

Heritage Storytelling for Destination Marketing in Melaka, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Melaka is internationally recognised for a layered port-city heritage shaped by Malay, Chinese, Indian, Portuguese, Dutch, British, Baba Nyonya, Chitty, and other cultural influences. Yet destination promotion often presents this heritage as a list of attractions rather than as a connected narrative system. This study develops a documentary-based storytelling framework for destination marketing in Melaka. Using an interpretivist case-study design, the study analysed 20 publicly accessible sources, including UNESCO records, Malaysian heritage and tourism portals, municipal heritage pages, tourism statistics, and peer-reviewed studies. Each source was coded for narrator, heritage form, temporality, spatiality, sensory affordance, marketing function, and ethical risk. The analysis produced five narrative architectures: Melaka as a port-city crossroads, living multicultural communities, everyday heritage and foodways, performative heritage and language, and the historic street and river as an urban archive. A cross-cutting finding shows that current digital promotion remains fragmented, attraction-led, and limited in community voice. The study proposes a Crossroads-Voices-Senses-Routes-Stewardship framework to guide linked digital storytelling, including community-authored short videos, multilingual audio walks, geolocated story routes, culinary micro-documentaries, archival overlays, and transparent content governance. The study contributes a conceptual and methodological foundation for narrative-based heritage destination marketing. It does not claim empirical validation of tourist preferences, resident approval, or marketing effectiveness. These require subsequent research with residents, tourists, heritage practitioners, and destination marketing organisations.

Keywords: digital storytelling, cultural heritage, destination marketing, Melaka, Malacca, authenticity, community narratives, qualitative document analysis

INTRODUCTION

Heritage destinations compete through meaning as much as through physical attractions. Buildings, streets, rituals, foods, music, and memories become tourism resources only after institutions and communities frame them into intelligible stories. Digital media expands that framing capacity. A destination can now connect archival material, first-person testimony, sound, maps, video, and interactive interpretation across the visitor journey. But digital reach does not guarantee interpretive depth. When promotion reduces heritage to isolated landmarks and highly shareable images, it can increase visibility while weakening historical context and community ownership.

Melaka offers a demanding case for heritage storytelling. UNESCO characterizes Melaka and George Town as historic trading cities produced through more than five centuries of exchange between Asian and European

cultures. Melaka contains material traces of the Malay sultanate and Portuguese and Dutch rule, alongside living cultural practices associated with Malay, Chinese, Indian, Baba Nyonya, Chitty, and Portuguese communities. Dondang Sayang further demonstrates that cultural forms in Melaka cannot be assigned neatly to one group. UNESCO describes the practice as shared among Malay, Baba Nyonya, Chitty, and Portuguese communities. The city therefore resists a single-author narrative. Its destination identity emerges from encounter, translation, conflict, adaptation, and coexistence.

This complexity creates a marketing problem. A simple heritage inventory can identify the Stadthuys, Porta de Santiago, Jonker Walk, Kampung Morten, the Portuguese Settlement, museums, religious sites, foods, and performances. It cannot explain how these elements form a coherent destination story. Nor can a generic multicultural slogan address unequal visibility among communities, contested colonial memory, commercialization, or the gap between staged spectacle and everyday cultural life. Recent research in Melaka shows that digital mediation can support community narratives, but can also encourage polished representations that visitors experience as shallow or overly staged (Bin Azizan et al., 2025).

This manuscript therefore conducts a qualitative documentary analysis of official heritage representations and relevant scholarship to identify Melaka-specific narrative architectures and digital design implications. It does not treat documentary sources as substitutes for residents, tourists, cultural practitioners, or destination managers. Instead, the documentary corpus is used to develop a preliminary conceptual framework that can be tested through subsequent empirical research.

The study addresses two questions. First, which cultural heritage contexts in Melaka offer strong narrative and digital affordances for destination marketing? Second, what structural and ethical principles should guide their translation into digital stories? The contribution lies in moving from a list of heritage assets to a story-system model. The analysis treats stories as linked arrangements of people, places, temporal layers, sensory cues, and governance choices. This approach provides a defensible foundation for content strategy while maintaining a clear boundary between interpretive potential and empirically tested stakeholder response.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Heritage as a living narrative system

Cultural heritage includes monuments and objects, but it also includes practices, social relationships, languages, skills, memories, and place-based routines. Heritage tourism becomes reductive when tangible heritage is treated as the primary product and living communities appear only as decorative context. Loulanski (2011) argue that sustainable integration requires tourism and heritage management to be treated as mutually dependent processes. In Melaka, this principle is visible in Kampung Morten, Kampung Chetti, and the Portuguese Settlement, where community continuity gives physical settings their cultural meaning (Abdul Aziz, 2017).

