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GENERATIVE AI IN TOURISM: OPPORTUNITIES, RISKS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN AND SUB-SAHARAN TOURISM DESTINATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is changing how tourists search for information, construct itineraries, evaluate destinations, and interact with tourism businesses. Recent tourism research has expanded rapidly, but the evidence base remains uneven across regions and applications. This literature review synthesizes recent scholarship on the opportunities and risks of GenAI in tourism and develops a specific discussion of implications for African and Sub-Saharan destinations. A structured narrative review approach was used, with targeted searches of academic and publisher databases and supplementary searches of authoritative industry, policy, and preprint sources. Literature was organized thematically around four opportunity areas: personalization, conversational travel planning, destination marketing and content generation, and operational efficiency; and four risk areas: algorithmic concentration of destination attention, trust and information-quality problems, ethical and environmental concerns, and dependence on digital infrastructure and data quality. The review finds that GenAI can lower information-search costs, support personalized travel planning, expand the capacity of destination marketers to create content, and improve service efficiency. At the same time, recent evidence indicates that AI recommendations can reproduce established tourism imaginaries, while inaccuracies, privacy concerns, limited transparency, and overreliance may weaken trust. For Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, these issues intersect with uneven digital infrastructure, skills, organizational capacity, and data availability. The review therefore argues that GenAI should be understood not only as a tourism-service innovation but also as a potential mechanism of destination visibility and exclusion. Rather than claiming that African destinations are already systematically under-recommended, the review identifies algorithmic under-representation as an empirically testable risk. Four research priorities are proposed: auditing AI representations of African destinations, testing the relationship between AI visibility and tourism demand, examining GenAI adoption among African tourism SMEs, and developing responsible and locally grounded AI practices for destination marketing.

Keywords: Generative Artificial Intelligence; Tourism; Destination Marketing; Conversational AI; Digital Over Tourism; Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa; Responsible AI

1 INTRODUCTION

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has moved rapidly from an emerging digital technology to a practical tool for tourism information search, itinerary planning, customer interaction, and marketing. Unlike conventional predictive AI, which primarily classifies, predicts, or recommends from existing data, GenAI can produce new text, images, and other forms of content in response to natural-language prompts. This capability makes it particularly relevant to tourism, an information-intensive sector in which travelers continually search, compare, imagine, and evaluate destinations before making decisions. Recent research shows that GenAI has already become a substantial area of tourism scholarship: Li et al. (2025), for example, systematically reviewed 170 publications and identified major clusters around antecedents of GenAI use, impacts and applications, and technical issues. Other recent reviews have focused specifically on consumer effects and on ChatGPT in tourism and hospitality (Zhang et al., 2026; Tuyen et al., 2025).

The rapid expansion of this literature creates an important opportunity for a more geographically sensitive research agenda. Much of the emerging evidence examines consumer adoption, service applications, destination marketing, or platform-level innovation without sustained attention to the structural conditions of African and Sub-Saharan tourism destinations. This matters because the value of AI-mediated visibility depends partly on the digital information environment from which AI systems learn and retrieve information. Destinations that are well represented online, described consistently, and supported by rich and current data may have advantages over destinations whose tourism assets are poorly documented in digital environments. At present, however, the proposition that African destinations are systematically disadvantaged in GenAI recommendations should be treated as a research question rather than an established empirical fact.

The review also responds to a second issue. The tourism literature increasingly recognizes that GenAI has a dual character. On the positive side, it can reduce information-search effort, personalize recommendations, generate marketing content, and improve operational efficiency (Saleh, 2025; Rather 2024). On the negative side, tourists may encounter inaccurate information, privacy concerns, algorithm aversion, anxiety, and excessive reliance on AI-generated recommendations (Seyfi et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2026; Park et al. 2025). A recent study of 50 structured ChatGPT travel conversations also found a strong tendency for recommendations to foreground established tourist hubs, while lesser-known alternatives appeared less frequently unless explicitly requested (Mellors, 2025). This evidence raises a useful distinction between physical over tourism and what this review terms digital over tourism: the concentration of informational attention around already visible destinations at the pre-travel stage.

