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## A Theoretical Perspective on the Decentring of the Human Subject through Virtual Reality: Toward Posthumanist Experiences in Tourism

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### *Abstract*

*Conventional tourism has historically privileged mainly white, wealthy, heterosexual, able-bodied males, marginalising groups such as women, local communities, technology and animals. Posthumanism challenges this anthropocentrism by decentring humans and highlighting relationships with non-human life such as technology. Virtual reality (VR) exemplifies this interconnectedness, allowing users to engage as cyborgs or avatars and fostering novel interactions with non-human entities and digitally mediated environments. Drawing on a comparative case study and literature review, this study is among the first to investigate VR in relation to conventional tourism through a posthumanist lens. Findings indicate that VR enhances visibility and recognition for marginalised groups, yet tensions persist concerning substitution, racial representation, socio-economic inequality, the digital divide and ethical considerations.*

*Keywords:* Anthropocentrism, Conventional Tourism, Cyborg, Posthumanism, Virtual Reality.

### Introduction

Anthropocentrism has long influenced Western thought by privileging humans, especially white, wealthy, heterosexual and able-bodied males, as the central subject (Bolter, 2016; Braidotti, 2013; Ranisch & Sorgner, 2014). The anthropocentric ideal extends to tourism, where these individuals are often positioned as ‘perfect’ tourists (Cohen, 2019). As a result, certain groups are marginalised or regarded as ‘less than fully human’, such as women, local and indigenous communities, and animals (Braidotti, 2013).

In response, posthumanism challenges anthropocentrism by rejecting human supremacy and emphasising interconnectedness with non-human life and technology (Bolter, 2016; Braidotti, 2013; Cohen, 2019; Tomassini, 2022). This perspective promotes a more inclusive understanding of tourists, animals and the environment, challenging traditional hierarchies within the conventional tourism industry.

In contemporary society, humans are increasingly entwined with technology, a development that aligns closely with posthumanist ideas. One prominent example is virtual reality (VR), which immerses users in simulated or virtual environments and allows them to interact and feel

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physically present through tools, such as headsets (De Luna, 2022). Building on this, Haraway (1991) and Hayles (1999), in their seminal research, conceptualise humans as ‘cyborgs’, entities that merge biological and technological elements. VR exemplifies this notion by enabling tourists to assume “virtual cyborg” (Cleland, 2010, 79) identities through avatars, digital representations that can be customised to express various aspects of the self (adapted from Merriam-Webster, 2025).

Building on these insights, this study applies a posthumanist framework to examine the intersection of tourism and technology, with particular attention to the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How do virtual and conventional tourism practices reflect or challenge posthumanist principles?

**RQ2:** What are the benefits and drawbacks of virtual tourism in comparison to conventional tourism in terms of posthumanism?

### Literature Review

Posthumanism is a relatively recent focus in tourism (Fennell, 2022). Early explorations exist (Guia & Jamal, 2020), though Cohen (2019) was among the first to introduce it, examining implications for animals, practical limitations and wider relevance.

Subsequent research has highlighted ethical concerns in human-animal relations, ranging from animatronic dolphins as alternatives to captivity (Fennell, 2022) and critiques of hunting and commodification of animals (López López, Quintero Venegas, & García Gutiérrez, 2023; López López, Quintero Venegas, & Kline, 2023) to multispecies livelihoods connecting human and non-human well-being (Thomsen, Thomsen et al., 2023; Thomsen, Copeland et al., 2023) and the animal gaze encouraging mutual encounters (Tomassini & Bertella, 2024). Grounded in the philosophy of interconnectedness by Gilles Deleuze, a French philosopher, posthumanist approaches have also critiqued neo-colonialism, neoliberalism and anthropocentrism (Guia & Jamal, 2020), with later contributions emphasising their value for addressing ethical and relational complexities (Guia & Jamal, 2023).

Building on these foundations, posthumanism has informed diverse tourism niches, including justice tourism (Guia, 2021), affirmative posthumanist ethics centred on relationality and diverse knowledge (Guia & Jamal, 2025), volunteer tourism revealing socio-material entanglements (Burrai & Sterchele, 2024) and cultural tourism advancing sustainable Sámi practices beyond human-centred pedagogy (Björn & Lüthje, 2025).

The literature review reveals key gaps that this study aims to address. First, it is among the first to compare VR tourism and conventional tourism from a posthumanist perspective. Second, it investigates the role of emerging technologies, particularly VR, in shaping posthumanist approaches within tourism. Thus, this study aims to demonstrate how VR challenges conventional tourism by promoting ethical, relational and technologically mediated practices that consider both human and non-human stakeholders.

