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From Story to Action: Affective Pathways to Engagement in Tourism Video Advertising

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Abstract

Tourism destination marketers increasingly rely on video advertising, yet the psychological mechanisms linking perceived advertising design and destination familiarity to engagement remain underspecified in tourism contexts. Drawing on narrative transportation and advertising stimulation perspectives, this study examines how perceived advertising design and destination familiarity relate to narrative transportation and advertising stimulation, and how these mechanisms relate to engagement. Using a survey of 915 Portuguese respondents and structural equation modeling in AMOS, we estimate a model comprising advertising design, destination familiarity, narrative transportation, advertising stimulation, and engagement. Results show that perceived advertising design is positively associated with narrative transportation ($\beta = 0.451$, $p < 0.01$) and advertising stimulation ($\beta = 0.158$, $p < 0.01$). Destination familiarity is also positively associated with narrative transportation ($\beta = 0.215$, $p < 0.01$) and advertising stimulation ($\beta = 0.104$, $p < 0.01$). Narrative transportation is strongly associated with advertising stimulation ($\beta = 0.659$, $p < 0.01$), whereas narrative transportation does not show a significant direct association with engagement ($\beta = 0.086$, n.s.). Advertising stimulation is positively associated with engagement ($\beta = 0.288$, $p < 0.01$). Findings suggest that, in this context, affective activation (stimulation) may be a more proximal correlate of self-reported engagement than narrative immersion alone, warranting careful interpretation given the cross-sectional, self-report design.

Keywords: tourism marketing; tourism video advertising; destination familiarity; narrative transportation; advertising stimulation; consumer engagement; structural equation modeling (SEM)

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1. Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of digital tourism marketing, video advertising has emerged as a dominant medium for shaping destination image and influencing traveler

behavior. As competition among destinations intensifies, the ability to capture the attention of potential tourists through compelling visual narratives has become a strategic imperative. In this context, advertising design assumes a critical role. It acts not merely as an esthetic choice but as a functional driver of consumer purchase decisions and behavioral intentions. As Duffett (2015) argues, effective advertisements must be meticulously crafted, "not forgetting the interaction and stimulation of consumers" (p. 520). This argument finds strong support in the context of tourism. Short-form destination videos shape travel intentions through the interplay of visual perspective, visual content, and narration appeal (Gan et al., 2023). A systematic review further identifies video-based storytelling as one of the fastest-growing and most strategically important streams in destination marketing research (X. Zhang & Ramayah, 2024).

Visual elements are central to constructing and conveying these promotional messages. With consumers attaching increasingly greater importance to visual esthetics, design plays a significant role in marketing effectiveness, particularly in tourism, where photographic and cinematic techniques serve as primary communication strategies (Lian & Yu, 2019).

Combining eye-tracking and experimental designs, S. Li et al. (2024) demonstrate that visual execution choices in destination advertising significantly affect consumer responses and identify narrative transportation as the psychological mechanism underlying these effects.

However, the effectiveness of these external stimuli does not occur in a vacuum; it is moderated by the consumer's internal knowledge structures, specifically destination familiarity.

Familiarity is a pivotal factor in the tourist context. When a tourist visits a destination, the experience generates memories and a desire to revisit, fostering loyalty and word-of-mouth promotion (Johnson & Russo, 1984). Consequently, familiarity significantly influences tourists' perspectives, reducing uncertainty and shaping how they process new advertising information.

Recent studies confirm that destination familiarity remains a central construct in contemporary tourism research, shaping destination image and loyalty among both visitors and residents (Casali et al., 2021), and influencing the image perceptions and travel intentions of potential tourists who have never visited the destination (D. Wang, 2025; Stylidis & Terzidou, 2024). This is particularly consequential in digital environments, where informational familiarity, built through media exposure rather than direct experience, conditions how promotional content is processed.

Despite the recognized importance of both design (stimulation) and familiarity (prior knowledge), there is a need to understand the psychological mechanisms that link these factors to consumer engagement. It is not enough to present a well-designed ad to a familiar audience; one must understand how these elements trigger narrative transportation and advertising stimulation. Understanding how advertising design, storytelling, and destination familiarity interrelate is thus crucial for optimizing advertising campaigns in the tourism sector. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the impact of advertising design and destination familiarity on narrative transportation and advertising stimulation in the context of tourism video marketing. Furthermore, it examines how these psychological states relate to consumer engagement, offering a comprehensive model of viewer response in the digital era.

Notwithstanding the acknowledged importance of both advertising design and destination familiarity, prior research has largely examined these factors in isolation or without clearly distinguishing the psychological mechanisms through which they influence consumer responses. In particular, there is limited integrative evidence on how cognitive

immersion and affective activation are jointly associated with engagement following exposure to tourism video advertising.

This gap is especially relevant in the current digital environment, characterized by short-form video content, high saturation of information, and reduced attention spans. Recent evidence shows that destination short-video marketing increasingly faces esthetic fatigue, difficulties in reaching potential users, and low conversion rates (L. Li & An, 2025), while algorithm-driven short-form platforms reshape tourism decision-making by triggering immediate affective responses that bypass deliberate evaluation (Z. Chen, 2025). At the same time, emerging research indicates that the effectiveness of tourism short-video advertising depends heavily on how design and narrative elements are configured (S.-N. Zhang et al., 2025). In such contexts, understanding not only whether advertisements are effective, but how and through which mechanisms they capture attention and foster engagement, becomes critical for both theory and practice.

Video advertising has become central to tourism promotion; however, the field still lacks integrative evidence on how viewers translate exposure to destination videos into engagement-related outcomes. Prior work highlights narrative transportation as an immersion mechanism that can reduce counter-arguing and shape persuasion (Green & Brock, 2000, 2002), and meta-analytic evidence indicates that transportation is linked to downstream attitudinal and behavioral consequences (van Laer et al., 2014).

More recently, empirical studies have confirmed that narrative transportation remains a central mechanism in destination short videos, reducing psychological reactance and fostering favorable brand attitudes (Cao et al., 2021), and that narrative (versus non-narrative) video structures elicit stronger mental simulation and more positive brand evaluations (X. Wang et al., 2023). However, this emerging stream has focused predominantly on attitudes and travel intentions, leaving the affective pathway from immersion to engagement largely unexamined.

