

## EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT THROUGH DIGITAL NARRATIVES: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF YOUTUBE STORYTELLING ON DESTINATION BRANDING AND PLACE IDENTITY IN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT:

In the digital age, user-generated material and emotionally compelling YouTube narratives are revolutionizing Indian destination branding. By narrative transportation and emotional involvement, travel vlogs serve as persuasive digital narratives that influence place identification and destination image, as this study explores. Based on the theories of destination image, **stimulus-organism-response** and narrative transportation, it offers a conceptual framework that positions storytelling “technology of power”. Using PLS-SEM analysis of survey data from 203 tourists, the study offers strategic recommendations for using YouTube storytelling to enhance destination image and community-driven brand identity are provided at the end for destination management organizations (DMO) in India.

**KEYWORDS:** Destination Branding, YouTube Storytelling, Emotional Engagement, Digital Narratives, **Destination image**, Travel vlogs, **User Generated Content (UGC)**.

### 1. Introduction:

The emergence of social media in the current digital era has drastically changed how travel destinations are promoted and experienced. Customers are becoming active co-creators who share their own experiences, impressions, and personal stories on various platforms rather of being passive users of brand narratives (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Adams, 2012). YouTube has become one of these platforms’ most potent storytelling tools, allowing users and content producers to create rich, emotionally engaging stories about locations, which in turn affects traveler behavior and destination perception. According to Gensler et al. (2013) and Kietzmann et al. (2011), social media platforms like YouTube have created a new type of open sources branding by democratizing content creation and enabling real-time customer participation. DMOs or destination marketing organization marketing organizations are becoming more and more aware of how important this change is. Since about 60% of DMOs now set aside money specifically for social media strategies (Barnes, 2015), YouTube and other similar platforms have evolved from promotional channels to collaborative spaces where users co-author destination brands through unplanned and improvised performance. This progress does, however come with difficulties in an ecosystem where user narratives, emotional engagement and fragmented storytelling are prevalent, traditional marketing models which are predicated on control consistency and predictability no longer completely apply (Fisher & Smith, 2011). Customers can now create destination identities that are unique, regional and emotionally compelling because to social media’s performativity agency and narrative skills (Berthon et al., 2012; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). According to Foucault (1977), social media serves as a platform for people to use narrative and emotional connection to exercise influence, and storytelling and performance can be viewed as technologies of power. Whereas previous study has examined social media branding on Facebook and Instagram (Visit Denmark’s Methods) YouTube’s long-form, immersive video content has received less attention, particularly in culturally diverse countries like India. Exploring how digital storytelling on YouTube influences destination branding, emotional engagement, and place identity is made easier by the rich legacy, regional identity, and narrative potential of the Indian tourism industry. Therefore, the aim of this research is to look into how YouTube storytelling affects viewers’ emotional involvement, their perception of the distinctiveness of destination brands and their behavioral intentions to travel to and suggest Indian places. Through emotional resonance and narrative authenticity, it positions storytelling as a performativity act that forms place identity and changes consumer behavior in addition to being a communication tool.

### 1.2. Research Questions:

**RQ1:** How does the perception of storytelling in destination branding influence tourists’ emotional engagement, perceived destination uniqueness, and behavioral intentions (like intention to visit and recommend)?

**RQ2:** To what extent do emotional engagement and perceived destination uniqueness mediate the relationship between storytelling perception in destination branding and tourists’ behavioral intention (visit and recommend)?

### 1.3. Research Gap:

The function of YouTube storytelling is still not well understood, despite the fact that social media has revolutionized destination branding, especially in the context of Indian travels. Research that has already been done mostly concentrates on Facebook and Instagram, ignoring YouTube lengthy, emotionally charged stories that have an ignoring YouTube’s lengthy, emotionally charged stories that have a significant impact on travelers’ perceptions. User generated and influencer content’s co-creative and participative potential is often overlooked in favor of top-down, DMO driven approaches. There is little empirical data on how YouTube narratives influence emotional engagement, brand distinctiveness and behavioral intentions like traveling to and recommending places, despite the apparent shift toward consumer led storytelling (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Additionally, there aren’t many frameworks that include performativity and sociological theories like storytelling as a power technology into models of tourism branding. Furthermore, there is little quantitative research that investigates the relationship between story perceptions, emotional connection and brand results using sophisticated techniques like PLS-SEM. There is a dearth of study on localization YouTube storytelling and its effects on genuine and emotionally compelling destination identities in the Indian setting, which is characterized by cultural and linguistic variety. The majority of work remains on Western-centric or concentrates on outside locations, failing to capture India’s own story and audience dynamics.

### 2. Literature Review:

2.1. Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Theory: According to Mehrabian and Russell (1974), the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model describes how environmental stimuli affect individual internal states, which in turn cause behavioral reactions. Storytelling is a stimulus used in tourism branding that elicits cognitive and emotional responses, such as emotional involvement and perceived distinctiveness, which influence traveler behaviors like recommendation or intention to visit. According to Hosany and Gilbert (2010), the relationship between stimuli and tourist behavior is mediated by emotional reactions. Furthermore, emotional encounter with destination narratives reinforce memories and inclinations to return, as demonstrated by Marques and Pinho (2021). Researchers can investigate how storytelling functions as a symbolic stimulus that elicits psychological involvement and strengthens brand advocacy and loyalty by using the

S-O-R framework. S-O-R theory then provides a clear explanation of how storytelling affects internal perceptions as well as exterior behaviors, thereby bolstering our theories regarding destination branding's emotional engagement, distinctiveness and behavioral purpose.

