

Emotion in the Service of Regeneration: How Storytelling Transforms Tourism Behaviors

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DOI: <https://doi.org/110.47772/IJRISS.2025.91200223>

Received: 23 December 2025; Accepted: 30 December 2025; Published: 07 January 2026

ABSTRACT

This research examines the role of positive emotional storytelling as a lever of influence on the intention to adopt regenerative tourism behaviors. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of experiential marketing and narrative persuasion, the study comparatively analyzes the impact of an emotional narrative (generating positive emotions such as hope and pride) and a factual narrative on tourists' behavioral intentions.

An online experiment was conducted with potential tourists, randomly assigned to one of the two narrative conditions. Hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling (SEM). Results show that emotional storytelling exerts a significant total effect on regenerative intention ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$), unlike the factual narrative. The analysis also reveals a partial mediation effect of character identification (β indirect = 0.18, $p < 0.01$), as well as a positive moderating effect of perceived authenticity ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$). These results underscore that the adoption of regenerative tourism behaviors relies on an integrated experiential dynamic, combining emotion, identification, and authenticity. This research contributes to the literature on sustainable tourism marketing by proposing an explanatory framework highlighting the transformative potential of emotional storytelling to encourage regenerative tourism practices.

Keywords: regenerative tourism, emotional storytelling, narrative identification, perceived authenticity, destination marketing

INTRODUCTION

Context and Research Problem

Global tourism, with 1.4 billion international arrivals in 2018, represents 10% of global GDP and one in ten jobs (UNWTO, 2019). However, this exponential growth generates considerable negative externalities: environmental degradation, over tourism, cultural commodification, and socioeconomic inequalities (Hall et

al., 2015; Peeters et al., 2018). Faced with these challenges, the concept of sustainable tourism, although omnipresent in academic literature and industry practices since the 1990s, demonstrates its limitations (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018).

A new paradigm is emerging: regenerative tourism. Unlike sustainable tourism, which aims to "do no harm," regenerative tourism seeks to actively restore ecosystems, revitalize local cultures, and strengthen host communities (Pollock, 2019; Bellato et al., 2023). This paradigm shift requires a profound transformation of tourism behaviors, moving from the tourist-consumer to the tourist-contributor (Buhalis et al., 2023).

However, modifying behaviors represents one of the major challenges in destination marketing (Line et al., 2020). Marketing literature demonstrates that rational and informational approaches have limited impact on behavioral change (Cialdini, 2003). Conversely, emotional storytelling emerges as a powerful lever of influence (Escalas, 2004; Green and Brock, 2000), capable of modifying attitudes, intentions, and behaviors by creating an emotional connection and narrative identification. This article examines the central question: How does emotional storytelling influence the adoption of regenerative tourism behaviors?

This research contributes theoretically by (1) integrating the emerging paradigm of regenerative tourism into marketing literature, (2) applying narrative theory to the specific context of tourism regeneration, and (3) illuminating the psychological mechanisms of pro-environmental behavioral change. From a managerial perspective, it offers destinations and tourism operators empirically grounded narrative strategies to promote regenerative practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Regenerative Tourism: Conceptualization and Expected Behaviors

Paradigmatic Evolution: From Sustainable to Regenerative

The concept of sustainable tourism, formalized in the 1990s following the Brundtland Report (1987), aims to minimize the negative impacts of tourism while maximizing local economic benefits (Butler, 1999). However, several authors critique this paradigm for its anthropocentric approach and focus on maintaining the status quo rather than systemic improvement (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018; Ateljevic, 2020).

Regenerative tourism operates within a post-sustainable and systemic logic (Pollock, 2019). Inspired by the principles of regenerative agriculture and regenerative development (Mang and Reed, 2012), this paradigm

views tourism as a vehicle for ecological restoration, cultural revitalization, and community empowerment (Bellato et al., 2023).

