

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Tourists' Destination Decision-Making: Evidence from the Sri Lankan Tourism Industry

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Abstract

The rapid adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) in the tourism industry has transformed how tourists plan, evaluate, and select travel destinations. This study investigates the impact of AI on tourists' destination decision-making in Sri Lanka. Using a quantitative survey of 365 international tourists, the study examines four key factors, such as, perceived usefulness, trust, perceived risk reduction, and perceived enjoyment, and their influence on destination choices. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to test hypothesized relationships. Results indicate that perceived usefulness, trust, and risk reduction significantly influence tourists' decisions, while perceived enjoyment has a positive but smaller effect. The findings highlight the importance of functional AI benefits over hedonic aspects in shaping destination selection. The study contributes to tourism technology literature and offers practical guidance for tourism stakeholders in emerging markets.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Tourism, Destination Decision-Making, Technology Adoption

1.0.Introduction

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors worldwide, and its contribution to national economies, employment, and cultural exchange is highly significant. In Sri Lanka, tourism plays a vital role as a foreign exchange earner, according to SLTDA, 2024, income from tourism reached USD 151.080 Million as of June 2024 with the arrival of 113, 470 tourists. With increasing global competition among destinations, understanding how tourists make decisions about where to travel has become a critical area of research. Traditionally, tourists relied on word-of-mouth, guidebooks, and travel agencies for information. However, the rapid development of digital technologies has transformed this decision-making process.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly integrated into the tourism industry, offering personalized recommendations, real-time assistance, and predictive insights to travelers. AI applications such as chatbots, recommendation engines, and virtual assistants are reshaping

how tourists search, evaluate, and select destinations. These technologies not only reduce information overload but also enhance tourists' confidence in making travel-related choices. While the adoption of AI is growing globally, its specific role in influencing tourists' decision-making within the Sri Lankan context remains underexplored.

Although AI-based tools are widely used in global tourism, there is limited empirical evidence on how such technologies affect the decision-making of tourists visiting Sri Lanka. Most existing studies (Momani, 2022; Limna, 2022; Fatima & Arsalan, 2024) focus on developed markets, leaving a research gap in developing destinations where tourism is a cornerstone of economic growth. Understanding how AI impacts tourists' perceptions, trust, and final destination choices in Sri Lanka is essential for industry stakeholders to design effective marketing strategies and enhance competitiveness.

Therefore, this study seeks to examine the impact of artificial intelligence on tourists' decision-making in selecting travel destinations, with a focus on Sri Lanka. The specific objectives are to: Investigate the extent to which AI-based tools influence tourists' destination choices. Identify key factors (e.g., perceived usefulness, trust, risk reduction, and enjoyment) that mediate the relationship between AI and destination decision-making and provide recommendations for tourism stakeholders in Sri Lanka on leveraging AI to enhance marketing effectiveness and customer satisfaction.

2.0.Literature Review

2.1.Artificial Intelligence (AI), Tourism Industry, and Tourist Decision Making

Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to computer systems designed to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence, such as learning, reasoning, problem-solving, and decision-making (Russell & Norvig, 2020). In the tourism industry, AI has become increasingly visible through applications such as chatbots, intelligent recommendation systems, and voice-based virtual assistants (Ivanov & Webster, 2019). These tools enable tourism businesses to provide 24/7 support, tailor travel packages to individual preferences, and predict tourist behavior more accurately. AI-driven platforms like TripAdvisor, Booking.com, and Expedia use machine learning algorithms to analyze tourists' past behavior and suggest personalized travel options (Gretzel et al., 2020). Such capabilities reduce information overload and enhance user convenience, thus making AI a key factor in modern tourism decision-making.

Tourist decision-making has long been a central topic in tourism research. Traditionally, models of consumer decision-making such as Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) have been used to explain how individuals evaluate alternatives before choosing a destination. Factors influencing decisions typically include perceived value, prior experience, social influence, and perceived risk (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). With the rise of digital technologies, this decision-making process has become more dynamic. Tourists now rely heavily on digital reviews, recommendation engines, and AI-

powered assistants that offer real-time and personalized guidance (Mariani et al., 2021). This shift highlights the importance of exploring AI's role as a mediator between tourist motivations and final destination choices.

