

Fantasy or reality? Unveiling the power of realistic narratives in tourism social media advertising

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ABSTRACT

Narrative storytelling, a cornerstone of narrative persuasion theory, plays a crucial role in nurturing robust consumer-brand relationships. Understanding persuasive narratives within the social media domain is critical for destination brands. Hence, this study investigates the impact of realistic narratives on attitudinal destination brand loyalty, mediated by self-congruence and brand attachment across two experiments. Study 1 provides evidence for the superiority of adventure-themed realistic fictional narratives over fantasy one in Facebook advertisements. Study 2 supports the findings of Study 1 with a romantic-themed narrative and a diverse destination in Instagram advertisements. Moreover, Study 2 reveals that consumer fantasy proneness diminishes the influence of realistic fictional narratives on self-congruence. These findings suggest a strategic shift toward realistic narratives over fantasy ones to stimulate self-congruence and cultivate destination brand attachment, ultimately fortifying the bonds between travellers and destination brands.

1. Introduction

Engaging with travellers through social media has emerged as a cost-effective strategy for promoting tourism destinations (Adamiş & Pınarbaşı, 2022). Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) are increasingly focused on shaping and guiding brand narratives within social media channels to influence travel decisions (Lund, Cohen, & Scarles, 2018; Ma, Scott, & Wu, 2023). However, social media advertising poses unique challenges for DMOs and destination marketers as they strive to stand out in crowded marketplaces. As a result, identifying the most persuasive methods to convey destination brand narratives has become crucial, with narrative storytelling proving to be a powerful tool in capturing travellers' attention and encouraging them to explore destinations (Youssef, Leicht, & Marongiu, 2019).

A "story-world", which comprises a series of interconnected events centred around a specific theme, settings, and characters immerse audiences in the captivating realm of storytelling (Ryan, 2016; Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008). Narrative storytelling is the art of narrating a sequence of events, whether based on true or fictional settings, by adeptly weaving together engaging story characters and immersive plots in a compelling manner (Ma et al., 2023; Tu, 2015). This form of storytelling has a powerful ability to persuade and transport its audience by

lessening negative cognitive responses and eliciting strong emotional reactions (Escalas, 2007). Consequently, narrative storytelling offers significant opportunities for enhancing destination brand perception, identity, and competitiveness in saturated markets (Bassano, Barile, Picicocchi, Spohrer, & Iandolo, 2019) and serves as a catalyst for destination development (Hartman, Parra, & de Roo, 2019).

Luo, Wan, and Liu (2023) highlight how romantic storytelling within tourist attractions influences travellers' impulsive purchasing behaviour more than non-romantic narratives. Destinations steeped in rich historical heritage, such as Egypt, Greece, and Turkiye, offer countless opportunities for weaving captivating narratives. These narratives serve as powerful tools for DMOs to entice prospective travellers by harnessing the allure of ancient cultures and legendary figures. Take, for example, the enduring saga of Cleopatra and Antony, intricately intertwined with the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Rome, which serves as a wellspring of inspiration. Therefore, the expanding body of literature on brand storytelling unveils promising avenues in destination branding (Park, Treen, Pitt, & Chan, 2023), highlighting the pivotal role of narrative storytelling (Lund et al., 2018). Nevertheless, empirical inquiries into the success of persuasive narratives in social media advertising and destination branding remain nascent (Moin, Hosany, & O'Brien, 2020). Notably, there are discernible research gaps in tourism and destination

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advertising literature concerning the influence of narrative storytelling on tourist behaviour, underscoring the imperative for further exploration (Akgün, Keskin, Ayar, & Erdoğan, 2015; Kim & Youn, 2017).

Hence the aim of this research is to examine the influence of realistic narratives on tourists' attitudinal loyalty towards destination brands, as evidenced by their intentions to visit or recommend a destination (Ekinci, Sirakaya-Turk, & Preciado, 2013). Building on narrative persuasion theory, we posit that realistic narratives have potential to hold the capacity to deeply engage audiences with the events depicted in the narrative setting (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2011). A realistic narrative portrays events, characters, or settings in a manner that closely resembles real-life situations or experiences within a believable framework. However, as emphasized by Roberts (2012), realistic narratives could vary in their degree of "true to life" depiction. This genuineness may either stem from events and experiences grounded in reality, thus aiming to accurately represent real-life situations (referred to as realistic non-fictional narratives) or incorporate exaggerations and imaginative events, while striving to unveil realistic perspectives of human potential and possibilities (hereafter called realistic fictional narratives) (Browse, Gibbons, & Hatavara, 2019; Wiese, 2015). In contrast, non-realistic narratives (hereafter called fantasy narratives) involve imaginative or creative stories and characters that are driven by fictional events (Bennett, Matos, Anaza, Ruvalcaba, & Hamilton, 2023; Laing & Crouch, 2009). We propose that realistic narratives could potentially foster the traveller's self-congruence, destination brand attachment and destination brand loyalty more effectively than fantasy narratives. Also, individuals with a propensity for fantasy are likely to engage less deeply with realistic narratives (Bennett et al., 2023). Hence, the objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to assess the impact of realistic narrative storytelling on travellers' destination brand loyalty; (2) to investigate the underlying mechanisms, including self-congruence and brand attachment, driving these effects; and (3) to determine whether fantasy proneness moderates the influence of realistic narrative storytelling on self-congruence.

Through this research, we aim to contribute to the existing literature in three significant ways. Firstly, this study enriches our understanding on realistic narrative storytelling and its impact on destination brand loyalty. Narrative persuasion theory suggests that individuals are more likely to be persuaded when information is presented in the form of a compelling story rather than through straightforward facts or arguments (Moyer-Gusé & Dale, 2017). Building on this foundation, previous research has advocated for inquiries into the effects of persuasive narrative storytelling on destination loyalty (Hay, Chien, & Ruhanen, 2022; Youssef et al., 2019). However, the potential impact of fictional and non-fictional narratives on destination brand loyalty remains largely unexplored (Reijnders, 2016). Our study addresses this gap by examining the causal effects of realistic narratives, such as realistic non-fictional and realistic fictional narratives, on destination brand loyalty. This investigation encourages tourism marketers to broaden the use of persuasive narratives in their marketing communications.

Second, the present study involves exploring the psychological mechanisms that underlie the effects of realistic narratives by exploring the roles of self-congruence and brand attachment as serial mediators. While self-congruence (Toteva, Savas-Hall, & Hall, 2024) and brand attachment (Hemsley-Brown, 2023; Shimul, 2022) have been commonly applied in explaining consumer-brand relationships and brand loyalty, their investigation within the narrative storytelling context is notably limited. To the best of our knowledge, there's a lack of prior research directly applying these concepts to narrative storytelling, despite their relationship with consumer behaviour is theoretically compelling (Escalas, 2007). This gap presents an opportunity to examine established theories in a novel context, which is crucial for advancing our understanding of consumer behaviour and marketing strategies. Importantly, our study aligns with the ongoing research interest in understanding the mechanisms driving the effectiveness of narrative storytelling in tourist behaviour (Van Laer, Feiereisen, & Visconti, 2019). By addressing this

gap, our research aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by offering insights into how self-congruence and brand attachment operate within narrative-storytelling driven marketing.

Third, introducing fantasy proneness as a potential moderator of the impact of narrative storytelling on self-congruence adds a unique contribution to existing knowledge. Fantasy proneness is a psychological trait that refers to an individual's inclination for fantasizing and how people respond to mental imagery presented in stories (Li, Tian, Lundberg, Gkritzali, & Sundström, 2021). Given that narratives often immerse readers in mentally imagined scenarios, the alignment between an individual's fantasy proneness and the depicted story content, including its setting, characters, and plot could shape their reactions. Therefore, in this study, we investigate the moderating role of fantasy proneness in shaping the impact of narrative storytelling on self-congruence.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

2.1. Narrative storytelling in tourism

Narrative storytelling involves the structured presentation of events, characters, and emotions in a way that creates a cohesive and engaging narrative for the audience (Woodside et al., 2008). Highlighting the fundamental components of a narrative storytelling, Escalas (2004) emphasizes chronology and causality. Chronology pertains to the arrangement of events in a temporal dimension, illustrating distinct beginnings, middles, and ends for each occurrence. Narratives interweave events and the experiences of the characters involve a coherent and logical sequence (Van Laer et al., 2019). With narrative storytelling a coherent framework is constructed that facilitates connections between different elements in the story, thus enabling causal inferences (Delgadoillo & Escalas, 2004).

Both authentic and realistic storytelling aim to engage and immerse audiences, yet they diverge in their approach to depicting reality, characters, and plots. While authentic storytelling emphasizes truthfulness of the events (Yin, Tang, Chiu, Hsieh, & Lai, 2023), realistic stories may also incorporate elements that deviate from strict adherence to actual events. Realistic narratives prioritize plausibility, thus aiming to portray events, characters, and settings in a manner that closely resembles real life (Green, 2004). For example, in realistic fictional storytelling, elements of realism seamlessly blend with imaginative storytelling, incorporating unauthentic characters, settings and plots. Despite these imaginative elements, the story's plausibility can resonate with real-life experiences.

Prior studies have explored establishing causality for the impact of narrative storytelling on various behavioural outcomes such as impulsive buying behaviour, visit intentions, or storytelling intentions (see Table 1). Moscardo (2020) explores key themes related to stories and the visitor experience, proposing a conceptual framework applicable before, during, or after travel. Moin et al. (2020) suggest using the Hero's Journey framework to create compelling promotional videos that better resonate with and captivate potential tourists. As it can be seen from Table 1, previous research on the effectiveness of narrative storytelling in destination marketing considered factors such as storyteller type (Pachucki, Grohs, & School-Grissemann, 2022), tourism activity type (Su, Cheng, & Swanson, 2020), storytelling elements (Kim & Youn, 2017) or narrative structure (Akgün et al., 2015).

