

The power of narratives in shaping tourism

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Abstract

Narratives significantly shape how people perceive and experience tourism. Narratives, ranging from destination stories to personal travel experiences, influence tourists' emotions, expectations, and satisfaction. This research aims to identify recurring themes and trends. A thorough analysis of existing literature was performed. The Web of Science (within the "Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism" category) and Scopus databases were searched, yielding 246 peer-reviewed papers. Relevant contributions were gathered using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) methodology, 117 peer-reviewed papers were systematically analyzed. Thematic analysis revealed the core themes discussed in the literature, and the results display the relationship between narratives and tourism experiences, uncovering how narratives are created and consumed within the sector. The insights gained from this review provide valuable knowledge for academics, industry practitioners, and policymakers, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the role narratives play in tourism and paving the way for future research and practical applications.

Keyword: *stories, DMO, emotions, experiences, themes*

1. Introduction

In the dynamic tourism industry, narratives have become a key force in shaping tourists' experiences and perceptions. As the market grows increasingly competitive, destinations are leveraging compelling narratives to create emotional connections, enhance their appeal, and bolster their branding and marketing efforts (Ferdinand et al., 2024). Narratives also play a crucial role in establishing a unique identity for destinations, helping them stand out from competitors (Youssef et al., 2019). Despite the recognition of narratives as vital promotional tools, research often isolates aspects of their impact, leading to a fragmented understanding. There is a need for integrated theoretical framework that capture the full extent of narrative influence on tourism. This paper addresses this gap by providing a comprehensive review of tourism narrative literature. Utilizing a systematic literature review with a framework-based approach and a thematic analysis, this study examines key themes, trends, and gaps, offering insights into how narratives affect tourist behavior and destination marketing. The findings aim to enhance understanding for scholars,

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practitioners, and policymakers, informing strategies to boost tourist engagement, loyalty, and marketing effectiveness.

2. Literature review

The concept of narrative spans multiple academic disciplines, reflecting its broad relevance and impact. In tourism, narratives are pivotal in shaping tourists' experiences and perceptions. They influence emotions, expectations, and satisfaction, playing a critical role in destination choice and loyalty (Nguyen & Tong, 2023). The growing significance of narratives in tourism is evident as destinations craft compelling stories to enhance their appeal and support branding efforts (Ferdinand et al., 2024; Youssef et al., 2019). Pearce & Moscardo (2020) describe narratives as chronological accounts, while McCabe & Foster (2006) emphasize that tourists often create narratives to interpret their experiences. This approach aligns with broader perspectives on narratives as essential tools for communication and perception (Moscardo, 2010).

In tourism research, 'narrative' and 'story' are often used interchangeably, though definitions can vary. Some studies use the terms synonymously (Avraham & Baum, 2022), while others differentiate between narratives as chronological accounts and stories as descriptions of character responses and plots (Pearce & Moscardo, 2020). Storytelling, whether by consumers or organizations, is a universal process involving the recounting of experiences to engage and inform audiences (Pachucki et al., 2022). This paper adopts an inclusive approach, treating 'narrative,' 'story,' and 'storytelling' as synonymous to capture the full spectrum of relevant research.

3. Method and data

This study utilizes a framework-based systematic literature review (SLR) to analyze and integrate existing research on tourism narratives. The SLR methodology, as described by Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart (2003), involves a structured approach to identifying, selecting, and assessing relevant literature to address specific research questions. This method is appreciated for its rigorous, transparent process that minimizes bias and provides a comprehensive overview of current knowledge (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Collins & Fauser, 2005). Data collection was conducted following PRISMA guidelines, focusing on high-quality sources from Scopus and Web of Science databases. Searches were limited to English-language articles published after 2010 in the "Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism" category to ensure relevance. Keywords included combinations of 'touris*' with

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'narrativ*' or 'story/stories/storytelling'. Only peer-reviewed articles directly related to tourism narratives were included.

The review process began with an extensive search that identified 246 records. After eliminating duplicates and irrelevant studies, 117 papers met the inclusion criteria, focusing on those with strong theoretical and methodological foundations related to tourism narratives. A detailed dataset was created, capturing essential information from each paper, such as authorship, publication year, and research methods.

