Modelling AI-Driven smart tourism experiences: A structural analysis of acceptance, trust, and sustainable engagement

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Abstract. As artificial intelligence (AI) becomes integral to tourism, understanding how it shapes smart travel experiences is essential. This study develops and tests a structural model linking six constructs: AI acceptance and usage, system quality, trust, infrastructure readiness, sustainability, and overall experience. Grounded in TAM, UTAUT, and the IS Success Model, it highlights trust, ethics, and sustainability as central to AI-driven tourism. Data from 538 travellers across Southeast Asia were analyzed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), with purposive sampling used to ensure relevance of AI experience. Results show that infrastructure readiness and system quality strongly influence trust and user satisfaction, while sustainability mediates the relationship between AI use and positive travel experiences. This research contributes a multidimensional framework connecting technology adoption with responsible tourism outcomes. The findings offer practical implications for policymakers and tourism providers to develop ethical, inclusive, and infrastructure-ready AI systems that enhance user trust and sustainable travel behaviour.

1 Introduction

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into tourism is reshaping the industry through smart tourism—a paradigm leveraging AI, IoT, and big data to deliver hyper-personalized, efficient, and sustainable travel experiences [1]. Tools such as recommendation engines, conversational agents, and predictive analytics enhance decision-making and service personalization. Beyond convenience, AI also supports environmental sustainability by forecasting demand and managing visitor flows. However, the successful adoption of AI in tourism hinges on a complex interplay of factors, including user acceptance, trust, infrastructure readiness, and sustainability. While classical models—such as TAM, UTAUT,

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and the IS Success Model—offer foundational insights into technology adoption, they often lack integration of socio-technical and ethical dimensions [1]. Trust, encompassing transparency, algorithmic reliability, and data security, emerges as a pivotal construct in shaping user engagement with AI. Simultaneously, digital infrastructure—connectivity, smart mobility, and analytics—is a prerequisite for effective AI implementation.

Previous studies tend to isolate technical factors or focus narrowly on usability, often overlooking how trust, infrastructure, and sustainability intersect in shaping AI-driven tourism experiences. Few have proposed integrative models, and even fewer have empirically tested them in Southeast Asia. This study addresses that gap by developing and validating a structural model that combines technological, ethical, and infrastructural factors. Its novelty lies in integrating sustainability and trust into adoption theory, while offering region-specific insights. The study aims to: 1) examine how AI acceptance, infrastructure readiness, and system quality influence trust and perceptions of sustainable tourism; 2) test their impact on overall experience and behavioral intention; and 3) provide practical guidance for building inclusive, trustworthy, and future-ready smart tourism systems. Data from 538 Southeast Asian travellers were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), offering theoretical contribution and actionable insights.

2 Literature review

2.1 Acceptance and usage of AI in tourism

User acceptance is a prerequisite for effectively integrating artificial intelligence (AI) in smart tourism. As AI increasingly facilitates personalized recommendations, conversational agents, and adaptive itineraries, its adoption is strongly influenced by perceived usefulness, ease of use, and alignment with travellers' goals. When tourists perceive AI systems as intuitive and reliable, they are more likely to adopt and integrate them into their travel planning, reinforcing habitual use and engagement [1]. This repeated interaction fosters trust, particularly when AI systems provide transparent, explainable, consistent outputs [2]. Trust enhances user satisfaction and serves as a key mediator between system interaction and perceived service quality. Moreover, growing familiarity with AI tools enhances perceptions of their role in promoting sustainability and inclusive tourism. AI-driven personalization and IoT integration contribute to responsible resource utilization and expand access to tourism services. Thus, AI acceptance transcends technical utility, embedding ethical and environmental considerations into the user experience. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Acceptance and usage of AI positively influence trust in AI systems.

H2: The acceptance and usage of AI positively influence perceptions of AI-supported sustainable and inclusive tourism.

H3: The acceptance and usage of AI positively influence the overall smart tourism experience and intention to recommend.

