



## The Impact of Digital Games on Travel Motivation: A Qualitative Study on Students at Mersin University

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### Abstract

This qualitative study examines how digital games shape the travel motivations of young people, focusing on Mersin University students. Data from 30 participants, collected via semi-structured interviews, were analyzed with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Findings show that games have moved beyond leisure to become multidimensional media that spark touristic curiosity. Open-world and story-driven role-playing titles—through visual realism and narrative depth—intensify desires to visit real destinations such as historic cities, exotic geographies, and natural landscapes. Cultural cues, including in-game music, architectural details, folklore, and gastronomic representations, reinforce authentic interest and imagined familiarity. Online gaming communities act as social proof in travel decisions by circulating recommendations, walkthroughs, and experience sharing. The expectation–reality gap between virtual exploration and the actual visit can recalibrate satisfaction, perceived authenticity, and destination image. Overall, results position digital games as next-generation destination marketing tools and a digital extension of creative tourism. The study proposes actionable steps: forge partnerships with developers, design virtual tours and “pre-experience” campaigns, co-create game-inspired itineraries, and incorporate digital media literacy into youth outreach. These strategies can translate game-driven curiosity into responsible, culturally sensitive visitation while expanding destinations’ narrative capital and competitive differentiation. Implications and limits for future research are briefly outlined herein.

### 1. Introduction

The rapid development of digital technologies is fundamentally transforming individuals' leisure practices and travel behaviors. Computer and console games, in particular, have transcended their sole purpose as entertainment, offering users virtual exploratory environments where they can experience different geographies, cultures, and architectural elements (Juul, 2011; Shaw, 2014). Open-world games, historical simulations, and story-driven role-playing games have the potential to provide players with a visual tourism experience through detailed and realistic settings (Connolly et al., 2012; Wolf & Perron, 2023).

Virtual reality and game-based experiences are gaining increasing attention in tourism literature. For instance, Spielmann and Orth (2020) demonstrate that virtual reality-based destination promotions can enhance travel intention through mental imagery and the anticipation of happiness. Similarly, Ye et al., (2024) found that virtual tourism strengthens users' desire to travel in the real world. Furthermore, Shin et al., (2024) reveal that virtual

travel experiences in the metaverse significantly influence visit intentions for both virtual and real destinations. These findings suggest that digital games and virtual experiences can be considered potential "virtual destination promotion tools" (Oncioiu, 2022; Hudson et al., 2015).

In the Turkish context, the participation of the younger generation in digital games is considerably high. According to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK, 2023), 72% of young people aged 16–24 regularly play online games. This generation also represents a significant segment of the tourism market as the active tourists of the future (Gretzel et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding the effects of university students' gaming experiences on their travel motivations is of strategic importance for both academic literature and tourism marketing (Beeton, 2016; Xiang & Fesenmaier, 2016).

This study aims to investigate how computer games contribute to individuals' desire to see new places in the real world through qualitative research conducted among students at Mersin University. The research focuses on the following key questions: (i) How do the virtual environments presented in computer games affect students' travel motivations? (ii) Which game genres are more effective at stimulating this motivation? (iii) Through which mechanisms do in-game visual and narrative elements shape destination perception and tourist preferences?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to make an interdisciplinary contribution to both the game studies literature and the field of tourism. The findings are also expected to offer practical recommendations for tourism destinations to develop game-based marketing strategies and to collaborate with game developers (Beeton, 2016; Xiang & Fesenmaier, 2016).

### 1.1 Aim and Significance of the Research

The potential effects of computer games and virtual reality-based digital experiences on individuals' travel behaviors and destination perceptions have emerged as a significant area of research in recent academic literature (Spielmann & Orth, 2020; Ye et al., 2024; Shin et al., 2024). High-resolution visuals, detailed spatial designs, and story-driven narratives enable players to virtually explore geographies they have not yet visited in real life (Juul, 2011; Wolf & Perron, 2023). Whether these virtual exploration processes trigger a desire in individuals to see these places in the real world is a topic that warrants careful investigation from a tourism marketing perspective (Oncioiu, 2022; Hudson et al., 2015).

