



Thematic Narrative in Cultural Heritage Tourism: How Narrative Elements Drive Destination Brand Loyalty

Yi Huang ^{1*}, Ming-Chia Chen ²

¹⁻² Overseas Education College of Fujian Business University, China

* Corresponding Author: Yi Huang

Article Info

ISSN (online): 2583-6641

Impact Factor (RSIF): 8.56

Volume: 05

Issue: 04

Received: 05-05-2026

Accepted: 03-06-2026

Published: 01-07-2026

Page No: 22-31

Abstract

This study examines how thematic storytelling drives tourism brand loyalty through the cognition–emotion–behavior path, with emotional experience as a mediator. An integrated model of "thematic storytelling–emotional experience–tourism brand loyalty" was tested via a survey of 313 tourists in Shoushan Village, Fuzhou. Results indicate that: (1) thematic storytelling significantly enhances emotional experience, with narrative immersion as the core driver; (2) emotional experience, particularly cultural identification, positively affects brand loyalty; and (3) emotional experience partially mediates the storytelling–loyalty relationship, accounting for 31.37% of the total effect. This research integrates narrative theory with brand management theory in the tourism context and offers practical guidance for cultural heritage destinations to strengthen brand competitiveness through storytelling strategies.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJMOR.2026.5.4.22-31>

Keywords: Thematic Storytelling, Tourism Brand Loyalty, Emotional Experience, Cultural Identification, Narrative Immersion, Destination Branding

1. Introduction

With the acceleration of globalization and liberalization of tourism markets, competition among tourism destinations has become increasingly fierce. In the context of the information age, emerging economic forms such as service economy, sharing economy, influencer economy, and community economy have profoundly influenced the development pattern of the tourism industry. Urry (1990) pointed out in *The Tourist Gaze* that "tourism is a visual experience away from home, seeking something different from what one sees at home or work". However, with the rapid development of tourism, many destinations face homogenization issues, with similarities in natural landscapes, cultural attractions, and tourism projects, leading to increased substitutability and weakened competitiveness.

In recent years, China's cultural industry and tourism have maintained steady growth, becoming important pillars and new growth poles of the national economy. According to the 2024 Cultural and Tourism Development Statistical Bulletin by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, domestic tourism reached 5.62 billion trips in 2024, with a total spending of 5.8 trillion RMB, representing year-on-year

increases of 14.8% and 16.2% respectively (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2024). The 14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural and Tourism Development emphasizes high-quality development, supply-side structural reform, and deep integration of culture and tourism to meet people's needs for a better life (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2021).

Against this backdrop, tourism destinations need to integrate resources, enhance core competitiveness, and create unique and distinctive tourism brands. However, most existing studies focus on macro- strategic aspects of brand building, with insufficient analysis of specific narrative strategies. Particularly, there is a lack of systematic theoretical frameworks and practical solutions for transforming local culture into emotionally resonant brand content through storytelling. Therefore, exploring innovative narrative methods to overcome homogenization and create emotionally appealing brand images has become crucial for enhancing destination competitiveness.

This study makes three theoretical contributions:

1. **Interdisciplinary Integration:** Combines narrative theory and marketing theory to enhance understanding of "how stories build brands", opening new theoretical perspectives for tourism brand research;
2. **Mechanism Elucidation:** Through empirical analysis, clarifies the impact path of "thematic storytelling - emotional experience - tourism brand loyalty", revealing the operational mechanism of storytelling in evoking emotions and building loyalty;
3. **Model Construction:** Develops and validates an integrated empirical model, providing a reference framework for future brand research on cultural heritage tourism destinations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Thematic Storytelling Research

Stories are effective tools for building emotional connections. Bernard (2015) defines a story as "an interesting narrative of one or a series of events designed to attract readers, listeners, or viewers". Thematic storytelling, as a specific narrative strategy, uses emotionally resonant content to narrow psychological distance with audiences. Zheng and Zhang (2022) note that "storytelling" and "narrative" are often used interchangeably in marketing and advertising, but narrative refers to a more comprehensive and complete interpretation of events (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Hsu, 2008).

Thematic storytelling differs from general narrative by requiring not only emotional arousal but also clear structure with beginning, background, end, and causally linked events, including challenges, surprises, character reactions, consequences, and resolutions (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982). Escalas and Stern (2003) identify three basic elements of complete thematic storytelling: chronological order, causality, and characters, which essentially form an expression rich in emotion and symbolism.

From a historical perspective, thematic storytelling is deeply intertwined with culture, serving as an important carrier for transmitting cultural values, social norms, experiences, and knowledge (Kvítková & Petru, 2021)^[8]. Kvitková and Petru (2021)^[8] summarize eight narrative structures applicable to destination marketing, among which the petal structure and hero's journey are most widely used. The petal structure develops multiple independent narratives around a core theme, while the hero's journey, centered on ordinary people overcoming challenges and achieving growth, suits adventure and experiential tourism projects.

