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RESEARCH LETTER

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ChatGPT and the tourist trail: pathway to overtourism or sustainable travel?

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ABSTRACT

This research letter presents a microstudy investigating how ChatGPT's travel recommendations may influence tourism flows. Drawing on a qualitative content analysis of 50 structured conversations, the analysis examines whether the model reinforces dominant travel patterns or brings visibility to lesser-known, sustainable, or community-based destinations. It identifies a strong tendency to prioritise iconic landmarks and high-density tourist hubs, with alternative destinations appearing less frequently and typically only when explicitly prompted. While the study does not assess real-world user behaviour, it offers early insight into how AI-generated suggestions may mirror and perpetuate established tourism imaginaries. These patterns prompt reflection on the role of conversational AI in shaping travel interest and attention. The study highlights opportunities for more intentional platform design that supports sustainability goals and more balanced tourism flows.

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Artificial intelligence; ChatGPT; overtourism; sustainable tourism; tourism flows

Background

Artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping travel planning, raising questions about its role in intensifying overtourism. Overtourism occurs when visitor numbers exceed a destination's capacity, placing pressure on infrastructure, inflating living costs, and damaging cultural and natural heritage. Urban centres like Venice, Barcelona, and Kyoto, as well as natural and rural sites such as Hallstatt, Maya Bay, and Iceland's Golden Circle, have all experienced these pressures to varying degrees (Goodwin, 2017; Milano et al., 2024). While some destinations have faced these challenges for years, others are now encountering them for the first time. Historically, overtourism has been driven by budget airlines, aggressive marketing, and short-term rentals (Capocchi et al., 2019; Dodds & Butler, 2019). More recently, digital platforms have become powerful in shaping tourist flows. Among them, ChatGPT has become a focal point in the growing use of AI for travel planning, offering users instant recommendations, tailored itineraries, and attraction suggestions (Carvalho & Ivanov, 2024). Although such tools offer clear benefits, concerns are growing that AI may reinforce existing patterns by directing users to already saturated destinations. Despite this, no empirical research (as far as can be determined from available sources) to date has examined how conversational AI influences travel choices or contributes to tourism concentration (Gössling & Mei, 2025).

In response to this gap, this research letter presents a microstudy: a focused, small-scale preliminary inquiry designed to generate rapid insights into an emerging issue and guide future research. It

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examines the types of destinations recommended by ChatGPT in structured conversations, using a thematically structured series of prompts designed to explore patterns related to tourism flows and sustainability. Rather than analysing user behaviour per se, the study focuses on the content of ChatGPT's travel suggestions to assess their potential influence. It considers whether the platform reinforces dominant travel patterns by prioritising well-known tourist hubs or whether it also promotes lesser-known, sustainable, or community-based alternatives. The study is guided by the question: To what extent do ChatGPT's travel recommendations favour mainstream destinations over those aligned with sustainable or community-oriented tourism?

Methods

A qualitative content analysis was carried out to explore the kinds of travel patterns ChatGPT-generated prompts may encourage. The study used ChatGPT version 4.0 and examined 50 conversations intended to evaluate the types of destinations it recommends. Conversations were grouped around three thematic areas: global exploration, sustainable travel, and overtourism avoidance. These themes were selected to assess both the model's general recommendation tendencies and its responsiveness to prompts reflecting alternative travel priorities. Each interaction began with broad questions such as 'What are some interesting travel destinations you would recommend?', followed by more specific prompts including 'What are some eco-friendly travel options for visiting Southeast Asia?' and 'Can you suggest lesser-known places that are often overlooked by tourists?'. The questions were not designed to be neutral but to reflect the range of ways users might realistically frame travel queries. All of them are, in different ways, leading, whether by implying interest in iconic sites or by explicitly highlighting sustainability or crowd avoidance. Their inclusion allowed the study to examine how ChatGPT responds to varied user intentions and to compare its default suggestions with those shaped by more purposeful or value-laden prompts.

To ensure consistency and minimise bias, all conversations were conducted in incognito mode, preventing responses from being influenced by personalised data or browsing history. This allowed for controlled comparison across interactions, though it neither replicates nor reflects typical user conditions, where prior context may shape responses. Interactions took place over a four-week period to capture potential variability in ChatGPT's outputs. While responses are largely deterministic, minor fluctuations may occur due to periodic model updates or inherent randomness. A total of 50 conversations were analysed, each involving approximately 20–25 prompts. Sessions lasted between 5 and 15 min, depending on the complexity of the dialogue and depth of follow-up questions. Conversations were considered complete when all thematic areas were covered and the model no longer produced novel or substantively different recommendations. Responses were systematically documented and categorised according to three criteria: destination type (high-density, emerging, or peripheral), recommendation type (mainstream or lesser-known), and inclusion of sustainable travel options. The analysis focused on three dimensions: destination types, prompt sensitivity, and treatment of sustainability. These assessed whether ChatGPT prioritised major tourist hubs or included more varied suggestions, responded flexibly to different queries, and meaningfully engaged with sustainability or overtourism. This provided a consistent framework for examining the kinds of travel behaviours the model may support or reproduce.

