

Digital Storytelling in Experiential Tourism Destination Imaging

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Abstract. *This literature study examines digital storytelling in experience-based tourism destination branding, focusing on narrative construction and its mechanisms in shaping tourist perceptions and decisions. The analysis reveals that effective storytelling construction requires authentic thematic foundations, emotional plot development, and integrated use of human characters, meaningful visuals, and audio elements. Consistency across platforms, audience interactivity, and multi-stakeholder collaboration strengthen the narrative ecosystem. Success is measured by the virtuous cycle between story, visitation, and post-visit narratives shared by tourists. Key elements influencing tourist perceptions include authenticity, emotional resonance, imaginative capacity, narrative structure, source credibility, functional visuality, and temporal urgency. Psychological mechanisms involve identification, narrative transportation, cognitive script formation, social validation, value resonance, expectation shaping, and post-visit memory construction. The study contributes theoretically by extending understanding of digital storytelling mechanisms in destination branding. Practically, it provides a framework for destination managers to design authentic, consistent narratives that build long-term emotional connections with tourists seeking meaningful travel experiences.*

Keywords: *Digital Storytelling; Destination Branding; Experience-Based Tourism; Tourist Perception; Narrative Transportation; Authentic Experience; Visitor Decision-Making*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the global tourism industry has witnessed a fundamental shift in how travelers choose and experience destinations. Contemporary travelers are no longer satisfied with merely visiting famous places and taking photographs. They seek meaning, emotional connection, and experiences that can be remembered for a lifetime. This shift has compelled destination managers to rethink how they position their tourist attractions in the minds of potential visitors. Destinations are no longer sold based on lists of facilities or mere visual beauty, but rather on stories that can be brought to life through visits (Zhiyong, 2022). Stories about local history, community wisdom, or natural uniqueness found nowhere else become primary attractions. In such situations, the ability to communicate these stories effectively becomes the determinant of a destination's success in attracting tourists (Moreira & Sousa, 2024).

Advances in digital technology have opened new pathways for tourist destinations to convey their stories to global audiences (Awaloedin *et al.*, 2024). Good digital literacy can assist individuals in making decisions (Khayru *et al.*, 2025). Social media, interactive websites, online videos, and content sharing platforms enable the dissemination of narratives with unprecedented reach. A remote village in the mountains can now share its beauty and uniqueness with potential tourists on other continents through short video uploads or evocative photographs. Technology also enables richer storytelling through the use of multimedia, animation, or even virtual reality that provides more vivid depictions of what visitors will experience (Ascaniis, 2022). The ease of access and content production means almost all destination managers can tell stories, yet herein lies the new challenge. Not all stories are capable of touching audience hearts, and not all delivery methods are able to build the expected emotional connection.

Digital storytelling emerges as a systematic approach to designing and delivering destination narratives through digital channels (Pachucki, 2025). This approach is not merely about transferring printed brochures to web pages, but rather designing story arcs that engage audiences emotionally. A good story has structure, characters, conflict, and resolution that transport audiences on imaginative journeys. In tourism, audiences are invited to imagine themselves as part of the story, experiencing adventures, feeling the warmth of community welcome, or being inspired by local wisdom. Digital storytelling utilizes various media formats to create

coherent and evocative narrative experiences (Deris *et al.*, 2025). When successful, storytelling not only informs but also inspires potential tourists to realize visits as part of fulfilling their desire for meaningful experiences.

Branding tourist destinations through digital storytelling becomes increasingly relevant as competition among destinations intensifies (Zhang & Ramayah, 2024). Every place possesses natural beauty or cultural heritage, yet not all are able to communicate these in ways that distinguish them from competitors. Authentic stories delivered appropriately can create distinctive brand identities in audience minds. Positive brand image supports customer loyalty (Safira *et al.*, 2025). Bali is not only sold as an island with beautiful beaches, but as a place with spirituality and living artistic culture. Raja Ampat is not only about marine biodiversity, but about adventure exploring a hidden paradise at the eastern tip of Indonesia. Abundant diversity can enhance satisfaction (Margareta & Darmawan, 2025). These stories shape ingrained perceptions and influence tourist decisions in choosing destinations. Strong branding through stories also helps destinations attract the right tourist segments, namely those seeking experiences aligned with values elevated in the narrative (Imran, 2024).

