

# Narrative Involvement Drives Travel Intention through Destination Distinctiveness in Short Travel Videos: The Moderating Role of Wishful Identification

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**Abstract:** Short travel videos increasingly shape destination impressions, but how narrative content develops into travel intention remains under-explored. Drawing on short video platform research and the cognitive-affective-behavioral framework, this study examines the mediating role of perceived destination distinctiveness and the moderating role of wishful identification. Based on 135 valid questionnaires, the results show that narrative involvement enhances perceived destination distinctiveness, which subsequently increases travel intention. Wishful identification negatively moderates the destination distinctiveness-travel intention relationship. The conditional indirect effect is significant at low and average levels of wishful identification but non-significant at a high level. These findings highlight destination distinctiveness as a key mechanism linking narrative engagement to travel intention.

**Keywords:** Short travel videos; Narrative involvement; Destination distinctiveness; Wishful identification; Travel intention

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## 1. Introduction

Short video platforms have become a highly visible channel for tourism information search, destination imagination, and travel decision-making. Unlike text-based reviews or static images, short travel videos combine moving scenes, music, narration, editing, and influencer commentary. Prior research has suggested that short video platforms operate as both social media environments and technology-based information systems, and that social media influencers and platform content jointly shape tourist attitudes and travel intention <sup>[1]</sup>. Tourism-related short videos also enable users to record, consume, and share travel experiences in compact and emotionally engaging forms <sup>[2]</sup>.

Although existing studies have examined source credibility, platform quality, travel inspiration, destination endorsement, and sharing behavior, less is known about how narrative involvement is converted into travel intention through destination-related cognition. In short travel videos, audiences may not simply receive information; they may become mentally involved in the story, follow the development of the travel experience, and imagine the destination as a unique place. This study therefore focuses on perceived destination distinctiveness as a mediator. It also examines wishful identification as a boundary condition because travel influencers are not only information sources but also symbolic models whom viewers may want to imitate. By testing a moderated mediation model, this study explains when narrative involvement relies more or less on destination distinctiveness to influence travel intention.

## **2. Literature review and hypotheses**

### **2.1. Narrative involvement and destination distinctiveness**

Narrative involvement refers to the extent to which viewers are mentally absorbed in a story and motivated to follow how the story unfolds. Short travel videos are particularly suitable for narrative involvement because they present destinations through condensed plots, visual movement, personal experiences, and emotional narration. Research on destination short videos has shown that narrative transportation can affect customers' attitudes toward destinations <sup>[3]</sup>. Short video platform studies also highlight personal involvement as an important mechanism linking symbolic short-video practices with travel intention <sup>[4]</sup>. When viewers become involved in a travel story, they are more likely to notice the destination scenes, experiences, and cultural features embedded in the video.

Destination distinctiveness refers to the perceived uniqueness, memorability, and irreplaceability of the destination shown in short travel videos. Recent studies have emphasized that destination distinctiveness and the overall distinctiveness of short travel videos are important drivers of audiences' responses <sup>[5-6]</sup>. Therefore, narrative involvement should help viewers interpret the destination as more distinctive rather than as a generic travel place.

H1: Narrative involvement positively influences perceived destination distinctiveness.

### **2.2. Destination distinctiveness and travel intention**

Travel intention reflects viewers' willingness or plan to visit a destination in the future. In tourism research, it is commonly regarded as a behavioral outcome of destination image, destination attitude, and online media influence <sup>[7]</sup>. The social-technical perspective on short video platforms suggests that media content can shape destination-related evaluations and travel intention <sup>[1]</sup>. Destination distinctiveness may increase travel intention because distinctive places provide viewers with uncommon experiences, memorable scenes, and symbolic value. Research on tourism short videos has also shown that destination novelty and distinctiveness can inspire audiences and strengthen tourism-related behavioral responses <sup>[5-6, 8]</sup>.

If a short travel video makes a destination appear unique and memorable, viewers may be more willing to translate their viewing experience into future travel plans. In this sense, perceived destination distinctiveness is expected to mediate the effect of narrative involvement on travel intention.