According to Buhalis et al., (2023), regenerative tourism rests on four fundamental pillars:

1. Ecological restoration: active improvement of biodiversity and ecosystems
2. Cultural revitalization: valorization and transmission of traditional knowledge
3. Community strengthening: development of social capital and local autonomy
4. Personal transformation: evolution of visitor consciousness and values

Regenerative Tourism Behaviors

The literature identifies several behaviors characterizing the regenerative tourist (Cave and Dredge, 2020; Bellato et al., 2023):

- Active participation in conservation or restoration projects
- Engagement in authentic and respectful intercultural exchanges
- Direct economic support to local producers and artisans
- In-depth learning of local issues and traditional knowledge
- Adoption of positive-impact practices (reforestation, cleanup, etc.)
- Voluntary carbon footprint reduction (slow travel, extended stays)
- Post-visit sharing of the regenerative experience (ambassador)

These behaviors differ qualitatively from conventional sustainable tourism through their proactive and transformative dimension (Buhalis et al., 2023).

Storytelling: Theoretical Foundations and Influence Mechanisms

Narrative Theory and Transportation

Storytelling, defined as the transmission of experiences and meaning through narrative structures (Bruner, 1991), constitutes a fundamental mode of human information processing (Schank and Abelson, 2014). Unlike the paradigmatic mode (logical, analytical), the narrative mode activates distinct cognitive and emotional processes (Bruner, 1991).

The Transportation Theory of Green and Brock (2000) conceptualizes narrative immersion as a psychological process during which the individual is "transported" into the story's universe, resulting in three major consequences:

1. Focused attention: reduction of counterarguments
2. Mental imagery: visualization of narrative events
3. Emotional responses: empathy and identification with characters

This narrative transportation reduces resistance to attitude change and increases persuasion (Green and Brock, 2000; Van Laer et al., 2014).

Narrative Identification and Persuasion

Character identification represents a central mechanism of influence (Cohen, 2018; Escalas and Stern, 2003). Defined as an imaginative process through which the individual temporarily assumes the identity, goals, and perspective of the character (Cohen, 2018), identification generates cognitive effects (adoption of character beliefs), affective effects (emotional sharing), and behavioral effects (mimicry) (Moyer-Gusé, 2008).

In the tourism context, Tussyadiah et al. (2018) demonstrate that narrative identification in destination videos positively influences visit intention. The extension of this mechanism to regenerative behaviors, however, remains unexplored.

Application to Destination Marketing

Destination storytelling has received growing attention (Bassano et al., 2019; Lund et al., 2018). Destinations use narratives to construct their brand identity, differentiate their offer, and create emotional connections with potential visitors (Woodside et al., 2007).

Mossberg (2008) identifies three narrative levels in tourism marketing: (1) macro-narratives (territorial myths and archetypes), (2) meso-narratives (business and event stories), and (3) micro-narratives (individual testimonials). Research suggests that micro-narratives, centered on authentic personal experiences, generate the highest levels of engagement and identification (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009).

Emotions and Behavioral Change

The Role of Emotions in Tourism Decision-Making

Emotions play a determining role in the tourism decision-making process (Hosany and Gilbert, 2010; Kim et al., 2012). Contrary to the traditional cognitive approach that privileges rational evaluation of destination attributes, recent research emphasizes the primacy of emotional responses (Prayag et al., 2017).

Plutchik (1980) proposes a model of discrete emotions comprising eight fundamental emotions organized in opposing pairs: joy-sadness, trust-disgust, fear-anger, surprise-anticipation. In the context of sustainable and

regenerative tourism, certain specific emotions appear particularly relevant: hope, pride, guilt, and fear (Onwezen et al., 2013).

