

An Exploratory Study on the Use of Artificial Intelligence for Tourism Marketing in the Midwest

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Abstract

Rural tourism plays a significant role in fostering economic development, preserving cultural heritage and promoting sustainable practices. It creates employment opportunities for local residents, both directly in the tourism sector and indirectly in supporting industries. Marketing tourism in rural communities requires a strategic approach that highlights the unique aspects of the area, promotes sustainable practices, and engages potential visitors. A strong understanding of marketing tools and techniques are critical in the usage of marketing (Wijijayanti et al., 2020). This study provides insight into the role that artificial intelligence (AI) currently plays in marketing efforts for tourism organizations in rural communities in the Midwest. It offers strategies of how the industry can assist businesses with the use of AI. Keywords: artificial intelligence; AI; rural tourism; marketing

Introduction

This study provides insight into the role that artificial intelligence (AI) currently plays in marketing efforts for tourism organizations in rural communities in the Midwest. It offers strategies of how the industry can assist tourism businesses with the use of AI.

Literature Review: Numerous studies have dove into the use of AI in tourism marketing and the benefits that come with it (Kishan et al., 2024; Bulchand-Gidumal et al., 2023; Hsu et al., 2022). Few studies, however, have focused on the use of AI in rural tourism marketing. Dan Xie (2022), says, “rural tourism marketing strategy based on artificial intelligence and big data can reasonably and efficiently integrate tourism resources, accurately find tourist needs, and provide tourists with the best and most suitable tourism services” (Xie, 2022). Overall, in the literature for Midwest tourism, there is not evidence that businesses have adapted the use of AI to enhance marketing efforts as it has been in other areas.

Methods

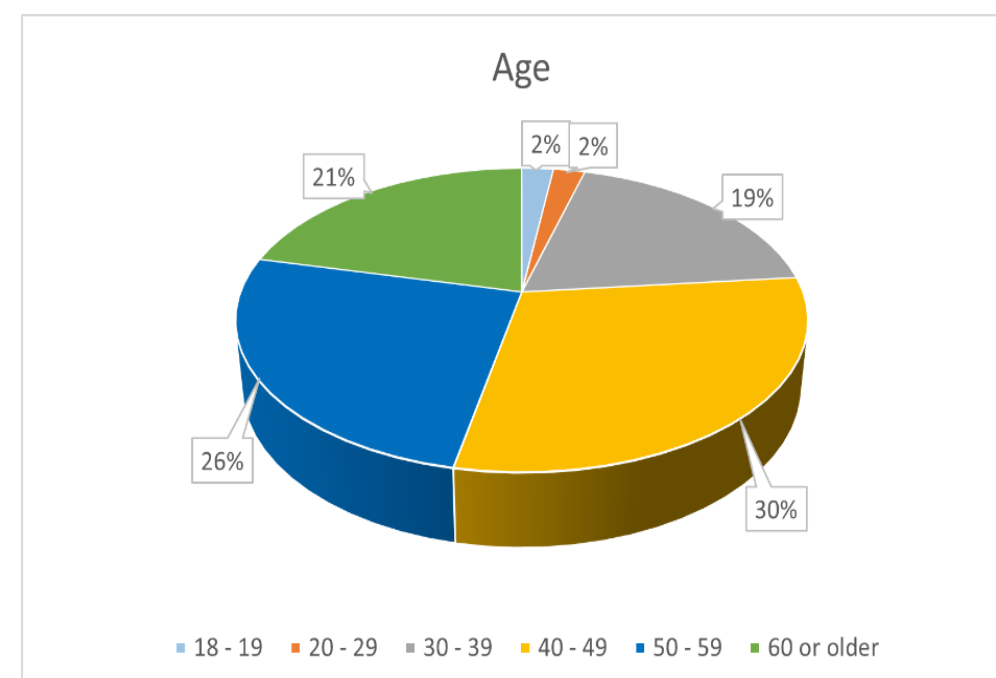
An online survey was designed as our primary method. The research instrument for the study was distributed via the Internet to the tourism professionals' membership contact information. The data is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. The population for this study was leaders of tourism businesses in a midwestern state who represent the travel industry from various regions of the state and embodied communities of all sizes. Total population was 165 tourism professionals and business owners that are members of a tourism industry trade association. The survey received a 30% response rate with a sample size of 49 tourism leaders. The questionnaire was designed to gain an accurate understanding of the current use of AI, knowledge of AI, and resources needed for those interested in wanting to implement AI usage for marketing efforts. Validity was ensured through a pre-testing process.