Against this background, the review asks four questions: (RQ1) what opportunities does GenAI create for tourism? (RQ2) What risks and limitations are emerging in the literature? (RQ3) What do these opportunities and risks imply for African and Sub-Saharan tourism destinations? And (RQ4) what research agenda can address the unresolved problem of AI-mediated destination visibility in Africa? The contribution is therefore not to claim that Africa has been ignored by all AI research, but to connect the broader GenAI-tourism literature with the region's distinctive digital, organizational, and infrastructural conditions.

2 REVIEW METHOD

This study adopts a structured narrative literature review rather than a full systematic review or meta-analysis. This distinction is important because the purpose is interpretive synthesis: to connect a rapidly developing GenAI literature with the specific institutional and technological conditions of African tourism. The approach is informed by systematic-review principles (transparent search concepts, explicit inclusion criteria, thematic organization, and verification of bibliographic information) but does not claim the exhaustive screening and statistical synthesis required for a systematic review.

The literature search was designed around combinations of the terms “generative AI,” “generative artificial intelligence,” “ChatGPT,” “large language models,” “tourism,” “hospitality,” “travel planning,” “destination marketing,” “tourist trust,” “Africa,” “Sub-Saharan Africa,” “developing countries,” and “digital divide.” Academic literature was prioritized from publisher and scholarly databases, while authoritative industry and policy sources were used only where they provided current information that was unlikely to be available in peer-reviewed literature. Recent work from 2024–2026 was prioritized because the consumer-facing GenAI tourism literature is developing exceptionally quickly, while selected earlier studies were retained when they provided important conceptual foundations.

Sources were included when they addressed at least one of four issues: (1) GenAI applications or consumer use in tourism and hospitality; (2) GenAI-related opportunities or risks; (3) AI, digital transformation, or technology adoption in African or developing-country tourism; or (4) destination representation, recommendation, trust, or digital visibility. Sources were excluded when they were unrelated to tourism, focused exclusively on technical AI development without tourism relevance, duplicated another publication, or provided claims that could not be adequately verified. Peer-

reviewed journal articles and scholarly book chapters formed the core evidence base. Industry reports and preprints were treated as supplementary evidence and their status is identified where relevant.

The final synthesis was organized thematically rather than statistically. First, evidence concerning benefits was grouped into personalization, travel planning, marketing/content generation, and operational efficiency. Second, evidence concerning risks was grouped into algorithmic concentration, trust and information quality, responsible-AI concerns, and infrastructure/data dependence. Third, these themes were interpreted through an African/Sub-Saharan lens, drawing particularly on literature concerning the digital divide, AI readiness, SME adoption, and technology barriers. Because this review does not report a complete database-by-database screening count, it should be understood as a transparent, structured narrative review rather than a PRISMA-compliant systematic review.

3 OPPORTUNITIES CREATED BY GENAI IN TOURISM

3.1 Personalization and Conversational Travel Assistance

Personalization is one of the clearest opportunities associated with GenAI. Conversational systems can process natural language descriptions of interests, budgets, travel dates, and constraints and convert them into destination or activity suggestions. This changes the interaction from a static search process to a conversational one in which the traveler can iteratively refine preferences. Recent reviews identify personalization, convenience, and decision support as recurring positive outcomes in tourism GenAI research

(Mehrgan et al., 2026; Zhang et al., 2026). Research on consumer value co-creation similarly finds that travel-planning assistance and time saving are important benefits, while inaccurate information and limited knowledge can create value co-destruction (Bui et al., 2025).

For destination organizations, conversational personalization also creates an opportunity to make less prominent attractions more discoverable. A tourism board could provide structured information about local experiences, community-based tourism, cultural events, conservation activities, transport options, and seasonal attractions in formats that can be incorporated into digital information ecosystems. However, visibility should not be assumed simply because content exists online; the actual representation of destinations by different AI systems requires empirical testing.