The effectiveness of AI tools in tourism largely depends on how tourists perceive them. Studies have shown that perceived usefulness and ease of use (Davis, 1989) significantly shape tourists' willingness to adopt AI technologies (Tussyadiah, 2020). Similarly, trust in AI systems is critical, as tourists are unlikely to rely on automated recommendations if they perceive them as biased or inaccurate (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). Other influencing factors include perceived risk reduction (AI minimizes uncertainty by providing tailored information) and enjoyment (interactive AI experiences enhance satisfaction). Together, these factors suggest that tourists' attitudes toward AI can shape their ultimate destination decisions.

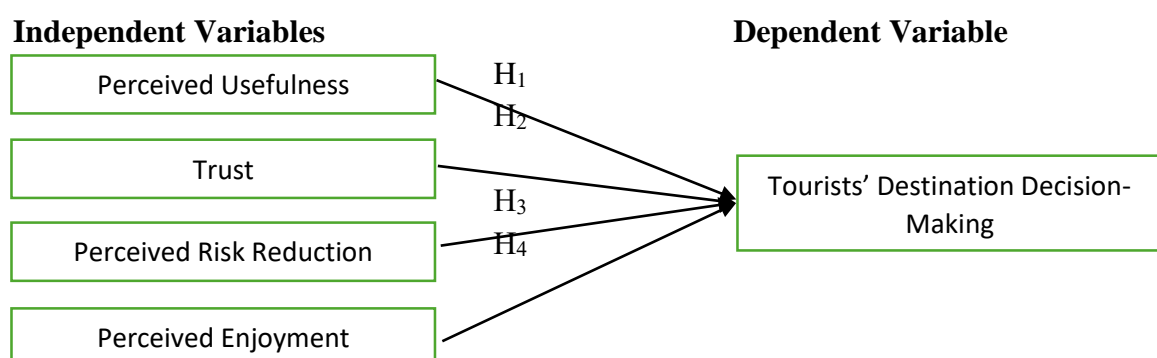
2.2. Global Evidence on AI in Tourism

Empirical studies from developed markets demonstrate that AI has a measurable impact on tourist behavior. For example, research in Europe shows that AI-powered booking systems increase destination confidence by providing personalized comparisons (Li et al., 2018). Similarly, studies in China highlight how AI chatbots enhance tourists' satisfaction and reduce the time spent in information search (Zhang & Kim, 2020). However, most of these studies are concentrated in technologically advanced tourism markets. There remains a lack of empirical evidence from developing nations, where technology adoption may face cultural, infrastructural, and resource-related challenges.

3.0. Methodology

3.1. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

Based on prior studies (Davis, 1989; Gefen et al., 2003; Tussyadiah, 2020; Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019), this study assumes that AI-related factors influence Tourists' Destination Decision-Making.



Source: Adopted and modified from (Tussyadiah, 2020; Pushpakumara & Ahsan, 2025)

According to the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), perceived usefulness strongly predicts technology adoption. In tourism, AI tools that provide accurate, relevant, and convenient information increase tourists' likelihood of relying on them for destination choices. Trust is essential when adopting technology-based recommendations (Gefen et al., 2003). Tourists are more likely to consider AI-generated suggestions if they perceive the system as reliable, unbiased, and secure. AI reduces uncertainty by offering personalized, data-driven suggestions and helping tourists evaluate safety, price, and quality. Studies show that risk reduction mechanisms strongly influence travel choices (Featherman & Pavlou, 2003). Technology adoption is not only functional but also hedonic. Enjoyment in using AI tools (e.g., interactive chatbots, virtual reality previews) enhances user satisfaction and shapes attitudes toward destinations (Van der Heijden, 2004). Based on the above evidences the following hypotheses were developed

H₁: Perceived usefulness of AI has a positive effect on tourists' destination decision-making.

H₂: Trust in AI systems has a positive effect on tourists' destination decision-making.

H₃: Perceived risk reduction through AI has a positive effect on tourists' destination decision-making.

H₄: Perceived enjoyment of AI systems has a positive effect on tourists' destination decision-making.