Narrative provides a mechanism for linking material and immaterial heritage. A story gives sequence to otherwise disconnected facts. It identifies actors, establishes temporal change, locates events, and explains why a place matters. Heritage narrative also allocates voice. A state agency, tour guide, resident, craft practitioner, religious institution, or visitor can describe the same place differently. These perspectives are not interchangeable. Story governance therefore concerns both content quality and representational authority.

The concept of an urban palimpsest is useful for Melaka. A palimpsest is a surface on which successive layers remain partially visible. Melaka's streets and waterfront contain Malay sultanate memory, Portuguese military remains, Dutch civic architecture, British administrative traces, religious institutions, commercial shophouses, and contemporary tourism infrastructure. Digital storytelling can reveal these layers through maps, timelines, archival images, reconstructed soundscapes, and resident testimony. It can also flatten them into a single colonial postcard. The analytical task is to distinguish between layered interpretation and visual accumulation.

Digital storytelling, transportation, and destination image

Digital storytelling combines narrative structure with media such as video, audio, photography, animation, mapping, augmented reality, and interactive choice. Its marketing value does not arise from technology alone.

Pera and Viglia (2016) show that digital stories can create rational, emotional, and relational experiences when audiences recognize shared meanings and move beyond passive viewing. Bassano et al. (2019) similarly frame place storytelling as a co-creation process involving stakeholders rather than a one-way advertising technique.

Narrative transportation theory explains why coherent stories may influence attitudes and intentions. Audiences become mentally involved when a story provides understandable causality, identifiable perspectives, and an imaginable world (Green & Brock, 2000). In destination marketing, the identity of the storyteller matters. First-person narration can strengthen social presence, engagement, destination image, and visit intention compared with third-person promotional narration (Pachucki et al., 2022). This evidence supports community-authored storytelling in Melaka, but it does not justify using any resident voice as a marketing instrument. Consent, attribution, compensation, and editorial control remain necessary.

Destination image contains cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. Visitors need factual orientation, emotional relevance, and a reason to act. Melaka research shows that heritage visitors value cultural significance, memorable experience, responsible behavior, and environmental care (Teo et al., 2014). Digital interpretation should therefore do more than increase recognition. It should help audiences understand relationships among sites, cultural practices, and community responsibilities.

Authenticity, spectacle, and community authority

Authenticity in tourism is not a simple test of whether an object or performance is original. Wang (1999) distinguishes object-related authenticity from experiences through which tourists feel connected, involved, or personally present. This distinction matters because digital storytelling can enrich interpretation while also intensifying staging. A reconstructed scene may be historically responsible and educational. A living practice can become inauthentic when organizers remove its social context, silence practitioners, or redesign it only for visual consumption.

Melaka research identifies a tension between spectacle and substance. Azizan et al. (2025) found that visitors and local stakeholders evaluated curated social media imagery differently. Some accepted colorful and staged presentation, while others sought unscripted community contact and deeper explanation. Abdul Aziz (2017) likewise identifies vulnerability and authenticity concerns in living heritage settlements. These findings imply that effective content cannot be judged only through reach, clicks, or attractiveness. It must also be judged through representational fairness and cultural continuity.

Community authority operates at several levels. Communities can supply stories, narrate them, review interpretation, set boundaries around sensitive knowledge, and share benefits. Digital storytelling projects often satisfy only the first level. They collect material from communities, then centralize editorial control in tourism organizations or vendors. A stronger model treats communities as rights-holders and co-producers. This study incorporates that principle into its analytical framework.

Melaka as a digital heritage destination

Melaka already possesses a substantial digital presence. The official tourism portal highlights UNESCO heritage, the Stadthuys, riverfront attractions, food, museums, and events. The municipal portal provides pages for major historic places, including the Stadthuys, Porta de Santiago, Kampung Morten, and the Portuguese Settlement. National and UNESCO portals document Dondang Sayang, while UNESCO's 2024 decision on kebaya adds a contemporary transnational heritage frame. Earlier research examined information kiosks at Melaka heritage sites, suggesting that digital interpretation can complement physical visitation when usability and perceived usefulness are addressed (Johari et al., 2010).