Ultimately, the relationship between digital storytelling and tourist experiences is circular. Stories conveyed before visits build expectations and desires. Experiences during visits are then compared to these stories, and if aligned, satisfaction is reinforced. After visits, tourists often become storytellers for destinations through social media posts or oral stories to relatives. Social media provides space for companies to communicate directly with customers (Infante & Mardikaningsih, 2022). They become part of storytelling ecosystems expanding destination narrative reach. This cycle demonstrates that digital storytelling is not merely a promotional tool but a foundation for building long-term relationships between destinations and tourists (Deris *et al.*, 2025). Understanding these mechanisms becomes key for destination managers to design effective communication strategies in the digital era.

Many destination managers remain trapped in conventional promotional approaches focused on presenting factual information about facilities and attractions (Berto *et al.*, 2023). They create websites containing lists of hotels, entrance fees, and ordinary photo galleries, without effort to weave these elements into an evocative narrative. Consequently, potential tourists struggle to imagine what kind of experience they would gain by visiting. The information presented feels cold and indistinguishable from other destinations offering similar facilities. When no emotional connection is built, tourist decisions tend to be based solely on price considerations or ease of access. This causes destinations to lose opportunities to build loyalty and attract tourists who genuinely appreciate the unique value they offer. Competition becomes unhealthy as all parties race to lower prices without being able to highlight各自的 advantages.

Another problem arises from the gap between stories conveyed digitally and realities encountered by tourists on site. Some destinations become overly enthusiastic in building images through beautiful digital content, yet forget to ensure that actual experiences provided match formed expectations (Renanda *et al.*, 2025). Tourists arriving with high expectations subsequently feel disappointed upon finding different conditions, such as dirty environments, poor service, or attractions not matching depictions. Because environment can influence individual attitudes and actions (Darmawan, 2013). This disappointment not only damages destination reputations in those tourists' eyes but also spreads through negative reviews on digital platforms accessible to thousands of other potential visitors. This problem demonstrates that digital storytelling cannot stand alone without being balanced by quality experience management at destinations. Understanding is needed about how to design compelling yet realistic narratives, and how to ensure consistency between stories and reality.

Post-pandemic tourist behavior shows increasingly strong tendencies toward seeking meaningful experiences rather than mere ordinary vacations (Zhang & Ramayah, 2024). Consumer behavior becomes a catalyst in industry growth (Gani *et al.*, 2021). People wish to make up for lost time by undertaking journeys providing added value to their lives. Short waiting times can enhance user convenience (Fahriza & Darmawan, 2025). They seek destinations offering connection with nature, local culture, or even spiritual journeys enriching the soul. This tendency is reflected in the proliferation of social media content about hidden places, unique experiences, and inspiring personal journeys (Andzani *et al.*, 2024). Simultaneously, digital platforms increasingly facilitate the spread of such stories. Destination managers capable of leveraging this momentum with appropriate storytelling will win the hearts of this growing tourist segment. Study of digital storytelling becomes important for understanding how narratives can be designed to resonate with contemporary tourist psychological needs. Psychology and emotion play roles in shaping individual conditions (Irfan & Darmawan, 2021).

Advances in artificial intelligence and augmented reality technologies open new possibilities in destination story delivery (Oralkan, 2021). Potential tourists can now experience more immersive previews before deciding to visit. Technology also enables story personalization according to each individual's specific interests, enhancing relevance and appeal. However, utilization of these technologies requires understanding of good storytelling principles (Li *et al.*, 2024). Without such understanding, technology will only produce visually appealing yet emotionally empty gimmicks. Examination of this topic will assist tourism practitioners not merely

to follow technological trends but to use them strategically in building destination brands. Knowledge development in this field will become foundation for tourism marketing communication innovation in the future.

