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The impact of cultural narratives in tourism short videos on destination brand equity among Chinese social media users

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the impact of cultural narratives in tourism videos posted on social media in China on destination brand equity, with a particular focus on the mediating role of narrative transportation. Drawing on customer-based brand equity and narrative transportation theories, we propose and empirically test a model in which cultural narratives, including narratives of heritage and landscapes, portrayals of folk customs and local life, and representations of food culture, influence destination brand equity across three dimensions: brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty. We surveyed 350 social media users in China who had watched tourism-related short videos in the previous six months. The collected data were analyzed using PLS-SEM. The findings support all ten hypotheses. Cultural narratives positively influence narrative transportation (β = 0.565) and have positive direct effects on brand awareness (β = 0.256), brand image (β = 0.284), and brand loyalty (β = 0.308). Narrative transportation is also positively related to all three dimensions of brand equity, with the strongest effect on brand image (β = 0.441). The mediation analysis indicates complementary partial mediation across all three paths, suggesting that cultural narratives influence destination brand equity through both direct effects and indirect effects mediated by narrative transportation. The model explains 41.7% of the variance in brand image, 36.3% in brand awareness, and 29.4% in brand loyalty. These findings extend the application of narrative transportation theory to the short-video culture of Chinese social media and provide destination marketing organizations with practical guidance on using cultural storytelling to build destination brands.

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1. Introduction

Few sectors in the global economy are evolving at the pace and scale of tourism, and perhaps no other national market exemplifies this more than China. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism revealed that in 2024, there were 5.615 billion trips made by Chinese citizens, which is a 14.8% increase compared to 2023. This increase in travel expenditure also reflects a significant increase in travel expenditure, which totaled 5.75 trillion yuan. Short video platforms are the driving force behind this change. As of July 2024, the China Internet Network Information Center reported more than 1.05 billion internet users in China, and short video users account for 95.5% of the total internet users. The information ecosystem of prospective travelers is reconstructed by travel videos made on these platforms: Douyin, Kuaishou, and Xiaohongshu.

Destination brand equity, the fundamental advantage a well-marketed location holds over its competition in the consumers' eyes, has consistently gained scholarly interest. Aaker (2000) and Keller (1993) pioneered the concept in the field of consumer goods and later adapted it to tourism (Boo et al., 2009; Chekalina et al., 2018; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007). This framework has a significant influence on visitor decision processes and consists of the dimensions of awareness, image, and loyalty. Simultaneously, narrative transportation theory, formulated by Green and Brock (2000), postulates that audiences who become mentally immersed in a narrative story hold story-consistent attitudes and decrease critical counterarguing (van Laer et al., 2014). In a tourism context, video viewers immersed in a destination's cultural story may, as a result, brand the destination more positively and enhance

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brand equity. More recent studies have started to combine storytelling and destination marketing. Zhang and Ramayah (2024) stated that the researchers most focused on destination marketing have started to focus on the theory of narrative transportation. Moreira et al. (2025) pointed out that authenticity and cultural originality are narrative value strategies that affect the decision-making process of tourists. Moin et al. (2020) found that most commercials for destination brands do not tell stories effectively. In the context of China, brevity, algorithmic distribution, high interactivity, and integration with e-commerce ecosystems, Cheng et al. (2020) and Du et al. (2022) are the authors that focus on short videos of 15 to 60 seconds and consider them to be a communicative environment with unique characteristics. A typical example of this was in early 2024, when a Douyin video about Tianshui's Malatang dish went viral, resulting in 4.64 million tourists and 2.7 billion yuan in tourism revenue in just one month.

There are still some gaps that exist in the literature, despite the advancements that have been made. The work most closely related to the present study is Cao et al. (2021), who demonstrated that narrative short videos shape destination brand attitude through narrative transportation. The present study builds directly on that contribution rather than claiming to be the first to link transportation and destination branding. It differs from Cao et al. (2021) in three respects. First, where Cao et al. (2021) contrasted narrative with non-narrative video formats in general terms, this study focuses specifically on cultural narrative elements, decomposing them into heritage and landscape, folk customs and local life, and culinary heritage. Second, Cao et al. (2021) treated the outcome as a unidimensional brand attitude, whereas this study disaggregates destination brand equity into its awareness, image, and loyalty dimensions, allowing the relative strength of the direct and mediated pathways to be compared across dimensions. Third, this study tests the model on naturally occurring short videos recalled by viewers across Douyin, Kuaishou, and Xiaohongshu, rather than on a single experimental stimulus. There is an imbalance in the research on destination branding and social media in that most of it has focused on Western and Southeast Asian countries (Abbasi et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2026), and less focus has been given to the unique features of Chinese social media platforms. Finally, there has been a reliance, in the majority of the literature, on qualitative and experimental studies (Zhang and Ramayah, 2024), and there is a paucity of literature that is based on surveys, is quantitative in nature, and that tests the relationships that have been hypothesized in large samples.

The current research aims to understand the influence of narrative elements of culture in tourism short videos on China's social media platforms on the brand equity of destinations. Using Keller's (1993) CBBE model combined with Green and Brock's (2000) narrative transport theory, the current research formulates and tests a cultural model where heritage and landscape, folk customs, and other local life and food narratives influence 3 brand equity components of destinations: brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty. The present study also examines narrative transport in the context of the cultural story's impact, suggesting that cultural narratives impact the psychological narrative of the destination story.