3.2. Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design to investigate the impact of artificial intelligence on tourists' destination decision-making in the Sri Lankan tourism industry. A survey-based approach was chosen, as it allows the collection of standardized data from a large number of respondents and facilitates statistical analysis. The design is explanatory in nature, aiming to establish relationships between AI-related factors (e.g., perceived usefulness, trust, risk reduction, and enjoyment) and tourists' destination choices.

3.2.1. Population and Sampling

The population of this study consists of international tourists visiting Sri Lanka during the study period of 2024. To ensure representativeness, a convenience sampling method will be used, targeting tourists at major entry points such as popular tourist destinations (e.g., Colombo, Kandy, Galle, Sigiriya), and selected hotels. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sampling table, which suggests a minimum of 384 respondents for large populations. Accordingly, this study aims to collect responses from approximately 400 tourists, which is sufficient for reliable statistical analysis, particularly for structural equation modeling (SEM) or multiple regression analysis.

3.2.2. Data Collection Method

Data collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to tourists during their stay in Sri Lanka. The questionnaire consist of two parts: Part I for Demographic information (e.g., age, gender, nationality, purpose of visit, frequency of visits), and part II for Research constructs measured using validated scales adapted from prior studies: Perceived usefulness of AI tools (Davis, 1989), Trust in AI systems (Gefen et al., 2003), Perceived risk reduction (Featherman & Pavlou, 2003), Perceived enjoyment (Van der Heijden, 2004) and Tourist decision-making (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005)

All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

3.2.3. Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and AMOS. The following steps will be undertaken: Data cleaning, checking for missing values and outliers. Descriptive statistics, summarizing demographic profiles of respondents. Reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency of the scales. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), to validate measurement items. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to test construct validity (convergent and discriminant) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to examine relationships between AI factors and tourists' decision-making.

4.0. Results and Findings

The results of this survey were organized to include an overview of the sample, reliability and validity of the measurement instruments, descriptive statistics of the key constructs, measurement model assessment, structural model analysis, hypothesis testing, and a summary of findings.

4.1 Response Rate and Demographic Profile

A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to international tourists visiting key tourist destinations and hotels in Sri Lanka. Of these, 365 questionnaires were returned and found usable, yielding a response rate of 91.25%. The respondents were fairly balanced in terms of gender, with 52% male and 48% female participants. The majority of tourists (40%) were aged between 25 and 34 years, followed by 28% aged 35-44, 20% under 25, and 12% over 45 years. Regarding nationality, the top three countries represented were India (25%), United Kingdom (18%), and Germany (12%), with other respondents from diverse global locations. Most participants (60%) were visiting Sri Lanka for leisure purposes, while 25% were on business trips and 15% for cultural or adventure tourism. First-time visitors accounted for 78% of the sample, with the remaining 22% being repeat visitors. The demographic distribution provides a broad and representative overview of international tourists, suitable for analyzing AI's influence on destination decision-making.

4.2 Reliability and Validity of Constructs

The reliability of the survey instrument was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha to ensure internal consistency of all constructs. The results indicated that all variables exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.70, with perceived usefulness scoring 0.85, trust 0.82, perceived risk reduction 0.80, perceived enjoyment 0.78, and destination decision-making 0.87. These values confirm that the measurement items for each construct are internally consistent and reliable.

The suitability of the data for factor analysis was confirmed through the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The KMO value of 0.81 suggested adequate sampling, while Bartlett's Test was significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the correlations among items were sufficient for factor analysis. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) revealed that all items loaded significantly on their intended constructs with factor loadings above 0.60, confirming construct validity. Subsequently, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using AMOS to assess the measurement model fit. The results demonstrated a good fit: Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.92, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.91, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.046, and chi-square/degrees of freedom (χ^2/df) = 2.15. All factor loadings were statistically significant, supporting convergent validity, while the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50 for all constructs, confirming discriminant validity. All these results validate the reliability and measurement accuracy of the survey instrument.