**2.2. Destination Image Theory:** Tourists create comprehensive mental impressions of places, according to destination image theory, which consists of conative (intentions), affective (feelings), and cognitive (beliefs) elements. According to Chronis (2012), the use of emotional, historical, cultural meanings into destination branding enhances both cognitive and affective representations. One of the main factors influencing travelers' intentions in the perceived uniqueness of a place, which is influenced by these improved impressions. The intention to return or promote a site strongly influenced by its image, as Styliadis et al. (2017) it show. Moreover, Qu, Kim and Im (2011) suggest that brand narratives-driven perceived uniqueness influences positive behavioral outcomes. This theory reinforces H2, H3, and H5 in your model by elucidating how storytelling enhances the affective and symbolic elements of a destination's image. As a result, destination image theory provides a strong foundation for comprehending how narrative enhances uniqueness and customer loyalty in travel related setting.

**2.3. Narrative Transportation Theory:** According to the Narrative Transportation Theory, people who are engrossed in a tale undergo emotional and cognitive involvement, which results in modification to their beliefs and actions. By producing affluent and emotionally stirring imagery that transports prospective travelers into imagined experiences, storytelling serves as an effective persuasive technique in destination branding (Zhang & Hao, 2019). Stronger emotional ties and increased behavioral intents, like visiting and endorsing the location are the results of this transportation. This is supported by Tussydiah (2014), who shows how immersive digital information improves both the intention to act and the travel experience. Marques and Pinho (2021) also demonstrate how emotionally charged stories support behavioral loyalty and memory formation. This hypothesis explains how storytelling affects emotional states and develops traveler intentions, which supports H1, H3, and H5. The affective and symbolic value of destination narrative in tourism marketing can therefore be effectively captured by Narrative Transportation Theory.

**2.4. Destination Branding:** Destination branding has become a vital strategic tool in the changing environment of tourism marketing, helping to set locations apart in a global market that is becoming more and more competitive. Today, consumer perception and co-created digital narratives have a considerable impact on destination and governmental initiatives (Pike, 2009). The development of a destination's identity and image heavily relies on emotional branding and storytelling, particularly on visual platforms (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006). Additionally, including user-generated content (UGC) into branding initiatives builds customer trust and authenticity, this supports long-term brand equity (Mariani et al., 2016). Destination branding is therefore no more a top-down procedure but rather a dynamic, participatory engagement influenced by tourists and marketers alike, necessitating ongoing innovation and adjustment to new digital ecosystems (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007).

**2.5. YouTube Storytelling:** A potent digital tool for destination branding, YouTube storytelling allows for emotionally compelling and immersive experiences that influence travelers' opinions and plans to visit. According to Tussydiah and Fesenmaier (2009), Visual platforms such as YouTube enable Locations to convey their distinct identities through dynamic, user-generated material that encourages genuineness and emotional engagement. Although they frequently combine amusement with compelling narratives that affect viewers' attitudes and behavioral intentions, vlogs and travel influences on YouTube have begun to be recognized for their role in creating the perception of a location (de Rosario et al., 2020). YouTube videos, as opposed to traditional advertising materials, frequently incorporate experience storytelling, which improves the construction of destination images on both a cognitive and affective level (Marine-Roig & Huertas, 2020). Thus, YouTube functions as a co-creative platform where destination brands are developed through interactive and emotionally charged digital storytelling, in addition to being an instrument for delivery of content.

**2.6. Emotional Engagement:** A Significant affective component of consumer-brand interactions is emotional engagement, which captures the degree of emotional connection that customer have in the product they are purchasing. According to Hollebeek (2011) and Brodie et al. (2013), emotional reactions like happiness, excitement, nostalgia, or even empathy have the power to profoundly influence consumer attitudes and behaviors, strengthening brand support and loyalty. Emotionally engaging experiences trigger deeper cognitive and affective processing, especially in digital and service based environments, which increases the chance of good word of mouth and repeat usage (Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009). Additionally, emotional engagement is essential to experiential marketing techniques, which engage consumers as co-creators of brand meaning through emotionally charged events rather than just passive recipients (Hollebeek, Clark & Macky, 2022). Additionally customers that are emotionally invested have higher customer lifetime values and are less price sensitive, which emphasizes the significance of emotional design and narrative in marketing tactics. In order to maintain competitive advantage in crowded marketplaces, it is important to cultivate emotional involvement in addition to strengthening brand ties.

**2.7. Digital Narratives:** Consumer perception, brand storytelling and destination image development have all benefited greatly from the use of digital narratives. Crafted and shared on popular platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and travel blogs, these narratives allow for participatory, interactive, and emotionally charged storytelling that goes beyond conventional marketing communication (Pulizzi, 2012; Gensler et al., 2013). According to Mariani et al. (2016), digital narratives enable users to co-author and co-create experiences, which results in more genuine and trustworthy depictions of locations in the context of tourism and destination branding. In contrast to top-down advertising content, user-generated digital stories are highly recognized as trustworthy and have a considerable impact on travelers' attitudes, intentions and behaviors (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). Furthermore, viewers are more deeply engaged by digital narratives that incorporate emotional and visual components, which enhance emotional resonance, recall, and identification (Malthouse et al., 2013). Due to this participatory culture and web 2.0 technologies, consumers now have more narrative power than marketers, which makes digital storytelling and essential feature of contemporary branding and engagement tactics (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

**2.8. User Generated Content (UGC):** It has revolutionized the field of digital marketing by enabling customers to participate in the development of brand narrative. Compared to brand generated material, user generated content (UGC) which includes reviews, images, videos, blogs, and social media posts is frequently seen as more genuine, reliable, and relevant (Christodoulides, Jevons, & Bonhomme, 2012). In experience based sectors like travel, hospitality, and fashion where emotional and visual storytelling are crucial, this content has a big impact on customer decision making (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Pera, 2018). UGC increases customer loyalty and advocacy by promoting two-way communication and creating a sense of community, which improves brand engagement (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). Additionally, through their shared experiences, users of platforms like Instagram, YouTube and TripAdvisor create participatory ecosystems that influence how consumers perceive brands and destinations (Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012). UGC is a strategic asset in modern digital branding because of its interactive and emotive qualities, which increase its persuasive power, particularly when the exhibits social proof and personal authenticity (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015).