Despite the previous efforts, there has been limited examination of narrative storytelling across different themes (e.g., Luo et al., 2023). Notably, there is a lack of investigation into the perceived realism of narrative persuasion on destination loyalty. Furthermore, there is an opportunity to delve into the underlying mechanisms influencing the impact of narrative persuasion on destination brand loyalty such as self-congruence, destination brand attachment along with exploring the moderating factors such as fantasy proneness.

While self-congruence (Kolanska-Stronka & Singh, 2024) and brand

Table 1
Overview of empirical studies on storytelling in tourism.

Authors	Theory	Method	Context	Main Effect	Mediator	Moderator	Key Findings
Luo et al. (2023)	The theory of embodied cognition	Experimental design with multiple studies. N ₁ = 210, N ₂ = 270, N ₃ = 340	Tourist attractions	The effect of storytelling theme (romantic vs. non-romantic) on tourists' impulsive buying	Perception of personal control	Colour (Red vs Blue)	Exposure to tourist destinations highlighting romantic themes triggers an automatic belief among tourists that "romance is uncontrollable". This belief fosters a sense of reduced personal control, leading to an increased tendency for impulsive purchasing. The impact of this effect is lessened when themed materials prominently feature the colour red.
Pachucki et al. (2022)	Narrative transportation theory	Mixed methods approach: social media secondary data set and an online experiment with multiple studies. N ₁ = 894 social media posts, N ₂ = 349	Destination online marketing	The impact of storyteller type (third person vs. first person) on social media engagement and tourist visit intentions	Narratively, Social tone; Narrative transportation, Social presence, Destination brand image	–	Engaging audiences in a first-person storytelling approach on social media yields increased impact on destination brand image and tourist visit intentions compared to third-person storytellers. The narrative style enhances text narrativity, social tone, and influences perceptions of narrative transportation and social presence.
Su et al. (2020)	Social facilitation theory and Self-expansion model	Experimental design with multiple studies N ₁ = 210, N ₂ = 270, N ₃ = 340	Destination marketing	The impact of tourism type activity on storytelling intentions.	Emotional arousal	Companion presence, Companion ability	Challenging tourist activities significantly boost emotional arousal and storytelling intentions, especially when accompanied by a travel companion. Perceived ability of the companion further influences emotional arousal, enhancing the effect for challenging activities when perceived as higher and diminishing it when seen as lower than that of the tourist.
Ryu, Lehto, Gordon, and Fu (2019)	Narrative transportation theory	Experimental design. N = 430	Luxury hotels	The effect of brand story structure elements (employment of historical connection, and first-person brand story structure on perceived brand image	Narrative transportation	–	A carefully crafted narrative about a brand has the power to enhance its image, and the influence of this effect is moderated by the engagement and involvement of the audience in the story.
Kim and Youn (2017)	Dual-coding Theory	Experimental design. N = 236	Destination marketing	The effect of story elements (Perceived authenticity & emotion) and presentation modes (audio-visual) on visit intention.	Autobiographical memory (Recollection & Vividness)	–	Integrating authentic cues and infusing positive emotions into a narrative substantially enhances individuals' perceived memory of the story and their inclination to visit. Moreover, participants who experience an audio-visual presentation mode exhibit improved perceived memory recall and a greater intention to visit.
Akgün et al. (2015)	Social network theory	Quantitative method, N = 155	Travel narrative	The effect of heuristic (perceived aesthetics, narrative structure, self-reference) components of travel	Empathy	–	Perceived aesthetics, narrative structure, and self-reference shape empathy. This, in turn, elicits positive emotional

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Authors	Theory	Method	Context	Main Effect	Mediator	Moderator	Key Findings
				narrative on word and mouth, and behavioural intention.			responses and behavioural intentions towards travel destinations, work, and mouth.
Rozier-Rich and Santos (2011)	Narrative transportation theory	Experimental design, N = 526	Destination promotional travel narratives	The effect of gender, age, geographic location, and travel experience on narrative transportation and skepticism towards travel articles and travel brochures	–	–	Certain demographic characteristics and the degree of skepticism an individual hold toward travel articles and/or brochures negatively influence the extent of narrative transportation experienced.
Our study	Narrative persuasion theory, self-congruence theory, attachment theory	Experimental design with multiple studies. N ₁ = 305, N ₂ = 306	Destination marketing	The effect of realistic narratives on destination brand loyalty	Self-congruence, Destination brand attachment	Fantasy proneness	Realistic fictional narratives enhance destination brand loyalty directly. Realistic fictional and realistic non-fictional narratives have an indirect impact through self-congruence, as well as sequentially through self-congruence and brand attachment. Also, fantasy proneness weakens the impact of realistic fictional narratives on self-congruence.

attachment (Hemsley-Brown, 2023) are not novel concepts, their integration into emerging themes and social media platforms holds promise for elucidating tourist-destination brand relationships and destination brand loyalty. Notably, the incorporation of fantasy proneness into narrative storytelling, destination branding, and social media advertising represents a relatively new frontier (Bennett et al., 2023) in destination marketing (e.g., Li et al., 2021). Consequently, we regard self-congruence, destination brand attachment, and fantasy proneness as a unique and emerging theme, providing underpinning mechanisms for understanding the impact of narrative storytelling on destination brand loyalty. The following subsections present an overview of studies, followed by the development of hypotheses, elaborating on the recognition of these gaps in research.

2.2. Overview of studies

Fig. 1 illustrates the suggested conceptual framework in this research, focusing on two experimental studies. The decision to adopt experimental approach is grounded in evidence indicating that experiment is a reliable method for establishing cause-and-effect relationships in the realm of marketing research (Bornemann & Hattula, 2022). Study

1 involves an online experiment designed to investigate whether adventured-themed realistic narratives, as compared to a fantasy narrative, directly as well as indirectly impact on destination brand loyalty considering the pathways via self-congruence and brand attachment (H1 to H4). Study 2 assesses the generalizability of the Study 1 findings by investigating the impact of realistic narratives with a romantic theme caption on destination brand loyalty in a different destination. Furthermore, Study 2 examines the moderating role of fantasy proneness in the proposed model (H5).

In Study 1, an image of Cappadocia, a cultural heritage site in Turkiye, is presented as an experimental stimulus (Appendix 1). In Study 2, the experimental stimulus features Naxos, an island in Greece (Appendix 2). These destination choices were made due to their rich historical backgrounds, as they were once home to ancient civilizations with compelling stories to tell. Since DMOs increasingly utilise the Internet and social media for destination branding communication (Dedeoğlu, van Niekerk, Küçükergin, De Martino, & Okumuş, 2020; Stojanovic, Andreu, & Curras-Perez, 2022), Study 1 examines narrative storytelling via Facebook advertisements, while Study 2 specifically focuses on destination brand narratives through Instagram advertisements.

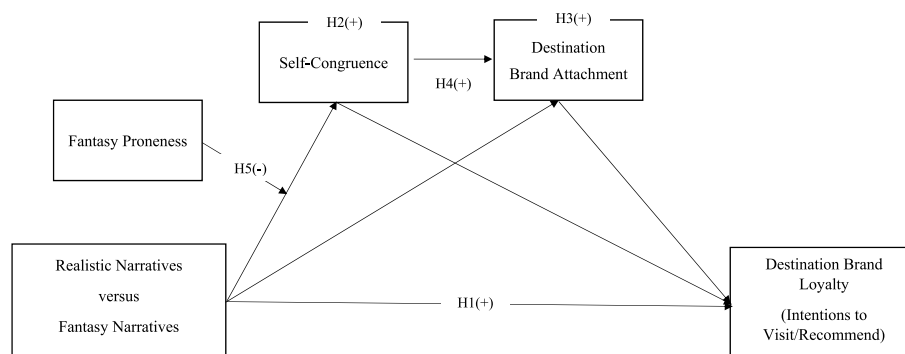


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

2.3. Realistic narrative storytelling and its impact on destination brand loyalty

Realistic narratives involve evaluating how closely a narrative reflects real life, by considering aspects such as plausibility, narrative consistency, and the credibility of characters (Green, 2004). Realistic narratives can be based on fictional and non-fictional events or characters (Tallis, 1986). Realistic non-fictional narratives revolve around real-life events or factual information, whereas realistic fictional narratives depict potentially realistic events and possess a moderate level of realism. On the other hand, fantasy narratives portray purely imaginative occurrences and tend to have a lower perceived realism (Carrick & Richmond, 2021).

Prior studies have linked audience engagement with realistic narrative storytelling (Green & Dill, 2013; Nabi & Green, 2015). Audience engage with stories due to their plots, settings or characters when they and their circumstances are perceived as realistic, thus underscoring the pivotal role of perceived realism in this context (Cho, Shen, & Wilson, 2014). This perceived realism not only heightens engagement but also influences audience attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour changes (Larkey & Hecht, 2010).

Narrative persuasion theory posits that individuals are motivated to develop beliefs that align with their understanding of the real world (Appel & Maleckar, 2012). Therefore, the persuasive power of storytelling hinges on the audience's ability mentally engage and internalize the narrative (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2011). Due to higher realism, realistic non-fictional narratives can be particularly effective for audiences. Realistic fictional narratives can also achieve a high degree of realism, effectively blurring the boundary between reality and imagination. It is worth emphasizing that works of fiction can offer credible depictions of extraordinary events (Morin, Acerbi, & Sobchuk, 2019), thereby fostering empathy and a profound connection with the characters. This empathetic engagement with fictional characters closely mirrors the empathy experienced by real-world individuals (Nomura & Akai, 2012).

