RESEARCH PAPER

From Digital Narratives To Travel Intention: A Dual-Process Model Mediated By Attitude And Moderated By Media Engagement

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Abstract

Digital narratives have become a core tool for tourism marketing in the social media era, but the psychological mechanisms by which they influence tourists' decision-making have not been fully elucidated. In this study, we integrated the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and narrative transmission theory to construct a dual-processing framework for digital narratives to influence tourism intention, revealing that they shape tourism attitudes through the central path (information quality) and the peripheral path (narrative attractiveness), thus influencing tourism intention and exploring the moderating effect of media engagement. The study used an online questionnaire to collect 367 valid samples, which were analyzed by structural equation modeling. The reliability of the measurement model was good (α=0.847-0.912, CR=0.853-0.915, AVE=0.638-0.782), and the fit of the structural model was excellent (χ^2/df=2.189, CFI=0.947, RMSEA=0.057). The results showed that: (1) both digital narrative quality (β=0.394***) and attractiveness (β=0.447***) significantly and positively affected tourism attitudes; (2) tourism attitudes fully mediated the effect of digital narratives on intention, with indirect effects of 0.269 and 0.305, respectively; and (3) media engagement significantly moderated the relationship between attitudes and intention ($\Delta\chi^2$=12.437***), and the path coefficient of high engagement group (χ^2/df=2.189, CFI=0.947, RMSEA=0.057). The path coefficient of the high participation group (β=0.762) was significantly higher than that of the low participation group (β=0.591), with a critical value of 4.23. The contribution of the study is to integrate the dual theoretical perspectives to clarify the influencing mechanism, to validate the mediating role of attitudes, and to reveal the boundary conditions of media participation, so that it can provide differentiated strategic guidance for destination marketing.

Keywords: Digital Narrative; Tourism Intention; Fine Processing Likelihood Model; Narrative Transmission Theory; Attitude Mediation; Media Engagement

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1. Introduction

The digital era has reshaped the narratives of tourism marketing. 80.7% of the population (approximately 69.9 million people) in Turkey alone will use the Internet for an average of 8 hours per day in 2022, providing an unprecedented opportunity to influence tourists' decisions through social media. As Gottschall (2012) argues, humans are essentially “storytelling animals” - stories are the fundamental way we understand the world. In this context, digital narratives are no longer simple technological migrations of traditional narratives,

but rather innovative forms of communication that incorporate multimodal elements, as demonstrated by Wang and Feng (2023) and Lang (2024), whose research confirms that the integration of verbal, visual, and audio elements in social media content creates compelling imagery of destinations. However, there is still a theoretical gap in the existing research on the psychological mechanisms of how digital narratives affect tourists' travel intentions.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), a classic framework for explaining information persuasion, has been widely used in tourism research.Chung and Han (2017) verified the persuasive effect of social media tourism information, and Kapoor et al. (2022) found that information quality positively affects intention to stay. However, as pointed out by Filieri and McLeay (2014), the ELM framework focuses mainly on the direct impact of persuasive factors and ignores the psychological conversion process of potential tourists. Meanwhile, the theory of narrative transmission reveals the unique persuasive mechanism of storytelling - when people are immersed in the narrative, “all mental processes are concentrated on the events occurring in the narrative” (Green & Brock, 2000). This state of transmission produces persuasive effects that “do not align with traditional dual-processing models” (Escalas, 2004). Therefore, how to integrate these two theoretical frameworks to explain the influence mechanism of digital narratives has become an urgent theoretical problem.

The core contributions of this study are: first, we constructed a dual processing model integrating ELM and narrative transmission theory to explain the mechanism by which digital narratives affect tourism attitudes through the central path (narrative quality) and the peripheral path (narrative attractiveness); second, we verified the mediating role of attitudes between digital narratives and tourism intention, and revealed the psychological transformation process from information reception to behavioral intention; third, we explored the moderating effects of Third, the moderating effect of media engagement was explored, providing a contextual perspective for understanding tourism decision-making in digital environments. These findings not only advance the theoretical research on tourism marketing, but also provide guidance for the digital marketing practices of destination management organizations.

2 Theoretical foundation and research hypotheses

2.1 Dual Processing Path of Digital Narratives

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) proposes that persuasion can occur through two paths: the central path involves in-depth processing of information, and the peripheral path relies on heuristic processing of simple cues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In the context of tourism, Yu and Ko (2021) stated that "the core path of ELM corresponds to the rational decision-making path of tourists, which is reflected in that consumers get the perception of destination and generate travel intention through in-depth reasoning and thinking of tourism information itself". This rational path emphasizes the role of information quality, accuracy and relevance. In contrast, the peripheral path focuses on “the symbolic meaning of the destination” and “the trust or emotional experience the tourism destination brings to tourists” (Yu & Ko, 2021).