**2.9. Travel vlogs:** Travel vlogs, which combine visual aesthetics, experimental narratives, and personal storytelling to influence viewers' opinions of destinations and travel intents, have become powerful tools in modern tourism marketing. Travel vlogs, a type of user generated content, offer immersive, emotionally compelling and genuine depictions of locations and frequently seen as more reliable than conventional advertising (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Månsson, 2011). Vloggers serve as unofficial opinion leaders by forming Para social bonds with viewers and influencing the way that people perceive a place through emotional storytelling, first-person accounts and real time experience (Hudson &

Thal, 2013; Pera, 2018). Travel motivation and decision making are positively impacted by these storylines, which increase viewer engagement by evoking feelings like excitement, nostalgia, and wanderlust. Additionally, by promoting viewer interaction likes shares and comments travel vlogs help co-create destination brands by increasing the reach and virality of messages within online communities (Mariani et al., 2016). Travel vlogs are a crucial link between digital storytelling and traveler behavior in a time when authenticity and experience are valued.

**2.10. Destination Image:**The Views, expectations and behavioral intentions of tourists are significantly influenced by the destination image. It includes both affective and cognitive elements how people assess a location’s qualities and the feelings it arouses (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). In addition to increasing the likelihood that tourists would visit, a strong, good destination image also affects post visit word-of-mouth, satisfaction and loyalty (Chi & Qu, 2008). By providing genuine, relatable and emotionally compelling representations, user generated content such as vlogs, reviews and social media posts contributes greatly to the creation and modification of destination image in the digital age (Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2015). **Additionally, travelers’ desire to visit the destination is strengthened when they emotionally engage with such content**, which amplifies affective image components (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). In order to co create image narratives that correspond with changing traveler motivations and identities, effective destination branding strategies increasingly use influencer marketing and digital storytelling (Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011). Therefore, in a congested global tourism market, preserving a destination’s image is crucial for maintaining long-term competitiveness and cultural relevance in addition to drawing tourists.

**Table A. Previous studies on destination tourism management frameworks.**

Study	Research Criteria / Focus Area	Key Objectives	Key Findings	Incremental Contribution of Your Study
Chronis (2012)	Storytelling in tourism marketing	To explore how narratives influence destination appeal	Cultural storytelling enhances memorability and emotional ties with destinations	Focuses specifically on YouTube-based storytelling and emotional connection within Indian destinations
Kim & Fesenmaier (2017)	Emotional engagement in travel narratives	To identify emotional triggers in digital storytelling	Emotionally evocative stories deepen viewer-destination connection	Applies emotional engagement theory to Indian YouTube tourism content
Li & Wang (2023)	Role of influencers and narratives	To examine how vlogger storytelling affects destination image	Authentic vlogs drive stronger emotional proximity and intention to visit	Goes beyond influencers to include official tourism campaigns and co-creation through viewer interaction
Månsson (2011)	User-generated travel videos	To analyze the impact of user videos on perceived authenticity	UGC enhances trust, relatability, and emotional engagement	Includes both user-generated and state-promoted videos in an Indian context
Singh & Das (2022)	YouTube storytelling by Indian tourism boards	To assess branding strategies of Indian states on YouTube	Videos with local culture and community stories evoke greater engagement	Adds analysis of place identity construction and emotional responses in Indian tourism narratives
Sharma & Patel (2023)	Audience response and place identity	To understand the role of YouTube comments in destination image	Audience engagement helps co-create place brand and identity	Adds emotional dimension (e.g., nostalgia, pride) in place identity formation
De Rosario et al. (2021)	Emotions in digital branding	To study how emotions influence loyalty in media marketing	Positive emotions correlate with deeper brand commitment	Examines emotional arcs (anticipation → belonging) in destination storytelling on YouTube
Hudson et al. (2015)	Branded content and emotional response	To explore emotional branding via social media content	Emotional storytelling increases consumer-brand relationships and loyalty	Brings the concept of emotional branding into Indian digital tourism content context
Tussyadiah (2020)	Immersive storytelling in tourism	To assess how immersive formats (video, VR) affect travel intention	Narrative immersion significantly enhances attitude toward destinations	Applies immersive narrative ideas to YouTube tourism storytelling in a culturally rich Indian setting

### 3. Hypotheses Development:

3.1: Perception of storytelling in destination branding : Storytelling has grown into an effective strategy in destination branding, used to elicit feelings and establish stronger bonds with prospective travelers in addition to providing accurate information. Research studies reveal that emotionally charged stories contribute to the development of a destination’s symbolic identity by forming significant associations in the minds of travelers (Chronis, 2012). The term “emotional engagement” here refers to the feeling evoked by captivating travel narratives, which are frequently disseminated via social media and digital platforms. Gretzel and Jamal (2009) assert that these kinds of narratives have the power to greatly improve the perception of a place and encourage personal relevance, both of which have an impact on attitudes and intents of travelers. Furthermore, narrative helps destination marketers to convey genuineness and collaborate with travelers to create unforgettable experiences, which strengthens emotional resonance and trust (Zhang & Hao, 2019). Additionally, storytelling helps to turn locations into imagined experiences, strengthening emotional ties and boosting traveler loyalty (Johnson & McCabe, 2021). These results imply that the strategic integration of storytelling into destination branding might increase emotional involvement and in turn, influence traveler behavior.