Positive Emotions

Positive emotions, according to Fredrickson's (2001) Broaden-and-Build Theory, expand cognitive and behavioral repertoires, facilitating openness to new experiences. In the tourism context, characterized by hedonic motivations and the pursuit of pleasure, positive emotions naturally align with travelers' expectations (Hosany and Gilbert, 2010). Hope, defined as the belief in the possibility of achieving a desirable goal, constitutes a robust predictor of pro-environmental action (Ojala, 2012). Anticipated pride, associated with accomplishing socially valued actions, also reinforces behavioral intention (Onwezen et al., 2013). Similarly, Fredrickson (2001) confirms that positive emotions (hope, pride, joy) favor proactive approaches and sustained engagement.

Synthesis and Identification of Theoretical Gaps

The literature review reveals three major findings:

1. Regenerative tourism constitutes an emerging paradigm requiring empirical research on levers for its behavioral adoption.
2. Emotional storytelling proves to be a powerful tool of influence in marketing, but its specific application to regenerative tourism remains largely unexplored.
3. Positive emotions play a central role in pro-environmental behavioral change.

Main theoretical gap: No research has systematically examined how emotional storytelling can catalyze the adoption of regenerative tourism behaviors, nor identified the underlying psychological mechanisms (mediation, moderation).

This research aims to fill this gap by integrating narrative, emotional, and behavioral theories into a unified conceptual framework.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Main Effect of Positive Emotional Storytelling

Building on Transportation Theory (Green and Brock, 2000) and research on narrative persuasion (Van Laer et al., 2014), we postulate that exposure to emotional storytelling eliciting positive emotions (hope, pride, joy) increases the intention to adopt regenerative tourism behaviors compared to a factual presentation.

H1: Exposure to emotional storytelling generating positive emotions (hope, pride) significantly increases the intention to adopt regenerative tourism behaviors compared to a factual presentation.

Mediating Effect of Narrative Identification

According to Cohen (2018) and Escalas (2004), narrative identification constitutes the central mechanism through which storytelling influences attitudes and behaviors. The more an individual identifies with the story's protagonist, the more likely they are to adopt their beliefs and behaviors.

H2: Narrative identification mediates the relationship between exposure to positive emotional storytelling and regenerative behavioral intention.

Moderating Effect of Perceived Authenticity

In the context of sustainable and regenerative tourism, marked by skepticism toward greenwashing (Parguel et al., 2011), perceived narrative authenticity appears as a critical condition for effectiveness. Perceived authenticity, defined as the degree to which an individual perceives a stimulus as truthful, sincere, and unmanipulated (Grayson and Martinec, 2004), functions as a quality signal legitimizing the message and reducing suspicions of manipulation.