In tourism, promotional videos are expected to create vivid mental representations of intangible experiences, making both the perceived design of the video and the viewer's destination familiarity particularly salient (Milman & Pizam, 1995; Prentice, 2004).

However, what remains unclear is how these elements interact within a unified framework that simultaneously accounts for both cognitive and affective processes, and how these processes differentially contribute to consumer engagement in tourism video contexts. Addressing this limitation is essential to better understand the mechanisms underlying effective digital destination marketing.

Addressing this gap, we test an integrated framework in which perceived advertising design and destination familiarity relate to narrative transportation and advertising stimulation, and in turn relate to engagement in the context of tourism video advertising.

This study makes three contributions to tourism marketing research. First, it integrates perceived advertising design and destination familiarity as joint antecedents of two distinct response mechanisms (narrative transportation and advertising stimulation) within a single SEM framework. Second, it empirically examines the relationship between narrative transportation and advertising stimulation in tourism video advertising, clarifying whether immersion co-occurs with (or relates to) affective activation. Third, it documents which mechanism is more closely associated with engagement in this setting, given the observed pattern in which advertising stimulation is associated with engagement, whereas narrative transportation is not directly significant. Collectively, the study offers evidence that can inform both theory refinement and practical video design decisions for destination marketing organizations.

In doing so, this study responds to recent calls for a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying customer engagement with branded digital content

(Krowinska & Dineva, 2025) and of how digital stimuli translate into customer responsiveness in service contexts (Sarkis et al., 2025).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Narrative Transportation, Advertising Design, and Advertising Stimulation

Contemporary literature in communication and marketing has consistently highlighted the central role of narratives and advertising stimuli in shaping consumers' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Among the most discussed concepts in this context is narrative transportation, initially proposed by Green (1996) and further developed by Green and Brock (2000), who define it as a psychological process of immersion in which the receiver's attention, imagination, and emotions converge on the story being presented. When this immersion occurs, the individual momentarily suspends their perception of the real environment and begins to experience the narrated events as if they were part of their own experiential framework, simultaneously reducing their motivation to counterargue the message. The literature supports the notion that this reduction in counter-argumentation facilitates the acceptance of the messages embedded in the narrative and enhances their persuasive effects (Green & Brock, 2002; Green & Clark, 2012). Thus, narratives constitute a particularly effective form of communication because they can integrate, in a convergent manner, cognitive and affective stimuli that appeal to both reason and emotion simultaneously.

Tourism videos operate at the intersection of narrative persuasion and sensory-rich destination communication. Narrative transportation refers to the extent to which viewers become mentally absorbed, allocating their attention and imagination to the story world (Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock, 2000). In destination contexts, where consumption is primarily experiential and intangible, transportation is especially relevant because the video must substitute for direct experience by enabling viewers to mentally simulate the destination. Narrative involvement has also been conceptualized as a process that promotes changes in perception during exposure to the story. Gerrig (1993) argues that the receiver mentally "travels" into the narrative universe, experiencing emotions and reactions aligned with the events of the story. Subsequent studies demonstrate that the effects of narrative transportation may extend beyond the moment of exposure, influencing beliefs and attitudes in the medium term (Appel & Richter, 2007). This understanding led to the development of the concept of narrative persuasion (Appel, 2022; Hamby & Brinberg, 2016), which describes how stories shape perceptions without relying on explicit arguments, but rather through the emotional experience they promote.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions under which narrative transportation occurs, van Laer et al. (2014) proposed the extended transportation-imagery model, which identifies imagination, empathy, and the structural quality of the narrative as essential elements of the process. The literature suggests that compelling narratives exhibit a coherent temporal sequence, characters with whom emotional bonds can be formed, and conflicts and resolutions that propel the story forward. According to Snowden (1999) and Brechman and Purvis (2015), such structural elements enable the construction of causality and facilitate cognitive involvement, thereby reinforcing the persuasive power of the narrative. In this sense, advertising that incorporates storytelling tends to be less intrusive and less likely to generate resistance, insofar as it does not present itself in an explicitly persuasive manner but instead appeals to emotion and identification, promoting deeper and more spontaneous involvement (Escadas, 2007).

Perceived advertising design provides immediate cues that facilitate immersion through video. Visual quality, coherence, and professional execution can enhance attention and perceived credibility, thereby supporting the conditions under which transportation is more likely to occur.

This is corroborated by mixed-method evidence. Using eye-tracking and experimental designs, S. Li et al. (2024) showed that visual execution choices in destination advertisements shape consumer responses precisely through narrative transportation, confirming that design cues operate as an entry point into the story world. In parallel, those same cues may evoke affective activation (operationalized here as advertising stimulation) through arousal, excitement, and perceived originality. The relationship between narrative transportation and advertising stimulation becomes particularly relevant when considering the role of visual, symbolic, and textual stimuli in digital communication. The effectiveness of advertising largely depends on how the design of the advertisement integrates these elements, functioning as a catalyst for consumer engagement (Cummins, 2021; Dwivedi et al., 2020; Guttmann, 2019). The literature emphasizes that design has the capacity to elicit both positive and negative emotional responses, thereby influencing perceptions and attitudes. When associated with well-structured narratives, design becomes an integral part of the immersive experience, functioning as a stimulation that reinforces the narrative's coherence and intensifies its impact. Brechman and Purvis (2015) highlight that the integration of narrative structure and visual stimuli results in a powerful communication tool capable of generating favorable cognitive responses, positive emotions, and more positive attitudes than purely argumentative advertisements. This finding is also supported by Chang (2009) and Dessart (2018).

In the context of tourism advertising, these elements assume particular importance, given the intangible nature of tourism services and the need to create vivid mental representations of destinations that have not yet been experienced. Familiarity with the destination thus emerges as a relevant moderator of narrative transportation, as it influences risk perceptions, destination image, and travel intentions (Milman & Pizam, 1995). When the receiver possesses prior references about the destination, the narrative resonates more strongly at the cognitive level, engaging the imagination more deeply and facilitating narrative transportation. More recent literature reinforces that narrative involvement plays a crucial role in the persuasive effectiveness of tourism advertising, shaping how promotional videos are interpreted and experienced (Zhu et al., 2024).

