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# DIGITAL STORYTELLING OF THE BA-LÁ BOAT AS A TOOL OF THE CREATIVE ECONOMY IN SUSTAINABLE RIVER TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, digital transformation has significantly altered how cultural heritage is interpreted and communicated in tourism contexts. Rather than simply improving promotional efficiency, digital technologies have begun to reshape how cultural meanings are constructed and experienced by visitors. Rather than treating the ba-lá boat as a purely functional object, this study approaches it as a narrative medium embedded in memory, place identity, and lived experience. Adopting a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, the research draws on cultural studies, tourism theory, and digital media analysis to examine selected digital narratives related to river tourism in the Mekong Delta. The analysis focuses on how multimedia formats, participatory platforms, and community-generated content contribute to the construction of cultural meaning. Digital storytelling does more than enhance communication. It transforms small-scale cultural elements into narrative structures that foster emotional engagement. At the same time, these practices contribute to the creative economy by extending cultural value beyond traditional tourism services. By focusing on a relatively underexplored form of riverine heritage, this study argues that digital storytelling can serve as a mechanism to reposition local cultural symbols within contemporary tourism systems.

*Keywords:* Digital storytelling, creative economy, river tourism, cultural heritage, community-based tourism, Mekong Delta.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Following the administrative restructuring in July 2025, Southern Vietnam has entered a pivotal stage of regional integration, notably through the formation of the “identity triangle” (urban–industrial–marine). Within this new spatial configuration, the Mekong Delta functions not just as a rural periphery but as a critical riverine axis connecting the Southern Economic Hub."

This raises a critical question: how can small-scale riverine cultural elements be meaningfully integrated into digitally mediated tourism?

In the context of accelerating digital transformation, tourism is no longer shaped solely by physical destinations but increasingly by how cultural meanings are constructed, mediated, and circulated through digital platforms. Beyond their functional role in promotion, digital technologies are actively reshaping how heritage is experienced, interpreted, and valued. In this shift, digital storytelling has emerged as a critical mechanism linking local cultural narratives with global tourism markets, enabling destinations to generate immersive, emotionally resonant experiences that extend beyond material space [1, 2].

Across global tourism contexts, riverine heritage has been widely recognized as a valuable cultural resource for sustainable development. Major river systems such as the Chao Phraya, Tonlé Sap, and the Amazon Basin demonstrate how cultural landscapes—comprising traditional boats, water-based livelihoods, and indigenous practices—can be reinterpreted through narrative and digital media to enhance destination identity and visitor engagement [3, 4]. However, these cases often privilege large-scale or visually spectacular representations, where cultural meaning is closely tied to scale, aesthetics, and cinematic visibility.

The Mekong Delta of Vietnam presents a fundamentally different cultural configuration. Rather than being organized around spectacle, its riverine identity is embedded in everyday practices, repetitive interactions with water, and localized forms of knowledge. Among these, the ba-lá boat stands as a small-scale yet culturally dense element, historically integral to mobility, livelihood, and collective memory [5, 6]. However, amid modernization and the expansion of motorized transport, the functional role of this traditional vessel has declined significantly declined. Within tourism, it is frequently reduced to a visual or experiential fragment, detached from its broader cultural and historical meanings. Within the broader regional framework, the ba-lá boat should not be understood merely as a traditional transport artifact, but as a connective cultural interface linking inland riverine practices to the broader urban–industrial–marine identity system. In this configuration, it operates along the riverine axis that mediates cultural flows between local lifeworlds and the Southern Economic Hub, positioning it as a strategic component of regional identity formation.

At the same time, contemporary tourism studies increasingly emphasize the role of storytelling in transforming cultural elements into meaningful experiences. Digital storytelling, in particular, has been identified as a key tool for heritage interpretation, audience engagement, and creative tourism development [2, 7]. Yet, existing research reveals two critical limitations. First, it tends to focus on large-scale or institutionalized heritage, overlooking small-scale, vernacular cultural forms embedded in everyday life. Second, digital storytelling is often approached as a communicative or promotional tool, with insufficient attention to its role as a discursive and economic mechanism that actively produces cultural value within the creative economy [8, 9].

