

When AI Becomes the Travel Agent: How Tourists Negotiate Trust, Autonomy, and Authenticity in AI-Generated Travel Decisions

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Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is increasingly transforming how tourists search for information, plan itineraries, and make travel decisions. However, limited qualitative research explains how tourists negotiate their agency when AI becomes actively involved in travel decision-making. This study explores how tourists experience GenAI-mediated travel decisions, focusing on autonomy, trust, skepticism, authenticity, and spontaneity. Drawing on a qualitative research approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six tourists who had experience using GenAI for travel planning. Thematic analysis identified five interconnected themes: AI as a travel decision partner; between convenience and decision autonomy; trust, verification, and skepticism; the tension between AI optimization and travel spontaneity; and reconstructing authenticity in AI-mediated travel. The findings indicate that tourists perceive GenAI as a decision partner rather than a replacement for human judgment. AI enhances planning convenience but can increase reliance, making autonomy a negotiated process. Trust is conditional and supported by verification, while AI optimization creates tensions with spontaneity. Furthermore, AI can facilitate authentic experiences while potentially contributing to algorithmic standardization. The study contributes to tourism research by conceptualizing AI-mediated travel decision-making as a process of negotiated agency between tourists and AI.

Keywords: *Generative Artificial Intelligence; AI-Mediated Tourism; Tourist Decision-Making; Tourist Autonomy; Trust and Skepticism; Travel Authenticity; Travel Spontaneity; Human–AI Interaction.*

1 INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly transforming how tourists search for information, evaluate destinations, organize itineraries, and make travel decisions (Christensen, Hansen, & Wilson, 2025). The emergence of generative artificial

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intelligence (GenAI), particularly large language model-based applications (Subramanian, 2024), has accelerated this transformation by enabling tourists to interact with AI through natural-language conversations rather than conventional search interfaces. Tourists no longer have to go on several sites, read reviews and watch travel videos, they can get help from AI. As a result, AI is no longer a mere information processing tool but has become a key player in the travel decision-making process (I. A. Wong, Lian, & Sun, 2023). Recent studies on tourism validate the impact of ChatGPT on tourist decision-making by offering easily accessible and possibly diagnostic travel information (James, 2026), while new research shows a growing acceptability of generative AI in travel planning and recommendation.

This change introduces a system regarding the tourist's experience and interpretation of the AI-driven decision-making process (Hasanein, Al-Romeedy, H Seraj, & Abdel Majeed, 2026). Traditionally, people have made travel decisions based on their personal preferences, social interaction, prior events, human expertise and spontaneous discovery (Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002). As more and more aspects of these choices are being delegated to AI, the distinction between human selection and AI influence may become uncertain. While AI can help minimize cognitive burden in destination comparisons and itinerary building, this increased dependence could also impact tourists' sense of control and autonomy. But it is important to consider that how tourists will exercise their agency as an algorithm takes more and more part in deciding where to go, what to see, and how to experience a tourist destination.

Another important aspect of this new partnership is trust (Jeong, Han, & Chung, 2026; Tedjakusuma, Liu, Eunike, & Silalahi, 2025). While AI-generated travel suggestions can be personalized, coherent, and authoritative, visitors may not be sure about the accuracy, relevance, or reliability of the information provided. Recent research demonstrates that tourists have concerns about the trustworthiness of and reliability in AI recommendations (Ali, Yasar, Ali, & Dogan, 2023; Su & Zakaria, 2026). This qualitative research suggests that there are barriers to using AI for travel advice, including usage, value, risk, image, and tradition. Furthermore, comparison to other studies shows that while users might trust travel plans generated by AI, they may also trust those generated by human agents, which shows that sophisticated technology does not always lead to trust. The results indicate that the process of trust is not an automatic or a prerequisite to embrace technology.

The increasing role of AI in travel choices also introduces a touch of authenticity and spontaneity (Park & Son, 2025). Tourism experiences are valued for personal discovery, interactions with local people, and experiences that cannot be entirely planned. By comparison, AI-powered itineraries can optimize journeys based on the time, preferences, popularity and convenience (Hlee, Yan, & Li, 2025). Any personalization that can help to make things more efficient can also limit the chances for surprise (Koo, Zaman, Ha, & Nawaz, 2025). Tourists may face a more efficient and highly personalized tour and a more spontaneous, and uncertain form of tourism. As AI technology in travel grows more sophisticated, this dynamic becomes even more pertinent when AI can suggest personalized travel itineraries and plan entire trips (Spyrou, Koutrintzes, & Karkanis, 2025).

While tourism research has recently started to pay more attention to AI use in tourism (Akbar & Agyei, 2024; Florido-Benítez & del Alcázar Martínez, 2024; Tuo, Wu, Zhao, & Si, 2025; Yu & Meng, 2026), the research has mainly concentrated on the intentions of adopting AI, the psychological factors, the effectiveness of AI recommendations, and

the resistance to AI-recommended travel advice. Less focus has been paid to the experiential nature of tourists' interactions with the touristic use of AI in making actual travel choices, or on the negotiation between the competing convenience, trust, autonomy, authenticity, and spontaneity tourists experience. To fill this gap, the current qualitative study investigates tourists' experiences of generative AI as a travel decision-making partner. The study explores four interlinked questions with the help of semi-structured interviews with six tourists with experience with using generative AI to make travel decisions. The research questions are as follows:

- RQ1.** How do tourists experience the use of generative AI in making travel decisions?
- RQ2.** How does reliance on AI influence tourists' perceived autonomy over their travel choices?
- RQ3.** How do tourists negotiate trust and skepticism toward AI-generated travel recommendations?
- RQ4.** How does AI-mediated decision-making reshape tourists' perceptions of authenticity and spontaneity?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Generative AI in Tourism

The use of Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is rapidly changing the landscape of tourism (Florido-Benítez, 2025), with the ability to create customized text, recommendations, travel itineraries and conversation responses based on tourists' preferences and contextual information. Unlike previous AI use cases, GenAI enables tourists to engage with technology in a natural language conversation and receive dynamically generated travel information. This shift has shifted AI from an operational tool to a more involved part of tourists' experiences and decision-making (Peng, Chen, & Cong, 2026), since, decision making is an integral part of every activity (Hussain, Rasheed, & Mahmood, 2025). Recent tourism research shows that GenAI is increasingly adopted for travel planning and that there are concerns regarding trust, reliability, risk, and resistance to AI-based recommendations. GenAI can serve as an interactive travel assistant that can lower the cost of information search and streamline complex travel planning processes (Suresh, Joshi, Poojary, & Reddy, 2025). Its results, however, rely on the quality, timeliness, and understanding of the information it has access to AI-generated recommendations. Thus, GenAI is not only another technology applied to tourism but an emerging interaction between humans and AI that is shaping the way information, preferences and decisions on traveling are negotiated.

2.2 AI-Mediated Tourist Decision-Making

The conventional tourist decision-making process consists of information seeking, alternative comparison, destination evaluation and activity choice based on preferences, resources and situational factors (Z. Chen, 2025). The introduction of GenAI adds a new dimension to mediation as tourists have the ability to increasingly hand over parts of these functions to conversational AI systems (Alharbi, Pandit, Wilk, Rosenberger III, &

Miah, 2026; Aransyah, Hermanto, Muftiadi, & Oktadiana, 2026). AI can digest vast amounts of information (Dong, Zhang, & Tian, 2026), create customized itineraries, suggest destinations and rank them based on user preferences. Recent studies highlight the growing importance of GenAI to travel planning and decision-making (Mladenović, Ismagilova, Mogaji, & Dwivedi, 2026), and several new studies indicate that algorithmic systems can drive tourist mobility by directing travelers towards and away from certain destinations and attractions. AI decision-making is not just about getting information from a technological source, it is an interaction in which tourists give preferences, interpret what AI has generated and maybe change the initial plan. This shift is significant as it moves away from an independent decision-making process and toward an emerging human-AI co-decision making process. It brings up questions regarding the role of tourists in the decision-making process when AI is increasingly involved.