Empirical evidence from destination short videos supports this view. Cao et al. (2021) demonstrated that the narrative dimension of short videos enhances destination brand attitudes by lessening viewers' psychological reactance toward official advertising and by providing an immersive sense of presence. Similarly, X. Wang et al. (2023) found that narrative (as opposed to non-narrative) video structures elicit stronger mental simulation among potential tourists, which in turn translates into more favorable brand evaluations.

The affective dimension of consumer response to advertising is best understood through experiential marketing theory. This perspective originated with Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), who argued that consumption involves symbolic, hedonic, and esthetic processes rather than utilitarian information processing alone. Building on this foundation, the experiential view holds that brands create value by engaging consumers through sensory, affective, and cognitive modules rather than functional attributes (Schmitt, 1999). According to Pine and Gilmore (1998), firms increasingly compete by staging memorable events that engage the senses and provoke emotional reactions. In tourism video advertising, this logic implies that design elements function as experiential stimuli rather than mere information carriers. Because these stimuli activate arousal, curiosity, and pleasure, they should elicit advertising stimulation as a distinct affective response. This reasoning grounds the expectation that perceived advertising design relates to advertising stimulation, and that stimulation operates as a proximal antecedent of engagement. Experiential marketing theory, therefore, complements narrative transportation, since the former explains affective activation, whereas the latter explains cognitive immersion.

The concept of advertising stimulation complements this process by describing the emotional and cognitive mechanisms activated by the advertisement. Well-designed stimuli (such as engaging storytelling, visual creativity, and a clear emphasis on product benefits) strengthen the emotional bond between the brand and the consumer, influencing preferences and behavioral intentions (X. Chen et al., 2023). In tourism videos, these stimuli serve a dual function: on the one hand, they facilitate narrative transportation; on the other, they directly contribute to the formation of positive perceptions of the destination by eliciting pleasure, curiosity, and enthusiasm. Thus, narrative transportation and advertising stimulation are not independent processes but complementary dimensions of consumer response to advertising.

While the evolution of digital media and social platforms has expanded the reach of narratives through user interaction and co-creation (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015; Hall, 2016), the fundamental efficacy of these communications remains anchored in the quality of the advertising design. The literature suggests that the structural and visual arrangement of the advertisement acts as the primary catalyst for the consumer's psychological response. Specifically, a coherent and visually stimulating design is required to trigger the immersion mechanism of narrative transportation and the cognitive-affective activation of advertising stimulation. Therefore, it is posited that advertising design serves as a critical antecedent to both processes, leading to the following hypotheses:

H1: *(ADSG → NATX) Perceived advertising design quality (e.g., visual coherence and professional execution) is expected to support attention allocation and narrative comprehension, facilitating immersion in the promotional narrative. Accordingly, higher perceived design quality should be positively associated with narrative transportation in tourism video advertising.*

H2: *(ADSG → ADST) Design elements can also elicit affective activation by intensifying sensory appeal and emotional response (e.g., excitement, originality). Therefore, perceived advertising design quality should be positively associated with advertising stimulation.*

H3: *(NATX → ADST) Immersion may intensify emotional and sensory activation because being "drawn into" the narrative can heighten experienced affect. Therefore, narrative transportation should be positively associated with advertising stimulation, while acknowledging that alternative orderings are plausible and should be tested in future work.*

2.2. Destination Familiarity

Destination familiarity further shapes processing by providing cognitive scaffolding, which facilitates more efficient information processing. Familiar viewers possess richer schemas, which can facilitate the integration of the video's scenes into existing knowledge structures and, in turn, elicit higher transportation and stimulation responses (Milman & Pizam, 1995; Prentice, 2004). At the same time, familiarity may relate to engagement because familiar viewers are more likely to seek additional information about the destination and interact with official channels. Destination familiarity is multifaceted, representing an accumulated synthesis of feedback, sensory impressions, and knowledge derived from the interactions between tourists, hosts, and society (Christou, 2003). As a pivotal determinant of a destination's reputation (Brooks & Highhouse, 2006), this construct presents a dual nature, capable of yielding positive (Yang, 2007) or adverse outcomes (Brooks et al., 2003). From a consumer perspective, establishing high levels of familiarity is essential for interpreting reputation signals (Lange et al., 2011; Mahon & Mitnick, 2010) and reducing the inherent uncertainty associated with travel choices.

The mechanism through which familiarity shapes processing is articulated by schema theory. Bartlett (1932) first defined schemas as organized cognitive structures that store prior

knowledge and guide the interpretation of new information. Within consumer research, schema theory explains how existing knowledge frameworks influence the evaluation of marketing stimuli (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989). When incoming content aligns with an established schema, processing becomes more fluent and cognitively efficient, as Fiske and Taylor (1991) show in their account of social cognition. Applied to destination marketing, this implies that familiar viewers hold richer destination schemas that ease the integration of advertising content. Because such integration reduces cognitive effort, familiarity should facilitate immersion in the promotional narrative. In addition, schema congruity can heighten personal relevance and emotional resonance, thereby strengthening the affective response to the advertisement. These propositions provide the theoretical justification for relating destination familiarity to both narrative transportation and advertising stimulation. Schema theory thus specifies the cognitive scaffolding through which prior knowledge conditions viewers' responses to tourism video advertising.

Conceptually, familiarity extends beyond mere awareness. Gefen (2000) posits that it stems from absorbing the context of human activity—understanding what, why, where, and when. It involves not only observation but the active acquisition of information and subsequent assessment of an entity (Luhmann, 2000; Monin, 2003). Johnson and Russo (1984) frame it as a construct built on diverse information streams, including direct visits, media exposure, and word-of-mouth.

In the tourism domain, this accumulated knowledge becomes a critical driver of decision-making (Gefen & Straub, 2004). As familiarity deepens, it strengthens the visitor's attachment to the destination (Hammitt et al., 2009) and refines its overall image (Marinao et al., 2012; Prentice, 2004). This positive influence (Andsager & Drzewiecka, 2002) fosters long-term loyalty, with established familiarity serving as a primary motivation for repeat visitation (Tsai, 2012).