In the digital narrative context, these two paths take on new forms. The central path is embodied in narrative quality-the richness, credibility, and utility value of information.Yoo et al. (2017) showed that "information quality, source credibility, interactivity, and accessibility have a positive influence on travel decision support satisfaction". When tourists carefully evaluate the destination information, the professional background of virtual spokespersons, or the level of detail of user comments in short videos, they are processing the central path. The peripheral path then manifests as narrative appeal-visual impact, emotional resonance, and social identity.Lim et al. (2017) found that social media influencers' attractiveness ($\beta = 0.381$, $p < 0.000$) and trustworthiness ($\beta = 0.263$, $p < 0.003$) significantly influenced attitudes, which in turn and attitude in turn predicted travel intention. This suggests that in digital narratives, surface features can also produce powerful persuasive effects.

However, there are limitations in the traditional ELM framework. As Thomas et al. (2024) pointed out in their meta-analysis, “narrative transportation did not adhere to a traditional dual-processing

model". Narrative transportation involves unique psychological mechanisms - while "cognitive effort is relatively high", "counterarguing is less likely to occur" (Nielsen & Escalas, 2010; Ma, 2020). 2010; Ma, 2020). This "unintentionally affective" rather than "intentionally cognitive" approach leads to "potentially increasing and long-lasting persuasive effects" (Appel & Richter, 2007). Richter, 2007). Therefore, this study integrates narrative transmission theory into the dual processing framework, suggesting that digital narratives ultimately influence tourists' attitudes toward destinations, regardless of the pathway taken. Based on this, we propose that

1. H1a: The quality of digital narratives (center path) positively affects tourist attitudes.
2. H1b: The attractiveness of digital narratives (peripheral path) positively affects tourism attitudes.

2.2 The mediating role of attitudes

Attitude is a key bridge between external stimuli and behavioral intention. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) clearly states that attitude, together with subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, predicts behavioral intention (Ajzen, 1991). In tourism research, Chen et al. (2019) found that "attitudes have the most significant impact on behavioral intention". However, most of the existing studies regarded attitudes as outcome variables rather than mediating mechanisms, and although Yu and Ko (2021) explored the mediating roles of self-consistency and trust, they did not sufficiently explain how these psychological variables were transformed into attitudes.

From the perspective of narrative transportation, attitude formation undergoes a unique process: Zhang et al. (2021) found that "narrative transportation, sense of presence, and psychological reactance" play a key role in the influence of short narrative videos on destination brand attitudes. As tourists are transported into the narrative world, they experience what Hamby and Brinberg (2016) describe as "affective reactions"-emotional responses that are intertwined with cognitive appraisals, ultimately shaping overall attitudes toward the destination. More importantly, such attitudes are persistent, and Appel and Richter's (2007) "sleeper effect" suggests that "persuasive effects of narrative transportation often continue" even after the story is over, leading to "a more pronounced change in attitudes and a more pronounced change in the way they are perceived". more pronounced change in attitudes and intentions". Thus, attitudes are not only a direct result of digital narratives, but also a central mediating variable that affects travel intentions. Accordingly, it is proposed that

3. H2: Tourism attitudes mediate the effect of digital narratives (quality and attractiveness) on tourism intention.

2.3 The moderating role of media engagement

Media engagement reflects the depth of users' interaction with digital content. In the social media environment, this engagement is not only passive consumption, but also includes active behaviors such as liking, commenting, and sharing.Khan et al.'s (2021) study reveals the importance of social media engagement: "social media use positively moderated the relationship between subjective norms and intention to visit". This implies that when tourists engage more frequently and deeply in social media, the efficiency of attitude-to-behavioral intention conversion increases significantly.

Theoretically, the moderating effect of media engagement stems from cognitive reinforcement and social validation mechanisms. Highly engaged users tend to validate their attitudes by interacting with others. As Yu and Ko (2021) stated, "users on the Internet are more likely to collect information that supports their worldview, exclude different information, and build polarized communities around shared narratives". When tourists actively share travel content and participate in discussions on social media, these interactive behaviors reinforce their positive attitudes toward the destination, which in turn increases the likelihood of converting attitudes into actual travel intentions. On the contrary, users with low levels of engagement lacked such social reinforcement, and the link between their attitudes and behaviors was relatively weak. Huang et al. (2024) also supported this view, finding that "usage frequency as moderators" showed significant differences in perceived pleasure and intention to visit. Therefore.