The central weakness is not absence of content. It is limited integration. Official pages commonly describe attractions separately, with brief historical facts and practical information. The visitor must construct the larger story without a clear narrative sequence, community perspective, or route across temporal layers. User-generated content partly fills this gap. Mohd Aris and Ahmad (2020) show that online reviews promote top-rated Melaka heritage locations through product and experience attributes. Yet platform visibility can reinforce already dominant attractions and compress heritage into ratings, photo opportunities, and convenience cues.

The research gap is therefore specific. Melaka needs a framework for selecting and connecting heritage contexts across official and community media. Such a framework must preserve the city's plural history, support digital engagement, and resist the conversion of living culture into interchangeable content.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted an interpretivist case-study design and qualitative documentary analysis. Interpretivism is appropriate because destination stories are constructed representations rather than neutral containers of fact. Documentary analysis treats public records, websites, policy pages, institutional descriptions, and prior studies as data that can reveal recurring categories, silences, narrative assumptions, and organisational priorities (Bowen, 2009). The design differs from interview-based phenomenology and survey-based visitor research. It does not infer private stakeholder meanings, measure tourist preference, or report participant experience. Instead, it examines how Melaka's heritage is represented in publicly accessible institutional and scholarly documents, then develops an interpretive framework from those representations. The unit of analysis was a meaningful narrative segment, including descriptions of people, places, practices, historical periods, sensory qualities, digital formats, or destination functions.

Documentary Corpus and Sampling

Documents were collected in July 2026 through purposive documentary sampling. The sampling strategy aimed to capture the main institutional and scholarly representations through which Melaka's heritage is currently narrated for public, tourism, and policy audiences. The corpus was not intended to represent every possible community memory or visitor interpretation. A source was included when it met four criteria: it addressed Melaka heritage or tourism directly; it contained substantive narrative, interpretive, historical, or promotional content; it was issued by an identifiable institution, public agency, heritage organisation, statistical authority, or scholarly outlet; and it was publicly accessible for verification. Sources were excluded when they were duplicate pages, purely commercial booking pages, general travel blogs without identifiable institutional or scholarly basis, pages containing only contact information, or materials unrelated to heritage storytelling and destination promotion. The final corpus contained 20 sources across five categories: UNESCO records, national and state heritage or tourism documents, municipal heritage pages, official tourism statistics, and peer-reviewed studies.

The 20-source corpus was considered appropriate for conceptual documentary analysis because the goal was depth of interpretive coverage rather than statistical representativeness. The corpus was deliberately balanced across international recognition, official destination promotion, site-level heritage description, tourism demand context, and academic critique. This selection allows the analysis to compare how Melaka is framed at different institutional levels while also identifying gaps in community voice and digital integration.

Table 1: Documentary corpus and source selection

ID	Source	Year	Document type	Primary analytical value
D01	UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Melaka and George Town property page	n.d.	World Heritage record	Port-city exchange, urban layers, outstanding universal value
D02	UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, Dondang Sayang	2018	ICH record	Shared performance across four Melaka communities
D03	UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, Kebaya decision	2024	ICH decision	Dress heritage, skills, transnational cultural exchange
D04	Tourism Melaka official home page	2026	Destination portal	Current promotional priorities, events, food, riverfront and heritage imagery
D05	Tourism Melaka, Culture and Heritage	2026	Destination portal	Institutional representation of ethnic and cultural communities

