



Virtual Reality Experience Marketing (Nissan Sakura Case Study in Vrchat Application)

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Abstract: *The article aims to analyze the possibility of using virtual reality (VR) technology as an experience marketing tool, enabling the building of ties between the brand and the consumer, based on deep emotions, translating into an increased liking for the company and attachment to its commercial offer. The analysis was based on a literature study on social communication, marketing communication and VR, as well as a case study of the Nissan Sakura electric car brand in the VRChat application, which was launched in May 2022, simultaneously on the Japanese market and in the Metaverse. The analysis of VR technology, carried out on the example of the VR experience „NISSAN SAKURA Driving Island” in the VRChat application shows that VR meets in practice the assumptions of experience marketing and can potentially be an effective tool for shaping attitudes and behaviors influencing the purchasing decisions of consumers on the automotive market. Nevertheless, due to the innovative nature of the tool, it does not currently provide the possibility of reaching a mass audience with the marketing message. The application nature of the work is related to the indication of the conditions, benefits and limitations of the use of VR technology in activities aimed at shaping attitudes and behaviors, influencing the purchasing decisions of consumers in the automotive market. Contrary to the literature in the field of social and marketing communication and the automotive market, which is very wide, issues related to VR technology are the area of interest of only a small group of researchers. Given the growing popularity of VR technology, knowledge of the possibility of using it to shape attitudes and behaviors that influence consumer purchasing decisions in the automotive market may turn out to be valuable both for theoreticians and marketing practitioners.*



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1. THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY AND MARKETING

At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, a new type of economy was born, referred to as the ‘experience economy’, which was driven by the enrichment and technological development of societies, enabling enterprises to provide consumers with a variety of experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Le et al. (2019) note that consumption is now less and less associated with the purchase of goods and services, and is increasingly associated with the enjoyment of the very act of consumption. Contemporary societies are thus becoming societies of sensations. Wikström (2008) notes that the change in which consumers prefer sensations while resigning from the consumption of material goods results from the increase in individualism and attitude of individuals towards self-realization. The two main forces responsible for the change in consumption patterns are, on the one hand, the increase in the economic well-being of societies and saturation with mass consumption, and on the other hand, individualism and liberalism of values manifested in the consumer attitude of expecting more choice. The above changes have led to the emergence of a new type of consumers on the market, called ‘prosumers’ (Sioshansi,

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2019). They are less sensitive than classic consumers to traditional marketing activities. A positive brand image and high quality of products are treated by 'prosumers' as obvious values that should be unconditionally guaranteed by producers and sellers of products and services. According to 'prosumers', the variety of experiences offered by enterprises differentiates commercial offers more than the tangible properties of products and services.

The concept that plays a key role in the experience economy paradigm is experience marketing. The above term means such activities of the company, which, based on experiences important to the customer, build bonds between the brand and the consumer, based on deep emotions, which translates into increased sympathy for the company and attachment to its commercial offer (Dziewanowska & Kacprzak, 2013). Consumer involvement should be built on several levels: rational, emotional, sensory and physical (Rosado-Pinto & Loureiro, 2020). According to Krishna and Schwarz (2014), in order to create an engagement effect, the experiences created by the company should affect both: the mind and the senses of consumers. Marketing activities should engage all the senses of consumers and evoke previously assumed positive associations and reactions. The goal of experience marketing is to create unique experiences that are transferred from short-term memory to long-term memory and evoke brand attachment in the consumer on a deeper, emotional level (Manthiou et al., 2014).

2. VIRTUAL REALITY TECHNOLOGY AS AN INSTRUMENT OF EXPERIENCE MARKETING

Virtual reality (VR) technology is a tool that allows in practice to meet the postulates of the sensation economy paradigm and can be used as an instrument of experience marketing. This term means a simulation of reality created using information technology. It consists of multimedia creation of a computer vision of objects, space and events. This simulation can represent both elements of the real world and a completely fictional one (Han et al., 2022). Contemporary VR technology consists of two elements. The first is hardware, meaning a VR system composed of several components: goggles with a head-mounted display, motion controllers and additional peripheral devices that extend the capabilities of the VR system. The second element is software that provides a virtual simulation environment (Grudzewski et al., 2018).

Virtual reality allows its user to evoke a sense of immersion in a virtual simulation environment (Makransky & Petersen, 2021). The latest generation of VR equipment has functionalities not present in earlier models, which can significantly increase the sense of immersion (Meta, 2022). Modern mobile VR equipment does not require a wired connection to a desktop computer, which makes it possible to provide the user with full freedom of movement in the physical space. The functionality of 6 degrees of freedom (6DOF) allows tracking the movements of the user's entire body in three-dimensional space. The display installed in the goggles allows to present the user a three-dimensional image (3D) and the natural scale of objects in a virtual environment. The speakers installed in the goggles enable the transmission of positional sound, which allows simulation of the change of the position of the sound source in three-dimensional space.

In May 2022, the market premiere of the Nissan Sakura electric car took place simultaneously on the Japanese market and in virtual reality (Nissan, 2022). Nissan has released a virtual world called 'NISSAN SAKURA Driving Island' (Lululuharu, 2022) on the VRChat social app, featuring life-scale functional replicas of Nissan Sakura cars. As part of the virtual experience, VRChat users can look at the details of the exterior and interior of the Nissan Sakura in virtual

reality, take a test drive, charge the car at an electric vehicle charging station and interact with other VRChat users.

