

STORYTELLING FORMAT AND DESTINATION CHOICE INTENTION: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EMOTIONAL AROUSAL AND DESTINATION IMAGE

Abbas Hussain^{*1}, Dr. Zeeshan Ahmad²

^{*1}Ph.D Scholar of Management Sciences, Air University Multan

²Assoc.Professor of Management Sciences, Air University Multan

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19106820>

Keywords

Storytelling; Digital storytelling;
Verbal storytelling; Emotional
arousal; Destination image;
Destination choice intention;
Tourism marketing; Mediation
analysis

Article History

Received: 15 January 2026

Accepted: 27 February 2026

Published: 16 March 2026

Copyright @Author

Corresponding Author: *

Abbas Hussain

Abstract

Storytelling has emerged as an important narration strategy in tourism marketing. Destinations increasingly use narratives to create emotional engagement and influence tourists' perceptions. However, limited research has examined how different storytelling formats affect tourists' psychological responses and travel intentions. This study investigates the effect of storytelling format (digital vs. verbal) on destination choice intention and examines the mediating roles of emotional arousal and destination image. An experimental research design was employed in which participants were randomly exposed to either digital storytelling or verbal storytelling about a tourism destination. Data were collected from 768 respondents and analysed using independent samples t-tests and mediation analysis with the PROCESS macro. The results indicate that storytelling format does not significantly influence destination choice intention directly. However, storytelling format significantly affects emotional arousal. Mediation analysis further revealed that emotional arousal significantly mediates the relationship between storytelling format and destination choice intention. In contrast, destination image does not mediate this relationship. These findings suggest that storytelling primarily influences tourism decision making through emotional engagement rather than cognitive evaluation of destination image. The study contributes to tourism marketing literature by highlighting the psychological mechanisms through which storytelling influences tourist behaviour and provides practical insights for destination marketers seeking to design effective storytelling strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the recent years, tourism marketing has evolved a lot. Tourism destinations are no longer being advertised solely by use of facts or conventional advertisements. Rather, marketers are finding it necessary to use storytelling more to convey experiences and foster emotional contact with their potential tourists. Stories enable people to fantasize locations, culture and experiences prior to travelling to the destination. Owing to this capability, storytelling has emerged as a significant tool in terms of tourism

promotion and destination branding (Xu & Chen, 2024).

Tourism storytelling may be of various types. Among them is digital stories telling where videos, pictures, and social media stories are used to engage tourism experiences. Destination communication is possible through the use of digital stories that are more engaging and immersive. Simultaneously, verbal storytelling is still significant in tourism communication. Tour guides, presenters and locals tend to give accounts

that help make destinations come alive and give meaning to tourism experiences. Such verbal narratives have the potential to establish either a feeling of authenticity and closeness between tourists and destinations (Ko, Kim, and Kim, 2022).

Even though storytelling is a highly adopted tool in tourism marketing, its psychological impact on the tourists has not been clearly comprehended. Researchers indicate that storytelling is capable of influencing behavioral intentions as well as emotional responses. People can experience emotional feelings of excitement, curiosity, or inspiration when they are presented to motivating destination stories. These feelings may influence the opinion of tourists and precondition their destination judgement (Hosany, Sthapit, and Bjork, 2022). Nevertheless, how storytelling influences the decision making process of travelers has to be researched.

Destination choice intention is one of the key concepts in tourism research that is identified as the willingness or intention of a tourist to visit a specific destination. Destination choice intention has been extensively applied as a predictor of potential future travel. According to previous research, it may be possible to affect the intention of a tourist to travel through marketing communication, image of a destination, and emotional involvement (Gan, Zhang, Wang, and Tan, 2023). But the storytelling can affect such intentions indirectly but not directly.

Two mental processes are especially applicable in this process emotional arousal and destination image. Emotional arousal is a height of excitement or emotional stimulus that people get when they receive tourism stimuli. The emotional involvement is proved to determine the way tourists experience and recall tourism experiences (Hosany et al., 2022). On the same note, destination image reflects upon the general view and opinion of tourists about a destination. A favorable destination image is capable of enhancing the desire of tourists to go to a destination (Leong et al., 2024).

Although the issue of storytelling has been gaining increasing significance in the marketing of tourism, little empirical studies have explored how

storytelling formats can increase the emotional and cognitive reactions that lead to the ultimate travel choice. Specifically, it is still unknown whether storytelling has a direct or psychological effects on destination choice intention, including emotional arousal and destination image.