Expanding on these insights, when prospective tourists encounter narratives that closely mirror real-world situations, they are more likely to form strong connections with these narratives and ascribe them with destinations depicted. This connection frequently plays a pivotal role in influencing their decision to visit these destinations and may also affect their likelihood of recommending these places to others. Conversely, in fantasy narratives, individuals may find it challenging to relate to the story's plot, characters, or setting due to its non-realistic nature. As a result, the persuasive power of fantasy storytelling in influencing travel decisions may be diminished compared to realistic narratives. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. Realistic narratives generate greater destination brand loyalty compared to fantasy narratives.

2.4. Mediation effect of self-congruence

Self-congruence involves individuals' subjective assessment of the extent to which their self-image aligns with a destination brand's image (Can, Ekinci, & Dilek-Fidler, 2023; Sirgy, 2018). Self-congruence plays a vital role in understanding how consumers make choices and interact with brands (Kumar & Kaushik, 2022). Positive outcomes of self-congruence include self-expression, favourable brand sentiments, and purchase intentions (Aw, Flynn, & Chong, 2019). In destination marketing, self-congruence pertains to the degree of alignment or mismatch between a tourist's self-image and their perception of destination image (Ahn, Ekinci, & Li, 2013). The match between a tourist's self-concept and the selected destination plays a crucial role in shaping the decision to visit and the intention to do so (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011).

Immersive narrative encounters entail a deep sense of engagement with the narrative, characterized by the credibility and coherence of the life scenarios presented (Busselle & Vierrether, 2022). The perceived

realism portrayed in a narrative story can evoke a sense of presence, compelling individuals to immerse themselves within the storyline and envision themselves as integral parts of the narrative experience. When individuals perceive story settings, characters, along with their associated events as resembling to real-life, there is a heightened probability of identifying themselves with these stories (Cho et al., 2014; Livingstone, 1990). This heightened sense of connection or relatability enriches the audience's perception of the elements within the narrative.

While only a limited number of studies have explored the relationship between narrative storytelling and self-congruence in tourism destinations, some recent research sheds light on this area. For instance, Guo, Cao, and Zhu (2022) demonstrate that the congruence between cultural oriented narratives and the self-identity influence the tourist's purchase intentions of heritage products. Research also indicates that the perception of similarities between the reader's self-concept and the story characters influences travel decisions about going to a particular destination (Tussyadiah, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2011).

Building on this concept, we anticipate that the similarities become even more pronounced when narrative stories closely resemble real experiences, as is the case in realistic non-fictional and realistic fictional narratives. As asserted by Kim and Malek (2017), self-congruence holds particular relevance in the context of destination loyalty. The stronger the perceived resemblance between travellers' identity and destination image, the higher the likelihood that they will hold favourable intentions toward visiting and recommending that destination. Therefore, we suggest that:

H2. Self-congruence serves as a mediator in the connection between realistic narratives and destination brand loyalty.

2.5. Mediation effect of brand attachment

In the context of consumer psychology, attachment theory postulates that strong emotional bonds are developed through consistent and reliable interactions, thus highlighting the significance of emotional connections in shaping consumer behaviour (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Building on this premise, every successful narrative integrates characters, settings, themes, and other elements that deeply resonate with the audience (Kent, 2015). This resonance often manifests itself in the strength of consumers' brand attachment (Huang, Zhang, & Hu, 2017). Brand attachment involves the extent to which consumers feel connected to a brand, viewing certain elements of the brand as integral to their self-concept (Schmalz & Orth, 2012). In the realm of tourism, destination brand attachment refers to the depth of the bond between a traveller and a destination brand (Japutra, Molinillo, & Ekinci, 2021).

Narratives serve as powerful communication tools, greatly enhancing emotional connections to a brand, particularly by evoking attachment to the brand and identification with its fundamental values (Dias & Cavalheiro, 2022). As the realism of the content escalates, consumers can relate to the brand persona and even envision themselves as protagonists in the story, thus fostering a profound attachment to the story place.

A robust brand attachment exhibits three distinct outcomes: the intention to recommend, purchase from the brand; resilience in the face of unfavourable information; and active defence of the brand (Japutra, Ekinci, & Simkin, 2014). Consumers with a robust brand attachment are more inclined to demonstrate brand loyalty, refrain from selecting competing brands and dedicate increased efforts to nurture their relationship with the brand (Huang et al., 2017). Given that brand attachment serves as the principal predictor of brand loyalty (Özer, Özer, Ekinci, & Koçak, 2022), we anticipate that realistic narratives foster destination brand attachment, consequently leading to attitudinal destination brand loyalty. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3. Brand attachment mediates the relationship between realistic narratives and destination brand loyalty.

2.6. Serial mediators: self-congruence and brand attachment

Perceived realism in narratives facilitates identification and engagement with the story, thus leading to positive responses (Nabi & Green, 2015). Moreover, perceiving alignment between self-concept and a brand image increases the likelihood of developing favourable emotions and attachment toward the brand (Huang et al., 2017). As a means of communication, narratives function as a tool for brands to cultivate affection, evoke emotional attachment and enable identification with core values (Dias & Cavalheiro, 2022). Additionally, research suggests that individuals with higher identification (i.e., self-congruence) and a strong emotional bond (i.e., brand attachment) are more inclined towards favourable consumer behaviour (Japutra, Ekinci, & Simkin, 2019; Japutra, Ekinci, Simkin, & Nguyen, 2018). More recently, Shimul and Phau (2023) reveal that brand self-congruence indirectly affects consumer voluntary recommendation through the mediation of attachment, thus highlighting the intricate nature of the relationship between consumers and brands. Drawing on these insights, we highlight the crucial role of self-congruence and brand attachment as serial mediators in linking realistic narratives to destination brand loyalty.

From a tourism standpoint, the attachments tourists feel towards a destination enhance their experiences, thereby positively affecting their behavioural intentions to the destination. For instance, focusing on the Shaolin Temple in China as a case study, Chen, You, Lee, and Li (2021) investigate the connections among historical nostalgia, brand authenticity (i.e., consistency, credibility, originality), brand attachment, and brand equity. Their findings illustrate that brand attachment plays a significant role in influencing brand equity, including aspects such as brand loyalty. Similarly, Centeno and Mandagi (2022) examined the broader impact of brand gestalt on brand attachment and brand loyalty. Their conclusions indicate that brand loyalty is influenced by brand attachment, revealing a direct influence of brand attachment on brand loyalty. Expanding on these findings, we anticipate that the perceived realism embedded within narratives fosters self-congruence, leading to a stronger emotional connection with the brand, ultimately driving destination brand loyalty. Hence, we propose that;

H4. The relationship between realistic narratives and destination brand loyalty is serially mediated by self-congruence and destination brand attachment.

2.7. Moderation effect of fantasy proneness

The concept of ‘fantasy proneness’ was initially introduced by Wilson and Barber (1982) to delineate a set of distinctive and interconnected traits exhibited by a group of individuals labelled as “fantasizers” (Merckelbach, Horselenberg, & Muris, 2001). It is a personality trait that reflects an individual’s inclination towards imagination and fantasizing. This trait is predominantly driven by mental imagery, a factor that has been recognized for its moderating role in prior research (Fan, Wong, & Lin, 2023).

Considering that people possess different degrees of fantasy proneness, their evaluation and response to mental imagery can vary. Individuals with elevated levels of fantasy proneness tend to be more predisposed to participate in imaginative activities or immerse themselves in characters (Merckelbach et al., 2001). The stronger the imagination and openness to mental imagery stimulation (Chen, 2015), the more positive the emotional and attitudinal responses, particularly in terms of destination image (Fan et al., 2023). Conversely, individuals with low fantasy proneness may struggle to engage with mental imagery, potentially leading to less favourable emotional and attitudinal reactions (Merckelbach, Otgaar, & Lynn, 2022).

Wang, Huang, Li, and Yang (2019) reveal that tourists’ fantasy proneness plays a determining role in the indirect impact of slogan unique selling proposition levels on travel intentions. Increased fantasy proneness significantly amplifies the indirect influence of slogan unique

selling proposition levels on travel intentions. This effect operates through enhanced elaboration and the quality of mental imagery. Conversely, tourists with low fantasy proneness generate less mental imagery and are less affected by slogan unique selling proposition levels regarding travel intentions. We support the notion that there is a connection between individuals’ propensity for fantasy proneness and their inclination towards imaginative, fantasy narratives. Building on this understanding, we posit that individuals with a higher inclination towards fantasy are more inclined to immerse themselves in fantastical and inventive stories. In contrast to individuals with a lower level of fantasy proneness, those with a higher level, when exposed to fantasy narratives, are likely to experience a stronger sense of identification with the story and its setting. This heightened identification stands in comparison to their interaction with more realistic narratives in destination storytelling. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H5. Fantasy proneness moderates the relationship between narrative storytelling and self-congruence. Specifically, we anticipate that the impact of realistic narratives on self-congruence will be diminished among individuals with a high level of fantasy proneness in comparison to those with a low level.

3. Study 1

The main goal of this study was to examine the following hypotheses: the direct effect of adventure-themed realistic narratives on destination brand loyalty (H1), the indirect effect through self-congruence (H2), and brand attachment (H3), along with their sequential mediation effect (H4).