2.3 Tourist Autonomy and Algorithmic Agency

Tourist autonomy is the sense of autonomy that is experienced by the individual in the ability to make and control their travel choices based on personal preferences, intentions and judgments (Yousaf, Mishra, & Amin, 2023). AI-powered travel planning questions this independence, as recommendations made by algorithms can start to affect the choices of tourists. In recent tourism activities, the notion of algorithmic co-agency has been introduced to note that tourist behaviors can be co-produced when there are interactions between human actions and algorithmic systems (Gazilas, 2025). However, rather than a replacement for tourist agency, AI can be seen as a redistribution or a sharing of the influence of decision making. While AI could offer tourists convenience and ease the mental load of considering many options, it also might lead them to take recommendations without digging into the details themselves. This pressure between human autonomy and algorithmic influence is crucial in the context of travel planning with GenAI (Nicolau, 2025). Tourist's lived experience can thus provide insights into the moments when AI is seen as a helpful assistant, a collaborative decision partner or a more important player in travel decisions.

2.4 Trust and Skepticism Toward AI Travel Recommendations

Recommendations can shape the choice of destinations, travel plans and booking decisions (Chemli, Vitale, & Valeri, 2026), making trust critical for tourists to accept the use of AI-based recommendations in travel planning. AI-generated information has been found to affect the trust and the intent to purchase a destination, as well as the perceived credibility and presentation of an AI recommendation. But the trust in GenAI has no limits, travelers might doubt the authenticity, timeliness, objectivity, or sensitivity of the AI-driven recommendations. However, recent studies reveal that resistance to using AI travel recommendations is driven by a number of factors (Seyfi, Gorji, Vo-Thanh, & Zaman, 2025; Seyfi, Lee, Jo, & Kim, 2025), including value, usage, image and tradition. It which shows that despite the technological interest, people can be skeptical about the use of AI. This allows tourists to check the reliability of AI recommendations via user-generated reviews, social media, and real-world experiences and human-generated suggestions. Therefore, it is important to see trust as a process

and a judgement that is negotiated, not a fixed attitude towards AI. This study is essential for grasping the tourists' reasons for accepting, questioning, modifying or rejecting AI-provided travel recommendations.

2.5 Authenticity and Spontaneity in AI-Mediated Tourism

Authenticity and spontaneity are key factors in tourism because travel experiences can be meaningful (J. Chen, Liu, Si, Law, & Zhang, 2022), but involve personal discovery, unexpected encounters, local interactions, and not fully planned experiences. GenAI can disrupt these attributes by creating highly customized and optimized travel itineraries, based on known preferences of tourists. The personalization can save on planning time and make life easier for tourists (Spyrou et al., 2025), but can also lead to them sticking to set suggestions instead of uncovering places on their own. Recent studies show that authenticity is already associated with tourists' evaluation of AI-generated tourism information, destination trust (Su & Zakaria, 2026). The more effective it is at optimizing a tourist's experience, the more there will be a chance that this aspect of spontaneity and personal discovery will be lost. Hence, authenticity and spontaneity should not be considered as by-products of AI application. They are meanings that tourists actively interpret and negotiate as they make their decisions.

2.6 Research Gap and Conceptual Direction

While AI research in the tourism sector is growing exponentially (Indaryanto, Harijadi, & Sinaga, 2023; Joshi, 2024), there are significant gaps in knowledge regarding the experiences and negotiations of tourists using AI in tourism-related decision-making. The use, acceptance, resistance, trust, and impact of generative AI on travel planning have been the focus of existing research, which are growing in number. For instance, recent studies have highlighted the significance of trust and reliability as factors that hinder users from following AI-generated recommendations when planning their trips (Paül i Agustí, 2025; Tuyen, 2026; J. W. C. Wong, Lai, & Lin, 2025). Other studies have shown that tourists may have different preferences for human-generated versus AI-generated travel recommendations throughout the travel process (Park & Son, 2025; Paül i Agustí, 2025). Likewise, recent research has developed the notion of algorithmic co-agency to capture the potential of digital platforms to shape tourist choices and mobility. In a similar way, emerging research has introduced the concept of algorithmic co-agency to explain how digital platforms can shape tourist choices and mobility.

Another area of concern is how AI support relates to the autonomy of tourists. Studies have already shown that algorithms affect tourists' decisions (Safari, 2026; I. A. Wong et al., 2023), but little is known about tourists' interpretation of this influence in their experiences. The question of when tourists characterize AI as an assistant, partner in decision making, or an actor that starts making decisions for them, remains unclear. The present study follows a qualitative, experience-oriented approach and focuses on the negotiation of the increasing role of GenAI in tourism decisions. The study takes a distributed agency approach by framing the travel decision making as an interaction between tourist intentions and AI-generated travel recommendations, instead of seeing it as a purely human or AI one. Additionally, the research then envisages GenAI as a travel decision-making assistant, not just a technological information source. Tourists

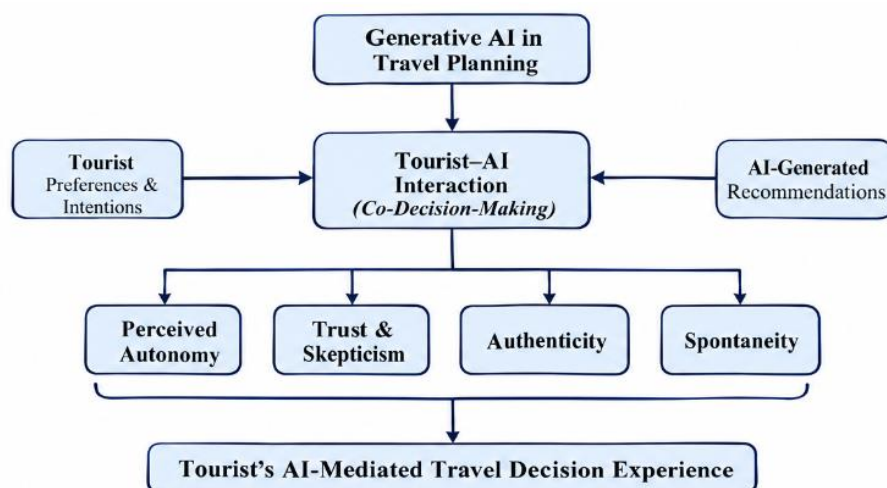


Figure 1 Conceptual Direction of the Study

give preferences and constraints, AI gives recommendations, tourists accept, modify, verify or reject recommendations. In this iterative process, agency, trust, authenticity, and spontaneity are continually negotiated. The study also examines the question of how tourists use GenAI, and how AI affects the travel experience of selecting, trusting, and experiencing travel. Finally, conceptual direction of the study is reported in Figure 1.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

The aim of this study is to investigate the experience and interpretation of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) among tourists in the travel choices process through a qualitative research approach. The study is qualitative because the study deals with subjective experiences, meanings, perceptions and decision-making processes, which are not well captured by pre-defined quantitative measures. The study aims to shed light on the dynamics of autonomy, trust, skepticism, authenticity, and spontaneity that tourists experience in their interactions with AI-generated travel suggestions. The study is informed by an interpretivist view on which people make meaning based on their experiences and interactions with their social and technological worlds. As a result, tourists are not just consumers of an AI technology but active participants who interpret and evaluate, accept and modify, verify and reject AI suggestions. This method follows the distributed-agency perspective of the study which describes travel decisions because of interaction between human travel intentions and technical travel recommendations.