D06	Tourism Melaka, Heritage	2026	Destination portal	Jonker Walk, Chitty Museum, Hang Tuah Centre and heritage inventory
D07	MBMB, Melaka City Information	2026	Municipal portal	Founding narrative, port geography and city history
D08	MBMB, Places of Interest	2026	Municipal portal	Taxonomy of historic places, attractions and museums
D09	MBMB, The Stadthuys Complex	2026	Municipal heritage page	Dutch civic architecture and museum cluster
D10	MBMB, Porta de Santiago	2026	Municipal heritage page	Portuguese and Dutch military layers
D11	MBMB, Kampung Morten	2026	Municipal heritage page	Living Malay settlement and Villa Sentosa
D12	MBMB, Portuguese Settlement	2026	Municipal heritage page	Kristang language, performance, food and community space
D13	National Heritage Department, Dondang Sayang	2018	National heritage page	Musical structure, pantun and performance practice
D14	Melaka State Government, World Tourism Day 2025	2025	Government tourism page	Sustainable transformation and global positioning
D15	Department of Statistics Malaysia, Domestic Tourism Survey by State 2024	2025	Official statistics	Holiday motivation and domestic tourism context
D16	Abdul Aziz, living heritage sites in Melaka	2017	Peer-reviewed article	Authenticity, vulnerability and community participation
D17	Bin Azizan et al., digital mediation and community narratives	2025	Peer-reviewed article	Spectacle, authenticity and community authority
D18	Mohd Aris and Ahmad, TripAdvisor heritage promotion	2020	Peer-reviewed article	User-generated promotion and top-rated heritage sites
D19	Johari et al., information kiosks at heritage sites	2010	Peer-reviewed article	Digital interpretation, usefulness and on- site adoption
D20	Teo et al., cultural heritage visitor behavior	2014	Peer-reviewed article	Memorable experience and responsible heritage behavior

Analytical Procedure and Coding

The analysis followed an iterative sequence adapted from document analysis and thematic analysis (Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, each document was read to identify its explicit purpose, institutional position, target audience, and heritage scope. Second, descriptive codes identified heritage elements, named communities, historical periods, sites, practices, media formats, and promotional functions. Third, interpretive codes examined narrative structure, including who speaks, how time is organised, whether places are connected, which senses are activated, which visitor actions are encouraged, and which cultural meanings are omitted. Fourth, codes were compared across source types to identify convergences, contradictions, and silences. Fifth, candidate themes were tested against the full corpus and refined into narrative architectures. Finally, each architecture was assessed for digital translatability and ethical risk.

The coding framework was developed deductively from heritage storytelling, destination image, authenticity, and digital narrative literature, then refined inductively during document reading. The initial codebook included narrator, heritage form, temporality, spatiality, sensory affordance, marketing function, and ethical risk. Coding consistency was strengthened through repeated reading, codebook refinement, source-by-source memoing, and negative-case analysis. Because the study did not employ multiple independent coders, no intercoder reliability coefficient was calculated. This is treated as a methodological limitation rather than hidden as a strength. To support transparency and reproducibility, Tables 1 and 2 report the corpus and coding dimensions used to generate the findings.

Table 2: Analytical Framework

Dimension	Analytical question	Illustrative indicators	Reason for inclusion
Narrator	Who speaks and with what authority?	Institution, resident, practitioner, visitor, historian	Voice affects trust, social presence and representational power
Heritage form	What is being represented?	Building, object, ritual, language, food, music, memory	Prevents overreliance on monuments
Temporality	How are historical layers connected?	Origin, succession, continuity, rupture, contemporary adaptation	Supports coherent narrative rather than isolated facts
Spatiality	How do places relate?	Street, river, settlement, route, threshold, network	Enables location-based and itinerary storytelling
Sensory affordance	What can audiences see, hear, taste, or perform?	Sound, movement, texture, recipe, dress, atmosphere	Informs media selection and experiential design
Marketing function	What destination task can the story perform?	Differentiate, educate, build trust, invite visitation, disperse flows	Connects interpretation to strategy
Ethical risk	What can be distorted or harmed?	Tokenism, extraction, stereotyping, congestion, sacred knowledge exposure	Adds stewardship to digital innovation

Trustworthiness, Coding Consistency, and Ethical Scope

Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation, audit-trail logic, and negative-case analysis. UNESCO records supplied international heritage framing. National and state portals supplied official policy and promotional framing. Municipal pages supplied site-level descriptions. Peer-reviewed studies supplied resident, visitor, authenticity, and technology perspectives. Negative-case analysis was used when documents complicated an emerging theme. For example, the prominence of colourful tourism imagery was considered alongside studies warning that spectacle can weaken perceived authenticity. An audit table linking themes to source documents was maintained during drafting to ensure that each narrative architecture could be traced to specific evidence anchors.

The study used public documents and did not involve human participants. Formal human-research ethics approval is therefore generally not required, subject to the author's institutional policy. Ethical responsibility still applies. The analysis avoids presenting institutional descriptions as uncontested community truth. It also avoids claiming that proposed story formats are preferred by tourists or approved by communities. Community participation, cultural ownership, consent, attribution, compensation, editorial review, and responsible digital representation are therefore treated as design requirements for future implementation rather than as completed outcomes of the present study.

