

Digital Pathways to Rural Fields: How Social Media Storytelling Shapes Agri-Tourism Destination Image and Visit Intentions

*Pranith Vontela¹ and Sudha Vemaraju²

¹Research Scholar and ²Associate Professor, GITAM School of Business,
GITAM University (Deemed to be University), Hyderabad

*pvontela@gitam.in; svemaraj@gitam.in

Abstract

Background: Agri-tourism has emerged as an important alternative tourism segment, offering authentic rural experiences while supporting local livelihoods. With the growing reliance on digital platforms for travel planning, social media storytelling and user-generated content increasingly shape tourists' perceptions of rural destinations. However, empirical evidence on how digital narratives influence agri-tourism visit intention remains limited. **Objectives:** This study examines the influence of digital storytelling elements on agri-tourism visit intention through cognitive–affective destination image. The study aims to investigate the effects of narrative vividness, perceived rural authenticity and user-generated content credibility on cognitive–affective destination image and to assess its impact on agri-tourism visit intention. **Methodology:** A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed. Data was collected from 256 urban respondents from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra states who are exposed to agri-tourism related digital content using a structured questionnaire. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to evaluate the measurement and structural models. **Results:** Results indicate that perceived rural authenticity and user-generated content credibility exert moderate positive effects on cognitive–affective destination image, while narrative vividness shows a smaller but significant influence. Cognitive–affective destination image strongly predicts agri-tourism visit intention ($\beta = 0.837$), explaining 70% of its variance. The model demonstrates substantial predictive power, with digital storytelling variables jointly explaining 72.9% of destination image. **Conclusion:** The findings highlight cognitive–affective destination image as a key mechanism linking digital storytelling to agri-tourism visit intention. Authentic rural representation and credible visitor-generated content emerge as more influential than aesthetic storytelling alone. The study offers practical insights for agri-tourism operators and policymakers to design authentic, trust-enhancing digital communication strategies that strengthen rural destination appeal and stimulate visitation.

Keywords: Destination image, agri-tourism, rural, user-generated content, social media

Introduction

Agri-tourism has emerged as a significant alternative tourism form that integrates agricultural practices with visitor experiences, offering travellers opportunities to engage with rural lifestyles, farming activities and local cultures. In recent years, agri-tourism has gained prominence as tourists increasingly seek authentic, meaningful and nature-based

experiences that contrast with mass tourism environments. Particularly in developing economies such as India, agri-tourism is being promoted as a tool for rural diversification, community empowerment and sustainable destination development. By creating supplementary income for farmers while fostering cultural exchange and environmental

awareness among visitors, agri-tourism represents a promising pathway toward inclusive tourism growth. Digital transformation has reshaped how tourism destinations are discovered, evaluated and selected. Social media platforms, user-generated content and digital storytelling have become central to tourists' information search and decision-making processes. Unlike traditional marketing communications, contemporary tourism promotion relies heavily on experiential narratives, immersive visuals and peer-generated content that collectively shape traveller's perceptions even before physical visitation occurs. For emerging tourism segments such as agri-tourism, where formal destination branding is often limited, digital platforms serve as primary channels for communicating rural experiences, farm lifestyles and local authenticity to prospective visitors.

Digital storytelling is characterized by vivid narratives, emotionally engaging content and experiential representations plays a particularly influential role in shaping destination perceptions. Through photographs, videos, reels and personal narratives, social media allows potential tourists to virtually experience farm environments, harvest activities, culinary traditions and pastoral landscapes. These digital representations often function as symbolic substitutes for direct experience, enabling individuals to mentally simulate their future visits. Prior tourism studies (Filiari et al., 2015) have established that such narrative-driven content enhances engagement, stimulates imagination and strengthens emotional connections with destinations. However, despite growing attention to digital tourism marketing, empirical research examining how storytelling mechanisms operate specifically within agri-tourism contexts remains limited.