## Methodology

For this study, a comparative case study (CCS) methodology was employed, enabling the systematic examination of two or more cases to identify similarities, differences and developing patterns (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Campbell, 2010). CCS is particularly suited to generating novel theoretical insights (Xiao & Smith, 2006), which aligns with the aims of this study. The cases were selected based on four criteria, namely the relevance to posthumanism, involvement of a virtual environment, use of avatars to illustrate the human-technology connection and the representation of real-life scenarios. Table 1 summarises the VR applications, including date of consultation, purpose, degree of immersion and type of experience offered, allowing a systematic analysis of how each case embodies posthumanist principles and engages users across varying levels of immersion.

**Table 1**

### *Comparative VR Case Studies*

<b>Name of VR application</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Degree of Immersion</b>	<b>Experience Offered</b>	<b>Date</b>
<i>World of Warcraft (WOW)</i>	Multiplayer virtual world	None	Narrative, social and skill-based play	2024-2025
<i>WildEarth</i>	Virtual safaris	Semi	Co-presence with guides and wildlife	2025
<i>Second Life (SL)</i>	Multiplayer virtual world	Semi	Avatar interaction, user content and exploration	2015
<i>1000 Cut Journey</i>	Embody a black male avatar	Fully	Cultural and historical storytelling	2025
<i>Museum in the Village</i>	Rural arts showcase	None	Heritage exploration and community exhibits	2025
<i>Rec Room</i>	Multiplayer game	Fully	Social play and user-generated content	2025
<i>VRChat Room</i>	A multiplayer virtual world	Fully	Avatar interaction, role-play and community events	2025

*Note.* Authors' own work (2025).

In addition, a literature review was conducted. The literature review served a dual function. First, it provided the theoretical foundation required to frame and interpret the CCS findings. Second, it functioned as a methodology in its own right, facilitating the secondary analysis of both explicit and tacit knowledge (Jesson et al., 2011). This review drew from a diverse range of academic sources, namely peer reviewed journal articles and academic books on posthumanism, tourism and VR, ensuring both conceptual depth and theoretical coherence.

## Discussion and Results

This section explores the extent to which conventional and VR tourism align with or diverge

from posthumanist principles, offering a critical analysis of their respective advantages and limitations. The discussion begins by outlining the benefits before turning to the drawbacks.

### **Benefits of Virtual Tourism vs Conventional Tourism**

As mentioned, conventional tourism has historically idealised the white, wealthy, heterosexual, able-bodied male (Yang & Schänzel, 2025), marginalising people with disabilities (PwDs), women, less affluent tourists, people of colour (PoC), members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual and others (LGBTQIA+), and local and indigenous communities. This section explores how VR tourism challenges these hierarchies, aligning with and promoting posthumanist principles (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

#### *Conventional Tourism vs. Virtual Tourism*

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Conventional Tourism</b>	<b>Posthumanist Virtual Tourism</b>
<b>Substitution</b>	PwDs are limited by their physical body	PwDs are free (i.e. cyborgs)
<b>Democratisation of Travel</b>	Hierarchies: wealthy vs. poor tourists	Social hierarchies are absent
<b>Gender Identity</b>	Binary: ‘man’ vs ‘woman’	Gender equality
<b>Racial Inclusion</b>	White male centred	Racial equality
<b>LGBTQIA+</b>	Heteronormative expectations dominate	LGBTQIA+ is recognised
<b>Indigenous and Local Communities</b>	Indigenous and local communities are ignored	Indigenous and local communities have a voice
<b>VR as an Enhancement Tool</b>	Physical body + VR technology	Physical body + VR technology

*Note.* Authors’ own work (2025).

Numerous studies in tourism have shown that the participation of PwDs is primarily limited by the physical constraints of their bodies (Deville & Moura, 2021; Kamyabi & Alipour, 2022). For example, individuals confined to wheelchairs often encounter barriers at destinations and attractions, such as stairs, which can be difficult to address due to high costs or conservation requirements (Guttentag, 2010; Mura et al., 2017; Ruiz-Rodrigo et al., 2024).

From a posthumanist perspective, VR can act as a substitute for PwDs, enabling them to transcend the limitations of their physical body and engage in tourism through avatars (Ali et al., 2024; Sussmann & Vanhegan, 2000). This creates a heterogeneous assemblage of body, technology and virtual self (Waligórski, 2024), as illustrated by the case of Norwegian gamer Mats Steen, who had a degenerative muscular disease. Steen used the online role-playing game *WoW* to virtually perform activities impossible in his physical reality (Jones, 2024). Despite its potential, a major challenge for VR in tourism remains its acceptance as an authentic alternative

to physical travel (Iftikhar et al., 2022).

