

Unveiling the aesthetics of sacred elephant interactions: a ChatGPT-driven analysis of Tripadvisor reviews

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This study employs ChatGPT, a powerful language model, to delve into the relatively unexplored domain of sacred elephant interactions in Asia. It aims to uncover the emotional and spiritual dimensions of these encounters, identify factors influencing visitor satisfaction, and highlight areas for enhancement. It analyses 1349 Tripadvisor reviews using ChatGPT. Deriving insights from this vast dataset, the research qualitatively categorizes the key dimensions. It underscores the significance of aesthetic elements in shaping tourists' perceptions and experiences during sacred elephant interactions, adding depth to the field of aesthetics in tourism. This research pioneers the application of ChatGPT in exploring sacred elephant interactions, demonstrating the capacity of artificial intelligence (AI) to derive meaningful insights from online reviews, contributing to an emerging field of study.

Keywords: *elephant tourism, sacred elephant interactions, ChatGPT, Tripadvisor reviews, visitor satisfaction, tourism aesthetics*

1 INTRODUCTION

In numerous Asian countries – including Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, India, and Thailand – elephants have been trained to cater to international tourists (Bansiddhi et al., 2020). This phenomenon, described in this study as ‘sacred elephant encounters’, refers to their participation in religious and cultural activities at sacred shrines. These majestic animals, often closely associated with specific deities and temples, infuse these sacred sites with spiritual and cultural richness. Such interactions with temple elephants offer unique and memorable experiences, forging connections with the divine and offering profound insights into the cultural heritage of the destinations. For instance, many Indian temples maintain one or two captive elephants for ceremonial rituals, underlining the enduring cultural significance of these gentle giants (Vanitha, 2007).

As the motivations of tourists evolve, the integration of diverse travel elements into religious tourism has become more pronounced (Liro, 2021). However, the use of elephants in this context, despite their majestic and sacred status, has raised ethical and conservation concerns. Various studies have highlighted challenges related to the living conditions, training methods, and overall wellbeing of temple elephants (Fernando, 2000). The practice of engaging elephants in temples, as well as in other tourism attractions, has sparked debates about their welfare and their impact on local ecosystems. Addressing these ethical considerations and conservation efforts is therefore pivotal to ensure the wellbeing and long-term survival of these revered creatures.

In recent years, there has been growing fascination with the aesthetic aspects of tourism, significantly influencing tourists' experiences and the appeal of destinations (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2015). Aesthetics, encompassing sensory elements such as visual beauty, sounds, scents, and overall ambiance, has become a crucial factor in the competitiveness and success of tourism destinations, shaping tourists' perceptions of authenticity and overall destination attractiveness (Genc and Gulertekin Genc, 2023). This paper explores the uncharted territory of sacred elephant encounters, unveiling the novel and innovative dimensions of this unique tourism phenomenon. The study aims to uncover the fundamental aesthetic aspects shaping visitors' experiences at religious shrines with elephants, and to analyse the implications of these dimensions for sustainable development and responsible tourism practices in this realm. It provides fresh insights into how an understanding of aesthetic dimensions can guide efforts toward more sustainable and responsible practices in sacred elephant encounters, at the intersection of aesthetics, cultural heritage, animal welfare, and responsible tourism.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In South Asia, the elephant enjoys a sacred status symbolizing royalty and cultural ties with humans (Trautmann, 2019). Asian elephants, unlike their African counterparts, have a deep-rooted connection with humans, reinforced by their representation as the revered elephant-headed Hindu deity Ganesha. These elephants are unique in forming such intimate bonds with humans, serving as symbols of pride and intelligence, and are closely associated with temples, particularly in southern India. Although their historical role as draft animals has waned, elephants continue to be venerated in temple sanctuaries (Vijaykrishnan and Sinha, 2019). They play crucial roles in Hindu religious ceremonies, with many temples traditionally housing a pair of confined elephants for daily rituals (Vanitha et al., 2011). Temple elephants also bless the public and partake in various ceremonial practices within the temples (Baskaran et al., 2011). The southern states of India, in particular, hold elephants in the highest esteem, with devotees offering them bananas and sometimes *payasam*, a sweet rice pudding (Kala and Sharma, 2010). As a result, elephant encounters within the realm of religious/spiritual tourism are somewhat prevalent in India.