3.2 Itinerary Planning and Decision Support

GenAI can reduce the time and cognitive effort involved in constructing travel itineraries. Tourists can ask for multi-day plans that combine attractions, food, transport, accommodation, and activities, and can revise the itinerary through follow-up prompts. Saleh (2025) identifies itinerary planning, personalization, operational efficiency, and implementation strategies as important areas of emerging tourism GenAI research. Park et al. (2025) also document the rapid integration of generative AI into travel-planning services, including conversational recommendation features used by major tourism platforms such as Expedia and Booking.com."

The implication for emerging destinations is potentially significant. If reliable local information can be incorporated into conversational systems, GenAI may reduce the information disadvantage faced by destinations that lack extensive conventional marketing budgets. At the same time, destination organizations must maintain accurate and current information. AI-generated itineraries can be misleading when opening hours, transport arrangements, prices, safety information, or attractions have changed. GenAI therefore creates an opportunity only when supported by reliable destination data and human oversight.

3.3 Destination Marketing and AI-Generated Content

GenAI can substantially reduce the cost and time required to produce tourism marketing content. Text-generation tools can assist with destination descriptions, social-media copy, multilingual content, campaign ideas, and customer responses, while image-generation systems can support visual storytelling and experimentation with destination imagery. Yu and Meng (2025) argue that image GenAI is likely to reshape destination-image creation and identify future research needs around programmed destination images, hyper-personalization, consumer perceptions, and sustainability. Zhang and Prebensen (2024) likewise demonstrate the emerging use of ChatGPT for tourism marketing materials.

For African tourism destinations, the attraction of these tools is particularly strong because smaller destination-management organizations and tourism SMEs may face financial and human-resource constraints. GenAI could assist with multilingual communication and rapid content adaptation. Nevertheless, generated content must not replace authentic local representation. Misleading imagery, invented attractions, cultural stereotyping, or unrealistic depictions

of landscapes can damage destination credibility. Responsible use therefore requires disclosure where appropriate, factual verification, and involvement of local tourism stakeholders.

3.4 Operational Efficiency

GenAI can also support tourism organizations behind the customer-facing interface. Potential applications include drafting routine communications, assisting customer-service agents, summarizing feedback, generating internal documents, and supporting knowledge retrieval. The recent literature suggests that operational efficiency is among the most frequently discussed positive effects of GenAI in tourism (Li et al., 2025; Saleh, 2025). For small tourism businesses, efficiency gains may be more realistic in the short term than expensive large-scale AI infrastructure. However, implementation still requires appropriate skills, governance, cyber security, and human supervision.

4 RISKS AND CHALLENGES

4.1 Algorithmic Concentration and Digital Overtourism

One of the most important emerging risks concerns the distribution of destination attention. Mellors (2025) analysed 50 structured ChatGPT travel conversations and found a strong tendency to recommend established tourism hubs and iconic landmarks, while lesser-known alternatives were less prominent unless explicitly requested. Importantly, the study did not measure actual tourist behaviour. Its contribution is therefore evidence about AI-generated travel suggestions, not proof that ChatGPT causes physical over tourism.

Building on this distinction, this review uses the term digital over tourism to describe a potential pre-travel concentration of informational attention. Digital over tourism should not be treated as synonymous with physical over tourism. It is better understood as a mechanism that may influence destination visibility and, under some conditions, contribute to the concentration of future demand. This framing is particularly relevant to Africa because destinations with strong international brands and extensive digital documentation may be easier for AI systems to describe than smaller destinations with limited digital footprints. The proposition remains empirically testable rather than established.

The sustainability implications are therefore two-sided. AI recommendations could reinforce existing concentrations, but they could also deliberately direct tourists toward under-visited attractions when sustainability, carrying capacity, seasonality, and local benefit are incorporated into recommendation design. Future studies should compare AI outputs under identical prompts across iconic and less-visible destinations and assess whether recommendations change when sustainability or community-benefit criteria are explicitly included.