A critical aspect of digital influence lies in tourists' evaluation of authenticity. Agri-tourism is fundamentally rooted in notions of genuineness, rural heritage and traditional agricultural practices. Yet, when these experiences are mediated through digital platforms, questions arise regarding how authenticity is perceived and constructed online. Perceived rural authenticity refers to tourists' beliefs that digital content accurately reflects real farming life, local culture and community values. Authentic representations are particularly important in agri-tourism because visitors are motivated not merely by leisure but by desires for learning, connection with nature and immersion in rural settings (Stylidis et al., 2017). When online content appears staged or overly commercialized, it may undermine trust and

weaken destination appeal. Therefore, understanding how perceived rural authenticity embedded in digital storytelling shapes destination evaluations is essential for agri-tourism development.

In agri-tourism, where standardized service benchmarks are often absent, user-generated content becomes a vital source of reassurance regarding safety, comfort and experiential value. Prior studies in mainstream tourism have demonstrated that credible user-generated content significantly influences destination image formation and behavioral intentions. Nevertheless, empirical evidence within rural and agri-tourism settings remains sparse. Destination image occupies a central position in tourism behavior literature, serving as a cognitive and affective representation of a place in tourists' minds. Cognitive destination image refers to beliefs and knowledge about destination attributes such as facilities, activities, accessibility and educational value, while affective image captures emotional responses such as relaxation, pleasure and excitement. Together, these dimensions form a holistic cognitive-affective destination image that guides travel-related decisions. For agri-tourism, destination image encompasses perceptions of farm infrastructure, participatory activities, learning opportunities and emotional experiences derived from nature and rural tranquillity. Digital storytelling elements are expected to shape both cognitive evaluations and affective impressions, thereby influencing tourists' intentions to visit agri-tourism destinations. By integrating digital storytelling theory with destination image formation and behavioral intention, this research contributes to both academic discourse and managerial practice. In an era where rural destinations increasingly depend on digital visibility, understanding how online narratives translate into real-world visitation is crucial. The findings are expected to offer evidence-based guidance for designing authentic, vivid and credible digital content that not only attracts tourists but also supports sustainable agri-tourism development.

Digital storytelling has become a dominant mechanism through which tourism destinations communicate experiential value and influence travel decisions. Social media platforms enable destinations to present immersive narratives using images, videos and personal stories that stimulate tourists' imagination and emotional engagement. Narrative vividness refers to the richness and sensory intensity of

such content, facilitating mental imagery and experiential simulation. Escalas (2004) explains that vivid narratives enhance narrative transportation, allowing individuals to psychologically enter the story world, thereby strengthening attitudes and behavioural intentions. Vivid digital content has been shown to increase engagement, perceived experiential quality and destination evaluations (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020). Rich visual storytelling helps potential tourists form clearer expectations about activities, landscapes and cultural encounters, which is particularly relevant for experiential forms of tourism such as agri-tourism. By presenting farm life, harvesting practices and rural landscapes in emotionally engaging ways, digital storytelling enables pre-consumption experience formation, influencing both cognitive assessments and affective responses toward destinations.

Authenticity is widely recognized as a core motivation in alternative tourism forms, including rural and agri-tourism. Tourists seek genuine encounters with local culture, traditions and everyday life rather than staged performances. Kolar & Žabkar (2010) conceptualize authenticity as a multidimensional construct encompassing object-based and existential dimensions, both of which shape destination image and loyalty. Perceived rural authenticity reflects tourists' beliefs that online and offline experiences genuinely represent farming lifestyles and community values. Lu et al. (2015) demonstrate that authenticity perceptions positively influence destination image and satisfaction, while also strengthening emotional bonds with destinations. Digitally mediated authenticity is increasingly important, as tourists often rely on online representations before visiting. Authentic rural portrayals enhance trust and emotional resonance, supporting favourable cognitive–affective evaluations.

User-Generated Content (UGC) plays a pivotal role in contemporary tourism decision-making. Compared with firm-generated marketing communications, UGC is perceived as more impartial and trustworthy. Cheung et al. (2009) argue that credibility is a key determinant of information adoption in online environments. In tourism, credible peer reviews and experiential posts reduce uncertainty and perceived risk, particularly for less standardized products such as agri-tourism. Filieri et al. (2015) Confirm that source credibility significantly influences destination image and booking intentions. Similarly, Styliadis et al. (2017) highlight that trustworthy online information strengthens tourists' cognitive knowledge while reinforcing positive affective impressions.

For agri-tourism destinations, where quality signals are often informal, credible UGC becomes a critical driver of image formation and behavioral intention.