3.1. Stimuli, measurements, and data collection

In this study, an online between-subjects experimental design was utilized, involving a fantasy narrative in the control condition and realistic (i.e., non-fictional, fictional) narratives in the treatment condition. To enhance behavioural realism, sponsored-post advertisements featuring the real image of Cappadocia, Turkiye, were featured for each condition and showcased within the Facebook frame (see Appendix 1).

We crafted three distinct Facebook captions, each representing a narrative story inspired by existing literature and associated with the chosen destination. To gauge the realism of experimental scenarios, we conducted expert opinion rounds by following the methodology outlined by Labrie, Kunneman, van Veendaal, van Kempen, and van Vilet (2023). In this regard, we sought insights from two experts in branding and destination marketing to evaluate the appropriateness of the proposed scenarios.

The caption for the realistic non-fictional narrative highlighted adventure and genuine human experiences. We incorporated adventure-related words such as “adventure”, “explorers”, “excitement”, and “adventurous journey” to evoke a sense of excitement and exploration. Additionally, to enhance the perception of realism, we utilized phrases such as “real-life adventure” set in the real destination (i.e., Cappadocia), and included real character names (i.e., Nikos and Eleni), along with specific time periods (1950s, 1990). By blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, the realistic fictional narrative remained grounded in plausibility, ensuring believability and relatability to the participants. We incorporated words such as “adventurous journey”, “explorers”, “exploring”, “adventure”, and “discovery” to emphasize adventure. Furthermore, we maintained the real names (i.e., Nikos and Eleni), featured the authentic destination (i.e., Cappadocia), and included phrases like “blurring boundaries between fact and fiction” and “blurs the boundaries between reality and mystery” to underscore the realistic yet mysterious nature of the narrative. To highlight the fictional aspect, we incorporated terms such as “mystic”, “imagination”, “tales”, and “ancient tales”. The fantasy narrative, born of pure imagination, wove a tale inhabited by imaginative characters and the allure of life’s

eternal mysteries. We utilized words such as “adventure”, “climb toll rock formations”, and “discovering” to highlight adventure while terms such as “magical landscapes and mysterious whispers”, “secrets of eternal life”, “enigmatic Keeper of Ancient Secrets, and Stelios, the Guardian of Hidden Portals” used to evoke the fantasy aspect. Finally, to reinforce a genuine feel, all scenarios incorporated relevant emojis and hashtags, underlining the adventurous essence of the highlights. Additionally, we evaluated narrative structure of the stories using four criteria adapted from Escalas (2004), focusing chronology, causality, character development, and temporal dimension with a beginning, middle, and end (e.g., To what extent does this story have a well-delineated beginning (initial event), middle (crisis or turning point), and ending (conclusion)?

Following two rounds of feedback reviews, we conducted a pilot test involving 149 British residents ($M_{age} = 38.31$, Female: 51.9%), distributing them almost equally among all conditions. We recruited these participants from Prolific, a platform renowned for providing high-quality experimental data (Peer, Rothschild, Gordon, Evernden, & Damer, 2022). The pilot study was conducted in August 2023. The one-way ANOVA findings suggest that all three conditions encompassed essential elements of storytelling, and there were no statistically significant differences among conditions $F(2,146) = 0.27, p = 0.77$ in terms of whether they were perceived as narratives. We measured whether the narratives emphasized an adventure theme with one question, “To what extent does this caption highlight an adventure story (i.e., discovery, wonder, expedition)?”. The results indicated that all captions highlighted adventures, as there were no statistically significant differences among conditions in terms of highlighting adventure ($F(2,147) = 1.79, p = 0.17$).

We incorporated the evaluation of perceived realism by assessing the plausibility of the narratives (Green, 2004), utilizing a question adopted from Cho et al. (2014) (i.e., To what extent do you think story in this caption could possibly happen in real-life?). The results indicated that participants exposed to the realistic non-fictional ($M = 3.82, SD = 1.56, p < 0.001$) and realistic fictional narratives ($M = 3.52, SD = 1.50, p < 0.01$) demonstrated significantly higher *perceived reality* scores compared to those in the fantasy narrative condition ($M = 2.64, SD = 1.55$). Furthermore, this effect was not statistically significant between participants in the realistic non-fictional and realistic fictional narrative conditions ($p = 0.59$). Hence, the suitability of the narratives was substantiated by the results of the pre-test.

The study involved employing measurements from previously validated research instruments. Participants were required to read the narratives thoroughly and subsequently respond to questions within a specified time frame of 1 min. Then, after viewing the sponsored Facebook advertisements, participants expressed their familiarity with the destination using a set of three statements ($\alpha = 0.96$) sourced from Artigas, Vilches-Montero, and Yrigoyen (2015). Attitudinal destination brand loyalty was assessed using four statements on visit and recommend intentions ($\alpha = 0.93$; Can, Ekinci, Viglia, & Buhalis, 2020; Can, Ekinci, & Pino, 2021). Following exposure to sponsored Facebook advertisements, participants provided ratings on self-congruence (i.e., actual, ideal) through six statements ($\alpha = 0.95$; Ekinci, Dawes, & Massey, 2008), and brand attachment through three statements ($\alpha = 0.96$; Japutra et al., 2019, 2021). All measured variables exhibited a minimum factor loading of 0.50, thus meeting the rule of thumb for acceptable construct validity (Hair, Matthews, Matthews, & Sarstedt, 2017) and Cronbach’s alpha values exceeding 0.70, in accordance with established guidelines by Nunnally (1978). A 7-point Likert-type scale was employed for all measurements, anchoring at (1) strongly disagree and (7) strongly agree (Appendix 3). Furthermore, demographic information about the participants was collected, including age, gender, and annual income.

For the main study, we recruited 305 participants from Prolific. They were randomly assigned to one of the conditions with around 100 respondents per group, thereby satisfying the minimum requirement of 30

participants per condition (Sawyer & Ball, 1981). Participants were recruited among British residents aged 18 years and above, all of whom were regular users of Facebook. Data were collected in September 2023. We employed one-way ANOVA to test the primary hypothesis and the PROCESS Macro (Model 6; Hayes, 2018) for examining the sequential mediation hypothesis.

3.2. Results

Respondents’ Profile: The gender distribution of the participants was almost equal, with males comprising 50.2% and females 49.5% of the total. A significant proportion reported an income level of £20,000–39,999 (24.7%), £40,000–59,999 (21%), £60,000–79,999 (10.5%), £80,000 or more (10%), and less than £19,000 (8.3%). The average age of the participants was 39.8.

Manipulation Check. The one-way ANOVA results indicated no significant differences among narratives in terms of highlighting adventure, ($F(2,302) = 0.18, p = 0.83$). Participants also perceived realistic non-fictional ($M = 3.66, SD = 1.85$) and realistic fictional narratives ($M = 3.53, SD = 1.77$) as significantly more realistic than the fantasy one [$(M = 2.63, SD = 1.42), (F(2,302) = 11.01, p < 0.001)$]. The results indicated that all scenarios incorporate the essential narrative structure of storytelling and there were no statistically significant differences across the narratives ($F(2,302) = 0.18, p = 0.21$). Furthermore, we measured respondents’ immersion to the story with one question: “To what extent did you feel immersed in the story depicted in this caption?” The results indicate no significant difference among the three narrative types: realistic non-fictional ($M = 4.40, SD: 1.58$), realistic fictional ($M = 4.57, SD: 1.50$), and the fantasy narrative ($M = 4.07, SD: 1.66$), $F(2,302) = 2.61, p = 0.08$. Moreover, the analysis showed no significant differences between realistic non-fictional and realistic fictional narratives ($p = 0.85$) regarding the *perceived realism* of these narratives.

A one way-ANOVA was utilized to examine if the realistic narratives led to higher destination brand loyalty than the fantasy narrative. The results indicated a significant impact of realistic narratives on destination brand loyalty ($F(2,302) = 7.43, p < 0.001$). Tukey post-hoc test revealed that participants exposed to the realistic fictional narrative ($M = 5.14, SD = 1.04, p < 0.001$) demonstrated significantly higher destination brand loyalty scores than those in the fantasy narrative condition ($M = 4.51, SD = 1.32$). However, there was no significant difference for the realistic non-fictional narrative condition ($M = 4.83, SD = 1.09, p = 0.13$).

The examination using the PROCESS macro produced further evidence for the influence of realistic fictional narratives on destination brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.29, SE = 0.13, p < 0.05$), but not for the realistic non-fictional narrative ($\beta = 0.15, SE = 0.13, p = 0.25$). Thus, these results provide support for H1 only for the realistic fictional narrative (See Table 2).

Before examining indirect effects, we investigated the relationship among variables. The results showed that compared to the fantasy narrative ($M = 3.49, SD = 1.38$), realistic fictional ($M = 4.03, SD = 1.40, p = 0.01$) and non-fictional narratives ($M = 3.89, SD = 1.26, p = 0.09$) resulted in higher self-congruence. Similarly, the realistic fictional narrative ($M = 3.25, SD = 1.60$) exhibited a stronger impact on destination brand attachment compared to the fantasy one ($M = 2.63, SD = 1.28, p < 0.01$). However, this was not the case for the realistic non-fictional narrative ($M = 2.71, SD = 1.25, p = 0.88$). Furthermore, linear regression analysis revealed a significant relationship between self-congruence and destination brand attachment ($F(1,303) = 212.40, p < 0.001$). Both self-congruence ($\beta = 0.37, p = 0.00$) and destination brand attachment ($\beta = 0.22, p = 0.00$) significantly influenced destination brand loyalty ($R^2 = 0.41$), as shown on Table 2.