Traditionally, familiarity is associated with the emotional closeness tourists develop towards a destination, often contrasted with the novelty and allure of the unknown. Hu and Ritchie (1993) conceptualize familiarity as a function of the distance between the individual and the destination, mediated by past experiences. However, recent scholarship challenges the notion that familiarity and novelty are mutually exclusive opposites. Stylidis and Terzidou (2024) argue that these two concepts can operate independently to influence consumer behavior. Drawing on the mere exposure theory, they suggest that increased exposure to a destination, even without physical visitation, enhances familiarity, which in turn breeds liking and perceived safety. This is particularly relevant for non-visitors, for whom familiarity is not experiential but informational, shaped by media and social knowledge. Thus, while the pursuit of the unknown may be a reactive mechanism in response to a new environment (Guan et al., 2022), familiarity provides the necessary cognitive framework for processing that environment.

The measurement of this construct has evolved significantly from Baloglu's (2001) foundational distinction between experiential (visitation) and informational sources. Prentice (2004) expanded this scope with a seven-component model that integrates factors such as education and proximity. Tan and Wu (2016) further refined this argument, suggesting that these factors should not be treated as standalone entities; instead, the overlap between informational, experiential, and educational dimensions creates a more robust theoretical model. Stylidis and Terzidou (2024) reinforce the importance of this multi-dimensional approach, demonstrating that for segments who cannot visit a destination, informational familiarity is a key determinant of their cognitive and affective image, effectively acting as a substitute for direct experience.

Ultimately, consensus identifies destination familiarity as a fundamental determinant of tourist attitudes. Prentice (2004) defines 'close familiarity' as the relational link connecting

a tourist's habitual environment to a destination, distinguishing repeat visitors from first timers. However, as Stylidis and Terzidou (2024) highlight, familiarity is equally critical for the "non-visitor" market, where it moderates perceptions and shapes the intent to visit. While previous studies have emphasized its role in lowering perceived risk and uncertainty (Bianchi et al., 2017), its influence extends to the processing of advertising content. Familiarity provides the necessary cognitive scaffolding that allows the viewer to align the ad's narrative with their existing mental schemas. This alignment not only facilitates a smoother entry into the story world, thereby enhancing immersion, but also amplifies the resonance of the visual and textual cues presented. Consequently, familiarity is posited to act as a catalyst that intensifies both the psychological state of being transported by the narrative and the cognitive-affective response to the advertising stimuli. Based on this theoretical framework, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: *(FAM → ADST) Familiarity may amplify emotional response by increasing personal relevance and recognition of destination attributes. Hence, destination familiarity should be positively associated with advertising stimulation.*

H5: *(FAM → NATX) Familiarity provides prior knowledge structures that can facilitate the interpretation of destination cues and enhance resonance with the video's content. Thus, destination familiarity should be positively associated with narrative transportation.*

2.3. Engagement

Finally, engagement in social media and digital destination contexts is widely conceptualized as comprising cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Harrigan et al., 2017; Trunfio & Rossi, 2021; So et al., 2014). In tourism video advertising, engagement can be plausibly linked to both immersion (transportation) and affective activation (stimulation). However, the relative roles of these mechanisms remain empirically unresolved in tourism settings, motivating the hypothesized model tested in this study. In the contemporary digital landscape, social media engagement (SME) has emerged as a pivotal construct in marketing and tourism research (Leung et al., 2013). While early definitions often focused on metrics, recent scholarship conceptualizes engagement as a multidimensional psychological state comprising cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021). Within the tourism context, So et al. (2014) conceptualized customer engagement as a higher-order construct encompassing five dimensions: identification, enthusiasm, attention, absorption, and interaction. This scale was later validated and refined by Harrigan et al. (2017) in a social media setting, who proposed a parsimonious model highlighting absorption, identification, and interaction as the core components driving loyalty.

Trunfio and Rossi (2021) further clarify that while the behavioral dimension (often measured through metrics such as likes, comments, and shares) remains the most investigated proxy for engagement, it captures only the visible manifestation of a deeper psychological process. This aligns with the COBRA's model (Consumers' Online Brand Related Activities), which classifies engagement behaviors into three levels of increasing involvement: consumption, contribution, and creation (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021).

Understanding what drives engagement is critical for effective digital strategy. Santini et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis identifying that customer engagement is significantly driven by relationship formation variables, specifically satisfaction, positive emotions, and trust. Their findings suggest that while commitment plays a lesser role, trust and satisfaction are fundamental antecedents that foster deep engagement.

The nature of the content itself is also a primary determinant of engagement. Krowinska and Dineva (2025) categorize branded content into four types: informational, entertaining, remunerative, and contextual. Their research indicates that different content

forms elicit distinct engagement behaviors; for instance, entertaining content (e.g., visual, emotional, behind-the-scenes) typically drives hedonic engagement, while informational content satisfies functional motives (Krowinska & Dineva, 2025). This is supported by Mariani et al. (2016), who found that visual content, specifically photos, and moderately long posts have a statistically significant positive impact on engagement metrics on Facebook.

Building on the role of specific content formats, Ferreira et al. (2021) examined the drivers of engagement, specifically within video advertising. Their study identifies informativeness and self-brand connection as critical predictors of engagement. They argue that for video content to generate engagement, it must not only provide utility (informativeness) but also foster a psychological bond where the consumer identifies with the brand (self-brand connection).

Recent developments in social media platforms have reshaped the tourism decision-making process. Z. Chen (2025) proposes a four-stage framework: information acquisition, emotional engagement, social interaction, and decision output, arguing that social media facilitates a shift from rational to impulse-driven decision-making. In this environment, "emotional immersion" acts as a core variable; short-form videos and algorithmic recommendations trigger immediate affective responses that bypass traditional rational evaluation (Z. Chen, 2025). This aligns with Jansson (2018), who discusses how "spreadable media" fosters heightened cultural reflexivity and alters how tourists appropriate and represent destinations, often creating tensions between authentic experience and digital performance.

Literature consistently links high levels of engagement to desirable marketing outcomes. So et al. (2014) and Harrigan et al. (2017) demonstrate that customer engagement significantly enhances brand usage intent and loyalty, while Santini et al. (2020) confirm its direct impact on behavioral intentions and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). However, understanding the downstream effects of engagement necessitates a clear comprehension of the upstream psychological mechanisms that precipitate it. Engagement is not merely a reactive metric but a consequence of deep cognitive and affective involvement. The immersion generated by narrative transportation fosters a state of absorption that motivates users to engage with the content, sustaining the experience. Concurrently, advertising stimulation provides the sensory and emotional arousal required to capture attention and provoke a behavioral response. Thus, these constructs are posited not just as parallel processes but as the primary psychological drivers that fuel consumer engagement in digital environments.