A complete and effective thematic narrative includes five core elements (Fog *et al.*, 2010; Gitner, 2016):

1. **Setting:** Geographical location and time background where the story takes place
2. **Characters:** Character settings that drive story development
3. **Conflict:** Key driver of story development, which can be cultural differences, environmental motivational contradictions
4. **Plot:** Ensures logical coherence of events
5. **Narrative Theme:** Transmits core values

Thematic storytelling has been widely applied in tourism as a powerful marketing and persuasive tool. With increasing market competition, storytelling has extended from cultural and artistic fields to tourism. Calvi and Hover (2021)

developed a tourism destination in Brabant, Netherlands, using Van Gogh's life as the narrative thread, integrating scattered heritage sites through scene restoration and plot visualization, allowing tourists to immerse themselves in Van Gogh's life experiences. This project effectively stimulated audience empathy and identity recognition, strengthening the brand positioning of "Van Gogh's Cradle of Growth".

Digital technologies have deepened the integration of thematic storytelling and immersive experiences. By excavating cultural connotations, integrating plot elements, creating exclusive storylines, and combining AR/VR technologies to digitally reconstruct historical sites, destinations can enhance product attractiveness and competitiveness (Zhao & Wang, 2025)^[20]. For example, Orlando Disney integrates thematic storytelling into immersive experiences in its outdoor queue areas for The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh, enhancing visitor engagement through interactive devices (Han *et al.*, 2025).

2.2. Tourism Brand Building Research

Tourism brand building has become a focus of competition both domestically and internationally. Yao (2001) defines tourism brand as a commitment based on the unique characteristics of tourism resources and regions, enabling tourists to obtain unique spiritual experiences. Hu and Wang (2022) expand this definition, viewing tourism brand as the collection of tourists' overall impressions and evaluations of a destination, reflecting uniqueness through natural landscapes, cultural history, and service quality.

From an international perspective, tourism destination brand was initially considered a "management process of designing logos, slogans, and implementing advertising activities" focused on basic identification and market differentiation. With the rise of service-dominant logic, tourism brand has evolved into a dynamic, co-created narrative process (Vlassi *et al.*, 2022)^[18]. Mandagi and Centeno (2024)^[11] view tourism brand as the sum of potential tourists' comprehensive perceptions and associations about a destination, shaped by natural scenery, cultural heritage, service experience, resident behavior, and marketing communication.

The Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, originating in the 1980s, has been extended to tourism and hospitality (Fayrene & Lee, 2011; Ekinci *et al.*, 2022; Kim & Lee, 2018)^[3]. Keller (1998) defines brand equity as "consumers' differential responses to brand marketing activities based on their brand knowledge".

Zhang *et al.* (2021) identify five dimensions of tourism brand equity: brand quality, brand awareness, brand image, value perception, and brand loyalty. Ekinci *et al.* (2022)^[3] propose a seven-dimensional model including brand awareness, destination quality perception, brand interaction quality, brand self-congruence, brand identification, destination brand trust, and destination brand loyalty. Herrero *et al.* (2017)^[4] establish four core dimensions based on CBBE: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty.

With "authentic experience" becoming a core tourist demand, the authenticity of tourism brand has gained importance. Shi *et al.* (2022)^[17] propose that tourism brand authenticity consists of four dimensions: continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism, which enhance revisit intention and satisfaction.

Srivastava *et al.* (2022) construct a brand experience model from sensory, emotional, behavioral, and intellectual

dimensions, finding that emotional experience has the most significant impact on destination advocacy behavior. Lin *et al.* (2025) confirms this finding through empirical research on Sanya scenic spots.

Based on literature integration, this study identifies five core dimensions of tourism brand:

1. **Brand Identification:** Foundation of brand building, including symbols like brand name and slogan.
2. **Quality Perception:** Tourists' overall evaluation of destination service quality, product experience, and environmental conditions.
3. **Value Identification:** Includes functional, emotional, and social value orientations.
4. **Experience Interaction:** Important means of brand value transmission, covering sensory, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive aspects.
5. **Brand Loyalty:** Tourists' revisit intention and recommendation behavior.

Brand building has evolved from symbolic design and promotion to a systematic process involving cognitive construction and emotional connection. Early brand building focused on extracting unique destination resources and symbolic expression. Yao (2001) pointed out that "tourism brand is a commitment based on the uniqueness of tourism resources". Konecnik and Gartner (2007) ^[6] developed the CBBETD model with four dimensions: brand awareness, destination image, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Herrero *et al.* (2017) ^[4] found that brand awareness forms tourists' initial impression, with more well-known destinations perceived as higher quality. Emotional experience serves as a key bridge between cognition and behavior. Jimenez-García *et al.* (2025) ^[5] found that positive destination images enhance tourist happiness, influencing revisit and recommendation intentions. Srivastava *et al.* (2022) confirmed that emotional dimension has the most significant driving effect on recommendation and revisit behavior.

The ultimate goal of tourism brand building is to generate revisit intention and word-of-mouth recommendation. Herrero *et al.* (2017) ^[4] found that destination quality perception directly influences tourist loyalty, which translates into brand assets through revisit and recommendation behavior. Hu and Wang (2022) proposed a "differentiation-integration-systematization" approach for tourism destination brand building.

This study proposes a "cognition-emotion-behavior" path for tourism brand building:

Cognition Stage: Establish brand visibility through awareness and image construction.

Emotion Stage: Deepen emotional connection through perceived quality and happiness.

Behavior Stage: Achieve behavioral change through loyalty and word-of-mouth communication.