Many contributions are present in this research. First, on a theory level, it broadens narrative transportation theory to short videos on Chinese social media, which is a context that is materially different from prior studies that examined written and long-form audiovisual stimuli. Additionally, it builds on the destination brand equity literature by revealing culturally based narrative antecedents that are less articulated in the current frameworks. On a practical level, the findings aim to provide practical recommendations to destination marketing organizations, content creators, and platform operators on how to use cultural storytelling in destination promotion. While it is described that China's tourism industry is entering a "new cycle of prosperity and development," understanding how narrative content influences perceptions of a destination academically and strategically is vital.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Cultural narrative elements in tourism short videos

This study shows that there are three main dimensions of cultural narrative elements present in tourism short videos that construct the independent variable in the research model.

The first dimension is the narrative of heritage and landscape, which brings together two summative cultural storytelling elements, the historical and the scenic. This means narratively dominant, culturally important natural heritage, historical legacy, relics of ancient architecture, and their natural scenic context. In the short tourism videos of China, the historical heritage and scenic landscape are hardly separable. Ancient structures are always scenic, and in landscape shots, a cultural historical context is almost always present. A video of the Great Wall illustrates imperial history, natural grandeur, and an engineering marvel. In heritage tourism studies, a narrative of history has been proven to augment the perceived authenticity and cultural dimension of the destination. This means that in short videos, the visual content acts as a semiotic resource that shapes the cognitive and affective responses (Gan et al., 2023; Guo et al., 2026).

The dimension of folk customs and local life portrayal includes the depiction of traditional festivities, rituals, crafts, daily lives of community members, and regional dialects. These factors convey the intangible cultural heritage of a place and provide a sense of authenticity and originality, which

is highly sought after by modern-day travelers. Village fairs, craft markets, and even artisan videos on Douyin and Kuaishou are a great way to explore and stimulate the nostalgia and interest of the audience for rural ways of life, especially those from urban environments (Du et al., 2022). While heritage and landscape stories focus on what is monumental and temporally and spatially distant, the narrative of folk customs focuses on what is mundane and intimately close.

The third dimension is the representation of culinary heritage, which exemplifies the importance of food as a cultural expression and an attraction in marketing tourism in the Chinese context. Short video platforms in China are saturated with food-related content (Cheng et al., 2020). A short video that focuses on the preparation of a local dish in a certain way tells the story of a particular regional cuisine, and/or a showcase of a night market with unique and diverse (regional) food offerings creates a multimedia story that connects food and geography. The 2024 malatang phenomenon in Tianshui is a perfect example of the viral phenomenon of a single short video creating a massive perception of a tourism destination. The culinary dimension is unique compared to the other two dimensions in its power of multisensory engagement, as viewers can almost taste and smell what they see in the videos.

2.2. Destination brand equity

The first to write about the concept of brand equity were Aaker (2000) and Keller (1993). Aaker (2000) stated that brand equity consists of the assets and the liabilities associated with the brand that add to or lessen the value of selling a product or service. He proposed four dimensions of brand equity: brand awareness/brand recognition, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Keller (1993) proposed a model called customer-based brand equity (CBBE), which, in a way, built off of Aaker (2000) by focusing on the differential impact that brand knowledge has on a consumer.

In 2007, one of the earliest tests of a model that incorporated four dimensions of the equity of a brand of destination model (i.e., awareness, image, perceived quality, and loyalty) was conducted by Konecnik and Gartner (2007). Boo et al. (2009) and Chekalina et al. (2018)bolstered this same structure for use in various frameworks, with Chekalina et al. (2018) further refining the model by incorporating destination resources and value perceptions as intervening variables.

This research defines destination brand equity through three first-order constructs: brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty. We do not model perceived quality as a separate dimension, because prior tourism studies have reported that perceived quality and brand image tend to load on overlapping factors (Boo et al., 2009) and raise discriminant validity concerns when treated as distinct constructs (Pike et al., 2010). We therefore integrate quality perceptions within brand image, consistent with Keller's (1993) understanding of quality as a component of brand image.

Awareness of the destination brand concerns the prominence of the brand in the memory of possible tourists, with the ability to recognize and recall the brand among competitors (Aaker, 2000; Abbasi et al., 2024; Keller, 1993). The destination brand image is the totality of the network of cognitive images with quality perception and the affective components of the brand (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007; San Martín et al., 2019). Brand loyalty signifies attitudinal commitment and behavioral intention, which can be measured as intention to revisit and willingness to recommend (Ekinci et al., 2023; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007).

2.3. Narrative transportation as a mediating mechanism

Narrative Transportation Theory was highlighted by Green and Brock (2000) and described as 'a convergent process, where all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narrative.' While 'transported' individuals show severe focus and mental clarity and high emotional responses, the likelihood of them counterarguing is low. This leads to the narrative's ability to shift belief in the story's context.

There is a substantial body of evidence supporting the use of narrative transportation in health communication, advertising, and consumer behavior. Transportation has been established as the strongest mediator in narrative psychology by van Laer et al. (2014) in a meta-analysis of 76 studies.

In the field of tourism, narrative transportation has been shown by Cao et al. (2021) to positively impact attitudes towards brands through the construction of a narrative in short videos of destinations. Cognitively and affectively, transportation and decreased psychological reactance contribute to improved destination image in short videos on Douyin, as shown by Han et al. (2022).

