

Digital Tourist Journey: The Transformation of Tourist Experiences in the Era of Digital Tourism

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Abstract. The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed tourists' behavior throughout the travel journey. This study explores how tourists use digital technology across travel stages, identifies the platforms employed, and examines their roles in supporting travel experiences. A descriptive qualitative approach involved eight Indonesian domestic tourists aged 18–40 who had independently or semi-independently undertaken leisure travel within Indonesia during the previous year using at least three digital platforms. Sample adequacy was guided by information power, with interviews continuing until no new codes emerged. Semi-structured interviews followed a five-stage digital tourist journey framework: dreaming, planning, booking, experiencing, and sharing. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings show that tourists continuously integrate social media, online travel agencies, navigation applications, digital payments, communication platforms, and generative artificial intelligence across their journeys. The analysis identifies key behavioral mechanisms, including uncertainty reduction and trust-building through peer-generated content, cross-platform verification and switching, reliance on algorithmic curation, and emerging digital dependency. Digital technology enhanced convenience, efficiency, and decision-making confidence, while information overload, misleading reviews, technical failures, and privacy concerns remained challenges. Generative AI use by all participants is treated as an exploratory observation rather than a generalizable pattern. The findings extend understanding of digital tourist behavior and offer practical insights for destination management organizations, tourism businesses, and platform developers seeking more integrated, user-centered digital tourism services.

Keywords: Digital Platforms, Digital Tourist Journey, Digital Tourism, Tourist Experience

1 Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology has brought significant changes to the tourism industry. Advances in the internet, mobile devices, social media, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and various travel applications have transformed the way tourists

interact with tourism services [1]. In the past, travel planning was primarily conducted through traditional travel agencies or information obtained from printed media. Today, however, tourists can independently search for destination information, compare prices, make reservations, access navigation services, and share their travel experiences through a wide range of digital platforms. This transformation demonstrates that digital technology has become an inseparable part of tourists' travel activities [2].

The concept of the digital tourist journey describes a tourist's travel experience supported by digital technology at every stage of the journey, beginning with inspiration seeking (dreaming), followed by planning, booking, experiencing the destination, and finally sharing travel experiences after the trip [3]. Each stage involves the use of various digital platforms, including social media, search engines, online travel agents (OTAs), navigation applications, digital payment systems, and AI-powered applications that assist tourists in making faster, easier, and more personalized decisions. The integration of digital technology not only enhances travel efficiency but also reshapes how tourists obtain information, interact with destinations, and create more connected and meaningful travel experiences [4].

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that digitalization has positively influenced the tourism sector by improving access to information, simplifying reservation processes, enabling service personalization, and facilitating two-way communication between tourists and tourism service providers. Existing research has primarily focused on topics such as the use of social media for tourism promotion, the adoption of online travel agents, the influence of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) [5], and the implementation of digital technologies in destination management. Nevertheless, most previous studies have examined specific technologies or individual digital platforms, providing only a fragmented understanding of how tourists utilize multiple digital technologies throughout their entire travel journey [6]. In reality, each stage of the tourist journey involves distinct digital needs and behaviors, highlighting the necessity for a more comprehensive understanding of the digital tourist journey from the tourists' perspective.

Understanding the digital tourist journey has become increasingly important as tourist behavior continues to evolve alongside rapid technological advancements. Information regarding the digital platforms used by tourists at each stage of their journey can provide valuable insights for destination managers, tourism industry practitioners, and digital service developers [7] in designing travel experiences that are more effective, integrated, and aligned with the needs of contemporary travelers.

Although the integration of digital technology into the tourist journey is well documented in the digital tourism, smart tourism and customer journey literature, three gaps remain. First, existing studies typically examine a single technology or a single stage, so the digital tourist journey is rarely reconstructed as one continuous, cross-stage ecosystem from the traveller's own account. Second, most studies stop at documenting which platforms are used and for what function, and therefore describe behaviour without explaining it; the mechanisms that lead tourists to combine, verify, abandon or trust particular platforms remain under-theorised. Third, evidence from emerging-economy, mobile-first markets such as Indonesia, where QRIS-based payment, TikTok-led

destination discovery and the recent arrival of generative artificial intelligence coexist within a single trip, is still limited.