Destination image represents tourists' overall perceptions of a place and is commonly conceptualized as comprising cognitive and affective components. Cognitive image relates to beliefs about destination attributes such as facilities, activities and accessibility, whereas affective image captures emotional reactions including pleasure, relaxation and excitement (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Russell, 1980). These dimensions jointly influence tourists' evaluations and choices. Extensive research confirms that destination image is a strong predictor of visit intention and loyalty (Fischer & Karl, 2025). In rural and agri-tourism contexts, destination image incorporates perceptions of farm infrastructure, learning opportunities, environmental quality and emotional experiences derived from nature. Digitally communicated narratives, authenticity cues and UGC collectively shape these cognitive–affective representations prior to actual visitation.

Visit intention reflects tourists' likelihood of choosing a destination and engaging in travel-related behaviors. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), Intention is widely accepted as a proximal antecedent of actual behavior. Tourism studies consistently demonstrate that favourable destination image increases visit intention, recommendation behavior and destination preference (Lam & Hsu, 2006). Positive cognitive evaluations of farm activities combined with affective responses to rural tranquillity are expected to motivate tourists to prefer agri-tourism over conventional travel options. As such, cognitive–affective destination image serves as a central psychological mechanism linking digital stimuli to behavioral outcomes.

The growing convergence of tourism and digital media has fundamentally reshaped how destinations are imagined, evaluated and selected. Travelers increasingly rely on online platforms not merely for logistical information but for experiential cues that enable them to mentally rehearse future journeys. This shift is particularly consequential for experiential tourism forms such as agri-tourism, where intangible qualities such as rural ambiance, farm lifestyles and emotional connections with nature constitute the core value proposition. Unlike conventional urban destinations, agri-tourism settings are often dispersed, locally managed

and weakly institutionalized in formal marketing channels. Consequently, digital storytelling and peer-generated content have become primary mechanisms through which agri-tourism destinations gain visibility and legitimacy in competitive tourism markets.

Digital storytelling operates through narrative structures that combine visual imagery, textual descriptions and personal testimonies to convey experiential meaning. These narratives allow prospective tourists to simulate farm experiences cognitively and emotionally before actual visitation. Escalas (2004) emphasizes that narrative processing facilitates transportation into story worlds, thereby strengthening affective engagement and attitudinal change. In tourism contexts, such narrative immersion enables individuals to imagine themselves participating in destination activities, fostering anticipatory emotions and shaping destination-related beliefs. Jiménez-Barreto et al. (2020) further demonstrate that vivid experiential narratives enhance perceived authenticity and destination brand evaluations. For agri-tourism, digital stories depicting harvesting rituals, farm-to-table practices and rural routines provide symbolic access to agricultural life, making distant rural spaces experientially accessible to urban audiences.

The importance of narrative vividness lies in its capacity to activate multisensory imagery and emotional resonance. Rich visual cues such as green landscapes, livestock interactions and traditional cooking scenes stimulate imagination and reduce psychological distance between tourists and destinations. Such imagery contributes to cognitive elaboration by providing concrete information about destination attributes while simultaneously eliciting affective responses associated with tranquillity, nostalgia and escape. This dual processing aligns with destination image theory, which conceptualizes image as comprising both cognitive beliefs and affective evaluations (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Russell, 1980). In digitally mediated environments, narrative vividness thus functions as a catalyst for holistic image formation, particularly when physical experience is absent.

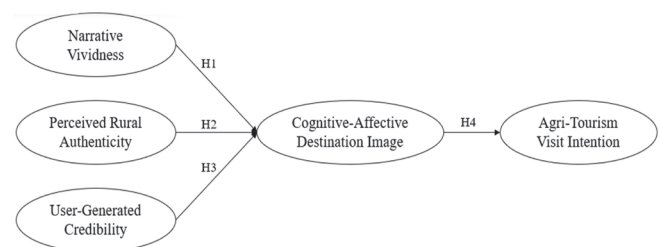
Authenticity emerges as a central theme in this digital construction of agri-tourism experiences. Tourists pursuing rural travel are often motivated by desires for genuine cultural encounters, simplicity and connection with nature. Kolar and Žabkar (2010) argue that authenticity encompasses both objective elements (tangible cultural artifacts) and

existential dimensions (personal feelings of self-discovery and meaning). In agri-tourism, authenticity is embedded in everyday farming practices, community interactions and ecological rhythms. However, when these elements are represented online, authenticity becomes perceptual rather than experiential, relying on tourists' interpretations of digital cues. Lu et al. (2015) demonstrate that perceived authenticity significantly enhances destination image and emotional attachment, suggesting that authenticity operates as a trust-building mechanism that validates tourists' expectations.