3.2 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research approach using an exploratory design to delve

into the new phenomenon of AI-driven decision-making by tourists. The design was chosen because travel planning is a relatively new domain for the use of GenAI, and there is little research on the experiences of tourists when they are given more responsibility for making travel decisions. The study does not seek to examine predetermined relationships, but rather it examines the way in which participants try to describe and make sense of their experience. The research design closely follows the four research questions related to the use of GenAI, perceived autonomy, trust and skepticism, and authenticity and spontaneity. Semi-structured interviews were the primary means of empirical data collection, which allowed the researcher to stick to the interview protocol and include enough room for discussion of surprising experiences and new issues.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

The participants in the study were six tourists who had prior experience using generative AI for travel-related decision-making. Purposive sampling was used since the study involved people who had firsthand experience with the phenomenon being studied. The only inclusion criteria were that participants had interacted with a generative AI application to get travel-related suggestions, create an itinerary, choose a location or attraction to visit, or use the application to aid an actual travel decision. People who have never experienced the use of GenAI for travel planning were not included as they lacked the necessary amount of experience to give an adequate description.

The number of participants in this exploratory, qualitative study was six because it involved a very tightly defined phenomenon and very specific participant criteria. When participants have a lot of information to answer a specific research question and when interviews yield rich detailed responses, smaller samples may well be appropriate. Here, the goal was not to generate a representative sample, but rather to gain in-depth accounts of the ways tourists use and engage with AI in making travel choices. Participants were not asked to come from a specific geographical location, and the analysis focused on the phenomenon of GenAI use in tourism, not on the features of the destinations.

3.4 Semi-Structured Interviews

Individual semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data. This approach was chosen for its consistency and flexibility to ensure that the researcher was able to engage with the same underlying themes with each participant, while also giving participants the opportunity to discuss experiences that were meaningful to them. The interview protocol was designed based on the study's research questions and conceptual focus. Table 1 highlighted the semi-structured interview protocol. The interviews centered around the participants' direct experiences with the use of GenAI in travel planning and decision-making. Participants were also asked to explain instances where AI recommendations have differed from their initial preferences or expectations. Open-ended probing questions were used to elicit detailed descriptions and clarification of the participants' interpretations. This helped the researcher understand both the choices tourists made and their perceptions about the value of using AI to inform those decisions.

Table 1 Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Research Question	Interview Question	Suggested Probes
RQ1: How do tourists experience the use of generative AI in making travel decisions?	IQ1. Can you describe your experience of using AI tool when planning or making decisions about a trip?	What did you use AI for? Which AI tool did you use? What type of recommendations did you receive?
	IQ2. Can you describe a specific situation in which an AI-generated recommendation influenced or changed one of your travel decisions?	What was your original decision? What did AI recommend? Did you follow, modify, or reject the recommendation? Why?
	IQ3. How do you decide whether to follow an AI-generated travel recommendation or make the decision yourself?	What makes you accept a recommendation? What makes you reject it? Who makes the final decision?
	IQ4. Can you describe a situation in which you felt that AI either increased or reduced your control over a travel decision?	Did AI make the decision easier? Did you feel dependent on AI? Did you still feel that the decision was your own?
RQ3: How do tourists negotiate trust and skepticism toward AI-generated travel recommendations?	IQ5. What makes you trust or distrust an AI-generated travel recommendation?	Accuracy? Personalization? Previous experience? Quality of information? Confidence in the AI response?
	IQ6. Can you describe a situation in which you questioned, verified, or rejected an AI-generated travel recommendation?	Why did you question it? How did you verify the information? What did you do after verification?
RQ4: How does AI-mediated decision-making reshape tourists' perceptions of authenticity and spontaneity?	IQ7. How do you think using AI-generated recommendations affects your experience of discovering authentic places, people, or activities?	Did AI help you discover something unexpected or local? Did the recommendation feel authentic? Why or why not?
	IQ8. Can you describe how using AI-generated travel plans has affected spontaneous or unplanned experiences during your trips?	Did you follow the itinerary closely? Did you ignore or change AI recommendations? Did AI make travel more predictable or leave room for unexpected experiences?

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was guided by a structured but flexible process. The subjects were first identified based on the inclusion criterion and were given information about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, and the use of the interview data. Participants gave

informed consent prior to being interviewed. The researcher then proceeded to carry out individual semi-structured interviews with the instrument of an interview guide. All the interviews started with the general question about the participant's experience with GenAI in the tourism domain and then moved on to more specific questions about autonomy, trust, skepticism, authenticity, and spontaneity. Participants were asked to give examples of specific times when AI recommendations affected, altered, or did not affect their travel choices. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission to ensure accuracy of their accounts. These recordings were then transcribed and analyzed. Any identifying data within the participants was anonymized and any identifying data within the transcripts was removed in order to protect confidentiality. Furthermore, the researcher used field notes throughout the data collection process to document contextual observations, developing interpretations, key contradictions, and possible linkages between the accounts given by the participants. These notes facilitated subsequent reflexive engagement with the data and made it easier to differentiate participants' statements from the researcher's initial interpretations.

3.6 Data Analysis

An analysis technique called reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This was suitable as the study aimed to uncover, explain and create meaningful patterns within the accounts of the participants, whilst acknowledging the active role that the researcher plays during the analytical process. The analysis was done iteratively, and coding was not a mechanical process. In the first place, the researcher was familiarized with the transcripts by reading the recordings of the interviews. Second, relevant parts of the transcripts were coded initially. Thirdly, related codes were analyzed and aggregated into larger candidate themes. Fourth, candidate themes were checked against the coded extracts and the full data set to determine if the themes were coherent and distinct. Fifth, the themes were polished, given names, reflecting the main meaning. Lastly, the researcher created an interpretive narrative linking the themes to the distributed-agency perspective and questions of study.

3.7 Trustworthiness and Rigor

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured by the four qualitative criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Ahmed, 2024). These criteria are common ones used to assess rigor in qualitative research. Credibility was strengthened with detailed, semi-structured interviews, multiple readings of the transcripts, probing questions, and comparisons of the interpretations of all six participants. To ensure transferability, this study considered the characteristics of the participants, the criteria for inclusion, the process of the interviews, and the analysis of the research. The research process was systematically documented, including interview guide, criteria for participants, coding, theme development, and reflections on the analysis, which helped to enhance dependability. To achieve confirmability, this study considered reflexive engagement with the researcher's assumptions, and grounds that were based on the participants' rather than on predetermined conclusions.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Theme 1: AI as a Travel Decision Partner

This theme focuses on the tourists' viewpoints on the impact of generative artificial intelligence in their travel decisions. The interviews were centered on the use of GenAI by tourists to get travel information, come up with alternatives, plan trips, and choose destinations and activities. The results indicated that there was no sense of AI as a traditional means of seeking information. Rather, AI was called an interactive "travel decision partner" that enables tourists to organize information, compare options, and create travel plans based on their unique preferences.