Empirical Boundary and Validation Plan

The proposed framework should be read as a documentary-based conceptual model, not as an empirically validated model of tourist behaviour or stakeholder consensus. Its practical value lies in organising heritage content and identifying testable propositions for future research. The next stage should involve residents, tourists, heritage practitioners, tourism practitioners, and destination marketing organisations through interviews, focus groups, co-design workshops, or surveys. Such empirical work should examine whether the five narrative architectures are culturally accurate, emotionally engaging, practically usable, and ethically acceptable to the communities represented. Visitor studies can then test whether linked story-system content improves perceived authenticity, destination image, learning, route completion, responsible behaviour, or intention to visit compared with conventional attraction-led descriptions.

FINDINGS

The analysis produced five Melaka-specific narrative architectures and one cross-cutting diagnosis of the current digital content environment. The architectures are not rankings of tourist preference and should not be read as validated stakeholder priorities. They are interpretive configurations derived from the documentary corpus, combining cultural density, place specificity, sensory potential, digital translatability, and ethical risk.

Melaka as a Port- City Crossroads

The strongest macro-narrative is the port-city crossroads. UNESCO frames Melaka through more than five centuries of trading and cultural exchange between East and West. The city's significance lies not in one colonial period but in succession and encounter. The Malay sultanate established the port's political and commercial importance. Portuguese and Dutch rule transformed military and civic space. Later British administration added another institutional layer. Asian mercantile, religious, linguistic, and domestic practices remained active throughout these changes. Official site pages provide fragments of this story. Porta de Santiago carries both Portuguese construction and Dutch modification. The Stadthuys represents Dutch civic authority and now houses several museums. The municipal city history links Melaka's location to maritime trade. Individually, these pages describe objects and dates. Read together, they reveal a narrative of strategic geography, competing sovereignties, and cultural translation. This architecture has high digital potential because it can organize temporal layers. An interactive timeline could show how the same river mouth, hill, fortification zone, and civic square changed function. Archival overlays could compare street patterns, shorelines, and building uses. A story should avoid presenting colonial succession as a clean sequence in which one power simply replaces another. Community life, trade networks, religious institutions, and local agency persisted across regimes. The core message is therefore not that Melaka contains many old buildings. It is that global exchange repeatedly remade a local city while leaving visible and living traces.

Living Multicultural Communities as Narrators

The second architecture concerns communities as living narrators rather than cultural categories. Tourism Melaka identifies Malay, Chinese, Indian, Baba Nyonya, Portuguese, and Chitty communities. This classification is useful for orientation, but separate profile blocks can imply bounded and internally uniform groups. The documentary corpus instead reveals interaction. Dondang Sayang is practised by Malay, Baba Nyonya, Chitty, and Portuguese communities. Kebaya knowledge extends across several Southeast Asian societies. Melaka's food, language, clothing, music, and domestic architecture show adaptation rather than isolation. Kampung Morten and the Portuguese Settlement demonstrate why community settings matter. Villa Sentosa links Malay domestic architecture to family collections and lived memory. The Portuguese Settlement links Kristang language, festivals, performance, seafood, and public space. Abdul Aziz (2017) shows that living heritage sites support identity and intergenerational transmission, while also facing vulnerability and authenticity pressures. These locations should not be marketed as static ethnic villages. Their value lies in continuity, adaptation, and community decision making. The preferred digital form is first-person and polyphonic. Short resident-led videos, oral-history clips, household-object stories, and practitioner profiles can present multiple positions without forcing one official voice. A community story series should include editorial protocols. Contributors need informed consent, attribution, the right to review, and a defined benefit arrangement. Sensitive religious, family, or ritual material should not be digitized merely because it attracts attention.