Following this, bootstrapping analysis was employed to assess the influence of realistic narratives on destination brand loyalty, taking into account self-congruence (H2), destination brand attachment (H3), and their sequential impact (H4). The indirect effects of realistic narratives

Table 2
Summary information for the multi-categorical serial mediator model (N = 305).

	M1 = Self-Congruence			M2 = Destination Brand Attachment			Y = Destination Brand Loyalty		
	Coeff.	SE	P	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p
X1 = Realistic Non-Fictional Narrative	0.40	0.19	0.03 ^a	-0.15	0.16	0.34	0.15	0.13	0.25
X2 = Realistic Fictional Narrative	0.55	0.19	0.00 ^b	0.29	0.16	0.06 ^a	0.29	0.13	0.03 ^a
M1 = Self-Congruence	-	-	-	0.60	0.05	0.00 ^b	0.37	0.05	0.00 ^b
M2 = Destination Brand Attachment	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.22	0.05	0.00 ^b
Constant	3.49	0.13	0.00 ^b	0.52	0.20	0.01 ^b	2.66	0.17	0.00 ^b
	R ² = 0.03			R ² = 0.37			R ² = 0.41		
	F (2, 302) = 4.47, p = 0.01			F (3, 301) = 58.71, p = 0.00			F (4, 300) = 52.18, p = 0.00		

X = Independent variable, Y = Dependent variable, M1 & M2 = Mediators.

^a Significant at .05 level (one-tail test).

^b Significant at .01 level (one-tail test).

on destination brand loyalty are presented in Table 3.

As presented in Table 3, the results indicate a statistically significant confirmation of the expected relationship between the impacts of realistic narratives and destination brand loyalty through self-congruence for both the realistic fictional (Effect = 0.20, 95% CI: 0.06, 0.38) and the realistic non-fictional narratives (Effect = 0.14, 95% CI: 0.01, 0.31). These results support H2. However, the indirect impact of realistic narratives on destination brand loyalty through destination brand attachment was not statistically significant in either condition, thus leading to the non-support of H3 (Realistic non-fictional narrative: Effect = -0.03, 95% CI: -0.10, 0.04; Realistic fictional narrative: Effect = 0.06, 95% CI: -0.00, 0.16). The findings from the serial mediation analysis suggest a positive association between realistic narratives and destination brand loyalty through self-congruence and destination brand attachment serially in both conditions, thus providing support for H4 (Realistic non-fictional narrative: Effect = 0.05, 95% CI: 0.00, 0.12; Realistic fictional narrative: Effect = 0.07, 95% CI: 0.02, 0.15). In simpler terms, realistic narratives impact upon destination brand loyalty first through self-congruence, and then through self-congruence and destination brand attachment in a sequential manner. When we incorporated destination familiarity and previous visits to the destination as controlled variables in the model, the results remained consistent.

4. Study 2

This study was aimed to reinforcing the robustness of findings in Study 1 by utilizing a different sample, destination brand, and social

Table 3
Summary of sequential mediation analysis for the impact of self-congruence and destination brand attachment on destination brand loyalty.

Hyp. No	Relationships	Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI
H2	Realistic Non-Fictional Narratives → Self-Congruence → Destination Brand Loyalty	0.14	0.07	0.014	0.306
H3	Realistic Non-Fictional Narratives → Destination Brand Attachment → Destination Brand Loyalty	-0.03	0.03	-0.102	0.037
H4	Realistic Non-Fictional Narratives → Self-Congruence → Destination Brand Attachment → Destination Brand Loyalty	0.05	0.03	0.004	0.117
H2	Realistic Fictional Narratives → Self-Congruence → Destination Brand Loyalty	0.20	0.08	0.056	0.376
H3	Realistic Fictional Narratives → Destination Brand Attachment → Destination Brand Loyalty	0.06	0.04	-0.002	0.159
H4	Realistic Fictional Narratives → Self-Congruence → Destination Brand Attachment → Destination Brand Loyalty	0.07	0.03	0.016	0.152

media platform. Additionally, it involved examining the moderating role of fantasy proneness on the impact of realistic narratives on self-congruence (H5).

4.1. Stimuli, measurements, and data collection

For this study, a between-subjects online experiment was employed, with a fantasy narrative as the reference category and both realistic non-fictional and fictional narratives as treatment conditions; all incorporating romantic themes. In order to enhance behavioural realism, we designed sponsored-post advertisements featuring Naxos, Greece, displayed on the Instagram frame for each condition. These advertisements featured the same image of Naxos, sourced from its official tourism portal (Appendix 2).

We developed the Instagram captions for the narratives based on the input from four international researchers specializing in destination marketing and branding. Since the themes of the narrative focussed on romanticism in the second study, we incorporated romantic-related keywords such as “a romantic story”, “romance”, “love”, and “passion” in the realistic narratives. To enhance realism, we included the real names of the characters - Nikos and Eleni - to reference the authentic destination of Naxos in both realistic narratives, but specified years (i.e., 1960’s) only in the realistic non-fictional narrative. The realistic fictional narrative incorporated phrases such as “mystic”, “imagination”, “tale”, “timeless and unbreakable bond” and “love’s flame burns on eternally” to accentuate its fictional nature. On the other hand, the fantasy narrative utilized words such as “mythical romance”, “love”, and “heart” to highlight romance. Additionally, we introduced non-human character names like “Zeus, the king of gods”, “Semele, a mortal princess”, and phrases such as “timeless love that transcends mortal constraints”, “godly form”, and “immortal threads”, “myth”, to underscore fantastical nature of the narrative.

Following two rounds of input from these experts, we conducted a pre-test involving 153 participants (M_{age} = 34.26, Female: 52.3%), recruited from the same crowdsourcing platform in Study 1. The results of the one-way ANOVA indicated that there were no significant differences among the three conditions in terms of how they were perceived in relation to narrative structure, (F (2, 150) = 2.32, p = 0.10). Moreover, all narratives were perceived as highlighting romanticism as there were no statistical differences among conditions, (F (2,150) = 1.10, p = 0.34). Additionally, as expected, the results showed that the perceived realism is higher both in the realistic fictional (M = 3.55, SD = 1.42, p < 0.001) and realistic non-fictional narrative (M = 4.02, SD = 1.70, p < 0.001) compared to the fantasy one, (M = 2.02, SD = 0.98).

We utilized the same measurements as in Study 1. Additionally, participants rated their fantasy proneness with five statements (α = 0.73) (Garrido & Schubert, 2011; Li et al., 2021). However, one statement exhibited a factor loading of 0.44, falling below the minimum acceptable level of 0.50 as per the rule of thumb (Hair et al., 2017). Consequently, this statement was omitted from the study and excluded from the subsequent analysis (Appendix 3). Additionally, we measured

narrative transportation with three statements ($\alpha = 0.90$): “I was mentally involved in the story in this caption”; “While thinking about the story in this caption, I could easily picture the events in it taking place”; “I could picture myself in the scene shown in the story in this caption” (Green & Brock, 2000). The initial assessment of Common Method Variance was conducted using Harman’s single-factor test. This test released three factors, and the first factor’s explained variance was 36.78 % that was smaller than the majority (>50%) of the total variance explained (85.69%). We also tested a one-factor model in Confirmatory Factor Analysis using the AMOS-21 software. The results showed poor model fit indices ($\chi^2 = 1937.23$, $df = 65$, $\chi^2/df = 29.80$, CFI = 0.49, NFI: 0.60, TLI = 0.53, GFI = 0.61; RMSEA = 0.30). However, a three-factor model demonstrated an acceptable fit ($\chi^2 = 140.24$; $df = 58$; $\chi^2/df = 2.41$, CFI = 0.98, NFI: 0.97, TLI = 0.97, GFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.06). These results indicate that Common Method Variance is not a threat to the study (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003; Richardson, Simmering, & Sturman, 2009).

For the main study, the sample consisted of 306 British residents aged 18 or above, all of whom possessed an Instagram account. They were equally and randomly distributed across conditions via Prolific. We examined the data through independent samples *t*-test in the first hypothesis. Subsequently, we employed the PROCESS Macro, specifically utilizing Model 6 for serial mediation analysis and Model 1 for simple moderation analysis (Hayes, 2018).

4.2. Results

Respondents’ Profile: The gender distribution of the participants was almost equal, with females comprising 52.0%, and males 47.1% of the total. Regarding the income level, a significant proportion of them reported earning between £20,000–39,999 (35%), followed by £40,000 and 59,999 (24.8%), £60,000 and 79,999 (17.3%), less than 19,999 (11.4%) and £80,000 or more (10.8%). The average age of participants was 35.6 years old.

Manipulation Check: The results indicate that all narratives contain essential narrative storytelling structures ($F(2, 303) = 1.84$, $p = 0.16$). Furthermore, no statistically significant differences were observed among conditions regarding immersion to the story, ($F(2, 303) = 0.493$, $p = 0.61$) and narrative transportation, ($F(2, 303) = 0.247$, $p = 0.89$). The results also suggested that there were no significant differences among the conditions regarding the emphasis on romanticism, ($F(2, 303) = 2.802$, $p = 0.06$). Moreover, it was observed that participants perceived both realistic non-fictional ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.61$, $p < 0.001$) and realistic fictional narratives ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.32$, $p < 0.001$) as significantly more true-to-life compared to the fantasy narrative ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.25$). Additionally, no statistical differences were found between perceptions of the realistic non-fictional and the realistic fictional narratives ($p = 0.16$). The results indicated that, compared to participants in the fantasy narrative condition ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.26$), those exposed to the realistic fictional narrative showed higher destination brand loyalty scores ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.01$, $p < 0.001$). However, this was not case for participants in the realistic non-fictional narrative condition ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.04$, $p = 0.38$). Thus, these results only partially support H1.