*Hypothesis 1: Perception of storytelling in destination branding positively influences emotional engagement with the destination.*

Destination storytelling is crucial in influencing how consumers perceive a brand’s distinctiveness in the increasingly competitive travel industry. Destinations can differentiate themselves from similar tourism offerings by emphasizing their cultural, historical, experiential uniqueness through the incorporation of narratives into allowing visitors to create symbolic interpretations; storytelling helps visitors create a distinctive identity (Johnson & McCabe, 2021). In addition to differentiating a place can help visitor see a place as more special (Zhang & Hao, 2019). Additionally, storytelling which frequently influences travelers’ expectations and choices, enhance place identity by expressing what makes the location unique and unforgettable (Kavoura, 2014) therefore, by creating positioning that is both emotionally and culturally rich, the use of storytelling in destination branding amplifies the brand’s perceived uniqueness.

*Hypothesis 2: Perception of storytelling in destination branding positively influences perceived uniqueness of the destination brand.*

3.2. Emotional engagement with the destination : The fundamental psychological process that connects travelers’ interior experiences with their behavioral intentions toward a destination is emotional involvement. People are more likely to exhibit positive intents, like traveling to

the location or recommending it to others, when they develop emotional connections through storytelling, images, or virtual experiences (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010). The word-of-mouth marketing and the desire to travel can both be improved by emotional involvement, which cultivates affective commitment and a sense of connection (Yuan, Cai, Morrison, & Linton, 2005). These emotional reactions transcend cognitive assessments, impacting choices by evoking sentiment of happiness, fondness, or motivation brought on by the destination brand (Prayag, 2009). Additionally, emotionally charged narratives frequently leave a lasting impact that enhance social sharing behaviors and revisit intention (Marques & Pinho, 2021). These results highlight how crucial it is to create emotionally compelling destination marketing efforts in order to favorably affect both traveler intention and destination advocacy.

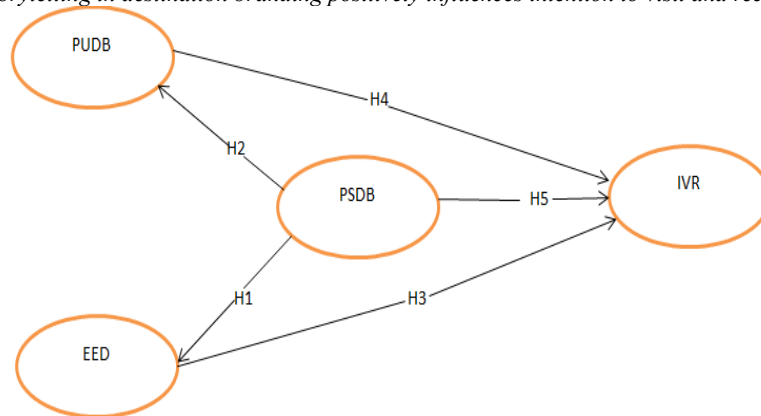
*Hypothesis 3: Emotional engagement with the destination positively influences intention to visit and recommend.*

**3.3. Perceived uniqueness of the destination brand :** A significant component of destination brand equity is perceived uniqueness, which affects travellers’ loyalty and decision making processes. Potential travelers find a place more appealing and memorable when they believe it to be unique, providing unique cultural experiences, landscapes, or stories (Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011). According to Stylelidis, Shani, and Belhassen (2017), uniqueness increases tourists’ desire to visit and their propensity to refer people to the location by creating a feeling of novelty and distinction. According to Tasci and Gartner’s (2007) research, travel destinations that are seen as unique and genuine are more likely to generate positive behavioral intentions, particularly at a time when tourists are looking for experiences that are significant and customized. In addition, perceived distinctiveness increases destination loyalty and emotional attachment, which raises the intention to visit and suggest the place (Wang & Xu, 2015). These results imply that a major driver of traveler behavior is to center a location on its distinctive features.

*Hypothesis 4: Perceived uniqueness of the destination brand positively influences intention to visit and recommend.*

**3.4. Perception of storytelling in destination branding :** Storytelling is a persuasive communication technique used in destination branding that influences visitor behavior by evoking strong feelings in addition to providing information. A destination’s captivating and immersive image can greatly impact travelers’ intention to visit and suggest it, due to narratives that are rich in local culture, history, and personal experiences (Chronis, 2012). By emotionally involving audiences, storytelling raises the destination’s perceived authenticity and appeal and ultimately encourages visitors toward positive behavioral intentions (Kim, Ahu, & Chung, 2013). According to studies, stories help travelers visualize themselves in the location, creating emotional connections which enhance their desire to visit and likely increase the possibility that they will suggest it to others (Zhang & Hao, 2019). According to Tussyadiah (2014), persuasive destination narratives also increase credibility and trust, which increases the effect and recall of marketing messages. In order to translate knowledge and Curiosity and visit and advocacy goals, the way that narrative is perceived is important.

*Hypothesis 5: Perception of storytelling in destination branding positively influences intention to visit and recommend.*



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework.