This gap is particularly evident in the Mekong Delta, where culturally significant yet small-scale elements such as the ba-lá boat remain underexplored in both academic research and tourism practice. Despite possessing strong narrative potential, these forms of micro-heritage are rarely activated as central components of digital storytelling, resulting in a loss of depth in both cultural representation and tourism experience.

Addressing this gap, this study reconceptualizes digital storytelling not merely as a tool of communication, but as a process of cultural mediation through which everyday heritage is narratively activated and transformed into experiential and economic resources. To articulate this shift, the paper introduces the concept of Micro-Riverine Heritage Storytelling (MRHS). This concept refers to the process through which small-scale, everyday riverine cultural elements are reinterpreted through narrative structures, sensory experiences, and digital platforms, enabling them to function as dynamic resources within contemporary tourism systems.

Unlike conventional heritage frameworks that prioritize monumental or institutionalized assets, MRHS foregrounds vernacular, mobile, and lived cultural forms. It emphasizes that cultural meaning does not reside inherently in heritage objects, but emerges through their narrative activation, mediated circulation, and participatory engagement across digital environments. In this sense, storytelling becomes not only representational but constitutive, shaping how cultural value is produced, distributed, and experienced.

Building on this conceptual foundation, the study aims to examine how digital storytelling can reposition the ba-lá boat as a narrative-centered cultural resource within the intersection of the creative economy and sustainable river tourism development. Specifically, it investigates the narrative mechanisms, media forms, and participatory dynamics through which small-scale riverine heritage can be transformed into meaningful tourism experiences and sources of cultural value creation.

In this context, the study is guided by the following central research question:

What narrative elements can support the integration of riverine symbols into sustainable tourism and the development of the creative economy while enhancing the role of local communities?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

International scholarship on digital storytelling in tourism primarily frames it as a tool for enhancing tourist experience and destination branding, emphasizing its capacity to create immersive and emotionally engaging narratives that shape visitor perceptions [10, 11]. Parallel research in cultural heritage studies highlights digital storytelling as a medium for preserving collective memory and expanding access to intangible heritage through digital platforms [1].

However, existing literature predominantly focuses on large-scale or institutionalized heritage, often overlooking small-scale, vernacular cultural elements embedded in everyday life. Moreover, digital storytelling is frequently treated as a functional or promotional tool, with limited attention to its role as a discursive mechanism that actively constructs cultural meaning [8, 9]. This tendency risks reducing heritage to visually consumable content, rather than engaging with its deeper socio-cultural and experiential dimensions.

In the Vietnamese context, studies on Mekong Delta culture have underscored the significance of river-based practices, where boats function as both material and cultural components of riverine life. Tourism research further identifies river landscapes and floating markets as key regional assets [3, 4]. Nevertheless, these studies remain largely descriptive and rarely address minor cultural symbols such as the ba-lá boat, particularly in the context of digital transformation.

Therefore, this study positions digital storytelling not merely as a communication tool but as a cultural mechanism that reconstructs the meaning of micro-scale riverine heritage. By framing the ba-lá boat as a narrative-centered cultural resource, the research contributes to bridging the gap between micro-scale cultural heritage and its strategic integration into digital tourism and the creative economy.

### 2.1. The Concept of Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling is a contemporary form of narrative in which stories are constructed and communicated through the integration of multimedia technologies such as images, audio, video, text, and interactive elements on digital platforms. This concept was systematized and popularized in the 1990s with the aim of empowering individuals and communities to tell their own stories through digital media [12].

Compared to traditional forms, digital storytelling not only focuses on narrative content but also emphasizes audience experience. Viewers and listeners can interact with, share, and co-create stories across digital platforms, thereby expanding the reach and social impact of narrative content [2]. In the contemporary context, digital storytelling is considered an important tool for preserving memory, safeguarding cultural heritage, and constructing community identity.

Studies indicate that digital storytelling consists of five key components [2]: (1) story content; (2) visual imagery; (3) audio; (4) interactivity; and (5) digital platforms. The effective integration of these elements enables vivid and emotionally engaging storytelling that extends beyond traditional communication forms.