Digitally conveyed rural authenticity is particularly salient because agri-tourism experiences are often marketed through informal channels, lacking standardized certification or branding. As a result, tourists depend heavily on online representations to judge whether destinations genuinely reflect rural life or merely commodify it for tourism consumption. Authentic portrayals of farming routines, local traditions and community participation reinforce credibility and emotional warmth, whereas overly stylized content risks eroding trust. This dynamic highlights the psychological importance of perceived rural authenticity in shaping cognitive-affective destination image prior to visitation.

Figure 1

Proposed Model



Source: Author's Work

Hypothesis:

H1: Narrative Vividness influences Cognitive-Affective Destination Image.

H2: Perceived Rural Authenticity influences Cognitive-Affective Destination Image.

H3: User-Generated Credibility influences Cognitive-Affective Destination Image.

H4: Cognitive-Affective Destination Image influences Agri-Tourism Visit Intention.

Objectives:

- To examine the influence of narrative vividness on cognitive–affective destination image in the context of agri-tourism.
- To assess the effect of perceived rural authenticity on cognitive–affective destination image.
- To analyze the impact of user-generated content credibility on cognitive–affective destination image.
- To determine the relationship between cognitive–affective destination image and agri-tourism visit intention.
- To investigate the mediating role of cognitive–affective destination image in the relationships between digital storytelling elements (narrative vividness, perceived rural authenticity and user-generated credibility) and agri-tourism visit intention.

Methodology

Research Design: This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships among digital storytelling elements, cognitive–affective destination image and agri-tourism visit intention. The quantitative approach was deemed appropriate given the study’s objective of testing hypothesized relationships and assessing predictive effects among latent constructs.

Locale: The target population comprised urban residents who actively use social media and online travel platforms and who had been exposed to agri-tourism content such as farm stay promotions, rural travel posts, or visitor-generated reviews. Respondents were from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra states.

Sampling Technique: Data were collected using a non-probability convenience sampling technique supplemented by snowball sampling to broaden participant reach. The respondents were required to be at least 18 years of age and to have encountered agri-tourism related digital content within the preceding six months.

Tools and Technique: A structured questionnaire survey was employed to collect primary data from potential tourists who had prior exposure to agri-tourism–related content on digital platforms. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section captured demographic information, including age, gender, education level and frequency of social media

use. The second section measured the study constructs using multi-item scales adapted from established literature and contextualized to agri-tourism. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree”. The survey was administered online using a web-based questionnaire link circulated through social media platforms and professional networks. Prior to participation, respondents were informed about the academic purpose of the study and assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Participation was voluntary.

After data screening total of 256 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis. The obtained sample size exceeded the minimum requirements for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), following both the “10-times rule” and more recent recommendations based on statistical power.

Data Analysis and Statistical Analysis: Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS software. PLS-SEM was selected due to its suitability for prediction-oriented research, its robustness with complex models and its ability to handle higher-order constructs. The technique is particularly appropriate for exploratory contexts such as agri-tourism, where theoretical development is still emerging.

The analysis followed a two-step procedure. First, the measurement model was evaluated by examining indicator loadings, Cronbach’s alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE) and variance inflation factor (VIF) values to establish reliability, convergent validity and collinearity. Second, the structural model was assessed using path coefficients, t-statistics, p-values, coefficient of determination (R^2), effect sizes (f^2) and bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to test the hypothesized relationships.

Given the self-reported nature of the data, potential common method bias was assessed. Procedural remedies included assuring respondent anonymity, minimizing item ambiguity and separating construct measurements within the questionnaire. Statistically, collinearity diagnostics were examined, with all VIF values falling well below the conservative threshold of 3.3, indicating that common method variance was unlikely to be a serious concern.