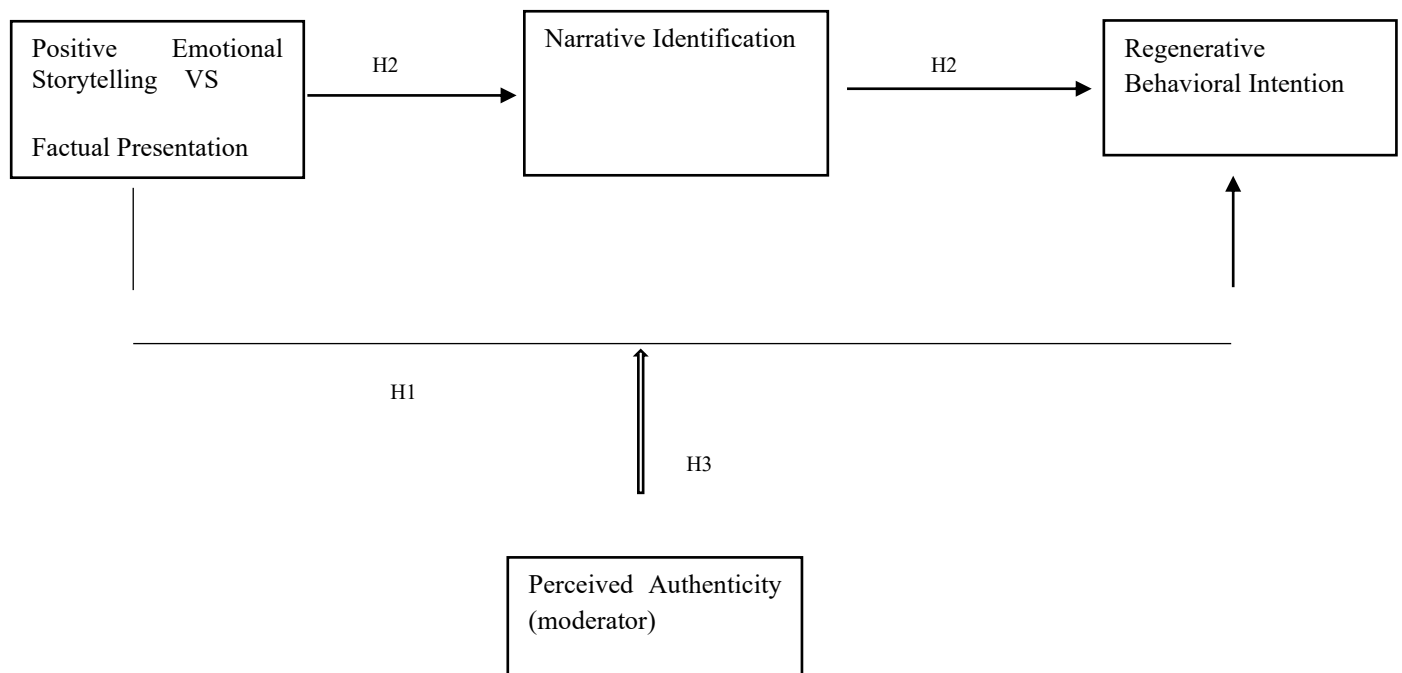
According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model of Friestad and Wright (1994), consumers develop knowledge about marketers' persuasive tactics. When a narrative is perceived as authentic, these "persuasion radars" are partially deactivated, increasing message receptivity. Conversely, a narrative perceived as manipulative or inauthentic can generate counterproductive effects through psychological reactance.

H3: Perceived narrative authenticity positively moderates the relationship between positive emotional storytelling and regenerative behavioral intention. The more authentic the narrative is perceived, the stronger its impact on intention.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Our conceptual model (Figure 1) integrates the three hypotheses into a unified theoretical framework, positing that positive emotional storytelling influences regenerative behavioral intention through a mediation mechanism (narrative identification) and under the constraint of a moderation boundary condition (perceived authenticity).

Figure 1: Research Model



METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research adopts a between-subjects experimental design with two conditions aimed at testing the causal effect of positive emotional storytelling on the intention to adopt regenerative tourism behaviors.

Experimental Conditions

Participants are randomly assigned to one of the following two conditions:

1. **Control Condition** (n = 80): Factual presentation of a regenerative destination (Takaungu, Kenya) in an informative, neutral, and descriptive format, without narrative structure or emotional content.
2. **Experimental Condition** (n = 80): Emotional storytelling presenting the same destination through the narrative testimony of a traveler (Sarah), structured to elicit positive emotions (hope, pride, joy).

Stimulus Development

Narrative Context

To ensure ecological validity, we selected a real destination engaged in a regenerative approach: the village of Takaungu in Kenya, involved in a mangrove restoration and community development project through tourism (inspired by real projects).



A Journey That Gives Back Life

Testimony of Sarah, French traveler

When I arrived in Takaungu, a coastal village in Kenya, I was simply looking for a different vacation. What I discovered changed my vision of travel.

On the first morning, I joined a local team to plant mangroves. Amina, a young Kenyan biologist, explained to me how these trees protect the coast and shelter hundreds of marine species. Pushing my hands into the mud, I felt something rare: the experience of being useful, even on vacation.

In the afternoon, I learned to weave baskets with village artisans. Their laughter, their patience, their knowledge passed down through generations... I was buying much more than a souvenir, I was directly supporting their family.

In the evening, watching the sunset over the mangroves we had planted, I was proud. Proud to have contributed, even modestly, to something greater than myself.