H2: Perceived destination distinctiveness positively influences travel intention.

H3: Perceived destination distinctiveness mediates the relationship between narrative involvement and travel intention.

### 2.3. The moderating role of wishful identification

Wishful identification captures viewers' desire to be like, imitate, or live in a way similar to a media figure. In short travel videos, influencers can work as socialization agents whose travel lifestyles and self-presentation influence audience responses<sup>[1, 9]</sup>. Destination endorser research also indicates that short-form travel videos can shape self-image construction and endorsement effects<sup>[10]</sup>. Therefore, viewers who strongly identify with travel influencers may form travel desire partly because they want to imitate the influencer's experience.

However, this identification may change the role of destination distinctiveness. When wishful identification is low, viewers may rely more on the destination itself, so destination distinctiveness should strongly predict travel intention. When wishful identification is high, viewers may already have travel desire because of the influencer model, reducing the marginal effect of destination distinctiveness. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: Wishful identification moderates the relationship between perceived destination distinctiveness and travel intention.

H5: Wishful identification moderates the indirect effect of narrative involvement on travel intention through perceived destination distinctiveness.

## 3. Methodology

A questionnaire survey was conducted among Chinese viewers who had watched travel influencer short videos (**Table 1**). All constructs were measured on seven-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Narrative involvement was measured with five items, perceived destination distinctiveness with four items, wishful identification with three items, and travel intention with four items. The wording was adjusted to the context of travel influencer short videos, following prior measurement practices in tourism and short video research<sup>[5–7, 10]</sup>.

After data screening, 137 responses were initially obtained. Data were analyzed using reliability analysis, correlation analysis, hierarchical regression, and bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5000 resamples. Harman's single-factor test showed that the first factor explained 35.52% of the variance, indicating that common method variance was not a serious concern.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents ( $n = 135$ )

| Variable  | Category              | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------|-----------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender    | Female                | 79        | 58.5%      |
|           | Male                  | 56        | 41.5%      |
| Age       | 21–30                 | 61        | 45.2%      |
|           | 31–40                 | 43        | 31.9%      |
|           | 41–50                 | 18        | 13.3%      |
|           | 20 or below           | 7         | 5.2%       |
|           | 51–60                 | 4         | 3.0%       |
|           | 60 or above           | 2         | 1.5%       |
|           |                       |           |            |
| Education | Bachelor degree       | 93        | 68.9%      |
|           | Postgraduate or above | 22        | 16.3%      |
|           | Diploma/college       | 10        | 7.4%       |

|                        |   |      |
|------------------------|---|------|
| High school/vocational | 9 | 6.7% |
| Junior high or below   | 1 | 0.7% |

## 4. Results

**Table 2** presents reliability, validity, descriptive statistics, and correlations. The Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.675 to 0.837, CR values ranged from 0.806 to 0.885, and AVE values ranged from 0.511 to 0.685. Although the alpha value of perceived destination distinctiveness was slightly below 0.70, its CR and AVE exceeded the recommended thresholds, so the construct was retained. The focal constructs were positively correlated. Narrative involvement was positively correlated with perceived destination distinctiveness and travel intention, while perceived destination distinctiveness also had a strong positive correlation with travel intention.

**Table 2.** Reliability, validity, descriptive statistics, and correlations

| Construct | Alpha | CR    | AVE   | Mean  | SD    | 1        | 2        | 3        | 4 |
|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----------|----------|----------|---|
| 1. NI     | 0.837 | 0.885 | 0.606 | 5.699 | 0.759 | 1        |          |          |   |
| 2. PDD    | 0.675 | 0.806 | 0.511 | 5.737 | 0.651 | 0.728*** | 1        |          |   |
| 3. WI     | 0.770 | 0.866 | 0.685 | 5.442 | 0.895 | 0.611*** | 0.632*** | 1        |   |
| 4. TRI    | 0.711 | 0.821 | 0.537 | 5.963 | 0.632 | 0.645*** | 0.704*** | 0.655*** | 1 |

Notes: NI = narrative involvement; PDD = perceived destination distinctiveness; WI = wishful identification; TRI = travel intention. \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ .

**Table 3** shows the hypothesis testing results. Narrative involvement significantly predicted perceived destination distinctiveness ( $B = 0.625$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), supporting H1. Perceived destination distinctiveness significantly predicted travel intention ( $B = 0.338$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), supporting H2. The direct effect of narrative involvement on travel intention became non-significant after the mediator and interaction term were included ( $B = 0.059$ ,  $P = 0.404$ ), suggesting a strong mediating effect. The interaction between perceived destination distinctiveness and wishful identification was significant and negative ( $B = -0.180$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), supporting H4.

Bootstrapping indicated that the conditional indirect effect was significant at low and average levels of wishful identification, but not significant at the high level. The index of moderated mediation was significant because its 95% confidence interval did not include zero. Thus, H3 and H5 were supported. These results indicate that narrative involvement increases travel intention through perceived destination distinctiveness, but this indirect mechanism becomes weaker when viewers show stronger wishful identification with travel influencers.

**Table 3.** Path analysis and conditional indirect effects

| Effect / Path             | B / Effect | SE    | P or 95% CI    | Decision  |
|---------------------------|------------|-------|----------------|-----------|
| NI to PDD                 | 0.625      | 0.051 | <0.001         | Supported |
| PDD to TRI                | 0.338      | 0.080 | <0.001         | Supported |
| PDD x WI to TRI           | -0.180     | 0.043 | <0.001         | Supported |
| NI to TRI                 | 0.059      | 0.071 | 0.404          | Not sig.  |
| Indirect effect at low WI | 0.303      | 0.071 | [0.162, 0.439] | Supported |

|                              |        |       |                  |           |
|------------------------------|--------|-------|------------------|-----------|
| Indirect effect at mean WI   | 0.207  | 0.058 | [0.095, 0.322]   | Supported |
| Indirect effect at high WI   | 0.110  | 0.059 | [-0.004, 0.226]  | Not sig.  |
| Index of moderated mediation | -0.108 | 0.034 | [-0.170, -0.037] | Supported |

Notes: Bootstrap results are based on 5000 resamples.  $R^2$  for PDD = 0.531;  $R^2$  for TRI = 0.633. Confidence intervals excluding zero indicate significance.

## 5. Discussion and implications

This study explains how narrative involvement in travel influencer short videos is translated into travel intention. The findings show that viewers who are more involved in a travel narrative are more likely to perceive the destination as distinctive. This result echoes short video research showing that narrative and platform content influence destination-related attitudes and travel responses<sup>[1, 3]</sup>. It also extends destination distinctiveness research by showing that distinctiveness is not only a content attribute but also an audience perception shaped through narrative engagement<sup>[5–6]</sup>.

The negative moderating effect of wishful identification is particularly meaningful. When wishful identification is low, perceived destination distinctiveness strongly increases travel intention. When wishful identification is high, this effect becomes weaker, and the indirect effect is no longer significant. A possible explanation is that highly identified viewers are motivated more by the influencer as a symbolic model than by the destination itself. Therefore, destination marketers should balance influencer-centered storytelling and destination-centered presentation. Travel influencers can attract attention and stimulate imitation, but the video should still highlight distinctive destination scenes, experiences, and cultural meanings so that travel intention is anchored in the destination rather than only in the influencer.

The study has limitations. The sample was collected through online questionnaires, and the cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Future studies may use experiments, compare different influencer types, and examine whether the same mechanism operates across platforms such as Douyin, TikTok, and YouTube Shorts.

## 6. Conclusions

Based on 135 valid responses, this study tested a moderated mediation model in the context of travel influencer short videos. Narrative involvement positively influenced perceived destination distinctiveness, which then increased travel intention. Wishful identification negatively moderated the effect of perceived destination distinctiveness on travel intention and weakened the indirect effect at a high level. These findings reveal a boundary condition for the role of destination distinctiveness and provide implications for short video destination marketing.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Author contributions

Xiaolin Zhou conceived the idea and wrote the paper. Dexin Zhao collected and organized the data and translation.

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