This study examines how cultural narrative components affect brand equity through the lens of narrative transportation. Viewers of tourism shorts with rich cultural narrative elements are expected to be narratively and mentally drawn into the destination. The experience of narrative transportation produces increased awareness, enriched image associations regarding the destination, and strengthened intended travel behaviors towards the destination, all of which are integral to building brand equity. Additionally, narrative transportation reduces counterarguing (or persuasive communication), which means that users are more likely to respond to narrative transportation without being influenced by skepticism about the promotional content, thus making narrative transportation very effective in social media environments.

2.4. Hypothesis development

2.4.1. Cultural narrative elements and destination brand equity

The relationship between narrative content and brand perceptions has been established across a range of marketing contexts. Escalas (2004) demonstrated that the narrative processing of advertisements enhances the formation of self-brand connections, which are closely related to brand associations and brand image. Lundqvist et al. (2013) found that exposure to a brand's origin story positively influenced consumers' brand experience and their willingness to pay a premium, outcomes that directly reflect brand equity dimensions. In the tourism context, Moscardo (2020) argued that stories serve as design elements that shape how tourists interpret and evaluate destinations before, during, and after travel.

With respect to short video content specifically, several studies provide evidence for a direct relationship between cultural or narrative content and destination perception. Gan et al. (2023) found that both visual content and narration appeal in tourism short videos significantly influenced viewers' travel intentions, with the effects varying by visual perspective and message framing. Han et al. (2022) showed that audience involvement with short-form travel videos (videos that typically incorporate cultural symbols such as attractions, food, and folklore) positively shaped both cognitive and affective dimensions of destination image. Similarly, Cao et al. (2021) found that narrative short videos generated more favorable destination brand attitudes than nonnarrative promotional videos. These findings suggest that cultural narratives in tourism short videos positively influence destination brand equity by increasing brand awareness, improving brand image, and strengthening brand loyalty through future visit and recommendation intentions. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: Cultural narrative elements in tourism short videos have a significant positive effect on destination brand awareness.
H1b: Cultural narrative elements in tourism short videos have a significant positive effect on destination brand image.
H1c: Cultural narrative elements in tourism short videos have a significant positive effect on destination brand loyalty.

2.4.2. Cultural narrative elements and narrative transportation

Green and Brock (2000) identified several antecedent conditions that facilitate transportation, including identifiable characters, a coherent plot, emotional content, and the imaginability of the narrative world. van Laer et al. (2014) confirmed that story characteristics accounted for a substantial proportion of variance in transportation, with identifiable characters and imaginable plots being among the most influential antecedents.

Cultural narrative elements in tourism short videos possess precisely these transportation-inducing qualities. Heritage and landscape narratives introduce characters (historical figures, local artisans, narrating travelers) and plots (the rise and fall of dynasties, the journey of a recipe through generations) while providing visually immersive settings that stimulate mental imagery. Folk customs portrayal offers vivid, emotionally evocative scenes that invite viewers into an unfamiliar yet emotionally accessible world. Culinary heritage representation combines visual richness with multisensory appeal, evoking taste and place simultaneously. Cao et al. (2021) found that the narrative structure of destination short videos significantly enhanced viewers' sense of presence. Accordingly:

H2: Cultural narrative elements in tourism short videos have a significant positive effect on narrative transportation.

2.4.3. Narrative transportation and destination brand equity

The consequences of narrative transportation for beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral intentions have been extensively documented. Green and Brock (2000) demonstrated that higher levels of transportation led to more story-consistent beliefs and more favorable evaluations. van Laer et al. (2014) confirmed through meta-analysis that transportation positively predicted affective responses, cognitive responses, beliefs, attitudes, and intentions. In the consumer behavior domain, Escalas (2004) found that narrative transportation enhanced the strength of self-brand connections, while Lundqvist et al. (2013) showed that transported consumers developed richer and more positive associations with the focal brand.

Applying these findings to the destination branding context, viewers who experience higher levels of narrative transportation while watching a tourism short video should develop stronger awareness of the featured destination (because their attentional resources were focused on the destination's story), a more favorable and differentiated brand image (because the associations formed during transportation are richer and less subject to counterarguing), and greater loyalty intentions (because the emotional engagement during transportation fosters psychological attachment).

Cao et al. (2021) provided partial support by demonstrating that transportation mediated the effect of narrative short video content on destination brand attitude. Thus:

H3a: Narrative transportation has a significant positive effect on destination brand awareness.

H3b: Narrative transportation has a significant positive effect on destination brand image.
H3c: Narrative transportation has a significant positive effect on destination brand loyalty.

2.4.4. The mediating role of narrative transportation

The preceding hypotheses, when considered jointly, imply a mediation structure: cultural narrative elements influence destination brand equity both directly (H1a-H1c) and indirectly through the mechanism of narrative transportation (H2 -> H3a-H3c). This mediation model is consistent with narrative transportation theory itself, which posits that the persuasive effects of narrative content operate through the psychological state of transportation (Green and Brock, 2000). van Laer et al.'s (2014) meta-analytic evidence strongly supports this mediating pathway.

In the tourism short video context, Cao et al. (2021) found that narrative transportation significantly mediated the relationship between short video narrativity and destination brand attitude. However, their study treated brand attitude as a unidimensional outcome and did not decompose it into the constituent dimensions of destination brand equity. The present study extends this inquiry by testing whether narrative transportation mediates the effects of cultural narrative elements on each of the three brand equity dimensions. Thus:

H4a: Narrative transportation mediates the relationship between cultural narrative elements and destination brand awareness.
H4b: Narrative transportation mediates the relationship between cultural narrative elements and destination brand image.
H4c: Narrative transportation mediates the relationship between cultural narrative elements and destination brand loyalty.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design

In this study, we used a quantitative cross-sectional survey method to analyze the cultural narrative elements, narrative transportation, and destination brand equity structural relationships. We considered the study's focus appropriate and supported by the literature.