Tourism brand building involves multiple interacting factors. Ritchie and Crouch (2003) proposed a destination competitiveness model including resource attractiveness, destination management, infrastructure, policy planning, location security, and cost-effectiveness. Destination image is a key factor influencing tourist recommendation and revisit rates (Chang, 2021; Dam & Dam, 2021). Jawahar and

Muhammed (2022) found that positive destination image increases brand value and tourist loyalty. Accessibility also affects destination visits, including distance, travel time, and public transportation convenience (Suleman, 2020; Saway, 2021). Chen and Kim (2025) ^[2] measured brand image and market competitiveness using brand awareness, satisfaction, and reputation. With the widespread use of social media, tourist sharing behavior has become important, with like counts reflecting tourist preference and brand awareness (Chen & Kim, 2025) ^[2].

2.3. Relationship Between Thematic Storytelling and Tourism Brand Building

Schank and Abelson (1995) summarized three core propositions of human cognition research:

1. Knowledge is constructed through stories;
2. New experiences are understood through existing stories;
3. Storytelling and retelling form the foundation of individual memory and identity.

Moscardo (2020) ^[14] noted the increasing use of thematic storytelling in tourism, recognizing stories as important factors influencing tourist cognition and behavior. Setting, as a basic component of thematic storytelling, provides contextualization for abstract tourism destinations (De Certeau, 1984; Hover, 2013). Lentini and Decortis (2010) proposed "sense of place" as a meaningful place formed by personal spatial experiences and local stories. Kvitková and Petru (2021) ^[8] found that character settings in narratives have a key impact on cognitive construction, with tourists as protagonists effectively triggering self-reference effects and enhancing identification. Akgün *et al.* (2015) confirmed that self-reference positively influences empathy, which in turn enhances word-of-mouth and visit intention.

The SOR (Stimulus-Organism-Response) model proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) ^[13] explains how environmental stimulus influences human behavior through emotional states. Brakus *et al.* (2009) ^[1] identified four dimensions of brand experience: sensory, emotional, behavioral, and intellectual.

Narrative transportation, a concept developed by Green *et al.* (2004), refers to a psychological state of complete immersion in story plots, guiding audiences into the narrative world and influencing attitudes and beliefs. Fu *et al.* (2023) identified four stages of immersive experience in theme parks: temporal-spatial immersion, sensory immersion, conceptual imagination immersion, and emotional immersion.

Empathy, an emotion that can be triggered through thematic storytelling, combines identification and insight (McKee & Grace, 2018). When tourists empathize with story characters, it effectively drives word-of-mouth dissemination and visit intention. (Akgün *et al.*, 2015). Social media integration enhances brand storytelling effectiveness, with visual narratives strengthening brand visibility and emotional appeal (Li *et al.*, 2024) ^[9].

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Framework

Based on literature review, this study constructs an integrated model of "thematic storytelling - emotional experience - tourism brand loyalty"(see Figure 1).

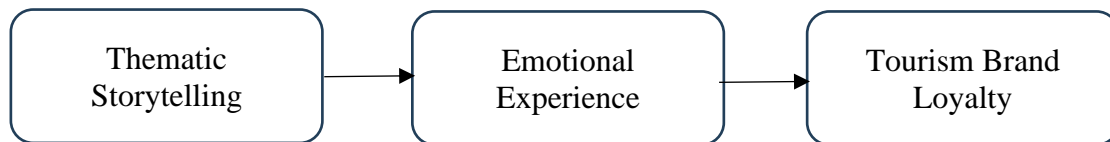


Fig 1: Research Framework

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Thematic storytelling has a significant positive impact on emotional experience.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Emotional experience has a significant positive impact on tourism brand loyalty.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Emotional experience plays a mediating role between thematic storytelling and tourism brand loyalty. Thematic storytelling is operationalized as tourists' perception of attractiveness and emotional touch from five core narrative elements during their visit to Shoushan Village:

1. **Setting:** Perception of natural environment, cultural atmosphere, and historical heritage.
2. **Characters:** Evaluation of character settings and their relevance to tourists.
3. **Conflict:** Perception of narrative tension and exploration motivation;
4. **Plot:** Overall feeling of tour rhythm, storyline completeness, and emotional changes.
5. **Narrative Theme:** Understanding and agreement with value concepts conveyed by stories.

Emotional experience is operationalized as "narrative transportation" and "empathy" during narrative immersion:

1. **Narrative Transportation:** Psychological state of high concentration, psychological substitution, and immersion in story world.
2. **Empathy:** Emotional resonance and identification with character fate, emotional conflict, and value propositions in stories.

Tourism brand loyalty is operationalized as tourists' comprehensive evaluation of Shoushan Village/ Shoushan Stone culture brand in five dimensions:

1. **Brand Identification:** Ability to recognize and remember brand name, logo, image, and core characteristics.
2. **Quality Perception:** Judgment of overall experience quality including services, products, and environment.
3. **Value Identification:** Degree of fit between brand value and personal needs in functional, emotional, and social dimensions.
4. **Experience Interaction:** Multi-dimensional interactive experience during visit, including sensory, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive aspects;
5. **Brand Loyalty:** Future revisit intention and recommendation behavior.

3.2. Research Object

This study focuses on tourists visiting Shoushan Village,

Fuzhou, a village with over 1500 years of stone mining and carving history and profound cultural heritage. Shoushan Stone is known as the "National Stone" of China, making this village an ideal case for studying cultural heritage tourism brand building through st

Sample Criteria:

1. Visited Shoushan Village in the past year with at least half a day of experience;
2. Aged 18 or above with full civil capacity;
3. Willing to participate in the survey and complete the questionnaire independently.