H6: *(NATX → ENG) Narrative transportation is often theorized to relate to downstream intentions and behaviors by reducing counter-arguing and increasing persuasive impact. Accordingly, narrative transportation should be positively associated with engagement.*

H7: *(ADST → ENG) Advertising stimulation reflects affective activation that can motivate approach behaviors and interaction with content or destination channels. Thus, advertising stimulation should be positively associated with engagement.*

To understand the structural dynamics of these variables, a conceptual model is proposed, as depicted in Figure 1.

Perceived advertising design (ADSG) and destination familiarity (FAM) are hypothesized to relate to narrative transportation (NATX) and advertising stimulation (ADST). Narrative transportation is hypothesized to relate to advertising stimulation, and both mechanisms are hypothesized to relate to engagement (ENG).

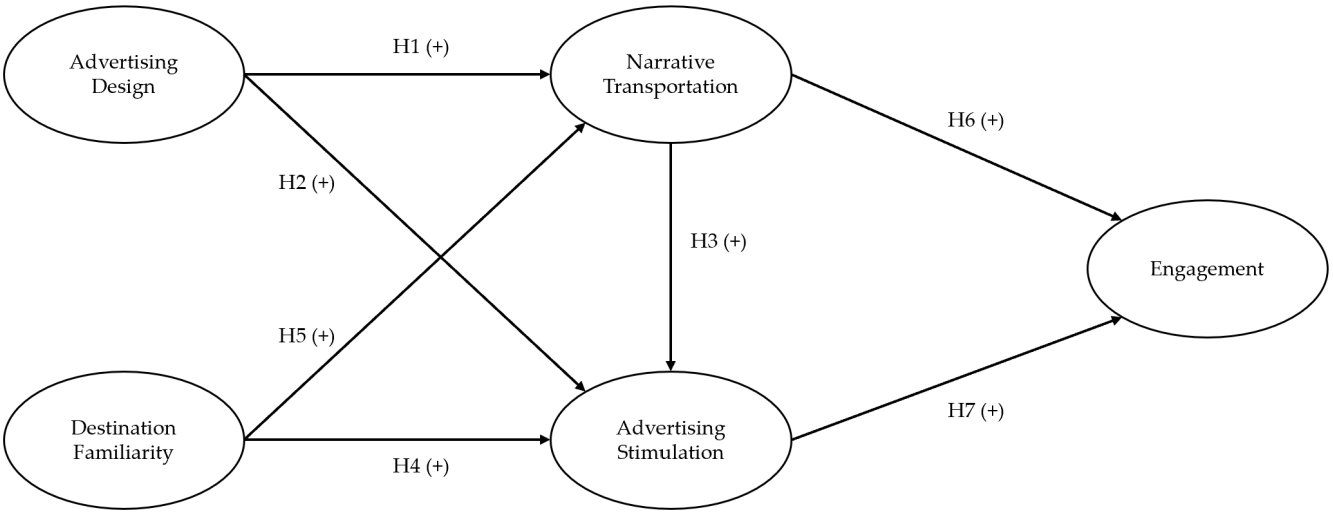

Figure 1. Conceptual Model.

3. Materials and Methods

The data for this study were collected using a pre-tested, self-administered questionnaire, specifically designed to capture the perceptions and behaviors of Portuguese tourists. This method is widely recognized in tourism and marketing research as a practical approach for testing theories and obtaining reliable responses from individuals directly involved in the phenomenon under investigation. Convenience sampling, although non-probabilistic, is frequently adopted in tourism studies due to its practicality and ability to reach respondents who naturally engage with the context under study, making it a suitable choice for the present research.

All respondents were exposed to the same official promotional video of VisitAlentejo immediately before answering the questionnaire and were approached under similar conditions. This stimulus was selected for three reasons. First, as an official campaign produced by the regional destination management organization, it reflects professional production standards and real-world destination advertising practice, enhancing ecological validity. Second, its format and style are representative of contemporary tourism video advertising, combining natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and gastronomy within a narrative structure. Third, exposing all participants to a single standardized stimulus ensured that variation in perceived advertising design reflected individual perceptions rather than differences in the advertisement itself. The video lasts 30 s and presents a fast-paced montage of cinematic scenes following a young couple as they experience the destination: photographing the Roman Temple of Évora, strolling through historic squares and whitewashed villages, cycling at a traditional rural estate, visiting a clay-amphora wine cellar, and sharing regional gastronomy and wine by the fireplace, interspersed with aerial shots of the region's heritage landmarks. The narrative adopts the visitors' perspective and includes an explicit social media motif, with the protagonists capturing and sharing their experiences on their smartphones. The advertisement contains no spoken dialog from the characters and is accompanied by a voice-over narration and an evocative musical score, closing with the campaign tagline "Alentejo #HáUmLugar" ("There is a place") and the destination's official website (www.visitalentejo.pt) as an implicit call to action. Notably, the embedded social media motif makes this stimulus particularly well-suited to examining digital engagement responses. The questionnaire, with the embedded video, was disseminated between 1 October and 30 November 2025 through Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, allowing the researchers to reach Portuguese tourists in a quick, accessible, and cost-effective manner.

To ensure data quality, 2 attention-check items were embedded in the questionnaire (e.g., «Please select option "not applicable"»), and respondents who failed these checks were excluded from the final sample.

At the beginning of the questionnaire, the purpose and nature of the study were clearly explained to minimize misunderstandings and reduce response bias. This initial clarification helped ensure that respondents were aware of the study's objectives and felt comfortable providing accurate information.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Individuals who agreed to participate first provided informed consent, after which they completed the questionnaire independently. The responses were then submitted directly through the digital platform used for data collection. This process ensured transparency, participant autonomy, and adherence to ethical research standards.

A total of 915 valid responses were obtained, providing a robust dataset for subsequent analysis. Although the study targeted Portuguese tourists broadly, the final sample consisted predominantly of female respondents. This characteristic aligns with previous findings suggesting that women tend to engage more frequently and more actively in certain consumer or service-related behaviors, which may influence their likelihood of participating in research activities.