The primary aim of this study is to examine the impact of computer games on individuals' desire to discover new destinations and travel, utilizing a qualitative perspective. To this end, semi-structured interviews with students from Mersin University will facilitate an understanding of the relationship between young adults' digital gaming experiences and their real-world travel motivations. Young adults constitute a strategic sample, as they are both intensive consumers of digital games and the active tourists of the future (Gretzel et al., 2020; TÜİK, 2023).

The significance of this research can be assessed on two levels. First, on a theoretical level, the study will contribute to filling the knowledge gap in the field of digital games and tourism interaction, thereby making an interdisciplinary contribution to the subject of game-based travel motivation (Beeton, 2016; Xiang & Fesenmaier, 2016). Second, on a practical level, the findings may open avenues for new strategic collaborations among destination managers, tourism marketers, and game developers. The use of games as marketing tools to strengthen destination image and increase the visit intention of potential tourists could offer innovative approaches in sustainable tourism planning (Hudson et al., 2015; Oncioiu, 2022).

Consequently, this study aims not only to understand the effects of young people's digital gaming habits on their tourism behaviors but also to contribute to the development of applicable policy and marketing recommendations for the digitalization processes of the tourism sector.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

There is growing evidence that digital games are evolving beyond mere entertainment tools to influence users' destination perceptions and travel behaviors. In particular, in-game spatial designs and narrative worlds can strengthen curiosity and intention towards real destinations by serving as a form of "pre-exploration" for players (Yin et al., 2024). The tourism literature has shown that creativity and digital experiences generate new forms of motivation, and that cultural content, when reframed through gaming and virtual platforms, can enhance destination appeal (Richards, 2011). Moreover, findings indicating that mobile and digital interactions significantly shape tourist decision-making processes suggest that game-based interactions may possess a similar guiding influence (Tussyadiah & Wang, 2016).

Specifically in Türkiye, digital engagement among the youth is notably high; the internet usage rate in the 16–74 age group reached 87.1% in 2023 (TÜİK, 2023). This landscape suggests that the perceptions of university students, shaped by their intensive exposure to digital media and games, may be reflected in their future travel decisions. Therefore, the central problem of this study is as follows:

To what extent and through which mechanisms do the virtual spaces and experiences offered by computer games influence young individuals' desire to see new places and travel in the real world?

## 1.3 Research Questions

Findings in the literature increasingly suggest that digital games can influence individuals' touristic curiosity and travel intentions through virtual space experiences (Yin et al., 2024; Richards, 2011; Tussyadiah & Wang, 2016). However, within the context of Türkiye, qualitative studies that deeply examine the travel motivations of young adults arising from their gaming experiences are quite limited (TÜİK, 2023). Addressing this gap, the research focuses on the following questions:

- In what ways do the virtual spaces offered by computer games affect students' desire to see new places in the real world?
- Which game genres (e.g., open-world, simulation, role-playing games) exert a stronger influence on travel motivation?
- What role do in-game visual quality, narrative structure, and cultural elements play in shaping destination perception and travel intention?
- How do the cultural and spatial elements encountered by players in their gaming experiences shape their expectations and decisions regarding actual travel plans?
- How are the perceptual differences between the virtual experience and the actual destination experience reflected in students' travel decision-making processes?

These questions are designed to understand the touristic motivations of Mersin University students that are formed through computer games and to reveal the potential contributions that digital games can make from a tourism marketing perspective.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Cultural and Social Impacts of Computer Games

Digital games are regarded not only as a means of entertainment but also as a platform for cultural transmission and social interaction (Juul, 2011; Shaw, 2014). Through game scenarios, players can indirectly acquire knowledge about different cultures, historical periods, and geographies; this process can shape individuals' perceptions of the world and their sense of curiosity (Connolly et al., 2012; Wolf & Perron, 2023). High-resolution graphics, realistic spatial settings, and interactive narrative structures provide players with what is essentially a virtual travel experience and enhance cultural awareness (Spielmann & Orth, 2020).