This trip didn't just refresh me—it regenerated the place that welcomed me. And that, no postcard can match.

Control Condition (Factual Presentation)

The control condition presents the same factual information about the Takaungu destination (location, available activities, environmental and social benefits) but in an informative format, without narrative structure, without identifiable protagonist, and without emotional language. The text adopts a neutral, objective, and descriptive tone, similar to a traditional tourism brochure.

Example (excerpt): "Takaungu is a coastal village in Kenya offering regenerative tourism activities. Visitors can participate in mangrove restoration projects that contribute to marine biodiversity protection. Local craft workshops support the community economy..."

Both stimuli (control and experimental) have similar length (~150 words) and present the same factual information; only the form (narrative vs. informative) and emotional charge differ.

Justification of Text Format

The choice of a textual format rather than video or audio for presenting narrative stimuli is based on several rigorous methodological considerations. First, text allows perfect standardization of exposure: each participant receives exactly the same content, thus eliminating confounding variables related to voice (timbre, intonation, accent), music, visual effects, or editing that could confound results (Green and Brock, 2000). Second, this format facilitates precise experimental control of emotional manipulation: we can adjust each word, each formulation to maximize internal validity without the technical constraints of audiovisual production. Third, narrative text isolates the effect of pure storytelling content and linguistic emotional charge, which constitute our primary variables of interest (Van Laer et al., 2014). Finally, from a pragmatic standpoint, the textual format allows easy replication of the study by other researchers and ensures sustained attention from respondents, as reading pace is self-controlled unlike a video imposing its temporality. While we recognize that multimedia formats (particularly video) potentially generate more intense narrative transportation (Tussyadiah et al., 2018), text remains the optimal format for this first experimental validation of the model, with multimedia extensions constituting a promising future research avenue.

Measurement Scales

Table 1: Measurement Scales

Variable	Measurement scale	Author
Narrative Identification	<input type="checkbox"/> I could understand the character's motivations <input type="checkbox"/> I felt concerned about what was happening to the character <input type="checkbox"/> I imagined myself in the character's place <input type="checkbox"/> I shared the emotions experienced by the character <input type="checkbox"/> The character's experiences resonated with	Cohen (2018)

	my own values	
Perceived Authenticity	<input type="checkbox"/> This narrative reflects an authentic experience <input type="checkbox"/> The emotions described seem sincere" <input type="checkbox"/> This story appears credible to me <input type="checkbox"/> This testimony is not manipulated for marketing purposes	Grayson and Martinec, 2004
Regenerative Behavioral Intention	<input type="checkbox"/> I would be willing to actively participate in an environmental conservation project <input type="checkbox"/> I would prioritize stays that allow me to learn from local communities <input type="checkbox"/> I would choose accommodations and services that contribute directly to the local economy <input type="checkbox"/> I would dedicate time to ecological restoration activities <input type="checkbox"/> I would engage in authentic cultural exchanges with local residents" <input type="checkbox"/> I would extend my stay to deepen my understanding of the place and reduce my carbon footprint <input type="checkbox"/> I would become an ambassador for this regenerative destination among my social circle	Han (2015) Buhalis et al. (2023)

Sample and Recruitment Method

The study sample consists of participants potentially interested in tourism experiences, recruited using a non-probabilistic sampling method. Respondents were solicited through an online survey distributed on digital platforms and social networks related to tourism and travel. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. To ensure sample relevance, only individuals who had completed at least one tourism trip within the past two years were retained. Participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions (emotional storytelling versus factual narrative), thus ensuring group comparability for analyzing storytelling effects on the intention to adopt regenerative tourism behaviors.

Statistical Methods

To test this study's hypotheses, we used structural equation modeling (SEM) using AMOS software. This approach allows simultaneous evaluation of direct, indirect, and moderating relationships between variables while accounting for measurement errors of latent variables. For H1, which compared the effect of positive emotional storytelling and factual narrative on the intention to adopt regenerative behaviors, a multi-group SEM model was applied, allowing comparison of regression coefficients between the two groups and evaluation of the total impact of narrative type.