This literature study aims to conceptually elaborate the role of digital storytelling as a branding instrument for tourist destinations that prioritize experience. The first objective is to analyze how digital narratives can be constructed through theme selection, plot development, and utilization of various media formats to build distinctive and meaningful destination brand identities. This analysis will explore various approaches to designing stories capable of evoking emotional connections with potential tourists. The second objective is to identify key elements in digital storytelling and psychological mechanisms influencing perception formation and tourist decision-making. The theoretical contribution of this study is to enrich tourism marketing literature, particularly in the realm of digital communication and destination brand management. Practically, the findings of this study can serve as a reference framework for destination managers, travel agencies, and tourism marketers in designing effective digital content to attract tourists seeking meaningful experiences.

Digital storytelling is a strategic method that allows tourist destinations to tell stories about their unique nature, culture and local values in an emotional way and build a distinct brand identity amidst increasingly high destination competition. However, the success of this method is highly dependent on the ability to combine interesting narratives, the use of appropriate digital media, and alignment between the stories created and the real experiences felt by visitors. Therefore, this research aims to analyze and understand how digital storytelling can be built as a branding tool for experience-based tourist destinations through developing themes, story lines, and utilizing various digital media formats. Apart from that, this research also focuses on identifying important elements in digital storytelling as well as psychological mechanisms that influence the formation of perceptions and decision-making processes by tourists towards a destination

RESEARCH METHODS

This research is designed as a pure library study relying on the tracing and analysis of written sources relevant to the topic of digital storytelling in tourist destination branding. The approach employed is qualitative with the aim of building systematic conceptual understanding of how digital narratives form experience-based destination brands. In practice, library research demands that researchers do not merely summarize reading materials but rather conduct critical synthesis of various ideas scattered across diverse literature. As emphasized by Creswell (2009), this process involves identifying, evaluating, and interpreting findings from previous research to develop a coherent framework of thought. The author traced various academic sources discussing topics in tourism marketing, digital communication, consumer psychology, and destination brand management. The tracing process was conducted gradually, commencing with identification of key terms such as digital storytelling, destination branding, experience economy, and tourist behavior to obtain broad and relevant literature coverage.

After library materials were collected, the subsequent step involved conducting content analysis with a thematic approach. This technique enables the author to categorize various findings and ideas into main themes aligned with research questions. According to Krippendorff (2004), content analysis in qualitative research permits researchers to draw valid conclusions from texts by attending to consistently emerging patterns. The author critically read each source, recorded key arguments, and compared perspectives across sources to identify common threads or even contradictions that enrich analysis. The sources utilized encompass standard textbooks, reputable academic journal articles, and seminar proceedings addressing strategic issues in tourism marketing and digital communication. This approach ensures that every statement within the discussion possesses a strong and accountable academic foundation.

Validity of findings in this library study is maintained through source triangulation, namely by comparing ideas from various authors and different disciplines. As explained by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), source triangulation enhances interpretation credibility because it enables researchers to view phenomena from multiple perspectives. The author also conducted searches of both classical and contemporary literature to ensure that the resulting analysis does not lose historical roots while remaining relevant to current developments. Through this method, the study is expected to generate knowledge synthesis that is not merely descriptive but also analytical and meaningful for theoretical development and practical application of digital storytelling in experience-based tourist destination branding.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Construction of Digital Storytelling in Building Experience-Based Tourist Destination Brands

The construction of digital storytelling for tourist destination brands begins with establishing a major theme that becomes the soul of the entire narrative. This theme must originate from the authentic uniqueness of

the destination that cannot be found elsewhere. A traditional village might raise themes of local wisdom and harmonious life with nature. A mountain area might choose themes of adventure and self-discovery through climbing. A strong theme functions as an umbrella uniting all story elements, ensuring that every piece of content created, whether in the form of videos, writings, or images, points toward one coherent main message. Without a clear theme, storytelling efforts will produce disconnected story fragments that do not build a complete brand identity. Tourists exposed to such diverse content will struggle to grasp destination essence, thus the brand is not firmly embedded in their memory (Deris *et al.*, 2025).