### 2.2. Digital Storytelling in Tourism and the Creative Economy

In the tourism sector, digital storytelling is approached as a strategic tool for destination promotion, emphasizing emotional engagement and visitor-centered experiences [2, 13]. Rather than merely providing descriptive information, it enables the reinterpretation of cultural values, people, and local spaces through authentic narratives, thereby enhancing destination differentiation and competitiveness [2].

Numerous studies highlight the role of digital storytelling in shaping destination image and strengthening tourist engagement before, during, and after travel experiences [10]. On digital platforms such as websites, social media, and online video, tourists are not only information receivers but also active participants in co-creating content, sharing personal experiences, and contributing to the circulation of destination narratives [11, 14].

From the perspective of the creative economy, digital storytelling serves as a bridge between cultural heritage and creative tourism products. Transforming local cultural elements into digital content enhances the economic value of heritage without necessarily compromising its authenticity [15]. However, this process also raises critical concerns regarding the commodification of cultural practices and the potential displacement of local meanings under platform-driven visibility logics.

### 2.3. The ba-lá Boat in Southern Vietnam's River Culture

The ba-lá boat is a traditional watercraft closely associated with the daily life, production, and trade activities of communities in the Mekong Delta [16, 17]. With its compact, lightweight, and easily maneuverable structure, this type of boat is well suited to the dense network of canals and waterways in the delta, reflecting indigenous knowledge and human adaptability to the riverine environment.

Beyond its functional value, the ba-lá boat holds symbolic significance in Southern Vietnamese culture. The image of a small boat gliding through canals, orchards, and floating markets has become a familiar representation of rural river life, often evoking cultural memory and regional identity.

Moreover, the ba-lá boat is associated with historical memories of Southern communities during wartime, when it served as a mobile means of transportation through dense canal systems. These historical associations further deepen its symbolic meaning within local cultural life.

However, in the modern context, the traditional role of this vessel has gradually diminished due to the development of motorized transportation. In tourism, the ba-lá boat is often reduced to a short experiential activity or a symbolic image, while its deeper cultural and historical layers remain insufficiently interpreted.

From a strategic perspective, these cultural values can be understood as narrative resources for developing creative tourism. In the context of digital transformation, digital storytelling not only facilitates interpretation and dissemination but also functions as a mechanism for integrating riverine cultural elements such as the ba-lá boat into broader regional development frameworks. Within the emerging urban–industrial–marine identity

triangle, the ba-lá boat can be repositioned as part of a "riverine axis" that connects inland cultural practices with regional tourism flows.

In this sense, the ba-lá boat is not merely a nostalgic artifact but a strategic mediator of place identity, capable of linking local heritage with contemporary tourism development and creative economy initiatives.

## 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in interdisciplinary perspectives on digital storytelling, the creative economy, and the narrative construction of cultural heritage. These perspectives provide the conceptual basis for examining how riverine cultural symbols can be transformed into resources for sustainable tourism development.

Rather than being treated as a purely communicative tool, digital storytelling is conceptualized here as an interpretive and discursive practice through which cultural meaning is constructed, mediated, and continuously reconfigured within tourism contexts [8, 7]. This perspective aligns with broader discussions on narrative economies, where storytelling functions as a mechanism for producing, circulating, and valorizing cultural meaning in digital environments [8].

Within this framework, the ba-lá boat is not understood as a static heritage object, but as a narrative medium whose meaning emerges through processes of mediation, representation, and audience engagement. Digital storytelling thus serves as a mediating bridge that translates the historical and cultural values of the ba-lá boat into narrative forms suited to platform-based environments [16]. In doing so, it contributes to the co-creation of experiential and symbolic value, consistent with service-dominant logic approaches in the creative economy [15].

This perspective also resonates with tourism development theories that emphasize the need for experiential innovation in mature destinations. As traditional tourism products reach saturation, narrative-based reinterpretation of cultural resources becomes essential for destination renewal and differentiation [18]. In this context, small-scale cultural elements such as the ba-lá boat can function as strategic assets within broader tourism systems when activated through storytelling.