2.2 System quality and AI recommendation effectiveness

The effectiveness of AI in tourism is strongly determined by system quality, encompassing accuracy, reliability, responsiveness, and relevance [3]. High-quality AI services—such as chatbots, virtual assistants, and adaptive recommendation engines—enhance engagement by offering dynamic, personalized interactions that align with users' evolving preferences. When perceived as competent and responsive, such systems foster trust and satisfaction, reinforcing their influence on user behaviour. Ethical system attributes—such as explainability, fairness,

and user-centeredness—affect users' quality assessments. Transparent AI recommendations are perceived as more trustworthy and aligned with values such as eco-efficiency and cultural sensitivity [2]. Consequently, system quality contributes to technical performance and perceptions of sustainability and inclusiveness. Moreover, emotionally intelligent AI—capable of addressing functional and affective user needs—can enhance engagement and loyalty to destinations, especially during service disruptions. As such, system quality is a critical driver of trust, sustainability perception, and positive tourism experiences. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: Perceived system quality positively influences trust in AI systems.

H5: Perceived system quality positively influences perceptions of AI-supported sustainable and inclusive tourism.

H6: Perceived system quality positively influences overall smart tourism experience and recommendation intention.

2.3 Trust and perceived security

Trust became a crucial role in adopting and continued use of AI in tourism, serving as a psychological mediator between system design and user behaviour. Key trust drivers include system transparency, accuracy, privacy protection, and ethical congruence. Transparent AI systems—those that clearly explain how data is used and decisions are made—reduce uncertainty and enhance user engagement. Perceived accuracy further reinforces trust, especially in real-time decision-making contexts such as itinerary changes or location-based recommendations. Meanwhile, privacy concerns remain a critical barrier: users are more likely to trust systems that offer secure, user-controlled data practices. When AI aligns with users' ethical values, trust is strengthened, fostering deeper engagement. Beyond cognitive trust, emotional security also influences user comfort with AI systems. Trusted AI fosters psychological safety, reducing resistance to automation and enhancing overall satisfaction [4]. In tourism—where experiences are personal and immersive—trust ensures that AI is perceived as an enabler of meaningful and seamless journeys. Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: Trust in AI systems positively influences the overall smart tourism experience and recommendation intention.

2.4 Infrastructure readiness

Infrastructure readiness is a foundational enabler for deploying AI-powered systems in the tourism sector. Essential components—such as high-speed internet, interoperable platforms, and smart mobility—form the backbone for delivering seamless, real-time AI services [5]. Even sophisticated AI tools struggle to deliver reliable user experiences without adequate infrastructure, particularly in location-sensitive applications such as dynamic itinerary generation and predictive recommendations. The quality of digital infrastructure has a direct impact on perceptions of system reliability and trust. Studies show that users are more inclined to trust and adopt AI when the supporting digital ecosystem is stable, responsive, and integrated across services [6]. In tourism, this integration is crucial for maintaining service continuity across diverse physical environments. Beyond functionality, robust infrastructure also impacts users' emotional comfort with AI systems. In unfamiliar destinations, well-developed digital environments convey a sense of security, digital maturity, and reliability, boosting trust and willingness to engage with automated services [5]. Accordingly, this study posits:

H8: Infrastructure readiness positively influences the acceptance and usage of AI.

H9: Infrastructure readiness has a positive influence on perceived system quality.

H10: Infrastructure readiness has a positive influence on trust in AI systems.

2.5 Sustainability and inclusiveness

Sustainability and inclusiveness are key pillars of smart tourism, extending beyond environmental considerations to address equitable access, cultural preservation, and community well-being. AI-powered technologies support these objectives through intelligent resource optimization, personalized content, and inclusive service design [3]. Real-time, context-aware recommendations can minimize environmental impact by reducing unnecessary travel and promoting eco-conscious behaviours. In addition, AI can enhance cultural sensitivity by generating itineraries that align with local traditions and heritage, thereby fostering meaningful interactions between tourists and the community [7]. Tourists who perceive AI as enabling respectful and enriching cultural experiences are more likely to develop destination loyalty and adopt responsible travel practices. Inclusiveness also demands that AI systems accommodate diverse user needs—across language, ability, and socioeconomic status. Features such as multilingual interfaces, accessibility options, and affordability are crucial in preventing digital exclusion in tourism [8, 9]. Bridging this digital divide is critical for ensuring socially equitable smart tourism ecosystems. Moreover, AI can contribute to cultural preservation by promoting authentic experiences and offering educational insights that encourage respectful visitor behaviour. Thus, the study proposes:

H11: Perceived Sustainability and inclusiveness of AI systems positively influence overall smart tourism experience and intention to recommend.