Participants highlighted the value of AI when they were unsure of their travel destinations or how to plan a trip. The use of AI was seen as being able to merge multiple preferences into one recommendation, thereby lessening the level of effort needed to search across multiple sources. One participant explained:

"When I tell AI what I like, how many days I have, and what kind of places I want to visit, it gives me different options. It feels more like someone is helping me plan the trip rather than just giving me information." (P1)

Another participant highlighted the interactivity of the relationship with AI. However, participant stated that they did not take the initial suggestion but rather asked further questions and altered the suggested itinerary:

"I normally do not take the first answer as my final plan. I ask AI to change it according to my interests, and then I ask again if I want something different. So, it becomes a conversation while I am planning the trip." (P3)

Additionally, the interviews show that AI has the potential to shape tourists' choice of alternatives. There is a starting point for the idea such as a place, an attraction, or an activity that the participant may have some knowledge and then AI can generate ideas that are not what they had originally envisioned. One participant explained this activity as:

"I already had an idea about where I wanted to go, but AI showed me some other places that I had not considered. I did not follow everything it suggested, but it helped me think about more possibilities." (P4)

Likewise, another participant mentioned the potential of AI in integrating various travel needs:

"The useful thing is that I can give several requirements at the same time. I can say I want cultural places, local food, not too much travelling, and only three days. AI can put these things together and suggest a plan." (P5)

But from what participants reported, it becomes clear that using the term "decision-maker" is not a suitable term to describe AI. But visitors still used their own sense of judgment in judging the recommendations. One participant stated:

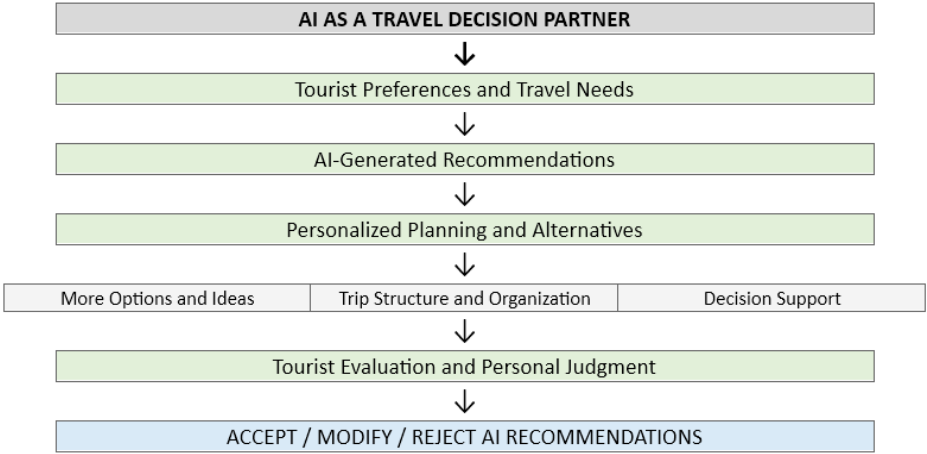


Figure 2 Summary of findings of AI as a travel decision partner

“AI can give me the options, but I still decide what I actually want to do. I see it as a partner for ideas, not as the person making the decision for me.” (P6)

Overall, the results indicate that GenAI is a hybrid between an information source and an autonomous decision-maker. However, tourists rely on AI to brainstorm ideas, structure travel details, and narrow down options, but still make the final decision. The new function of AI can now be called a travel decision partner, one that allows agency to be shared between the tourist's preference and the capabilities of the AI system to create and present alternatives. Figure 2 highlighted the summary of findings of AI as a travel decision partner.

4.2 Theme 2: Between Convenience and Decision Autonomy

The second theme focuses on the conflict between the ease of GenAI and tourists' autonomy in making travel choices. Participants found that AI has significantly simplified travel planning, cutting down on the amount of time it takes to search for information, compare options, and organize activities. But the interviews also suggest that convenience does not imply full delegating of decision-making to AI. On the other hand, tourists are constantly making decisions about how much responsibility they are willing to consider for technology. One participant explained:

“Before using AI, I had to search many websites and then compare everything myself. With AI, I can explain what I need and get a plan within a few minutes. It saves a lot of time.” (P1)

Another participant stressed the level of thinking that was not needed with AI in arranging the various aspects of a journey:

“The biggest advantage for me is that I do not have to organize everything from the beginning. AI can arrange the places, activities, and timing, and then I only need to decide whether the plan suits me.” (P2)

Hence, the use of AI in planning can boost tourists' perceived decision efficiency. Convenience, however, could also lead to participants becoming overly dependent on AI recommendations. One participant explained this as a tension:

“Sometimes the AI gives such a complete itinerary that I feel there is no reason to search for anything else. It is convenient, but I think that can also make you depend too much on the recommendation.” (P3)

This observation suggests that AI can be both a facilitator and influence of autonomy. The technology will save the decision-making effort, but can make tourists less likely to take a chance on an alternative. However, overall, participants had a sense of personal control over recommendations by adjusting or rejecting them. One participant explained:

“I use AI to make the planning easier, but I do not blindly follow it. If it suggests something I do not like, I remove it. So, the final decision is still mine.” (P4)

Another participant reported a more cooperative type of decision making:

“I think AI gives me a starting point. It can suggest what I could do, but I compare that with what I personally want. Sometimes I follow it, sometimes I change it completely.” (P5)

Another participant said that how dependent one is on another could depend on the nature of a decision:

“For simple things like finding attractions, I am comfortable letting AI suggest options. But for important decisions, I want to check everything myself before deciding.” (P6)

Thus, the results show there is a inconsistency between convenience and autonomy. GenAI can contribute to the autonomy by giving the tourists more information, alternatives and decision support. However, too much convenience may limit the extent to which the tourist can independently explore and evaluate alternatives at the same time.

The results do not imply autonomy is absent or present but rather that tourist autonomy is negotiated throughout the AI-mediated decision process. When tourists have a degree of autonomy to provide critical evaluations of AI recommendations, adjust proposed plans, and make final decisions, they are not just users of technology. On the other hand, autonomy can be diminished if convenience leads tourists to simply take on board the plans generated by AI without further consideration. Finally, summary of findings of convenience and decision autonomy is reported in Figure 3.

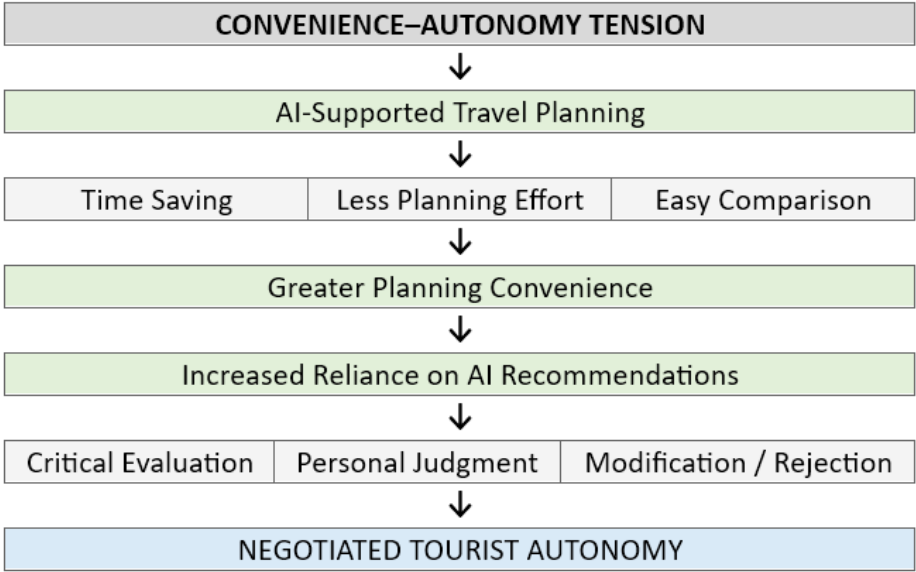


Figure 3 Summary of findings of convenience and decision autonomy

4.3 Theme 3: Trust, Verification, and Skepticism

This theme underscores the tourists' confidence or distrust of AI travel recommendations. The interviews centered on tourists' responses to the trustworthiness and reliability of information generated by generative AI and their willingness to accept, verify, alter, or reject AI-generated recommendations. The results indicate that tourists do not have to be fully trusting or skeptical of AI. Rather, trust seems to be dependent and situational, people do not trust the recommendations in general, but only when they perceive the recommendations as useful, credible, accurate, and relevant for their travel decisions. The summary of findings is given in Figure 4.