On this basis, the study develops a process-oriented conceptual framework to clarify the relationships between digital storytelling, narrative depth, emotional engagement, and destination value. The framework positions storytelling as the central mechanism linking cultural representation with value creation, highlighting how narrative activation transforms micro-scale heritage into experiential and economic resources within tourism systems.

The conceptual approach of this study is structured as a process-oriented framework, which is illustrated in detail in Figure 1.

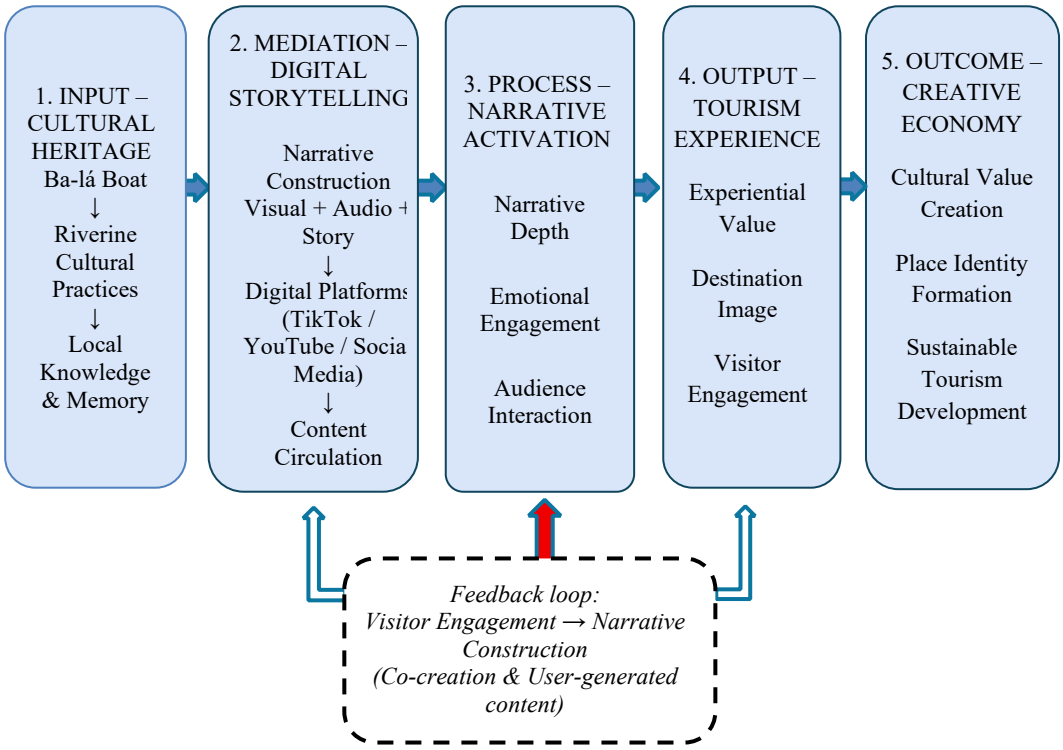


*Figure 1.* A process-oriented conceptual framework of Micro-Riverine Heritage Storytelling (MRHS) in creative tourism development

The detailed operational mechanisms, including the sequential flow and feedback loops of this transformation, are further elaborated in Figure 2.

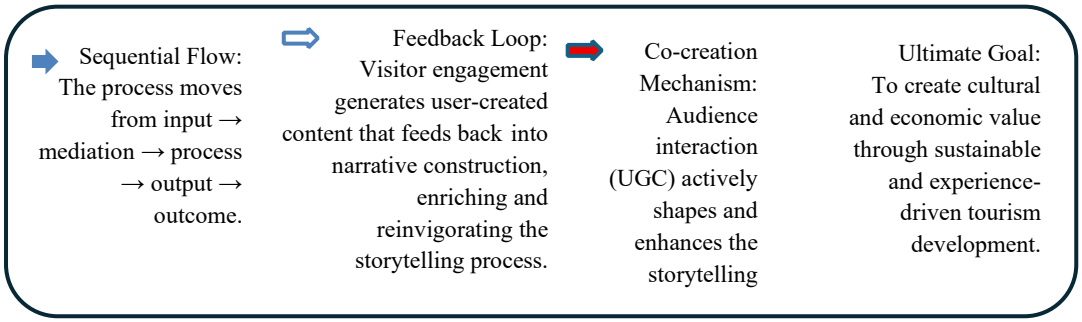


*Figure 2.* A process-oriented conceptual framework illustrating how Micro-Riverine Heritage Storytelling (MRHS) transforms riverine cultural elements into experiential and economic value within sustainable tourism systems. Source: Developed by the author

## 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine how digital storytelling represents and reinterprets the cultural value of the ba-lá boat in Southern Vietnam's river tourism. A combination of document analysis and qualitative content analysis is employed to ensure analytical depth and methodological rigor.