4.2 Trust, Accuracy, Privacy, and Information Quality

Trust is a second major challenge. Seyfi et al. (2025) examine barriers and personality influences in tourists' adoption of GenAI for travel planning and decision-making, highlighting the importance of factors that shape resistance to AI. Recent research also demonstrates that responsible-AI features such as perceived controllability can influence user responses to AI-generated tourism recommendations (Singu et al., 2025). Dong et al. (2026) further show that the quality of AI-generated tourism information varies across platforms, prompting strategies, and question types. This reinforces the idea that GenAI outputs should not automatically be treated as authoritative travel information.

The problem is especially important for tourism because travelers may use AI outputs for consequential decisions involving money, health, safety, transportation, visas, or culturally sensitive experiences. Hallucinated attractions, outdated information, fabricated citations, or overconfident answers can create both consumer harm and reputational damage for destinations. Tourism organizations should therefore treat GenAI as an information-support tool rather than an unquestionable source of truth. Human verification, clearly defined responsibility, and mechanisms for correcting inaccurate destination information are essential.

4.3 Ethical, Cultural, and Environmental Concerns

The rapid generation of tourism content raises ethical questions about authenticity, cultural representation, intellectual property, privacy, and environmental costs. AI-generated destination images can influence how places are imagined before a tourist arrives, meaning that visual GenAI is not simply a production tool but also a destination-image technology (Yu & Meng, 2025). If generated images exaggerate landscapes, omit local communities, or reproduce stereotypes, they may contribute to distorted destination expectations.

Responsible AI therefore requires more than technical accuracy. Tourism organizations should consider whose culture is being represented, whether local communities participate in content decisions, whether generated material is identifiable as such when necessary, and whether AI adoption creates benefits for local enterprises. Ethical governance

is particularly important in African tourism contexts where cultural heritage, wildlife, community-based tourism, and conservation are often central to destination value.

4.4 Dependence on Data and Digital Infrastructure

GenAI performance depends heavily on the availability and quality of digital information. A destination that has few authoritative websites, limited structured data, inconsistent naming, outdated attraction information, or weak multilingual content may be less visible or less accurately represented in AI-mediated travel search. This does not necessarily mean that AI systems intentionally exclude such destinations; rather, unequal digital representation can become an input into unequal visibility.

This issue connects GenAI with the broader digital divide. Mpofu (2024) identifies digital infrastructure, digital financial literacy, cyber security, confidentiality, ethical considerations, and other forms of digital exclusion as important barriers to technology adoption in developing-country tourism. These constraints mean that the benefits of GenAI cannot be separated from the broader capacity of tourism organizations and destinations to participate in digital ecosystems.

5 IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN AND SUB-SAHARAN TOURISM DESTINATIONS

5.1 The Structural Digital and AI Divide

The African context is not technologically uniform. AI readiness differs substantially among Sub-Saharan countries. Malatji (2026), using the 2024 Government AI Readiness Index, reports higher readiness in Mauritius and South Africa than in several other Sub-Saharan countries and emphasizes differences in infrastructure, education, policy support, and AI-development capacity. This evidence is from a preprint rather than a peer-reviewed journal article and should therefore be treated as emerging evidence, but it provides a useful indication of the uneven environment in which AI adoption is taking place.

For tourism, the digital divide operates at several levels. The first concerns access to connectivity and digital infrastructure. The second concerns skills: tourism businesses need employees capable of using, evaluating, and governing AI tools. The third concerns the ability to convert digital access into economic value. A tourism business may have an internet connection and social-media account but still lack the skills or resources to produce reliable, discoverable, and multilingual digital information. These conditions can influence how well destinations participate in AI-mediated information environments.

