

An Online Platform in 3D Virtual Environment, a Tool in Entrepreneurship Empowerment for Goods and Services Supply Chain

Abstract

This paper presents a virtual trade platform to promote entrepreneurial spirit and provide a systemic approach to support businesses and consumers to successfully promote their products and services in exhibitions through virtual reality, overcoming problems of transport, cost, and weakness for their participation due to insularity. Several activities were developed in the 3D Virtual World, involving the entrepreneurial spirit with innovative activities and procedures, increasing opportunities and putting theoretical knowledge into practice. The S.A.A.T. online expo platform uses 3D virtual reality (VR) to enhanced entrepreneurship focused on the agri-food domain and the tourism, since it is possible for SME's to promote products and services by overcoming distance problems from potential customers and interested investors, easily. According to the above mentioned, the online S.A.A.T. expo platform provides some of the main functions of a modern virtual exhibition, in order to improve the applications of VR in those fields.

Keywords

Virtual Reality • Virtual Environment • Agro Food • Entrepreneurship • Platform

Introduction

Globalization and world economic growth have made it simpler to interact and exchange products and services. With the development of technology like virtual trading platforms, artificial intelligence, and computer robots during the past ten years, there has been a dramatic shift in business models and investing strategies [1]. These latest technologies may result in increased performance, productivity, and competition [2] can be a possible tool

Research Article

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Received: 07 December 2023; **Accepted:** 22 December 2023; **Published:** 28 December 2023

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to meet the future demand for promoting sustainable products. The current technology revolution can benefit all businesses irrespective of the company size. For example, virtual reality technology can assist SMEs in creating and managing remote business operations and activities in circumstances where direct contact is challenging or restricted, such as during the COVID-19 community lockdown [3-5]. Regardless any direct contact restrictions or limitations, SMEs can digitize business activities and undertake virtual operations to enhance competitiveness, productivity, and business performance, and to ensure business survival [6-9]

These technologies can also be used to promote entrepreneurship in the agri-food and tourism sectors which are strategic sectors and are pillars of the development of the countries of Europe. Entrepreneurship in both sectors can be a source of employment, a source of wealth for society as a whole, a source of community development and a source of social capital [10]. It is emphasized that innovative technologies to promote products and virtual reality tools can be very helpful in formulating new frameworks to support entrepreneurship in the agri-food and tourism sectors, which will be able to attract potential customers and help them to learn more effectively to carry out their activities [11, 12]. 3D virtual world simulations can overcome barriers such as distance, space and human resources, and can be used for more efficient, safe and comfortable training. The use of VR in the promotion of agri-food products can be a means for the promotion of agri-food products. Many quality products are produced in areas where it is difficult and costly to promote them by attending trade fairs, especially in remote areas.

In this paper, we present a novel virtual world platform to promote entrepreneurship of agri-food producers and tourism enhancement through its products. It is designed for assisting islanders to diffuse the production activities of highly quality local products, otherwise they have to incur large expenses in transport and participations in live exhibitions for dissemination of their enterprises. This virtual world online platform provides the main functions of a modern virtual exhibition, aiming to support potential users, such as ordinary visitors navigating through the stores, and retailers advertising their products/services. It can advance the process of modernizing agricultural promotion by improving VR applications in the agri-food and tourism sectors. The platform is well suited for both formal and informal learning and has a great potential for further development. The innovative S.A.A.T online expo platform in a 3D virtual tour environment will be a pioneering tool for all existing agri-food and tourism supply chains, which will enhance the extroversion and competitiveness especially of very small businesses that do not have the opportunity to participate in trade fairs in physical presence.

Also, very important is the fact that the promotion of products and services through the platform skips over the presence of intermediaries, who have a large intervention in the formation of the final price, shrinking the profit of the

producer. Finally, especially for the South Aegean Region of Greece, the platform will be an important development factor because it overcomes the problems of transportation, costs, and participation weaknesses due to the insularity of the Region.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 is described the virtual technology. Section 3 presents related works and the literature review. Section 4 describes the innovative online platform that has been formulated to assist learners in exploring entrepreneurship used in SAAT project. Section 5 concludes this paper.

Virtual Technology

The virtual environment can be described as a computing system, in which interactions take place [13]. A virtual trading environment connects exhibitors and attendees so that they can communicate and share information with each other regardless of where they are physically located. Through the Virtual Trade Environment, chat rooms, videoconferencing, augmented reality, 360-degree video, virtual reality, 4D, customized digital presentations and interactive online product displays can be used to create interaction between exhibitors, organizers and visitors. Using these tools, organizers can create a virtual media station that can be accessed by visitors through a visit to the physical location or by logging on from home.

