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American University *of* Armenia

Tales of Armenia: Digital Storytelling, Gamification, and Sustainable Tourism Promotion

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Armenia's Culture

Armenia encompasses a home to a wide range of ancient traditions, cultural storytelling, and historical landmarks that have shaped a unique identity across centuries. From the adoption of Christianity as a state religion in 301 A.D. to the preservation of oral folklore and music, Armenia holds one of the richest cultural narratives in the Eurasia. This deep-rooted heritage provides a strong foundation for modern cultural expressions, yet much of it remains unseen by the global public. While countries around the world are actively showcasing their culture to attract cultural tourism, Armenia's narrative still lacks the digital visibility and emotional resonance needed to captivate international audiences (Niculescu, 2009).

Armenia, with so many stories to tell, is both unexploited potential as a tourist destination, and a challenge, to find its audience, in an age where tourists are looking for experiences and not just tours. This can be put to better use via tourism, especially in the context of the digital space where national narratives can tap into larger audience, tech-savvy potential travelers.

### 1.2 Tourism and Digital Innovation

While a multitude of travel agencies dedicated to promoting Armenia strives to get people to visit the country, very few manage to connect with foreign travelers on a separate cultural level. This gap begs the question for the tourism industry to fully embrace the digital innovation. Virtual tours, interactive storytelling and gamification are some amazing tools that allow users a taste of cultural experiences long before a real visit. Research has indicated that these types of digital tools have a significant impact on travel decisions, positively affect

destination image, and facilitate interactions with local stories and emotional resonance (Doyle, 2018; Braimah et al., 2022).

International visitors are seeking more and more qualitative necessary content through online platforms as these platforms become more prominent and powerful. It also means we need a platform on which we will vividly, engagingly, and emotionally present Armenia's cultural narrative. Travel blogs and Instagram pages on Armenia have these simple techniques but they are not implemented effectively and sustainably ensuring minimal interaction and a really shallow understanding. Closing this digital gap is just as critical for visibility as it is for culture preservation, economic development, and responsible tourism (Nguyen Thi et al., 2024; Tovmasyan, 2019).

### 1.3 The Problem and Its Context

The main question of this paper is *“How can a tourism blog leveraging digital storytelling, interactivity, and sustainability attract new types of international tourists to Armenia?”* Other travel spots are moving toward interactive technology as ways to tell their story, while Armenia has not begun to fully utilize digital means in delivering its historical or traditional messages online. Mobile apps and websites fall short of deep emotional engagement as immersive storytelling platforms or gamified experiences fail to arise, which leads to low interest among potential tourists and low visibility of Armenia as a culturally rich, sustainable travel destination.

This is an even more challenging for sustainable tourism, not only sustainable tourism will be good for nature but also it will help to protect formal and informal sustainable intangible cultural heritage and help local people. As Mkrtchyan (2024) and Nguyen Thi et al. (2024) argue, tourism can facilitate regional development and cultural revival, particularly if coupled

with digital empowerment campaigns to raise public awareness. As such, it's not only a visibility issue, but an opportunity to utilize innovation to communicate the fullness of what authentic Armenian culture might be, within a framework that supports long-term benefits and adds an emotional weight to a fragmented, date-based, place-making strategy.

#### 1.4 Gap in Literature and the Need for Innovation

Although several studies have investigated upon the effect of storytelling, in general, in tourism marketing (Doyle, 2018; Braimah et al., 2022), relatively few studies have zeroed in onto the way digital storytelling through gamification and sustainable practices can reform the current tourism image of an underexploited yet rich culture region/country like Armenia. The integration of technology and cultural content, especially in the context of a post-Soviet nation still defining its global brand, remains underexplored in literature. There is a critical need to develop and study digital solutions that enhance both tourist experience and cultural preservation. Moreover, little scholarly attention has been given to how interactive and emotionally driven content, such as virtual tours or gamified storytelling, can be strategically applied to less-commercialized destinations to foster deeper user engagement, build national branding, and promote responsible travel behaviors.

#### 1.5 Tales of Armenia

*Tales of Armenia* is a digital travel blog designed to bridge the gap between Armenia's rich cultural heritage and the global audience through immersive storytelling. The platform incorporates historical narratives, personal reflections, and user-centered content that invites readers into the Armenian experience. The user interface is also integrated with interactive elements like quizzes, virtual tours, and gamification for increasing user engagement and

educational value. These features are meant to create an emotional connection of the user with culture which has been proven to positively influence tourists' attraction (Braumah et al., 2022).