Results and Discussion

Demographics: The sample comprised 256 respondents (Table 1) with a balanced gender distribution (51.6% male and 48.4% female). Most participants belonged to the 26–34 age group (36.7%), followed by 35–44 years (27.7%), indicating strong representation of working-age adults. A majority of respondents held postgraduate qualifications (57.4%), reflecting a well-educated sample. Private sector employees constituted the largest occupational group (40.6%). With respect to digital engagement, over 89% reported using social media for more than one hour daily, confirming high exposure to online tourism content. Additionally, 60.2% had prior agri-tourism experience, while the remaining respondents were digitally exposed to agri-tourism destinations.

Table 1
Demographic Profile of Respondents

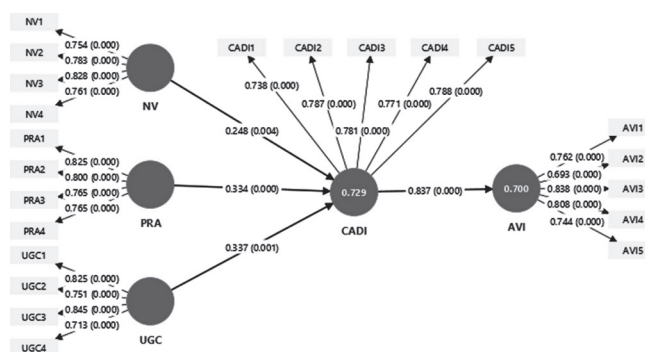
Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	132	51.6
	Female	124	48.4
Age Group	Below 25 years	38	14.8
	26–34 years	94	36.7
	35–44 years	71	27.7
	45–54 years	39	15.2
	55 years and above	14	5.6
Educational Qualification	Undergraduate	61	23.8
	Postgraduate	147	57.4
	Doctorate/ Professional	48	18.8
	Occupation	Student	42
Occupation	Private sector employee	104	40.6
	Government employee	46	18.0
	Self-employed/ Business	39	15.2
	Others	25	9.8
	Monthly Income (INR)	Below 30,000	49
30,001–60,000		92	35.9
60,001–100,000		73	28.5
Above 100,000		42	16.4
Frequency of Social Media Use	Less than 1 hour/day	28	10.9
	1–3 hours/day	97	37.9
	3–5 hours/day	86	33.6

	More than 5 hours/day	45	17.6
Previous Agri-Tourism Experience	Yes	154	60.2
	No (but exposed digitally)	102	39.8

Source: Author's Work

PLS SEM Bootstrapping and Algorithm: Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) (Figure 2) was employed to assess both the measurement and structural models (Hair et al., 2021). The analysis proceeded in two stages: evaluation of the measurement model to establish reliability and validity, followed by assessment of the structural model to test the hypothesized relationships.

Figure 2
PLS SEM Results



Source: Author's Work (Output of Smart PLS 4.0)

Measurement Model and Validity Statistics: The measurement model was evaluated in terms of indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability and convergent validity. All indicator loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2021), ranging from 0.693 to 0.845 (Table 2), indicating satisfactory item reliability. Internal consistency reliability was examined using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.788 to 0.832, surpassing the recommended benchmark of 0.70, thereby confirming adequate internal consistency across all constructs. Composite reliability values ranged from 0.863 to 0.881, further supporting the reliability of the latent variables.

Convergent validity was assessed through average variance extracted (AVE). All constructs demonstrated AVE values above the threshold of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), with Narrative Vividness (0.611), Perceived Rural

Authenticity (0.623), User-Generated Content Credibility (0.616), Cognitive–Affective Destination Image (0.598) and Agri-Tourism Visit Intention (0.594) (Table 2). These results indicate that each construct explains more than 50% of the variance in its indicators, confirming adequate convergent validity.