Analysis

The analysis of ChatGPT's travel recommendations reveals a marked preference for well-established tourist hubs, though references to emerging and peripheral destinations also occur. High-density locations such as Paris, Rome, and New York are frequently cited, often alongside iconic landmarks like the Eiffel Tower, the Colosseum, and Times Square. This pattern reflects the model's alignment with dominant tourism patterns and its reliance on widely recognisable points of interest. When asked general questions such as 'What are some interesting travel destinations you would

recommend?', ChatGPT typically suggests globally familiar cities and attractions. While 'interesting' is subjective, such answers appear designed to match common user expectations and serve as safe, conventional starting points. In the absence of specific criteria, the model tends to reproduce popular locations already circulating across travel media, guidebooks, and mainstream digital content. Nonetheless, a degree of variation emerges when the prompt includes alternative framings. Cities such as Tbilisi, Medellín, and Porto appear with moderate frequency, especially when users include phrases like 'off the beaten path' or 'less touristy'. These cities are often described in terms of cultural vibrancy, affordability, or urban regeneration. More peripheral destinations, including rural villages or lesser-known islands, are rarely featured but tend to be framed through themes of tranquillity, authenticity, or remoteness. Despite these occasional departures, major tourist centres remain dominant in ChatGPT's travel suggestions.

ChatGPT's recommendation logic is shaped primarily by the structure, tone, and specificity of user prompts. Broad or open-ended queries tend to elicit conventional results, while more targeted or imaginative prompts are more likely to generate diverse or unconventional suggestions. This responsiveness reveals that the model does not operate with a fixed internal hierarchy of destinations, but instead mirrors the assumptions embedded in the question. For instance, when prompted to suggest 'hidden gems in Southeast Asia', ChatGPT recommended the village of Pai in Northern Thailand, describing it as 'a serene escape from bustling city life, with lush landscapes and a vibrant local community'. The inclusion of lesser-known sites in this case illustrates the model's ability to respond to alternative travel preferences, provided these are clearly signalled. However, the model shows little initiative in broadening the frame unless directed to do so. It does not typically challenge the underlying logic of a prompt or introduce contrastive options unless explicitly invited. This limits its ability to diversify travel imaginaries on its own terms. While ChatGPT can accommodate a wider range of interests, it relies heavily on the user to set the parameters of diversity, novelty, or cultural depth. The variation in its output is less a sign of intentional curation than a reflection of user-driven input.

This prompt-dependent pattern is particularly evident in ChatGPT's treatment of sustainability. The model is capable of referencing concepts such as eco-lodges, low-impact transport, and community-based tourism, but these are rarely featured unless sustainability is clearly foregrounded in the prompt. For example, when asked about sustainable travel in the Mediterranean, ChatGPT often suggests popular destinations like Santorini or Dubrovnik, despite both being well-known cases of overtourism. More sustainable alternatives, such as agritourism in rural Spain or community tourism in southern Albania, typically appear only when explicitly requested. This reflects a reactive approach, where responsible tourism appears as an optional layer rather than a guiding principle. Moreover, the model's engagement with sustainability often remains superficial. While it can reproduce familiar terminology associated with eco-conscious travel, its suggestions are not always grounded in realistic, location-specific information or critical consideration of trade-offs. There is also an unresolved tension around the role the model should play. Should it attempt to influence user choices in favour of more sustainable behaviours, or simply respond neutrally to the request? Recommending alternatives to popular sites might be seen as unwanted intervention, while omitting them may reinforce unsustainable travel patterns. In this sense, ChatGPT's contribution to sustainable tourism remains limited.

Denouement

This microstudy reveals that ChatGPT's travel recommendations predominantly reflect established tourism narratives, favouring iconic landmarks and high-density urban hubs such as Paris, Rome, and New York. These destinations, along with widely recognised landmarks like the Eiffel Tower and Times Square, consistently appear as must-see attractions. In contrast, lesser-known or community-based alternatives, such as rural villages or destinations in Southeast Asia and the Caucasus, surface far less frequently and typically only when prompted with specific terms. This pattern

raises the question of whether ChatGPT simply mirrors prevailing travel interests or contributes to reinforcing them through algorithmic repetition. If such technologies influence travel intentions at scale, their recommendation patterns may exacerbate overtourism while neglecting more sustainable or community-based alternatives. While AI itself cannot be held responsible for such outcomes, those who design and govern these systems can be. Developers and platform custodians have an opportunity to embed more inclusive datasets, design for prompt diversity, and foreground underrepresented locations within certain query types. Although building a culture of sustainable tourism ultimately relies on human decision-making, AI tools like ChatGPT could be more effectively aligned with that goal through transparent design choices, curated partnerships, and input from tourism stakeholders.

Beyond the limitations already discussed, this study faces additional constraints that are typical of microstudies, which prioritise timely, exploratory insights over the extended rigour of large-scale empirical research. The analysis is based on a limited set of 50 conversations, which, while structured and illustrative, cannot capture the full range of possible inputs or user intentions related to travel planning. Likewise, the findings are derived from interactions with ChatGPT rather than real-world user behaviours and reflect the influence of underlying training data that may privilege mainstream destinations. The study also does not account for the broader socio-economic factors that shape tourism decisions, nor the complexity of individual travel motivations. Despite these limitations, the study offers an important starting point for considering how AI recommendation systems might influence tourism flows. The findings suggest that digital platforms such as ChatGPT could be better aligned with sustainability goals through intentional algorithmic design. In doing so, they could help reduce pressure on overvisited destinations and support a shift toward more inclusive and community-oriented tourism models.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Joseph Mellors:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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