Analysis

Once we received our survey results, we entered the analysis stage. During this time we read through each response to look for skewed or incomplete data. Upon further filtering and cleaning, we calculated percentage results for each questions. Over two-thirds (67.35%) of respondents have received no training by their organization on AI technology for tourism marketing purposes. Eight respondents (16.33%) identified receiving training and another 16.33% were ‘unsure.’ When asked where respondents seek information about AI in tourism marketing, 34.1% identified ‘online articles’ as the primary source. Other sources of information included industry conferences (22%), peer networks (22%), organizational training (6.1%), and trade magazines (3.7%). Another 12.1% stated they do not seek out information about AI. When asked about whether or not resources are easily available to enhance understanding of AI and its applications 69.6% stated they were ‘unsure’, 23.9% stated ‘yes,’ and another 6.5% state ‘no’ resources available. Despite a lack of organizational training and uncertain availability of resources, 76.1% of respondents felt that it was ‘important’ or ‘very important’ to stay up to date on the latest developments and trends in AI. Another 4.3% stated it was ‘unimportant’ to stay up to date on such technology. Just under two-thirds (63%) of respondents stated their organization does not utilize AI in tourism marketing efforts. Lastly, when asked their perception on the adoption of AI in tourism marketing as compared to other regions 0% of the respondents felt the Midwest was ‘leading’ efforts. On the other hand, 50% felt ‘unsure,’ 33.3% felt the Midwest is ‘lagging behind,’ and another 16.7% felt the Midwest was ‘on par’ with other regions in terms of AI adoption.

Results

Demographics



Population Results of the Survey

Population	#	%
Less than 500	2	4.2%
501 to 4,999	13	27.7%
5,000 to 9,999	6	12.8%
10,000 to 14,999	3	6.4%
15,000 to 19,999	1	2.1%
20,000 to 24,999	4	8.5%
25,000 to 49,999	6	12%
50,000 to 74,999	3	6.4%
75,000 to 99,999	2	4.2%
100,000 or more	7	14.9%

Foundational Challenging Themes of AI From Open-Ended Questions

1. Lack of knowledge and training
2. Concern of authenticity
3. Concern on accuracy of AI
4. Generational Gap in the workplace

Foundational Themes of Strategies for Improvement From Open-Ended Questions

1. Educational webinars or workshops
2. Opportunities to share knowledge
3. Open Mindset on AI

When survey participants were asked if they had any additional comments about their AI usage it revealed that while all of the challenges above exist, it is important to not ignore artificial intelligence, because it is not going anywhere in today's world. Artificial intelligence should be viewed as a tool to assist in tourism marketing. By viewing it as an assistance, many participants found common ground on recommending that AI be used in content idea generation. Instead of copying what AI generates, many industry professionals commented that using these little bits of ideas to spark their own creativity can be beneficial. Lastly, as stated above, almost every professional surveyed mentioned that continuous learning and more standardized base models are needed for artificial intelligence.

AI Usage

Current AI Usage	Number of Responses
Usage of AI for content generation in marketing materials	10
Usage of AI to create blogs and other social media posts	13
Usage of AI in Canva	6
Usage of AI for predictive analytics	4
Usage of Chat GPT for AI content generation	13

Benefits of AI from Respondents

Benefits	#
Improved personalization	12
Enhanced customer experience	15
Increased efficiency	35
Cost savings	25
I do not see any benefits.	6
I do not know enough about AI to understand the benefits.	5

Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into the tourism industry, overall, marks a transformative time that holds immense significance. AI has proven to be invaluable in enhancing various facets of the tourism industry, including marketing efforts. The ability of AI to analyze vast amounts of data, predict trends, and adapt to changing preferences contributes to streamlined operations and improved decision-making processes. Moreover, AI-driven innovations such as chatbots and virtual assistants not only enhance customer service but also contribute to cost savings for businesses. As the tourism industry continues to evolve, embracing and leveraging AI will not only optimize efficiency but also foster a more immersive and satisfying travel experience for tourists. The strategic incorporation of AI will help tourism businesses stay at the forefront of technological advancements and assist in meeting the evolving needs of modern travelers.

Although not surprising, it is interesting to validate that tourism professionals believe AI technology is very important but use it very little. With 63% of the professionals' organizations not using AI, it is evident that there is a large opportunity for the industry to assist professionals with awareness and education about the technologies. An observational correlation shows that since the majority of respondents were forty years or older, then the adoption of technology, such as AI, may prove to be more challenging. The study shows, however, that the professionals do believe understanding AI is very important.

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