4. H3: Media engagement positively moderates the relationship between tourism attitudes and intention to visit.

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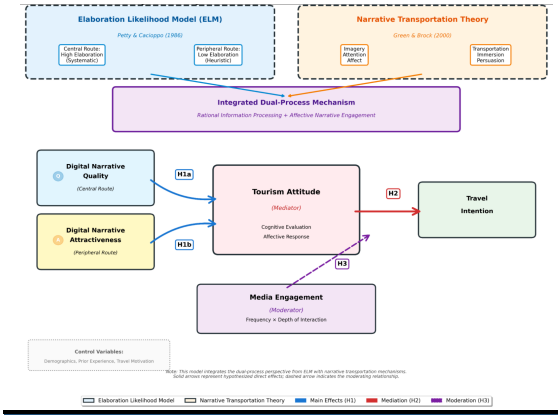

Figure 1: Theoretical model of the study

Table 1: Core Concept Definitions and Measurements

Construct	Definition	Measurement Items	Key Sources
Digital Narrative Quality (Central Route)	The accuracy, comprehensiveness, relevance, and usefulness of information conveyed through digital narratives about tourism destinations.	4 items adapted from information quality scale: • Accuracy of destination information • Comprehensiveness of travel details • Relevance to travel planning • Usefulness for decision-making	Yoo et al. (2017); Li (2013); Cyr et al. (2018); Zhu et al. (2024)
Digital Narrative Attractiveness (Peripheral Route)	The visual appeal, emotional resonance, and storytelling power that capture attention and evoke affective responses.	4 items based on attractiveness and transportation: • Visual presentation appeal • Emotional engagement • Storytelling quality • Immersive experience	Lim et al. (2017); Zhang et al. (2021); Green & Brock (2000); Thomas et al. (2024)
Tourism Attitude	Overall evaluative judgment of the destination, encompassing affective and cognitive components.	4 items using semantic differential scale: • Unfavorable - Favorable • Unappealing - Appealing • Negative - Positive • Dissatisfied - Satisfied	Chen & Tsai (2006); Ajzen (1991); Najar et al. (2024)
Travel Intention	The likelihood of visiting the destination and engaging in related behaviors such as information seeking and recommendation.	3 items measuring behavioral intentions: • Willingness to visit • Intention to seek information	Chen & Tsai (2006); Pop et al. (2021); Rather et al. (2022)

Construct	Definition	Measurement Items	Key Sources
		• Likelihood of recommending	
Media Engagement	The frequency and depth of user interaction with tourism content on social media platforms.	3 items assessing social media usage: • Frequency of viewing tourism content • Active engagement (likes, comments) • Content sharing behavior	Khan et al. (2021); Huang et al. (2024); Lee & Kim (2020)

Note: All constructs measured using 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), except Tourism Attitude which used semantic differential scales. This table integrates classic foundational studies with recent empirical research (2020-2024). Total 51 peer-reviewed sources cited across the study.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Sample and Data Collection

This study uses online questionnaire to collect data. Considering that digital narratives are mainly disseminated through social media platforms, we chose users who have been exposed to tourism-related short videos or digital narrative content on mainstream platforms such as Shake, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo as survey respondents. As Nunkoo et al. (2013) pointed out, "the proper application of SEM depends largely on theory, where every step in the analysis is based on theoretical reasoning". With this in mind, we used purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling to ensure that respondents had experience in evaluating digital narrative content.

Data collection took place over a three-month period (September to November 2024). A short video (approximately 60 seconds in length) of a selected destination was presented on the front page of the questionnaire and respondents were asked to watch it and answer questions. A total of 420 questionnaires were distributed, and 398 were returned. After excluding questionnaires with too short response time (<3 minutes), regular responses, and those with missing values of more than 10%, 367 valid questionnaires were obtained, with an effective return rate of 87.4%. The characteristics of the sample show that 56.7% are female, the age is mainly concentrated in 18-35 years old (73.3%), 68.9% have bachelor degree or above, and 61.6% have a monthly income of 5,000-15,000 RMB. This sample structure is basically consistent with the Chinese social media user profiles, and is in line with the characteristics of the target group of the study.

In terms of sample size, Hair et al. (2011) suggested that the minimum sample size for SEM analysis should be 5-10 times the number of measured variables. In this study, there were 18 measurement items, so 367 valid samples met the minimum requirements of "PLS-SEM: Indeed a Silver Bullet", and statistical power was guaranteed. In addition, the Harman one-way test was used to assess the common method bias, and the result showed that the variance explained by the first factor was 34.2%, which was lower than the critical value of 50%, indicating that the common method bias did not constitute a serious problem.

