



## DIGITAL STORYTELLING AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN SARAWAK DESTINATION

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### Abstract

This study explores the potential of storytelling as a tool for promoting and preserving the rich cultural heritage of Sarawak, Malaysia. Despite its cultural wealth, Malaysia's heritage is underrepresented due to limited digital promotion. The research addresses this by developing a framework for creating compelling storylines that integrate cultural heritage with tourist experiences. The study employs case study qualitative research methods, identifying best practice examples of digital storytelling, evaluating digital cultural heritage portfolios in Sarawak, and identifying suitable local and regional traditions for tourism promotion. The research contributes to the theory and practice of destination marketing, providing guidelines for tourism marketers, web designers, IT professionals, and heritage administrators. It also offers insights to government and policymakers on the link between effective digital media use and tourist experiences. The study promotes sustainable tourism practices and encourages co-creation between tourists and destinations, making a significant contribution to both theoretical knowledge and practical applications within the realm of tourism marketing.

*Keywords:* tourist experiences; digital promotion; storylines.

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### 1. Introduction

Sarawak, a Malaysian state, is a cultural hub with over 40 ethnic groups contributing to its rich heritage. Despite its cultural wealth, Malaysia faces the risk of losing its identity due to insufficient representation of its cultural diversity. The country has numerous cultural heritage sites, but limited digital promotion has resulted in only a few being widely known among tourists. Storytelling, an integral part of human communication, is an effective way to promote undiscovered cultural heritage. It helps tourists connect with the local culture and history, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the destination. However, storytelling principles have not been widely adopted in the tourism industry, particularly in destination marketing.

The research identifies two main challenges hindering the wider dissemination of storytelling advantages. First, controlling narratives in tourism destinations is more challenging than corporate communication due to the diverse range of stakeholders involved. Second, the principle of "one main story/plot/archetype for one brand" can create conflicts among stakeholders and confusion among target customers due to the complexity of the destination.

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The research poses a general question: How can cultural heritage and tourism experiences be effectively combined to create exemplary storylines? To address this, it breaks down into more detailed research questions: RQ1) What are the best practice examples for combining digital storytelling with local and regional heritage? RQ2) What are the digital cultural heritage portfolios available in Sarawak? RQ3) Which stories from the history and present of local or regional traditions qualify to be used for tourism promotion with digital storytelling?

The main aim of this thesis is the development of exemplary storylines combining cultural heritage and touristic experience. To accomplish this, it sets specific research objectives: to identify and analyse the best practice examples for combining digital storytelling with local and regional heritage; to identify and evaluate the digital cultural heritage portfolios available in Sarawak; and to identify appropriate stories from the history and present of local or regional traditions for tourism promotion with digital storytelling.

In conclusion, this research aims to explore the potential of storytelling as a tool to promote and preserve Sarawak's cultural heritage, making it more accessible and appealing to tourists. It seeks to address the challenges in implementing storytelling in destination marketing and aims to develop effective strategies for combining cultural heritage and tourism experiences to create compelling storylines.

## **2. Literature Review**

Malaysia, a Southeast Asian country known for its diverse cultural heritage, beautiful natural scenery, and modern infrastructure, is a renowned global tourist destination. It consists of Peninsular Malaysia and Malaysian Borneo (Sabah and Sarawak). The tourism industry significantly contributes to Malaysia's economy, offering attractions that range from cultural heritage and natural beauty to modern urban experiences.

The country's vibrant cultural tapestry blends Malay, Chinese, Indian and Indigenous traditions, highlighted in historic cities like Malacca and George Town. Nature and adventure tourism thrive in the tropical climate, with Borneo's rainforests hosting unique species such as orangutans and the Rafflesia flower. Marine parks, such as those around Sipadan Island, offer world-class diving and snorkelling. Urban tourism is prominent in cities like Kuala Lumpur, home to the iconic Petronas Twin Towers and bustling shopping districts, and in George Town, Penang, known for its colonial architecture and vibrant street food scene. Malaysia also excels in health and wellness tourism, providing high-quality medical services and serene wellness retreats at competitive prices. This diverse tourism landscape is supported by Malaysia's robust infrastructure, including international airports, extensive road networks and a wide range of accommodation options.