Data was collected through both online and offline channels:

- **Online:** Distributed through stone enthusiast forums and tourism communities;
- **Offline:** Distributed at scenic spots and museum exits in Shoushan Village.

A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed, with 313 valid responses, resulting in an effective response rate of 89.4%.

3.3. Questionnaire Survey

Develops the "Questionnaire on Thematic Storytelling Experience and Tourism Brand Evaluation in Shoushan Village" based on literature review and context adaptation. The questionnaire includes four parts:

1. **Basic Information:** Gender, age, education level, income, tourism frequency, and cultural heritage interest.
2. **Thematic Storytelling Elements:** 14 items measuring setting, characters, conflict, plot, and narrative theme.
3. **Emotional Experience:** 8 items measuring narrative transportation and empathy.
4. **Tourism Brand Loyalty:** 9 items measuring brand identification, quality perception, value identification, experience interaction, and brand loyalty.

All items use a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The sample consists of 51.1% male and 48.9% female respondents, with 81.2% aged 18-45 years. Education levels are diverse, with 31.3% holding junior college degrees and 27.5% high school or below. Monthly income is concentrated in the 3000-10000 RMB range (60.7%). Regarding cultural heritage interest, 48.2% respondents show general concern (Table 1).

Table 1: Basic data descriptive statistics table

Category		Frequency	percentage
Gender	Male	160	51.1
	Female	153	48.9
Age	Ages 18-25	76	24.3
	Ages 26-35	85	27.2
	Ages 36-45	93	19.7
	46 years old and above	59	18.8
Education level	Bachelor's degree	70	22.4
	Junior college	98	31.3
	High school and below	86	27.5
	Master's degree or above	59	18.8
Average monthly income (RMB)	Under 3000 (RMB)	72	23
	3000-6000(RMB)	101	32.3
	6000-10000(RMB)	89	28.4
	10000 and above (RMB)	51	16.3
Travel frequency over the past year	0-1 time	82	26.2
	2-3 times	92	29.4
	4-5 times	78	24.9
	6 times or more	61	19.5
Attention to traditional culture/intangible cultural heritage projects	Basically ignored	54	17.3
	Occasionally pay attention and get involved	71	22.7
	Often participate in	107	34.2
	Very enthusiastic, one of the main interests	81	25.9

All 31 questionnaire items have means above the theoretical median of 3.0, indicating generally positive evaluations. Character setting interest and stone carving appreciation have the highest scores, while future revisit intention has the lowest score, indicating room for improvement in behavior loyalty conversion. Standard deviations are generally above 1.2, showing significant individual differences in tourist perceptions.

4.2. Factor Analysis

1. Thematic Storytelling Factor Analysis

KMO measure is 0.941, and Bartlett's test is significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating data suitability for factor analysis. Exploratory factor analysis extracts three core factors (see Table 2), the cumulative variance explanation rate is 51.96%:

- **Narrative immersion:** It refers to the overall sense of immersion in the narrative environment.
- **Emotional Resonance:** Reflects emotional involvement during experience.
- **Value Identification:** Reflects recognition of cultural values like craftsmanship spirit and aesthetic lifestyle.

Table 2: Analysis of Narrative Factors in Thematic Stories

	Narrative immersion	Emotional Resonance	Value Identification
COQ2	0.758		
ROQ1	0.587		
THQ1	0.582		
SCQ1	0.557		
PLQ1	0.546		
PLQ2	0.527		
PLQ4		0.732	
COQ1		0.699	
SCQ3		0.582	
THQ2		0.547	
PLQ3			0.801
ROQ2			0.627
THQ3			0.439

2. Emotional Experience Factor Analysis

KMO measure is 0.870, and Bartlett's test is significant ($p < 0.001$). Factor analysis extracts two core factors (see Table 3), the cumulative variance explanation rate is 51.14%:

- **Cultural Identification:** Reflects understanding and

identification with craftsmanship inheritance and cultural values.

- **Sensory Immersion:** Reflects tour concentration, immediate sensory pleasure, and psychological immersion.

Table 3: Emotional experience factor analysis

	Cultural Identification	Sensory Immersion:
EMQ3	0.782	
EMQ2	0.717	
EMQ1	0.582	
NTQ2	0.480	
NTQ3	0.428	
NTQ1		0.898
EMQ4		0.557
NTQ2		0.520

3. Tourism Brand Loyalty Factor Analysis

KMO measure is 0.898, and Bartlett's test is significant ($p < 0.001$). Factor analysis extracts three core factors (see Table 4), the cumulative variance explanation rate is 59.82%:

- **Brand Perception:** Reflects comprehensive cognitive evaluation of brand image, service quality, and

environmental conditions.

- **Experience Interaction:** Reflects interaction opportunities, multi-sensory experience, and participation depth.
- **Behavior Loyalty:** Reflects degree of conversion from brand cognition to actual behavior intention.