In the example of the VR experience 'NISSAN SAKURA Driving Island' in the VRChat application, the virtual reality technology was analyzed in terms of benefits and limitations concerning the possibility of using it as a practical instrument of experience marketing. The application nature of the work is related to the indication of the conditions, benefits and limitations of the use of VR technology in activities aimed at shaping attitudes and behaviors that affect the purchasing decisions of consumers in the car market.

3. BENEFITS

The VR experience 'NISSAN SAKURA Driving Island' strongly stimulates the senses of sight and hearing of the user. The user can explore the virtual environment - the island, along with its nature, road infrastructure, buildings and equipment, including - an electric vehicle charging station. The island is divided into areas corresponding to the four seasons. In each of the zones, the user is surrounded by nature in a different stage of bloom, appropriate for a given season. There are different locations on the island that the user can explore: a teahouse, a coffee shop, a beach, and a snow dome. The user can move between locations by car, on foot, or by using shortcuts on the map, allowing them to immediately move to a given place. The virtual environment includes detailed life-scale models of Nissan Sakura electric cars. The user can look at the details of their external appearance, as well as enter their interior, which has also been reproduced in detail.

Visual and auditory stimuli are provided to the user through VR goggles (Head Mounted Display, HMD) equipped with speakers. A stereoscopic image reaches the user's eyes, giving the impression of the depth of space and the three-dimensionality of objects - car models, surroundings and user avatars. The user hears binaural surround sound, which allows the sound source to be localized in the virtual environment, making conversation with other users of the virtual experience feel natural and intuitive. [Bhide et al. \(2019\)](#) note that by using this sound technique it is possible to control the user's attention and direct it to a specific element of the narrative, in accordance with the intention of the virtual experience designer. The intense sensory experience provided by VR technology increases the user's sense of immersion in the virtual environment ([Flavián et al., 2019](#)). This sense of immersion translates into better memorization of the content presented to the user of the virtual experience ([Mania & Chalmers, 2001](#)).

The participant of the VR experience can interact with many elements of the virtual environment of 'NISSAN SAKURA Driving Island'. The user can take any seat in the car and look at the details of the car interior from any perspective. It is also possible for the user to test drive the car and simulate the process of charging the car at an electric vehicle charging station. Nissan Sakura car models have the functionality of opening and closing all doors and the car's charging lid. It is possible to adjust the height and depth of the seats. The car model can move forward and backward, adjust the speed and change the direction of travel using the steering wheel. Users can interact not only with predefined elements of the virtual environment but also with each other. Interactions between users take place through avatars. The body movements and voice of the user in the real world are transmitted via the Internet and translated into the movements and speech of the avatar representing the user in virtual reality. Users can get in the same car and take a test drive together in virtual reality, regardless of whether in the real world they are in the same physical space or places far apart. The use of interactive elements in the VR experience

has a positive effect on evoking an emotional reaction in the recipient (Pallavicini et al., 2018). Alsharif et al. (2021) note that strong emotional relationships of consumers, caused by the content and form of the marketing message, can have a positive impact on better-remembering information about the product brand and commercial offer by the consumer.

Participants in the virtual experience of 'NISSAN SAKURA Driving Island' can also compete against each other by taking part in a car race. The use of elements taken from traditional computer games in the VR experience can increase the level of consumer engagement and shape the consumer's positive attitude towards the product brand (Hsu & Chen, 2018).

4. LIMITATIONS

The technological exclusivity of virtual reality is one of the main reasons for the limitations of using VR as an instrument of experience marketing. Despite the constantly growing number of users of VR equipment, it is still relatively expensive and not very popular even among the representatives of the younger generation. For this reason, VR technology currently has a small range of reaching the recipients of marketing messages. The VR technology market is now becoming more and more competitive due to the expanding range of VR hardware and software offered by manufacturers from different countries around the world (Henriques & Winkler, 2021). The increase in competition may lead to a decrease in the prices of VR hardware and software on the market, which may be an opportunity for the dissemination of VR technology and increase its range of reaching users with a marketing message.

The 'NISSAN SAKURA Driving Island' virtual reality experience is currently only available through the VRChat social media app, available to users of Meta Quest hardware and software. The VRChat application is actually available for desktop computers through web browsers, but it is a different kind of experience that does not have the highly immersive properties characteristic of virtual reality.

The Nissan's virtual experience is only available in Japanese and English - manuals for car models and a map of the island in virtual reality were written in these languages. The lack of other language versions may be an additional barrier for application users.

The 'NISSAN SAKURA Driving Island' experience does not provide haptic stimulation, despite the fact that the VRChat social platform supports such functionality. In some VR experiences of a similar type, when the user touches objects in the virtual environment, he or she feels the vibrations emitted by the motion controllers held in their hands. The use of such a solution could increase the range of sensory experiences of the user and give the VR experience an additional dimension of interaction, thus increasing the sense of immersion in the virtual environment (Flavián et al., 2019).

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of VR technology carried out on the example of the VR experience 'NISSAN SAKURA Driving Island', indicates that VR meets the assumptions of experience marketing in practice and can potentially be an effective instrument for shaping attitudes and behaviors influencing the purchasing decisions of consumers on the car market. Nevertheless, due to the innovative nature of the tool, it currently does not provide the possibility of reaching the mass

recipient with the marketing message. The chance to increase the reach of the marketing message in virtual reality lies in the potential increase in popularity and affordability of VR technology in the future.

It is worth considering conducting empirical scientific research aimed at verifying the potential of the 'NISSAN SAKURA Driving Island' VR experience to shape attitudes and behaviors that affect the purchasing decisions of consumers in the car market.

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