Conventional tourism remains largely accessible to affluent travellers, effectively rendering those from lower-income due to cost (Park et al., 2020; Prideaux, 2005). However, Mura et al. (2017) argue that VR democratises tourism by allowing people to experience destinations irrespective of their financial constraints. For instance, tourists can engage virtually, and at no cost, in a safari experience at Djuma Game Reserve in South Africa, facilitated by *WildEarth*, a British-South African conservation and broadcasting organisation (Getaway, 2025).

Gender significantly shapes tourism and often reflects a traditional divide between ‘men’ and ‘women’ (Yang & Schänzel, 2025). Women often encounter restrictions in conventional tourism. For example, some Muslim women are prohibited from traveling alone without the consent of a male guardian or husband (Kiani et al., 2024; Tavakoli & Mura, 2015).

VR challenges these constraints by providing women an opportunity for self-expression by enabling them to control their avatars (Kiani et al., 2024; Tavakoli & Mura, 2015). A study by Tavakoli and Mura (2015) supports this. According to the study, in SL, a popular online virtual world, Iranian women were able to contest gender stereotypes and express themselves more autonomously and hedonistically through their avatars (Second Life, 2025).

PoC sometimes encounter racial discrimination from hosts and other tourists at destinations (Cole, 2010), a disparity not typically experienced by white tourists. For example, in 2017, a video on Instagram showed how a white Airbnb host in Amsterdam physically pushed a black woman down a flight of stairs after she was late checking out (Zwane, 2023).

VR may help address such inequalities. Studies show that white participants embodying darker-skinned avatars exhibited reduced racial bias lasting up to a week (Banakou et al., 2016; Peck et al., 2013). For example, *1000 Cut Journey*, the immersive experience highlights the social realities of racism faced by PoC. In this VR experience, users embody a black male avatar and confront racism from a PoC perspective (Games for Change, 2025).

LGBTQIA+ individuals are often pressured to conform to heteronormative expectations in conventional tourism, with many modifying their appearance or adopting an alternative persona (Booking.com, 2024; Usai et al., 2022). A study by Booking.com (2024) found that 40% of LGBTQIA+ tourists alter their appearance and behaviour, while 41% construct an alternative persona to navigate different environments.

VR provides a safer space for authentic self-expression, allowing individuals to engage freely as avatars without social constraints (Brooks, 2021). For example, virtual destinations in SL, such as *Club Multiverse*, offer inclusive environments where LGBTQIA+ users can explore and express their identity safely (Second Life, 2025).

Indigenous and local communities are important stakeholders in conventional tourism. Their cultural knowledge and deep connection to the environment reflect posthumanist principles (Björn & Lühje, 2025; Zambrano-Mieles et al., 2025). However, these communities are often overlooked or commodified, reflecting an anthropocentric view.

VR offers a posthumanist approach by providing communities the opportunity to participate in tourism planning, share their narratives, as well as, represent their culture, environment and ecosystems ethically. Therefore, it is essential for planners to design virtual environments that enable local communities to explore projects, thereby enhancing participation and fostering a sense of ownership (Verkerk, 2021).

In addition, local and indigenous VR museums and heritage sites allow tourists to experience immersive cultural, ecological and technological narratives (Guttentag, 2010; Wiangkham et al., 2025). For example, *Museum in the Village (Museu na Aldeia)* is a digital initiative in Portugal that connects museums with rural communities, enabling residents over 65 to share and showcase local cultural heritage and art. Visitors explore it via an interactive map or documentary. The project won a European Heritage Award for promoting community engagement and inclusion through culture (Museu na Aldeia, 2025). Such experiences demonstrate how VR can dissolve boundaries between tourists and local communities, fostering meaningful engagement and co-creation.

In conventional tourism, VR complements the customer journey across three phases, namely pre-consumption, consumption and post-consumption. In the pre-consumption phase, VR provides a ‘try-before-you-buy’ experience, for example a virtual tour of a cruise ship. During the consumption phase, VR enhances the experience with additional virtual elements, for example interactive simulations. In the post-consumption phase, VR allows tourists to re-live experiences, reinforcing memories and encouraging recommendations (Flavián et al., 2024; Hollebeek et al. 2020).