Sarawak, a state in Malaysian Borneo, exemplifies sustainable tourism with its extensive rainforests, diverse wildlife and rich cultural heritage. Major attractions include Kuching, Bako and Mulu National Parks and traditional Iban longhouses. Despite challenges such as accessibility and resource management, Sarawak's focus on ecotourism and community involvement ensures its appeal as a unique destination.

The literature review explores the rise of digital storytelling and its diverse applications in marketing, tourism, and cultural heritage preservation. Digital storytelling creates immersive experiences, fosters engagement, and preserves cultural narratives. It also enhances the accessibility and promotion of cultural heritage, contributing to a deeper understanding of this contemporary narrative form and its impact on culture, history and tourism.

### *2.1. Digital Storytelling*

Digital storytelling is an evolution of traditional storytelling, leveraging modern technology to convey narratives. The narrative has roots in ancient practices dating back to cave drawings, reflecting humanity's inherent desire to share stories (Bruner 2002; Sylaiou and Dafiotis 2020). In marketing, entities like museums and cultural organizations have realized that stories, not just brand names, are what truly engage consumers (Rizvic, Okanovic, and Boskovic 2020).

Digital technology has given rise to digital storytelling, which combines narrative art with multimedia (Paolini and Di Blas 2014; Handler-Miller 2014; Robin 2016). This method has been used in various fields, such as social work, healthcare and education (Chan and Sage 2021; Schmier 2021; Ohler 2013)). It allows individuals to share first-person experiences and plays a crucial role in preserving and promoting cultural heritage (Pera and Viglia 2016).

Digital storytelling provides an immersive experience for travellers, allowing them to interact with cultural heritage in unprecedented ways. For instance, the Sarawak Tourism Board offers a 360-degree virtual tour of Sarawak, and the Russian Museum uses VR to take visitors through centuries of Russian history (Sarawak Tourism Board, 2021; The State Hermitage Museum, 2017; Heath-Jones, 2017).

Notably, digital storytelling creates an emotional connection with the audience, forming a personal bond with each destination or tourism business (Katsoni and Fyta, 2021). This emotional resonance can inspire travellers to become ambassadors for these destinations, promoting them through their shared experiences. Digital storytelling has been recognized as an effective way to market tourist destinations due to its authenticity, creativity, and inspirational potential (Katsoni and Fyta, 2021). Recent initiatives like the Lasem Heritage Foundation have demonstrated the power of digital storytelling in preserving and communicating cultural heritage (Cahyani, Mardani, and Widianingsih, 2023).

## *2.2. Digital Storytelling in Destination Marketing*

Digital storytelling is a powerful tool in destination marketing, adeptly merging educational messages with interactive learning experiences to foster immersive settings (Smeda, Dakich, and Sharda, 2014). It helps build brand recognition and convey brand distinctiveness, leading to an increased inclination among marketers to employ narratives (Hay, Chien, and Ruhanen, 2022). This approach establishes deeper emotional connections with audiences, making interactions more memorable (Olsson, Therkelsen, and Mossberg, 2016).

Destination marketing organizations can promote and manage narrative interactivity, connecting and empathizing with their target audiences on a deeper level (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2008). Digital storytelling draws upon residents' experiences and perspectives, creating compelling destination narratives (Hay, Chien, and Ruhanen, 2022). First-person storytellers significantly increase engagement on social media, destination brand image, and tourist visit intentions compared to third-person storytellers (Pachucki, Grohs, and Scholl-Grissemann, 2022).

Despite the dominance of storytelling, empirical research on the effects of organizational narratives in destination marketing is still in its early stages (Pachucki, Grohs, and Scholl-Grissemann, 2022). However, creative narratives supported by new technologies are emerging as potent tools for destination marketing (Korez-Vide, 2017). There is a need to identify effective storytelling elements and modes of story presentation (Zins and Abbas Adamu, 2023).

Destination marketing organizations often aim to attract potential customers in the shortest possible time and do not fully utilize storytelling principles to form an emotional connection with potential customers. According to Zins and Abbas Adamu (2023), storytelling principles have not been widely adopted in the tourism industry, especially in destination marketing. There is a gap between the potential benefits of narrative and its actual implementation in the tourism industry, indicating a lack of adoption of narrative principles in destination marketing (Frost et al., 2020). This gap highlights the need for more empirically driven research in narrative research in destination marketing (Frost et al., 2020).

