2023 9th International Conference on Virtual Reality
https://doi.org/10.1109/ICVR57957.2023.10169768

Conference Paper

A Playable 3D Virtual Tour for an Interactive Campus Visit Experience: Showcasing School Facilities to Attract Potential Enrollees

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How to cite this article:
Garcia, M. B., Perez, M. R. L., Pempiña, E. B., Mansul, D. M. C., & Adao, R. T. (2023). A Playable 3D Virtual Tour for an Interactive Campus Visit Experience: Showcasing School Facilities to Attract Potential Enrollees. *2023 9th International Conference on Virtual Reality*. https://doi.org/10.1109/ICVR57957.2023.10169768.

Article History:
Received: 13 Feb 2023
Accepted: 2 Apr 2023
Presented: 14 May 2023
Published: 7 July 2023

Abstract:

Advances in technology have revolutionized student recruitment strategies employed by educational institutions. These innovations led to the adoption of virtual campus tours to provide prospective students with an immersive expedition into the school facilities replicated in a digital environment. However, the existing virtual tour technologies pose challenges, including cybersickness in virtual reality and limited interactivity in 360-degree videos. In this study, we fill these research gaps by developing a playable and interactive campus virtual tour where potential enrollees can visit and tour the campuses remotely. In addition to a series of beta tests with enrolled students, we recruited students specializing in game development and their associates to evaluate the application using an extended Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) framework. In this evaluation, we found that the application was well-received by prospective students and was regarded as useful in delivering an immersive campus visit experience. From the TAM perspective, it was evident that there was a significant difference in how enrolled and potential students assess the application in terms of perceived usefulness and behavioral intention. The positive acceptance of the application led to the recommendation of playable campus virtual tours as a tool for improving student recruitment strategies.

Keywords:

Virtual Tour, Campus Visit, Interactive Tour, Student Enrollment, Education Services, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions are in relentless pursuit of effective recruitment strategies for potential students (Akbulut & Looney, 2009; Frølich et al., 2009). Increasing the enrollment of students is a vital aspect of school administration and beneficial for a variety of reasons. For example, maintaining sufficient enrolled students is necessary for the financial stability of the institution, as it enables the allocation of resources toward staffing, academic facilities, and degree offerings. Furthermore, the availability of additional funds can be invested in mentorship programs, financial aid assistance, and educational technologies (e.g., Almeida, 2023; Garcia & Garcia, 2023; Tomé & Coelho, 2023). Paradoxically, these academic resources and other academic support are critical in improving enrollment as well as retention and graduation rates in higher education (Talbert, 2012). The ever-increasing competition among institutions consequently led to a more market-like environment that influences how universities and schools profile themselves and compete for students (Frølich & Stensaker, 2010). In this regard, there is a growing movement of education becoming increasingly influenced by market forces, such as competition, consumer choice, and the commodification of academic services. Exploring other potential recruitment strategies is consequently imperative for educational institutions. To thrive in this competitive landscape, they must continuously explore innovative student recruitment strategies that align with evolving market dynamics and student preferences.

The marketization of education compelled institutions to be creative and innovative in attracting prospective students. Some of the recruitment strategies they typically employ can be broadly categorized into academic programs and offerings, scholarships, marketing and advertising, scholarships, and campus visits. First, offering a diverse range of high-quality academic programs can be useful in catering to the diverse needs and interests of potential students. By offering a variety of degrees and programs, students are also afforded a comprehensive and engaging educational experience, which is a significant factor in student satisfaction and retention (Butt & Rehman, 2010). In the realm of marketing, institutions use various channels, such as direct mail campaigns, digital advertising, social media, and print advertisements to reach potential students (Kittle & Ciba, 2001; Naidoo & Wu, 2011). The proliferation of digital marketing strategies (e.g., Garcia, 2022) has also led to the growth of progressively sophisticated student recruitment strategies that are cost-effective and highly targeted. Institutions may also offer scholarships and financial aid packages to assist with the cost of tuition and further incentivize students to enroll (Gabelaia, 2022). This strategy positions a school as an institution that values and supports student success. Meanwhile, other institutions use scholarship and financial support offerings as an opportunity to develop collaborations and partnerships with local organizations and businesses and form mutually beneficial relationships (Gross et al., 2015). Finally, a campus visit is another recruitment strategy that offers students a unique opportunity to experience the institution and its facilities. Several studies have exhibited the substantial role of campus tours in shaping potential students' perceptions and attitudes toward the educational institution (e.g., Smith et al., 2022; Swanson et al., 2021).