When the information was relevant to the traveler's needs, participants found AI-generated recommendations to be very helpful. One participant explained:

"I usually trust the AI when the answer is specific to what I asked. If I explain my interests and it gives me a detailed recommendation that makes sense, I feel more confident about using it." (P1)

Another person emphasized the need for consistency in AI suggestions and their prior understanding:

"If the recommendation matches what I already know or what I have seen from other sources, then I am more comfortable trusting it. When it gives me something completely different, I become more cautious." (P2)

This implies that tourists can connect with an advanced AI system and establish trust not just due to its ability to produce information, but also because of its claimed

relevance and consistency. This suggests that perceived relevance and consistency are key factors in developing a sense of trust among tourists, not just the production of information by an advanced AI system. Participants were also asked that there is a difference in trust depending on the travel decision type. One participant explained:

“For general suggestions like places to visit, I don't worry too much. But if it is something important, such as transportation or whether a place is open, I want to check the information somewhere else.” (P3)

Verification became a crucial component of tourists' experiences with AI. Participants shared the instances of them using other sources of information to verify the AI recommendations before taking certain decisions. One participant stated:

“I normally use AI to get the initial information, but then I check Google or the official website. I don't want to depend on only one source, especially if I am actually going to spend money or travel somewhere.” (P4)

Another participant described verification as a response to uncertainty:

“Sometimes the AI answer sounds very confident, but I still wonder whether the information is current. When I have doubts, I search for the place myself and compare the information before deciding.” (P5)

Participants also shared experiences that might raise doubts about the recommendations provided by AI. Recommendations that were generalized, impractical or contradictory to other information were more likely to be questioned. One participant explained:

“There were times when the answer sounded good, but when I checked it, some details were not correct. After that, I became more careful and stopped accepting every recommendation without checking.” (P6)

Therefore, the results reveal that the process of tourists' trust for GenAI is an iterative one whereby recommendation, evaluation, and verification, and decision-making are negotiated. While AI can help tourists find travel information more efficiently at first, when the recommendation comes with more uncertainty or potential consequences, it is still crucial to verify the information. Importantly, the rejection of AI does not have to be a product of skepticism. Skepticism is not necessarily a driver of AI rejection. Rather, the tourists can adopt a conditional trust approach in which AI serves as an initial source and other sources are accessed as needed.

Overall, Theme 3 serves as a testament to the fact that the relationship between tourists and AI is neither unconditional nor cynical. On the contrary, visitors proactively validate the trustworthiness of the AI suggestions based on the type of choice, the trust in the information, and the accessibility of other sources. Therefore, AI is a provisional source of travel knowledge which needs to be evaluated and verified by people. Summary of findings of trust, verification, and skepticism are reported in Figure 4.

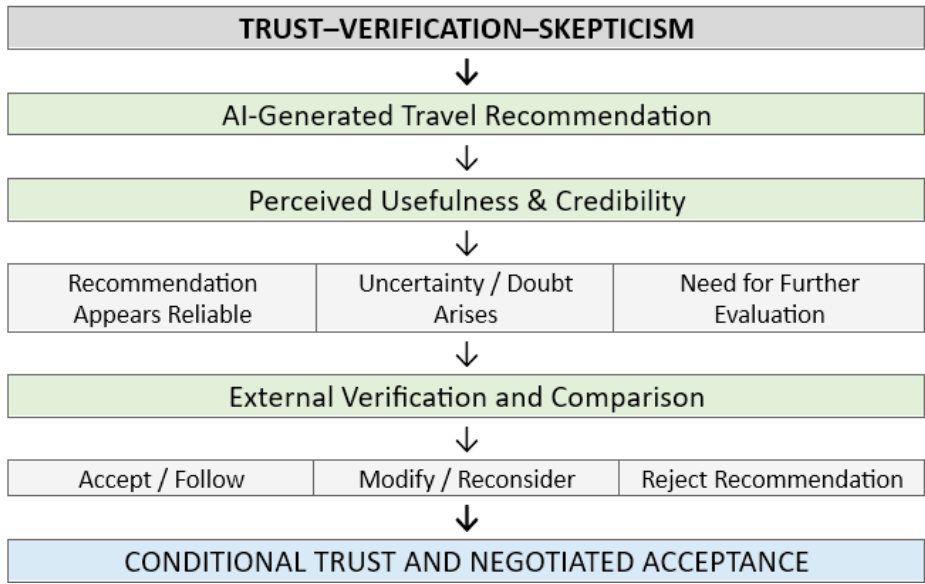


Figure 4 Summary of findings of trust, verification, and skepticism

4.4 Theme 4: The Tension Between AI Optimization and Travel Spontaneity

The tension between AI optimization and travel spontaneity is a Theme 4 that focuses on the contradiction between optimizing travel experiences using AI and maintaining the spontaneity of travel itself. The theme emphasizes the attitudes of tourists to the impact of AI-driven travel planning on spontaneity and unexpected discovery within the tourism experience. Participants said that AI-powered travel plans were helpful for arranging the trip's destination, activities, route, and time. The results indicate that AI optimization can help to minimize uncertainty and optimize travel planning for tourist by offering a structured recommendation. But at the same time, participants were aware that highly planned AI-driven travel plans might limit free choice and unforeseen experiences. Summary of findings reported in Figure 5.

The first point participants pointed out was that AI-powered itineraries enabled them to manage their travel plans efficiently. One participant explained:

“AI makes the trip much easier because it can arrange the places according to the time I have. I do not have to keep thinking about where to go next because the itinerary is already organized.” (P1)

A second participant mentioned the value of AI to optimize travel routes:

“I usually ask AI to arrange the places so that I do not waste time travelling back and forth. It gives me a logical sequence, and that makes the whole trip more manageable.” (P2)

Therefore, AI-driven recommendations can optimize travel efficiency and minimize

uncertainty. The participants enjoyed the convenience of having AI coordinate several activities in a short travel time. But the interviews also indicate that there is no need for tourists to have a fixed itinerary for the entire trip. One participant stated:

"I like having a plan, but I don't want every hour of my trip planned. Sometimes I just want to walk around and see what happens. If I follow the AI plan exactly, I feel that I might miss something unexpected." (P3)

Another participant similarly emphasized the importance of leaving space for improvisation:

"The AI itinerary is a good starting point for me, but once I reach the destination, I don't always follow it. If I find something interesting, I change my plan even if it was not recommended by AI." (P4)

Unexpected discovery was also noted as an important part of travel by participants. One participant explained:

"Some of my best travel experiences were things I did not plan. I found a small place while walking around. AI could not have planned that experience for me because I did not know it existed." (P5)

However, spontaneity was not necessarily viewed as being incompatible with AI. Instead, the participants seemed to treat AI as a flexible planning tool but did not adhere strictly to its suggestions. As one participant said:

"I don't see AI and spontaneity as opposites. I use AI to prepare myself, but I leave some free time. During that free time, I can decide what I want to do based on what I experience there." (P6)

Hence, the results indicate that visitors perform a balance of algorithmic optimization and spontaneous discovery. AI offers structure, efficiency, predictability; tourists might set aside unstructured time for the sake of the unexpected. Consequently, AI is not intended to replace spontaneity, but rather to give tourists a framework in which they can be flexible.