As explained by Hair et al. (2021), a quantitative approach leads to the greatest success when grounded hypotheses regarding relationships spanning multiple latent variables are tested. Survey-based research is the prevailing paradigm of both narrative transportation (van Laer et al., 2014) and destination brand equity literature (Ekinci et al., 2023; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007), bolstering the case for comparability. We acknowledge, however, that a cross-sectional design cannot establish causal direction; this limitation, and the implications for interpreting the reported relationships, are discussed in Section 5.

For data analysis, we chose the analytical method of partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 4 software. PLS-SEM was chosen over covariance-based SEM for various reasons. PLS-SEM is more suited to research that aims to explain and predict simultaneously (Hair et al., 2011; Sarstedt et al., 2023). PLS-SEM also provides a better result with a complex model that has many endogenous variables and several mediating paths (Hair et al., 2021). Additionally, PLS-SEM does not require the assumption of multivariate normality; thus, it is more flexible to the nonnormal distribution that is often found in Likert-scale surveys (Sarstedt et al., 2023). PLS-SEM is also gaining popularity in recent studies on destination brand equity (Abbasi et al., 2024; Chekalina et al., 2018) and tourism short video studies (Cao et al., 2021; Han et al., 2022).

3.2. Population and sampling

The target population for this research study is the users of Chinese social media who have viewed tourism-related short videos on the social media platforms of Douyin, Kuaishou, or Xiaohongshu in the 6 months before the data collection.

The study uses a nonprobability purposive sampling method, along with snowball sampling. The use of nonprobability sampling has been justified in social media and tourism studies, as there is no complete sampling frame, rendering probability sampling useless (Abbasi et al., 2024; Boo et al., 2009).

It should nonetheless be acknowledged that purposive and snowball recruitment through WeChat and QQ travel groups does not yield a sample that is statistically representative of all Chinese short-video users. As reported in Section 4, the achieved sample is skewed toward respondents with bachelor's or master's degrees, so the findings should be generalized to less-educated segments of the user population only with caution. This limitation is revisited in Section 5.

In terms of sample size, the study adheres to Hair et al.'s (2021) recommendations for PLS-SEM. In the current model, brand loyalty has the highest number of incoming paths (three). Applying the inverse square root method of Kock and Hadaya (2018), which is appropriate for PLS-SEM, the minimum sample required to detect a path coefficient of 0.2 at a significance level of 0.05 and a statistical power of 0.80 is approximately 155 responses. However, in line with comparable tourism PLS-SEM studies that usually aim for 300-500 responses (Abbasi et al., 2024; Ekinci et al., 2023), this study aims for at least 350 valid responses.

The demographic profile of the 350 valid responses retained for analysis is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the sample (N = 350)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	155	44.3
	Female	195	55.7
Age (years)	18–24	53	15.1
	25–34	111	31.7
	35–44	91	26.0
	45–54	66	18.9
	55 and above	29	8.3
Education	High school	38	10.9
	Bachelor's degree	144	41.1
	Master's degree	131	37.4
	Doctoral degree	37	10.6
Viewing frequency	Multiple times per day	49	14.0
	Daily	105	30.0
	Weekly	128	36.6
	Less than weekly	68	19.4

3.3. Data collection procedure

We designed a self-administered questionnaire using Wenjuanxing (wjx.cn), a popular survey tool among Chinese social science researchers. Given that the target audience of this study was social media users and that this method was likely to provide the best access and response rate, we disseminated the questionnaire link to relevant travel and tourism groups on the WeChat and QQ social media platforms, as well as the comment sections of travel videos on Douyin and Xiaohongshu, and among networks of university students.

To target respondents with the appropriate experience, the first question on the questionnaire was a filter question regarding tourism-related short videos on Chinese social media platforms. Responses indicated that the videos were posted within the previous six months. Those who responded negatively to this question were directed to the last page of the survey. Respondents who were qualified were asked to think of a specific tourism short video containing cultural content about a particular destination while responding to the remaining questions. This recall-and-anchor method aligns with the methodology of Cao et al. (2021) and Han et al. (2022).

3.4. Measurement instrument

All constructs are assessed via multi-item scales modified from existing tools in marketing, consumer psychology, and tourism. Items are framed on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) in accordance with the original narrative transportation scale (Green and Brock, 2000) and destination brand equity studies (Boo et al., 2009; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007). All modified scales followed the translation-back-translation method (Brislin, 1970) to achieve equivalence of meaning. Two bilingual scholars in the tourism field evaluated the translated items and discussed any differences to reach consensus.

The questionnaire is divided into three sections. Section A on demographic data (gender, age, education, income, and social media use) is followed by Section B, in which the five latent constructs are measured. Section C has a single, unprompted question where respondents are to identify the destination in the video they remembered, which acts as a manipulation check. The full list of measurement items is shown in Table 2.

Cultural narrative elements are conceptually defined as comprising three thematic facets: heritage and landscape (CNE1, CNE2), folk customs and local life (CNE3, CNE4), and culinary heritage (CNE5, CNE6). Because the present model is concerned with the overall richness of cultural narrative content rather than with contrasts among its facets, cultural narrative elements are operationalized as a single reflective construct measured by the six items, consistent with the treatment of narrative content in Cao et al. (2021). The tenability of this specification is not assumed a priori; it is examined empirically in Section 4, where the unidimensionality of the six items and the convergence of the three facets are assessed before the construct enters the structural model.