### 4.1. Document Analysis

Document analysis is used to establish the theoretical foundation of the study. Sources include academic publications, policy documents, and reports related to digital storytelling, cultural heritage, and tourism development. This step supports the identification of key concepts and research gaps relevant to the study.

### 4.2. Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to construct a multi-source qualitative dataset. A total of 36 digital artifacts were selected, including 14 travel vlogs (YouTube, TikTok), 12 institutional promotional videos, and 10 tourism website articles. To strengthen the representation of riverine cultural practices, a small number of documentary and television segments depicting canal-based mobility in the Mekong Delta were additionally consulted as contextual media references.

The vlog sample consists of travel content creators and local digital producers who actively document everyday riverine experiences. Representative creators include Khoai Lang Thang, Chan La Cà, and Ninh Tito, alongside emerging local creators on TikTok and YouTube platforms. Although these creators do not exclusively focus on the ba-lá boat as a primary subject, their content consistently captures river-based mobility, canal navigation, and embodied water-based experiences. Within these contexts, small manually rowed boats consistent with the structure and function of the ba-lá boat are visually identifiable as part of everyday river tourism practices.

The inclusion of documentary and television materials serves a complementary role. Unlike short-form digital content, these formats typically provide more context-rich and temporally extended representations of riverine life, including clearer depictions of traditional boats and their socio-cultural functions. While not subjected to full coding procedures, these materials support the interpretive validity of the dataset by reinforcing the cultural visibility and narrative continuity of the ba-lá boat across different media environments.

The selection of primary materials was guided by four criteria:

1. Relevance to river-based tourism or water-based mobility in the Mekong Delta;
2. Presence of identifiable narrative structures;
3. Public availability on widely used digital platforms; and
4. Measurable audience engagement.

All selected materials are publicly accessible and were included based on clearly defined sampling criteria, ensuring transparency and replicability. The sample size was determined based on theoretical saturation, allowing for sufficient analytical depth across diverse media forms.

### 4.3. Content Analysis

The study employs qualitative content analysis following established approaches in content analysis and thematic analysis. A structured coding framework was developed through a combination of deductive and inductive approaches.

Five analytical dimensions were used:

- Narrative structure
- Cultural representation
- Experiential elements
- Interactivity
- Sustainability framing

### 4.4. Analytical Procedure

The analysis was conducted in four stages:

1. Data familiarization
2. Coding
3. Thematic analysis
4. Interpretive synthesis

This process enabled the identification of key narrative patterns and differences between user-generated and institutional storytelling. This methodological approach enables a systematic examination of how digital narratives construct and reinterpret the cultural value of the ba-lá boat in river tourism, directly addressing the study's central research question.

### 4.5. Reliability

To ensure reliability, approximately 20% of the dataset was independently re-coded and cross-checked to assess consistency across coding categories. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through iterative refinement of the coding scheme. This process enhances the validity and transparency of the analytical framework.

## 5. RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings derived from the qualitative content analysis of 36 digital storytelling artifacts. Rather than treating digital storytelling as a neutral representational tool, the analysis examines how narrative forms, media structures, and platform dynamics shape the construction of cultural meaning around the ba-lá boat in contemporary river tourism.

### 5.1. From Visual Presence to Narrative Activation

Across the dataset (n = 36), the ba-lá boat appears in 32 cases (88.9%) as a recurring visual element. However, only 11 cases (30.6%) develop it as a central narrative component, while the remaining instances rely primarily on aesthetic or symbolic representation.