After the theme is established, the next step involves developing a story arc capable of taking audiences on an emotional journey (Renanda *et al.*, 2025). The classic structure of introduction, conflict, and resolution can be adapted into destination narratives. The introduction can depict local community life or unspoiled natural beauty. Conflict can emerge in the form of challenges to be faced in achieving authentic experiences, such as journeys to remote locations or processes of learning traditional skills. Resolution represents the peak experience when tourists successfully integrate with the destination and attain new meaning. This structure prevents stories from being flat, instead providing dynamics that make audiences curious and emotionally engaged. When well-designed, audiences will feel they are following a heroic tale in which they themselves can become the main characters by visiting the destination (Pachucki, 2025).

Characters or figures in destination storytelling can take the form of local community members, traditional leaders, or even previous tourists sharing their experiences (Zhang & Ramayah, 2024). These figures give human faces to stories, making them more relatable for audiences. An elderly fisherman sharing stories about the sea and his life philosophy will be more touching than mere descriptions of beach beauty. A coffee farmer explaining the process of lovingly tending plants creates emotional connections that cannot be achieved by production facts alone. These figures become representations of the values the destination brand wishes to highlight. Audiences not only imagine places but also the people they might meet, possible interactions, and life lessons that could be gained from such encounters (Khater *et al.*, 2025).

Visualization plays a crucial role in digital storytelling because tourism is fundamentally a highly visual industry (Kim & Youn, 2017). High-quality photographs, cinematic videos, and interactive content can evoke desires to see directly the beauty being displayed. However, visualization in storytelling should not merely become beautiful displays without meaning. Every image must be selected because it supports the narrative to be conveyed. Videos about traditional weaving processes, for example, not only display the beauty of patterns but also stories about perseverance, ancestral heritage, and philosophical meanings behind each motif. Such richly meaningful visualizations will leave deeper impressions on audiences because they not only see but also understand and feel the values contained within (Alamin *et al.*, 2021; Khater *et al.*, 2025).

The use of sound and music in digital content also contributes significantly to building emotional atmosphere (Priliantini *et al.*, 2023). Appropriate background music can evoke feelings of calm, joy, or curiosity according to the story segment being conveyed. Natural sounds such as birds chirping, waves crashing, or leaves rustling add authenticity to virtual experiences. In promotional videos, warm and inviting narrator voices can make audiences feel personally addressed. The harmonious combination of visual and audio elements creates immersive multimedia experiences, bringing audiences closer to the sensation of being at the destination even while still at home. The emotional closeness built through these virtual experiences becomes valuable capital for driving actual visit realization.

The digital platforms used to disseminate stories also influence how audiences receive and interpret narratives (Awaloedin *et al.*, 2024). Social media platforms like Instagram are more suitable for conveying stories through instantly evocative images and short videos. Destination websites can accommodate lengthy narratives, in-depth articles, and interactive content enabling further exploration. YouTube serves as a container for documentary videos or travel vlogs providing comprehensive depictions of destination experiences. Platform selection must be aligned with story characteristics and target audience segments. Message consistency across various platforms must still be maintained, yet presentation formats can be adapted to optimize each channel. This multiplatform strategy ensures stories reach audiences at various touchpoints in the most effective ways.

Interactivity constitutes an advantage of digital storytelling not possessed by conventional media (Deris *et al.*, 2025). Audiences can respond, ask questions, or even contribute to story development through comments or their own uploads. Destination managers can utilize this interaction to build two-way dialogue deepening relationships with potential tourists. Answering questions personally, appreciating visitor stories uploaded, or holding user-generated content contests are ways to make audiences feel part of the destination community. This sense of ownership is very powerful in driving brand loyalty and advocacy. Tourists who feel actively involved in storytelling ecosystems tend to become storytellers for the destination within their social circles.