3.5. Data analysis procedure

The data analysis follows the two-stage approach recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) and adapted for PLS-SEM by Hair et al. (2021). In the first stage, data are screened for missing values, outliers, and normality, and demographic characteristics are described. In the second stage, the measurement model is assessed for indicator reliability (outer loadings > 0.708), internal consistency (composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha between 0.70 and 0.95), convergent validity (AVE >= 0.50; Fornell and Larcker, 1981), and discriminant validity using both the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio (Henseler et al., 2015).

Once the measurement model is confirmed, the structural model is evaluated by examining collinearity (VIF < 5.0), path coefficient significance by bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples (Becker et al., 2023; Hair et al., 2021), coefficient of determination (R^2), and effect sizes (f2; Cohen, 1988). The mediating effects (H4a-H4c) are tested using bootstrap confidence intervals, with mediation type classified according to Zhao et al. (2010).

Because all constructs were measured with self-report items collected from the same respondents at a single point in time, the potential for common method bias is addressed. Following Podsakoff et al. (2003), procedural remedies were applied at the design stage, including guaranteed anonymity, the use of separate questionnaire sections, and the avoidance of leading item wording. Common method bias is then assessed statistically through Harman's single-factor test, in which all indicators are entered into an unrotated exploratory factor analysis; a substantial bias is indicated if a single factor accounts for the majority of the variance. In addition, two further analyses are conducted to strengthen inference. First, the unidimensionality of the cultural narrative elements construct is examined by inspecting the factor structure of its six items and

the intercorrelations among its three thematic facets. Second, a robustness check re-estimates the structural model with gender, age, education, and short-video viewing frequency entered as control variables on the three brand equity dimensions, so that the stability of the hypothesized paths can be evaluated once individual differences are accounted for.

Table 2: Measurement items for all constructs

Construct	Code	Item	Adapted from
Cultural narrative elements (CNE)	CNE1	Heritage & landscape: The short video vividly portrayed the historical heritage and cultural significance of the destination.	Cao et al. (2021), Gan et al. (2023), and Han et al. (2022)
	CNE2	Heritage & landscape: The video presented the destination's natural landscapes and iconic landmarks in a culturally meaningful way.	
	CNE3	Folk customs & local life: The video depicted local folk customs, traditional festivals, or the daily life of the community.	
	CNE4	Folk customs & local life: The video conveyed a sense of authentic local culture through scenes of traditional crafts, rituals, or regional dialects.	
	CNE5	Culinary heritage: The video showcased local cuisine or food culture as part of the destination's identity.	
	CNE6	Culinary heritage: The video told a story about the origin, preparation, or cultural meaning of a local dish or food tradition.	
Narrative transportation (NT)	NT1	While watching the video, I could easily picture the events taking place at the destination.	Appel et al. (2015) and Green and Brock (2000)
	NT2	I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the video.	
	NT3	I was mentally involved in the video while watching it.	
	NT4	I wanted to learn how the destination's story ended.	
	NT5	The video affected me emotionally.	
	NT6	While watching the video, my body was in the room, but my mind was inside the world created by the story.	
Brand awareness (BA)	BA1	After watching the video, I can recognize this destination among other travel options.	Aaker (2000), Boo et al. (2009), and Konecnik and Gartner (2007)
	BA2	Some characteristics of this destination come to mind quickly after watching the video.	
	BA3	When I think about tourism destinations, this place comes to mind easily.	
	BA4	I am now aware of this destination as a place worth visiting.	
Brand image (BI)	BI1	The destination portrayed in the video seems to offer rich cultural experiences.	Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Konecnik and Gartner (2007), and San Martín et al. (2019)
	BI2	The destination gives me a feeling of excitement and fascination.	
	BI3	I have a favorable impression of this destination's overall attractiveness.	
	BI4	The destination appears to provide high-quality tourism experiences.	
	BI5	The environment and atmosphere of the destination appear pleasant and inviting.	
	BI6	The destination has a unique character that distinguishes it from other places.	
Brand loyalty (BL)	BL1	I would like to visit this destination in the future.	Ekinci et al. (2023) and Konecnik and Gartner (2007)
	BL2	I would recommend this destination to friends and family.	
	BL3	If I were planning a trip, this destination would be among my top choices.	
	BL4	I would choose this destination over other similar options.	

4. Results

A total of 350 valid responses were retained for analysis after removing incomplete and inattentive submissions (Table 1). The sample comprised 155 males (44.3%) and 195 females (55.7%), consistent with the female skew typically observed among social media users who engage with travel content in China. The largest age cohort was 25 to 34 years old (31.7%, n = 111), followed by 35 to 44 (26.0%, n = 91), 45 to 54 (18.9%, n = 66), 18 to 24 (15.1%, n = 53), and 55 and above (8.3%, n = 29). The majority of respondents held a bachelor's degree (41.1%) or a master's degree (37.4%), with smaller proportions reporting high school education (10.9%) or a doctoral degree (10.6%). Regarding short video consumption, over 80% of respondents reported watching tourism short videos at least weekly (36.6% weekly, 30.0% daily, 14.0% multiple times per day), indicating that the sample was well situated to evaluate the cultural narrative content under investigation. The manipulation check in Section C asked respondents to name the destination featured in the short video they had recalled. Because respondents who did not recall watching a qualifying tourism short video were screened out by the opening filter question, the analyzed sample by design consisted of viewers anchored to a specific video; consistent with this, all 350 retained respondents were able to name an identifiable Chinese tourism destination. Their open-ended responses corresponded to a wide range of provinces and cities rather than clustering on a few prompted examples, indicating that the responses reflected genuine recall of a specific cultural tourism video rather than a generic impression. The check should therefore be read as confirming the integrity of the recall-and-anchor procedure among retained respondents, not as an independent estimate of recall accuracy in the general population. Common method bias was examined using Harman's single-factor test. An unrotated exploratory factor analysis of all 26 indicators returned five factors with eigenvalues above 1.0, mirroring the five-construct structure of the model, and the first factor accounted for 41.3% of the variance, below the 50% threshold

commonly used to indicate a serious bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Common method bias is therefore unlikely to be a substantive threat to the findings, although, as a single-source cross-sectional study, the design cannot fully rule it out.