Everyday Heritage and Foodways

The third architecture is everyday heritage. Official promotion already recognizes cendol, asam pedas, Nyonya food, Portuguese seafood, markets, crafts, and shopping streets. Yet food is often presented as a consumable attraction detached from migration, labor, domestic practice, religious rules, seasonal rhythms, and family knowledge. A story-system approach treats foodways as evidence of cultural exchange. Melaka's culinary narrative can connect ingredients, techniques, utensils, markets, kitchens, celebrations, and neighborhoods. The strongest digital stories would follow a dish or ingredient across people and places. A micro-documentary on a family recipe could connect domestic memory to port trade. A market map could explain how spices, preserved foods, rice, coconut, seafood, and imported ingredients entered local practice. A beaded-shoe or kebaya story

could connect material selection, craft skill, dress, ceremony, and contemporary enterprise. This architecture activates several senses and supports strong pre-visit engagement. Video can show preparation and movement. Audio can record kitchen rhythms and spoken explanation. Macro photography can reveal texture and workmanship. Interactive recipes can provide context without disclosing protected knowledge. The primary ethical risk is extraction. Tourism organizations can convert community knowledge into destination content while returning little value to the people who maintain it. Contributor payment, business attribution, usage limits, and co-ownership of media assets should therefore be built into project design.

Performative Heritage, Language, and Dress

The fourth architecture centres on performance, language, and dress. Dondang Sayang is especially powerful because it joins melody, instruments, pantun, improvisation, humor, advice, and interaction among communities. It is not merely a song genre. Its dialogic form makes the relationship between performers and audience part of the heritage. The Portuguese Settlement adds Kristang language and festival performances. Kebaya adds garment knowledge, embroidery, fastening, social use, and transnational variation. These practices offer richer digital affordances than static description. A multilingual audio story can let audiences hear pronunciation, poetic exchange, and instrumental roles. Split-screen video can show how pantun is constructed and answered. Motion capture or close-up filming can explain dance or garment technique. Interactive subtitles can preserve original language while supporting access. Digital content should avoid replacing live practice. Its role is to prepare audiences, document practitioner knowledge with permission, and encourage respectful participation. Performance also provides attention potential without requiring invented spectacle. The structure of Dondang Sayang already contains uncertainty and exchange. Digital campaigns can emphasize the skill of spontaneous response rather than stage an artificial dramatic script. This approach protects cultural specificity while still producing engaging media.

The Historic Street and River as an Urban Archive

The fifth architecture treats the city itself as a navigable archive. Jonker Walk, the Stadthuys complex, Porta de Santiago, religious streets, Kampung Morten, the riverfront, museums, and settlements are usually promoted as separate stops. Their interpretive value increases when visitors understand movement between them. Streets, bridges, slopes, river edges, and thresholds can reveal how trade, worship, administration, defense, residence, and tourism occupied urban space. Location-based storytelling is therefore a high-leverage format. A route can be organized by theme rather than by attraction popularity. A port-and-power route could connect the river, civic square, fortification remains, and museums. A living-community route could link markets, places of worship, domestic architecture, food, and oral histories. A sound route could connect bells, calls to prayer, street activity, river movement, music, and performance. Geolocation can trigger short stories at the point where a visitor can observe the relevant evidence. Spatial storytelling can also support tourism management. It can distribute attention beyond a few crowded photographic landmarks, encourage slower walking, and direct visitors toward museums or community enterprises. But digital routes can create new congestion and expose residential areas to intrusive visitation. Route design therefore requires capacity limits, respectful-hour guidance, photography rules, and resident consultation.

Fragmented Promotion is the Binding Constraint

Across the corpus, the binding constraint is fragmentation. Melaka does not lack heritage assets, official pages, events, visual material, or public recognition. The problem is that content is commonly organized by administrative category or attraction type. History places, museums, food, culture, recreation, and events appear in separate menus. Individual pages provide useful facts but rarely connect sites to community voices, historical transitions, or visitor routes. This structure creates three losses. First, it weakens causal meaning. Visitors encounter a building without understanding the trade, conflict, labor, faith, or domestic life that produced it. Second, it concentrates attention on already recognizable images. User-generated promotion then reinforces top-rated and highly photographed sites, as Mohd Aris and Ahmad (2020) observed. Third, it leaves communities visible as labels but less visible as narrators and decision makers. The solution is not a larger content inventory. It is a linked story architecture with shared metadata, cross-references, route logic, and governance. Each digital asset should identify its narrator, place, period, heritage form, related stories, language, permissions, and visitor

responsibility. This finding shifts the strategic question from what else Melaka should promote to how existing and new content should be connected.