5.2 Tourism SMEs and Organizational Readiness

Tourism SMEs are especially important because accommodation providers, guides, restaurants, community enterprises, transport operators, and small attractions collectively shape destination experiences. Evidence from South African SMEs indicates that inadequate digital infrastructure, technical skills, financial resources, and resistance to organizational change can constrain AI adoption, consistent with the Technology Organization Environment (TOE) perspective (Chasaya & Ayandibu, 2025). Evidence from South African SMEs indicates that inadequate digital infrastructure, technical skills, financial resources, and resistance to organizational change can constrain AI adoption, consistent with the Technology Organization–Environment (TOE) perspective (Chasaya & Ayandibu, 2025). Mpofu (2024) similarly highlights the double-edged nature of advanced technologies in African tourism, where efficiency and market opportunities coexist with challenges related to the digital divide, digital literacy, cybercrime and fraud, ethical concerns, and exclusion.

The TOE perspective provides a useful organizing lens for the African tourism context. At the technological level, businesses need connectivity, reliable data, interoperable systems, and cyber security. At the organizational level, they need management support, employee skills, financial resources, and routines for checking AI outputs. At the environmental level, they need supportive policies, training ecosystems, digital-payment infrastructure, tourism platforms, and regulatory clarity. This framework suggests that GenAI adoption should not be reduced to an individual user's willingness to experiment with ChatGPT; it is also an organizational and ecosystem issue.

5.3 Destination Visibility as an Emerging Strategic Issue

The most distinctive implication for African destinations concerns visibility. Destination marketing has traditionally relied on websites, search engines, social media, travel agencies, online reviews, and advertising. Conversational AI introduces another layer: tourists can ask an AI system which destinations to visit, what to do, and how to construct an itinerary. This means that destination competitiveness may increasingly depend not only on what information tourism organizations publish, but also on how AI systems retrieve, interpret, and synthesize that information.

This creates an opportunity for African destinations to improve the quality of their digital information ecosystems. Tourism boards and SMEs can strengthen official websites, publish accurate structured information, maintain consistent destination names and descriptions, develop multilingual content, and document community-based and lesser-known attractions. However, the objective should not simply be to “optimize for AI” at the expense of authenticity. The strategic goal should be to make accurate, locally grounded tourism information more available to both human travelers and AI-mediated information systems.

6 RESEARCH AGENDA

Table 1: Proposed research agenda linking GenAI opportunities and risks to African and Sub-Saharan tourism destinations

Research priority	Key question	Suggested method	Contribution
AI representation of African destinations	How do different GenAI systems describe, rank, and recommend African destinations under standardized prompts?	Repeated prompt experiments; content analysis; cross-platform comparison	Evidence on algorithmic visibility and representation
AI visibility and tourism demand	Does increased AI recommendation visibility correspond with changes in search interest, bookings, or visitor concentration?	Longitudinal analysis linking AI outputs with tourism/search/visitor data	Tests the digital-over tourism proposition
GenAI adoption by tourism SMEs	What technological, organizational, and environmental factors shape adoption?	TOE-based surveys and interviews	Context-specific adoption theory
Trust and information quality	How do African and non-African travelers evaluate AI-generated tourism information?	Cross-cultural experiments and surveys	Evidence on trust, accuracy, and cultural differences
Responsible destination AI	How can tourism boards and platforms promote accurate, inclusive, and sustainable recommendations?	Design research, stakeholder workshops, policy analysis	Practical governance framework

Four research priorities are especially important. First, researchers should systematically audit how major GenAI systems represent African destinations. Such studies should use standardized prompts, multiple models, repeated trials, and transparent coding procedures. Second, researchers should examine whether AI-mediated visibility is associated with real tourism outcomes. This would move the literature beyond analysis of recommendations toward evidence about search behaviour, bookings, visitation, and spatial concentration. Third, GenAI adoption among African tourism SMEs should be studied using organizational frameworks such as TOE, rather than assuming that access to consumer AI tools automatically translates into business adoption. Fourth, cross-cultural research should test whether trust, perceived risk, and willingness to use AI-generated travel information differ between African and non-African tourists.