Following Hair et al.'s (2021) two-stage approach, the measurement model was assessed before evaluating structural relationships. A total of 350 valid responses were analyzed using SmartPLS 4. As Table 3 shows, all outer loadings ranged from 0.730 to 0.877, exceeding the 0.708 threshold. Cronbach's alpha values (0.863-0.912) and composite reliability values (0.897-0.932) surpassed the 0.70 benchmark while remaining below 0.95, confirming internal consistency. All AVE values exceeded 0.50 (range: 0.593-0.740), establishing convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

The decision to operationalize cultural narrative elements as a single construct was examined empirically before the construct entered the structural model. Because the three thematic facets are each represented by only two items, a fully identified second-order confirmatory factor model could not be estimated reliably; we therefore assessed unidimensionality through the factor structure of the six items together with the intercorrelations among facet composites. An exploratory factor analysis of the six CNE items extracted only one factor with an eigenvalue above 1.0, which accounted for 59.4% of the variance, and every item loaded on that factor at 0.73 or above (Table 3). Treating the three thematic facets as composite scores, the facets were strongly and evenly intercorrelated (heritage and landscape with folk customs, r = 0.60; heritage and landscape with culinary heritage, r = 0.56; folk customs with culinary heritage, r = 0.56) and formed a reliable higher-order scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.80). The three facets thus converge on a common underlying dimension rather than functioning as empirically distinct predictors, which supports modeling cultural narrative elements as one reflective construct in the present study. The implications of this specification, and the alternative of treating the facets separately, are considered in Section 5.

Table 3: Construct reliability and validity

Construct	Item	Loading	Cronbach's α	CR (rho_c)	AVE
Cultural narrative elements (CNE)	CNE1	0.814	0.863	0.897	0.593
	CNE2	0.784			
	CNE3	0.768			
	CNE4	0.784			
	CNE5	0.730			
	CNE6	0.737			
Narrative transportation (NT)	NT1	0.804	0.912	0.932	0.694
	NT2	0.835			
	NT3	0.824			
	NT4	0.829			
	NT5	0.860			
	NT6	0.845			
Brand awareness (BA)	BA1	0.866	0.874	0.914	0.726
	BA2	0.835			
	BA3	0.855			
	BA4	0.852			
Brand image (BI)	BI1	0.820	0.910	0.930	0.689
	BI2	0.839			
	BI3	0.839			
	BI4	0.831			
	BI5	0.830			
	BI6	0.821			
Brand loyalty (BL)	BL1	0.877	0.883	0.919	0.740
	BL2	0.857			
	BL3	0.850			
	BL4	0.857			

Discriminant validity was assessed using the HTMT criterion (Henseler et al., 2015). As shown in Table 4, all HTMT values fell below the conservative 0.85 threshold, with the highest being 0.658 (NT ↔ BI), confirming that each construct is empirically distinct.

Table 4: Discriminant validity: Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT)

Construct	BA	BI	BL	CNE	NT
BA	---				
BI	0.446	---			
BL	0.404	0.482	---		
CNE	0.560	0.593	0.538	---	
NT	0.632	0.658	0.530	0.628	---

All inner VIF values (1.000-1.468) were well below 5.0, ruling out multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2021). The SRMR of 0.049 satisfied the recommended 0.08 criterion (Henseler et al., 2015). R^2 values indicated moderate-to-substantial explanatory power: 0.417 (BI), 0.363 (BA), 0.319 (NT), and 0.294 (BL), all exceeding the 0.10 minimum for meaningful models (Cohen, 1988).

Bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples was used to test path significance (Table 5). The strongest direct effect was CNE → NT (H2: β = 0.565, t = 15.531, p < 0.001), confirming that cultural narratives powerfully drive narrative transportation. CNE also directly influenced BL (H1c: β = 0.308, t = 5.479, p < 0.001), BI (H1b: β = 0.284, t = 5.523, p < 0.001), and BA (H1a: β = 0.256, t = 5.456, p < 0.001). Narrative transportation significantly predicted all three brand equity dimensions, with the strongest effect on BI (H3b: β = 0.441, t = 9.793, p < 0.001),

followed by BA (H3a: β = 0.420, t = 8.241, p < 0.001) and BL (H3c: β = 0.305, t = 5.620, p < 0.001). The comparatively large t value for the CNE → NT path arises because this is a single-predictor relationship with a substantial standardized coefficient (β = 0.565) estimated on 350 observations, which yields a small standard error; it does not signal a measurement problem. Multicollinearity concerns the joint behavior of two or more predictors of the same endogenous construct, whereas narrative transportation is regressed on cultural narrative elements alone.

The low inner VIF values reported below (all between 1.000 and 1.468) are therefore fully consistent with a strong but non-collinear CNE → NT path.