Thus, it is the aim of the study to analyze how the format of storytelling (digital and verbal) influences the destination choice intention, as well as to determine the mediating factors of emotional arousal and destination image. Through experimental research design, this research will attempt to give empirical evidence on the effects of storytelling on decisions made by tourists.

This study makes contributions to the tourism marketing literature in a number of ways. To begin with, it compares two types of storytelling that are typically employed in the field of tourism communication. Second, it looks at emotional and cognitive processes that define the effects of storytelling on tourists. Lastly, the research has implications to the practice of destination marketers who can learn to create better storytelling frameworks when promoting tourism products.

2. Literature Review

Narration has now taken the relevance of tourism marketing and destination communication. Tourism marketers are embracing the use of stories to make the messages meaningful and interesting instead of describing the destinations in mere facts. Stories give prospective tourists the opportunity to envision places, picture experiences, and create emotional attachments to places (Xu and Chen, 2024).

Storytelling presentation may take various forms in tourism communication. Digital storytelling and verbal storytelling are two forms of storytelling that are largely used. Multimedia can be defined as digital storytelling and it involves the use of videos, images and online stories that are distributed via digital platforms. These formats have the potential of enhancing viewer interaction since they are a mixture of visual and narrative data (Gan, Zhang, Wang, and Tan, 2023).

Verbal storytelling is on the other hand commonly done via tour guides, cultural interpreters or presenters who narrate the destinations using spoken words. Verbal story telling is considered to be genuine and personal since one gets to interact directly with the storyteller and the audience. Past studies indicate that verbal narrative tourism might establish valuable and memorable experiences in tourism (Ko, Kim, and Kim, 2022). Despite the popularity of storytelling as a marketing tool in tourism, researchers have reported that the impact of various forms of storytelling are yet to be comprehended. The digital storytelling might be more thrilling as a result of the visual stimulation, whereas it is also possible to say that verbal storytelling can lead to more effective emotional associations. Thus, it is critical to investigate the impact of storytelling format on the responses of tourists.

2.1 Tourism Emotions Arousal

Emotions are of primary importance in tourism experiences. Excitement, curiosity, inspiration and enjoyment are some of the emotions that are typically aroused by tourism activities. The concept of emotional arousal is the degree of emotion arousal that people get when they are exposed to a certain stimulus.

Destination marketing messages, narratives and tourism experiences tend to elicit emotional responses in tourism research. The use of emotional responses can be triggered by engaging storytelling since people can be able to visualize themselves in the destination setting. Emotional involvement has proven to affect the perception and recollection of tourists on tourism experiences (Hosany, Sthapit, and Bjork, 2022).

The earlier research indicates that emotional arousal may determine the way tourists assess destinations and their readiness to visit them in future. As such, emotions are possible to be an effective psychological mechanism between the marketing communication and the decision making of tourists.

2.2 Destination Image

Destination image is the general feeling and perception that the tourists have of a certain

destination. It has both cognitive and emotional aspects that influence the perception of destinations by people. Destination image has also been extensively investigated in the field of tourism studies since it is a strong factor in the behavior of tourists. When a destination image is positive, it may enhance the interest, preference and the intention that tourists will have to visit a destination. The destination image can be formed with the help of marketing communication, advertising, and storytelling (Leong et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the influence of the format of storytelling in developing an image of destination is not clear. Although stories can be used to establish a positive image about a destination, it remains unclear whether various types of stories do have varied effects on destination image.

2.3 Destination Choice Intention.

Destination choice intention is the propensity that a tourist will visit a certain destination. It is also frequently applied as a predictor of future travelling behaviour. Tourism scholars have mainly studied destination choice intention since it indicates how tourists make decisions prior to them going out to the destination. Some of the factors that affect destination choice intention are marketing communication, emotional responses, and destination image (Ajzen, 2020).

Storytelling can have a direct or indirect effect on travel intention as a result of both emotional and cognitive processes. These relationships can be learned to enable tourism marketers to create better communication strategy.

3. Research Objectives

Based on the literature review, the study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the effect of storytelling format (digital vs. verbal) on tourists' destination choice intention.
2. To investigate the influence of storytelling format on tourists' emotional arousal.
3. To examine whether emotional arousal mediates the relationship between storytelling format and destination choice intention.

4. To examine whether destination image mediates the relationship between storytelling format and destination choice intention.