Table 4: Analysis of Tourism Brand Loyalty Factors

	Brand Perception	Experience Interaction	Behavior Loyalty
EIQ2	0.798		
PQQ2	0.673		
PQQ1	0.599		
BIQ2	0.518		
EIQ1		0.732	
BLQ1		0.709	
PVQ1		0.583	0.533
BIQ1			0.821
BLQ2			0.634

4.3. Reliability analysis

This study, the reliability analysis was based on the Cronbach's α coefficient as the judgment basis. DeVellis believes that when the value is between 0.60 and 0.65, it is in the worst state. When the value is between 0.65 and 0.70, it barely reaches the minimum value. When the value is

between 0.70 and 0.80, it is in a very ideal state. When the value is between 0.80 and 0.90, it is in the most ideal state. The reliability test was conducted on the questionnaire of this study, and the results are shown in Table 5. The value of this questionnaire is 0.941, so the reliability of this study is ideal.

Table 5: Questionnaire reliability test

Reliability Statistics α		
Scale	Cronbach's	Number of questions
Theme story narration	.883	14
Emotional experience	.792	8
Tourism brand loyalty	.828	9
Total scale	.941	31

4.4. Correlation analysis

In this study, the Pearson correlation coefficient was used to test the relationships between variables. The results showed that there were significant positive correlations among all

variables ($p < 0.01$), with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.488 to 0.715, indicating a moderately strong correlation, which is suitable for regression analysis. The analysis results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Correlation analysis of variables

	NIQ	ERQ	VIQ	CAQ	SEQ	BPQ	EIQ	BAQ
NIQ	1							
ERQ	.685*	1						
VIQ	.679*	.647*	1					
CAQ	.715*	.668*	.690*	1				
SEQ	.659*	.629*	.583*	.607*	1			
BPQ	.678*	.668*	.639*	.666*	.617*	1		
EIQ	.646*	.638*	.573*	.601*	.591*	.629*	1	
BAQ	.578*	.527*	.571*	.581*	.488*	.533*	.500*	1

* $p < .05$

4.5. Research hypothesis testing

To ensure the simplicity and effectiveness of the model, this paper first conducts an independent samples t-test and an ANOVA test to verify the relationships between all background variables (such as gender, age, education level, etc.) and the research factors. The test results show that the impacts of these background variables on each research factor do not reach a statistically significant level. Therefore, in the subsequent analysis, to facilitate the focus on the

relationships of the main factors, the above-mentioned background variables are omitted from the final model.

1 Regression analysis of thematic storytelling on emotional experience

To test Hypothesis 1, a simple linear regression was conducted with thematic storytelling as the independent variable and emotional experience as the dependent variable. The results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Regression analysis of thematic storytelling on emotional experience

Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	0.421	0.152		2.770	0.006
Thematic Storytelling	0.693	0.042	0.680	16.385	<0.001

Note: $R^2 = 0.463$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.461$, $F = 268.456$, $p < 0.001$

As shown in Table 7, thematic storytelling has a significant positive impact on emotional experience ($\beta = 0.680$, $t = 16.385$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 46.3% of the variance in emotional experience. Hypothesis 1 (H1) is therefore supported.

To further identify which specific narrative elements drive

emotional experience, a sub-dimension regression analysis was conducted using the three factors of thematic storytelling (narrative immersion, emotional resonance, and value identification) as independent variables and emotional experience as the dependent variable (see Table 8).

Table 8: Sub-dimension regression of thematic storytelling factors on emotional experience

Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	0.312	0.178		1.753	0.081
Narrative Immersion	0.421	0.058	0.412	7.259	<0.001
Emotional Resonance	0.215	0.054	0.208	3.981	<0.001
Value Identification	0.131	0.049	0.135	2.673	0.008

Note: $R^2 = 0.487$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.482$, $F = 98.241$, $p < 0.001$

The results show that all three narrative elements significantly predict emotional experience. Among them, narrative immersion has the strongest predictive power ($\beta = 0.412$, $p < 0.001$), followed by emotional resonance ($\beta = 0.208$, $p < 0.001$) and value identification ($\beta = 0.135$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that the overall sense of immersion in the narrative environment is the core driver of tourists' emotional experience, which is consistent with the narrative

transportation theory (Green *et al.*, 2004).

2 Regression analysis of emotional experience on tourism brand loyalty

To test Hypothesis 2, a simple linear regression was conducted with emotional experience as the independent variable and tourism brand loyalty as the dependent variable. The results are presented in Table 9.

Table 9: Regression analysis of emotional experience on tourism brand loyalty

Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	0.832	0.178		4.674	<0.001
Emotional Experience	0.571	0.045	0.579	12.563	<0.001

Note: $R^2 = 0.335$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.333$, $F = 157.829$, $p < 0.001$

As shown in Table 9, emotional experience has a significant positive impact on tourism brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.579$, $t = 12.563$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 33.5% of the variance in brand loyalty. Hypothesis 2 (H2) is therefore supported.

The sub-dimension regression analysis further examines which dimensions of emotional experience most strongly predict brand loyalty (see Table 10).

Table 10: Sub-dimension regression of emotional experience factors on tourism brand loyalty

Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	0.621	0.192		3.234	0.001
Cultural Identification	0.378	0.061	0.368	6.197	<0.001
Sensory Immersion	0.214	0.057	0.213	3.754	<0.001

Note: $R^2 = 0.352$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.348$, $F = 84.726$, $p < 0.001$

The results indicate that both dimensions of emotional experience significantly predict tourism brand loyalty. Cultural identification has a stronger predictive effect ($\beta = 0.368$, $p < 0.001$) compared to sensory immersion ($\beta = 0.213$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that tourists' recognition of

craftsmanship inheritance and cultural values plays a more critical role in forming brand loyalty than immediate sensory pleasure.