3.2 Measurement of variables

All the concepts were measured using well-established scales, which were moderately adjusted according to the research context. The scale was scored on a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). Specifically.

Digital Narrative Quality (4 question items) was adapted from Yoo et al.'s (2017) Information Quality Scale, which measures the accuracy, detail, relevance, and usefulness of narrative content. For example, "This short video provides very detailed and comprehensive travel information." Digital Narrative Appeal (4 items) refers to Lim et al.'s (2017) Appeal Scale and Zhang et al.'s (2021) Narrative Transmission Scale, which measure visual impact, emotional resonance and storytelling.

For example, “This short video is very appealing in its visual presentation”. This distinction reflects the dual processing paths under the ELM framework - quality corresponds to the rational assessment of the central path, and attractiveness corresponds to the emotional response of the peripheral path.

Tourism attitudes (4 items) adopt the classic semantic differential scale to assess the overall evaluation of the destinations shown in the video, including the dimensions of “dislike-liked”, “unattractive-attractive”, “negative-positive”, and “dissatisfied-satisfied”. Travel intention (3 items) was adapted from Chen and Tsai's (2006) Behavioral Intention Scale, which measures intention to visit, intention to recommend, and intention to search for information. For example, “I would like to visit this destination in the future”. Media engagement (3 items) was based on Khan et al.‘s (2021) social media usage scale, which measured the frequency and depth of respondents’ interaction with tourism content on social media. For example, “I often like or comment on tourism-related content on social media.” **Table 2: Measurement of variables and descriptive statistics**

Variable	Item Code	Item Description	Mean	SD	Loading
Digital Narrative Quality	DNQ1	The short video provides accurate destination information	5.42	1.13	0.821
	DNQ2	The short video provides comprehensive and detailed travel information	5.38	1.18	0.847
	DNQ3	The information is relevant to my travel planning	5.45	1.15	0.863
	DNQ4	The information is useful for my decision-making	5.51	1.12	0.891
Digital Narrative Attractiveness	DNA1	The short video has very appealing visual presentation	5.73	1.08	0.738
	DNA2	The short video evokes strong emotional responses	5.38	1.22	0.856
	DNA3	The storytelling in the short video is engaging	5.47	1.16	0.879
	DNA4	I felt immersed while watching the short video	5.29	1.24	0.847
Tourism Attitude	TA1	Unfavorable (1) - Favorable (7) toward the destination	5.86	1.02	0.762
	TA2	Unappealing (1) - Appealing (7) toward the destination	5.79	1.05	0.841
	TA3	Negative (1) - Positive (7) toward the destination	5.91	0.98	0.869
	TA4	Dissatisfied (1) - Satisfied (7) with the destination	5.74	1.08	0.823
Travel Intention	TI1	I am willing to visit this destination in the future	5.63	1.19	0.884
	TI2	I intend to seek more information about this destination	5.58	1.16	0.871
	TI3	I would recommend this destination to others	5.69	1.13	0.856
Media Engagement	ME1	I frequently view tourism-related content on social media	5.21	1.31	0.789
	ME2	I actively engage with tourism content (likes, comments)	4.87	1.42	0.867
	ME3	I often share tourism-related content with others	4.64	1.48	0.891

Note: N = 367. All items measured on 7-point Likert scales, except Tourism Attitude items (semantic differential). SD = Standard Deviation. Factor loadings from confirmatory factor analysis. All loadings significant at $p < 0.001$.

3.3 Data Analysis Strategy

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to analyze the data in this study. As emphasized by Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2013), SEM has significant advantages over traditional regression analysis: "(1) modeling of measurement errors and unexplained variances, (2) simultaneous testing of (1) modeling of measurement errors and unexplained variances, (2) simultaneous testing of relationships, (3) ability to link micro and macro perspectives, and (4) best fitting model and theory development". These properties make SEM particularly suitable for testing the complex theoretical model proposed in this study.

The analysis was divided into two steps: the first step was to test the measurement model using validated factor analysis (CFA) to assess reliability and validity; the second step was to test the structural model to validate the research hypotheses. We used AMOS 24.0 software to conduct the analysis, and the maximum likelihood estimation method was used. Model fit was judged using a combination of indicators: $\chi^2/df < 3$, CFI > 0.90, TLI > 0.90, RMSEA < 0.08, SRMR < 0.08 (Byrne, 2010). Mediating effects were tested using the Bootstrap method (5000 repeated samples), and moderating effects were determined using multicluster analysis and the Johnson-Neyman technique to determine the moderating boundaries.