This imbalance indicates a dominant pattern of visual reduction, in which the boat functions as a signifier of "river authenticity" without deeper contextualization. In many institutional videos, for example, the boat is presented within wide landscape shots accompanied by generalized narration, with limited reference to its historical or cultural significance.

In contrast, narrative activation occurs primarily in user-generated content (UGC), where the ba-lá boat is embedded within experiential sequences and first-person narration. Here, meaning emerges through movement, temporality, and interaction, transforming the boat from a visual object into an experiential medium.

This imbalance between visual presence (88.9%) and narrative activation (30.6%) can be further explained by platform-specific content dynamics. Digital platforms such as TikTok and YouTube tend to prioritize short-form, visually striking content that maximizes immediate viewer attention and retention. As a result, creators are structurally incentivized to foreground aesthetic appeal rather than narrative depth.

This algorithmic bias contributes to a pattern of visual reductionism, where cultural elements are simplified into easily consumable images. In this context, the ba-lá boat risks being reduced to a visual backdrop rather than functioning as a carrier of lived cultural meaning. Consequently, narrative activation depends not only on creative intent but also on the ability to navigate and, at times, resist platform-driven constraints.

This significant imbalance between visual presence (88.9%) and narrative depth (30.6%) is not merely a creative choice but is deeply rooted in algorithmic bias inherent to global social media platforms. Platforms such as TikTok and YouTube prioritize short-form, high-impact 'aesthetic spectacles' designed to maximize user retention through immediate visual gratification. This structural incentive forces vloggers to focus on the external beauty of the ba-lá boat rather than its complex cultural layers. Consequently, this process creates what might be termed 'digital ghosts'-where the heritage element is reduced to a static prop for selfie-taking or a background aesthetic, detached from its lived historical reality and indigenous knowledge systems.

### 5.2. Two Dominant Narrative Models

The analysis identifies two dominant storytelling models, with clear differences in narrative structure, sensory engagement, and authorship.

#### *5.2.1. Participatory Experiential Storytelling (UGC)*

This model appears in 14/36 cases (38.9%), primarily in travel vlogs. It is characterized by non-linear or loosely structured narratives, first-person perspectives, and a strong emphasis on embodied interaction, such as rowing or navigating narrow canals. Ambient sound—water movement, oars, and local voices—plays a central role in shaping the narrative experience.

In these cases, storytelling emerges through movement and temporal progression rather than scripted explanation. The ba-lá boat functions as an experiential interface, mediating the relationship between the visitor and the riverine environment. This bottom-up narrative form enhances immediacy and perceived authenticity.

#### *5.2.2. Institutionally Structured Storytelling*

This model is observed in 12/36 cases (33.3%), primarily in official tourism media. It typically follows a linear structure, supported by voice-over narration, background music, and clearly segmented itineraries.

Within this model, the ba-lá boat serves as a narrative connector linking different tourism activities. However, sensory immersion is mediated through editing and narration, resulting in a more controlled and curated representation. While this approach enhances clarity and destination branding, it limits narrative plurality, as local voices are rarely foregrounded and perspectives remain externally constructed.

The divergence between these two models reflects a structural gap between bottom-up and top-down narrative production. Participatory storytelling emphasizes lived experience and situational authenticity, whereas institutional storytelling prioritizes coherence, standardization, and message control.

This distinction has direct implications for audience engagement. User-generated narratives tend to produce stronger emotional resonance due to their immediacy and embodied perspective, while institutional narratives, although coherent, may appear less immersive. At the same time, participatory content remains uneven in quality, whereas institutional content provides consistency but often at the cost of narrative depth.

Overall, these two models illustrate that authenticity in digital tourism storytelling is not fixed, but negotiated through the interaction between creators, institutional frameworks, and platform dynamics.

### 5.3. Digital Mediation and the Transformation of Heritage

The findings indicate that digital storytelling operates as a mediating process through which the ba-lá boat is transformed from a material object into a narrative resource.

This transformation occurs through three mechanisms:

Selection: Only certain aspects (e.g., scenic movement, tranquility) are consistently highlighted

Abstraction: Complex historical and socio-cultural meanings are simplified

Recontextualization: The boat is repositioned within tourism-oriented narratives

As a result, cultural meaning is not inherent but emerges through mediated representation [2, 19]. The same object can function differently depending on narrative framing—either as a passive visual symbol or an active experiential medium.