Before exploring indirect effects, we scrutinized the relationships among variables through regression analyses. In the context of a one-way ANOVA, unlike the fantasy narrative ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.44$), both the realistic fictional narrative ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.32$), $p < 0.01$) and the realistic non-fictional ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.27$), $p = 0.05$) were linked to an elevated sense of self-congruence. When contrasting the fantasy narrative ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.28$) with the realistic narratives, it becomes evident that only the realistic fictional narrative exerts a statistically significant influence on destination brand attachment ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.40$, $p = 0.05$), whereas the realistic non-fictional narrative ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 1.33$, $p = 0.19$) does not show such an influence. Additionally, linear regression analysis unveiled a significant link between self-

congruence and destination brand attachment ($F(1, 304) = 174.35$, $p < 0.001$). Importantly, both self-congruence ($F(1, 304) = 203.45$, $p < 0.001$) and destination brand attachment ($F(1, 304) = 141.24$, $p < 0.001$) exerted a substantial influence on destination brand loyalty. The model with the ‘realistic versus fantasy narrative’ as independent variables and ‘self-congruence’ and ‘destination brand attachment’ as mediators, demonstrates an R-squared value of 47% in predicting ‘destination brand loyalty’. This highlights the significant influence of narrative storytelling on destination brand loyalty, mediated through both self-congruence and destination brand attachment in our investigation.

Then, we employed the PROCESS Macro (Model 6) with 5000 bootstrapped samples to investigate the serial mediator (Table 3). The results demonstrated a statistically significant impact of realistic narratives → self-congruence → destination brand loyalty for both conditions (Realistic non-fictional narrative: Effect = 0.16, 95% CI: 0.02, 0.32; Realistic fictional narrative: Effect = 0.23, 95% CI: 0.08, 0.42), thus providing support for H2. However, the indirect effect of realistic narratives → destination brand attachment → destination brand loyalty was not significant for either conditions (Realistic non-fictional narrative: Effect = 0.02, 95% CI: -0.05, 0.09; Realistic fictional narrative: Effect = 0.02, 95% CI: -0.05, 0.10), thus not confirming H3 similar to Study 1. The findings additionally validated H4, as a statistically significant indirect serial mediation effect of the realistic narrative → self-congruence → destination brand attachment → destination brand loyalty was observed for both conditions (Realistic non-fictional narrative: Effect = 0.06, 95% CI: 0.00, 0.13; Realistic fictional narrative: Effect = 0.09, 95% CI: 0.03, 0.15). H4 When we included destination familiarity and previous visit to destination in the model as controlled variables, the outcomes remained unchanged.

Finally, we ran the PROCESS macro (Model 1) to test the moderation role of fantasy proneness on the relationship between the realistic narratives and self-congruence. In this analysis, since the reliability of the fantasy proneness is not close to 1 ($\alpha = 0.73$), we followed Pieters et al.’s (2022) recommendation and considered factor loading for the latent moderation analysis. The result indicated that the higher the fantasy proneness, the weaker effect of the realistic fictional narrative on self-congruence ($\beta = -0.34$, $p = 0.01$), but this was not case for the realistic non-fictional narrative ($\beta = -0.11$, $p = 0.42$). Hence these results partially confirm H5. To summarize, our findings underscore the distinct influence of fantasy proneness, emphasizing its role in shaping the relationship between the realistic fictional narrative and self-congruence.

5. Discussion

Utilizing narrative stories in destination branding has been found to yield substantial benefits to destinations (Tussyadiah et al., 2011). Previous studies have examined the influence of storytelling on consumers’ visit intentions (e.g., Kim & Youn, 2017) and social media engagement (e.g., Pachucki et al., 2022), with no consideration for the perceived realism of the narratives, as to our knowledge. Moreover, there is an increasing demand for a more comprehensive understanding of the elements and mechanisms underlying narrative effects (Moin et al., 2020; Moscardo, 2020; Nabi & Green, 2015); how narratives operate and should be developed in the context of tourism, particularly regarding destinations (e.g., Van Laer et al., 2019).

In broader marketing studies, it has been established that storytelling has a greater impact through narrative transportation, facilitated by factors like character identification and character type (Laurence, 2018). However, there remains a gap in understanding if all narratives achieve an equal level of immersion with the characters and/or the story, prompting further investigation. Through this study, we aimed to address these knowledge gaps and respond to this demand. It is one of the first endeavours geared towards establishing a comprehensive understanding of the impact of perceived realistic in narratives on

travellers' responses to destination brand loyalty.

The findings of the initial study present compelling evidence that Facebook advertisements featuring the realistic fictional narrative, enriched with adventure themes, exert a positive influence on destination brand loyalty. This impact is observed indirectly through the mediating factor of self-congruence for both realistic non-fictional and the realistic fictional narratives. Additionally, realistic narratives play a sequential role in affecting destination loyalty by first affecting self-congruence and subsequently influencing destination brand attachment. The second study extends the external validity of the initial findings by investigating a different destination and focusing on Instagram advertisements with romantic themes. The results reaffirm the direct impact of the realistic fictional narrative on destination brand loyalty and the indirect impact through self-congruence for realistic non-fictional and realistic fictional narratives. The study also identifies a sequential effect through self-congruence and destination brand attachment for impact realistic narratives on destination brand loyalty. Importantly, the research confirms that brand attachment does not mediate the relationship for the realistic narratives.

Furthermore, our findings underscore that individuals with a heightened propensity for fantasy proneness tend to form a less robust connection with the realistic fictional narrative compared to narratives solely rooted in fantasy. In conclusion, this research holds significance not only for its theoretical contributions, but also, for its practical implications, providing nuanced insights into the dynamics of narrative influence on brand loyalty across diverse contexts (i.e. romantic and adventure themes).

5.1. Theoretical implications

Our study offers substantial contributions to the theoretical landscape in three crucial grounds. First, we contribute to the advancement of the narrative persuasion theory by addressing a nuanced aspect. While existing theory acknowledges the importance of plausibility of narratives in influencing individuals' behaviour (Cho et al., 2014), our research specifically examines the impact of perceived realism on narrative storytelling and their impact on destination brand loyalty. We underscore the superiority of the realistic fictional narrative over the fantasy-based narrative. While the perceived realism of narratives has been extensively explored in the realm of media and communication studies (e.g., Bilandzic & Busselle, 2011; Busselle & Vierrether, 2022), our research represents a novel application of this notion to the domain of destination branding. Moreover, within the tourism context, our findings complement the observations made by Kim and Youn (2017), indicating that narratives eliciting positive emotions are more memorable and increase the likelihood of individuals visiting their locations. Additionally, our research aligns with the conclusions drawn by Ryu et al. (2019), emphasizing the importance of a coherent narrative structure, compelling character portrayal, well-defined events, and a historical backdrop in fostering an immersive experience for travellers. We extend this perspective by highlighting the crucial role of perceived realism in destination narratives, particularly in cultivating loyalty behaviours among tourists towards destinations.

Second, our findings demonstrate that realistic narratives contribute to increased self-congruence, subsequently fostering brand attachment and ultimately leading to greater behavioural loyalty. While existing literature acknowledges the distinction between persuasive messages, such as narratives, and traditional informational and argumentative messages (Green, 2006), there is a gap in understanding the underlying psychological mechanisms that explain the effects of the persuasive nature of storytelling. This research serves to uncover the underlying psychological processes that account for the impact of persuasive narratives on destination brand loyalty. Previous studies have suggested that travellers often cultivate loyalty toward specific tourism destinations due to the symbolic qualities and alignment of the destination brand with their self-image (Ekinci et al., 2013). The findings of this

study further reveal that realistic narratives, as intangible components of destinations, can enhance self-congruence, thus strengthening the bond between individuals and the destination, ultimately resulting in greater loyalty.

Furthermore, grounded in attachment theory, brand attachment has emerged as a fundamental construct in the consumer-brand relationship literature, with applications to travel destinations in recent years (Japutra et al., 2021). However, this study is the first to apply this concept in the context of destination narratives, uncovering that the realistic nature of these enables individuals to identify themselves within the stories, consequently deepening their emotional connection with the depicted location. This, in turn, leads to a greater inclination towards loyalty-driven behaviours.

Finally, this research presents its ultimate contribution by introducing the novel concept of fantasy proneness into the realm of destination narratives. Our findings demonstrate that the presence of fantasy proneness weakens the influence of the realistic fictional narrative on self-congruence. This discovery aligns with Chen's (2015) research, emphasizing the positive impact of fantasy proneness on narrative transportation, particularly within the context of mini-film advertising effectiveness. However, our findings question the perspective presented by Park (2022), who suggested that, individuals with elevated levels of fantasy proneness substantially alter their brand attitude through successive exposure to media and brand engagement, especially in the context of non-narrative fashion films. It is crucial to note that this disparity may be specific to the context, as Park (2022) conducted research in the realm of fashion films, whereas our study was focused on destination narrative storytelling within the framework of social media advertisements. This concluding contribution adds depth to our theoretical framework, revealing the nuanced role of fantasy proneness in shaping the impact of destination narratives on self-congruence.