4.3 Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

The descriptive statistics reveal the general perception of tourists regarding AI tools and their impact on destination decision-making. Perceived usefulness received the highest average score ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.61$), indicating that tourists generally agreed that AI tools provide meaningful guidance and facilitate destination selection. Trust in AI systems also scored high ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.69$), reflecting strong confidence in AI recommendations and information reliability. Perceived risk reduction scored moderately high ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.72$), suggesting that tourists believe AI tools help minimize uncertainties related to travel planning. Perceived enjoyment had a slightly lower mean score ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.74$), indicating that while tourists value the functional benefits of AI, the hedonic aspect is somewhat less influential. Finally, destination decision-making recorded a high mean score ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.65$), showing that AI tools significantly contribute to tourists' final travel choices in Sri Lanka.

4.4 Structural Model Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

The study employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to evaluate the hypothesized relationships between AI-related factors and tourists' destination decision-making. The structural model demonstrated a good fit with the observed data, with CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.046, and $\chi^2/df = 2.15$, indicating that the proposed model is appropriate for examining the relationships.

The path analysis revealed that perceived usefulness has a strong positive effect on destination decision-making ($\beta = 0.32$, $p = 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Trust in AI systems was also positively associated with tourists' destination decisions ($\beta = 0.28$, $p = 0.004$), confirming Hypothesis 2. Perceived risk reduction showed a significant positive impact ($\beta = 0.21$, $p = 0.012$), supporting Hypothesis 3, while perceived enjoyment, though weaker, still had a statistically significant positive effect on decision-making ($\beta = 0.15$, $p = 0.045$), confirming Hypothesis 4. These results indicate that functional benefits of AI, particularly usefulness and trust, play a more dominant role in shaping tourists' destination choices than hedonic factors, although enjoyment remains relevant.

The findings demonstrate that AI tools are influential in the decision-making process of tourists visiting Sri Lanka. Tourists perceive AI as a valuable source of guidance that enhances confidence in destination selection, reduces planning uncertainty, and facilitates information processing. The study's results align with the Technology Acceptance Model and prior research in global tourism contexts, which emphasize the importance of perceived usefulness and trust in technology adoption. While enjoyment contributes to engagement and satisfaction, it appears secondary to functional considerations in tourists' travel planning.

The evidence also highlights a research gap addressed by this study: the impact of AI on tourism in developing nations. Unlike studies conducted in technologically advanced markets, the Sri Lankan context demonstrates that even in emerging tourism destinations, AI adoption is meaningful and affects tourist behavior. This suggests potential opportunities for tourism marketers and destination managers to leverage AI for personalized recommendations, risk reduction, and enhanced customer satisfaction.

5.0. Discussion

5.1 Perceived Usefulness and Destination Decision-Making

The study found that perceived usefulness of AI tools significantly influences tourists' destination decision-making, supporting Hypothesis 1. This indicates that tourists are more likely to rely on AI-powered platforms when they perceive that these tools provide meaningful, accurate, and convenient information that facilitates travel planning. These findings are consistent with the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), which posits that perceived usefulness is a primary determinant of technology adoption. Previous studies in international contexts, such as Li et al. (2018) and Tussyadiah (2020), similarly reported that tourists value AI functionalities that reduce cognitive effort and improve decision quality. In the Sri Lankan context, where tourists often face uncertainty regarding accommodation, transportation, and local attractions, AI tools offering personalized recommendations appear particularly influential in guiding destination choices.

5.2 Trust and Destination Decision-Making

Trust in AI systems was also found to positively affect tourists' decision-making, confirming Hypothesis 2. Tourists are more likely to follow AI-generated suggestions if they perceive the technology as reliable, unbiased, and secure. This aligns with findings from Buhalis and Sinarta (2019), who emphasized that trust is a crucial factor in technology-mediated tourism services.

In emerging tourism destinations such as Sri Lanka, where tourists may have limited prior experience or information about the destination, trust in AI systems becomes even more critical. The results indicate that building trustworthy AI interfaces through transparent algorithms, credible data sources, and responsive support can enhance tourists' confidence and positively shape their destination decisions.

5.3 Perceived Risk Reduction and Destination Decision-Making

Perceived risk reduction was another significant predictor of tourists' decision-making, supporting Hypothesis 3. AI tools that provide detailed information about safety, pricing, and quality of services help tourists reduce uncertainty, which is a major concern in travel planning. These findings validate prior research by Featherman and Pavlou (2003), who highlighted risk reduction as a key factor influencing technology adoption in uncertain contexts. In the Sri Lankan tourism setting, tourists are likely to use AI-based platforms to evaluate travel options, minimize risks associated with unfamiliar destinations, and enhance the overall security of their travel experience. This demonstrates the functional advantage of AI tools in reducing uncertainty, thereby facilitating informed destination choices.