Table 2
Measurement Model and Validity

Items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
NV1	0.754	0.788	0.863	0.611
NV2	0.783			
NV3	0.828			
NV4	0.761			
PRA1	0.825	0.798	0.868	0.623
PRA2	0.800			
PRA3	0.765			
PRA4	0.765			
UGC1	0.825	0.791	0.865	0.616
UGC2	0.751			
UGC3	0.845			
UGC4	0.713			
CADI1	0.738	0.832	0.881	0.598
CADI2	0.787			
CADI3	0.781			
CADI4	0.771			
CADI5	0.788			
AVI1	0.762	0.827	0.879	0.594
AVI2	0.693			
AVI3	0.838			
AVI4	0.808			
AVI5	0.744			

Source: Author's Work

Model Fit Indices: Model fit was examined using the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), chi-square and normed fit index (NFI). The SRMR values for the saturated model 0.068 and estimated model 0.080 (Table

3) were within or at the acceptable threshold of 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), indicating an adequate overall model fit. Given the satisfactory SRMR values and strong explanatory power of the endogenous variables, the overall model fit was deemed acceptable for hypothesis testing.

Table 3
Model Fit Indices

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.068	0.080
Chi-Square	340.984	363.540
NFI	0.754	0.738

Source: Author's Work

Coefficient of determination (R²): The predictive accuracy of the model was evaluated using the coefficient of determination (R²). Cognitive–Affective Destination Image (CADI) achieved an R² value of 0.729 (adjusted R² = 0.721) (Table 4), indicating that Narrative Vividness, Perceived Rural Authenticity and User-Generated Content Credibility collectively explained approximately 72.9% of the variance in CADI. This reflects a substantial level of explanatory power.

Agri-Tourism Visit Intention (AVI) recorded an R² value of 0.700 (adjusted R² = 0.697), suggesting that CADI explained 70.0% of the variance in visit intention. According to established PLS-SEM guidelines, these values indicate strong predictive accuracy. The minimal differences between R² and adjusted R² further confirm the stability of the model.

Table 4
R² and Adjusted R²

	R Square	Adjusted R Square
AVI	0.700	0.697
CADI	0.729	0.721

Source: Author's Work

Hypothesis Testing Results: Bootstrapping procedures were used to examine the hypothesized relationships. The results reveal that all proposed paths are statistically significant (Hair et al., 2021) and supported (Table 5). Narrative Vividness positively influences Cognitive–Affective Destination Image ($\beta = 0.248$, $t = 2.914$, $p = 0.001$), supporting H1. The associated effect size ($f^2 = 0.068$) indicates a small-to-moderate impact, suggesting that vivid digital storytelling contributes meaningfully to destination image formation.

Perceived Rural Authenticity demonstrates a significant positive effect on Cognitive–Affective Destination Image ($\beta = 0.334$, $t = 3.571$, $p = 0.004$), confirming H2. The effect size ($f^2 = 0.126$) reflects a moderate influence, underscoring the importance of authentic rural representations in shaping tourists’ cognitive and emotional evaluations.

Similarly, User-Generated Content Credibility significantly predicts Cognitive–Affective Destination Image ($\beta = 0.337$, $t = 3.388$, $p = 0.001$), supporting H3. With an effect size of $f^2 = 0.127$, this relationship also demonstrates a moderate impact, highlighting the pivotal role of trustworthy peer-generated content in destination image construction.

Cognitive–Affective Destination Image exhibits a very strong positive effect on Agri-Tourism Visit Intention ($\beta = 0.837$, $t = 16.345$, $p = 0.001$), providing strong support for H4. The exceptionally large effect size ($f^2 = 2.330$) indicates that destination image is the dominant predictor of visit intention, emphasizing its central role in translating digital storytelling influences into behavioral outcomes.

Table 5
Hypothesis Testing and Results

	β Value	T Statistics	f Square	P value	Decision
H1 NV → CADI	0.248	2.914	0.068	0.001	Supported
H2 PRA → CADI	0.334	3.571	0.126	0.004	Supported
H3 UGC → CADI	0.337	3.388	0.127	0.001	Supported
H4 CADI → AVI	0.837	16.345	2.330	0.001	Supported

Source: Author’s Work

Collinearity Testing: Collinearity among indicators was assessed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values. As presented in Table 6, all VIF values ranged from 1.395 to 2.081 (Table 6), which are well below the conservative threshold of 3.3 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and substantially lower than the more lenient cut-off of 5.0 recommended in PLS-SEM literature. These results indicate the absence of multicollinearity issues among the measurement items.