**Table B: Demographic information.**

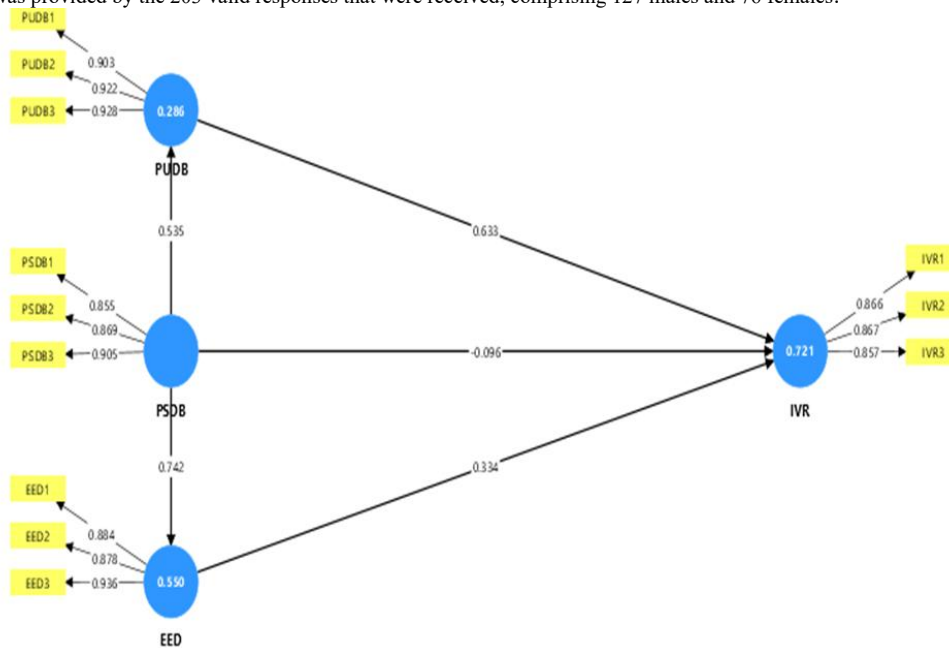
Variable	Category	Numbers (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	127	62.56%
	Female	76	37.43%
Age	18-24	50	24.63%
	25-34	131	64.53%
	35-44	20	9.85%
	45-54	2	0.98%
Income	Below 10000	37	18.22%
	10000 to 30000	29	14.28%
	30000 to 50000	69	33.99%
	50000 to 70000	25	12.31%
	70000 and above	43	21.18%
Frequency of watching travel content YouTube	Daily	155	76.35%
	2-3 times a week	35	17.24%
	Once a week	11	5.41%
	Rarely	2	0.98%

**4. Method:**

**4.1. Research Methodology:** This study used quantitative research methodology to investigate the influence of emotional engagement through YouTube storytelling on tourists’ perceptions. The study is grounded in several theoretical frameworks, such as digital narratives (Chung & Buhalis, 2008), destination branding (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007), Travel vlogs (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009), emotional engagement (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), and community-driven branding (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). In particular, it studies how YouTube user-generated and influencer-driven content affects travelers’ opinions of places and their ensuing plans for behavior. A systematic questionnaire with two main components was used to collect the data. Using validated scales from previous research, the first segment assessed key constructs such as emotional engagement, destination image, narrative impact and community resonance (Hudson et al., 2015; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017; Molinillo et al., 2018). To capture complex comments, a 7- point Likert scale was used. In order to facilitate subgroup analysis and a more thorough contextual understanding of the influence of YouTube storytelling, the second segment gathered demographic data from the respondents, such as their age, gender, frequency of travel.

**4.2. Research Method:** Purpose sampling was used in this study to find participants who frequently travel inside India and are avid YouTube viewers. The participants selected were acceptable for analyzing the study’s main constructs since the method of sampling made sure they had relevant exposure to travel-related digital storytelling content. The research team divided individuals into groups according to how frequently they watched YouTube travel stories in order to record differences in exposure and engagement. Depending on how frequently they interacted with such content, respondents were divided into four groups. Table B displays these frequency groupings. This categorization made it possible to do insightful subgroups analysis and provided insight into how different engagement levels affect behavioral intentions destination perceptions and emotional reactions. In exploratory tourism research, the purposive approach method was chosen because it is effective in focusing on cases with a wealth of information, especially when the goal is to examine a particular behavior or pattern of digital media consumption (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). The study focuses on user utilizing the YouTube storytelling formats, like influencer stories and trip vlogs, guaranteed data dependability and relevance for exploring the effect on place identification and destination branding.

**4.3. Data collection and sample Characteristics:** A systematic online questioner was used to gather data in order to evaluate the impact of emotional engagement in YouTube storytelling on destination branding. To ensure content validity and contextual relevance; the survey was examined by three academics and senior professors. Item clarity was examined in a pilot research involving thirty participants. On important question asked, “How often do you use YouTube? There were four possible answers: Rarely, 2-3 times per week, once per week and Daily. Minor changes were made to better reflect actual usage behavior in response to the input. Twenty-five individuals respond using YouTube for more than five years, reporting their YouTube engagement experience. An online survey was the most appropriate given the digital setting (Pereira & Tam, 2021) Experienced consumers of digital content pertaining to travel were guaranteed to be included through the use of a purposive sampling technique. It was voluntary to participate. A varied and pertinent sample was provided by the 203 valid responses that were received, comprising 127 males and 76 females.



**Figure 2:** Proposed model prepared by the authors, using SMART PLS.

**5. Result:** Smart PLS 4.0, a statistical program, was used to estimate the model using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) (Ringle et al., 2005; Ringle et al., 2022). PLS-SEM estimation involves two steps: The validity and reliability of construct measures were first confirmed by evaluating the measurement model. To test the theories, the structural model was then evaluated.

**5.1. Measurement model evaluation:** We studied the measurement model’s discriminant validity, convergent validity and reliability. When conducting the reliability test, researchers have to look at a construct’s Composite Reliability (CR) and item loadings. The frequently accepted standards state that the CR of a construct must be greater than 0.7 and that all items’ loading on their respective constructs must be greater than 0.7 (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012; Henseler et al., 2009). A construct’s average variance extracted (AVE), which must be more than 0.5, must be examined in order to demonstrate convergent validity (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012).