(3) Mediating effect test of emotional experience

To test Hypothesis 3, this study employed the Bootstrap

method recommended by Hayes (2013) to examine the mediating role of emotional experience between thematic storytelling and tourism brand loyalty. Using the PROCESS

macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples, the direct effect, indirect effect, and total effect were estimated. The results are presented in Table 11.

Table 11: Bootstrap test for the mediating effect of emotional experience

Effect Path	Effect	Boot SE	Boot CI Lower (2.5%)	Boot CI Upper (97.5%)	Proportion
TS → BL (Total effect)	0.583	0.048	0.489	0.677	—
TS → BL (Direct effect)	0.400	0.049	0.304	0.496	68.63%
TS → EE → BL (Indirect)	0.183	0.032	0.124	0.251	31.37%

Note: TS = Thematic Storytelling; EE = Emotional Experience; BL = Brand Loyalty. 5,000 bootstrap resamples.

As shown in Table 11, the total effect of thematic storytelling on tourism brand loyalty is significant ($\beta = 0.583$, 95% CI [0.489, 0.677]). When emotional experience is included as a mediator, the direct effect of thematic storytelling on brand loyalty remains significant ($\beta = 0.400$, 95% CI [0.304, 0.496]), and the indirect effect through emotional experience is also significant ($\beta = 0.183$, 95% CI [0.124, 0.251]). The indirect

effect accounts for 31.37% of the total effect, indicating that emotional experience plays a partial mediating role between thematic storytelling and tourism brand loyalty.

To further examine the specific mediating pathways, this study decomposed the indirect effect at the sub-dimension level (see Table 12).

Table 12: Sub-dimension mediating effect analysis

Mediating Pathway	Effect	Boot SE	Boot CI Lower	Boot CI Upper	Proportion
NI → CI → BL	0.082	0.023	0.041	0.131	44.81%
NI → SI → BL	0.038	0.015	0.012	0.071	20.77%
ER → CI → BL	0.035	0.014	0.011	0.066	19.13%
ER → SI → BL	0.016	0.009	0.002	0.038	8.74%
VI → CI → BL	0.008	0.006	0.001	0.023	4.37%
VI → SI → BL	0.004	0.004	0.000	0.015	2.19%

Note: NI = Narrative Immersion; ER = Emotional Resonance; VI = Value Identification; CI = Cultural Identification; SI = Sensory Immersion; BL = Brand Loyalty.

The sub-dimension mediation analysis reveals that the pathway "Narrative Immersion → Cultural Identification → Brand Loyalty" has the largest indirect effect (effect = 0.082, accounting for 44.81% of the total indirect effect), followed by "Narrative Immersion → Sensory Immersion → Brand Loyalty" (effect = 0.038, 20.77%) and "Emotional Resonance → Cultural Identification → Brand Loyalty" (effect = 0.035,

19.13%). These findings further confirm that narrative immersion is the core driver of emotional experience, and cultural identification is the most important emotional factor in building tourism brand loyalty.

In summary, all three research hypotheses are supported. The hypothesis testing results are summarized in Table 13.

Table 13: Summary of hypothesis testing results

Hypothesis	Content	Result
H1	Thematic storytelling has a significant positive impact on emotional experience.	Supported
H2	Emotional experience has a significant positive impact on tourism brand loyalty.	Supported
H3	Emotional experience plays a mediating role between thematic storytelling and tourism brand loyalty.	Supported (partial mediation, 31.37%)

5. Conclusions and Suggestions

5.1. Research Conclusions

This study constructed and empirically validated a "thematic storytelling – emotional experience – tourism brand loyalty" theoretical model, using Shoushan Village in Fuzhou as a case of cultural heritage tourism. Through questionnaire survey (N = 313) and rigorous statistical analysis including factor analysis, correlation analysis, multiple regression, and Bootstrap mediation tests, the following main conclusions were drawn:

First, thematic storytelling significantly and positively influences tourists' emotional experience (H1 supported). Among the three sub-dimensions of thematic storytelling, narrative immersion exerts the strongest predictive effect ($\beta = 0.412$), followed by emotional resonance ($\beta = 0.287$) and value identification ($\beta = 0.156$). Together, these three dimensions explain 52.3% of the variance in emotional experience, indicating that well-designed storytelling

elements—including immersive plot construction, emotional character engagement, and cultural value transmission—are powerful drivers of tourists' emotional responses at heritage destinations.

Second, emotional experience significantly enhances tourism brand loyalty (H2 supported). The regression analysis confirms that emotional experience accounts for 33.5% of the variance in brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.579$, $p < 0.001$). At the sub-dimension level, cultural identification ($\beta = 0.368$) exerts a stronger influence than sensory immersion ($\beta = 0.213$) on brand loyalty. This finding reveals that tourists' deep appreciation of cultural values and craftsmanship heritage plays a more critical role in forming long-term brand attachment than immediate sensory pleasure alone.