This process indicates that digital storytelling does not simply "represent" heritage but actively reconfigures it. The transformation of the ba-lá boat into a narrative resource reflects a shift from material heritage to mediated heritage, where meaning is increasingly produced through circulation, repetition, and reinterpretation within digital environments.

This shift from material to mediated heritage also reflects a broader transformation in the ontology of cultural value. Heritage is no longer anchored solely in physical objects or practices, but increasingly in their capacity to be narrated, circulated, and reinterpreted across digital networks. In this context, storytelling becomes a form of cultural production rather than mere representation.

### 5.4. Implications for Creative Economy and Tourism Value Creation

The data suggests that narrative integration significantly affects value creation.

In cases where the boat is narratively activated (11/36), engagement indicators (such as comments and shares) tend to be higher compared to purely visual representations, although this study does not aim to quantify these differences statistically.

These narratives often incorporate sensory elements—movement, sound, and temporality-which appear to contribute to stronger emotional responses among viewers, thereby enhancing both experiential intensity and audience engagement.

This supports the argument that storytelling enhances not only experiential value but also circulatory value, enabling content to travel across digital platforms.

Furthermore, UGC expands the range of narrative voices, introducing more diverse and situated perspectives. However, this expansion is uneven, as visibility remains dependent on platform algorithms.

Based on these findings, several strategic directions can be proposed for destination management organizations (DMOs):

- Enhancing narrative depth: Encourage storytelling formats that integrate local voices, temporal progression, and experiential elements rather than relying solely on visual representation.
- Supporting participatory content creation: Facilitate collaboration between local communities and content creators to expand authentic storytelling practices.
- Balancing visibility and depth: Develop hybrid media strategies that combine short-form content for visibility with long-form narratives for cultural depth.

These strategies suggest that effective tourism communication should move beyond promotion toward narrative-based value creation.

### 5.5. Constraints and Structural Tensions

Despite its potential, digital storytelling is shaped by structural limitations.

First, algorithmic visibility favors short, visually engaging content. As a result, slower and more context-rich narratives are underrepresented (observed in only 6/36 cases).

Second, selective authenticity is evident across both models. While the boat is framed as "authentic," this authenticity is often partial and curated.

Third, narrative ownership remains contested. Although UGC introduces participatory dynamics, it does not necessarily ensure cultural accuracy or local control.

These findings suggest that digital storytelling is not a neutral tool but a negotiated space, shaped by competing logics of culture, media, and market, where the pressures of visibility and commodification often override the depth and plurality of cultural representation.

As shown in Table 1, the findings reveal a significant imbalance between visual representation (69.4%) and narrative depth (30.6%), indicating a tendency toward surface-level storytelling.

*Table 1.* Summary of coding results for digital storytelling analysis

| Dimension | Category | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Narrative Structure | Linear | 15 | 41.7% |
| | Non-linear / emergent | 21 | 58.3% |
| Cultural Representation | Surface-level (visual only) | 25 | 69.4% |
| | Contextualized (historical/social meaning) | 11 | 30.6% |
| Sensory Engagement | High (sound + movement) | 18 | 50.0% |
| | Low (visual dominant) | 18 | 50.0% |
| Interactivity | High (comments, engagement) | 14 | 38.9% |
| | Low | 22 | 61.1% |
| Sustainability Framing | Present | 9 | 25.0% |
| | Absent | 27 | 75.0% |

*Note: n = 36 digital artifacts analyzed.*

*Source: Author's analysis*

An additional constraint lies in the digital divide between content creators and local communities. Traditional boat artisans and local residents often face structural barriers in accessing digital infrastructures, including technological literacy, platform access, and resource inequality. As a result, narrative control may shift away from local actors toward external content producers, potentially resulting in epistemic displacement, where local knowledge systems are marginalized or reinterpreted through external narrative frameworks.