**Table 1. Path coefficient and hypothesis testing summary.**

Hypothesis	Path	Original Sample	Sample Mean	Standard Deviation	T-Statistics	P-Values	Interpretation
H1	EED→IVR	0.368	0.373	0.08	4.573	0	Significant
H2	PSDB→EED	0.729	0.728	0.045	16.334	0	Highly Significant
H3	PSDB→IVR	0.029	0.029	0.053	0.551	0.582	Not Significant
H4	PSDB→PUDB	0.591	0.588	0.059	10.072	0	Significant
H5	PUDB→IVR	0.407	0.401	0.07	5.791	0	Significant

**Table 2. Convergence validity and cross-loading.**

	EED	IVR	PSDB	PUDB
EED1	0.903	0.586	0.651	0.587
EED2	0.925	0.687	0.727	0.727
EED3	0.88	0.619	0.587	0.757
IVR1	0.669	0.888	0.529	0.651
IVR2	0.624	0.875	0.538	0.573
IVR3	0.58	0.913	0.372	0.662
PSDB1	0.56	0.278	0.848	0.383
PSDB2	0.68	0.443	0.916	0.596
PSDB3	0.686	0.65	0.904	0.563
PUDB1	0.749	0.759	0.557	0.914
PUDB2	0.667	0.54	0.501	0.905
PUDB3	0.661	0.599	0.548	0.91

The findings, which are displayed in Table 2, indicate that all of the aforementioned requirements were fulfilled because all item loading were greater than 0.7, CRs was higher than 0.7 and AVEs were greater than 0.5, Used the guidelines established by Hair et al. (2011) for the discriminant validity test first looking at the cross-loading and then performing Fornell and Larcker (1981). Table 2 cross-loading results verified that no item loaded higher on any other constructs than its own. According to the Fornell and Larcker (1981) test, the square root of each construct's AVE must be higher than any of the subsequent ones when compared to the constructs' correlations with one another. Table 3, which presents the results, shows that this requirement was also satisfied.

**Table 3. Fornell and Larcker test.**

	EED	IVR	PSDB	PUDB
EED	0.903			
IVR	0.701	0.892		
PSDB	0.729	0.538	89.00%	
PUDB	0.765	0.706	59.10%	0.909

**5.2. Structural model evaluation and hypothesis testing:**

The structural model was assessed to test the proposed links between constructs after construct validity and reliability were established by the measurement model evaluation (Table 2 -6). Table 1 show and illustrated in Figure 2 the path analysis results, which include standardized path coefficients ( $\beta$ ), t-statistics and p-values. The significance of each path was evaluated using bootstrapping based on 5000 resamples. As shown in Table 1 and, H1 suggested that intention to visit/revisit (IVR) is favorable influenced by Emotional Engagement with the Destination (EED). The statistically significant and positive link is indicated by the path coefficient ( $\beta = 0.368, t=4.573, p < 0.001$ ). Higher emotional engagement with a destination enhances the possibility that travelers will plan to return or promote it, according to this research, which supports H1. Hypothesis 2 suggested a favorable relationship between EED and the perception of storytelling in destination branding (PSDB). H2 is supported by the data, which indicate a strong and very significant connection ( $\beta = 0.729, t = 16.334, p < 0.001$ ). Table 1 summarizes the outcome of the hypotheses testing (supplementary Data: Figure 1)

**Table 4. Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT).**

	EED	IVR	PSDB	PUDB
EED				
IVR	0.793			
PSDB	0.816	0.588		
PUDB	0.853	0.786	0.651	

This suggests that promoting emotional involvement among prospective tourists requires destination narrative. In contrast, H3 which suggested that PSDB directly affects IVR was not substantiated. With  $t = 0.551$  and  $p = 0.582$ , the path coefficient was  $\beta = 0.029$ , supporting the non-significant strength of the connection. This implies that narratives by themselves may not directly affect travelers' intentions to return, rather, they may have an indirect impact through emotional or cognitive mediators like engagement or distinctiveness, H4 investigated the connection between perceived uniqueness of the destination brand (PUDB). H4 was supported by the path coefficient, which showed a strong and significant correlation ( $\beta = 0.591, t = 10.072, p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that creating a distinctive location brand identity in the minds of travelers is facilitated by storytelling. Lastly, H5 examined the effect of PUDB, H5 examined the effect of PUDB on IVR and confirmed it with a substantial and beneficial effect ( $\beta = 0.407, t = 5.791, p < 0.001$ ). This implies that tourists' behavior intentions, such as visiting or suggesting a location, is much increased when they believe the destination to be distinctive. All things considered, four of the five hypotheses (H1, H2, H4, and H5) received support.

**Table 5. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)**

	VIF
EED1	2.673
EED2	2.904
EED3	2.269
IVR1	2.217
IVR2	2.221
IVR3	2.771
PSDB1	2.18
PSDB2	2.696
PSDB3	2.232
PUDB1	2.505
PUDB2	2.896
PUDB3	2.842

The paradigm emphasizes how storytelling affects revisit intentions indirectly, mainly through emotional connection and perceived distinctiveness, as opposed to directly influencing them. The conceptual framework's use of EED and PUDB as mediators is further supported by the rejection of H3. Strong convergent validity (Table 6), discriminant validity (Tables 2-4), and the lack of multi collinearity (Table 5) all demonstrate that the measurement model supporting these findings is robust. When taken as a whole, the results increase trust in the validity of the structural model and offer empirical support for the theoretical presumptions that link branding behavioral objectives, and emotional and cognitive reactions in tourism contexts. The results have significant ramifications for brand strategists and destination marketers. In particular, they emphasize the importance of developing emotionally engaging and narratively rich destination stories that engage prospective tourists and help create a distinctive and memorable brand identity, both of which are critical for fostering traveler loyalty and advertising through word-of-mouth.