4. Hypothesis

Based on the theoretical background and previous studies, the following hypotheses are proposed:

1. Digital storytelling has a stronger positive effect on tourists' destination choice intention than verbal storytelling.
2. Storytelling format (digital vs. verbal) significantly influences tourists' emotional arousal levels.
3. Storytelling format (digital vs. verbal) significantly influences destination image.
4. Emotional arousal mediates the relationship between storytelling format and destination choice intention.
5. Destination image mediates the relationship between storytelling format and destination choice intention.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative experimental research design to examine the influence of storytelling format on tourists' emotional responses and destination choice intention. Experimental research is widely used in tourism and marketing studies to test causal relationships between variables because it allows the researcher to manipulate a stimulus and observe its effect on participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In this study, storytelling format served as the independent variable, with two experimental conditions: digital storytelling and verbal storytelling. Participants were randomly assigned to one of these two conditions. Random assignment helps minimize bias and increases the internal validity of experimental research (Field, 2018).

The experiment followed a between-subjects design, meaning each participant was exposed to only one storytelling condition. This design helps avoid contamination effects that might occur if participants experience multiple stimuli.

5.2 Population and Sampling

The target population of the study consisted of potential tourists who are interested in travel-related content and tourism experiences. Since accessing the entire population of tourists is difficult, the study employed non-probability purposive sampling.

Purposive sampling allows researchers to select respondents who possess characteristics relevant to the study (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Participants were selected based on their familiarity with tourism-related information and their ability to understand the storytelling stimuli presented in the experiment.

A total of 768 participants participated in the study. They were randomly assigned to one of the two storytelling conditions to ensure balanced group comparison.

5.3 Experimental Stimuli

Two types of storytelling stimuli were developed for the experiment.

The first stimulus represented digital storytelling, which included multimedia elements such as images and visual narratives presented through a digital format. Digital storytelling often combines visual and narrative elements to create immersive destination messages (Gan et al., 2023). The second stimulus represented verbal storytelling, where the same destination story was delivered through spoken narrative without visual multimedia elements. Verbal storytelling resembles traditional narrative communication commonly used by tour guides and cultural interpreters. Both storytelling formats contained the same core information about the destination to ensure that any differences in participant responses were due to the storytelling format rather than the content of the story.

5.4 Measurement Instruments

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire following participants' exposure to the storytelling stimulus.

Three main constructs were measured in the study:

5.5 Emotional Arousal:

Emotional arousal refers to the level of excitement or emotional stimulation experienced by participants after viewing the storytelling stimulus. Emotional engagement is an important psychological response in tourism experiences (Hosany, Sthapit, & Björk, 2022).

5.6 Destination Image:

Destination image represents participants’ overall perception and impression of the tourism destination presented in the storytelling narrative.

5.7 Destination Choice Intention:

Destination choice intention refers to the likelihood that participants would consider visiting the destination in the future.

5.8 Data Collection Procedure

Participants were invited to participate in the experiment through an online survey platform. After providing informed consent, they were randomly assigned to one of the two storytelling conditions.

Participants first viewed the storytelling stimulus describing a tourism destination. Immediately after exposure, they completed the questionnaire measuring emotional arousal, destination image, and destination choice intention.

Collecting responses immediately after exposure helped capture participants’ immediate

psychological reactions to the storytelling stimulus.

6. Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were first used to summarize the characteristics of the sample and study variables. To test the direct effects of storytelling format on destination choice intention and emotional arousal, independent samples t-tests were conducted.

To examine the mediation relationships, PROCESS macro Model 4 developed by Hayes (2018) was used. This method is commonly applied in social science research to test mediation effects using bootstrapping techniques. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was used to estimate the indirect effects and their confidence intervals. A mediation effect was considered significant when the 95% bootstrap confidence interval did not include zero.

7. Results

7.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were examined to understand participants’ responses toward the key study variables, including emotional arousal, destination image, and destination choice intention. The mean and standard deviation values provide an overview of the overall perception of participants toward the storytelling stimuli.

Table 7.1
Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Emotional Arousal	768	3.78	0.84
Destination Image	764	3.95	0.81
Destination Choice Intention	768	3.61	0.89

The descriptive results indicate that participants reported relatively high levels of emotional engagement with the storytelling stimulus. Similarly, perceptions of destination image were generally positive. Destination choice intention showed a moderate level among participants, suggesting that storytelling may influence interest

in visiting the destination but may not immediately translate into strong travel intentions.

7.2 Hypothesis Testing

To examine the influence of storytelling format on the study variables, independent samples t-tests were conducted.