4.5 Theme 5: Reconstructing Authenticity in AI-Mediated Travel

In this theme, the focus is on the authentication of tourists' perceptions and evaluations, as the involvement of AI in tourist experiences becomes more significant. Authenticity was defined by participants as an experience of a place, a person, a culture, and a type of activity and environment that is meaningful to the individual, unique, and local. Results indicate that AI can play a part in authenticity by connecting the tourist to lesser-known destinations and experiences. The participants also expressed concerns that algorithmic recommendations may have a homogenizing effect on the travel experience

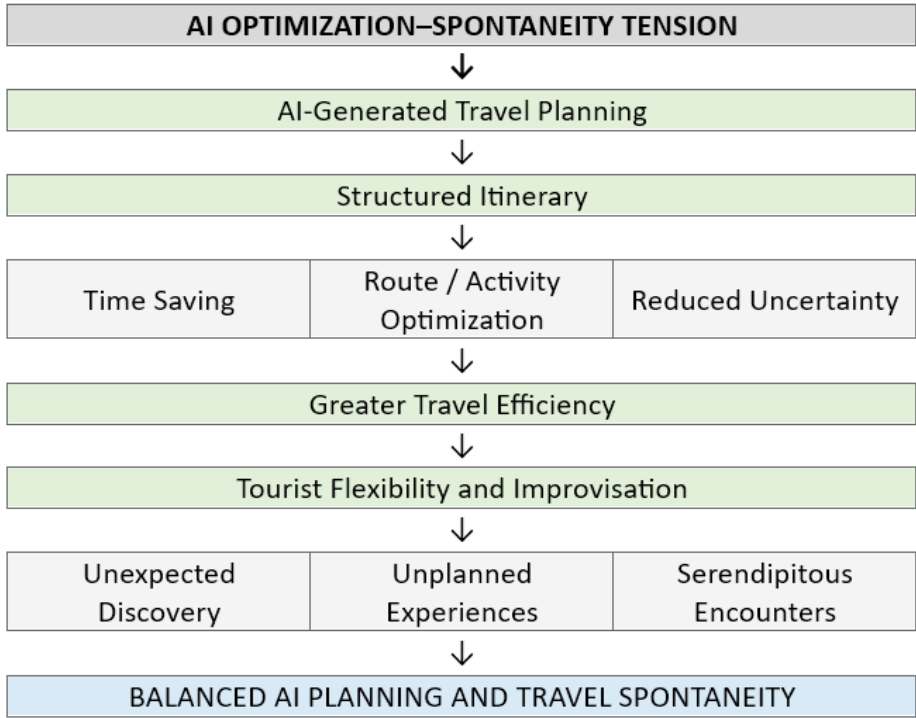


Figure 5 Summary of findings of AI optimization and travel spontaneity

when similar recommendations are given to different tourists. The summary of findings is reported in Figure 6.

First, participants said AI can help them have a greater awareness of experiences they would not otherwise discover. One participant explained:

“I normally search for the famous places, but when I asked AI for something more local, it gave me some places that I had never heard about. That made me feel that I was getting something different from the usual tourist experience.” (P1)

Another respondent emphasized the customization of AI suggestions:

“I told AI that I wanted to experience the local culture rather than only visit popular attractions. The suggestions were more suitable for what I personally wanted, so I felt the experience was more meaningful.” (P2)

The above discussion suggest that GenAI could also support access to perceived authentic experiences by aligning the recommendations to the tourists' interests. Participants also raised concerns that an experience cannot be authentic if it is found through an algorithm. One participant stated:

“If AI tells thousands of tourists to visit the same ‘hidden’ place, then it is not really hidden anymore. The recommendation itself could make the place become another tourist attraction.” (P3)

One other participant referred to authenticity as something that requires a personal experience, not just a source of a recommendation:

“I don't think something becomes authentic just because AI recommends it. For me, authenticity depends on how I experience the place, how local it feels, and whether I actually connect with the people and culture.” (P4)

Participants also understood that AI-driven recommendations could have an impact on tourists' pre-arrival perceptions of destinations. One participant explained:

“When AI describes a place in a certain way, I already have an expectation before I go there. Sometimes the real experience is different, and then I have to decide for myself whether it actually feels authentic.” (P5)

This indicates that the authenticity is not only based on the destination and the recommender's recommendation. Instead, tourists might re-construct and interpret authenticity in their real experience. Another participant said, “Yes,” this just reinforces the point:

“AI can recommend a local restaurant or a cultural activity, but I think the authenticity comes from what happens when you are actually there. The recommendation only opens the door.” (P6)

Therefore, AI can enhance the experience for tourists by offering more unique and less famous experiences. AI can provide more unique and less known experiences for tourists. On the contrary, algorithmic recommendation can also be a factor in standardization, if similar tourists are given similar recommendations. Thus, authentication in AI-enabled tourism seems to be negotiated, rather than assured. Whether an AI-recommended experience is genuine depends on the tourists' interpretation, interaction with the destination, and the perception of the local culture. Table 2 provides a summary of the five themes which were found to exist in this study, and shows how they correspond with Figures 2 to 6. The results reveal that tourists see GenAI as a travel decision helper that makes planning easier and engenders a desire to assert their independence and autonomy. Trust in AI recommendations is not absolute, but rather involves verification in cases of doubt. The results also reveal a inconsistency between the convenience of AI optimization and the desire for spontaneous travel experiences, highlighting the tourists' appreciation for both structure and spontaneity. Finally, AI can enable access to personalized and less-explored experiences, and authenticity is reliant on the tourist's personal interpretation and engagement with the place. The five themes show that the use of AI in tourism is an ongoing process of negotiation between technology support and human agency.