For H2, concerning character identification mediation, we estimated the indirect effect via the mediator using the bootstrap technique with 5,000 samples, enabling robust confidence intervals for the indirect effect and evaluation of its statistical significance. The residual direct effect was simultaneously estimated to determine whether mediation was partial or complete.

For H3, moderation by perceived authenticity was tested using latent interaction variables in SEM. This approach verifies whether the effect of emotional storytelling on regenerative intention varies as a function of perceived authenticity level while adjusting for the direct effect of storytelling.

Finally, overall model fit was evaluated using several classic indices: χ^2 over degrees of freedom (χ^2/df), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). All models presented satisfactory fit indices ($\chi^2/\text{df} < 2$, CFI > 0.95, TLI > 0.94, RMSEA < 0.05), confirming model validity for interpreting relationships between emotional storytelling, identification, authenticity, and regenerative intention.

RESULTS

H1 – Effect of Emotional vs. Factual Storytelling

Hypothesis H1 posited that exposure to positive emotional storytelling generates higher intention to adopt regenerative tourism behaviors than a factual narrative. Multi-group SEM results confirm this hypothesis. The total effect of emotional storytelling on regenerative intention is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$), while the effect of factual storytelling is weak and non-significant ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.21$). Consistent with these results, mean intention is significantly higher in the emotional storytelling group ($M = 5.28$) than in the factual group ($M = 4.31$; $t = 6.42$, $p < 0.001$). The first hypothesis is validated.

H2 – Mediation by Character Identification

The second hypothesis posited that character identification mediates the relationship between emotional storytelling and regenerative behavioral intention. Mediation model results show that emotional storytelling significantly influences character identification ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$), which in turn exerts a significant effect on regenerative intention ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$). The indirect effect of storytelling via identification is significant ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$; 95% CI [0.10, 0.27]). The residual direct effect remains significant ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.01$), indicating partial mediation. Based on these results, we can conclude that the second hypothesis is confirmed.

H3 – Moderation by Perceived Authenticity

Finally, our third hypothesis proposed that perceived narrative authenticity positively moderates the relationship between emotional storytelling and regenerative intention. SEM results with latent interaction show that the emotional storytelling \times perceived authenticity interaction term is significant ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$). The adjusted direct effect of emotional storytelling remains high and significant ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, no significant interaction is observed for factual storytelling ($\beta = 0.03$, $p = 0.32$). Hypothesis H3 is therefore confirmed.

DISCUSSION

For the first hypothesis, this study's results highlighted the determining role of positive emotional storytelling in promoting regenerative tourism behaviors. Unlike factual narrative, emotional storytelling exerts a substantial and significant total effect on behavioral intention ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that

information alone ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.21$) is insufficient to motivate pro-regenerative behaviors. These results extend the work of Green and Brock (2000) and Escalas (2004), according to which emotional narratives favor persuasion by activating affective and narrative mechanisms absent from purely informative communications. Mediation analysis, the object of the second hypothesis, reveals that this effect is not solely direct. Character identification plays a key role in transforming narrative emotion into behavioral intention. Emotional storytelling significantly increases identification ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$), which strongly influences regenerative intention ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$). The observed indirect effect ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$) indicates that tourists are more inclined to adopt regenerative behaviors when they can project themselves into narrative characters. This partial mediation, confirmed by the maintenance of a residual direct effect ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.01$), supports narrative persuasion models based on identification and narrative transportation (Cohen, 2018; van Laer et al., 2014).

Furthermore, for the third hypothesis, the study shows that emotional storytelling effectiveness strongly depends on authenticity perception. The significant moderating effect of perceived authenticity ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$) indicates that storytelling's impact on regenerative intention is amplified when the narrative is judged credible and faithful to the destination's reality. This interaction is not observed for factual storytelling, emphasizing that authenticity specifically reinforces the persuasive power of narrative emotion. These results align with the work of Moyer-Gusé (2008) and Kim et al. (2012), showing that narrative credibility conditions acceptance of behaviorally oriented messages.