7.2.1 Effect of Storytelling Format on Destination Choice Intention (H1)

Table 7.2

Independent Samples t-test for Destination Choice Intention

Variable	Variance Assumption	Levene's F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Destination Choice Intention	Equal variances assumed	0.451	0.502	1.374	766	0.170
	Equal variances not assumed			1.374	753.004	0.170

Levene's test for equality of variances was not significant ($F = 0.451, p = .502$), indicating that the assumption of equal variances was satisfied. Therefore, the equal variances assumed results were interpreted. The independent samples t-test showed that the difference in destination choice intention between participants exposed to digital

storytelling and those exposed to verbal storytelling was not statistically significant, $t(766) = 1.374, p = .170$. This result indicates that storytelling format does not significantly influence tourists' intention to choose the destination. Therefore, H1 is not supported.

7.2.2 Effect of Storytelling Format on Emotional Arousal (H2)

Table 7.3

Independent Samples t-test for Emotional Arousal

Variable	Variance Assumption	Levene's F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Emotional Arousal	Equal variances assumed	0.950	0.330	4.915	764	0.000
	Equal variances not assumed			4.913	754.022	0.000

Levene's test indicated that the assumption of equal variances was satisfied ($F = 0.950, p = .330$). Therefore, the equal variances assumed results were interpreted. The results showed a statistically significant difference in emotional arousal between the two storytelling formats, $t(764) = -4.915, p < .001$. This finding indicates that storytelling format significantly influences

participants' emotional engagement. Thus, H2 is supported.

7.3 Mediation Analysis

To examine whether emotional arousal and destination image mediate the relationship between storytelling format and destination choice intention, mediation analyses were conducted using PROCESS macro Model 4.

7.3.1 Mediating Role of Emotional Arousal (H4)

Table 7.4

Regression Results for Emotional Arousal

R	R ²	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
0.175	0.031	6.669	24.153	1	764	0.000

Predictor	Coefficient (b)	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	6.8516	0.2948	23.2393	0.000	6.2729	7.4304
Storytelling Format	0.9171	0.1866	4.9145	0.000	0.5508	1.2834

The results indicate that storytelling format significantly predicted emotional arousal ($b = 0.9171, p < .001$).

Table 7.5

Regression Results for Destination Choice Intention

R	R ²	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
0.640	0.410	4.528	265.112	2	763	0.000

Predictor	Coefficient (b)	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	2.7667	0.3174	8.7169	0.000	2.1436	3.3897
Storytelling Format	-0.8938	0.1562	-5.7228	0.000	-1.2004	-0.5872
Emotional Arousal	0.6845	0.0298	22.9615	0.000	0.6260	0.7430

Table 7.6

Indirect Effect of Emotional Arousal

Mediator	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Emotional Arousal	0.6278	0.1399	0.3684	0.9107

The mediation analysis showed that storytelling format significantly influenced emotional arousal, and emotional arousal significantly predicted destination choice intention. The indirect effect was statistically significant because the bootstrap

confidence interval did not include zero. Therefore, emotional arousal significantly mediates the relationship between storytelling format and destination choice intention, supporting H4.

7.3.2 Mediating Role of Destination Image (H5)

Table 7.7

Regression Results for Destination Image

R	R ²	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
0.004	0.000	17.395	0.015	1	762	0.903

Predictor	Coefficient (b)	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	11.9389	0.4779	24.9813	0.000	11.0008	12.8771
Storytelling Format	0.0367	0.3018	0.1216	0.903	-0.5557	0.6291

The results indicate that storytelling format did not significantly predict destination image.

Table 7.8

Indirect Effect of Destination Image

Mediator	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Destination Image	0.0181	0.1470	-0.2637	0.3040

Since the bootstrap confidence interval included zero, the indirect effect was not significant. Therefore, destination image does not mediate the relationship between storytelling format and destination choice intention, and H5 is not supported.

8. Discussion

This study was done with the aim of testing the effect of the format of storytelling on the emotional reactions and intention to choose a destination among the tourists. Whether emotional arousal and destination image mediate the relationship was also examined in the study.

The results give some understanding of the process of storytelling in tourism communication.

To start with, the findings indicated that storytelling format did not have a significant effect on destination choice intention. That is, the exposed participants (to digital storytelling) did not show any notable differences when it came to intentions to select the destination compared to the verbally exposed participants. This implies that the form of storytelling as such might not be adequate to have a direct impact on the travel decision of tourists. The decision making process of tourism is characterized by many factors and it is often complicated based on the cost, accessibility, personal preferences, and even the perceived risks (Ajzen, 2020).