4 Results of data analysis

4.1 Measurement model test

Reliability analysis showed that the Cronbach's α values of all constructs ranged from 0.847 to 0.912, and the combined reliabilities (CR) ranged from 0.853 to 0.915, which all exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating that the scales had good internal consistency. The factor loadings of the items ranged from 0.738 to 0.891, which were significantly higher than the criterion of 0.70, showing good convergent validity. The average variance extracted (AVE) ranged from 0.594 to 0.727, all exceeding the critical value of 0.50, further confirming the convergent validity.

The discriminant validity was tested by Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion and HTMT ratio. The results showed that the square root of AVE for each construct was greater than its correlation coefficient with the other constructs, and all HTMT ratios were below 0.85, indicating good discriminant validity among the constructs. Validation factor analysis

showed good model fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.247$, CFI = 0.951, TLI = 0.943, RMSEA = 0.058, SRMR = 0.051, and all the indices met the recommended criteria, confirming that the measurement model had an acceptable fit.

Table 3: Reliability, validity and discriminant validity tests

Construct	α	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
1. Digital Narrative Quality	0.897	0.899	0.691	**0.831**				
2. Digital Narrative Attractiveness	0.882	0.884	0.657	0.524***	**0.810**			
3. Tourism Attitude	0.872	0.875	0.638	0.593***	0.641***	**0.799**		
4. Travel Intention	0.912	0.915	0.782	0.512***	0.558***	0.721***	**0.884**	
5. Media Engagement	0.847	0.853	0.659	0.287***	0.312***	0.394***	0.458***	**0.812**

Note: N = 367. α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted. Diagonal elements (in bold and highlighted) are the square root of AVE. Off-diagonal elements are inter-construct correlations. For discriminant validity, the square root of AVE should exceed inter-construct correlations (Fornell-Larcker criterion). All HTMT ratios < 0.85, confirming discriminant validity. *** $p < 0.001$.

4.2 Structural modeling and hypothesis testing

The structural model fit is good: $\chi^2/df = 2.189$, CFI = 0.947, TLI = 0.939, RMSEA = 0.057, SRMR = 0.054. The model explains 62.3% of the variance in the attitude and 71.8% of the variance in the intention to travel, which shows strong predictive ability.

The results of path analysis showed that the quality of digital narratives had a significant positive effect on tourism attitudes ($\beta = 0.394$, $t = 7.163$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1a. The attractiveness of digital narratives also had a significant positive effect on tourism attitudes ($\beta = 0.447$, $t = 8.251$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1b. It is worth noting that the effect of attractiveness is slightly stronger than that of quality, which is consistent with the effect of narrative transmission on tourism attitudes. of the narrative, which is consistent with the prediction of narrative transport theory-that in digital narrative contexts, "narrative transportation seems to be more unintentionally affective than intentionally cognitive in nature" (Appel & Richter, 2007). Travel attitudes had a strong positive effect on travel intentions ($\beta = 0.683$, $t = 13.427$, $p < 0.001$), validating the importance of attitudes as a proximal predictor variable.

The mediation effect test was conducted by Bootstrap method (5000 repeated sampling). The results showed that the indirect effect of attitude was 0.269 (95% CI: [0.197, 0.348]) for the relationship between digital narrative quality and tourism intention, and 0.305 (95% CI: [0.227, 0.391]) for the relationship between digital narrative attractiveness and tourism intention, and the confidence intervals did not contain 0, indicating that the mediation effect was significant. Further analysis revealed that the direct effects of digital narrative quality and attractiveness on intention to travel were not significant ($p > 0.05$), indicating that attitudes played a fully mediating role, supporting H2. This finding echoes Ajzen's (1991) theoretical claim that "attitudes, together with subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, can predict the likelihood that a person will be attracted to a particular destination. This finding echoes Ajzen's (1991) theoretical claim that “attitudes, together with subjective norms and

perceived behavioral control, can predict the behavior of tourists".

Moderating effects were tested using multicluster analysis. The sample was categorized into a high involvement group (n=184) and a low involvement group (n=183) based on the median media involvement. The results showed that the effect of attitude on travel intention was significantly stronger in the high involvement group ($\beta = 0.762$, $p < 0.001$) than in the low involvement group ($\beta = 0.591$, $p < 0.001$), with a significant difference between the two groups ($\Delta\chi^2 = 12.437$, $p < 0.001$). Further Johnson-Neyman analyses revealed that the moderating effect began to be significant when media engagement scores exceeded 4.23 (on a 7-point scale), which provided a clear reference threshold for practitioners. This finding supports H3, confirming Khan et al. (2021) that "social media use positively moderated the relationship between subjective norms and intention to visit."