Aesthetics, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, delves into beauty and artistic discernment, influencing the interdisciplinary realm of aesthetics in the context of consumerism (Breiby and Slåtten, 2018). Tourist aesthetic judgement comprises nine overarching themes – scale, time, condition, sound, balance, diversity, novelty, shape, and uniqueness – providing a framework for understanding aesthetic value in tourism destinations (Kirillova et al., 2014). Aesthetics in tourism, encompassing sensory aspects such as visual beauty, sounds, scents, and overall ambiance, significantly influences tourist perceptions, emotions, and satisfaction. However, aesthetics in tourism has received less attention in scholarship compared to other topics (Kirillova, 2023). In the context of sacred elephant encounters, aesthetics includes the visual appeal of elephants, their adornments, the architectural grandeur of the temples, and the immersive experiences during religious ceremonies.

In analysing Tripadvisor reviews, natural language processing (NLP) techniques can provide a deeper understanding of sacred elephant encounters, offering the ability to extract valuable information from a wealth of text data (Mäntylä et al., 2018). This analysis enables the identification of sentiments, categorization of topics, and pattern recognition within the reviews. Thematic analysis, when executed properly, proves to

be an invaluable tool for qualitative studies, offering profound insights and contributing to theory-building in the investigation of diverse phenomena (Christou, 2022).

The tourism sector is undergoing significant disruption due to the rapid expansion of artificial intelligence (AI) (Carvalho and Ivanov, 2024). Using AI tools such as OpenAI's ChatGPT for this research introduces a new dimension to academic publishing, particularly in fields like hospitality and tourism (Iskender, 2023). This study addresses two primary research questions:

1. What are the fundamental aesthetic dimensions in sacred elephant encounters?
This question seeks to identify the key aesthetic dimensions shaping tourists' experiences at religious shrines with elephant attractions.
2. What are the implications of these dimensions for sustainable development and responsible tourism practices in the realm of sacred elephant encounters?

This study analyses the implications of these aesthetic dimensions for sustainable and responsible tourism practices, examining ethical considerations, environmental impacts, and ways to promote responsible visitor behaviour. Ultimately, it aims to provide insights into how an understanding of aesthetic dimensions can guide efforts toward more sustainable and responsible practices in sacred elephant encounters.

3 METHODS

Examining 1349 Tripadvisor reviews of 33 temples located in India, this research delved deep into the aesthetic aspects of sacred elephant interactions, employing ChatGPT for qualitative analysis. While ChatGPT was not designed for this purpose, it performs well in qualitative data analysis (Morgan, 2023). Before ChatGPT, the predominant application of AI in qualitative data analysis involved integrating NLP in different iterations of software packages (Silver, 2023). Qualitative analysis software such as ATLAS.ti and MAXQDA have partnered with OpenAI, integrating ChatGPT. ATLAS.ti (2023) focuses on automatic coding, positioning ChatGPT at the start of the analysis to reduce manual coding. However, it treats ChatGPT primarily as a coding tool (Hecker, 2023; Friese, 2023). MAXQDA, in contrast, uses ChatGPT for summarizing data after manual coding, aiding in understanding the coded information (Morgan, 2023).

The examination of reviews across chosen temple sites aimed to ascertain popularity and visitor engagement, particularly in temples featuring elephants, as emphasized by Alrawadieh et al., (2019). Initially, transcription and analysis of the data were conducted manually; ChatGPT was then deployed to gain additional insights. Following the methodology recommended by Rahman et al., (2023), the program was engaged with critically by the researcher, employing judicious paraphrasing and excluding unreasonable suggestions for optimal and meaningful outcomes. As highlighted by Morgan, (2023), ChatGPT demonstrated effectiveness in qualitative data analysis when provided with transcribed data. To ensure the accuracy and relevance of the analysis, a meticulous manual review of the dataset was undertaken in accordance with the cross-validation process. This step was imperative in scrutinizing the AI-generated output, with the researcher carefully assessing the nuances of the content to validate its alignment with the research objectives.