Narrative consistency over time presents its own challenge in digital storytelling construction (Khater *et al.*, 2025). Changes in management personnel or pressures to constantly create new content can lead to deviations from established major themes. Consequently, destination brands become chaotic and difficult to recognize. To avoid this, well-documented narrative guidelines are needed, understood by all parties involved in

content creation. These guidelines encompass core values that must always appear, language style to be used, and boundaries in story development. Periodic evaluation of produced content also needs to be conducted to ensure consistency is maintained. With a systemic approach, digital storytelling can proceed sustainably without losing direction. Sustainability challenges demand strategic management (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2021; Arifin & Darmawan, 2021).

Collaboration with various parties can enrich the stories being conveyed. Local governments have access to tourism development data and policies (Mikraj *et al.*, 2023). Local communities are invaluable sources of authentic stories. Business actors such as hotels, restaurants, and travel agencies possess perspectives on tourist experiences. Academics can provide scientific viewpoints on destination cultural or natural uniqueness. Combining these various perspectives in narratives will generate rich, credible, and engaging stories. Collaboration also expands distribution reach because each party can share the same content with their respective networks. This synergy creates stronger storytelling ecosystems compared to individual efforts.

Measurement of digital storytelling effectiveness needs to be conducted to ensure investments yield desired outcomes (Rohrberg, 2020). Metrics such as view counts, interaction rates, and comment sentiment can provide indications of how far stories are received by audiences. More importantly, measuring impacts on brand perceptions and visit interest is essential. Periodic audience surveys can be conducted to determine whether delivered stories successfully build desired destination images. Actual visitation data also needs to be correlated with storytelling campaign periods to see effectiveness in driving travel realization. With proper measurement, managers can continuously refine storytelling strategies over time.

Adaptation to changing audience preferences becomes inevitable in digital storytelling construction (Li *et al.*, 2024). Younger generations have different perspectives and content preferences compared to previous generations. They prefer authentic content, not overly edited, and feeling close to daily life. Short video formats with vlog styles are more popular than overly perfect cinematic advertisements. Destination managers must be sensitive to these changes and willing to adjust storytelling styles without sacrificing core brand values. Flexibility in format yet consistency in essence is key to remaining relevant amidst changing times. Control of change dynamics demands strong managerial capacity (Mardikaningsih & Darmawan, 2022). This adaptive capacity determines whether digital storytelling will remain effective or be abandoned by audiences.

Successful digital storytelling construction is that which can create virtuous circles among stories, visits, and new post-visit stories (Gravili *et al.*, 2017). Compelling stories drive visits. Satisfying visits generate new stories shared by tourists through their social media. These tourist stories become authentic content reinforcing main narrative credibility. Destination managers need to design mechanisms to encourage and facilitate visitor story creation. Attractive photo spot facilities, inspiring signage, or even story-sharing programs with prizes can stimulate tourists to contribute. The more stories circulating, the stronger destination brands become embedded in public consciousness.

The success of digital storytelling construction also depends heavily on honesty and transparency (Yadav, 2019). Exaggerated or even reality-fabricating stories will be exposed when tourists arrive and find different realities. Negative reviews spreading on digital platforms can destroy painstakingly built reputations. Negative reviews can decrease purchase interest in products or services (Riski & Darmawan, 2025). Therefore, stories must be rooted in destination realities. If shortcomings exist, it is better to acknowledge them sincerely while demonstrating improvement efforts. Modern tourists appreciate honesty and actually feel closer to destinations that do not pretend to be perfect. Building experience-based brands means building trust that the stories conveyed will truly be experienced when visiting. This trust becomes the foundation for long-term relationships with tourists.

Digital storytelling construction in building experience-based tourist destination brands begins with establishing authentic themes constituting the soul of narratives, followed by developing story arcs that take audiences on emotional journeys (Rohrberg, 2020). Human characters, meaningful visualization, and audio elements play important roles in creating emotional closeness. Appropriate platform selection, interactivity utilization, and narrative consistency over time determine story delivery effectiveness. Collaboration with various parties enriches perspectives and expands reach. Impact measurement and adaptation to changing audience preferences are needed for continuous refinement. Virtuous circles among stories, visits, and new post-visit stories become success indicators, with honesty and transparency as the main foundation maintaining brand credibility in tourist eyes.