Table 6
VIF Results

	VIF
NV1	1.486
NV2	1.564
NV3	1.757
NV4	1.531
PRA1	1.808
PRA2	1.672
PRA3	1.607
PRA4	1.524
UGC1	1.736
UGC2	1.505
UGC3	1.890
UGC4	1.417
CADI1	1.675
CADI2	1.900
CADI3	1.775
CADI4	1.800
CADI5	1.786
AVI1	1.721
AVI2	1.395
AVI3	2.081
AVI4	1.880
AVI5	1.554

Source: Author’s Work

The present study investigated how digital storytelling elements influence agri-tourism visit intention through the mediating role of cognitive–affective destination image. Specifically, narrative vividness, perceived rural authenticity and user-generated content credibility were examined as key antecedents shaping tourists’ destination image, which subsequently drives behavioral intention. The empirical findings provide strong support for the proposed relationships and offer meaningful theoretical and practical insights into digitally mediated agri-tourism decision-making.

The results reveal that cognitive–affective destination image exerts a very strong positive effect on agri-tourism visit intention ($\beta = 0.837$, $p < .001$), accompanied by an exceptionally large effect size ($f^2 = 2.330$). This finding confirms destination image as the dominant determinant of tourists’ behavioral intention and highlights the central role of integrated cognitive evaluations and emotional responses in motivating agri-tourism visits. This outcome is consistent with earlier tourism research demonstrating that favorable

destination image significantly enhances visit intention and destination preference (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Lam & Hsu, 2006; Styliadis et al., 2017). In the agri-tourism context, this suggests that tourists' intentions are shaped not only by functional assessments of farm facilities and activities but also by affective responses to rural environments, such as feelings of relaxation, nostalgia and connection with nature.

Among the digital storytelling antecedents, perceived rural authenticity and user-generated content credibility emerged as the strongest predictors of cognitive–affective destination image, both exhibiting moderate effect sizes. These findings underscore the importance of authenticity and trust-related cues in shaping tourists' perceptions of agri-tourism destinations. Prior studies have emphasized that tourists increasingly seek genuine cultural encounters and meaningful engagement with local lifestyles and that authenticity significantly enhances destination image and emotional attachment (Kolar & Žabkar, 2010; Lu et al., 2015). The present results extend this literature by demonstrating that perceived rural authenticity conveyed through digital platforms plays a pivotal role in forming positive destination evaluations even before physical visitation occurs.

Similarly, the significant influence of user-generated content credibility aligns with existing research highlighting the persuasive power of peer-created content in tourism decision-making. Credible reviews and shared experiences reduce uncertainty and strengthen confidence in destination quality (Cheung, 2009; Filieri et al., 2015). In agri-tourism, where service offerings are diverse and formal quality indicators are often limited, travelers rely heavily on trustworthy visitor-generated content to evaluate experiential value. The findings suggest that credible UGC not only informs tourists but also reinforces emotional assurance, thereby strengthening overall destination image.

Narrative vividness also demonstrated a significant positive effect on cognitive–affective destination image, although its effect size was comparatively smaller. This indicates that visually rich and emotionally engaging digital storytelling contributes to destination image formation, but its influence is less pronounced than that of authenticity and credibility. While vivid imagery enables tourists to mentally simulate farm experiences and enhances emotional engagement, its effectiveness appears contingent on the perceived genuineness and trustworthiness of the content.

This result supports narrative processing theory (Escalas, 2004) and experiential tourism research (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020), suggesting that aesthetic appeal alone is insufficient in agri-tourism unless accompanied by authentic rural representation and credible peer validation.

For agri-tourism entrepreneurs and destination marketers, the results suggest that digital strategies should prioritize authentic rural storytelling and encourage credible visitor participation. Farm operators should showcase real farming activities, local traditions and host–guest interactions rather than relying solely on stylized imagery. Encouraging guests to share genuine experiences and reviews can strengthen user-generated credibility and enhance destination image. Policymakers and rural tourism planners may also leverage these insights to design digital campaigns that align promotional narratives with lived rural realities, thereby supporting sustainable agri-tourism development.

This study extends tourism literature by integrating digital storytelling, perceived rural authenticity and user-generated credibility and advances agri-tourism research by demonstrating that destination image serves as a central psychological mediator linking online narratives to behavioral intention. Furthermore, the findings highlight the relative importance of authenticity and credibility over aesthetic storytelling, offering nuanced insights into how tourists evaluate rural destinations in digitally mediated environments.