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Advances in technology have revolutionized these strategies for educational institutions, including the way that campus tours are conducted and the methods used to reach and engage prospective students. The widespread availability of technology such as 360-degree videos (Manuel B. Garcia et al., 2023), virtual reality (Azizo et al., 2020), augmented reality (Garcia, 2020a), and interactive 3D models (Maiellaro et al., 2019) has introduced innovative approaches to deliver an immersive and engaging experience of the campus visit. These tours enable prospective students as well as visitors (e.g., parents, alumni, community members, and other interested individuals) to explore the campus from the comfort of their own homes. Beyond the first-hand experience of visiting remote locations within a digital environment, virtual touring is also an effective medium for promoting school facilities (Maines & Tang, 2015). In the literature, several studies used virtual reality to create highly engaging experiences of virtual campus tours (e.g., Rohizan et al., 2019). While it can offer a highly immersive experience, it requires specialized headsets that can limit accessibility for some users. Additionally, not all institutions have the resources to invest in VR technology, making it an inaccessible option for some. As an alternative, this study reports the development of a playable virtual campus tour application where users can control movement and exploration of the campus using a desktop computer or a smartphone.

Figure 1: A Playable Campus Virtual Tour Using a Smartphone

RELATED WORKS

Virtual campus tours have obtained increasing attention in recent years as a technology-driven tool for promoting educational institutions and attracting potential students. Numerous studies have been conducted to develop and examine the effectiveness of virtual campus tours. For example, one study developed a remote open campus system that enables users to remotely control robots located on school campuses (Kusu et al., 2013). The developers used the Robot Service Network Protocol to create a communication channel between the service platform and the real world. Another study also employed robots to develop their remote open campus system (Fujita et al., 2014). For this version, the robot not only traverses the campus and displays the live camera information but also acts as an agent when users need to converse with another person. Both studies are examples of campus virtual tours that rely on robot technologies, as other technologies (e.g., virtual reality, 360 videos, game technology, and augmented reality) that are more immersive have yet to fully materialize. Nevertheless, robots have been used in other areas, such as art galleries, museums, cultural institutions, and even healthcare facilities, to assist site visitors and interact with humans naturally (Gasteiger et al., 2021).

Rather than relying on robotics technology to navigate the campus, other developers utilized 360-degree panoramic images. For example, one study captured spherical panorama photos using ultra-wide-angle lenses to create a visual field with a horizontal and vertical angle of view close to 360 degrees (Samala et al., 2022). The pictures taken using a dual fisheye camera were stitched to produce a spherical image format using the determined stitching position. A similar study used the same technology but claimed to integrate auto-stitching using insta360 (Suryanto & Wibowo, 2020). Nevertheless, a detailed account of how this auto-stitching works was not included in the discussion. Another study developed a virtual tour application that utilized the photo-stitching technique to generate a panoramic view of the campus (Rohizan et al., 2019). The main goal of this virtual campus tour application was to enhance the visitor experience by mimicking the real world via computer-generated environments. Although there was no evaluation conducted with visitors, the study concluded that their virtual tour resulted in the enhancement of visitor experience through a convenient tour of the campus. A virtual tour panorama was also utilized in another study arguing that it allows for better interaction and navigation with a more attractive appearance than regular photos (Widiyaningtyas et al., 2018).