Table 3: Narrative architectures and Digital Applications

Narrative architecture	Core story	Evidence anchors	Recommended formats	Primary risk
Port-city crossroads	Successive exchange and adaptation remade the city	UNESCO property, river, Stadthuys, Porta de Santiago	Interactive timeline, archival overlay, map-based narrative	Colonial sequence that erases local agency
Living communities	Heritage continues through households, language and social practice	Kampung Morten, Portuguese Settlement, Baba Nyonya, Chitty and other communities	First-person video, oral history, object stories	Tokenism and extractive use of community voice
Everyday heritage and foodways	Trade and memory become visible through daily practice	Markets, asam pedas, cendol, Nyonya and Portuguese food, craft and dress	Micro-documentaries, culinary map, craft close-ups	Commercial appropriation and loss of context
Performance, language and dress	Identity is enacted through sound, improvisation, movement and skill	Dondang Sayang, Kristang, kebaya, festivals	Multilingual audio, annotated performance, interactive subtitles	Staging, simplification and disclosure of sensitive knowledge
Urban archive	Streets and the river connect buildings, communities and periods	Jonker Walk, civic square, religious streets, riverfront and settlements	Geolocated walks, thematic routes, sound maps	Congestion, residential intrusion and route bias

	CROSSROADS Layered time and exchange	
VOICES Community authority and first-person narration	MELAKA STORY SYSTEM Linked content, shared metadata and ethical governance	SENSES Sound, taste, movement, texture and atmosphere
STEWARDSHIP Consent, attribution and benefit sharing	ROUTES Spatial sequence and visitor movement	STEWARDSHIP Capacity, conservation and visitor responsibility

Figure 1.0: Crossroads-Voices-Senses-Routes-Stewardship framework

DISCUSSION

Attraction Inventory to Story System

The findings challenge an asset-first model of destination promotion. Melaka's competitive advantage does not depend on discovering unknown heritage assets. It depends on connecting known and less visible assets into stories that audiences can follow. The attraction inventory remains necessary for navigation and service information, but it is insufficient for meaning. A story system adds temporal sequence, narrator identity, sensory cues, cross-links, ethical metadata, and governance rules. This distinction explains why more content can still produce weak interpretation. A portal may contain hundreds of pages while leaving the destination narrative fragmented. Each page can answer what a place is, but not how it relates to another place, why different communities interpret it differently, or what responsibilities visitors have when entering living heritage settings.

Story-system design treats every page, video, map point, audio clip, and social post as part of a larger knowledge architecture. Bassano et al. (2019) describe place storytelling as stakeholder co-creation. The Melaka findings extend that principle by identifying a practical content structure. Crossroads provides the macro-narrative. Voices determine who interprets it. Senses determine how meaning becomes experiential. Routes connect stories spatially. Stewardship constrains what should be produced, where it should circulate, and how benefits and risks should be managed.

Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to digital destination storytelling in three ways. First, it reframes context selection as architecture rather than ranking. The question is not simply which story is most attractive. Different narratives perform different functions. A port-city timeline establishes destination distinctiveness. A resident story builds social presence. A culinary story activates sensory imagination. A route organizes movement. A stewardship layer protects legitimacy. Second, the study connects narrative transportation with representational authority. Coherence can increase audience involvement, but coherence produced through a single institutional voice can erase disagreement and cultural plurality. In a multicultural heritage city, polyphony is not noise that marketers must remove. It is part of the destination's identity. The design problem is to create navigable plurality. Third, the study treats authenticity as a governance outcome. Digital realism, high production value, or archival accuracy cannot by themselves establish authenticity. Authenticity also depends on who controls the narrative, whether context is retained, and whether a practice remains connected to its community. This interpretation aligns with Melaka research showing that digital mediation can move between cultural depth and staged spectacle (Bin Azizan et al., 2025).

Practical Strategies for Melaka

A feasible strategy should begin with governance rather than technology procurement. Tourism agencies, municipal authorities, museums, community organizations, cultural practitioners, and researchers should agree on contributor rights, editorial review, sensitive-content rules, language priorities, and asset ownership. Without these decisions, a technically sophisticated platform can reproduce extraction and fragmentation. The second step is to build a shared content schema. Every story asset should contain a title, short description, narrator, community affiliation where relevant, location, historical period, heritage form, related stories, language, media rights, access restrictions, and visitor conduct note. This schema allows a single community video to appear within a route, a thematic collection, a museum page, and a school resource without losing attribution. The third step is to prototype a small number of linked story modules. A sensible pilot would include one port-city timeline, one community-led oral-history series, one foodways micro-documentary sequence, one Dondang Sayang audio feature, and one geolocated urban route. Each module should be tested with residents and visitors before expansion. Metrics should include comprehension, emotional engagement, route completion, distribution of visits, resident approval, contributor satisfaction, and evidence of respectful behavior. Reach alone is a weak success measure.