Through an iterative manual review, any discrepancies or subtleties in the analysis were identified and addressed. Subsequent intercoder reliability tests were conducted to gauge the consistency between insights derived from ChatGPT and those generated

Table 1 Details of temples whose Tripadvisor reviews were collected

Name	Location in India	No. of reviews mentioning 'elephant'/'elephants'	
1	Arulmigu Manakula Vinayagar	Puducherry	534
2	Virupaksha	Hampi, Karnataka	179
3	Guruvayur	Guruvayur, Kerala	174
4	Madurai Meenakshi Amman	Madurai, Tamil Nadu	108
5	Ambalapuzha Sree Krishna	Ambalapuzha, Kerala	36
6	Vadakkunnathan	Thrissur, Kerala	34
7	Jambukeswarar	Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu	30
8	Uppiliappan	Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu	24
9	Sri Krishna	Udupi, Karnataka	23
10	Arulmigu Patteeswarar Swamy	Perur, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu	21
11	Sri Ranganathaswamy	Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu	20
12	Adi Kumbeswarar	Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu	20
13	Poornathrayesa	Tripunithura, Kerala	15
14	Sree Padmanabhaswamy	Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala	14
15	Thiruvambadi Krishna	Thrissur, Kerala	11
16	Sringeri Mutt	Sringeri, Karnataka	13
17	Kukke Shree Subramanya	Subramanya, Karnataka	11
18	Mullakkal Rajeshwari	Alappuzha, Kerala	11
19	Chottanikkara	Chottanikkara, Kerala	10
20	Kateel Shri Durgaparameshwari	Mangalore, Karnataka	8
21	Ettumanoor Mahadeva	Ettumanoor, Kerala	7
22	Kundrakkudi Murugan	Kundrakkudi, Tamil Nadu	6
23	Janardhana Swami	Varkala, Kerala	6
24	Arattupuzha	Thrissur, Kerala	5
25	Vaikom Mahadeva	Vaikom, Kerala	4
26	Triprayar Sri Rama	Thrissur, Kerala	3
27	Shri Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham	Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu	3
28	Kamakshi Amman	Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu	2
29	Velorvattom Mahadeva	Thalassery, Kerala	2
30	Thanumalayan	Suchindram, Tamil Nadu	2
31	Malai Mahadeshwara	Chamarajanagar, Karnataka	1
32	Sabarimala Sri Dharmasastha	Pathanamthitta, Kerala	1

through human coding. This comprehensive approach, integrating manual scrutiny and intercoder reliability assessments, aimed to refine and enhance the overall credibility of the analysis. This analysis provided insights into the level of attention and interest that specific temples attract, as shown in Table 1.

4 RESULTS

The analysis revealed a spectrum of aesthetic dimensions, ranging from the visual allure of the elephants to the sensory opulence of religious and everyday temple rituals and ceremonies, unravelling the nuanced interplay of visual, auditory, and spatial elements that mould the sacred encounters.

4.1 Affective experience

The qualitative analysis of affective experiences also reveals a spectrum of emotions conveyed through reviews, underscoring the profound impact of sacred elephant encounters. The narratives encapsulate sentiments of bliss, relaxation, and rejuvenation, offering a glimpse into the emotional tapestry woven during these encounters. For instance, a visitor to Adi Kumbeswarar temple, Kumbakonam, shares a poignant experience: ‘The highlight of our visit was the elephant blessing the devotees near the temple entrance. What an intelligent being! If a parent went with a child for the blessing, he blessed the child first. Happy to see such traditions still being maintained.’ This firsthand account emphasizes the perceived intelligence of elephants and the preservation of age-old traditions, evoking a sense of happiness and cultural continuity.

Equally compelling is another visitor’s perspective of Virupaksha temple, Hampi: ‘The highlight for me, as a Westerner, was getting a blessing from the elephant!’ This cross-cultural encounter reflects a unique and personal connection with the sacred ritual, highlighting the universality of the emotional impact experienced by individuals irrespective of their cultural background. The emotional journey embarked upon during these sacred elephant interactions, as narrated in the reviews, encapsulates a myriad of feelings, offering a nuanced understanding of the affective dimensions that contribute to the tapestry of these unique and culturally significant experiences.