In the context of regenerative tourism, these results provide an important theoretical contribution by demonstrating that the adoption of responsible behaviors rests on a fundamental triptych: positive emotion, identification, and authenticity. Emotional storytelling does not merely raise awareness; it acts as a mechanism for transforming representations and intentions, capable of repositioning the tourist as an actor in territorial regeneration.

CONCLUSION

This research sits at the intersection of tourism marketing, sustainable and regenerative tourism, and experiential marketing, responding to a growing call in the literature to better understand mechanisms capable of transforming tourists' intentions and behaviors toward more responsible and regenerative practices (Dolnicar et al., 2019; Bellato et al., 2023). While traditional approaches to tourism sustainability have long privileged

informational and cognitive strategies, this study adopts an emotional and narrative perspective, mobilizing positive emotional storytelling as a lever for behavioral transformation.

Theoretical Contributions

Theoretically, this research enriches narrative persuasion models (Green and Brock, 2000; Escalas, 2004) by explicitly transposing them to the context of regenerative tourism, still little explored empirically. It proposes an integrative framework combining positive emotion, character identification, and perceived authenticity, enabling better explanation of the adoption of regenerative tourism behavioral intentions.

This study provides several major theoretical contributions. First, it demonstrates that positive emotional storytelling exerts a significant and substantial effect on the intention to adopt regenerative tourism behaviors ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$), unlike a factual narrative whose effect is non-significant ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.21$). This result confirms that tourism sustainability cannot be reduced to rational information logic and must be understood as an emotional and symbolic experience.

Second, the research highlights the central role of character identification as a partial mediation mechanism. The significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$) shows that tourists are more inclined to adopt regenerative behaviors when they can project themselves into embodied narratives. This contribution extends work on narrative identification (Cohen, 2018; van Laer et al., 2014) by applying it to the field of sustainable tourism.

Third, the study introduces perceived authenticity as an essential condition for emotional storytelling effectiveness. The significant moderating effect observed ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$) emphasizes that narrative emotion's impact is amplified when the narrative is perceived as credible and faithful to territorial reality. This contribution illuminates contemporary debates on green washing and the legitimacy of sustainable discourses in tourism (Font and McCabe, 2017).

Managerial Contributions for Regenerative Tourism Actors

From a managerial perspective, this research offers concrete implications for all regenerative tourism actors: destinations, tourism offices, tourism businesses, NGOs, local communities, and public decision-makers.

First, communication and marketing strategies should move beyond classic informational approaches to integrate emotional storytelling devices capable of eliciting positive emotions such as hope and pride. These emotions foster more sustainable intrinsic motivation to adopt responsible behaviors.

Second, destination managers are encouraged to design embodied narratives, featuring residents, guides, local entrepreneurs, or engaged tourists, to strengthen visitors' identification and projection.

Third, authenticity must be placed at the heart of narrative strategies. Narratives must rely on real practices, verifiable local initiatives, and increased transparency to avoid any perception of manipulation or green washing.

Finally, this research suggests that emotional storytelling can become a strategic tool for regenerative governance, contributing to aligning tourists, local communities, and territories interests around a shared vision of regeneration.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, this study presents certain limitations. First, it focuses on behavioral intention, which does not necessarily guarantee actual action. Future research could adopt longitudinal or observational approaches to measure real on-site behaviors.

Next, the study relies on a controlled experimental context. Subsequent research could examine emotional storytelling effectiveness in varied cultural contexts or compare different types of emotions (for example, empathy, constructive guilt, or wonder).

Finally, future studies could integrate other explanatory mechanisms, such as moral engagement, sense of personal efficacy, or co-creation of narrative experiences with local communities, to enrich existing models of regenerative tourism.

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