However, in addition to engagement, Tales of Armenia serves as a platform for sustainable tourism promotion. This blog features off-the-beaten-path and over-looked spots, and at the same time calls on travelers to practice slower travel that helps preserve the nature and culture. Both Airbnb and Becker support particular tenets of governance of sustainable tourism and sustainable regional development principles (Mkrtychyan, 2024; World Bank, 2023). In this regard the platform not just a step needed in advertising but as a way of cultural advocacy

### 1.6 Relevance of the Project

This thesis presents an original travel blog project called Tales of Armenia, which incorporates storytelling, moments of virtual interaction, and gamified experiences to promote Armenian culture and heritage. This study satisfies both the academic and practical context by investigating how digital content has the potential to change how travel is perceived and how these perceptions can be used to promote sustainable forms of tourism. So, this blog acts as a case study of the digital tools that was introduced to make Armenia visible, important and interesting to int. tourists. This also contributes to broader discussions on sustainable tourism and cultural branding in developing tourism economies.

### 1.7 The Aim

This study project is to explore the relationship between digital innovation in terms of culture promotion of Armenia as a part of sustainable tourism. The research adds to the general discourse on innovation in tourism in less represented destinations by examining virtual tours, gamification and interactive storytelling as digital tools to enhance cultural presence of Armenia.

The goal is to create a platform that is intellectually meaningful and emotionally resonant, inspiring a more inclusive and sustainable model of tourism.

### 1.8 Research Question

To which extent Armenia's tourism industry can be reshaped using digital innovation, including gamification and virtual tours, website storytelling, and the promotion of sustainable tourism impacting the visibility of Armenia's culture?

### 1.9 Objectives

- To explore how digital storytelling impacts the promotion of Armenia's cultural narrative unveiled for the international audience.
- To examine the phenomenon of sustainable tourism in Armenia emphasizing the showcasing of the cultural heritage through the lens of tourism.
- To design and interpret the website Tales of Armenia integrating the digital elements, including virtual tours and gamification, as well as website storytelling.

## 2. Literature review

The intersection of tourism, digital innovation, and cultural storytelling has increasingly become a focal point in both academic and practical efforts to revitalize underrepresented destinations. Storytelling is recognized as a powerful tool to emotionally engage travelers and shape the image of a destination, particularly when it is delivered through immersive and interactive digital technologies (Brimah et al., 2022; Doyle, 2018). In the context of Armenia, a nation with a rich but globally underexplored cultural heritage, the adoption of such strategies remains limited. This literature review explores the theoretical and empirical foundations of storytelling in tourism promotion, the role of digital tools, particularly gamification and virtual tours, and the integration of sustainable tourism practices. It also identifies the gap in current literature where the *Tales of Armenia* project contributes using emotionally driven, tech-enhanced storytelling as a method for promoting Armenia's cultural visibility and sustainable travel.

### 2.1. Tourism Storytelling and Destination Branding

In the evolving field of tourism studies, storytelling has emerged as a critical strategy for enhancing destination branding, shaping tourist perceptions, and deepening emotional engagement with a place. Unlike conventional marketing, which often emphasizes visual aesthetics and logistical convenience, storytelling infuses the promotional narrative with meaning, memory, and identity (Chronis, 2012). By transforming destinations into emotionally resonant experiences, storytelling shifts tourists from passive consumers of information into active participants in place-making (Doyle, 2018). Such narrative co-creation reinforces not only the visitor identities through their sense of belonging but also cultural understanding and empathy which is key to sustainable tourism, and hence sustainable cultural heritage.

Research agrees that tourism storytelling is ultimately about communication strategies that convey a sense of place, cultural authenticity, and emotional depth. According to Mossberg (2008) destination images are surrounded by stories and these stories are connecting to cultural traditions, myth and local voices. They are individual mental maps that tourists use to connect emotional and informational elements of strange places. Building on this notion, Soleimani and Ghaderi (2021) explain that narratives that trigger strong emotions are memory-rich, and thus hold the key to tourist satisfaction, revisit, and oral communication. Thus, storytelling is directly proportional to destination loyalty, an increasingly important tourism metric in the competitive landscape of global tourism.