Elements and Mechanisms of Digital Storytelling in Shaping Tourist Perceptions and Decisions

The first element in digital storytelling influencing tourist perceptions is the authenticity of the stories conveyed. Modern tourists possess high sensitivity to narratives that feel fabricated or merely replicas of other destinations (Pachucki, 2025). They seek stories born from daily community life, genuinely practiced traditions, or natural beauty that indeed exists without excessive manipulation. This authenticity creates trust that the experiences promised in stories will truly be felt when visiting. When stories feel authentic, tourists tend to

develop stronger emotional attachments. They imagine themselves interacting with local communities, learning from living wisdom, or experiencing tranquility found only in that place. This attachment becomes the foundation for forming positive perceptions of destinations.

The second element is the emotional resonance that narratives are capable of evoking. Stories touching universal aspects such as happiness, hope, love, or even longing are more easily accepted across cultures (Lund *et al.*, 2017). A video about an elderly grandmother patiently creating batik while smiling can evoke warm feelings and admiration. Stories about groups of young people struggling to protect traditional forests from modernization threats can evoke respect and solidarity. This emotional resonance makes stories not only remembered but also felt. Tourists who are emotionally connected tend to develop strong preferences toward the destination, even before they make visits. These preferences subsequently influence decision-making processes when they must choose among several destination alternatives.

The third element is the story's ability to build imagination about future experiences. Effective digital storytelling not only depicts what exists at the destination but also invites audiences to imagine what they will feel, do, and learn if they come (Oralkan, 2021). Descriptions of the sensation of standing on a hilltop at sunrise, hearing the echo of the call to prayer in valleys, or smelling spices in traditional markets stimulate sensory imagination. The more detailed and vivid the images created, the more real the experience becomes in audiences' minds (Oralkan, 2021). This imagination process is essentially mental simulation of future visits. When mental simulation generates positive feelings, the desire to realize it in reality becomes increasingly strong. This mechanism explains why storytelling rich in sensory details is more effective in driving visit decisions.

The fourth element relates to narrative structure facilitating cognitive processing. Stories with clear plots, identifiable characters, and focused messages are easier to understand and remember compared to collections of unstructured factual information. The human brain is naturally programmed to process information in story format. When destination information is presented within narrative frames, audiences more easily absorb and retain it. Story structure also helps audiences organize various destination information into meaningful frameworks (Yadav, 2019). They not only remember that there are beaches, mountains, and culture somewhere but understand how all these elements connect into a unified experiential whole. This efficient cognitive processing increases the likelihood that the destination will enter consideration when tourists plan trips. Purchase decisions result from various individual considerations (Putri & Darmawan, 2025).

The fifth element is the credibility of story sources influencing the extent to which audiences trust the narratives conveyed. Stories originating from previous tourist experiences, shared through reviews or vlogs, are often considered more credible than official content from destination managers (Oralkan, 2021). This is because other tourists are perceived as having no commercial interest in exaggeration. On the other hand, stories conveyed by community figures or cultural experts also possess credibility because they are based on direct knowledge and experience. Destination managers need to recognize these dynamics and design strategies utilizing various story sources (Campos, 2024). Combining official content with user-generated content, and providing space for local communities to tell stories, will build credible narrative ecosystems in potential tourists' eyes.

The sixth element is visuality that is not only attractive but also functional in conveying information. High-quality photos and videos are indeed important for capturing attention amidst floods of digital content (Campos, 2024). However, more important is how these visuals help audiences understand what they will experience. Visuals showing activities that can be done, social interactions that may occur, or atmospheres that will be felt are more meaningful than mere beautiful scenery without people (Zhang & Ramayah, 2024). Videos depicting tourists learning traditional dances, helping farmers harvest rice, or sitting with locals enjoying coffee provide concrete depictions of participatory experiences. Such functional visuals help audiences assess whether the destination aligns with their preferences and travel styles.