The sample profile, as shown in the dataset, reflects a diverse group of tourists. Women represented 68.3% of the respondents, while men accounted for 31.4%, with a small percentage identifying as a different gender. The average age was 30.26 years (SD = 13.83), with a substantial proportion of participants between 20 and 29 years old. Educational levels were also notably varied, with 53.9% of respondents having completed basic or secondary education and 46.1% holding higher education degrees.

Overall, the data collection process was carefully structured to preserve methodological rigor, ensure ethical compliance, and obtain reliable information from a relevant segment of Portuguese tourists. The final sample size and diversity offer a solid foundation for the empirical analyses presented in the study.

All constructs used in this study were measured using previously validated scales, which were adapted to the context of tourism communication. As shown in Table 1, narrative transportation was measured with three items adapted from Solja et al. (2018), advertising stimulation with three items from Voorveld et al. (2018), destination familiarity with four items from Bianchi et al. (2017), engagement with six items from Ferreira et al. (2021), and advertising design with four items from Shaouf et al. (2016). All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"), ensuring consistency and comparability across constructs.

Table 1. Constructs, measurement items, standardized loadings, reliability, and validity.

Constructs and Items		Standardized Loadings	t-Value
Code	**Item**		
Narrative Transportation (α = 0.87; CR = 0.875; AVE = 0.70)			
NATX1	While watching the promotional video, I did not think about anything else.	0.89	(a)
NATX2	This promotional video captivated me from beginning to end.	0.91	36.03
NATX3	This promotional video held my attention from start to finish.	0.70	24.73
Advertising Stimulation (α = 0.82; CR = 0.840; AVE = 0.64)			
ADST1	I was thrilled by this promotional video.	0.66	(a)
ADST2	This promotional video seduced me.	0.84	21.43
ADST3	This promotional video is original and unique.	0.89	22.20

Table 1. *Cont.*

Constructs and Items		Standardized Loadings	t-Value
Code	**Item**		
	Destination Familiarity (α = 0.84; CR = 0.845; AVE = 0.58)		
FAM1	I know the Alentejo well.	0.72	(a)
FAM2	I am aware of the attractions that the Alentejo has to offer tourists.	0.76	20.70
FAM3	I often look for information about the Alentejo.	0.78	21.27
FAM4	I know the Alentejo better than my friends and family.	0.78	21.26
	Advertising Design (α = 0.95; CR = 0.939; AVE = 0.76)		
ADSG1	Overall, the visual elements of the video (e.g., colors, images, lighting, size, shape, etc.) are of high quality.	0.91	(a)
ADSG2	Overall, the elements used made the video professional and well-designed.	0.91	43.82
ADSG3	The video contained appealing visual connections.	0.92	45.07
ADSG4	In general, the visual elements in the video were pleasing.	0.87	39.90
	Engagement (α = 0.91; CR = 0.912; AVE = 0.64)		
ENG1	I am familiar with the Alentejo Tourism website (VisitAlentejo).	0.79	28.78
ENG2	I frequently visit the Alentejo Tourism website (VisitAlentejo).	0.69	23.58
ENG3	I am familiar with the Alentejo Tourism Facebook/Instagram pages (VisitAlentejo).	0.62	20.53
ENG4	I will follow/I follow the Alentejo Tourism (VisitAlentejo) Facebook/Instagram pages.	0.89	35.73
ENG5	I want to comment on Alentejo Tourism (VisitAlentejo) content on its Facebook/Instagram page.	0.92	37.51
ENG6	I often share Alentejo Tourism (VisitAlentejo) content on Facebook/Instagram.	0.85	(a)

Notes: NATX = Narrative Transportation; ADST = Advertising Stimulation; FAM = Destination Familiarity; ADSG = Advertising Design; ENG = Engagement; (a) a value of 1 was set to obtain the item metric; CR—Composite Reliability, AVE = Average Variance Extracted. The engagement scale captures respondents' platform familiarity and self-reported behaviors/intentions related to VisitAlentejo. Accordingly, we interpret engagement as a broad propensity for destination-related digital engagement rather than a purely post-exposure behavioral outcome.

Before data collection, a pre-test was conducted with 15 tourists who were pre-selected to ensure they possessed prior knowledge of the tourism context and the topic under study. This preliminary step helped refine the clarity and relevance of the items. Furthermore, the questionnaire underwent an additional layer of scrutiny through a critical review conducted by three academic experts and tourism professionals. This procedure reinforced the content validity of the measurement instrument, ensuring that each construct accurately captured its underlying theoretical domain.

4. Results

4.1. Common Method Bias

Because the data were derived from a single self-administered questionnaire, common method bias required careful attention. Following Podsakoff et al. (2003), both ex ante and ex post procedures were applied. At the ex ante stage, respondents were not informed about the hypothesized relationships, which prevented them from aligning items with specific expectations. The questionnaire also blocked backward navigation, and each section required full completion before progression. Anonymity was assured, and respondents were told that no answers were correct or incorrect, which reduced evaluation apprehension. Ex post diagnostics reinforced these safeguards. Harman's single-factor test showed that the first factor explained 35.72% of the total variance, well below the 50% threshold. Multicollinearity was additionally assessed, and the variance inflation factors ranged from 1.876 to 4.916. These values remained below the upper bound of 5 recommended

by Hair et al. (2018). Therefore, common method variance was unlikely to distort the subsequent estimates.

4.2. Measurement Model

The measurement model was estimated in AMOS through confirmatory factor analysis, as reported in Table 1. The model comprised five latent variables and twenty observed indicators. No respecification was required, and the solution converged on an admissible fit. The fit indices fell within accepted ranges, with χ^2 = 1037.05, df = 178, GFI = 0.90, CFI = 0.939, NFI = 0.927, IFI = 0.939, TLI = 0.928, and RMSEA = 0.073. These results indicate that the measurement model represents the observed data adequately.

Construct reliability was examined through Cronbach's alpha, with values between 0.819 and 0.945. All coefficients exceeded the 0.70 minimum recommended by Hair et al. (2018). Convergent validity was supported by standardized loadings ranging from 0.620 to 0.920, since each indicator loaded significantly onto its intended construct. The average variance extracted ranged from 0.578 to 0.756 and surpassed the 0.50 benchmark. Composite reliability ranged from 0.840 to 0.939, again above accepted standards. Together, these indicators confirm reliable and convergent measurement across the five constructs.