From a posthumanist perspective, VR gives tourists a voice (Sangadji et al., 2025), enabling them to express whether they actually wish to visit the physical destination. This illustrates the dynamic, interdependent relationship between tourists and technology, showing that neither exists independently of the other.

### **Drawbacks of Virtual Tourism vs Conventional Tourism**

This section critically evaluates the limitations of VR tourism in comparison to conventional tourism through a posthumanist framework. It addresses key issues including substitution, racial representation, socio-economic disparities, the digital divide and ethical considerations. Table 3 provides a summary of these factors, illustrating the ways in which VR tourism continues to fall short of fully embodying posthumanist principles.

**Table 3**

*Virtual Tourism vs Conventional Tourism*

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Virtual Tourism</b>	<b>Conventional Tourism</b>
<b>Substitution</b>	Cyborg body, short term	Physical body, long term
<b>Racial Representation</b>	PoC underrepresented/stereotyped	PoC underrepresented/stereotyped
<b>Socio-Economic Divides</b>	Hierarchy: poor vs wealthy tourists	Hierarchy: poor vs wealthy tourists

<b>Global North vs Global South</b>	Divide persists	Divide persists
<b>Ethical Issues</b>	Lacks clear ethical and privacy regulations	Regulated protections

*Note.* Authors own work (2025).

In terms of substitution, VR provides only a temporary connection. This transient merging exemplifies posthumanism, as the experience is co-created by human and technology; however, humans remain in charge, with the interaction ending when, for example, a headset runs out of power (Waligórski, 2024).

Although VR is promoted as a tool to reduce bias, it often reproduces existing inequalities (Groom et al., 2009; You et al., 2024). In virtual worlds, PoC are often underrepresented or stereotyped, as default avatar templates privilege whiteness and provide limited diverse features. Hence, PoC must modify avatars to reflect their identities, exposing persistent structural biases (Hatfield et al., 2022; McLean, 2019; Waddell et al., 2024). Moreover, research shows that on the social VR platform *VRChat Room*, black users often adopt avatars of different colours to avoid harassment (DeVeaux et al., 2025). In addition, some white players in virtual games are less likely to assist black avatars and are more inclined to act aggressively toward them compared to white counterparts (Groom et al., 2009; Peck et al., 2013). These patterns of exclusion undermine posthumanist ideals of inclusivity, positioning PoC as ‘less than human’ (Braidotti, 2013) and thereby replicating, rather than challenging, conventional social hierarchies.

VR tourism often reproduces the socio-cultural hierarchies of conventional tourism. Economically disadvantaged users are limited to virtual experiences, while wealthier tourists use VR to enhance real-world travel (Dewailly, 1999). Rather than dismantling privilege, VR extends it into digital spaces, sustaining the ‘tourist gaze’ in which affluent users consume images of the ‘Other’ (Urry, 2002). Virtual slum tourism illustrates this continuity, positioning poor residents as objects of the gaze, a similar situation as conventional tourism (Griffin & Muldoon, 2022).

These inequalities also unfold on a global scale. Many countries in the global South lack the resources to develop VR technologies, limiting their participation in virtual tourism and restricting potential revenue streams (Swarbrooke, 1995; Verkerk, 2021). Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that, rather than eliminating inequalities, VR often amplifies them, undermining posthumanist ideals that aim to blur social hierarchies and dissolve entrenched boundaries.

Lastly, VR is often described as ‘the Wild West’ (Devereaux, 2021) or a ‘lawless world’ (Noval, 2024), particularly in relation to privacy, children and virtual animals. The absence of clear regulation poses significant risks as companies (e.g. Meta) collect and sell user data, raising concerns over surveillance and exploitation. Addressing these issues remains challenging, since legal frameworks differ across jurisdictions and consistently lag behind technological innovation (Kulal et al., 2022; TrustArc, 2025).

These privacy concerns intersect with the vulnerability of children in virtual environments, who

may encounter harmful or sexual content. In two studies, researchers posing as children in *Rec Room*, a VR multiplayer online game, encountered disturbing scenes, including virtual strip clubs and a suicide, highlighting how weak safeguards pose ethical risks extending beyond data protection to child welfare (Cross, 2023).

Ethical concerns in VR extend beyond humans to virtual animals, which are often reduced to objects for user consumption and depicted as inferior to humans similar to their real counterparts (Burns & Benz-Schwarzburg, 2024; López López et al., 2023; Thomsen, Thomsen et al., 2023; Thomsen, Copeland et al., 2023). Unlike digital humans, their mistreatment rarely sparks debate. For instance, the game *Postal 2* was banned in Australia and New Zealand for extreme violence against virtual humans (Coghlan & Sparrow, 2021), yet similar abuse of digital animals draws little outcry, reflecting persistent hierarchies of value.