The seventh element is the time element influencing story urgency and relevance. Narratives associated with specific seasons, annual festivals, or even natural phenomena occurring only during certain periods create a sense of limitation driving faster decision-making (Chang *et al.*, 2025). Stories about cherry blossoms blooming only two weeks a year, or cultural festivals held only once annually, provide reasons for tourists to immediately plan visits (Campos, 2024). The time element can also be linked to life stages, such as stories about healing journeys after loss or adventures before entering new life phases. Personal relevance created through time elements makes stories feel close and urgent to respond to.

The first psychological mechanism operating in digital storytelling is identification, wherein audiences place themselves as characters in stories. When watching videos about adventurers finding peace in mountains, audiences unconsciously imagine themselves doing the same. This identification process is strengthened when story characters possess characteristics similar to audiences, such as same age, background, or life values (H. Li *et al.*, 2024). The stronger the identification occurring, the greater the desire to imitate those experiences (Zhang & Ramayah, 2024). Identification explains why stories featuring ordinary tourists are often more effective than

those featuring celebrities or idealized figures. Ordinary tourists are easier to identify with because they are perceived as representing experiences achievable by anyone.

The second mechanism is narrative transportation, namely the condition when audiences become carried away into story worlds, losing awareness of surrounding environments. In this immersed state, messages within stories are received with less critical resistance. Audiences no longer analyze whether information is true or false but experience it as real (Zhang & Ramayah, 2024). Narrative transportation occurs when stories possess strong emotional appeal, compelling plots, and captivating characters. The longer audiences remain in immersed conditions, the deeper the emotional traces left behind. This immersed experience then becomes associated with the destination in the story, thereby creating strong positive associations. When subsequently thinking about the destination, feelings that emerged during immersion will also be remembered.

The third mechanism is the formation of cognitive scripts about what will be done at destinations. Stories depicting sequences of activities, such as arriving at airports, being picked up by local guides, checking into unique accommodations, then participating in traditional rituals, form mental guides for tourists. These scripts reduce uncertainty and anxiety about what will be encountered at unfamiliar destinations (Khater *et al.*, 2025). Tourists feel more prepared and confident because they already have depictions of experience flows to be undergone. Cognitive scripts also assist tourists in comparing destination alternatives (Berto *et al.*, 2023). Destinations offering clear, compelling experience scripts will be more chosen than destinations only displaying fragmented information without coherent flow. Place management strategies need to attend to visitor needs and expectations (Auliyah & Darmawan, 2025).

The fourth mechanism is social validation reinforced through stories from many people. When potential tourists see that many people have visited a destination and shared positive stories, they tend to consider the destination worthy of visiting. This phenomenon is reinforced by metrics such as numbers of likes, comments, or shares displayed on social media. Social validation reduces psychological risk in choosing unfamiliar destinations. Psychological factors play roles in decision-making processes (Hidayat & Darmawan, 2025). If many people have good experiences, the likelihood of obtaining similar experiences becomes higher. Destination managers can utilize this mechanism by encouraging visitors to share their stories and creating collective movements on social media (Yadav, 2019). The more stories circulating, the stronger the social validation built. Positive perceptions can drive long-term loyalty (Nahar *et al.*, 2025).

The fifth mechanism is the formation of emotional bonds through value resonance. When destination stories touch values held dear by individuals, such as environmental preservation, social justice, or spirituality, the bonds formed are very strong. Tourists choose destinations not only based on beauty or facilities but because they feel their visits are expressions of support for those values (Cao, 2019). Stories about villages successfully preserving forests through local wisdom will attract environmentally conscious tourists. Stories about communities empowering persons with disabilities through handicrafts will attract tourists concerned with social inclusion. This value resonance creates loyalty far beyond transactional satisfaction. Furthermore, service improvement strategies need to attend to customer needs and expectations (Rahayu & Darmawan, 2025). Tourists will return and recommend destinations because they feel part of larger movements (King, 2023).