Exhibitors have access to visitor details through registration, and customers have access to the virtual tour and the necessary brochure download through contact details. With the help of artificial intelligence, exhibitors can track visitors and make use of this data in the future. Virtual tradeshows are equipped with powerful tracking devices that help exhibitors to follow up on the leads they receive. Multiple visitors can log in at the same time. This gives them uninterrupted access to participate in video conferences or chat with exhibitors. A virtual environment with a high degree of VR and computer-assisted modes of communication allows exhibitors to save time and money.

Many new methods of solving problems can be provided by the emergence and development of VR technology. One of the greatest key technologies for the improvement of entrepreneurs in the field of agricultural products could be the virtual promotion of agricultural products. The VR technology for commercial agricultural food and

tourism on virtual shops, we may find that the VR is widely applicable and will create an innovative train of thought and new ways for agricultural science promotion and agricultural production. The application of virtual environment in exhibitions for agri-food and tourism can be an entrepreneurial use of resources, simulate the activities of picking, marketing, and playing to get businesses and visitors participate and experience the availability of products easily [14].

In conclusion, virtual technology can be applied to agriculture in the field of scientific research, teaching, agricultural resources, planning, production, distribution of goods and agricultural machinery design and manufacturing.

Literature Review and Related Work

Literature review focus mainly on three dimensions of advantages of virtual trade environment: First, as a marketing tool for establishing valuable relationships with stakeholders, second to inform and communicate, leading to the value creation process and third as an online platform for marketers to create an experiential event [15]. Godlieb and Bianchi (2017) demonstrate that the main motivations for participating in virtual trade environment are increased sales revenue, reduced costs, access to new or different markets, and brand credibility and organizational legitimacy among of guests attending. The authors conclude that the future of virtual trade shows will likely depend on the technological development of the systems and how they are integrated into existing technological and strategic corporate processes for exhibitors and visitors.

Trainor et al. [16] argue that focusing on technology alone is not enough. Virtual marketing capabilities are necessary to adapt traditional marketing actions to the virtual environment to gain a competitive advantage. For instance, the use of virtual technology in marketing initiatives like trade exhibitions enables businesses to identify and take advantage of possibilities through new, difficult-for-competitors-to-imitating methods that are faster, more efficient, and less expensive [17]. Virtual technology can also help businesses respond to consumer needs and communicate and interact with them in real time. Virtual marketing capabilities allow a company to create an open, public, and low-cost global platform with rich content and real-time data and deploy it widely throughout the supply

chain (Liu *et al.*, 2010). These competencies may promote cross-organizational communication, worldwide reach, and foreign marketing, which may present possibilities or obstacles for an individual firm [18]. Points [19] out that these opportunities can lead to increased customer loyalty through the provision of efficient and convenient quality service. In their research [20] demonstrated that while the physical trade environment is crucial for human personal interaction, like the creation of informal contact networks and face-to-face interactions, virtual trade environment is highlighted as a catalyst for promoting of interaction and connection before and after physical exposure.

With regards to sales-related performance, virtual trade platforms are still deemed a sales-generating marketing tool. Virtual trade platforms increase sales orders although they mentioned that exhibitors and the experience of customers moderate the relationships between activities and outcomes.

Sarmiento and Simoes (2018) demonstrated that despite the inadequacies of virtual trade shows, related to characteristics of interaction, the technology expands the opportunities for companies to collect, store and use data [21]. Thus, virtual trade fairs outperform live trade fairs in the areas of gathering and sharing information and understanding the market, allowing for an efficient exchange of information between exhibitors and visitors. Virtual trade activities have a positive effect on maintaining the existing customer base and gaining new customers from the market, while managing virtual activities such as customer acquisition and retention, is a big challenge for marketers.

The question of whether virtual trade shows could replace live trade fairs has been extensively discussed in the empirical literature and there are conflicting views [22]. The virtual [23] environment should be viewed as a setting that can both strengthen and enable new knowledge links. The boundaries between geographic scales and various sources of knowledge are blending more and more as the relevance of the virtual environment grows. The idea that the virtual and physical dimensions are inseparably linked poses new theoretical and empirical challenges. More research is needed to understand how innovation processes and collaborative dynamics unfold at the intersection between virtual and physical spaces.