Conclusion

This study examined how digital storytelling elements influence agri-tourism visit intention through cognitive–affective destination image. By integrating narrative vividness, perceived rural authenticity and user-generated content credibility into a unified framework, the research provides empirical evidence on how digitally mediated rural representations shape tourists' perceptions and behavioral intentions. The findings demonstrate that cognitive–affective destination image is the most influential determinant of agri-tourism visit intention, highlighting the critical role of integrated cognitive evaluations and emotional responses in motivating rural travel. Among the antecedents, perceived rural authenticity and user-generated content credibility emerged as stronger predictors of destination image than narrative vividness, indicating that trust and genuineness outweigh purely aesthetic storytelling in agri-tourism

contexts. While visually engaging content facilitates experiential imagination, its effectiveness depends largely on the authenticity of rural representation and the credibility of peer-generated information.

The results underscore the growing importance of digital platforms in shaping agri-tourism demand and highlight destination image as a central psychological mechanism linking online narratives to travel decisions. From a practical perspective, the study suggests that agri-tourism operators should prioritize authentic storytelling that reflects real farming practices, local culture and host-guest interactions. Encouraging visitors to share genuine experiences can further enhance credibility and strengthen destination image. Policymakers and rural tourism planners may leverage these insights to design digital campaigns that align promotional narratives with lived rural realities, thereby supporting sustainable agri-tourism development. Despite its contributions, the study is limited by its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported data, which restrict causal inference. Future research may adopt longitudinal approaches, incorporate actual visitation behavior, or explore additional variables such as environmental values or experiential learning outcomes.

References

- Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179–211. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978\(91\)90020-T](https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T)
- Berli, A., & Martin, J. D. (2004). Factors influencing destination image. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 31(3), 657–681. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2004.01.010>
- Cheung, M. Y., Luo, C., Sia, C. L., & Chen, H. (2009). Credibility of electronic word-of-mouth: Informational and normative determinants of online consumer recommendations. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 13(4), 9–38. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27751305>
- Escalas, J. E. (2004). Narrative processing: Building consumer connections to brands. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 14(1–2), 168–180. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327663jcp1401&2_19
- Filieri, R., Algezai, S., & McLeay, F. (2015). Why do travelers trust TripAdvisor? Antecedents of trust towards consumer-generated media and its influence on recommendation adoption and word of mouth. *Tourism Management*, 51, 174–185. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2015.05.007>
- Fischer, R., & Karl, J. A. (2025). What predicts intentions and behavior? A cultural exploration of attitude, belief, and norm effects across 55 countries. *Cross-Cultural Research*, 59(5). <https://doi.org/10.1177/10693971251338204>
- Fornell, C., & Larcker, D. F. (1981). Evaluating structural equation models with unobservable variables and measurement error. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 18(1), 39–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224378101800104>
- Hair, J. F., Hult, G. T. M., Ringle, C. M., & Sarstedt, M. (2021). *A primer on partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM)* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Hu, L., & Bentler, P. M. (1999). Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives. *Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 6(1), 1–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705519909540118>
- Jiménez-Barreto, J., Rubio, N., & Martínez, S. C. (2020). Destination brand authenticity: What an experiential simulacrum! A multigroup analysis of its antecedents and outcomes through official online platforms. *Tourism Management*, 77, 104022. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2019.104022>
- Kolar, T., & Žabkar, V. (2010). A consumer-based model of authenticity: An oxymoron or the foundation of cultural heritage marketing? *Tourism Management*, 31(5), 652–664. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2009.07.010>
- Lam, T., & Hsu, C. H. (2006). Predicting behavioral intention of choosing a travel destination. *Tourism Management*, 27(4), 589–599. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2005.02.003>
- Lu, L., Chi, C. G., & Liu, Y. (2015). Authenticity, involvement, and image: Evaluating tourist experiences at historic districts. *Tourism Management*, 85–96. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2015.01.026>
- Russell, J. A. (1980). A circumplex model of affect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39(6), 1161–1178. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0077714>
- Stylidis, D., Shani, A., & Belhassen, Y. (2017). Testing an integrated destination image model across residents and tourists. *Tourism Management*, 58, 184–195. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2016.10.014>