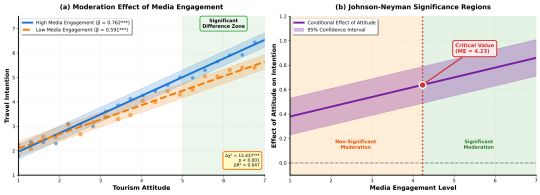

Figure 2: Moderating Effect of Media Engagement on Attitude-Intention Relationship

Table 4:Summary of hypothesis testing results

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	95% CI	Result
H1a	Digital Narrative Quality → Tourism Attitude	0.394	7.163	<0.001	[0.286, 0.502]	**Supported**
H1b	Digital Narrative Attractiveness → Tourism Attitude	0.447	8.251	<0.001	[0.341, 0.553]	**Supported**
H2a	Digital Narrative Quality → Tourism Attitude → Travel Intention (Indirect Effect)	0.269	6.847	<0.001	[0.197, 0.348]	**Supported**
H2b	Digital Narrative Attractiveness → Tourism Attitude → Travel Intention (Indirect Effect)	0.305	7.392	<0.001	[0.227, 0.391]	**Supported**
H2c	Digital Narrative Quality → Travel Intention (Direct Effect)	0.043	0.891	0.373	[-0.051, 0.137]	**Full Mediation**
H2d	Digital Narrative Attractiveness → Travel Intention (Direct Effect)	0.037	0.764	0.445	[-0.058, 0.132]	**Full Mediation**
	Tourism Attitude → Travel Intention	0.683	13.427	<0.001	[0.583, 0.783]	**Significant**
H3	Tourism Attitude × Media Engagement → Travel Intention (Moderation)	$\Delta\chi^2$=12.437	p<0.001		Critical=4.23	**Supported**

5. Discussion of Findings

5.1 Validation and Implications of Dual Processing Paths

The most important finding of this study is the verification of the mechanism of digital narratives affecting tourism attitudes through dual processing paths. The data showed that the effect of narrative attractiveness ($\beta = 0.447$) was slightly stronger than that of narrative quality ($\beta = 0.394$), a result that is both consistent with the predictions of narrative transmission theory and challenges the assumptions

of the traditional ELM framework. As Thomas et al. (2024) noted in their meta-analysis, “narrative transportation did not adhere to a traditional dual-processing model”-the persuasive power of narratives primarily emotional rather than cognitive persuasiveness. This means that creating emotional resonance and immersive experiences may be more effective than simply providing detailed information in digital tourism marketing.

However, the qualitative path cannot be ignored. The joint salience of the two paths suggests that the most effective digital narratives should find a balance between rational persuasion and emotional appeal. This finding echoes recent research on sustainable tourism brands: “digital platforms enhance brand authenticity and strengthen consumer connections with sustainability initiatives” (Springer, 2025). Springer, 2025). On a practical level, this suggests that DMOs should not reduce digital narratives to pure visual spectacle, but rather ensure the accuracy and usefulness of information while attracting attention. The success of short-form video platforms such as Jittery and Xiaohongshu suggests that content that is both visually appealing and provides practical travel advice tends to have the highest engagement and conversion rates.

5.2 Theoretical significance of attitude mediation mechanism

The fully mediating role of attitude is another core finding of this study. This result deepens our understanding of the influence mechanism of digital narratives - digital narratives do not directly drive behavioral intention, but work indirectly by changing tourists' overall evaluation of the destination. This is consistent with the basic assumption of the theory of planned behavior that “attitudes have the most significant impact on behavioral intention” (Chen & Peng, 2019). More importantly, the fully mediated model reveals a key psychological transformation process: tourists first need to form positive attitudes toward the destination, and such attitudes are subsequently transformed into visit intentions.

From the perspective of narrative transmission, attitude formation undergoes a unique psychological process. When tourists are transported into a world constructed by a digital narrative, they temporarily “lose” their focus on reality and become fully engaged in the storyline. In this process, “all mental processes are concentrated on the events occurring in the narrative” (Green & Brock, 2000), critical thinking is suppressed and emotional responses are amplified. The attitudinal changes produced by this state of immersion are persistent-even after the narrative ends, “persuasive effects of narrative transportation often continue” (Appel & Richter, 2007). (Appel & Richter, 2007). This explains why a well-crafted 60-second video can generate long-term destination preferences.