A fifth priority concerns responsible destination representation. Future work should examine whether AI systems can be designed to provide balanced recommendations that account for carrying capacity, seasonality, local economic benefits, cultural sensitivity, and conservation. This is particularly important because a system that merely maximizes clicks or predicted popularity may unintentionally reproduce concentration, whereas a system designed around sustainable tourism objectives could potentially diversify attention.

7 DISCUSSION

The synthesis suggests that the central issue is not whether GenAI is beneficial or harmful to tourism. Its effects are conditional. The same technology that lowers search costs can also amplify dominant tourism narratives; the same personalization that improves convenience can narrow exposure to alternatives; and the same content-generation capability that helps a small tourism business communicate internationally can also produce inaccurate or culturally inappropriate material. This duality is consistent with recent tourism reviews that call for greater attention to both positive and negative consumer outcomes (Zhang et al., 2026).

The African context makes these tensions more consequential because technological opportunity is embedded within uneven infrastructure, skills, organizational resources, and digital representation. Consequently, the strategic question for African destinations should not simply be how quickly tourism organizations can adopt GenAI. A more appropriate question is how destinations can participate in AI-mediated tourism without reproducing existing inequalities in visibility, ownership, cultural representation, and economic benefit.

The review therefore proposes a shift from an adoption-only perspective to a destination-visibility perspective. Adoption research asks whether tourists and businesses will use GenAI. A destination-visibility perspective asks what happens after they use it: which destinations become visible, which attractions are recommended, whose stories are represented, and whether those recommendations support sustainable and inclusive tourism. This perspective offers a potentially useful bridge between tourism technology research, destination marketing, responsible AI, and African tourism development.

Limitations

This review has several limitations. First, it is a structured narrative review rather than a fully systematic review; therefore, it does not claim exhaustive coverage of all publications. Second, the literature is developing rapidly, so findings may change as new empirical studies and AI platforms emerge. Third, some evidence concerning Africa and AI readiness is drawn from a 2026 preprint and should be interpreted cautiously until further peer-reviewed evidence becomes available. Fourth, industry and policy sources can provide useful current information but are not equivalent to peer-reviewed research. Finally, the concept of digital over tourism proposed here is primarily conceptual: existing evidence demonstrates patterns in AI recommendations, but more research is needed before any causal relationship between AI recommendations and physical tourist flows can be established.

8 CONCLUSION

Generative AI is becoming an important layer in tourism information search, travel planning, destination marketing, and service delivery. Recent scholarship demonstrates substantial opportunities for personalization, conversational assistance, content generation, and operational efficiency, while also identifying concerns involving trust, inaccurate information, privacy, ethical design, and the concentration of destination attention. The emerging evidence on AI-generated travel recommendations is particularly important because it suggests that conversational systems can reproduce established tourism imaginaries, although current research does not yet establish that such recommendations cause physical over tourism.

For African and Sub-Saharan tourism destinations, GenAI presents a dual opportunity and challenge. It may lower the cost of reaching international travelers and enable smaller tourism organizations to produce and distribute content more efficiently. At the same time, uneven digital infrastructure, skills, organizational capacity, and online representation may limit the ability of some destinations to benefit from AI-mediated discovery. The review therefore identifies algorithmic under-representation as a plausible but unproven risk that deserves empirical investigation.

The principal implication is that destination competitiveness in the GenAI era may depend increasingly on the quality, accuracy, diversity, and accessibility of digital tourism information. African tourism stakeholders should therefore invest not only in AI tools but also in digital infrastructure, workforce skills, reliable destination data, local content, and responsible governance. Future research should test how GenAI systems represent African destinations, whether AI-mediated visibility affects actual tourism demand, how tourism SMEs adopt GenAI, and how responsible recommendation systems can support more inclusive and sustainable destination development.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

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