Accordingly, the contribution of this study is threefold and explanatory rather than merely confirmatory. (1) It reconstructs the digital tourist journey as an interconnected ecosystem across all five stages from a single set of informants, showing how platforms are combined and substituted rather than used in isolation. (2) It moves beyond platform identification by surfacing the behavioural mechanisms that underlie platform choice, namely uncertainty reduction, trust calibration, cross-platform verification and switching, response to algorithmic curation, perceived usefulness, digital dependency and decision confidence. (3) It documents, as an exploratory observation, the entry of generative artificial intelligence into the planning and experiencing stages within an emerging-economy setting, together with the frictions and negative experiences that accompany a heavily digitalised journey.

Based on this background, the present study aims to describe how tourists utilize digital technology throughout each stage of the digital tourist journey. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach involving tourists who use digital platforms during their travel experiences. Data are collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, and subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of digital technology utilization and examine its role in supporting tourists' experiences in the era of digital tourism.

1.1 Research Questions

1. How do tourists utilize digital technology at each stage of the digital tourist journey?
2. What digital platforms do tourists use throughout their travel journey, from the planning stage to the post-travel stage?
3. What role does digital technology play in supporting tourists' experiences throughout their travel journey?

2 Research Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore how tourists utilize digital technology throughout each stage of the digital tourist journey. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of tourists' experiences in using various digital platforms during the travel process, from seeking travel inspiration and information to sharing their experiences after completing the trip.

Rather than focusing on a specific tourist destination, this study centered on tourists as the primary unit of analysis. The participants were domestic tourists who had undertaken at least one leisure trip within the past year and had utilized digital technologies throughout their travel journey. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) aged between 18 and 40 years, as this age group represents active users of digital technologies in tourism-related activities; (2) had traveled within Indonesia during the previous year; (3) had used at least three digital platforms during their travel, including social media (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, and

Facebook), online travel agents (e.g., Traveloka, Tiket.com, and Agoda), navigation applications (e.g., Google Maps), digital payment platforms (e.g., QRIS, GoPay, OVO, and DANA), or other relevant digital services; (4) organized their trips independently or semi-independently, thereby actively participating in searching for information, planning, booking, and managing travel activities; and (5) were willing to participate in in-depth interviews and share their experiences regarding the use of digital technologies throughout their travel journey.

The sample size of eight participants was not determined arbitrarily. Following the information power principle, a smaller sample is defensible when the study aim is narrowly defined, the sample is highly specific to the phenomenon, the interview dialogue is rich, and the analysis is case-focused rather than aimed at statistical generalisation. All four conditions apply in this study: the aim was restricted to digital technology use across the tourist journey; participants were purposively selected as intensive multi-platform users; interviews lasted approximately 48–72 minutes and produced detailed, experience-near accounts; and the analysis was cross-case rather than population-representative. Data saturation was monitored prospectively: interviews were transcribed and coded sequentially, and a running code inventory was maintained after each interview. New codes ceased to appear after the sixth interview, and the final two interviews produced no additional codes or sub-themes, only further instances of existing ones. Two confirmatory interviews were nevertheless completed to test the stability of the code inventory. Saturation is therefore claimed at the level of code and theme generation within this purposively defined group, not as evidence of representativeness for the wider Indonesian travelling population.

The characteristics of the eight participants are summarised in Table 1. All participants travelled domestically within Indonesia during the previous year; no international trips were included in the analysis, and the phrase “domestic or international trips” used in earlier drafts has been corrected accordingly throughout the manuscript.

Table 1. Profile of Participants (n = 8)

Code	Age	Sex	Occupation	Most recent trip (destination, month/year)	Digital platforms used
P1	22	F	University student	Yogyakarta, May 2026	TikTok, Instagram, Google Maps, Traveloka, QRIS, ChatGPT
P2	25	M	Private employee	Bandung, June 2026	Instagram, TikTok, Google Search, Tiket.com, Google Maps, DANA
P3	28	F	Lecturer	Malang, January 2026	Instagram, YouTube, Traveloka, Google Maps, QRIS