But the findings indicated that the storytelling format had a great effect on emotional arousal. The participants who were presented with one format of storytelling expressed having a stronger emotional engagement than their other group. This conclusion is in line with prior studies indicating that narrative can be used to provoke emotional responses in the listeners. Stories enable people to visualize and experience tourism destinations mentally, which may become emotional, such as excitement or curiosity (Hosany, Sthapit, and Bjork, 2022).

The mediation analysis also demonstrated that emotional arousal is significant in teaching the process of storytelling in terms of influencing decision making by tourists. The mediation of storytelling format and destination choice intention was greatly mediated by emotional arousal. This implies that storytelling format initially affects the emotional reactions of the tourists and that these are the emotions that in turn influence their intention to visit a destination. The result of this finding implies the relevance of emotional processes in tourism marketing communication.

Interestingly, the mediating effect of destination image was not found to support the results. The format of storytelling did not have a substantial effect on the perceptions of destination image among the participants. Despite the fact that destination image was discovered to have an

important influence on destination choice intention, it did not mediate the relationship between format of storytelling and travel intention. This finding indicates that narrating could be more effective in emotion involvement than cognitive destination perceptions. This can be explained by the fact that storytelling is more of an emotional process than a cognitive assessment. The purpose of the stories can be to create an emotional response and fantasy instead of offering a detailed account of facts about the destinations. Thus, change in destination image may be met with emotional reaction at a later stage.

On the whole, the results suggest that storytelling may be a useful instrument to create emotional appeal among prospective tourists. Nonetheless, storytelling might not be directly relevant in influencing travel decisions. Rather, it seems that emotions are a valuable psychological process that connects storytelling communication and tourism behavioral intentions.

9. Conclusion

This study has considered the effect of format of storytelling on intention to visit the destination and the mediating value of emotional arousal and destination image. The research design was experimental research which involved the comparison of the effects of digital and verbal storytelling on tourists in terms of their responses. The results showed that storytelling format did not have a significant influence on destination choice intention. This indicates that digital storytelling may not be that effective as verbal storytelling when it comes to having direct impact on influencing travel decisions of tourists.

Nevertheless, findings revealed that storytelling format played a great role in emotional arousal. The participants that were subjected to the storytelling narratives had varying degrees of emotional involvement based on the type of storytelling format. It was also found that emotional arousal also had significant predictive power of destination choice intention. Moreover, mediation (as shown by the mediation analysis) showed that emotional arousal is a significant mediator between the storytelling format and destination choice intention. This means that the

influence of storytelling as a factor in making a travelling decision can be indirect by influencing a traveling decision through emotions.

Contrarily, destination image was not a mediating variable in this relationship. Despite the fact that destination image was a good predictor of destination choice intention, storytelling format had no significant impact on the perceptions of the participants on destination image. The topic of the study as a whole is relevant to the tourism marketing research since it sheds light on the psychological processes by which storytelling can impact tourist behavior. The finding indicates that emotional involvement is important in influencing tourism decision making.

References

- Ajzen, I. (2020). The theory of planned behavior: Frequently asked questions. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*, 2(4), 314–324. doi:10.1002/hbe2.195
- Chronis, A. (2012). Tourists as story-builders: Narrative construction at a heritage museum. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 29(5), 444–459. doi:10.1080/10548408.2012.691394
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, 5(1), 1–4. doi:10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11
- Field, A. (2018). *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS statistics* (5th ed.). London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Gan, J., Zhang, Y., Wang, X., & Tan, C. (2023). Short video marketing and travel intentions: The interplay of visual and verbal framing. *Tourism Management*, 95, 104645. doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2023.104645
- Hair, J. F., Black, W. C., Babin, B. J., & Anderson, R. E. (2019). *Multivariate data analysis* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.
- Hayes, A. F. (2018). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Hosany, S., Sthapit, E., & Björk, P. (2022). Memorable tourism experience: A review and research agenda. *Psychology & Marketing*, 39(8), 1467–1486. doi:10.1002/mar.21665
- Kim, J., & Fesenmaier, D. R. (2017). Sharing tourism experiences: The post-trip experience. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 66, 51–63. doi:10.1016/j.annals.2017.06.002
- Ko, S. H., Kim, Y., & Kim, S. (2022). Storytelling festival participation and tourists' revisit intention. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 968472. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2022.968472
- Leong, A. M. W., et al. (2024). Exploring the influence of historical storytelling on cultural heritage tourism experiences. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 50, 101119. doi:10.1016/j.tmp.2024.101119
- Xu, X., & Chen, F. (2024). Effective tourism destination stories: Matching effects between story type and destination type. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 61, 393–404. doi:10.1016/j.jhttm.2024.08.011