The engagement scale captures platform familiarity together with self-reported behaviors and intentions toward VisitAlentejo. Accordingly, engagement is interpreted here as a broad propensity for destination-related digital engagement rather than a purely post-exposure behavioral outcome. This interpretive boundary matters because the composition of the scale conditions how the engagement results should be read.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion. The square root of the average variance extracted for each construct, shown on the diagonal of Table 2, exceeded that construct's correlations with the remaining constructs. This condition held for all five variables, which supports the empirical distinctiveness of each construct.

Table 2. Fornell and Larcker (1981) Criterion.

Construct	NATX	ADST	FAM	ADSG	ENG
NATX	**0.838**				
ADST	0.564 **	**0.800**			
FAM	0.071	0.088	**0.760**		
ADSG	0.227 **	0.241 **	0.013	**0.870**	
ENG	0.092 **	0.128 **	0.329 **	0.014	**0.799**

Notes: NATX = Narrative Transportation; ADST = Advertising Stimulation; FAM = Destination Familiarity; ADSG = Advertising Design; ENG = Engagement. Diagonal elements (in bold) represent the square root of the AVE; off-diagonal elements are inter-construct correlations. ** Correlation significant at $p < 0.01$.

4.3. Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model was estimated using SEM, and the results appear in Table 3. The chi-square statistic was significant (χ^2 = 1250.26, df = 180), an outcome expected with a sample of 915 respondents. The comparative and incremental indices remained within acceptable thresholds, with GFI = 0.90, CFI = 0.924, NFI = 0.912, IFI = 0.924, and TLI = 0.951. However, the RMSEA was 0.080, which lies at the upper limit of the conventionally acceptable range. The test of close fit returned PCLOSE = 0.000, indicating that the hypothesis of close fit (RMSEA $\leq$ 0.05) was rejected. Consequently, the overall fit is treated as acceptable rather than strong, and the possibility of model misspecification is acknowledged. Given the cross-sectional, self-report design, the estimated paths are reported as directional associations consistent with prior theory rather than as causal effects.

Table 3. Hypothesis test.

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-Value	Significance
H1 (+)	ADSG → NATX	0.451	13.636	Supported ($p < 0.01$)
H2 (+)	ADSG → ADST	0.158	5.123	Supported ($p < 0.01$)
H3 (+)	NATX → ADST	0.659	14.757	Supported ($p < 0.01$)
H4 (+)	FAM → ADST	0.104	3.604	Supported ($p < 0.01$)
H5 (+)	FAM → NATX	0.215	6.261	Supported ($p < 0.01$)
H6 (+)	NATX → ENG	0.086	1.445	Not Supported (n.s.)
H7 (+)	ADST → ENG	0.288	4.679	Supported ($p < 0.01$)

Notes: β = standardized path coefficient; n.s. = not significant. Model fit: $\chi^2 = 1250.26$; df = 180; GFI = 0.90; CFI = 0.924; NFI = 0.912; IFI = 0.924; TLI = 0.951; RMSEA = 0.080; PCLOSE = 0.000.

The explained variance differed markedly across the endogenous constructs. The model accounted for 27.2% of the variance in narrative transportation ($R^2 = 0.272$) and 60.9% in advertising stimulation ($R^2 = 0.609$). Engagement showed a low explained variance ($R^2 = 0.128$), which is consistent with the non-significant transportation path reported below.

Advertising design was positively associated with narrative transportation (β = 0.451, t = 13.636, $p < 0.01$), which supports H1. Advertising design was likewise positively associated with advertising stimulation (β = 0.158, t = 5.123, $p < 0.01$), supporting H2. Narrative transportation showed a strong positive association with advertising stimulation (β = 0.659, t = 14.757, $p < 0.01$), supporting H3. Destination familiarity was positively associated with advertising stimulation (β = 0.104, t = 3.604, $p < 0.01$), supporting H4. In addition, destination familiarity was positively associated with narrative transportation (β = 0.215, t = 6.261, $p < 0.01$), supporting H5. The path from narrative transportation to engagement was not significant (β = 0.086, t = 1.445, n.s.), and therefore H6 was not supported. Finally, advertising stimulation was positively associated with engagement (β = 0.288, t = 4.679, $p < 0.01$), supporting H7.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The first notable result concerns the link between perceived advertising design and narrative transportation, which was the strongest antecedent path in the model (β = 0.451). This finding corroborates recent destination-advertising evidence. Combining eye-tracking and experimental designs, S. Li et al. (2024) demonstrated that visual execution choices shape consumer responses through narrative transportation. The present study extends that conclusion to a survey-based tourism video context, in which perceived design quality operates as an entry point into the story world. Therefore, design functions less as decoration than as a structural enabler of cognitive immersion.

Perceived advertising design was also positively associated with advertising stimulation, although this path was considerably weaker (β = 0.158). The result indicates a dual but uneven role for design, since it appears more effective at facilitating immersion than at directly triggering affective arousal. This pattern is consistent with the experiential view, which treats sensory and esthetic cues as activators of affective response (Schmitt, 1999). However, the modest coefficient suggests that affective activation depends on elements beyond visual execution alone.

The relationship between narrative transportation and advertising stimulation was the strongest in the whole model (β = 0.659). This indicates that cognitive immersion and affective activation are closely intertwined rather than independent. Immersion in the destination narrative appears to heighten the emotional and sensory intensity of the viewing experience, which aligns with experiential perspectives linking absorption to amplified affective engagement (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). The result is also consistent with evidence

that narrative video structures generate stronger mental simulation than non-narrative formats (X. Wang et al., 2023).

Destination familiarity contributed positively to both mechanisms, yet its effects were modest (β = 0.215 for transportation; β = 0.104 for stimulation). Familiarity, therefore, matters, but it is not a dominant driver in a single-exposure video context. This qualifies studies that position familiarity as a central determinant of destination image and loyalty (Casali et al., 2021). Likewise, it tempers the emphasis placed on informational familiarity as a substitute for direct experience among non-visitors (Stylidis & Terzidou, 2024). A plausible reading is that, when a professionally produced stimulus is presented, design cues outweigh prior knowledge in shaping the immediate response. This interpretation is consistent with schema-based reasoning because schema congruity facilitates processing without, in itself, generating activation (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989).