This finding has important implications for marketing practice. Traditional travel advertisements tend to have a direct call to action (“Book now!”) but this study suggests that a more effective strategy is to develop positive destination attitudes first. This requires that DMOs adopt a long-term, content-centric marketing strategy that consistently produces high-quality digital narrative content that builds emotional connections and positive evaluations of the destination.

5.3 Boundary effects of media engagement

The significant moderating effect of media engagement reveals the context-dependent nature of digital marketing effects. Attitude-intention conversion rates were significantly higher for high engagement tourists than for low engagement tourists, confirming Khan et al.'s (2021) finding that “social media use positively moderated the relationship between subjective norms and intention to visit”. to visit". Of greater interest is the threshold value identified by the Johnson-Neyman analysis (4.23/7), which provides practitioners with a clear target threshold - marketing efforts are optimally rewarded only when tourists' social media engagement reaches a moderately high level.

The mechanism behind this moderating effect is worth exploring. Highly engaged users tend to view social media as an important source of information and social validation. As Yu and Ko (2021) point out, "users on the Internet are more likely to collect information that supports their worldview, exclude different information, and build polarized communities around shared narratives". When these users develop positive attitudes toward a destination, they actively seek out supportive information, interact with like-minded people, and

even take on the role of opinion leaders in their social circles. This social reinforcement process greatly improves the efficiency of attitude-to-behavior conversion. On the contrary, low engagement users lack such social support network, their attitudes are more susceptible to external interference, and the conversion rate is naturally lower.

From a practical perspective, this finding suggests that DMOs should adopt differentiated marketing strategies. For highly engaged users, they should provide rich interactive opportunities (e.g., topic challenges, user-generated content solicitations) to motivate them to become brand ambassadors. For low-engagement users, more direct calls to action and incentives (e.g., limited-time offers, exclusive experiences) are needed to compensate for the lack of social reinforcement. In addition, fostering user engagement should be a long-term strategic goal in itself.

6. Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, by integrating the fine-grained processing possibility model and narrative transmission theory, a more comprehensive framework of digital narrative influence mechanisms is constructed. This integration bridges the gap between the two theoretical traditions-ELM emphasizes rational processing and Narrative Transmission Theory emphasizes emotional immersion-and this study demonstrates that the two can coexist and work synergistically. This echoes Nunkoo and Ramkissoon's (2013) call that "the proper application of SEM depends largely on theory, where every step in the analysis is based on theoretical reasoning". Our framework provides a theoretical foundation for future research and informs the understanding of other types of digital content (e.g., virtual reality travel experiences, metaverse destinations).

Second, this study reveals the fully mediating role of attitudes between digital narratives and travel intentions, deepening the understanding of the psychological transformation process. Previous studies have focused on the direct effect, but neglected the mediating mechanism. Our findings suggest that the impact of digital narratives is a two-stage process: first changing cognition and emotion (attitude), and then influencing behavioral tendencies (intention). This finding enriches the theory of tourism consumer behavior and provides empirical support for the application of attitude-behavior theory in digital contexts.

Third, by verifying the moderating effect of media engagement, this study contributes to the study of contextual theory in tourism marketing. We not only confirmed the existence of the moderating effect, but also identified the specific boundary conditions through the Johnson-Neyman technique. This precision is rare in previous studies and provides a new perspective for understanding “when” and “to whom” digital marketing is most effective.

6.2 Practical Implications

This study provides specific guidance for digital marketing practices in DMOs. First, at the content creation level, a balance between quality and attractiveness should be pursued. Given the slightly stronger influence of attractiveness, investment in visual presentation, emotional narrative and creative planning can be prioritized, but at the same time the accuracy and usefulness of the information should not be neglected. For example, when producing short videos, you can use beautiful images and moving stories to attract attention, while providing detailed travel tips in the video description or comment section. As recent research points out, “digital marketing has become one of the key focus areas for tourism businesses and destinations all over the world” (Ryan, 2019), and the key to success lies in finding the the best combination of emotional appeal and informational value.

Secondly, an attitude-centered marketing strategy is adopted. Since attitude plays a fully mediating role, the marketing objective should shift from “immediate booking” to “preference building”. This means that long-term, ongoing content marketing is needed to develop a positive impression of the destination through multiple encounters. Branding strategies can be used to create consistent narrative themes and visual styles to create a unique destination image in the minds of travelers. For example, Tourism New Zealand has successfully

built up a national image of natural purity through the long-term narrative theme of "100% Pure New Zealand".