Research on the effects of virtual trade shows on companies and their relationships with each other [24, 25] is relatively limited. Little is known about the platforms where trade shows may take place and their connections. Particularly, less focus is given to commercial activities associated with virtual displays. In addition, studies tend to focus on one stakeholder at a time, mainly emphasizing the side of exhibitors and neglecting visitors [26] and organizers [27]. Stressed [28] the further development of measurement for the effectiveness of virtual trade environment. As the number of studies is very limited, further investigation can be made on developing, validating, and establishing more generalizable constructs to enrich this field. Future research can employ objective measures for capturing outcomes more vividly. Along with objective measures, researchers can also investigate non-sales and non-financial exhibition objectives, such as information acquisition, relationship improvement, corporate image, and the motivation of employees [29].

An Application Case of Virtual Agri-food and Tourism Expo Platform

Online Expo Platform

S.A.A.T. online expo platform provides the main functions of a modern virtual exhibition, aiming to support potential users, such as ordinary visitors navigating through the stores, and retailers advertising their products/services. In the following section, we will describe the technical and functional specifications of the online platform, which consists of two different applications, a 3D and a Web application (Figure 1a & 1b).

3D Virtual Environment

The SAAT development is a 3D virtual environment using Unity3D (v.2019.4), which was later built and published in WebGL. WebGL is a JavaScript API that renders 2D and 3D graphics in a web browser. With the Unity WebGL build option we can run Unity content in a web browser. Throughout the 3D project development, the Scripting Runtime version was .NET 4.6 equivalent, C# compiler was Roslyn and the C# language version used was v7.3.

The 3D virtual environment consists of three scenes: *Loading*, *Login*, *MainApp*. In the first scene (*Loading*), the connection to the server (using PUN) is made, and then we go to the second scene (*Login*), displaying the roles a user can enter the mall. The user roles are *Guest*, *Retailer* and *Admin*. The first two categories of users enter the same “room” so that they can have visual contact with each other. The latter category redirects to the admin web application interface. Finally, we are transferred to the final scene (*MainApp*) where we enter the virtual environment of the “mall”.

In the *Login* scene, the user can enter the mall as guest (i.e., any user visiting the agro-food and tourism stores) and have free access to the online platform and visit the stores of the virtual mall. Entering the virtual mall as a “Guest”, you can navigate through the stores either in the classic way (“W/A/S/D” keys for movement and the mouse for camera direction) or by using the map (“M” key) and choose the floor and the store to which he wants to be transferred directly. Furthermore, you can interact with the advertised products (description, price) and contact the retailer of the store for more details and any purchases.



Figure.1a & 1b.

More specifically, you can view the product/service details such as image/video with its description and contact details of the retailer (website, address). Moreover, each store has a chat panel where the guests can have live contact with the retailer about products or the store, in general.

Retailers must meet some prerequisites to obtain the rights of a store in the virtual mall. First, they must register and create an account. After logging in to the web platform with their credentials, they will be able to submit the details of the store (name, address, website, tax number) and apply for acquiring one of the virtual mall's available stores. After user's application is accepted by the *Admin*, he will be able to enter the mall with retailer's permission. More specifically, the user will be able to add/update/remove product details (logo, description, images/video), internal design and/or contact details of the assigned store. As stated above, he/she will be able to respond to guests' questions via a live chat panel. Finally, entering as "*Admin*" at the "Login" scene, the user will be redirected to the Admin User Interface web application.

Admin Web User Interface

To address the problem of managing the entities of the platform, we developed a web application using Symfony (v6.0) and EasyAdmin bundle (v4.1) to create a user-friendly administration backend. Throughout the web application development, the PHP language version used was v8.1.

First, we created the entities of our application: User, Submission, Shop and Product, using the Doctrine ORM. A user can make many submissions and each shop can have multiple products. As a result, User and Submission entities have a Many To One relationship, as well as, Shop and Product entities too. User entity consists of 5 fields: id, email, roles, password and created_at. The email is required to be unique field. The roles field is of type json and can take the values "ROLE_ADMIN", "ROLE_USER" and empty (string). In order a user to obtain "ROLE_USER", the admin must accept the users' submission, otherwise it will be an empty string.

Submission entity consists of 9 fields: id, user_id, name, address, website, created_at, updated_at, status and shop_id. The user_id corresponds to the unique number

of each user from the user entity. The status field can take 3 values, "PENDING_MODERATED", "ACCEPTED", "DECLINED" depending on whether a response is pending, accepted, or rejected. Finally, there is the unique number shop_id which corresponds to the id of the shop entity for which a request was made.

Shop entity consists of 9 fields: id, availability, status, internal_design, storage, name, address, website, and chat. The availability field can take the boolean values TRUE / FALSE, based on which, the submissions are made. Finally, the chat field takes the "out" and "in" values, corresponding to the retailer being online or offline for live chat.