The most theoretically significant result is the divergence between the two mechanisms in their links to engagement. Narrative transportation showed no significant direct association with engagement (β = 0.086), whereas advertising stimulation was positively and significantly associated with it (β = 0.288). This divergence challenges the assumption that immersion translates directly into behavioral outcomes. Meta-analytic evidence has linked transportation to downstream attitudinal and behavioral consequences (van Laer et al., 2014). The present study does not contradict that body of work outright, but it locates the influence of immersion upstream rather than at the point of action. Affective activation, rather than cognitive immersion, therefore emerges as the more proximal correlate of engagement in this setting.

This proximity of affect to action resonates with recent accounts of social-media-driven tourism decisions. Z. Chen (2025) argues that short-form video and algorithmic recommendations trigger immediate affective responses that bypass deliberate evaluation. The present results are consistent with that logic, since the affective pathway, and not the reflective one, was associated with engagement. The experiential tradition offers a complementary explanation, because it treats emotionally charged stimuli as primary drivers of consumer action (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Together, these perspectives suggest that engagement in saturated digital environments is propelled more by felt arousal than by narrative absorption.

Two cautions qualify this interpretation. First, the strong transportation-to-stimulation path, combined with the significant stimulation-to-engagement path, is consistent with an indirect route from immersion to engagement through affective activation. Nevertheless, no formal mediation was tested, so this sequential reading remains a hypothesis for future verification rather than an established effect. Second, the engagement scale combined prior platform familiarity with current behaviors and intentions. This composition may have attenuated the transportation-to-engagement association, because part of the construct reflects pre-existing familiarity rather than a response to the stimulus. The null path should therefore be read as provisional and partly contingent on measurement.

Taken together, these findings refine persuasion models in tourism video advertising. They distinguish cognitive immersion from affective activation and show that the two mechanisms carry unequal weight for engagement. This distinction responds to calls to clarify the psychological mechanisms underlying engagement with branded digital content (Krowinska & Dineva, 2025). It also speaks to how digital stimuli translate into customer responsiveness in service contexts (Sarkis et al., 2025).

5.2. Practical Implications

The findings offer several actionable insights for destination marketing organizations. First, perceived design quality is the strongest correlate of narrative transportation, so

investment in cinematic execution and narrative coherence is strategically justified. Design should be treated as a functional tool for enabling immersion rather than as a stylistic finish. Second, because advertising stimulation is the mechanism most closely associated with engagement, campaigns should deliberately cultivate emotional and sensory intensity. Dynamic pacing, novelty, and evocative imagery can sustain arousal, although they work best when embedded within a coherent narrative. Third, familiarity exerts only a modest influence, which suggests differentiated targeting. For familiar audiences, recognition and personal relevance can be leveraged to reinforce emotional connection. For less familiar audiences, narrative clarity and immersive design help reduce uncertainty and ease initial processing. In summary, engagement appears better served by affective richness than by narrative absorption alone, and this should guide creative priorities.

5.3. Limitations

Several limitations warrant a cautious reading of the findings. First, the cross-sectional and single-source self-report design precludes causal inference and may introduce common method bias, so the relationships are best interpreted as associations. Second, convenience sampling through social media, a predominantly female and relatively young sample, and a focus on Portuguese respondents constrain generalizability. Third, the use of a single VisitAlentejo video means that some results may reflect features specific to that advertisement rather than tourism video advertising in general. Fourth, the engagement measure combined familiarity, behaviors, and intentions, which may not fully capture a post-exposure outcome and could partly explain the non-significant transportation path. Fifth, the model fit was acceptable rather than strong, since the RMSEA reached 0.080 and the close-fit test was rejected (PCLOSE = 0.000), so potential misspecification cannot be excluded. Finally, the proposed sequence from immersion to engagement through activation was not formally tested, which limits any conclusion about the underlying process.

5.4. Future Research

Future work should adopt designs that establish temporal ordering and reduce method bias. Experimental manipulation of design features, with destination content held constant, would clarify the role of perceived design in shaping psychological responses. Replications using multiple stimuli that vary in destination, duration, and narrative structure would help separate stimulus-specific effects from generalizable mechanisms. Longitudinal designs could measure transportation and stimulation immediately after exposure and then track engagement behaviors, such as follows, clicks, and shares over time. Measurement refinement is equally important, since engagement should be operationalized as explicitly post-exposure intentions or observed behaviors, while familiarity should be decomposed into experiential and informational components. Researchers should also estimate and compare alternative structures, including formal mediation in which transportation relates to engagement through stimulation. Finally, replication using variance-based SEM would permit the HTMT assessment of discriminant validity, complementing the covariance-based approach adopted here.

6. Conclusions

This study examined how perceived advertising design and destination familiarity relate to narrative transportation and advertising stimulation, and how these two mechanisms relate to engagement in tourism video advertising. The model was estimated through structural equation modeling with 915 Portuguese respondents. Perceived advertising design was positively associated with both narrative transportation ($\beta = 0.451$) and advertising stimulation ($\beta = 0.158$). Destination familiarity was likewise associated

with the two mechanisms, although more weakly (β = 0.215 and β = 0.104). Narrative transportation showed the strongest association with advertising stimulation (β = 0.659). However, narrative transportation was not directly associated with engagement (β = 0.086, n.s.), whereas advertising stimulation was positively associated with it (β = 0.288).

These results, when integrated, indicate that, in this sample and operational context, engagement aligns more closely with affective activation than with cognitive immersion alone. The study therefore contributes a clearer separation between immersion and activation as distinct response mechanisms within a single tourism video framework. It also documents which mechanism is more proximally linked to engagement, which refines persuasion accounts that treat narrative absorption as a direct route to action. This refinement matters because it shifts attention toward the affective conditions under which exposure is converted into engagement. From a managerial standpoint, the findings underline the strategic value of design decisions that support both narrative absorption and emotional stimulation. Destination marketers should treat high-quality design as a means of enabling immersion, while deliberately engineering the emotional intensity that appears more directly tied to engagement.

These conclusions require cautious interpretation. The cross-sectional and single-source self-report design supports associative rather than causal claims, and the composite engagement measure may partly account for the non-significant transportation path. Future research should pursue experimental and longitudinal designs, multiple video stimuli, and refined engagement metrics that capture explicitly post-exposure behavior. Such work would clarify whether immersion and activation operate as sequential mechanisms or as overlapping facets of a broader response system.

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