3 Methods

This quantitative, cross-sectional study explored the relationships between AI acceptance, system quality, trust, infrastructure readiness, sustainability perception, and smart tourism experience. Five hundred thirty-eight valid responses were obtained through purposive sampling of tourists in Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand who had used AI-enabled tourism tools (e.g., chatbots, smart itineraries). Data were collected online between March and May 2025 via travel platforms and social media. The instrument was developed by adapting measurement items from established and validated scales in prior literature. Items for AI usage and acceptance were adapted from TAM and UTAUT constructs [10, 11], as applied in tourism contexts [1, 12]. System quality and trust/security items were drawn from the IS Success Model and trust-based frameworks in AI service adoption [13, 14]. Infrastructure readiness was measured using indicators adapted from smart tourism infrastructure studies [15, 16], while sustainability and inclusiveness items were based on sustainable tourism and ethical AI adoption literature [17, 18]. Overall experience and intention to recommend were adapted from service satisfaction and behavioral intention literature [4, 8]. All items used a five-point Likert scale, and the instrument was pilot-tested (n = 30) and reviewed by experts. Ethical standards were maintained through informed consent and anonymity. Analysis was conducted using PLS-SEM (SmartPLS 3.0), with model validity assessed through reliability, AVE, and discriminant validity, and structural relationships tested via path coefficients, R^2, f^2, and Q^2.

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Respondent profiles

Five hundred thirty-eight valid responses were obtained from travellers across Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand. The gender distribution was relatively balanced (54.5% female; 45.5% male), while 72% of respondents were aged 18–25, reflecting a predominance of Millennial and Gen Z tourists—groups known for early technology adoption and experience-driven travel. Regarding occupation, 64% were students, followed by private employees, civil servants, entrepreneurs, and freelancers. Regarding travel frequency, 43% travelled 2–3 times yearly, and 30% reported more than five trips annually, indicating high mobility. Nature-based tourism was the top preference (59.3%), followed by culinary (20.3%), adventure (11.9%), and wellness tourism (6.1%). Notably, 70.3% of participants regularly used Smart Tourism Technologies (STTs). Commonly used tools included booking apps (Traveloka, Agoda), AI-based navigation (Google Maps, Waze), and smart itinerary tools (TripIt, Google Travel). Several also used AR/VR guides and AI-powered chatbots. These results indicate a tech-savvy, mobile, and digitally engaged tourist segment, aligning with the study's objectives. The prevalence of young users highlights the significance of AI in shaping the future of travel experiences in Southeast Asia.

4.2 Measurement model evaluation

The measurement model demonstrated strong reliability and validity. All constructs met internal consistency standards, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.762 to 0.864 and composite reliability (CR) from 0.863 to 0.898, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Table 1). Convergent validity was supported, as all Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.550 to 0.700, surpassing the 0.50 benchmark. Most outer loadings were above 0.70, indicating strong indicator reliability. For example, AI Acceptance indicators (e.g., AU6 = 0.826) and Experience items (ORI1–ORI4, all > 0.80) loaded strongly onto their respective constructs. Smart Tourism Infrastructure and Sustainable AI Tourism constructs also consistently converged loadings between 0.750–0.789 and 0.832–0.842, respectively. System Quality and Trust constructs showed reliable loadings across all items, confirming robust measurement. These results affirm the adequacy of the model's constructs in capturing the underlying theoretical dimensions.

Table 1. Internal consistency reliability.