## *2.3 Missing Resources and Insights from a Cultural Heritage Perspective*

The tourism industry has seen a significant transformation with the phasing out of traditional methods of promoting physical, cultural sites in favour of digital means, as tourists increasingly want to access information anytime, anywhere (Pucciarelli and Giachino, 2019). This shift is due to the rapid evolution of tourist destinations

and the inefficiency of traditional travel methods. The rise of social media and mobile technology, replacing Web 2.0 technology, has altered how people interact and conduct business.

Digital cultural heritage, the digital representation of cultural heritage, is becoming increasingly important. It includes customs, traditions, historical sites, and other cultural assets, and is considered computerized information of enduring value that should be preserved for future generations (UNESCO, 2021). Various apps have been developed to digitally promote and protect cultural heritage development, such as the Sabah E-Culture application, CrossCult components, the PLUGGY project, the Heritage in Action project, and the music guide-themed app "Stockholm Sounds" (Antoniou et al., 2018; CORDIS, 2021; Tourism 4.0, n.d.; Åkerström, n.d.).

The current era of digital acceleration is changing the tourism landscape, necessitating that cultural heritage assets remain digitally accessible and encourage visitor engagement experiences through interactive virtual worlds (Ch'ng, 2011; Not and Petrelli, 2019). Digital destination storytelling, a new form of narrative that combines traditional storytelling with digital technology, can create immersive and memorable experiences for visitors (Cunsolo Willox, Harper, and Edge, 2013).

However, despite the opportunities offered by digital technology, many cultural heritage destinations, including those in Malaysia and the Southeast Asia region, have yet to embrace or reconfigure the tourism experience. Malaysia, home to 69 national heritage sites, has a long history of traditions and cultures from many different ethnic groups, but only a few of its national heritage sites have been transformed into renowned tourist destinations (Noor et al., 2019). These include the UNESCO-recognized historic cities of Malacca and George Town, Gunung Mulu National Park in Sarawak, and Kota Kinabalu Park in Sabah (UNESCO, n.d.). Other cultural heritage destinations include the Lenggong Valley World Heritage Site, Geopark in Langkawi, and Lembah Bujang National Heritage Site. Despite the potential benefits, there is still a gap in adopting digital technology in these destinations.

#### *2.4 Integrating Cultural Heritage into Destination Marketing through Digital Storytelling*

Storytelling is inherent to human nature and has been recognized as a powerful tool for building brand recognition and loyalty due to its ability to evoke emotions and create connections with consumers (Kao, 2019; Hong et al., 2022). Despite its success in the commercial industry, storytelling remains underutilized as a corporate communication and public relations tool in the tourism industry. Existing research on the use of storytelling in destination marketing is limited, focusing primarily on the storytelling component and its potential impact (Moscardo, 2018).

Sedej and Mlaker Kač (2022) emphasized the need to identify effective story elements and modes of story presentation, given the widely discussed benefits of utilizing storytelling in tourism destinations. Digital technology can encourage people to share their travel stories and experiences, integrating cultural heritage into the destination. This aligns with the observations of Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2008) and Tussyadiah, Park, and Fesenmaier (2011), who highlighted the growing importance of digital storytelling in tourism marketing, providing opportunities for entertainment, adventure and cultural tourism.

Storytelling has emerged as a crucial tool in destination promotion, enabling a destination to convey its unique history and cultural identity to potential visitors. Past surveys have confirmed the stimulating effect of travellers' blog entries, which report their experiences as engaging stories (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2008; Tussyadiah, Park, and Fesenmaier, 2011). Studies have examined the effects of storytelling as a co-creation behaviour (Pera, 2017) and the impacts of storytelling on destination branding (Ben Youssef, Leicht, and Marongiu, 2019; Lund, Cohen, and Scarles, 2018; Zhong, Busser, and Baloglu, 2017). However, these studies rarely link this listening phase to the story-building and storytelling component, which is critical to a coherent identity development strategy and improving destination competitiveness.