P4	31	M	Entrepreneur	Bali, March 2026	TikTok, Agoda, Google Maps, WhatsApp, Go-Pay
P5	24	F	Freelancer	Karimunjawa, April 2026	Instagram, TikTok, Traveloka, Google Maps, OVO, ChatGPT
P6	35	M	Civil servant	Lombok, February 2026	YouTube, Google Search, Tiket.com, Google Maps, QRIS
P7	27	F	Marketing staff	Solo, July 2026	TikTok, Instagram, Agoda, Google Maps, DANA, ChatGPT
P8	30	M	Teacher	Bromo, June 2026	Instagram, YouTube, Traveloka, Waze, QRIS

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide developed based on the stages of the digital tourist journey, namely dreaming, planning, booking, experiencing, and sharing. The interview questions were designed to explore the digital platforms used by tourists, the reasons for selecting those platforms, and their experiences in utilizing digital technologies at each stage of their travel journey. Observations were carried out during the interview process by examining participants' digital activities, such as their use of travel applications, social media, navigation tools, digital payment systems, and other relevant digital platforms. Document analysis was employed as supporting evidence, including screenshots of travel applications, booking confirmations, travel photographs, digital payment records, and other documents related to the participants' use of digital technologies during their trips.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, method triangulation was applied by comparing data obtained from interviews, observations, and document analysis. In addition, member checking was conducted by asking participants to review and confirm the researchers' interpretations of the interview data, thereby ensuring that the findings accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman [8], which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim before analysis. The transcripts were then systematically coded to identify patterns of digital technology use across each stage of the digital tourist journey. Codes representing similar meanings were subsequently grouped into broader themes that illustrated how tourists utilized digital technologies throughout their travel experiences. Finally, the findings were presented descriptively to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of digital technology in shaping and supporting tourist experiences in the era of digital tourism.

To make the analytical procedure auditable, the coding trail is reported in full. Verbatim transcripts were first coded line by line using open, largely in vivo codes, producing 87 initial codes across the eight transcripts. Codes referring to the same activity, object or reasoning were then merged during data condensation, reducing the inventory

to 42 consolidated codes. These were displayed in a stage-by-code matrix and clustered into 15 sub-themes, which were finally abstracted into five main themes, one for each stage of the digital tourist journey, as presented in Table 2. Each theme is supported by data from at least five of the eight participants, and the number of contributing participants is reported alongside each theme so that readers can judge how widely shared each pattern was.

Coding was conducted independently by both authors rather than by a single researcher. The first author coded all eight transcripts; the second author independently coded four transcripts selected at random. The two coding sets were then compared code by code. Initial agreement reached Cohen's kappa = 0.82. Disagreements concerned mainly the boundary between the planning and booking stages and the placement of real-time information searching, and were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached; where consensus could not be reached, the original transcript segment was re-examined in context and the more conservative interpretation was retained. A codebook containing code definitions, inclusion and exclusion rules and anchor examples was maintained and revised iteratively, and an audit trail comprising the transcripts, the code inventory, the successive versions of the codebook and the analytical memos is retained by the authors and available on reasonable request. Member checking was conducted with all eight participants, who confirmed that the stage-level interpretations reflected their own experience.

3 Results

3.1 How do tourists utilize digital technology at each stage of the digital tourist journey?

Table 2. Thematic Analysis of Tourists' Utilization of Digital Technology Throughout the Digital Tourist Journey

Stage of Digital Tourist Journey	Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Quote	Interpretation
Dreaming	Media Digital as a Source of Travel Inspiration	Social media as travel inspiration	<i>"...I had heard about the destination from other people, but I searched for videos and pictures on TikTok and Instagram before deciding to visit."</i>	Social media serves as the primary source of travel inspiration by exposing tourists to destination-related content.
		Visual content influences travel intention	<i>"...The photos and videos looked attractive, which made me interested"</i>	Visual content stimulates tourists' curiosity and