The increasing role of digital storytelling in tourism: recent research. Today with blogs, social media, and multimedia, destinations have more ammunition than ever to tell their stories to the world. Braimah et al. According to Braimah et al. (2022) storytelling using digital formats with a special emphasis on a personalized and visually rich narrative voice, may significantly increase user engagement. They state that posting emotional narratives, whether through video, blog, or podcast giving content, they make locations more attractive and memorable. Digital storytelling is an essential scalable solution for small or nascent tourist areas like Armenia, that may have underfunded or underdeveloped traditional tourism campaigns.

By utilizing these principals, the Tales of Armenia blog hopes to expand upon these ideas by using local stories, actual interviews, and history from rural villages to create an enticing digital narrative. Richards and Wilson (2006), for instance recommend that tourism stories are told in authentic ways while engaging the voices of local people, enabling cultural integrity. The blog turns cultural tourism into a two-way exchange between storytellers and an increasingly large, interested global readership by representing village-level stories in both

written and interactive forms. In addition, with the contribution from scholars such as Chronis (2012) and Doyle (2018), this co-creation of tourism experience is also the foundation to establish an affective link between site and traveler.

To sum up, storytelling in tourism is a multidimensional practice, not a mere narrative act, as it plays an important role in brand building, stimulating cultural interaction and enriching consumer experience. Utilizing these findings and adapting them to a culturally abundant but digitally absent environment such as Armenia, this research enables the forming of Tales of Armenia as an innovative sustainable destination marketing case.

## 2.2. Digital Innovation in Tourism

Digital transformation has reshaped the way tourism destinations engage with audiences. Sending postcards: Digital technologies enable pre-visit engagement, interaction during the visit and post-visit reflection, from augmented reality apps to immersive 360-degree virtual tours (Buhalis & Law, 2008 and Tussyadiah et al., 2018). Such tools are providing smaller or less represented destinations with an opportunity to promote themselves and reach the international markets without excess costs.

Gamification, especially, has developed as a way of increasing engagement. Gamified applications such as badges, quizzes, and narrative missions, can not only increase the dwell time on the tourism websites and the user experience (Xu et al., 2017), but also encourage learning (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). Gamified tourism platform characteristics have been found to impact tourist decision making and elicit emotional responses (Huotari & Hamari, 2012). Some of these studies argue for the connection of digital mechanics and cultural stories, and Tales of Armenia plans to adopt gamified learning about the Armenian culture.

In addition, virtual tours provide spatial context, and make a venue more visually familiar to a tourist and can be important for heritage tourism (Jung et al., 2015). They are also capable of student site visits without disturbing fragile landscapes and can help cut down any tourism planning-related carbon footprint. Such tools have been increasingly utilized by destinations like Japan, Scotland, and Peru as tools for digitally replicating sites that are either inaccessible or under threat (Beck et al, 2019).

Beyond engagement and simulation, digital platforms not only provide a channel for consumer engagement but also allow for the dynamic personalization of tourism experiences, a core expectation of contemporary consumer culture. Using data analytics and AI, websites can customize cultural elements, recommend routes, or stories based on individual interests and online activity of any user (Neuhofer et al., 2015). Such personalization contributes to user experience and increases the chances of users completing the conversion from the online world to the travel world (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015).

Furthermore, digital innovation is crucial for making cultural heritage accessible to everyone. In simpler terms, digital platforms eliminate cultural geographical and socioeconomic boundaries (Economou & Meintani 2011). For countries like Armenia that does not have the cultural tools and infrastructures on ground due to high dispersion and landlocked character, technology presents an innovative and scalable approach to link people with their heritage.

Tales of Armenia leverages this prospect through WordPress, where interactive components and virtual stories educate visitors on Armenian history and culture. By using these tools, the blog encourages users to engage with Armenian culture in meaningful emotionally and sustainable ways, not only raising awareness, but also inviting participation.