Product entity consists of 8 fields: id, shop_id, katastima, proion, name, link, description and uploaded. shop_id corresponds to the unique number of the shop entity to which this product belongs. The fields katastima, proion and name are strings used to display media (image/video).

Using EasyAdmin, we implemented a Dashboard displaying the application entities. Depending on the permissions of the logged-in user, different elements are displayed on the dashboard. More specifically, if the logged in user has the "ROLE_ADMIN", then can see all the entities on the Dashboard and, also, perform Create, Update, Delete (CRUD) operations on all entities. If the logged in user has the "ROLE_USER", dashboard displays submissions of the current user, and maintain the ability to perform CRUD operations only on his own submissions, at this case.

SAAT online expo competitive advantage

Attending trade shows and exhibitions can be beneficial to a business because it provides the opportunity to meet potential customers and generate leads [30-32].

Entrepreneurs of agro food and tourism business type through SAAT can come closer to the benefits of participating in trade shows and to: a) Raise awareness (as exhibiting is a good way to raise a business's profile and create brand awareness including advertising and sponsorship opportunities), b) Networking (because trade shows are a great way to meet potential new customers, suppliers and learn more about your competitors), c) New product launch (exhibitions are a good place to introduce

a new product or service, d) Build a database (contacting leads at an exhibition helps build marketing lists and generate qualified sales leads).

The advantage from the development of SAAT online expo platform is that it was developed with an emphasis on the needs of the region and the entrepreneurs of the remote island regions, considering the peculiarities of entrepreneurship in the South Aegean. It takes the advantages of participating in conventional exhibitions while eliminating the disadvantages of booth space, booth design and construction costs. This is achieved by providing a wide range of development and design alternatives to differentiate itself from competitors in the same field. It also boosts interest and participation from more business sectors from different regions, addressing issues of low participation and creating equal opportunities compared to larger-scale businesses, while publicity and participation of more visitors is greater when a larger number of visitors are allowed to visit visitors.

Conclusion

Virtual agri-food business and tourism platform is the result of combining agribusiness and virtual reality technology. Developing agricultural research in the virtual reality environment, can reduce experiment costs, shorten the research time, get experiment results directly and finally this can improve the research efficiency of agricultural domain.

In this paper, we presented the main idea of the project 'Enhancing extroversion of agri-food and tourism supply chains by developing virtual 3D virtual exhibition' – 'SAAT platform' which developed in the Operational Program "South Aegean 2014-2020", "Strengthening of research, development & innovation projects in the priority areas of the

Smart Specialization Strategy of the South Aegean Region" with OPS Code 3437. The S.A.A.T. online expo platform is a virtual world platform to promote entrepreneurship. The innovative S.A.A.T online expo platform in a 3D virtual tour environment will be a pioneering tool for all existing agri-food and tourism supply chains, which will enhance the extroversion and competitiveness especially of very small businesses that do not have the opportunity to participate in trade fairs in physical presence. This virtual environment aims at supporting the commercial activities, and the potential users, such as ordinary visitors navigating through the stores, and retailers advertising their products/services, so the process of retailers to promote their products and services will become more and more intuitive. With the development of the SSAT online expo platform, the elements presented in the 3D rendering can optimize the user experience providing added value to the business activity of the agri-food and tourism sector. Due to its extensive features, the virtual reality that has been used adds more dimensions to the architecture to view the final product. Users feel that they are experiencing real participation while not limiting the experience of visiting an exhibition of groups with special needs such as residents of remote areas, and it should be added that it is also highly appreciated by people with disabilities, because by using virtual reality they can explore the real world. Furthermore, for the tourism sector, virtual reality gives a complete and detailed picture of a place. Finally, among the main advantages of virtual reality is that it helps to form new relationships in a more effective way compared to real life, providing a new experience of communicating with people.

The effectiveness, ease of use and acceptance of the platform will be subject to further study, where it will be evaluated by users and improved accordingly, in order to become a powerful tool for the development of both businesses and remote island regions.

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Citation: Dagkinis K. Ioannis, Psomas M. Panagiotis, Vlachvei Aspasia, and Koskeris Andreas, et al. "An Online Platform in 3D Virtual Environment, a Tool in Entrepreneurship Empowerment for Goods and Services Supply Chain". *J Glob Entrep Manage* (2023): 104. DOI: [10.59462/JGEM.1.1.104](https://doi.org/10.59462/JGEM.1.1.104)