4.2 Sacred symbolism

Elephants, gracefully adorning the temple premises, embody symbols of power and divinity, enriching the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of the encounters. The following review by a visitor to Sri Ranganathaswamy, Tiruchirappalli, introduces us to ‘Aandal’, the temple elephant, portrayed as a representation of the goddess, the divine consort: ‘Do meet with Aandal the temple elephant. She represents the Goddess, the divine consort. She along with the temple cow and horse wake up the Majestic *Maha Vishnu* every morning in a serene ceremony.’ The inclusion of this ritual accentuates the sacred symbolism attributed to temple elephants, positioning them as revered conduits connecting the earthly and divine realms. These majestic beings not only serve as symbols of veneration but also play an integral role in bridging the gap between the tangible world and the ethereal, fostering a profound connection between devotees and the divine during the temple ceremonies. In the enchanting ambiance of these encounters, visitors find solace in the majestic presence of temple elephants, adding a beautiful note to their overall spiritual and cultural journey.

4.3 Animal companionship, welfare, and cultural exchange

Temple elephants weave an aesthetic tapestry of animal companionship, exuding warmth and serenity, and providing captivating photo opportunities that resonate with visitors. Several reviews offer insightful glimpses into the reciprocity and cultural immersion experienced during interactions, such as feeding and receiving blessings. Expressing the allure of the temple elephant, a visitor to Uppiliappan, Kumbakonam, notes, ‘The temple elephant is an attraction as many gather around for photos’, capturing the magnetic charm these majestic beings hold for onlookers. Introducing ‘Bhuma’, an elephant named after the goddess, the review adds, ‘She loves fruits, especially dry

fruits and jaggery. Don't forget to take them for her.' These insights offer a personal touch to the encounter, fostering a deeper connection.

4.4 Visitor engagement

Several reviews resonate with the vibrant symphony of visitor engagement, underscoring the playful nature of temple elephants and their harmonious response to temple music. The emphasis on the elephants' affable nature establishes a connection between the pilgrims and the temple environment. The playful demeanour of an elephant aids in creating a joyous atmosphere, as described by a visitor to Mullakkal Rajeshwari temple, Alappuzha: 'There was an elephant with beautiful tusk[s] at the backside of the temple. It was in playful mood, moving to the song being played in the temple.' The reviews collectively convey the interactive and engaging nature of these encounters, where visitors become integral participants in the elephants' world, forging memories that resonate with the spirit of the temple. The engagement becomes a two-way interaction, with both elephants and visitors deriving joy and satisfaction from the encounter.

4.5 Majestic visuals

The allure of temple elephants transcends the ordinary, elevating the visitor experience with their majestic visuals seamlessly woven into the grandeur of temple surroundings. Particularly, festivals such as *Thrissur Pooram* in Kerala unfold a spectacle of grandiosity, featuring caparisoned elephants, vibrant parasols, and dynamic processions that captivate the hearts of visitors. A firsthand account echoes the enchantment of *Thrissur Pooram*:

My sister and I visited Thrissur for the Pooram (Elephant Festival) held at the end of April. It is the most amazing experience with 30 decorated elephants with a team behind each one to change the beautiful, coloured parasols. Two teams of 15 elephants face each other with about 1 million people in between, cheering for the colours of the parasols.

This vivid portrayal encapsulates the magnitude of the festival, intertwining the visual splendour of decorated elephants with the lively ambiance of the event.

4.6 Temporal significance

The timing of visits, particularly during evening ceremonies, reveals the profound temporal significance embedded in these experiences. A captivating highlight emphasized by visitors is the *Ksheeveli*, a spectacle where the deity is paraded on an elephant around the temple, accompanied by traditional musicians. A visitor to Poornathrayesa temple, Tripunithura, passionately declares it 'a sight to behold', underlining the visual and auditory splendour woven into the fabric of this ceremonial procession:

The must see is the 'ksheeveli' where the lord is taken on an elephant around the temple accompanied by traditional musicians. It is a sight to behold. Evenings one can see the thousands of lamps lit on special occasions & the temple in all its glory. If you are in this part of the country, it is a must visit for all Hindu religion people.