### 2.2 The Contribution of Games to Travel and Exploration Motivation

The virtual space experiences offered through video games can stimulate players' interest in real-world destinations. Yin et al., (2024) have empirically demonstrated that in-game destination factors strengthen players' intention to visit these locations in real life. Similarly, studies examining the impact of virtual reality-based promotions on travel intention (Ye et al., 2024; Shin et al., 2024) indicate that game-based experiences can support touristic motivations. Hudson et al. (2015), by examining the effects of social media on emotions and brand relationships, also emphasize the indirect contribution of online interactions to destination perception. These findings suggest that digital games can be considered a creative tool in tourism marketing (Oncioiu, 2022; Unur & Kinikli, 2020).

### 2.3 Digital Tourism, Gamification, and Virtual Experiences

Tourism literature has long discussed that digital and creative experiences shape touristic motivations. Richards (2011) argues that creative tourism generates new forms of motivation and that digital experiences can transform touristic perception. Tussyadiah and Wang (2016) highlight the role of mobile technologies in tourists' decision-making processes, revealing the impact of digital interactions on travel intention. In this context, gamification and virtual tourism applications offer innovative strategies to strengthen destination image and attract the interest of potential tourists (Gretzel et al., 2020; Xiang & Fesenmaier, 2016).

In the specific context of Türkiye, the high participation rate of the young population in digital games (TÜİK, 2023) necessitates the consideration of this potential in local tourism policies. Young adults, such as university students, constitute a critical sample for this research, both because they interact intensively with digital games and because their future touristic preferences are still in a formative stage.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This study was conducted within the framework of a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The qualitative approach is suitable for gaining an in-depth understanding of individuals' experiences, perceptions, and motivations through their own narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this method, detailed and contextual data were obtained regarding the impact of computer games on travel motivation.

**Table 1** Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Faculty/Department	Daily Gaming Time (hours)	Most Preferred Game Genre
P1	Male	19	Engineering (Mechanical)	2.5	Open World
P2	Female	20	Communication	1.0	Role-playing (RPG)
P3	Male	21	Arts and Sciences (Geography)	3.0	Strategy
P4	Female	22	Tourism	1.5	Story-driven adventure
P5	Male	23	Engineering (Computer)	4.0	FPS / Action
P6	Female	20	Faculty of Education	0.8	Simulation
P7	Male	21	Arts and Sciences (History)	2.0	Historical RPG
P8	Female	19	Health Sciences	1.2	Adventure
P9	Male	22	FEAS (Business Administration)	3.5	Open World
P10	Female	21	Communication	2.0	Social/multiplayer
P11	Male	20	Engineering (Electrical)	1.5	Sports
P12	Female	23	Tourism	2.5	Open World
P13	Male	19	Arts and Sciences (Physics)	0.7	Strategy
P14	Female	21	Faculty of Education	1.0	Role-playing (RPG)
P15	Male	22	Engineering (Mechanical)	3.0	FPS
P16	Female	20	Health Sciences	1.3	Simulation
P17	Male	23	FEAS (Economics)	2.5	Open World
P18	Female	19	Tourism	0.9	Story-driven adventure
P19	Male	21	Arts and Sciences (Geography)	1.5	Strategy
P20	Female	22	Communication	2.2	Role-playing (RPG)
P21	Male	20	Engineering (Computer)	4.0	FPS
P22	Female	21	Faculty of Education	1.2	Simulation
P23	Male	22	Tourism	2.7	Open World
P24	Female	19	Health Sciences	1.0	Adventure
P25	Male	23	FEAS (Business Administration)	3.5	Strategy
P26	Female	20	Arts and Sciences (History)	1.3	Historical RPG
P27	Male	21	Engineering (Electrical)	2.5	Sports
P28	Female	22	Tourism	1.8	Role-playing (RPG)
P29	Male	20	Arts and Sciences (Physics)	0.9	Simulation
P30	Female	23	Communication	2.1	Open World