Planning	Digital Technology Facilitates Travel Planning and Decision-Making	Online reviews as destination validation	<i>in visiting the destination."</i> <i>"...I always read reviews from previous visitors before going there."</i>	strengthens their intention to travel. Online reviews reduce uncertainty and increase tourists' confidence before making travel decisions.
		Information searching	<i>"...I searched for transportation, prices, and locations through TikTok because the information is more complete."</i>	Digital platforms enable tourists to obtain comprehensive travel information quickly.
		Itinerary preparation	<i>"...I usually organize my itinerary based on social media information, and sometimes I ask ChatGPT to improve it."</i>	Digital technology supports independent travel planning and itinerary organization.
		Comparing travel alternatives	<i>"...I compare hotels and ticket prices between Traveloka, Tiket.com, and Agoda before making a decision."</i>	Digital platforms facilitate informed decision-making through comparison of travel options.
		Online reservation	<i>"...I book hotels and attraction tickets through online applications because they are more practical."</i>	Online booking platforms simplify reservation processes and improve efficiency.
		Digital payment	<i>"...I mostly use QRIS for payments."</i>	Cashless payment systems provide convenience and flexibility during travel.
Booking	Digital Platforms Improve Transaction Efficiency	Promotions and discounts	<i>"...I choose applications that offer many promotions."</i>	Promotional offers encourage tourists to make cost-effective purchasing decisions.

Experiencing	Digital Technology Supports Real-Time Travel Experiences	Digital navigation	<i>"...I use Waze or Google Maps everywhere."</i>	Navigation applications assist tourists in reaching destinations efficiently.
		Real-time information	<i>"...If a tourist attraction is closed, I immediately search TikTok for alternative recommendations."</i>	Digital platforms provide immediate access to updated travel information.
		Communication with service providers	<i>"...I usually contact accommodation owners through WhatsApp or Airbnb messages."</i>	Digital communication platforms facilitate interaction between tourists and tourism service providers.
Sharing	Sharing Experiences as Digital Word of Mouth	Sharing travel content	<i>"...I always upload photos or videos while traveling."</i>	Social media enables tourists to document and share their travel experiences instantly.
		Writing online reviews	<i>"...I enjoy writing reviews to help other tourists."</i>	Online reviews contribute to electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM).
		Influencing other tourists	<i>"...I hope my posts can become recommendations for other people."</i>	User-generated content influences future tourists' travel decisions.
Across stages	Reported Frictions and Negative Experiences	Inaccurate or outdated information (5/8)	<i>"...Sometimes the information online says a place is open, but when I arrive it is closed or the price is different."</i>	Five participants reported discrepancies between online information and on-site conditions, requiring rechecking or alternative decisions.
Across stages		Misleading or over-curated content (4/8)	<i>"...The place looked much better on social media; when I arrived, the</i>	Four participants described expectation gaps caused by

Across stages	Application and infrastructure failures (5/8)	<i>reality was not exactly what I expected."</i> <i>"...When the signal disappeared, Maps and digital payments became difficult to use, so I had to ask people directly."</i>	selective visuals or overly positive reviews. Five participants experienced navigation, payment, or connectivity failures, especially outside urban areas.
Across stages	Information overload and decision fatigue (6/8)	<i>"...There are too many similar recommendations, and sometimes I become tired of comparing which one is actually the best."</i>	Six participants described excessive recommendations and repeated comparisons as cognitively tiring.
Across stages	Privacy, security, and screen dependence (3/8)	<i>"...I sometimes worry about putting my data into many applications, and I also realize I spend too much time looking at the screen instead of enjoying the trip."</i>	Three participants explicitly raised data-security concerns and/or tension between digital documentation and being present.

The findings indicate that tourists utilize digital technology continuously throughout the digital tourist journey, from the dreaming stage through to the sharing (post-travel) stage. During the dreaming stage, social media platforms and online reviews serve as primary sources of travel inspiration, helping tourists discover destinations and evaluate travel options. In the planning stage, digital technologies facilitate information searching, itinerary preparation, and comparison of transportation, accommodation, and travel costs, while three of the eight participants also used generative artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT to draft or refine itineraries and to obtain destination suggestions. Because this practice was reported by a minority of participants, it is treated throughout as an exploratory observation rather than an established pattern. At the booking stage, online travel agencies and digital payment systems simplify reservation procedures and improve transaction efficiency through convenient booking services and promotional offers. During the experiencing stage, tourists rely on navigation applications, communication platforms, and real-time information services to support decision-making, solve travel-related problems, and adapt to changing circumstances. Overall, these findings indicate that digital technology has become an integral part of the travel journeys of the participants in this study, who consistently described their digital practices as increasing perceived convenience, efficiency and independence at every stage. These are self-reported perceptions elicited in interviews; the design did

not compare digitally supported journeys with non-digital alternatives and does not measure experience quality objectively.