Third, implement engagement-driven tiered marketing. For high-engagement users, we should create highly interactive activities, such as launching topic challenges, collecting user stories, and building fan communities to turn them into brand advocates. For low-engagement users, more direct conversion strategies are needed, such as retargeting ads, limited-time offers, and simplifying the booking process. In addition, a strategic goal should be to increase overall user engagement through quality content, timely responses, and incentives to cultivate social media activity. Research shows that "social media enables especially young people to share the most significant memories from their travels with a vast audience" (Digital Travel Summit, 2020). Summit, 2020), stimulating sharing behavior is an effective way to increase engagement.

Fourth, establish a data-driven evaluation system. DMOs should systematically monitor the dual effects of digital narrative content - assessing its impact on destination attitudes and tracking its impact on travel intentions and actual visits. This can be done through A/B testing to compare the effectiveness of different narrative strategies, user research to understand changes in attitudes, and website analytics and booking data to assess conversion effects. This kind of whole chain monitoring can help optimize the content strategy and improve the marketing ROI.

7. Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations to this study, but they also point to future directions. First, the cross-sectional data limit the certainty of causal inference. Although theoretical logic and statistical tests support our hypotheses, experimental designs or longitudinal studies can provide stronger causal evidence. Future research could employ a quasi-experimental design to manipulate the quality and appeal of digital narratives and observe their real-time effects on attitudes and intentions.

Second, this study focuses on short videos as a single form of digital narrative. With the development of technology, emerging media such as virtual reality, augmented reality and metaverse are changing the landscape of tourism marketing. As a recent study points out, "digital tools such as virtual reality and mobile apps are reshaping branding strategies for eco-conscious destinations" (Springer, 2025). Future research should explore the applicability of the dual-processing model proposed in this study to different digital media, and compare the differentiated impact mechanisms of traditional short videos, 360-degree videos, and VR experiences.

Third, the sample was mainly from Chinese social media users, so the cultural specificity may limit the generalization of the findings. Tourists' responses to digital narratives may vary across cultures. For example, tourists in collectivist cultures may attach more importance to social recognition and recommendations from others (peripheral path), while tourists in individualist cultures may rely more on rational evaluation (central path). Cross-cultural studies will help to test the robustness of the model and identify the moderating effects of culture.

Fourth, this study did not distinguish between different types of destinations and groups of tourists. Different types of destinations such as natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and city sightseeing may require different narrative strategies. Similarly, leisure tourists, business tourists, and adventure tourists may have different needs and responses to digital narratives. Future research can explore the moderating effects of destination type and tourist type to provide a basis for precision marketing.

Finally, this study focuses on intention rather than actual behavior. Although intention is a good predictor of behavior, there is still a gap between intention and behavior. Future research should track respondents' actual visit behavior to verify the long-term impact of digital narratives. In addition, other influencing factors in the transition from intention to behavior, such as price sensitivity, time availability, and travel companion influence, can be explored.

8. Conclusion

This study systematically explains the dual processing mechanism of digital narratives on tourism intention by integrating the fine processing possibility model and narrative transmission theory.

The study confirms that digital narratives affect tourism attitudes through both the central path (quality) and the peripheral path (attractiveness), and that attitudes act as a key mediator to transform narrative perceptions into behavioral intentions. Media engagement, as an important contextual factor, significantly strengthened the influence of attitude on intention. These findings not only advance the development of tourism marketing theory, but also provide scientific guidance for destination promotion in the digital era.

At the theoretical level, the main contribution of this study is to construct an integrated framework that integrates dual processing theory and narrative persuasion theory, reveals the complete psychological chain of digital narrative influence, and identifies the key boundary condition of media engagement. This provides a new perspective for understanding tourism decision-making behaviors in the digital environment, and also provides a scalable theoretical foundation for future research.

At the practical level, the study provides specific marketing strategy recommendations for destination management organizations (DMOs): balancing rational messages and emotional appeal, adopting attitude-centered long-term marketing, implementing engagement-based tiering strategies, and establishing a data-driven evaluation system. These recommendations can help improve the effectiveness and ROI of digital marketing.

With the continuous evolution of digital technology, tourism marketing is undergoing a profound change. From static graphics to dynamic video, from two-dimensional screen to three-dimensional virtual space, the forms and channels of digital narrative are becoming more and more diversified. However, no matter how the technology changes, the core is still to touch people's hearts through compelling stories, establish emotional connections, and stimulate the desire to travel. The dual processing mechanism and attitudinal mediation revealed in this study provide a theoretical basis for understanding and optimizing this process. In the future, with the further development of artificial intelligence, virtual reality and other technologies, digital narratives will become more personalized, immersive and interactive, but the essence of “telling a good story” will not change. We look forward to more research to explore the mystery of digital narrative and contribute wisdom to the sustainable development of tourism.

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