Another emerging technology in the development of virtual campus tours is augmented reality. Compared to 360 videos and panoramic images, this technology can provide a more vivid and interactive experience by overlaying virtual elements (e.g., text, images, and videos) in the physical environment (Garcia, 2020a). One more advantage of augmented reality is that it is accessible through handheld devices without the need for expensive hardware. This technology is thereby a more cost-effective option for schools to showcase their facilities and attract enrollees. One study created an Android mobile application for a campus virtual tour using markerless augmented reality technology (Liang et al., 2021). According to the evaluation using the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the augmented reality-based campus tour application

passed several constructs, such as perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, user satisfaction, and attribute of usability. In a review of mobile augmented reality for offering campus tours to educational stakeholders, it was found that there are features that need to be present to improve user experience, such as indoor view, search and navigation, 3D objects, and even games (Andri et al., 2018). One study also reported the suggestion of users to integrate social media networks (e.g., Facebook) to improve application usability (Chou & ChanLin, 2012).

As demonstrated by earlier studies, the integration of gaming technology in campus virtual tours can enhance the experience and satisfaction of users. For example, the utilization of an avatar-based interaction can be especially effective in attracting students who are digitally native and seek a social-like virtual experience. In one study (Razia Sulthana et al., 2018), users can perform movements using gyroscopic inputs from their mobile devices. This capability allows users to simulate their physical presence in the virtual environment. As a form of real-time computer-mediated communication, motions performed by digital avatars are essential in establishing realistic social interaction in the virtual world (Rogers et al., 2022). The necessity for this realistic movement led to the usage of full face and body motion capture to ensure a similar experience to face-to-face interaction. In another study (Tsujinaga et al., 2018), Kinect technology was utilized to generate skeleton data of the human body with 25 joints, such as the head, left and right shoulders, and left and right hands. This data was then integrated into the virtual reality technology to simulate real human movements (e.g., walking and turning around). Overall, the integration of game technology is a promising approach to this technological application.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Project Overview

The campus virtual tour application that we developed is part of a larger educational technology project called MILES Virtual World. This project is an attempt to build an online multiplayer metaverse-inspired video game where student life is recreated in a digital counterpart of the real world. Unlike this ambitious educational technology project, its lite version (hereinafter referred to as MILES Virtual Tour) is only a single-player game with the sole purpose of touring the virtual world (i.e., game environment). Both applications showcase 3D virtual environments that are the exact replicas of the university campuses, including specialized facilities (Figure 3), classrooms (Figure 4), and common areas (e.g., study areas) (Figure 5).

As presented in the sample screenshots, application users can explore the campuses through a third-person perspective. Inspired by video games, viewing the virtual world from this perspective provides a wider field of view that consequently allows users to see more of the virtual surroundings and to better assess the distances and extrapolate the trajectory of digital objects (Salamin et al., 2006). Meanwhile, the representation of users in the virtual world is through avatars that are already predetermined in the MILES Virtual Tour. Although self-representation is a vital feature in a digital environment (Zimmermann et al., 2022), customizable 3D avatars are only available in the MILES Virtual World. Nevertheless, both applications were

developed in Unity and coded using C# programming language (M. B. Garcia, R. T. Adao, E. B. Pempiña, et al., 2023; M. B. Garcia, R. T. Adao, O. N. Ualat, et al., 2023).

Figure 2: Mechanical Engineering Laboratory

Figure 3: Computer Laboratory

Figure 4: Study Area

Beta Tests

Prior to the main evaluation, we conducted several beta tests to gather data on the initial acceptance of the application. In one of the events (See Figure 5), we recruited enrolled students since they know the layouts and designs of the campuses very well. It was also intended to assess the capability of the server to handle multiple players at one time and gather feedback on the features expected by students in the MILES Virtual World version. There was also a survey at the end of the playtest to measure different game metrics, which was participated by 144 game testers. Our assessment revealed that the initial loading time (n = 65; 45.1%) and loading time per scene (n = 95; 66.0%) were less than five seconds. Most of the students believed that the game interface is appropriate for this application (n = 66; 45.8%) and that it is easy to navigate and well-presented (n = 61; 42.4%). However, most of them are unsure whether the 3D assets are appealing (n = 48; 33.3%) and the animations are natural-looking (n = 49; 34.0%). Overall, this preliminary rating served as useful evidence (Garcia et al., 2021) to improve both MILES Virtual World and Virtual Tour. We also gathered qualitative feedback on how to improve the game:

> *It needs to have a running feature but in only selected places of the school or any form of way to walk faster inside the building because the building is too big to explore.* – S41
>
> *I hope there would be a map for every campus and can have a teleportation option since the surface area is huge.* – S86
>
> *I recommend that before we officially take our tour, a character or a text may inform us of the details of the facilities or the campus as a whole.* – S141

Figure 5: Beta Test of the Campus Virtual Tour with Enrolled Students

Game Evaluation

In this study, we conducted another round of evaluation but with a specific emphasis on the technology acceptance concept using the extended TAM framework proposed in the evaluation of virtual and augmented realities (Shen et al., 2022). This theoretical model utilizes the core constructs of TAM, such as perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, attitude, and behavioral intention with additional factors such as hedonic motivation and perceived price value. In the field of information system research, technology acceptance is a critical aspect as it assists organizations to understand how individuals adopt and utilize new technology (Garcia, 2023a). The extended TAM model is applicable in this research study since digital games can also be viewed from an information system perspective (Xexéo et al., 2021).

Procedures and Data Analysis

After several game revisions following the suggestions from the beta tests, we recruited information technology students who specialized in animation and game development to evaluate the latest game build and represent the sample of enrolled students. In addition, we adopted a chain referral sampling and convinced these students to invite their friends and relatives (as the second sample) to also assess the game. This strategy was employed to capture the perspectives

of both enrolled and potential students. To compare their evaluations, we utilized Mann-Whitney U Test. We also used the Spearman Rank-Order Correlation Coefficient to measure the strength and direction of association between the extended TAM constructs. We also utilized the Chi-square test of Independence to evaluate whether experience and familiarity with the campus virtual tour are significantly different between enrolled and potential students. Descriptive statistics were also used to summarize the ratings given to the TAM constructs.

Figure 6: Campus Selection Game Interface

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The primary goal of this study was to develop an interactive campus virtual tour application and evaluate its technology acceptance among students. A total of 52 enrolled students and 52 potential students (n = 104) participated in the game evaluation. Most of the participants are familiar with the concept of a virtual tour (n = 81; 77.89%), but only less than a quarter (n = 23; 22.12%) have experience in using this technology. The chi-square tests showed that there was no significant difference in terms of familiarity (χ^2 = 1.396, p = .237) and experience (χ^2 = 0.056, p = .813) between the two groups. These findings imply that the campus virtual tour is not that ubiquitous which could warrant a significant difference.

In terms of the extended TAM constructs, we noticed mixed findings (See Table 1) in the game evaluation between enrolled and potential students. The non-significant results were evident in the perceived ease of use (U = 1170.0, p = .135), attitude (U = 1222.0, p = .254), hedonic motivation (U = 1235.0, p = .225), and perceived price value (U = 1185.5, p = .090)

constructs. On the other hand, only perceived usefulness (U = 471.5, p = .000) and behavioral intention (U = 479.0, p = .090) were significantly different between the groups. One obvious reason why potential students (4.83 ± .38), compared to enrolled students (4.10 ± .53), categorized virtual campus tours as more useful is because they have probably not visited the campuses yet or seen the facilities. A virtual campus tour permits them to gain access to the location from anywhere and without the constraints of time or travel. It is also the safer option for people to go outside and navigate the campus during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dybsand, 2022; Garcia, 2020b). These reasons may also explain why potential students (4.42 ± .65) were more willing to use this technology than enrolled students (4.04 ± .59). From a TAM perspective, perceived usefulness is a predictor of behavioral intention (Garcia, 2023a). As presented in Table 2, we also found that perceived usefulness and behavioral intention have a strong positive correlation (r = .686, p < .01). These findings suggest a necessity for schools to adopt a campus virtual tour technology, especially to serve and attract potential students.

