999; Guttentag, 2010; Park & Nah, 2008; Smith, 2008; Weiss, Bialik, & Kizony, 2003; Wolfendale, 2006); yet, there is a relative paucity of empirical studies that have explored people's patterns of behaviour in virtual tourist destinations. This paper is original as it provides an overview of tourists' behaviour in the context of interactive 3D virtual worlds. Furthermore, the findings of this study contribute to our knowledge as they cast light on a relatively neglected, specific group of tourists, namely Iranian Muslim women on holiday in virtual destinations. The contribution of this study also lies on the methodological approach employed, as netnography is rarely employed by tourism scholars. Finally, this paper further advances our understanding of the symbolic meanings of tourists' experiences. The nature of tourism experiences has been highly debated in the literature (Cohen, 1979; MacCannell, 1976; Mura & Tavakoli, 2014; Wang, 1999); yet, the significance of tourists' virtual experiences has not received much attention. Overall, this paper highlights that the virtual tourism journey is a meaningful experience for Iranian women as it gives them the possibility to play with their gendered identities and to experience moments of perceived freedom outside their ordinary routines. Also, the findings of this study clearly emphasise that virtual tourism and hyperreality represent important forms of mobility as they may lead to more sustainable travel patterns. However, more research needs to be conducted on the relationship between sustainability, hyperreality and authenticity. In this respect, more needs to be known on whether and how hyperreal/sustainable tourist experiences may influence (positively or negatively) perceptions of authenticity and tourist satisfaction.

This study is novel as it provides an insight into Iranian Muslim women's patterns of behaviour in virtual tourist destinations. However, more research is needed to verify the results obtained. Virtual tourism is not a new concept; yet, more studies on understanding virtual tourist behaviour are necessary to have a better understanding of virtual tourism and virtual tourist experiences. As technology is an important part of old and new generations' lives, it is likely that the future potential customers in tourism will demand more virtual tourist experiences. Moreover, a better understanding of virtual tourism may also help the tourism industry to implement better forms of sustainable tourism. Indeed, to provide sophisticated virtual experiences could be the solution to preserve heritage sites that are at risk of being destroyed by heavy tourist flows. Also, it could offer more opportunities for tourists to visit virtually reconstructed forms of ruined monuments and cultural artefacts. Finally, more research is needed to provide the tourism industry with a deeper insight into the virtual tourist experiences of other segments of the market, including non-Muslim women and men. This will offer tourism marketers more detailed information on virtual tourist experiences and virtual tourist behaviour.

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