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SERVICE ROBOTS OR HUMAN STAFF IN A CROWDED TOURISM ENVIRONMENT?

Service providers in tourism and hospitality are beginning to welcome robots as a customer service option. **Prof Gang Li** and colleagues conducted experimental research to reveal that a destination which is more (vs. less) crowded generally motivates tourists to favour robot-provided services rather than those from human staff.



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SERVICE ROBOTS OR HUMAN STAFF: HOW SOCIAL CROWDING SHAPES TOURIST PREFERENCES

PROF GANG LI

Given the increasing popularity among tourism and hospitality service providers in adopting robots, it is important to explore the factors driving tourists' willingness to accept such new technology. Different from previous research, most of which paid attention to the role of technology such as performance reliability and consumers' individual differences including self-identity, this study focuses on the role of crowding, an environmental factor widely observed in destinations susceptible to over-tourism, in shaping tourists' willingness to adopt service robots. Based on a survey and two experiments, this research demonstrates that tourists are more likely to accept robot-provided

services rather than human services in a more crowded tourism environment. This research is among the first tourism-related attempts to explore the impacts of crowding on individual tourists' service preferences. Moreover, despite numerous studies indicating the negative consequences of crowding, this study demonstrates that crowding can enhance tourists' willingness to adopt service robots. In addition, this study reveals the mechanism behind this effect by investigating the role of tourists' social withdrawal tendency, thus deepening our understanding of tourists' psychological states in crowded destinations.



FURTHER READING:

Hou, Y., K. Zhang and G. Li (2021). Service Robots or Human Staff: How Social Crowding Shapes Tourist Preferences. *Tourism Management*

Link: bit.ly/3h6h2vH

This study has useful implications with respect to operation management and capacity planning of tourism service providers. First, it empirically demonstrates that the employment of service robots in a crowded tourism environment represents a win-win strategy for service providers and tourists. Given consumers' mixed attitudes towards service robots, the findings imply feasible scenarios in which to adopt robots. Second, this research suggests that tourist activities should be well designed to satisfy visitors' need for social distance.