### 3.2 Participants

The research group consisted of 30 undergraduate students from various faculties at Mersin University (Table 1). Participants were selected through maximum variation sampling; care was taken to ensure they possessed

diverse characteristics in terms of gender, department, year of study, and gaming habits. This approach enabled the examination of gaming experiences and travel motivations from multiple perspectives (Patton, 2015). All participants took part in the research voluntarily and signed an informed consent form.

### 3.3 Data Collection Tool

A semi-structured interview guide was prepared for data collection. The guide consisted of two parts:

1. **Demographic information:** Age, gender, department, duration, and frequency of gaming.
2. **Research questions:** 10 open-ended questions designed to explore in-depth the effect of gaming experiences on travel motivation.

In preparing the interview guide, similar studies in the literature were reviewed (Yin et al., 2024; Spielmann & Orth, 2020), and expert opinion was sought. Each interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participant's consent.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed according to the steps of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Two independent researchers conducted the coding process separately; in cases where consensus could not be reached, agreement was achieved through discussion.

### 3.5 Validity and Reliability

Triangulation and member checking strategies were implemented in the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, the interview guide was tested through a pilot study to confirm the clarity and appropriateness of the questions for the research aim. Ethical approval was obtained from the Mersin University Ethics Committee, and the anonymity of the participants was maintained.

## 4. Findings

An analysis of the data from the 30 students selected from various faculties at Mersin University reveals a relatively balanced gender distribution and an age range of 19–23. Daily gaming time varies between 0.7 and 4 hours. The most frequently preferred genres are open-world (11 participants), role-playing (8 participants), and strategy games (6 participants). This diversity has enabled the observation of the impact of digital games on travel motivation in various contexts.

### Theme 1. The Role of Virtual Spaces in Increasing the Desire for Exploration

- **Sub-themes:**

- **Historical cities:** 18 participants emphasized that the historical city designs in games like *Assassin's Creed* and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* sparked curiosity about real-world destinations.
- **Natural landscapes:** 10 participants stated that the natural landscapes in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* or *Skyrim* increased their interest, particularly in Northern Europe.
- **Modern metropolises:** 7 participants expressed that the urban landscapes depicted in *Watch Dogs: Legion* or *GTA V* created a "desire to see the city in person."

The statement by P12 is typical:

"After seeing the Istanbul scenes in the *Assassin's Creed* series, I absolutely wanted to visit the historical peninsula."

These findings align with the conclusions of [Yin et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Spielmann and Orth \(2020\)](#), which show that game environments strengthen destination image.

### Theme 2. Cultural Elements and Storytelling

- **Sub-themes:**

- **Local music and art:** 14 participants indicated that game music and folkloric elements (e.g., the Polish language and folk melodies in *The Witcher* series) triggered their desire to travel.
- **Emphasis on cuisine and gastronomy:** 9 participants mentioned that depictions of culinary culture in games increased their interest, especially in gastronomy tourism.
- **Architectural details:** 17 participants said that realistic architectural elements in games caught their attention and sparked an intention to visit the regions where these structures are located.

P4 stated:

"The Central European village atmosphere in *The Witcher* made me eager to go to Poland."

This result is supported by [Richards' \(2011\)](#) findings that creative and cultural experiences increase touristic motivations.

### Theme 3. Social Interaction and Peer Group

- **Sub-themes:**

- **In-game chat and recommendations:** 12 participants noted that recommendations from online communities guided their travel plans.
- **Planning travel together:** 7 participants said they made real-world travel plans with their gaming friends.
- **Community-driven curiosity:** 10 participants expressed that real travel photos shared by other players triggered their own interest in destinations.