The use of digital media can help overcome the limitations and challenges of using storytelling in destination promotion. Digital media offers a logical and creative way to open subspaces for travellers and visitors to explore and fill with their own experiences. This technology can also assist tourists in fully understanding their own interests in cultural heritage and can be used as a tool to promote cultural heritage sites. Specifically, digital

technology can recommend tourists' favourite cultural heritage sites and motivate tourists to suggest someone else visit a specific cultural heritage site based on their positive experiences (Gnoth, 2017). Enabling storytelling can play an important role in destination promotion through digital means, creating a connection between the destination and audience and enhancing the persuasiveness of destination promotion.

### **3. Methodology**

This study will employ case study qualitative research methods, which are effective for complex, multifaceted, and context-specific phenomena. The focus is on Sarawak's intangible heritage. A purposeful sampling approach will be used to engage with heritage representatives or documentary experts.

To address RQ1, best practice examples for digital heritage storytelling in combination with destination marketing will be identified through an online desk research of literature and websites worldwide. The findings will primarily focus on Sarawak due to cost and time efficiency, but the implications can be applied to other destinations in Malaysia and beyond.

For RQ2, a portfolio of digitally available cultural heritage in Sarawak will be created through primary research on accessible cultural heritage assets and artifacts. Interviews with representatives of the identified heritage or attraction sector (n=15) will be conducted to understand digital availability and openness for integration into destination marketing activities.

RQ3 will expand on RQ2 to discover appropriate stories from local or regional traditions. This will be supplemented by conducting expert interviews with representatives from the destination marketing, cultural heritage sectors, and tourism (n=15). Data collection will be conducted in 8 divisions of Sarawak. Nvivo 15.0 will be used for data reduction and presentation. The research aims to help Malaysia develop exemplary storylines that combine cultural heritage and tourism experiences.

### **4. Findings**

For this conference presentation, we provide an overview of the ongoing study on Digital Storytelling and Cultural Heritage in Sarawak Destination Marketing. The understanding of storytelling in the form of a conceptual model and pragmatic guidelines will help to develop existing and new digital platforms of destination marketing in Malaysia. In addition, the study fills the conceptual gap in the existing knowledge of storytelling principles in destination marketing. By leveraging digital technology, Malaysia's tourism industry can demonstrate its cultural heritage to a global audience and improve Malaysia's competitive position as a tourist destination in the future. Besides, the study will also increase accessibility to visitors. By offering digital cultural heritage online, more people can access and appreciate it wherever they are. This may lead to an increased interest in visiting Malaysia as a tourist destination and experiencing the culture for themselves.

### **5. Conclusions**

This research aims to enhance the theory and practice of destination marketing through digital storytelling. It seeks to fill gaps in knowledge about digital storytelling and cultural heritage in destination marketing, providing a framework for Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) to engage travellers effectively.

The study informs the National Tourism Policy 2020 by highlighting storytelling's potential to increase destination appeal and emotional connection. It offers a framework for creating storylines that combine cultural heritage and touristic experience, aiding DMOs in promoting cultural tourism digitally.

The research benefits society by improving tourist experiences and emotions in Malaysian destinations. It provides guidelines for tourism marketers, web designers, IT professionals, and heritage administrators to enhance their marketing tools and competitiveness. It also offers insights to government and policy makers on the link between effective digital media use and tourist experiences, highlighting new opportunities in smart tourism.

The study promotes tourism sustainability and awareness, encouraging tourists to become co-marketers of tourism information and offerings. This contributes to economic growth, particularly in less developed states, and enhances the social dimension of tourism by linking activities and experiences to local and regional cultural heritage stories.

This study is unique in its multidisciplinary approach, combining digital storytelling, cultural heritage, and destination marketing. It addresses a gap in existing research by developing a comprehensive framework for creating compelling storylines that integrate cultural heritage with tourist experiences. The research highlights the potential of storytelling to enhance the appeal and emotional connection of travellers to destinations. Practical guidelines are provided for Destination Marketing Organizations on how to leverage this power of storytelling effectively.

Moreover, this study offers valuable insights into the effective use of digital media platforms in enhancing tourist experiences and emotions, contributing to the growing field of smart tourism. By promoting sustainable tourism practices and encouraging co-creation between tourists and destinations, it makes a significant contribution to both theoretical knowledge and practical applications within the realm of tourism marketing.

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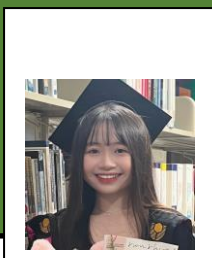
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