Third, emotional experience plays a significant partial mediating role between thematic storytelling and tourism brand loyalty (H3 supported). The Bootstrap mediation test shows that the indirect effect through emotional experience

accounts for 31.37% of the total effect, while the direct effect remains significant (68.63%), confirming partial rather than full mediation. The sub-dimension mediation analysis further reveals that the pathway “narrative immersion → cultural identification → brand loyalty” contributes the largest share (44.81%) of the total indirect effect, highlighting the central role of immersive storytelling in activating culturally rooted emotional bonds that ultimately drive loyalty behavior.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

First, this study bridges the research gap between narrative theory and tourism brand management. While previous studies have separately examined storytelling in cultural contexts (Moscardo, 2020; Kvítková & Petru, 2021) ^[14, 8] and brand equity in tourism (Herrero *et al.*, 2017; Ekinçi *et al.*, 2022) ^[4, 3], few have empirically integrated these two streams into a unified framework. By constructing and validating the “thematic storytelling – emotional experience – tourism brand loyalty” model, this study provides a theoretically grounded explanation of how stories function as brand-building mechanisms in cultural heritage tourism.

Second, the study extends the application of the SOR (Stimulus–Organism–Response) model to the context of cultural heritage tourism. Thematic storytelling elements serve as external stimuli (S), emotional experience—including narrative transportation, empathy, and cultural identification—represents the organism’s internal states (O), and brand loyalty behaviors—including revisit intention and word-of-mouth recommendation—constitute the behavioral responses (R). The confirmed mediating role of emotional experience validates the cognitive–affective–behavioral sequence proposed by the SOR framework and demonstrates its explanatory power in heritage tourism settings.

Third, the identification of narrative immersion as the core driver and cultural identification as the strongest emotional predictor of brand loyalty enriches the understanding of emotional experience dimensions in tourism. Existing literature often treats emotional experience as a unidimensional construct (Brakus *et al.*, 2009; Srivastava *et al.*, 2022) ^[1]; this study demonstrates that distinguishing between different types of emotional experience yields more nuanced insights into their differential effects on brand outcomes.

5.3. Practical Implications

First, destination managers should prioritize the design of immersive narrative environments over static displays. The finding that narrative immersion is the strongest predictor of emotional experience suggests that destinations should move beyond informational plaques and guided tours toward multi-sensory, story-driven experiences. For Shoushan Village specifically, this could involve creating living workshops where visitors participate in the stone carving process, developing guided walking routes that follow the chronological story of the village’s 1,500-year history, and employing local artisans as narrative characters who share personal stories of their craft.

Second, storytelling strategies should emphasize cultural value transmission to build deeper brand loyalty. Since cultural identification proved more influential than sensory immersion in predicting loyalty, destination marketers should design narratives that help tourists understand and appreciate the underlying cultural values—such as the spirit of craftsmanship, the aesthetics of stone art, and the continuity

of intangible heritage. This can be achieved through interpretive storytelling that connects historical narratives to contemporary cultural significance, rather than relying solely on visually spectacular but superficially engaging experiences.

Third, a systematic thematic storytelling framework should be developed with clear integration of the five core narrative elements. Destination managers should ensure coherence among setting, characters, conflict, plot, and narrative theme, as the cumulative effect of these elements drives the overall emotional experience. For instance, at Shoushan Village, a master narrative centered on the theme of “stone as a living cultural legacy” could unify individual stories of artisans, geological history, artistic evolution, and community life into a cohesive brand narrative that strengthens destination identity.

Fourth, digital technologies should be strategically integrated to enhance narrative immersion. The study’s findings align with emerging trends in AR/VR-enhanced heritage tourism (Li *et al.*, 2024; Zhao & Wang, 2025) ^[9, 20]. Destinations should leverage digital tools to reconstruct historical scenes, create interactive storylines, and enable virtual time-travel experiences that allow tourists to witness the evolution of stone carving traditions across dynasties. However, technology should serve the narrative rather than overshadow it; the primary goal remains emotional engagement through meaningful cultural stories.

5.4. Research Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the meaningful findings, this study has several limitations that point to directions for future research. First, the empirical data were collected from a single case—Shoushan Village—which, while rich in cultural heritage, may limit the generalizability of the findings to other types of cultural heritage tourism destinations. Future studies should replicate this research across diverse settings, including industrial heritage sites, ethnic minority villages, and UNESCO World Heritage sites, to examine whether the proposed model holds across different cultural and geographical contexts.

Second, this study adopted a cross-sectional survey design, which captures tourists’ perceptions and intentions at a single point in time. While this approach is efficient, it cannot fully capture the dynamic evolution of emotional experiences and brand loyalty over time. Longitudinal research designs, including pre-visit, during-visit, and post-visit measurements, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how narrative experiences unfold and how their effects on loyalty develop and decay over time.

Third, the measurement of brand loyalty in this study relies on self-reported behavioral intentions (revisit and recommendation), which may not fully correspond to actual behavior. Future research could incorporate behavioral data, such as actual revisit records, social media engagement metrics, and online review patterns, to triangulate and validate self-report measures.

Fourth, this study did not examine potential moderating variables that may influence the strength of the relationships in the model. Individual differences such as cultural background, prior knowledge of the heritage, travel motivation, and personality traits may moderate how tourists respond to thematic storytelling. Future studies should explore these boundary conditions to develop a more complete picture of when and for whom storytelling

strategies are most effective.