### 2.3. The Role of Social Media and User-Generated Content

Social media redefined the rules of the game of the tourism industry, as we know it today, through the channels detailed in the following section that is adapted to the digital age. Such platforms not only allow destinations and travelers to communicate with each other in real time but also allow the users themselves to transform into powerful narrators of travel. In their studies, Instagram, travel blogs, YouTube, and TikTok represent top channels, through which UGC influence destination branding and tourist decision-making process. Gretzel et al. (2006) claim that user-generated content provides an authenticity, a relatability, and a credibility that marketers do not reach with traditional marketing. As the content is created and spread by actual travelers, it may be viewed as more trustworthy and emotionally appealing than adverts from official authorities of tourism.

This has been especially true for Instagram, which has been the strongest visual storytelling platform. Instagram, with more than a billion monthly users, provides a platform for travelers to post aesthetically mapped-out experiences, which tend to inspire travel desires of followers (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Through the power of hashtags, geotags and influencer campaigns, pieces of the same puzzle that visualize collective stories about certain destinations put together. These narratives are particularly powerful as they are co-created by everyday users and spread within their social networks. Research has shown that travelers are turning to the social platforms when to determine where to go, rather than relying on adverts or guidebooks (Mariani et al., 2016; Sigala, 2017).

But even with limited storytelling depth, this content is usually legendary. For Armenia, media outlets such as Explore Armenia, Armenia Tour and Armenia Holidays give a lot of visual coverage of stunning mountains, old churches and national food. However, most of these

account posts show off a more aesthetic, visual side of culture than true storytelling. Often, they lack interpretative context, historic background or local voices, limiting Armenia to a collection of pretty pictures instead of a connection to a cultural narrative experience firsthand. This aligns with insights from Dwivedi et al. Venezia et al. (2021), claim that most of the destination accounts are poor in using UGC for a valid cultural promotion.

While Instagram also includes likes, shares, and comments, these functions do not provide many opportunities for educational engagement or storytelling. According to Xiang and Gretzel (2010), digital tourism is implementing the next generation of platforms where content modelling and delivery move beyond passive content consumption to interactive narratives. So here Tales of Armenia comes to bridge this gap. The blog provides these longform stories in place and time and feeling, unlike static images or one-sentence captions. It pushes generations of readers to not simply look at Armenia, but to think about it and experience it, interacting with digital tools that allow readers to take quizzes, go on virtual journeys, and participate in gamified content.

Moreover, social media algorithms favor trending content over original or educational content, potentially sidelining less popular locations or nuanced cultural histories (Gretzel 2017). While Armenia has a lot to offer to those who are tired of other destinations with more aggressive or better SEO digital campaigns, it remains an overshadowed destination. Projects such as Tales of Armenia are therefore crucial to redress these processes by intentionally crafting a narrative that is rich in cultural content while being digitally appealing.

To wrap up, social media and user-generated content obviously made destination marketing more democratic and gave voice to travelers, but it has its restrictions too. Their top-level approach to culture shows the vacant space for deep, honest, and interactive cultural

content platforms. And this is exactly the thing that Tales of Armenia is capable of creating, narrative instead of image, journey instead of destination.

#### 2.4. Sustainable Tourism and Cultural Preservation

Sustainable tourism is one of most talked solution to harmonize Cultural preservation and tourism development. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), sustainable tourism should re invest in local communities and preserve all cultural characteristics (tangibles and intangibles) (UNWTO, 2013). Given the numerous heritage sites in danger from environmental degradation and a general lack of awareness of heritage, sustainable tourism is even more relevant here in Armenia.

Mkrtchyan (2024) writes about Armenia's protected nature areas and the economic role of eco-tourism in the development of regions. In a similar vein, Tovmasyan (2019) finds that sustainable tourism in Armenia requires local involvement and collaboration with local authorities. The World Bank (2023) on Green and Sustainable Cities in Armenia and Georgia highlights the importance of combining digital campaigns to create awareness and promote responsible tourism activities.

Nguyen Thi et al. Santos & Djesimpa (2024) also add that sustainable tourism projects should comprise culture-sensitive governance and digital outreach strategies to sustain tourism demand and strengthen community identity. These results strongly fit with the sustainability focus of Tales of Armenia, encouraging travel that embraces heritage in a responsible and respectful manner. The researchers have acknowledged that the capabilities of locals to be a part of tourism planning and narratives are necessary for sustainable tourism to survive (Simpson, 2008; Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Destinations can facilitate cultural pride as well as educate

visitors by embedding local narratives into their tourism offer. This method complements Armenia's community-based tourism efforts and promote rural economic diversification.