5.4 Perceived Enjoyment and Destination Decision-Making

While perceived enjoyment also had a positive effect on destination decision-making, it was weaker compared to functional factors such as usefulness and trust, confirming Hypothesis 4. Tourists appreciate engaging AI experiences, such as interactive chatbots, virtual tours, and gamified recommendations, but these hedonic benefits appear secondary to practical concerns. This observation aligns with Van der Heijden (2004), who noted that enjoyment enhances technology adoption but is less influential than utility in decision-oriented contexts. In the Sri Lankan tourism context, these findings suggest that while interactive and enjoyable AI tools may improve engagement and satisfaction, tourists primarily rely on AI for information accuracy and reliability rather than entertainment.

6.0. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to investigate the impact of artificial intelligence on tourists' destination decision-making in the Sri Lankan tourism industry. The findings indicate that AI plays a significant role in shaping how tourists search, evaluate, and select travel destinations. Among the key determinants, perceived usefulness emerged as the most influential factor, demonstrating that tourists prioritize AI tools that provide accurate, personalized, and convenient information to guide their decisions. Trust in AI systems was also a critical predictor, highlighting the importance of reliability, transparency, and credibility in influencing tourists' reliance on technology. Perceived risk reduction further contributed to decision-making, suggesting that AI tools help mitigate uncertainties related to travel planning, such as accommodation quality, safety, and pricing. Perceived enjoyment, while significant, had a smaller effect, indicating that hedonic aspects of AI tools, such as interactivity and gamification, are less critical than functional benefits in tourists' destination selection process. The study provides strong empirical evidence that AI is not only transforming the tourism

industry in developed countries but also significantly affects tourist behavior in emerging destinations like Sri Lanka.

7.0. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The study contributes to tourism and technology adoption literature in several ways. First, it extends the Technology Acceptance Model and related frameworks by applying them to a developing country context, providing evidence that perceived usefulness, trust, risk reduction, and enjoyment collectively influence tourists' destination decision-making. Second, it demonstrates the importance of a multi-dimensional approach to understanding AI adoption in tourism, integrating both functional (usefulness, risk reduction) and hedonic (enjoyment) factors. Third, it addresses a research gap by providing empirical insights from Sri Lanka, an emerging tourism market, where studies on AI adoption and its effects on tourist behavior are limited.

From a practical perspective, the findings offer several actionable insights for tourism stakeholders in Sri Lanka. Tourism authorities, hotels, travel agencies, and online platforms should prioritize the development and deployment of AI systems that are reliable, accurate, and personalized to meet the functional needs of tourists. Enhancing trust through transparent algorithms, verified information sources, and responsive AI interfaces can strengthen tourists' confidence and influence their destination choices. While incorporating enjoyment features such as interactive chatbots, virtual tours, and gamified recommendation systems may enhance engagement, these should complement functional benefits rather than replace them. Strategic use of AI can increase tourist satisfaction, reduce uncertainty, improve planning efficiency, and ultimately enhance Sri Lanka's competitiveness as a global tourism destination.

8.0. Limitations and Direction for Future Research

Despite the significant contributions of the study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study employed convenience sampling, which may limit the generalizability of the results to all international tourists visiting Sri Lanka. Second, the reliance on self-reported survey data introduces the possibility of response bias. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study captures tourist perceptions at a single point in time, whereas tourists' experiences and reliance on AI tools may evolve over multiple trips or changing circumstances.

Future research should consider using larger and more representative samples to increase generalizability. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into how tourists' perceptions and reliance on AI evolve over time and across multiple visits. Experimental designs can be employed to test the effectiveness of specific AI tools or features in influencing destination choices. Additionally, future studies could explore AI adoption in niche tourism segments, such as eco-tourism, cultural tourism, or adventure tourism, to identify context-specific drivers and barriers. Comparative studies between developed and developing tourism markets may also yield valuable insights into cross-cultural differences in AI adoption.

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