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Acceptance & Usage of AI in Tourism	0.840	0.886	0.610
Overall Experience & Recommendation Intention	0.839	0.892	0.674
Smart Tourism Infrastructure Readiness	0.786	0.875	0.700
Sustainable & Inclusive Tourism with AI	0.864	0.898	0.596
System Quality & AI Recommendation Effectiveness	0.837	0.880	0.550
Trust & Perceived Security	0.762	0.863	0.677

To test discriminant validity, the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio was used. All HTMT values were below the conservative cutoff of 0.90, with most falling below 0.85, indicating that each construct is empirically distinct (Table 2).

Table 2. Discriminant validity.

HTMT Ratio	AU	ORI	SIT	SIA	SQA
Overall Experience & Recommendation Intention	0.871	–			
Smart Tourism Infrastructure Readiness	0.749	0.752	–		
Sustainable & Inclusive Tourism with AI	0.868	0.874	0.862	–	
System Quality & AI Recommendation Effectiveness	0.889	0.809	0.830	0.837	–
Trust & Perceived Security	0.863	0.871	0.868	0.884	0.882

These results confirm that the measurement model meets all psychometric criteria and is suitable for structural model analysis.

4.3 Structural model

The structural model was tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with bootstrapping (5000 resamples). The analysis assessed path coefficients, R^2, effect sizes (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and model fit (SRMR). All hypothesized paths were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), supporting the full model. The strongest direct effects were from Infrastructure Readiness → System Quality ($\beta = 0.679$, $t = 24.96$) and Infrastructure Readiness → AI Usage ($\beta = 0.615$, $t = 19.89$). The use of AI significantly influenced perceptions of sustainability ($\beta = 0.465$), trust ($\beta = 0.303$), and overall experience ($\beta = 0.287$) (Table 3 and Figure 1).

Table 3. Path coefficients and hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	AU → ORI	0.287	5.673	0.000	Supported
H2	AU → SIA	0.465	10.427	0.000	Supported
H3	AU → TPS	0.303	5.708	0.000	Supported
H4	SIT → AU	0.615	19.892	0.000	Supported
H5	SIT → SQA	0.679	24.963	0.000	Supported
H6	SIT → TPS	0.292	6.068	0.000	Supported
H7	SIA → ORI	0.317	6.263	0.000	Supported
H8	SQA → ORI	0.099	2.101	0.036	Supported
H9	SQA → SIA	0.370	8.785	0.000	Supported
H10	SQA → TPS	0.288	6.097	0.000	Supported
H11	TPS → ORI	0.200	4.044	0.000	Supported

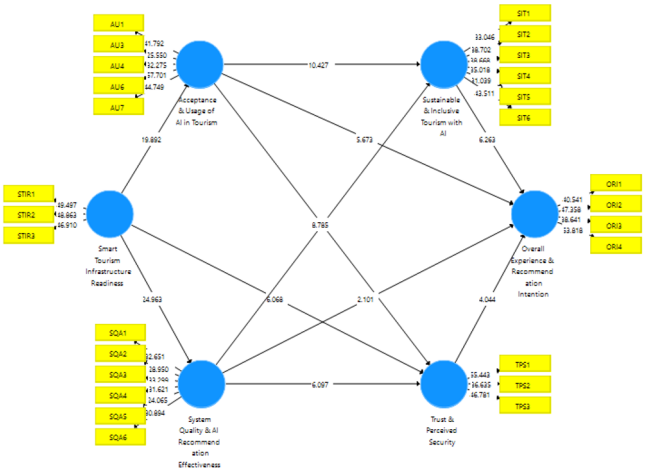

Fig 1. Evaluated structural model

The structural model demonstrates strong explanatory and predictive power. The highest R^2 values were observed for Overall Tourist Experience and Behavioral Intention (0.655), followed by Trust and Perceived Security (0.615) and Sustainable Value Creation (0.612), indicating robust explanatory strength. System Quality (0.461) and AI Usage (0.378) showed moderate explanatory capacity. Effect size analysis (f^2) revealed that Smart Infrastructure Readiness had the strongest influence, with large effects on System Quality and AI Usage. Moderate effects emerged for AI Acceptance and System Quality on Sustainable Value, while Trust, Acceptance, and Quality had smaller effects on Tourist Experience—implying their role as foundational rather than dominant drivers. All Q^2 values were above zero, confirming strong predictive relevance, particularly for Tourist Experience and Intention (0.435), Trust (0.409), and Sustainability (0.361). Model fit indices were within acceptable thresholds (SRMR = 0.056; NFI = 0.824), and no multicollinearity was detected (VIF = 1.49–2.15), affirming the model's overall robustness and validity in explaining AI-integrated tourism systems.