5.2. Managerial implications

This study holds practical significance in elucidating the practical applications of brand narratives in destination promotions. Consistent with the insights of Calvi and Hover (2021), who have found evidence that narratives serve as a medium for readers or listeners to empathize with the protagonist, thereby imbuing the physical locations that constitute the mythological setting with significance. To encourage tourists to actively engage and immerse themselves in social networks, destinations should accentuate the reality of their narratives. Narrative storytelling can effectively facilitate the development of thematic elements in promotional campaigns for destinations, which can subsequently be communicated through various social media platforms. Furthermore, there should be a concerted effort to emphasize the reality of characters in storytelling, rather than heavily relying on fantastical elements when showcasing the primary features of products. Marketing managers are encouraged to prioritize the incorporation of genuine, relatable stories and characters in their narratives to enhance the perceived reality and appeal of the storytelling process.

Destination brands can enhance emotional engagement with travellers and foster long-term loyalty by harnessing the power of realistic narratives because these narratives contribute to the development of destination brand personality, self-brand identification, immersion, and personal relevance. Also, our findings underscore the importance of considering personal characteristics, such as an individual's propensity for fantasizing, when evaluating the impact of different narrative styles on self-congruence. Understanding this moderating factor can enable a more nuanced approach to tailoring narratives to specific target audiences based on their levels of fantasy proneness. This insight can empower practitioners in the tourism industry to tailor their narratives more effectively, thereby resonating more strongly with their intended audiences.

5.3. Limitations and future research avenues

In this study, we successfully tested the proposed research framework within the context of romantic and adventure story themes. However, a crucial acknowledgment lies in the potential limitations regarding the generalizability of our findings to a broader spectrum of narrative genres. For example, as highlighted by [Laing and Frost \(2012\)](#), different genres may evoke varying degrees of interest in travel, thus prompting researchers to explore how our observed effects manifest across a wider range of storytelling themes. Moreover, while we considered factors such as familiarity and previous visits as controlled variables, we acknowledge the potential limitation of not assessing participants' prior knowledge about the destination ([Huang, Afsharifar, & van der Veen, 2016](#)). Additionally, our reliance on self-reported measures represents another potential limitation due to their subjective nature ([Guerrero-Rodriguez, Stepchenkova, & Kirilenko, 2020](#)). Incorporating additional objective measures, such as observing participants' behaviours during or after exposure to narratives alongside self-reported data, could provide valuable insights into participants' responses to narratives. Also, the emphasis on organisational narratives within tourism research (e.g., [Youssef et al., 2019](#)) directs attention to a potential avenue for future exploration. While our focus has been on the impact of organisational narratives on destination brand loyalty, a promising research direction involves delving into consumer narratives. [Lund et al. \(2018\)](#) argue that these personal stories, often shared through platforms like travel blogs, actively contribute to brand co-creation, communication, and experiential representation. Further research could untangle the intricate dynamics between organisational and consumer narratives within the tourism context, thereby providing a more holistic understanding of their combined influence on brand loyalty. The exploration of consumer narratives aligns with the evolving landscape of brand co-creation and user-generated content, presenting an opportunity to expand the current research model.

Moreover, our study suggests exciting possibilities for future research by highlighting the broader applicability of the proposed research model beyond destination marketing. Building on [Cho et al. \(2014\)](#), there is clear need for continued exploration of the multi-faceted nature of perceived realism. This opens up a promising research avenue for examining how perceived realism operates in diverse contexts, thus offering valuable insights into consumer engagement and loyalty dynamics. Such research endeavours have the potential to greatly enhance our understanding of narrative storytelling strategies for branding across different sectors.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2024.104998>.

Appendix 1. Stimuli for Study 1

6. Conclusion

This study pioneers a shift in the exploration of perceived realism within destination brand narratives, diverging from prior research that have predominantly explored general aspects of storytelling. In contrast to earlier attempts, our research distinctly focuses on a specific and pivotal dimension—the impact of perceived realism in destination narratives on destination brand loyalty. By investigating the nuanced differences between realistic narrative and fantasy one, the current study has uncovered psychological mechanisms like self-congruity and brand attachment. Furthermore, the introduction of the concept of fantasy proneness has added a novel dimension to our understanding of how narratives operate in shaping travellers' responses. In essence, this research has involved pioneering a more tailored and focused exploration of realistic narrative influences in the intricate realm of tourism destination branding.

Impact statement

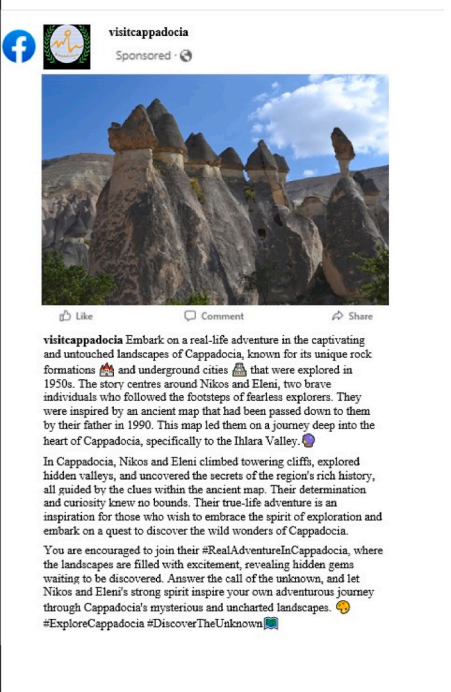

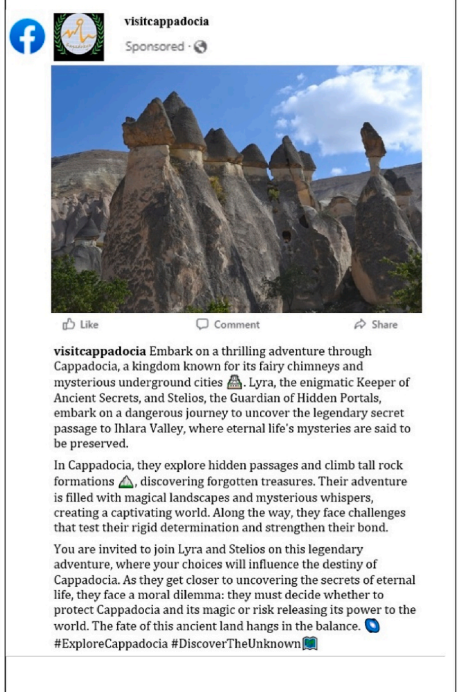

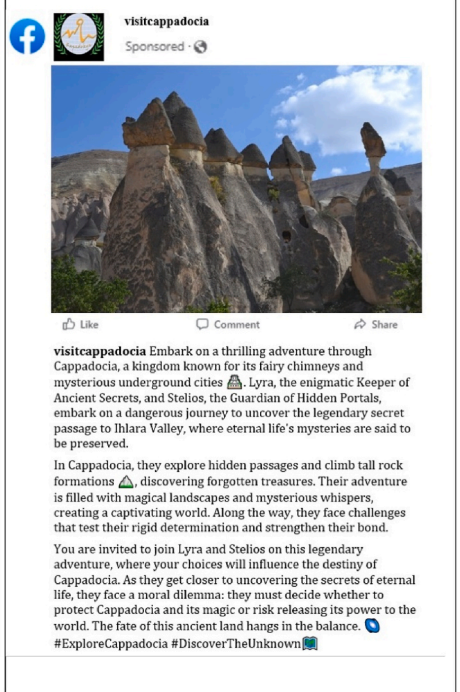

Our study explores the transformative power of narrative storytelling in shaping destination brand loyalty in the tourism industry. We offer actionable recommendations for destination marketers to refine narrative approaches, advocating for the integration of realistic elements to strengthen connections with potential travellers. We also identify fantasy proneness as a key influencer of tourist behaviour. Emphasizing self-congruity, brand attachment, and fantasy proneness, our research equips marketers with strategies to drive positive transformations in destination branding. We highlight the importance of crafting resonant narratives tailored to target audiences. Ultimately, our study empowers practitioners with actionable strategies to navigate the evolving landscape of narrative storytelling, serving as a catalyst for enhancing destination marketing practices.

CRediT authorship contribution statement



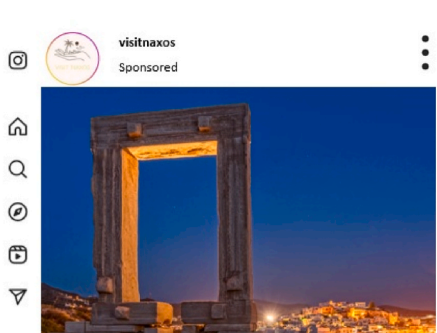
Ali Selcuk Can: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Yuksel Ekinci:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Setenay Dilek-Fidler:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