4. Findings

4.1. Descriptive results

The dataset of 117 papers shows a clear upward trend in scholarly publications over time. Geographically, the majority of studies were from the United States (22%) and China (12%), with the rest distributed across various countries. In terms of journal distribution, the Journal of Heritage Tourism published the most papers (11%), followed by Annals of Tourism Research (9%) and Tourism Management (8%), which are leading journals in the field. The papers focus on two main groups: 57 papers discuss stakeholders like destination marketers, tour guides, and hotel operators, while 55 papers focus on tourists, including museum visitors and travel bloggers. Five papers address both sides. Most studies (65%) employed qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, sentiment analysis, and narrative analysis.

4.2. Themes

The thematic analysis identified five key themes in tourism narratives.

Destination Image: Approximately 35% of studies focus on how destination images are crafted, significantly influencing tourist decisions. Storytelling is used strategically by destination marketers to build destination brands and enhance appeal. It imbues destinations with personality traits and leverages emotional connections to increase credibility and engagement (Pachucki et al., 2022; Moin et al., 2020). Digital storytelling and first-person narratives are particularly effective, enhancing brand image and boosting visit intentions (Ryu et al., 2019). The metaverse also offers new opportunities for immersive storytelling, enriching the destination experience (Zhang & Wang, 2023).

Experiences: Around 22% of papers explore how storytelling influences tourist experiences and perceptions. This theme emphasizes the active role of tourists in co-creating their experiences and the impact of narratives on emotional engagement and empathy (Chronis, 2012; Pera, 2017). Positive emotions from shared stories enhance perceptions of

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authenticity and increase revisit intentions (Clarke & McAuley, 2016; Servidio & Ruffolo, 2016). Tourists use storytelling to align their experiences with their self-presentation on social networks, influencing destination perceptions and expectations (Lee & Oh, 2017; Qian, 2023).

Identity: About 21% of studies focus on how travel narratives contribute to personal and collective identity formation. Those narratives help individuals and communities articulate their identities through personal experiences and cultural myths (Downey & Sherry, 2023; Prince, 2021). Dark tourism sites use narratives to address historical traumas and foster reconciliation (Laing & Frost, 2019; Stone, 2011). Counter-narratives challenge dominant stories, promoting social justice and highlighting marginalized voices (Benjamin & Laughter, 2023). Heritage sites connect personal narratives with broader cultural contexts, influencing place identity (Dimache et al., 2017).

Authenticity: Approximately 11% of papers examine how authenticity is managed in tourism. Authenticity, a key criterion for travel experiences, involves both objective and existential dimensions. Objective authenticity relates to preservation efforts, while existential authenticity focuses on personal, unique experiences (Kim and Youn, 2016; Salet, 2021). Tourism narratives blend real and imagined elements to boost engagement, however, destinations may often prioritizing fantasy over genuine authenticity (Avraham and Daugherty, 2012).

Sustainability: The final theme is covered by about 10% of studies. This involves recognizing the impact of tourism on human and ecological systems and promoting ethical practices (Grimwood et al., 2019; Chen, 2023). Decolonizing tourism narratives and integrating Indigenous perspectives are essential for creating equitable models (Grimwood et al., 2023). Tourism imaginaries guide perceptions and practices, influencing responsible engagement and addressing issues like overtourism (Derrien and Stokowski, 2020). Expanding moral and cultural narratives can promote more ethical interactions and balance tourism promotion with sustainability goals (Zhang et al., 2021).

5. Conclusion

Narratives play a pivotal role in shaping tourist experiences, perceptions, and behaviors. Through storytelling, destinations craft compelling images that foster emotional connections, influence decision-making, and enhance tourist satisfaction. This study highlights five key themes in tourism narratives: destination image, experiences, identity, authenticity, and sustainability. Each contributes uniquely to how tourism is marketed, consumed, and understood. Future research should further explore the evolving impact of

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digital storytelling and the metaverse in tourism. By integrating diverse perspectives, tourism narratives can foster sustainable, inclusive, and engaging tourist experiences.

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