4.4 Discussion

This offers valuable insights into how interrelated socio-technical factors shape AI-driven tourism experiences. A notable observation is the pivotal role of infrastructure readiness, which appears to underpin both system quality and tourists' willingness to adopt AI tools. Rather than serving merely as a technological backdrop, digital infrastructure seems to foster a sense of reliability and seamlessness, particularly in contexts where real-time data and personalized services are essential [6, 19]. Interestingly, the relationship between AI acceptance and users' perceptions of trust and sustainability suggests that tourists evaluate technology for its utility and ethical resonance. This highlights the relevance of designing AI systems that are not just efficient, but also transparent and user-aligned. In line with existing literature [1], it seems that perceived usefulness remains a core predictor—but in the context of tourism, its impact may extend to value-based judgments, especially when sustainability is a salient concern.

System quality, meanwhile, plays a subtler role. While technically important, its influence on the user experience was weaker than anticipated. This may reflect a shifting baseline: as AI systems become more common, users may take functional quality for granted, placing greater weight on emotional and ethical dimensions. The data also suggest that tourists increasingly associate system design with inclusivity and cultural sensitivity—an emerging theme in responsible tourism discourse [7, 8]. Moreover, trust and sustainability perceptions appear to be central in shaping users' emotional responses and behavioral intentions. These findings resonate with recent arguments that tourism experiences are no longer judged solely by convenience, but also by the perceived alignment of technology with users' values and sense of agency [4]. These results indicate the need for tourism stakeholders to move beyond efficiency-focused implementation and engage with broader questions of inclusion, ethics, and digital equity. As destinations adopt AI at scale, understanding the layered dynamics of acceptance, trust, and sustainability will be essential for user satisfaction and long-term legitimacy.

5 Conclusion and implications

This study explores how various socio-technical elements—ranging from infrastructure and system quality to trust and sustainability—interact in shaping AI-enabled tourism experiences. The findings indicate a nuanced relationship between technological readiness and meaningful user engagement. Rather than functioning solely as a technical backbone, infrastructure appears to act as a catalyst that enables users to perceive AI as usable, reliable,

and trustworthy. One of the more compelling insights lies in how trust and sustainability emerge not as secondary considerations, but as central factors influencing tourist satisfaction and behavioral intention. This offers a shift in perspective: AI in tourism is no longer judged only by its efficiency or personalization features, but by how well it aligns with ethical expectations and cultural sensitivity. Such results are particularly relevant for regions like Southeast Asia, where rapid digital growth intersects with rich cultural diversity and evolving visitor expectations.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the growing need for adoption models that extend beyond usability metrics. By embedding constructs such as trust and sustainability into a structural framework grounded in TAM, UTAUT, and the IS Success Model, this study opens new space for understanding technology not just as a system, but as an experience. It responds to calls in the literature for more integrative, value-conscious models of smart tourism. For practitioners and destination planners, the findings underscore three priorities: investing in inclusive digital infrastructure, developing AI services that are transparent and secure, and aligning technological innovation with the values of sustainability and equity. These are not peripheral concerns—they are increasingly central to travelers' decision-making processes. Of course, there are limits to what this study can claim. While appropriate for the research context, the use of purposive sampling limits how broadly the findings can be generalized—particularly to older or less digitally engaged populations. The cross-sectional nature of the data also makes it difficult to observe how perceptions of AI may evolve. Future research could take a longitudinal approach or apply qualitative methods to better capture trust's emotional and cultural dimensions, especially in contexts where AI is still emerging.

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