This ritualistic homage not only captures the essence of divine worship but also holds temporal significance.

4.7 Natural beauty

For some visitors, encounters with elephants extend beyond temples into sanctuaries and natural habitats, offering a deeper appreciation of the elephants' natural beauty and behaviour. As a visitor to Sri Ranganathaswamy temple shares, 'The early morning ritual of the elephant bringing water from river Cauvery for the main deity, and then saluting the Lord when the curtain is raised, followed by *Viswaroopa Darsana* is a no miss.' These encounters in natural settings provide a different perspective, allowing visitors to witness elephants in their more unfiltered and authentic habitat, fostering a deeper appreciation of their natural beauty and behaviour.

4.8 Preservation of heritage, ethno-cultural legacy, and betterment of local communities

Temple elephants emerge as custodians of cultural heritage, symbolizing tradition and continuity. They contribute to local economies and community pride by generating employment opportunities for caretakers, such as mahouts, and other related services. A visitor to Vadakkunnathan temple, Thrissur, notes that:

We visited the Great Temple this month where lots of Elephants will be decorated and famous for Festival. The temple is well maintained and has a clear map, showing how to reach every nook and corner and its importance. The mahout who showed us around was very enthusiastic and proud of his elephant.

This review encapsulates the intertwined nature of elephants, temples, and local communities. The elephants, adorned and celebrated during festivals, become a focal point of cultural pride. The engagement of local caretakers, exemplified by the enthusiastic mahout, adds a personal touch, further connecting the elephants to the local community.

The preservation of heritage, ethno-cultural legacy, and positive impacts on local communities collectively positions temple elephants as integral contributors to the cultural fabric of the regions they inhabit.

5 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research significantly advances current understanding of the aesthetic dimensions of sacred elephant encounters, holding societal, practical, and theoretical implications. Empirical evidence emphasizes how temple elephants enhance the aesthetic allure of religious and cultural rituals. Tourists' experiences reveal the profound impact of elephants on visitors' perceptions and engagement. The study also highlights ethical concerns tied to sacred elephant encounters, particularly regarding welfare and treatment. Ethical considerations arise from reviewers' observations of elephants' living conditions, wellbeing, and interactions, thus affecting the overall aesthetic appeal. In navigating the ethical dimensions of sacred elephant encounters, it is essential to strike a balance between preserving cultural traditions, ensuring animal welfare, and promoting responsible tourism practices for sustainable development.

6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study recognizes AI's advantages in efficiently processing large datasets, and values human expertise in result refinement. Advocating a collaborative approach, it balances technological advancements with nuanced understanding in qualitative research. Despite ChatGPT's commendable performance, limitations include issues around contextual understanding, bias, and researcher agency constraints (OpenAI, 2021). This study acknowledges these limitations, emphasizing their recognition as vital for comprehensive interpretation. ChatGPT, combined with manual analysis, enhances overall robustness, despite potential challenges with interpretive aspects (Morgan, 2023). Caution is urged to inform readers about AI tool intricacies and potential bias. A balanced interpretation, leveraging both manual analysis and ChatGPT strengths while navigating limitations, ensures a comprehensive understanding of qualitative data in sacred elephant interaction research. Illustrating the ongoing efforts to explore and apply diverse methodologies to address the complexities inherent in qualitative tourism research (Paraskevaidis and Andriotis, 2023), this study recognizes the importance of combining AI tools with human expertise to refine and interpret the results accurately.

7 CONCLUSION

This research offers crucial insights, championing ethical standards in tourism for a compassionate aesthetic experience. Its distinctive approach seamlessly integrates the unparalleled efficiency of AI with the nuanced expertise of human input, refining results with precision. Encouraging scholars to delve into the intricate complexities of sacred elephant interactions, the study explores both immediate and long-term impacts on cultural practices and animal welfare. By fostering a comprehensive understanding, it actively contributes to the development of sustainable tourism practices, ensuring the preservation of cultural heritage while prioritizing the wellbeing of sacred elephants.

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