Table 1: Mann Whitney-U Test Results

Constructs	Groups	Mean	SD	*U*	*p*
Perceived Ease of Use	Enrolled	4.77	.625	1170.0	.135
	Potential	4.33	.486		
Perceived Usefulness	Enrolled	4.10	.534	471.5	.000
	Potential	4.83	.383		
Attitude	Enrolled	4.81	.398	1222.0	.254
	Potential	4.71	.457		
Hedonic Motivation	Enrolled	4.69	.673	1235.0	.225
	Potential	4.87	.397		
Perceived Price Value	Enrolled	4.73	.564	1188.5	.090
	Potential	4.90	.298		
Behavioral Intention	Enrolled	4.04	.593	479.0	.000
	Potential	4.81	.445		

In addition to the perceived usefulness construct, attitude is also an essential factor since it has a significant relationship with behavioral intention (see Table 2). Their association is regarded as important in the fields of information technology and human-computer interaction as it helps to explain why people adopt and use technology. For example, studies have shown that a positive attitude toward any technology is associated with a higher level of perceived usefulness (Lee et al., 2020; Mustafa & Garcia, 2021). In other words, users who have favorable attitudes are more likely to believe that using it will be beneficial to them. From a managerial perspective, schools must implement strategies that can elicit a positive attitude. One idea is to nurture a culture that values and encourages technology use (Garcia, 2023b). This strategy will create a modern and technology-forward institutional image, one that carries a commitment to innovation and progress. Another approach to encourage a positive attitude is making the technology

available to as many people as possible. In our case, MILES Virtual Tour is playable through a range of devices and platforms which aids to boost its reach and impact.

Constructs	PEOU	PU	ATT	HM	PPV	BI
PEOU	-					
PU	.197*	-				
ATT	.027	-.099	-			
HM	.084	-.023	-.056	-		
PPV	.005	.144	.002	-.048	-	
BI	.182	.686**	-.194*	.091	.120	-

Note: PEOU = Perceived Ease of Use; PU = Perceived Ease of Use; ATT = Attitude; HM = Hedonic Motivation; PPV = Perceived Price Value; BI = Behavioral Intention. * = Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) and ** = correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Unlike most studies on technology acceptance research (e.g., Garcia, 2023a), perceived ease of use did not have a significant relationship with behavioral intention. However, it is still significantly linked to perceived usefulness, which poses important implications. If people find technology complicated to operate, they may be less likely to believe that it will vastly improve their performance or personal life. On the other hand, if they find it easy to use, they are more likely to believe that it will be useful (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2019; He et al., 2018; Iftikhar et al., 2022). As shown in Table 2, perceived usefulness has a strong positive significant relationship with behavioral intention. Likewise, both constructs are significant predictors of attitude toward technology (Fagan et al., 2012). The higher ratings given by enrolled students (4.77 ± .63), compared to potential students (4.33 ± .49), to perceived ease of use were anticipated since they are enrolled in an information technology degree specializing in animation game development. Meanwhile, one advantage of MILES Virtual Tour is its independence in the usage of virtual reality headsets. For instance, using Oculus Rift head-mounted displays decreases telepresence because users are experiencing physical impediments (e.g., cybersickness).

CONCLUSION

In this study, we developed and evaluated a playable virtual tour showcasing school facilities to create an interactive campus visit experience. From a technological perspective, we designed and developed MILES Virtual Tour using game technology as it allows for a more immersive experience compared to traditional virtual tours (e.g., 360 videos) that only provide a passive view of the environment. Our results showed that the application was well-received by prospective students and was deemed useful in providing an immersive campus visit experience. Thus, schools should consider the implementation of 3D virtual tours as a tool to improve their student recruitment strategies. Future research may investigate whether this technology significantly influences students' decision-making process when choosing a school. For our research project, the next step is to transform MILES Virtual Tour into a complete online

multiplayer metaverse video game. MILES Virtual World will feature customizable virtual avatars and real-world activities simulated in the virtual environment. In summary, this study highlights the potential of 3D virtual tours in creating an interactive campus visit experience and paves the way for the future developments of our metaverse project.

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LET'S COLLABORATE!

If you are looking for research collaborators, please do not hesitate to contact me at mbgarcia@feutech.edu.ph.

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