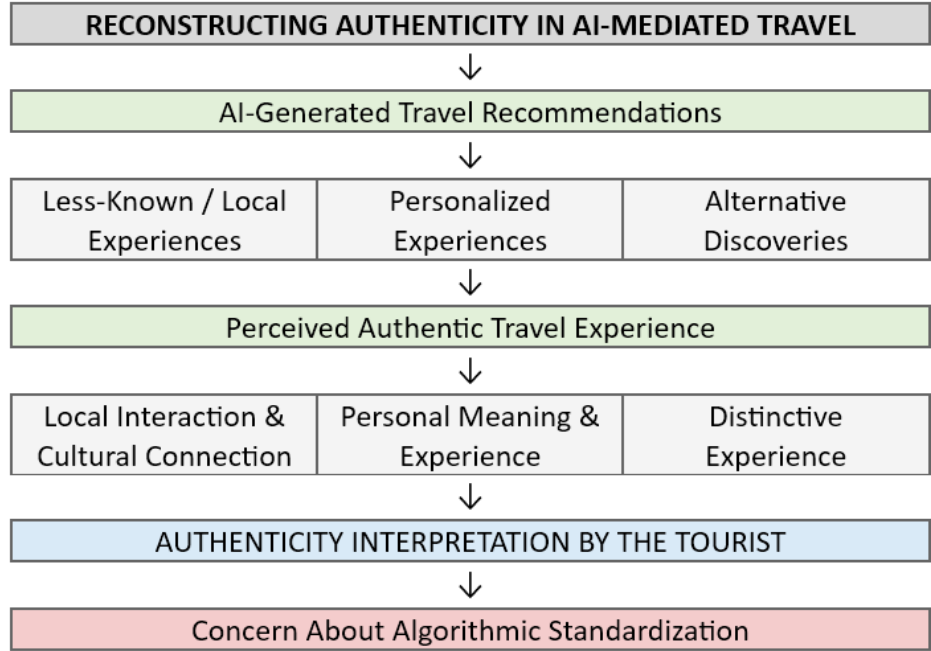


Figure 6 Summary of findings of authenticity in AI-mediated travel

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explores how tourists experience GenAI-mediated travel decisions, focusing on autonomy, trust, skepticism, authenticity, and spontaneity. The Theme 1 indicates that travelled users are more involved Generative AI (GenAI) as a travel decision partner and not just a data source. Participants explained how they use AI to find alternatives, organize travel details and customize trips to their taste. The results align with recent studies indicating that GenAI can impact tourists' information search and travel decision-making through customized recommendations (Mladenović et al., 2026; Tran, Nguyen, & Le, 2026). Specifically, recent studies have showed that various types of GenAI personalization can have an impact on tourists at different stages of their travel journey (Essawy & Shokry, 2026; Luo, Xu, Li, & Wan, 2025), from recognizing a need for a trip through to selecting the route and destination.

The result also adds to the existing research by highlighting the interactivity of AI-supported decision-making processes. The study De Cicco et al. (2025) revealed that tourists' attitudes to the GenAI and human advice differ at various points in the travel journey, with the human generated information being seen as more positive before the trip. Likewise, the study that looked at AI-generated travel plans and human-generated travel plans showed tourists rated human-generated plans as more reliable, but adding an identity to the AI-generated travel plans increased perceptions of the plan's reliability. The current results thus indicate that tourists are not necessarily rejecting GenAI products as an alternative to human decision-making. Rather, AI seems to fall somewhere in the middle of being an information provider, advisor, and decision

Table 2 Comprehensive Summary of Qualitative Findings

Theme	Central Finding	Key Dimensions Identified	Illustrative Qualitative Interpretation
Theme 1: AI as a Travel Decision Partner	Tourists perceive GenAI as an interactive partner that supports, rather than completely replaces, travel decision-making.	Tourist preferences and needs; AI-generated recommendations; personalized planning; alternative generation; decision support; acceptance/modification/rejection	Participants use GenAI to translate their preferences into travel alternatives and structured plans. However, tourists retain personal judgment by evaluating, modifying, or rejecting AI recommendations. Thus, AI occupies an intermediate position between an information source and an autonomous decision-maker.
Theme 2: Between Convenience and Decision Autonomy	GenAI increases travel-planning convenience while simultaneously creating the possibility of greater reliance and algorithmic influence.	Time saving; reduced planning effort; easy comparison; greater convenience; AI reliance; critical evaluation; personal judgment; modification/rejection	AI reduces the time and cognitive effort required to plan travel. However, highly convenient and complete recommendations may encourage tourists to rely more heavily on AI. Autonomy is maintained when tourists critically evaluate and modify AI-generated plans. Thus, autonomy is negotiated rather than completely surrendered.
Theme 3: Trust, Verification, and Skepticism	Tourists develop conditional trust in AI recommendations and, when necessary, external verification.	Perceived usefulness and AI credibility; recommendation reliability; uncertainty; verification; comparison with external sources; acceptance; modification; rejection	Tourists do not blindly trust or completely reject AI-generated recommendations. Trust depends on perceived relevance, accuracy, and the type of travel decision. When uncertainty arises, tourists verify information through other sources before accepting or rejecting the recommendation. This produces conditional trust and negotiated acceptance.
Theme 4: The Tension Between AI Optimization and Travel Spontaneity	AI improves travel efficiency and itinerary organization but tourists continue to value flexibility, improvisation, and unexpected discovery.	AI-generated planning; structured itinerary; time saving; route/activity optimization; reduced uncertainty; flexibility; improvisation; unexpected discovery; serendipitous encounters	Tourists appreciate AI's ability to optimize routes, activities, and available time. Nevertheless, completely structured itineraries may reduce opportunities for spontaneous discovery. Tourists therefore tend to use AI as a flexible planning framework while retaining opportunities to deviate from recommendations. The resulting experience reflects a balance between algorithmic optimization and human spontaneity.
Theme 5: Reconstructing Authenticity in AI-Mediated Travel	AI can facilitate access to personalized and less-known experiences, but tourists ultimately determine whether an experience is perceived as authentic.	AI-generated recommendations; less-known/local experiences; personalized experiences; alternative discoveries; local interaction; cultural connection; personal meaning; algorithmic standardization; interpretation	GenAI can broaden tourists' awareness of local or less familiar experiences. However, repeated algorithmic recommendations may create concerns about standardization and commercialization. Consequently, authenticity is not automatically produced by AI; it is interpreted and reconstructed by tourists through their actual experiences and interactions with destinations.

partner. The tourists give preferences and constraints, the AI creates alternatives, and the tourists make evaluations and selections among the alternatives. This provides further evidence to support the view that AI-powered travel decisions constitute an instance of human–AI co-decision-making (Saranya, Gupta, Smitha, Raj, & Philip, 2025), where the tourist is still a decision maker, but the choice environment is increasingly determined by AI.

The Theme 2 recognizes a convenience and autonomy related elements. One of the participants appreciated GenAI for saving time and effort in information searching, comparing options, and arranging trips. This discovery aligns with recent studies indicating that tailored GenAI suggestions can enhance the efficiency of tourists' search and decision-making processes (Luo et al., 2025; Shehawy & Faisal Ali Khan, 2026). The results also show that convenience can have a significant unintended consequence: increased reliance on AI. If the tours are well planned and tailored to the individual customer, the tourist could get less inclined to look for other alternatives. This aligns with studies that have found resistance in travelers to AI-driven travel suggestions on topics like trust, reliability, perceived risk, and value. For instance, Seyfi, Kim, Nazifi, Murdy, and Vo-Thanh (2025) mention trust and reliability as key issues that impact tourists' receptivity to using GenAI for travel planning and decision-making. Therefore, AI does not always diminish autonomy, rather, the impact of AI on autonomy relies on how tourists use its suggestions. Tourists' evaluation, modification, and rejection of an AI-generated itinerary provide a strong sense of control over their decisions, while acceptance of an itinerary that was created by the algorithm without interaction will increase their degree of algorithmic influence.

The Theme 3 highlights the trust of tourists in AI-generated travel. Participants were also reluctant to accept information that is generated by AI. Rather, trust was based on perceived relevance, credibility and accuracy, and the type of travel decision involved. These results are consistent with Seyfi, Kim, et al. (2025), who have highlighted trust and reliability issues as significant issues on the pathway to GenAI for travel planning and decision-making. The results are also in line with studies that have analyzed and compared travel plans generated by humans and by AI (Huang, Du, & Zhang, 2026). Tourists have been shown to trust human-created plans more than GenAI created plans, but personalization can increase the trust in the AI recommendations. It implies that visitors can interact with GenAI while at the same time keeping some skepticism about its results. Importantly, the present results show that skepticism does not necessarily translate into rejection. In contrast, visitors can react to uncertainty by seeking to confirm information produced by AI from other sources. The act of such behavior offers a indication of how tourists can be critical evaluators instead of passive recipients of algorithmic information. This is especially significant given that AI-generated travel information may not be as reliable based on the travel question and the travel recommendations generated. Instead, trust should be considered as a state of mind rather than a fixed response to GenAI.