**Table 6. Measurement model assessment: reliability and validity**

Construct	Items	Outer Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Emotional Engagement of Destination	EED1	0.903	0.887	0.930	0.815
	EED2	0.925			
	EED3	0.880			
Intention to Visit/Revisit (IVR)	IVR1	0.888	0.872	0.921	0.796
	IVR2	0.875			
	IVR3	0.913			
Perception of Storytelling in Destination Branding (PSDB)	PSDB1	0.848	0.870	0.919	0.792
	PSDB2	0.916			
	PSDB3	0.904			
Perceived Uniqueness of the destination Brand (PUDB)	PUDB1	0.914	0.896	0.935	0.827
	PUDB2	0.905			
	PUDB3	0.910			

**6. Discussion**

The objective of the study was to examine how storytelling functions in destination branding and how it affects travelers' emotional engagement and perceptions of the destination brand's distinctiveness and behavioral intentions more especially, the desire to travel there or suggest it to others. The structural model's results provide solid empirical backing for most of the assumption put out offering important theoretical and practical insights into the ways in which narrative based branding strategy influence the attitudes and actions of tourists. The findings shows that EED is strongly and statistically significantly influenced by PSDB ( $\beta = 0.729, p < 0.001$ ). This demonstrates the potent emotional impact

of storytelling and confirms that skillfully written tales that are anchored in the local identity, culture and legacy may significantly strengthen visitors' emotional bonds with a place. This result is in line with past studies that highlight the symbolic and emotional significance of destination narrative (Chronis, 2012; Kim & Richardson, 2003). PUDB was also found to be considerably improved by PSDB ( $\beta = 0.591, p < 0.001$ ). This demonstrates that narratives not only evoke emotional resonance but also aid in distinctiveness by creating a unique brand image of storytelling. Together, these findings support the idea that storytelling is a multifaceted branding technique that can elicit affective (emotional engagement) and cognitive (perceived uniqueness) reactions, additionally; IVR of tourists were significantly and favorably impacted by both EED and PUDB. Particularly, PUDB  $\rightarrow$  IVR produced  $\beta = 0.407 (p < 0.001)$ , whereas EED  $\rightarrow$  IVR produced  $\beta = 0.368 (p < 0.001)$ . These findings highlight how perceptual and emotional assessments influence travelers' intentions to visit or suggest a place. People who are emotionally invested and who believe that a place is special are more inclined to turn those inner reactions into results that are action-oriented. Remarkably, PSDB's direct impact on IVR was not statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.029, p = 0.582$ ), indicating that behavioral intentions are not directly influenced by storytelling alone. Instead, EED and PUDB act as complete mediators of its influence. This has significant theoretical ramifications, especially when considering the S-O-R framework. Storytelling functions as the stimulus in this situation, influencing internal organismic states (emotional and perceptual evaluations) which in turn produce the response the desire to go or suggest. Though this mediated approach, we can better understand how storytelling functions as a strategic instrument that modifies internal psychological mechanisms rather than as a direct behavior motivator. These results demonstrate how storytelling has a significant though indirect, impact on traveler behavior. Tourists' intents are ultimately shaped by the emotional investment and perceived uniqueness of the brand, not just the story. As a result, storytelling becomes an integral part of a larger destination brand strategy rather than a stand-alone method. Practically speaking, these observations provide managers of tourism brands and DMOs with useful advice. Particularly marketers should concentrate on developing narratives that are authentic, emotionally compelling, and rich in symbols and rooted in the destination's cultural and historical identity. Brand distinctiveness and emotional connection can be strengthened by utilizing tools including influencer-led narratives, user-generated content, immersive visual storytelling, and interactive digital platforms. Such narrative techniques have the potential to improve brand positioning, strengthen visitor engagement and eventually influence behavioral outcomes like more site visit and word-of-mouth referrals when used successfully. All things considered, our study confirms that, when employed skillfully, storytelling is a potent tool for influencing perception, fostering loyalty, and motivating action in tourism scenarios.

#### 7. Theoretical Implications

This research makes a number of significant theoretical advances in the fields of consumer psychology, destination branding and traveler behavior, especially when it comes to narrative driven marketing tactics. First, the study bolsters the theoretical and empirical underpinning of storytelling as a strategic tool for destination branding. This research elevates storytelling to a theoretically grounded antecedent that activates important psychological mechanisms, specifically emotional engagement and perceived uniqueness, which in turn influence behavioral intentions. Prior research has frequently approached storytelling as a creative communication tool or promotional tactic. In doing so, the study positions storytelling as a crucial factor in the decision making processes of tourists, extending it conceptual function beyond its aesthetic or rhetorical appeal. Second, by combining emotive and cognitive reactions into a single conceptual framework, the results add to the body of knowledge on branding. This study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how tourists process branding stimuli by epically demonstrating that destination engagement and perceived uniqueness, in contrast to much of the previous research that tends to isolate emotional and rational responses. By demonstrating that emotional connection and cognitive difference can coexist and independently influence customer behavior, this dual pathways model contributed to theoretical discussions in experiential marketing and brand positioning. Third, the study emphasizes how psychological dimensions, particularly perceived uniqueness and emotional engagement, mediate the relationship between behavioral intention and storytelling. A mediated (or process-oriented) model of influence is supported by the substantial indirect effects through these mediators and the lack of a large direct effects through these mediators and the lack of a large direct effect from narrative to intention. By confirming that narrative persuasion operates by influencing internal states that in turn drive action rather than by using direct behavioral triggers this adds to theoretical models in tourism and consumer behavior. It supports the S-O-R paradigm by providing empirical evidence of the relationship between narrative inputs (stimuli) and organismic states (cognitive and affective reactions), which in turn shape behavioral intentions. Finally, the study addresses the need for additional context-specific theory development in experiencing service contexts and high involvement consumption domains by implementing and evaluating this model in a tourism environment. Travel offers a fertile arena for testing theories of narrative influence and experience and experiential branding since it is an emotionally charged and identity relevant activity. Thus, the study adds to the expending amount of research that emphasizes the importance of narrative persuasion in influencing consumer experiences, particularly in situations when emotions, meaning making and personal relevance are crucial. When all factors looked at, this study not only supports the theoretical applicability of storytelling in destination marketing, but it also establishes it as a central tool in the developing conversation about experiential branding customer interaction and traveler decision making. It urges future studies to have an impact on additional high touch emotionally charged consuming categories.