 <p>visitcappadocia Sponsored · 🌐</p>  <p>Like Comment Share</p> <p>visitcappadocia Embark on a real-life adventure in the captivating and untouched landscapes of Cappadocia, known for its unique rock formations 🏞️ and underground cities 🏰 that were explored in 1950s. The story centres around Nikos and Eleni, two brave individuals who followed the footsteps of fearless explorers. They were inspired by an ancient map that had been passed down to them by their father in 1990. This map led them on a journey deep into the heart of Cappadocia, specifically to the Ihlara Valley. 🗺️</p> <p>In Cappadocia, Nikos and Eleni climbed towering cliffs, explored hidden valleys, and uncovered the secrets of the region's rich history, all guided by the clues within the ancient map. Their determination and curiosity knew no bounds. Their true-life adventure is an inspiration for those who wish to embrace the spirit of exploration and embark on a quest to discover the wild wonders of Cappadocia.</p> <p>You are encouraged to join their #RealAdventureInCappadocia, where the landscapes are filled with excitement, revealing hidden gems waiting to be discovered. Answer the call of the unknown, and let Nikos and Eleni's strong spirit inspire your own adventurous journey through Cappadocia's mysterious and uncharted landscapes. 🗺️</p> <p>#ExploreCappadocia #DiscoverTheUnknown 🌐</p>	 <p>visitcappadocia Sponsored · 🌐</p>  <p>Like Comment Share</p> <p>visitcappadocia Embark on an adventurous journey through the captivating and mystic landscapes of Cappadocia. Meet Nikos and Eleni, two fearless explorers who are captivated by this ancient and enigmatic place. Their quest leads them deep into Cappadocia, known for its rugged landscapes and mysterious underground cities 🏰. Guided by cryptic maps, they bravely traverse treacherous landscape, climbing cliffs and exploring hidden valleys. Exploring ancient cave dwellings 🏞️ and uncovering the secrets of underground cities, they feel the pulse of adventure.</p> <p>In Cappadocia, their journey leads them to the enchanting Ihlara Valley, where reality blurs under the moonlit nights 🌙. Their journey is a testament to the power of imagination and the wonders concealed just beneath the surface of reality. As they share their tales with fellow travellers, they inspire others to embrace the unknown, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction.</p> <p>You are encouraged to join their #AdventureInCappadocia, where the wind carries echoes of ancient tales, and the landscapes resonate with the joy of discovery. This adventurous journey blurs the boundaries between reality and mystery, inviting you to explore the uncharted territories of Cappadocia's enigmatic landscapes. 🗺️</p> <p>#ExploreCappadocia #DiscoverTheUnknown 🌐</p>	 <p>visitcappadocia Sponsored · 🌐</p>  <p>Like Comment Share</p> <p>visitcappadocia Embark on a thrilling adventure through Cappadocia, a kingdom known for its fairy chimneys and mysterious underground cities 🏰. Lyra, the enigmatic Keeper of Ancient Secrets, and Stelios, the Guardian of Hidden Portals, embark on a dangerous journey to uncover the legendary secret passage to Ihlara Valley, where eternal life's mysteries are said to be preserved.</p> <p>In Cappadocia, they explore hidden passages and climb tall rock formations 🏞️, discovering forgotten treasures. Their adventure is filled with magical landscapes and mysterious whispers, creating a captivating world. Along the way, they face challenges that test their rigid determination and strengthen their bond.</p> <p>You are invited to join Lyra and Stelios on this legendary adventure, where your choices will influence the destiny of Cappadocia. As they get closer to uncovering the secrets of eternal life, they face a moral dilemma: they must decide whether to protect Cappadocia and its magic or risk releasing its power to the world. The fate of this ancient land hangs in the balance. 🗺️</p> <p>#ExploreCappadocia #DiscoverTheUnknown 🌐</p>
<p>A realistic and non-fictional narrative with an adventure theme</p>	<p>A realistic and fictional narrative with an adventure theme</p>	<p>A fantasy narrative with an adventure theme</p>

Appendix 2. Stimuli for Study 2

 <p>visitnaxos Sponsored</p> <p>Immerse yourself in an incredible true story around the alluring island of Naxos 🌴, where the romantic and heartwarming journey of Nikos Kazantzakis and Eleni Samiou 🌹, the young residents of Naxos lived in 1960s, unfolds against the backdrop of breathtaking scenery. Nikos, a soul captivated by Eleni's incredible beauty, embarks on a fateful love that ignites in the year 1960, sparking a timeless and unbreakable bond that has transcended eternal love since then.</p> <p>On Naxos, a place where true love coexists harmoniously among its gracious inhabitants, you can bear witness to the unwavering strength of love and the profound art of selfless sacrifice 🌟.</p> <p>Join us on this enlightening journey as we venture into the profound depths of passion, discovering the everlasting beauty of enduring love 🌹, and setting forth on the path to achieving your own romantic aspirations. Embrace the magic of #RealLove on this enchanting odyssey through Naxos, a place where love's flame burns on eternally. 🌹❤️</p>	 <p>visitnaxos Sponsored</p> <p>Immerse yourself in a mystic and romantic story that blossomed on the alluring island of Naxos 🌴, where the heartwarming tale of Nikos and Eleni 🌹, young residents of Naxos who lived on the island once upon a time, unfolds against the backdrop of breathtaking scenery. Nikos, a soul captivated by Eleni's incredible beauty, embarks on a fateful love, sparking a timeless and unbreakable bond that has transcended romantic love 🌹.</p> <p>On Naxos, a place where romance and love coexists harmoniously among its gracious inhabitants, you can bear witness to the unwavering strength of passion and the profound art of selfless sacrifice 🌟.</p> <p>Join us on this enlightening journey as we venture into the profound depths of passion, discovering the everlasting beauty of enduring love through imagination, and setting forth on the path to achieving your own romantic aspirations. Embrace the magic of #RomanticLove on this enchanting odyssey through Naxos, a place where love's flame burns on eternally. 🌹❤️</p>	 <p>visitnaxos Sponsored</p> <p>Immerse yourself in a captivating mythical romance on the island of Naxos 🌴, where Zeus, the king of gods 🌟, falls for Semele, a mortal princess 🌹, amidst breathtaking scenery. Despite her deep longing to witness his real godly form, their union sparks a timeless love that transcends mortal constraints. 🌹</p> <p>Witness the unwavering strength of love and the art of selfless sacrifice, where gods and humans coexist in harmonious wonder. Join our enlightening trip, explore the depths of passion, and unlock your #MythicalLove 🌟.</p> <p>Unravel the immortal threads, leaving an indelible mark on your heart and soul. Embrace the captivating realm of myth and love on Naxos as you experience the divine allure and the intertwining secrets of gods and mortals. Unleash the mystical power within your heart and join us now in the enchanting world of #MythicalLove. 🌹❤️</p>
<p>A realistic and non-fictional narrative with a romantic theme</p>	<p>A realistic and fictional narrative with a romantic theme</p>	<p>A fantasy narrative with a romantic theme</p>

Appendix 3. Measurements, descriptive statistics, reliability and factor loadings

Item Label	Item Description	Mean		S.D.		Skewness		Kurtosis		Cron. Alpha		CR		AVE		Factor Loading	
		S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2
Destination Brand Loyalty (DBL)										0.93	0.92	0.95	94	0.84	0.81		
DBL1	(X) is worth visiting.	5.34	4.99	1.25	1.17	-1.00	-0.58	1.30	0.49							0.81	0.81
DBL2	I would say positive things about (X) to others.	4.82	4.56	1.21	1.18	-0.41	-0.40	0.66	0.65							0.93	0.91
DBL3	I would recommend (X) to others.	4.64	4.25	1.33	1.31	-0.41	-0.05	0.23	-0.02							0.96	0.95
DBL4	I would encourage my friends to visit (X).	4.53	4.14	1.38	1.30	-0.36	-0.09	0.00	-0.20							0.95	0.93
Self-Congruence (SC)										0.95	0.96	0.96	0.97	0.80	0.84		
SC1	The typical visitor of (X) is consistent with how I see myself.	3.87	3.58	1.49	1.50	-0.12	-0.13	-0.70	-0.89							0.90	0.91
SC2	The typical visitor of (X) is a mirror image of me.	3.33	3.04	1.51	1.48	0.27	0.29	-0.65	-0.71							0.87	0.89
SC3	The typical visitor of (X) is similar to me.	3.77	3.45	1.50	1.49	-0.16	-0.05	-0.75	-1.02							0.91	0.92
SC4	The typical visitor of (X) is consistent with how I would like to see myself.	4.01	3.53	1.49	1.49	-0.15	-0.07	-0.51	-0.79							0.90	0.94
SC5	The typical visitor of (X) is a mirror image of how I would like to be.	3.80	3.31	1.57	1.51	0.03	0.10	-0.59	-0.82							0.88	0.91
SC6	The typical visitor of (X) is similar to how I would like to be.	4.06	3.50	1.55	1.52	-0.25	-0.11	-0.65	-0.92							0.91	0.92
Destination Brand Attachment (DBA)										0.96	0.94	0.97	0.97	0.92	0.93		
DBA1	I feel emotionally connected to (X).	3.06	2.43	1.49	1.46	0.46	0.73	-0.64	-0.58							0.95	0.95

(continued on next page)

(continued)

Item Label	Item Description	Mean		S.D.		Skewness		Kurtosis		Cron. Alpha		CR		AVE		Factor Loading		
		S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	
DBA2	I have a personal bond with (X)	2.71	2.16	1.39	1.31	0.63	0.91	-0.12	-0.23								0.96	0.97
DBA3	I feel attached to (X).	2.84	2.25	1.50	1.40	0.65	0.94	-0.28	-0.04								0.97	0.97
Fantasy Proneness (FP)																		
FP1	I daydream and fantasize with regular or common things that might happen to me.	-	4.83	-	1.34	-	-0.93	-	0.64		0.73		0.83		0.56		-	0.71
FP2	I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel.	-	4.78	-	1.42	-	-0.85	-	0.44								-	0.78
FP3	After seeing a play or movie, I would feel that I was one of the characters.	-	3.78	-	1.50	-	-0.18	-	-0.81								-	0.70
FP4	When I am reading an interesting story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me.	-	4.76	-	1.31	-	-0.87	-	0.42								-	0.79

S1: Study 1; S2: Study 2; (X) Cappadocia in the first study, Naxos in the second study, CR = Composite Reliability, AVE = Average Variance Extracted.

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