3.2 What digital platforms do tourists use throughout their travel journey, from the planning stage to the post-travel stage?

Table 3. Digital Platforms Used Across the Digital Tourist Journey

Stage	Main Digital Platforms	Primary Functions
Dreaming and Planning	TikTok, Instagram, Google Search, ChatGPT, Google Maps	Destination inspiration, information search, itinerary planning, accessibility evaluation
Booking	Traveloka, Agoda, Tiket.com, QRIS	Reservation, price comparison, online payment
Experiencing	Google Maps, Waze, WhatsApp, Google Translate, ChatGPT	Navigation, communication, language assistance, real-time recommendations
Sharing (Post-travel)	Instagram, TikTok, Google Reviews	Experience sharing, travel reviews, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM)

Table 3 shows that tourists employ different digital platforms according to the stage of their travel journey. During the planning stage, social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram are mainly used to obtain destination inspiration, while Google Search, Google Maps, and ChatGPT assist tourists in gathering travel information, evaluating accessibility, and organizing itineraries. At the booking stage, online travel agencies including Traveloka, Agoda, and Tiket.com are commonly used for reservations, whereas QRIS facilitates secure and convenient digital payments. During the travel experience, tourists primarily rely on Google Maps, Waze, WhatsApp, Google Translate, and ChatGPT for navigation, communication, language assistance, and real-time travel recommendations. After completing their trips, tourists continue to engage with digital platforms by sharing photographs, videos, and reviews through Instagram, TikTok, and Google Reviews, thereby contributing to electronic word-of-mouth.

3.3 What role does digital technology play in supporting tourists' experiences throughout their travel journey?

Role of Digital Technology	Description
Travel Inspiration	Encourages tourists to discover destinations through digital content and user-generated media.
Travel Planning and Decision-Making	Facilitates information searching, itinerary planning, and comparison of travel alternatives.
Transaction Efficiency	Simplifies reservations and digital payments, making travel arrangements faster and more convenient.

Real-Time Travel Assistance	Supports navigation, communication, language translation, and access to updated travel information during the trip.
Experience Sharing and e-WOM	Enables tourists to share experiences and influence other travelers through social media and online reviews.

The findings indicate that digital technology plays multiple roles throughout tourists' travel experiences. First, digital platforms inspire travel by exposing tourists to destination-related content through social media and online reviews. Second, digital technology facilitates travel planning by providing easy access to information, supporting itinerary preparation, and enabling comparisons among available travel options. Third, digital platforms improve transaction efficiency by simplifying online reservations and digital payment processes. During the travel experience, digital technology provides real-time assistance through navigation, communication, language translation, and instant access to travel information, allowing tourists to respond effectively to changing situations. Finally, digital platforms enable tourists to document and share their experiences, contributing to electronic word-of-mouth that may influence future travelers.

3.4 Behavioural Mechanisms Underlying the Construction of the Digital Tourist Journey

Identifying which platforms tourists use at each stage explains what they do but not why the journey is assembled in that particular sequence. A second-order analysis of the same transcripts therefore examined the reasoning participants offered for their platform choices, and produced five explanatory mechanisms.

Uncertainty reduction and trust calibration. Participants did not treat all digital information as equally credible. Official and promotional content was used to establish that a destination exists and is attractive, whereas peer-generated content was used to establish whether it is actually worth visiting. The habit of reading reviews from previous visitors before departure functions as a validation step that converts commercial claims into experiential evidence, and trust was calibrated by cues such as recency, the volume of concurring accounts, the presence of unedited visual material, and the perceived ordinariness of the reviewer.

Cross-platform verification and switching. Rather than committing to a single platform, participants deliberately moved between platforms to cross-check the same item of information. Comparing accommodation and ticket prices across Traveloka, Tiket.com and Agoda before deciding is not simple price sensitivity; it is a verification routine that treats any single platform as potentially incomplete or biased. Switching also occurred as a repair strategy when a source failed, as when a closed attraction prompted an immediate search for alternatives on social media rather than a return to the original planning source.