The Theme 4 highlighted the relationship between algorithmic optimization and tourist spontaneity. The participants found AI ability to schedule, route, plan activities and minimize uncertainty very useful. These results align with the evolving landscape of personalized AI travel itinerary systems (Aggrawal, Teotia, Yash, & Shukla, 2025; Sharma, Suwar, Nipane, Rathod, & Sayyed, 2025), aiming to align travel suggestions with tourists' preferences and limitations. However, participants also appreciated the opportunity for unexpected discoveries and for going off script with their plans. This is

the theoretical significance of the finding which implies that travel efficiency does not equal travel quality. Itineraries designed to be efficient according to time, distance and preferences can be very efficient but may not be the type of unexpected encounters tourists would expect from meaningful travel. Recent research has started to investigate how AI-generated recommendations (Palahan & Arunthari, 2024) can help to enable more unique and authentic trips. The present findings have expanded this view by demonstrating how the use of AI optimization depends on the attitudes of tourists. Tourists are able to use AI to set up a rough framework and intentionally allow for invention. Thus, the best way to use AI is to create a flexible framework in which tourists can make spontaneous decisions.

The Theme 5 highlighted most theoretically interesting results of the study. The participants acknowledged AI potential to uncover local, less-known experiences and tailor them to their individual tastes. This aligns with recent research that specifically focuses on the possibility of using AI-suggested recommendations to enhance more unusual and authentic travel experiences (Palahan & Arunthari, 2024; Yang, Zhang, & Feng, 2024). AI can be a tool to help and hinder perceived authenticity. The current results also indicate that the authenticity is not a simple function of the recommendation. Authenticity is measured by the tourists' own experiences with the locals, culture, location, and people. AI is a tool that can generate potential authenticity, not actual authenticity. Recommendations can be an invitation to see a certain kind of event, but the tourist can only decide if the event is meaningful or not, and whether it is authentic or not. This is also relevant to ongoing debates on the impact of algorithms in tourism. Algorithmic recommendation systems may guide the tourists to specific locations and objects to offer, which may lead to the concentration of tourists and impact the local community and other stakeholders. Thus, AI technologies could facilitate tourists to discover unique locations, and also boost the quantity of tourists visiting them.

Finally, the five themes collectively imply that the dynamics between tourists and GenAI are not a simple case of technological replacement, but are rather negotiated agency. The results reveal how tourist customers can leverage AI to enhance the information provided, create alternatives, streamline the planning process, and explore potentially real experiences. Concurrently, visitors actively manage the impact of AI with their own decision, verification, modification, rejection, and spontaneous deviation. This interpretation aligns with recently published studies that indicated that tourists' reactions to GenAI vary based on the stage of the tourism experience and nature of the information used. It also showing that perceived reliability and trust is still a key factor in user limitations of AI travel planning.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

The present research has a number of theoretical implications for the ongoing research on generative artificial intelligence and tourism. Firstly, it examines GenAI as not only a source of information but also as a travel decision partner. Primarily, the study has found that GenAI has a growing impact on tourist information search and travel decisions, even when making personalized recommendations. This study, contributes to body of literature by highlighting the relationship between tourist preferences and AI-generated alternatives. Tourists continue to assess, alter and reject recommendations, indicating that AI-driven travel decisions are not a technological replacement but an agency distributed or negotiated among tourists. Secondly, it makes a contribution

through the identification of a convenience autonomy paradox. While GenAI saves planning time and increases the efficiency of the decision-making process, it also makes planning more convenient, which can lead to increased reliance on algorithmic recommendations. This builds upon earlier studies demonstrating that GenAI enhances travel decision making, but with the caution of trust, reliability and resistance issues. Therefore, tourist autonomy should not be viewed merely as the outcome of using AI; rather, it is the result of tourists' assessment and negotiation of AI recommendations. Thirdly, trust is approached as something conditional and negotiated. Trust and information reliability have been found to be significant factors in tourists' reaction to AI-generated travel suggestions in previous studies. The present results build on this knowledge by revealing that tourists can use AI simultaneously and at the same time doubt the information provided by it, especially if it needs to be verified. Lastly, the study sheds light on the paradoxes of AI-related experiences, such as optimization, spontaneity and personalization, and authenticity. The results indicate that more personalized suggestions do not automatically result in positive tourism experiences and that tourists might choose to decline new experiences or decide for themselves whether an AI-generated experience is authentic or not.

5.2 Policy Recommendations

The results have significant implications for destination managers, tourism businesses, the designers and developers of AI tools, and tourism marketers. First, tourism organizations should not create AI travel assistants with the expectation that their visitors will want them to be fully automated. Tourism operators should not build their AI travel agents based on the assumption that tourists are looking for total automation. Rather, AI systems ought to assist tourists in making decisions, and give them an opportunity to change, question, and refuse recommendations. Instead of one "best" choice, offering multiple potential options might maintain the tourists' sense of freedom of choice. Second, the AI-generated travel recommendations need to be more supportive of verification and transparency. Visitors are unlikely to trust the accuracy or timeliness of information created by AI. Therefore, tourism platforms should include reliable source references, clearly identify AI-generated suggestions and identify if information is likely to need confirmation. This is especially applicable since recent studies indicate that the trustworthiness of the GenAI recommendations and the format of the information contribute to its perceived usefulness. Thirdly, tourism companies should not over-optimize their trips. AI systems might intentionally include flexibility in time, activities, local revelations, and exploration, rather than create an entirely inflexible timetable. Fourth, destination marketers need to be aware of the implications of AI recommendations for authenticity and destination concentration. Local communities and destinations may feel pressure from the algorithms when they are constantly pushed to the same spots by tourists. Algorithmic decision-support systems which highlights the possibility of algorithmic tourism being unintentionally targeted in ways that can impact local communities and other stakeholders. Therefore, to promote more diversified recommendations for tourism organizations that spread the flow of visitors and make them aware of the other experiences that are to be found in the local area.

6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

First, the sample size of this study is small, with a qualitative sample of six tourists, suitable for an exploratory study of a high information content phenomenon, but not suitable for statistical generalization. Using larger qualitative samples or mixed methods designs in future research could allow for a broader examination of the identified theme. Secondly, a more specific setting of the study can help to generate more reliable results. This helps it to focus on the general phenomenon of AI mediated tourism, but restricts the development of ideas regarding the impact of cultural, institutional and destination specific factors on tourists' experience. Future studies could examine whether different destination types, and different countries differ in their perceived autonomy, trust, authenticity and spontaneity by comparing tourists in different destinations. Thirdly, the study is based on self-reported experiences of tourists. Participants can reflect their decision making following their travel. Longitudinal designs, or real-time observation of AI-assisted travel planning could be employed in the future to directly capture the decision process. Fourth, the study is quite general about GenAI in contrast to comparing AI systems or recommendation architectures. AI-based recommendations can take various formats as seen in tourism literature, such as AI-based recommendation only or combined with human recommendation, therefore, future research can explore the comparison of these formats. Finally, future research should explore the potential long-term effects of the frequent use of AI.

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