These structural constraints highlight the role of platform governance in shaping cultural representation. Algorithmic systems prioritize engagement metrics such as watch time, likes, and shares, thereby privileging content that is immediately appealing rather than contextually rich. Consequently, cultural narratives are subtly reconfigured to align with platform logics, reinforcing a cycle in which visibility is achieved at the expense of depth.

This dynamic suggests that digital storytelling operates within a political economy of attention, where cultural meaning is continuously negotiated under conditions of commodification and algorithmic control.

### 5.6. Synthesis and Theoretical Contributions

This study demonstrates that digital storytelling functions as a cultural mediating mechanism through which small-scale riverine heritage is transformed into experiential, symbolic, and economic resources within tourism systems.

By identifying two dominant storytelling modes—participatory experiential and institutionally structured—this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of narrative forms in digital tourism. More importantly, it demonstrates that storytelling is not merely a representational tool, but a constitutive process through which cultural meanings, values, and hierarchies are actively produced.

The study extends existing discussions in three key ways. First, it shifts the focus from large-scale or institutionalized heritage to small-scale, everyday cultural elements, highlighting their potential within creative tourism frameworks. Second, it reconceptualizes digital storytelling as a discursive and economic mechanism, rather than a purely communicative strategy. Third, it foregrounds the role of community participation in shaping both the authenticity and the distribution of cultural value.

In this context, the ba-lá boat can be understood as a form of "mobile heritage of memory"—a narrative medium through which spatial experience, historical depth, and cultural identity are continuously rearticulated within digital environments. This reconceptualization provides a foundation for future research on the intersection of digital media, cultural heritage, and sustainable tourism development.

The contributions of this study can be distinguished at two levels. At the theoretical level, it introduces the concept of micro-riverine heritage storytelling, expanding existing frameworks beyond large-scale heritage. At the practical level, it provides actionable insights for tourism stakeholders in designing narrative-driven communication strategies that enhance both cultural value and audience engagement.

This study contributes to the literature by repositioning digital storytelling as a constitutive mechanism of cultural value production rather than a supplementary communication tool. By foregrounding micro-scale riverine heritage, it challenges the dominance of scale and spectacle in existing tourism and heritage frameworks.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study has examined how digital storytelling reshapes the cultural meaning of the ba-lá boat within river-based tourism in the Mekong Delta. The findings demonstrate that digital narratives do not simply represent heritage objects but actively reconfigure them through processes of selection, abstraction, and platform-mediated circulation. In this sense, heritage is not pre-given but continuously produced through digital narrative practices.

Empirically, the analysis reveals a persistent imbalance between visual presence and narrative depth. While the ba-lá boat is widely circulated as a visual signifier of river authenticity, its deeper cultural, historical, and experiential meanings are often underdeveloped in dominant digital representations. In addition, the coexistence of user-generated and institutional storytelling reflects two contrasting narrative logics shaped by differences in authorship, structure, and platform governance.

Theoretically, this study contributes to digital heritage and tourism scholarship in three key ways. First, it introduces the concept of micro-riverine heritage storytelling, which foregrounds the narrative potential of small-scale, everyday cultural forms that have been largely overlooked in dominant heritage frameworks. Second, it develops a typology distinguishing participatory experiential storytelling from institutionally structured storytelling, thereby clarifying how narrative authority and experiential depth are distributed in digital tourism environments. Third, it proposes a process-oriented framework that conceptualizes digital storytelling as a mechanism of mediation through which cultural meaning and economic value are co-produced within the creative economy.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that sustainable tourism communication should move beyond surface-level visual representation toward deeper narrative construction and embodied cultural engagement. Strengthening collaboration between local communities and digital content producers may enhance both the authenticity and interpretive depth of tourism narratives, particularly in contexts where heritage is embedded in everyday practices.

However, this study is limited by its focus on selected digital artifacts within a specific temporal and geographical context. Future research could extend this framework by incorporating comparative cases across different riverine systems, as well as by examining the role of emerging technologies such as AI-generated content and immersive media in shaping heritage storytelling.

Overall, this study argues that digital storytelling should be understood not as a neutral communication tool, but as a constitutive cultural and economic mechanism through which heritage meanings are continuously negotiated, reconstructed, and valorized in contemporary tourism systems.

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