The statement by P18 summarizes this situation:

"I added some countries to my list based on my gaming friends' recommendations; their experiences motivated me."

This is consistent with the findings of [Tussyadiah and Wang \(2016\)](#), who emphasized that digital interactions shape tourist decision-making processes.

### Theme 4. Comparison with the Real Travel Experience

- **Sub-themes:**

- **Difference in visual expectation:** 11 participants noted that the color saturation and sense of scale in the game felt different during the actual visit.
- **Crowds and infrastructure conditions:** 8 participants stated that they found European cities, in particular, to be "much more crowded than in the game."
- **Perception of cultural authenticity:** 6 participants found the "authentic" atmosphere in the game more impressive, feeling that some traditional elements were commercialized in tourist areas.

The words of P7 are typical:

"I found Florence to be more crowded than how I saw it in the game, but its historical texture still impressed me."

These findings align with the study by [Shin et al. \(2024\)](#), which shows that perceptual differences between virtual and real destination experiences can be reflected in travel satisfaction.

### Theme 5. Opportunities for Tourism Marketing

- **Sub-themes:**

- **Game-destination collaborations:** 13 participants suggested integrating tourism promotion campaigns into game content.
- **Impact of virtual tours on tourism revenue:** 9 participants stated that virtual tour experiences could be used as a promotional tool before an actual visit.

The point emphasized by P25 is summary:

"Integrating city promotions from games into official tourism campaigns would be very effective."

This view is supported by the findings of [Oncioiu \(2022\)](#), who highlighted the role of virtual reality applications in destination marketing.

## 5. Discussion

This research, conducted through a qualitative investigation of students at Mersin University, has revealed the effects of digital games on young people's desire to see new destinations in the real world. The findings indicate that games function not only as a means of entertainment but also as a powerful medium that triggers touristic motivations. In this section, the obtained results are discussed in comparison with the existing literature.

### 5.1 Comparison with Literature

Our study identified open-world and story-driven games as the genres that most significantly trigger the desire to travel. This result aligns with the findings of [Yin et al., \(2024\)](#), which showed that in-game destination factors increase players' actual visit intentions. The participants' curiosity about the historical cities and natural landscapes they saw in virtual spaces also corroborates the conclusions of [Spielmann and Orth \(2020\)](#) regarding the impact of virtual reality-based destination promotions on travel intention.

Furthermore, participants stated that cultural elements within games (music, architecture, culinary depictions) strengthen their travel motivation. This finding parallels [Richards' \(2011\)](#) emphasis on how creative tourism and digital experiences transform touristic perception. The element of social interaction is consistent with the results of [Tussyadiah and Wang \(2016\)](#), who found that digital interactions influence tourist decision-making processes. This suggests that gaming communities and multiplayer platforms play a significant role in travel planning.

### 5.2 The Potential of Digital Games in Tourism Marketing

Similar to the work of [Oncioiu \(2022\)](#), which highlighted the role of virtual reality applications in destination marketing, this research demonstrates that digital games can be used as a strategic tool for destination promotion. The high rate of digital game participation among young adults in particular ([TÜİK, 2023](#)) supports the potential for collaborations between game developers and destination marketers to develop innovative applications that could increase tourism revenue.

### 5.3 Contribution and Originality in the Turkish Context

Considering the scarcity of studies on travel motivation through gaming in Türkiye, this research fills a significant gap in the literature. In line with the call by [Gretzel et al. \(2020\)](#) regarding the transformation of e-tourism, this study, which shows how the concept of digitalized tourism interacts with new media forms (e.g., computer games), offers an interdisciplinary perspective to both tourism academia and the field of applied marketing.

### 5.4 Limitations and Future Research

This research is limited to students from Mersin University; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire youth population of Türkiye. Furthermore, as the data is based on self-reports, the expressed impact of gaming experiences on travel intention may not fully reflect long-term behavioral change.