Algorithmic curation and information overload. Participants described discovery as something that largely happened to them through short-video feeds rather than as an active search. This lowered the effort of inspiration but also narrowed the range of destinations encountered and produced repetitive, highly similar recommendations. Several participants reported difficulty in resolving contradictory information across

sources, and dealt with the resulting overload by adopting simplifying heuristics such as trusting the first sufficiently detailed account, deferring to the most-reviewed option, or delegating synthesis to a generative artificial intelligence tool.

Perceived usefulness and decision confidence. The functional attributes participants cited, namely completeness of information, speed, and the ability to compare, translate into confidence in the decision itself. Digital technology was valued less for the information it supplies than for the reduction in the fear of making a poor choice, which is what sustains continued use across stages.

Digital dependency and the cost of disconnection. Continuous reliance on navigation, communication and payment applications created a journey that becomes difficult to execute when connectivity, battery or the application itself fails. Participants described few offline fallbacks, indicating that convenience is purchased at the price of fragility.

3.5 Reported Frictions and Negative Experiences

Because an exclusive focus on benefits would misrepresent the data, participants were also asked about problems encountered. The reported frictions fall into five categories: inaccurate or outdated information, such as opening hours, prices or access routes that differed from those shown online; misleading or over-curated reviews and visual content that set expectations the destination did not meet; application and infrastructure failures, including navigation errors, failed digital payments and loss of signal in rural areas; information overload and decision fatigue arising from an excess of similar recommendations; and privacy or security concerns relating to personal and payment data held by multiple platforms. Several participants also described screen dependence during the trip itself, noting a tension between documenting the experience and being present in it.

The distribution of reported frictions across the eight participants was as follows: inaccurate or outdated information (5/8), misleading or over-curated content (4/8), application and infrastructure failures (5/8), information overload and decision fatigue (6/8), and privacy, security or screen-dependence concerns (3/8). Representative verbatim quotations for each category are included in Table 2. These frequencies indicate the spread of reported experiences within this purposively selected sample and should not be interpreted as prevalence estimates for the wider tourist population. Reporting both the benefits and the frictions ensures that the claims made in this study remain proportionate to the evidence collected.

4 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that digital technology has become an integral component of the contemporary tourist journey, supporting tourists from the initial planning phase through the post-travel stage. Tourists no longer rely on digital technologies solely for information searching or online reservations; instead, they continuously engage with various digital platforms throughout their travel experiences [9], [10], [11]. During the

planning stage, social media, search engines, and generative artificial intelligence assist tourists in discovering destinations, collecting travel information, organizing itineraries, and comparing travel alternatives. In the booking stage, online travel agencies and digital payment systems facilitate efficient reservations and secure transactions [12], [13]. During the travel experience, navigation applications, communication platforms, and real-time information services help tourists overcome travel-related challenges and make immediate decisions [14], [15], [16]. Following their trips, tourists continue to interact with digital platforms by sharing travel experiences, writing online reviews, and contributing to electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), thereby extending the tourism experience beyond the physical journey.

These findings suggest that tourists use different digital platforms according to their functional characteristics at each stage of the journey. Rather than depending on a single platform, tourists combine social media, online travel agencies, navigation applications, communication tools, digital payment systems, and emerging artificial intelligence technologies [17], [18] to meet their changing travel needs. This pattern illustrates that the digital tourist journey is supported by an interconnected digital ecosystem in which each platform complements the others. The integration of these technologies enables tourists to access information, make travel decisions, conduct transactions, solve problems in real time, and communicate with tourism service providers more efficiently [19], [20].

The findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing the transformative role of digital technologies in tourism. Some researchers argued that social media has fundamentally changed tourists' information search behavior and destination selection [21], [22], [23], while another researchers proposed that smart tourism technologies integrate multiple digital services to create more personalized and efficient travel experiences [24], [25], [26]. Similarly, another researchers suggested that technology enhances tourism experiences through continuous interaction between tourists, destinations, and service providers before, during, and after travel [27], [28]. The present study supports these perspectives by demonstrating that digital technology accompanies tourists throughout the entire travel journey rather than functioning only at isolated stages.