Fifth, the mediation analysis reveals that emotional experience explains approximately 31.37% of the total effect, meaning that a substantial portion (68.63%) of the influence of thematic storytelling on brand loyalty operates through pathways other than emotional experience. Future research should investigate additional mediating mechanisms, such as perceived authenticity, place attachment, cognitive satisfaction, and social identity, to account for the direct effect and provide a more comprehensive model of how storytelling builds tourism brands.

5.5. Declarations and Statements

1. Funding Support

The authors declare that this study received no financial support, funding, or grants from any public, commercial, or non-profit funding agencies.

2. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. There are no relevant financial or non-financial relationships to disclose.

References

- Brakus JJ, Schmitt BH, Zarantonello L. Brand experience: What is it? How is it measured? Does it affect loyalty? *J Mark.* 2009;73(3):52-68. doi:10.1509/jmkg.73.3.52.
- Chen C, Kim S. The role of social media in shaping brand equity for historical tourism destinations. *Sustainability.* 2025;17(10):4407. doi:10.3390/su17104407.
- Ekinci Y, Japutra A, Molinillo S, Li X. Extension and validation of a novel destination brand equity model. *J Travel Res.* 2022;62(6):1-15. doi:10.1177/00472875221087689.
- Herrero A, San Martín H, García de los Salmones MM, Rodríguez del Bosque IA. Examining the hierarchy of destination brands and the chain of effects between brand equity dimensions. *J Dest Mark Manag.* 2017;6(4):353-362. doi:10.1016/j.jdmm.2017.05.003.
- Jiménez-García D, Espinoza Heredia O, Cruz Lizana E, Ochoa Rodríguez M. Destination image and brand value as predictors of tourist behavior: happiness as a mediating link. *Adm Sci.* 2025;15(5):176. doi:10.3390/admsci15050176.
- Konecnik M, Gartner WC. Customer-based brand equity for a destination. *Ann Tour Res.* 2007;34(2):400-421. doi:10.1016/j.annals.2006.08.004.
- Kumar V, Kaushik AK. Destination brand experience and visitor behavior: the mediating role of destination brand identification. *J Travel Tour Mark.* 2018;35(5):649-663. doi:10.1080/10548408.2017.1369002.
- Kvítková Z, Petru Z. Approaches to storytelling and narrative structures in destination marketing. *Tour South East Eur.* 2021;6(2):425-438. doi:10.1558/tose.18918.
- Li N, Li L, Chen X, Zhang Y. Digital destination storytelling: narrative persuasion effects induced by story satisfaction in a VR context. *J Hosp Tour Manag.* 2024;58(1):184-196. doi:10.1016/j.jhtm.2024.02.014.
- Li S, Hussain K, Ragavan NA, Hui TK. The role of

destination brand experience, emotions and brand credibility in influencing destination brand equity. *J Hosp Tour Insights.* 2025;8(5):1743-1763. doi:10.1108/JHTI-01-2024-0003.

- Mandagi DW, Centeno D. Destination brand gestalt: dimensionalizing co-created tourism destination branding. *Int J Tour Cities.* 2024;10(2):1-20. doi:10.1108/IJTC-06-2023-0160.
- Marques C, Vinhas da Silva R, Antova S. Image, satisfaction, destination and product post-visit behaviours: how do they relate in emerging destinations? *Tour Manag.* 2021;85:104293. doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2020.104293.
- Mehrabian A, Russell JA. *An Approach to Environmental Psychology.* Cambridge (MA): MIT Press; 1974. doi:10.7551/mitpress/1569.001.0001.
- Moscardo G. The story turn in tourism: forces and future. *J Tour Futures.* 2020;7(2):168-173. doi:10.1108/JTF-09-2019-0055.
- Ringler C, Sirianni NJ, Peck J. Does your demonstration tell the whole story? How a process mindset and social presence impact the effectiveness of product demonstrations. *J Acad Mark Sci.* 2023;52(2):512-530. doi:10.1007/s11747-022-00856-1.
- Ruiz-Real JL, Uribe-Toril J, Gazquez-Abad JC. Destination branding: opportunities and new challenges. *J Dest Mark Manag.* 2020;17:100453. doi:10.1016/j.jdmm.2019.100453.
- Shi H, Liu Y, Kumail T. Tourism destination brand equity, brand authenticity and revisit intention: the mediating role of tourist satisfaction and the moderating role of destination familiarity. *Tour Rev.* 2022;77(3):751-778. doi:10.1108/TR-03-2021-0099.
- Vlassi A, Gnoth J, Ryan C. Destination branding as a co-created narrative process. *J Travel Res.* 2022;61(9):1-15. doi:10.1177/00472875211052311.
- Woodside AG. Brand-consumer storytelling theory and research: introduction to a *Psychology & Marketing* special issue. *Psychol Mark.* 2010;27(6):531-540. doi:10.1002/mar.20358.
- Zhao Y, Wang Y. Research on communication practice of new Chinese-style tourism in social media environment. *Media.* 2025;13(13):94-96. doi:10.13999/j.cnki.mbpt.2025.013.021.

How to Cite This Article

Huang Y, Chen MC. Thematic narrative in cultural heritage tourism: How narrative elements drive destination brand loyalty. *Int J Manag Organ Res.* 2026;5(4):22-31. doi:10.54660/IJMOR.2026.5.4.22-31.

Creative Commons (CC) License

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.