Future research could examine the dimensions of this relationship in greater depth by using quantitative and mixed methods with larger samples from different universities and age groups. Additionally, a comparative analysis of the different effects between game genres (e.g., role-playing vs. e-sports) would also provide significant contributions.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 6.1 General Conclusions

This qualitative research, focusing on students at Mersin University, reveals that digital games have evolved beyond being a mere leisure activity to become a powerful media tool that shapes young individuals' worldview, cultural curiosity, and real-world travel motivations. The findings from the thematic analysis indicate that this impact has a multidimensional structure, shaped by five core dynamics: the role of virtual spaces in triggering the desire for exploration, the appeal of cultural and narrative elements, the guiding power of social interaction, the dialogue between real and virtual experiences, and the new opportunities arising for tourism marketing.

The study's most prominent finding is that immersive genres, particularly open-world and story-driven role-playing games, strongly encourage players to explore real destinations such as historical cities, exotic geographies, and natural landscapes, thanks to the visual realism and narrative depth they offer. This is consistent with the empirical results presented by [Yin et al. \(2024\)](#), which showed that in-game destination factors increase visit intention, and with the findings of [Spielmann and Orth \(2020\)](#) on how virtual experiences trigger the desire to travel through mental imagery.

Furthermore, it was determined that motivation is not limited to visual exploration alone; diegetic (in-narrative) cultural elements within games—such as music, architectural details, folkloric items, and gastronomic representations—also cause players to develop an authentic interest in that region. Additionally, online gaming communities function as social reference points, directly influencing individuals' destination choices through peer recommendations and shared experiences. This social proof mechanism supports the points emphasized by [Tussyadiah and Wang \(2016\)](#) regarding the role of digital interactions in tourist decision-making processes. Finally, it was observed that the perceptual differences (the expectation-reality gap) between the virtual experience and the actual visit directly shape travel satisfaction and future destination image ([Shin et al., 2024](#)). This demonstrates

that the role of virtual experiences extends beyond motivation; they are also critical for managing visitor expectations and mitigating potential disappointment.

When all these results are considered together, it becomes clear that digital games should be regarded as a next-generation destination marketing tool, as indicated by [Oncioiu \(2022\)](#), and as a digital extension of the concept of creative tourism, as proposed by [Richards \(2011\)](#).

## 6.2 Policies and Practical Recommendations

### For Tourism Sector Stakeholders

- **Strategic In-Game Collaborations:** Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), ministries of tourism, and local governments should establish proactive collaborations with popular game developers. These collaborations should extend beyond simple logo placements to include real-location-themed downloadable content (DLC), side quests with enhanced historical accuracy, or narrative content that reflects the region's cultural fabric. This would allow for organic and immersive promotion for potential tourists through "transmedia storytelling."
- **"Explore Virtually First, Then Experience in Reality" Models:** High-quality virtual tours inspired by in-game virtual spaces can be used as a "pre-experience" marketing tool. These tours can reduce uncertainty for undecided tourists, thereby encouraging the actual travel decision, and can serve as a pre-qualification filter for destinations.

### For Education and Youth Policies

- **Digital Media Literacy and Tourism Awareness:** Universities and youth centers should organize elective courses or workshops on the interaction between digital culture, game design, and tourism. These programs would enhance young people's skills in critically analyzing digital representations (media literacy) and increase their awareness of the touristic and cultural values of their own geography.

### For Future Research

- **Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Research:** To validate and generalize the qualitative findings of this study, quantitative research should be designed with larger samples possessing diverse demographic characteristics (e.g., age, socio-economic status). In such studies, the correlation between variables like gaming duration, genre preference, and in-game spending with travel intention and expenditure could be statistically measured.
- **Longitudinal Studies:** Studies that follow participants over a long period are critically important for tracking the conversion process from travel *intention* to actual *behavior*, and for understanding the persistence and depth of this effect.
- **Comparative Cultural Analyses:** Comparative studies with participants from different countries could be conducted to understand whether the effect of games on travel motivation is universal or varies according to the cultural context.

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### Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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