Table 5: Structural model results: Direct effects

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1a	CNE → BA	0.256	5.456	< 0.001	Supported
H1b	CNE → BI	0.284	5.523	< 0.001	Supported
H1c	CNE → BL	0.308	5.479	< 0.001	Supported
H2	CNE → NT	0.565	15.531	< 0.001	Supported
H3a	NT → BA	0.420	8.241	< 0.001	Supported
H3b	NT → BI	0.441	9.793	< 0.001	Supported
H3c	NT → BL	0.305	5.620	< 0.001	Supported

Bias-corrected 95% bootstrap confidence intervals (5,000 subsamples): CNE → BA [0.162, 0.345]; CNE → BI [0.178, 0.380]; CNE → BL [0.195, 0.414]; CNE → NT [0.488, 0.629]; NT → BA [0.317, 0.518]; NT → BI [0.349, 0.527]; NT → BL [0.197, 0.407]. No confidence interval includes zero

As reported in the note to Table 5, the bias-corrected 95% bootstrap confidence interval for every direct path excludes zero, which corroborates the significance of each effect independently of the p-values. Mediation was assessed through specific indirect effects with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (Preacher and Hayes, 2008; Zhao et al., 2010). As Table 6 shows, all three indirect paths were significant, with CIs excluding zero. Since the direct effects of CNE on all three brand equity dimensions also remained significant, each mediation pathway represents complementary partial mediation (Zhao et al., 2010): the CNE → NT → BA path (H4a: β = 0.237, t = 6.923, p < 0.001), the CNE → NT → BI path (H4b: β = 0.249, t = 8.353, p < 0.001), and the CNE → NT → BL path (H4c: β = 0.172, t = 5.007, p < 0.001).

Table 6: Mediation analysis: Specific indirect effects

Hypothesis	Indirect path	β	t-value	p-value	95% CI	Decision
H4a	CNE → NT → BA	0.237	6.923	<0.001	[0.174, 0.308]	Supported
H4b	CNE → NT → BI	0.249	8.353	<0.001	[0.193, 0.310]	Supported
H4c	CNE → NT → BL	0.172	5.007	<0.001	[0.109, 0.243]	Supported

CI: Bias-corrected confidence interval (5,000 subsamples); No CI includes zero

Effect sizes (f2) further clarified the practical significance of each path. A large effect was found for CNE → NT (f2 = 0.468); NT → BI (f2 = 0.227) and NT → BA (f2 = 0.189) showed medium effects; and the remaining paths exhibited small effects (CNE → BI: f2 = 0.094; CNE → BL: f2 = 0.091; NT → BL: f2 = 0.090; CNE → BA: f2 = 0.070). It should be noted that, with a sample of 350, even modest effects reach conventional significance levels; the p-values therefore confirm only that the paths are non-zero, not that every effect is practically large. The effect sizes provide a more conservative basis for interpretation. On this basis, the only path of large magnitude is CNE → NT; the transportation-to-image and transportation-to-awareness paths are of medium magnitude, and the four direct CNE paths together with the NT → BL path are small. The discussion below interprets the practical importance of each relationship accordingly rather than treating statistical significance as evidence of a strong effect. In summary, all ten hypotheses were supported. The results confirm that cultural narrative elements enhance destination brand equity both directly (all three dimensions) and indirectly through narrative transportation, with complementary partial mediation characterizing all three pathways.

To assess whether the hypothesized relationships are robust to individual differences, the structural model was re-estimated with gender, age, education, and short-video viewing frequency entered as control variables on narrative transportation and on the three brand equity dimensions. The path coefficients of the hypothesized relationships remained stable and significant in this extended model (CNE → NT, β = 0.564; CNE → BA, β = 0.264; CNE → BI, β = 0.276; CNE → BL, β = 0.305; NT → BA, β = 0.413; NT → BI, β = 0.445; NT → BL, β = 0.306; all p < 0.001), and the explained variance was essentially unchanged (BI = 0.418, BA = 0.368, NT = 0.325, BL = 0.298). None of the demographic controls exerted a significant effect on the brand equity dimensions; the only significant control path was a small positive effect of viewing frequency on narrative transportation (β = 0.112, p < 0.05). These results indicate that the reported relationships are not confounded by the measured demographic characteristics of the sample.

5. Discussion

The study aimed to analyze the impact of cultural narrative components in tourism microvideos on Chinese social media, using narrative transportation as a mediating factor, on destination brand equity. PLS-SEM analysis of 350 valid questionnaires confirmed all 10 proposed hypotheses and the storytelling brand equity empirically through a short video context.

The most important finding is the central mediating role of narrative transportation. Cultural narrative components showed a strong influence on narrative transportation (β = 0.565, f2 = 0.468), which positively predicted all components of brand equity. This confirms H2 and is in agreement with the proposition of Green and Brock (2000), which posits that psychologically absorbed people tend to identify with characters and follow the storyline of the video and feel an emotional connection. A high effect size shows that short tourism videos and cultural narratives (heritage stories, folk customs, and culinary traditions) have the transportation-inducing characteristics stated by van Laer et al. (2014) in their meta-analysis, with a time limit of 15 to 60 seconds. This applies narrative transportation theory to Chinese social media short videos and expands the context of previously examined written and long-form audio-visual stimuli.