Policy and Management Implications

Melaka's tourism demand strengthens the case for better interpretation and management. The Department of Statistics Malaysia reported that holiday, leisure, and relaxation was the primary purpose of domestic overnight trips to Melaka in 2024, unlike the dominant visiting-friends-and-relatives pattern in most states. This means destination content directly shapes a substantial leisure market. It also raises pressure on heritage areas. Digital storytelling can support sustainable transformation when it redistributes attention, explains visitor responsibilities, and increases the value of slower engagement. It can also intensify pressure by making residential places newly visible. Tourism policy should therefore connect content planning to carrying capacity, mobility, opening hours, noise, waste, photography practices, and community benefit. A viral story should trigger a management review, not only a marketing celebration. World Tourism Day 2025 positioned Melaka around tourism and sustainable transformation. The proposed framework gives that aspiration an operational form by treating sustainability as a design constraint applied to voice, content rights, visitor movement, and evaluation.

Ethical Considerations for Responsible Digital Representation

The strongest practical implication is that digital heritage content should not be produced as extractive promotion. Community participation should move beyond consultation at the end of production. Communities should help decide which stories can be shared, who can narrate them, which languages should be used, what knowledge should remain private, how contributors are credited, and how benefits are returned. This is particularly important for living practices such as Dondang Sayang, Kristang language, family foodways, domestic objects, and settlement-based heritage. Responsible digital representation requires consent, attribution, review rights, compensation where appropriate, culturally sensitive editing, and clear visitor conduct guidance. Without these safeguards, storytelling can reproduce tokenism even when the content appears inclusive.

CONCLUSION

Melaka's strongest digital storytelling potential lies in connecting its cultural diversity into a coherent narrative system. Rather than presenting heritage sites, food, crafts, performances, and communities as separate attractions, destination storytelling should link them through the Crossroads-Voices-Senses-Routes-Stewardship framework. This approach connects Melaka's port-city history with community perspectives, sensory experiences, walkable routes, and responsible cultural governance.

The study contributes a practical and theoretical shift from listing heritage assets to designing linked narrative structures. It also provides a more transparent documentary-analysis method by clarifying source selection, inclusion and exclusion criteria, coding dimensions, trustworthiness procedures, and the limits of a documentary corpus. For tourism and heritage organisations, the framework offers a basis for planning content, designing visitor routes, selecting suitable digital media, and protecting community ownership of cultural narratives.

The study also has clear limitations. It relies on publicly available and institutionally visible sources. Community archives, oral traditions, local-language materials, informal knowledge, and less visible cultural perspectives may therefore be underrepresented. No residents, tourists, cultural practitioners, or destination managers were interviewed, so the proposed framework should not be treated as stakeholder consensus or as proof that digital storytelling will increase trust, satisfaction, loyalty, or visit intention. The study also did not calculate intercoder reliability because it used documentary interpretation rather than a multi-coder content-analysis design.

Future research should test and refine the framework through participatory work with local communities, cultural practitioners, destination marketing organisations, and visitors. Visitor studies can examine perceived authenticity, narrative understanding, emotional engagement, destination image, route behaviour, and intended behaviour. Mixed-method research combining co-design workshops, interviews, surveys, experiments, digital analytics, and spatial observation would provide stronger evidence of whether linked storytelling can improve visitor experience, support cultural transmission, distribute tourism benefits, and reduce pressure on heavily visited heritage areas.

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Appendix B. Proposed empirical validation questions

1. Which of the five narrative architectures do residents consider culturally accurate, incomplete, or inappropriate?
2. Which communities and heritage practices remain absent from the documentary corpus?
3. How do tourists respond to linked story-system content compared with conventional attraction descriptions?
4. Do first-person community narratives increase understanding and perceived authenticity without increasing intrusive visitation?
5. Can geolocated routes distribute visitor movement while protecting residential areas and sensitive sites?
6. What governance model ensures consent, attribution, compensation, review rights, and long-term community access to digital assets?