The sixth mechanism is the influence of stories on expectations and post-visit evaluation. Stories conveyed before visits build specific expectations. These expectations subsequently become comparison standards when tourists directly experience destinations. If experiences obtained match or exceed expectations built by stories, satisfaction will be high. If mismatched, disappointment will emerge. Therefore, destination managers must be careful in building expectations through stories. Exaggeration is actually counterproductive because it increases disappointment risk. Each individual has different risk tolerance levels (Cahyani & Darmawan, 2025). The wiser approach is to build realistic yet engaging expectations, and ensure that experiences provided fulfill story promises (Campos, 2024). This consistency between story and reality becomes the foundation for long-term reputation.

The seventh mechanism is the role of stories in memory and post-visit identity formation. After returning from trips, tourists bring not only physical souvenirs but also stories they will share with others (Campos, 2024). These stories become part of their identities as adventurers, culture lovers, or nature explorers. Destinations providing story-rich experiences will be more easily remembered and retold. The process of remembering and retelling strengthens emotional bonds with destinations in the long term. Each time they recount experiences, tourists indirectly promote destinations. They become credible marketing agents within their social circles. This cycle demonstrates that digital storytelling does not end when visits conclude but continues in tourists' lives (Pachucki, 2025).

Digital storytelling elements influencing tourist perceptions include story authenticity, emotional resonance, ability to build imagination of future experiences, narrative structure facilitating cognitive processing, source credibility, functional visuality, and time elements creating urgency (Kim & Youn, 2017). Psychological mechanisms operating include identification with characters, immersive narrative transportation, formation of cognitive scripts about activities, social validation through collective stories, value resonance creating emotional

bonds, story influence on expectations and evaluation, and the role of stories in building memory and post-visit identity. Understanding these elements and mechanisms enables destination managers to design storytelling that not only attracts attention but also effectively shapes positive perceptions and drives visit decisions, while creating long-term relationships with tourists.

CONCLUSIONS

This literature study concludes that digital storytelling constitutes a fundamental instrument in building experience-based tourist destination brands, not merely a conventional promotional tool. Effective storytelling construction begins with establishing authentic themes constituting the soul of narratives, developing story arcs that take audiences on emotional journeys, and integrated utilization of human characters, meaningful visualization, and audio elements. Narrative consistency across platforms, interactivity with audiences, and collaboration with various parties strengthen the story ecosystems built. The success of this construction is measured by the creation of virtuous circles among stories, visits, and new post-visit stories disseminated by tourists. On the other hand, storytelling effectiveness in shaping tourist perceptions and decisions is determined by elements such as authenticity, emotional resonance, ability to build imagination, narrative structure, source credibility, functional visuality, and time elements. Psychological mechanisms operating include identification, narrative transportation, cognitive script formation, social validation, value resonance, influence on expectations, and the role of stories in memory and post-visit identity. Understanding these constructions, elements, and mechanisms becomes the foundation for destination managers to design authentic, consistent digital storytelling capable of building long-term emotional relationships with tourists.

This study provides theoretical implications for the development of tourism marketing literature, particularly in expanding understanding of digital storytelling psychological mechanisms in shaping tourist perceptions and decisions. Practical implications include the need for destination managers to invest resources in deep research to identify authentic themes genuinely representing their place uniqueness. Managers must also build monitoring systems to ensure consistency between stories conveyed digitally and experience realities at destinations. Collaboration with local communities, business actors, and tourists needs facilitation to enrich story perspectives and expand content distribution reach through respective networks. Future research is recommended to conduct quantitative empirical studies to test relationships between digital storytelling elements and destination brand performance indicators such as awareness, image, and loyalty. Comparative studies across destinations with different characteristics are also needed to understand contextual factor influences on storytelling effectiveness. Practitioners are advised to begin implementation with audits of existing stories, identifying gaps between narratives conveyed and destination realities. Development of well-documented narrative guidelines needs to be undertaken to maintain long-term consistency. Tourism associations can facilitate knowledge-sharing forums among destination managers about best practices in digital storytelling, including utilization of new technologies such as augmented reality. Periodic evaluation of storytelling impacts on visit interest and tourist satisfaction needs to be conducted for continuous refinement.

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