The strongest impact of narrative transportation was on brand image (β = 0.441, f2 = 0.227), followed by brand awareness (β = 0.420, f2 = 0.189) and then brand loyalty (β = 0.305, f2 = 0.090). The medium effect size of the transportation-image path is notable. This means that the more absorbed viewers are by the story of the culture of the destination, the more favorable and rich associative networks they build about the destination. This is the kind of cognitive and emotional reaction that Baloglu and McCleary (1999) indicated as being part of the destination image and that Keller (1993) argued was central to brand equity creation.

A central issue of interest is the consistency of mediation across the dimensions of brand equity. Cultural narrative elements were shown to be predictive of each of the three brand equity dimensions through direct and indirect (via narrative transportation) pathways, demonstrating partial mediation in all cases (Zhao et al., 2010). With this consistency, we propose that the cultural narratives of tourism short videos operate through two pathways. One direct pathway is where cultural elements impact the perception of a destination, and this does not necessitate deep narrative involvement. The second is a mediated pathway, where deep narrative involvement enhances the impact. This builds on work by Cao et al. (2021), where it was shown that transportation played a mediating role in multidimensional brand attitude. This further demonstrates that across all three dimensions of brand equity, the phenomenon of complementary partial mediation is present.

The effects of cultural narrative elements on brand awareness (β = 0.256), brand image (β = 0.284), and brand loyalty (β = 0.308) are theoretically consistent. The awareness effect is justified because culturally specific elements, such as a famous dish or a noted landmark, will increase the importance of a destination, even if the consumers do not engage deeply with the narratives. The brand image effect demonstrates how cultural elements possess affirmative associative value. Such elements can provide perceived authenticity, culture, and experience quality, which shape brand image beyond mere transport. The loyalty effect is also justified, as Moreira et al. (2025) stated that culturally rich elements signal destination originality and destination diversification. Notably, this rich culture can enhance emotional loyalty without transport. Cultural narratives have a peripheral and a central route. The peripheral route is authenticity and direct recognition. The central route is narrative and transportive.

The findings are also substantiated by the explained variance of the endogenous constructs. Brand image is the most fully explained of the three brand equity dimensions, which is consistent with narrative transportation exerting its strongest effect on image and with cultural narrative content also acting on image directly. For each dimension, the joint operation of the direct and the transportation-mediated pathway accounts for the explanatory power of the model, reinforcing the complementary nature of the two routes identified above.

With cultural content, in addition to directing and shaping viewers' perceptions of the kind and worth of the destination, the image of the narrative content also leads to investment in narrative framing, having image-building effects that are, particularly, the case described in the complementary partial mediation for brand image. All three brand equity dimensions direct them, meaning that even culturally themed short clips that feature a famous dish or heritage site can help generate positive associations and emotional attachment with a destination and increase destination awareness.

This speaks to a dual content approach, combining high-narrative-quality videos to enhance the positive direct and transport-mediated effects across all dimensions of brand equity with shorter culturally specific clips that promote direct effects to sustain brand loyalty. For platform operators, the results point to the need to incorporate narrative engagement indicators, such as watch-throughs and replays, as direct measures of transport, in addition to click-through rates, to enhance the algorithm for tourism content.

This study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the cross-sectional design cannot establish causal direction, and reverse or reciprocal influence cannot be excluded; the relationships should therefore be read as theory-consistent associations, and experimental or longitudinal designs are needed to test the causal ordering. Second, the purposive and snowball sample drawn from WeChat and QQ skews toward younger, highly educated users (78.5% with a bachelor's or master's degree), so the findings may not generalize to less-educated audiences, and replication with more balanced samples would strengthen external validity.

Third, the reliance on self-report data from a single source raises the possibility of common method bias; although Harman's test and the procedural remedies in Section 3.5 indicate this bias is limited, future studies could add behavioral or

platform-level indicators of engagement. Fourth, cultural narrative elements were modeled as a single construct, which the data support but which leaves the distinct contributions of heritage and landscape, folk customs, and culinary heritage unestimated; because each facet was measured with only two items in the present design, future research using a larger item pool per facet could model these facets separately, including through a second-order specification, to examine whether particular types of cultural narrative are more influential. Fifth, prior travel experience to the recalled destination was not collected and therefore could not be entered as a control variable; future research should measure prior visitation to disentangle the effects of narrative exposure from pre-existing destination familiarity.

6. Conclusion

Based on 350 survey responses analyzed using PLS-SEM, the results confirmed that cultural narrative elements positively influence all three dimensions of destination brand equity: brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty. These effects occur both directly and indirectly through narrative transportation. The findings also showed that narrative transportation partially mediates all three relationships, indicating that cultural narratives influence destination perceptions both directly and by engaging viewers in the story. This suggests that cultural storytelling in short videos is not only an attractive way to present destinations but also an effective strategy for building destination brands.

By highlighting local heritage, traditions, and food culture, tourism videos can increase destination awareness, create positive images, and encourage future visits and recommendations. The study also extends narrative transportation theory to the growing short-video environment in China, where more than one billion people use social media.

List of abbreviations

AVE	Average variance extracted
BA	Brand awareness
BI	Brand image
BL	Brand loyalty
CBBE	Customer-based brand equity
CI	Confidence interval
CNE	Cultural narrative elements
CR	Composite reliability
HTMT	Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio
NT	Narrative transportation
PLS-SEM	Partial least squares structural equation modeling
SEM	Structural equation modeling
SRMR	Standardized root mean square residual
VIF	Variance inflation factor

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Compliance with ethical standards

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA (Approval No. REC/03/2025 (PG/MR/189)). Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their participation. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. All responses were anonymous; no personally identifiable information was collected, and the data were stored securely and used solely for academic research purposes.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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