From a posthumanist perspective, issues of privacy, child safety and animal ethics reveal contradictions in VR: while it can blur boundaries between humans, non-humans and technology, ongoing exploitation, inequality and weak regulation risk undermining its posthumanist potential.

## **Conclusion**

Conventional tourism has historically privileged white, wealthy, heterosexual, able-bodied male tourists, while PwDs, women, less affluent travellers, PoC, LGBTQIA+ individuals and local communities are often marginalised or deemed ‘less than human’ (Braidotti, 2013). Posthumanist tourism challenges these hierarchical, anthropocentric assumptions by emphasising the interrelations among tourists, technology, animals and the natural environment. VR reinforces this perspective by merging humans and technology, allowing tourists to inhabit virtual cyborgs or avatars. Using a combined CCS approach and literature review, this study is one of the first to examine how VR shapes posthumanist experiences compared with conventional tourism.

Findings show that VR aligns with key posthumanist principles by expanding opportunities for PwDs, women, economically disadvantaged tourists, PoC, LGBTQIA+ communities, and local and indigenous residents. This is because VR acts as a substitute, allowing marginalised tourists to transcend physical and social constraints and temporarily move beyond race, gender and nationality through avatars (Graffam, 2012). In addition, VR demonstrates that tourists remain constantly connected to technology, especially throughout the customer journey. This connection decentres the human subject and blurs the boundaries between humans and technology.

VR also reveals tensions with posthumanist ideals. Issues of substitution, racial representation, socio-economic inequality, the digital divide and ethics persist. The virtual body exists only temporarily, meaning humans remain central. Systemic hierarchies continue to marginalise PoC, economically disadvantaged users and communities in the global South. Weak ethical and privacy frameworks, especially regarding children and virtual animals, further reflect persistent anthropocentric values. These challenges indicate that, despite its potential, VR development must actively address enduring inequalities to realise posthumanist tourism fully.

## **Limitations and Future Studies**

Existing literature suggests that posthumanism has received limited attention from tourism scholars (Tomassini, 2022). Thus, it leaves significant opportunities to explore its application, particularly in relation to technology. Scholars such as Cohen (2019) and Tomassini (2022) argue that future research should move beyond anthropocentric ideologies by recognising the roles of non-humans and technology, framing tourism as a network of relationships among people, non-humans and technologies.

Future studies should also challenge the notion of the 'perfect tourist'. This study demonstrates how marginalised tourists meaningfully contribute to tourism experiences, questioning traditional assumptions about who participates in tourism. While this research focused on the virtual cyborg, broader human-technology interactions remain underexplored, opening avenues to examine how humans and machines shape experiences in dynamic and unexpected ways.

While this study briefly discussed VR as a substitute and complement for conventional tourism, future scholars should examine its role as both a substitute and an enhancement tool within a posthumanist framework.

Further research should also include additional case studies to explore diverse applications and contexts within the context of posthumanism.

Beyond VR, posthumanist inquiry could extend to other technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), which highlights the blurring of human-technology boundaries. Similarly, non-technological contexts, such as food and drink tourism, could benefit from a posthumanist lens, recognising food itself as an active participant in tourism experiences.

There is a pressing need for empirical research in this largely conceptual field. Expanding empirical inquiry would enrich theoretical debates and enhance the practical application of posthumanist perspectives in tourism. Future scholars could adopt exploratory qualitative designs to investigate whether VR aligns with posthumanist principles (Craig-Hare, 2022; Stebbins, 2008). This study provides a foundation for future empirical investigations.

### **Practical Implications**

The findings of this study have clear managerial relevance for tourism planners, destination managers and policymakers. From a posthumanist perspective, tourism planning can no longer focus only on human bodies in physical spaces. Tourists increasingly engage as avatars in virtual environments. Planners can use VR to make tourism more inclusive.

For marginalised groups, this could include free or accessible VR tours and avatars representing women, PwDs, LGBTQIA+ individuals and PoC. VR can also be used for staff training to foster empathy and inclusion. Local communities can use VR to share their perspectives and participate in planning. For tourists, VR can provide authentic, immersive experiences, such as interactive virtual exhibitions, which strengthen engagement and encourage visits to physical destinations. As hybrid experiences become central, governments and international tourism bodies must address ethical issues, especially the representation of children, animals and communities in virtual spaces.

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