#### 8. Managerial Implications:

The study's conclusion offer a number of practical recommendation for tourism boards, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and branding experts looking to improve visitor engagement and enhance behavioral outcomes through strategic narrative branding. First, it is crucial to go beyond conventional promotional massaging and perceived uniqueness. The creation of genuine, emotionally stirring, and culturally grounded narratives that capture the destination's heritage, unique identity should be a top priority for DMOs. This type of storytelling strengthens visitors' emotional bond with the location, which is crucial in determining whether or not they would return or suggest the location, as this study demonstrates. Second, storytelling's beneficial impact on perceived brand uniqueness emphasizes how valuable it is as a crucial differentiator in the very competitive and crowded travel industry. Though folklore, local legends, historical landmarks or the lived experiences of locals, DMOs can use narrative to convey what makes the place genuinely unique. Narrative branding can enhance competitive positioning, brand recall and preference by presenting the location as distinctive and memorable. Third, the association between storytelling and behavioral intentions is mediated by emotional and cognitive components, indicating that narrative and cognitive components, indicating that narrative branding has an indirect and process based effect. Storytelling affects visitor behavior by influencing their internal views and emotions rather than by directly causing them to act. This realization necessitates a comprehensive and integrated marketing approach that ensures narrative is continuously included into all touch points, including social media, travel guides, booking portals, destination websites and in person visitor experiences. Forth, because storytelling has an indirect and psychological effect, DMOs should investigate immersive and interactive formats that increase engagement, such as influence led storytelling, virtual reality tours, augmented reality overlays, interactive videos, and user-generated content campaigns. These methods not only increase tourists' emotional involvement but also give them the opportunity to co-create and customize their experience with the destination brand, making the engagement more memorable, participatory and shareable. Furthermore, study highlights the importance of managing destination storytelling as a long term strategic investment rather than a short term promotional tactic. Creating a compelling narrative identity necessitates working with local stakeholders, incorporating community perspectives, and producing content constantly. When destination storytelling is in line with the destination's core values and brand personality, it can promote repeat visitors, foster long-term loyalty, and encourage natural authentic word-of-mouth and digital advocacy among travelers. In a nutshell destination storytelling when executed with authenticity, creativity, and strategic consistency, can be a potent branding tool that drives emotional connection, brand distinctiveness, and ultimately, behavioral engagement in the tourism industry

## 9. Limitations

The study provides insightful information about the function of storytelling in destination branding, however it should be highlighted that it has several limitations. Its cross-sectional design, which limits causal interpretations, first records impressions at a single moment in time, to investigate how visitor attitudes and actions evolve over time; longitudinal or experimental research is advised. The generalization of the sample may be its particular demographic and geographic focus. Cross-cultural research with a range of traveler types is required to increase applicability. Although perceived uniqueness and emotional involvement were important mediators, other elements including perceived value, trust and destination image may also influence traveler choices. These could provide a more comprehensive model. Subsequently, the study evaluated perceived storytelling quality without making a distinction between different sorts of narratives. Future should look at how alternative storytelling styles, such as influencer driven or heritage based content, affect traveler behavior differently. By addressing these issues, narrative in destination marketing will have more theoretical depth and usefulness.

## 10. Future Research Directions

The result and limitations of this study can be expanded upon in a number of ways to enhance knowledge of destination branding storytelling. First, longitudinal research might examine how behavioral intentions, emotional involvement, and perceived uniqueness change before, during and after a trip, emphasizing the importance of storytelling for memory, contentment and loyalty. Second by adjusting narrative factors such as perspective, tone and media format, experiential designs can determine causal relationships and determine which components have the greatest impact on visitor reactions. Third, breaking down narratives into cultural, historical, and environmental and user generated categories may help identify what attracts to certain traveler demographics, allowing for more specialized marketing tactics. Fourth, extending the paradigm to incorporate moderators or mediators like cultural orientation, trust, authenticity, or past experience may provide a deeper comprehension of how narrative influences behavior. To create worldwide adaptable narrative techniques, it is imperative to conduct cross-cultural studies to ascertain if the impacts of storytelling are culturally particular or universal. Furthermore, by combining self-reported replies with digital behavior data (such as click-through rates and social media engagement), a more complete picture of how destination stories affect real travel behavior online may be obtained. All things considered, a dynamic, audience-centered approach to narrative design in tourism marketing, cultural sensitivity and a variety of methodologies are necessary to further storytelling research.

## 11. Conclusion

The significant part of storytelling plays in destination branding is validated in the study, which makes important theoretical and empirical contributions. Using an integrated structural model, it shows how the PSDB has a large impact on perceived uniqueness PUDB and EED, both of which are major predictors of tourist behavioral intentions, such as visiting or recommending a place. The dual emotive and cognitive mechanisms through which narrative influences decision-making are highlighted by these studies. The main indirect influence of storytelling is through emotional and distinctiveness impressions, while context may affect the direct consequences. As a strategic branding tool that is essential to the decision-making process for tourists, this presents storytelling as more than just a marketing gimmick. Destinations are more likely to develop emotional ties, differentiate their brands and increase visitor loyalty if they tell stories that are genuine and emotionally impactful. The study theoretically bridges gaps in branding, experiential marketing, and tourist literature by combining behavioral intents, storytelling, emotional engagement and uniqueness in a single framework. It gives a methodical organized comprehension of how tales influence consumer behavior and serves as a foundation for further research into comparable mediated mechanisms in other service contexts. In practical terms, the article proposes the DMOs make investment in narrative-driven, culturally-based strategies for digital, social and immersive platforms. Such narratives boost brand equity, increase engagement and encourage word-of-mouth and visitor traffic. All things considered, storytelling becomes a crucial strategic tool for destination branding, helping to build meaningful visitor experiences, engagement and loyalty in a cutthroat, experience-driven travel market.

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