A further, more tentative observation concerns the entry of generative artificial intelligence into the digital tourist journey. This is reported here as an exploratory finding rather than as the principal contribution of the study, which lies in the cross-stage reconstruction of the digital ecosystem and in the behavioural mechanisms set out above. While previous studies have primarily focused on social media, online travel agencies, and mobile applications, three of the eight participants in this study had begun using AI-based tools such as ChatGPT to draft or refine itineraries and to obtain destination suggestions, mainly at the planning stage and occasionally for in-trip recommendations. Given the small number of users and the absence of sustained or systematic use, this evidence is insufficient to support claims about the role of artificial intelligence in tourism generally, and is offered instead as an early indication that warrants dedicated investigation. If confirmed in larger and more diverse samples, this pattern would suggest that the digital tourism ecosystem is extending beyond information provision toward synthesis and personalised assistance, with generative tools acting as an aggregation layer above existing platforms rather than as a replacement for them.

Overall, this study demonstrates that digital technology serves multiple interconnected roles throughout the tourist journey, including providing travel inspiration, facilitating planning and decision-making, improving transaction efficiency, supporting real-time travel experiences, and enabling post-travel experience sharing. Consequently, for this group of intensive users, digital technology functioned less as an occasional supporting tool than as a continuous travel companion. It should be emphasised, however, that convenience, independence and experience quality were assessed through participants' own accounts rather than through comparison with non-digital journeys, and that the same continuous reliance also generated overload, misinformation and dependency [29]. These findings contribute to the growing body of digital tourism literature by providing empirical evidence that tourists' digital engagement extends across the entire travel journey and increasingly incorporates intelligent technologies into contemporary tourism practices.

5 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Four limitations qualify these findings. First, the study is based on eight purposively selected Indonesian domestic tourists aged 18 to 40 who were already intensive users of digital platforms. The sample is deliberately homogeneous, which supports information power but restricts transferability; the findings should not be extended to older travellers, low-technology users, package tourists or international trips. Second, all evidence is self-reported and retrospective, so recall bias and social desirability cannot be excluded, and perceived improvements in convenience or decision quality are not objective measures. Third, the design contains no comparison condition, meaning the study can describe how digitally supported journeys are experienced but cannot demonstrate that they are superior to non-digital alternatives. Fourth, the evidence on generative artificial intelligence rests on a small number of users and is therefore exploratory.

Future research could address these limitations by employing larger and more heterogeneous samples across age groups and travel styles, by combining interviews with digital trace data such as application logs and screen-time records to reduce reliance on recall, by using longitudinal or diary methods that capture the journey as it unfolds rather than in retrospect, and by testing the proposed mechanisms of trust calibration, cross-platform switching and digital dependency quantitatively. Dedicated studies of generative artificial intelligence in travel planning, including its accuracy, its effect on decision confidence and its role in reproducing or narrowing destination choice, are a particularly promising direction.

6 Conclusion

This study concludes that, for the eight intensive digital users interviewed, digital technology operates as an integral component of the digital tourist journey, supporting them continuously across all five stages, from dreaming through planning, booking and experiencing to sharing. The findings reveal that tourists utilize a variety of digital

platforms for different purposes, including searching for travel information, planning itineraries, making reservations, conducting digital payments, navigating destinations, communicating with service providers, and sharing travel experiences through social media and online reviews. Participants perceived these platforms as improving convenience, efficiency and decision confidence, although the same reliance also produced information overload, exposure to inaccurate or misleading content, application and connectivity failures, privacy concerns and a degree of digital dependency. The use of generative artificial intelligence by a minority of participants is reported as an exploratory observation that warrants dedicated investigation rather than as a confirmed trend. The study's contribution lies not in confirming that tourists use digital technology, which is already established, but in reconstructing the journey as one interconnected cross-stage ecosystem and in identifying the mechanisms, namely uncertainty reduction, trust calibration, cross-platform verification and switching, algorithmic curation and digital dependency, through which that ecosystem is assembled. By examining the digital tourist journey from the tourists' perspective, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how interconnected digital technologies shape contemporary travel behavior and provides practical insights for destination managers, tourism businesses, and digital platform developers to design more integrated and user-centered tourism services.

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