Digital tools form the backbone of delivery for these sustainable objectives. According to Boley and McGehee (2014), bloggers and social media put out responsible tourism content which has the potential to influence ethical tourist behavior and thus diminish the potential for cultural commodification. With these narratives in mind, Tales of Armenia hopes to add to the conversation by providing an immersive stories, virtual experiences and interactive tools for not only popular but lesser-known heritage sites that need to be preserved.

Moreover, the integration of sustainability themes into digital content increases a destination's appeal to environmentally and socially conscious travelers, a rapidly growing segment of the global market (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005). These travelers often seek experiences that align with their values, such as low-impact travel, heritage conservation, and cultural authenticity. By curating content that educates and empowers users to travel responsibly, *Tales of Armenia* acts not just as a tourism blog but as an agent of sustainable cultural development

## 2.5. Bridging the Gap: A Digital Narrative for Armenia

Despite increasing interest in digital storytelling, gamification, and sustainability in tourism studies, few academic works examine how these elements intersect to promote the heritage of countries like Armenia. Most existing digital tourism models are based in Western Europe or East Asia, leaving a gap in scholarship for post-Soviet, small-scale destinations that aim to reintroduce their identity in the global market. Armenia's unique combination of deep cultural heritage and limited digital exposure offers a compelling case for study.

*Tales of Armenia* addresses this research gap by integrating place-based storytelling with interactive digital design and sustainability messaging. Its hybrid approach, part blog, part

learning platform, positions it as an innovative model for cultural tourism. As such, this research contributes to multiple scholarly discussions: destination branding, tourism innovation, heritage preservation, and sustainable travel.

More specifically, the project leverages theoretical insights from cultural tourism literature, such as the co-creation of experiences (Doyle, 2018) and emotional destination engagement (Mossberg, 2008) and applies them in a context where such models are underutilized. The design of *Tales of Armenia* draws upon digital tools validated in existing studies, like virtual tours (Jung et al., 2015) and gamification (Huotari & Hamari, 2012), yet adapts them to reflect Armenian values, narratives, and endangered heritage sites.

Furthermore, this research serves a dual purpose: academic and practical. Academically, it demonstrates how digital media can be localized and ethically applied to underrepresented cultural contexts. Practically, it provides a scalable framework for Armenia's tourism sector to attract conscious travelers, boost community-based tourism, and protect cultural assets. In doing so, the project not only fills a literature gap but also presents a viable alternative to generic and visually dominant tourism promotion strategies.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This literature review has explored a wide range of theoretical and empirical sources related to storytelling, digital innovation, and sustainable tourism. It has demonstrated that while each area has been studied extensively in isolation, their integration, especially in the Armenian context, remains underexplored. The review provides the intellectual foundation for the capstone project, supports the design of *Tales of Armenia*, and establishes a clear direction for the study's methodology and analysis. By bridging these perspectives, the research aims to deliver both academic insight and practical impact.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design and Rationale

This study adopts a **qualitative research methodology** to explore the ways in which digital innovation, specifically, gamification, virtual tours, and interactive storytelling, can reshape Armenia's tourism industry and enhance the visibility of its rich cultural heritage. The research also investigates the implications of promoting Armenia through sustainable tourism practices that integrate emotional and psychological dimensions of cultural identity. Given the exploratory nature of the research question and the study's focus on interpreting meanings, values, and perceptions, a qualitative approach is both appropriate and necessary (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research is designed to understand subjective experiences, cultural narratives, and the digital representation of identity, making it unsuitable for quantitative measurement. Instead, qualitative methods are used to elicit deep, contextual insights from participants and analyze the cultural narratives that already exist in Armenia's tourism ecosystem. The methodology aligns with the study's theoretical framework, which incorporates ideas from destination branding, storytelling theory, and sustainable tourism.

This design allows for the collection of rich, nuanced data from two key sources:

1. **Content analysis** of digital platforms and the original blog *Tales of Armenia*.
2. **Semi-structured interviews** I conducted semi-structured interviews with a cultural marketing expert at KATIL, which is an Armenian music and branding project engaging in cultural storytelling and heritage promotion.

#### 3.2 Research Question and Operationalization of Concepts

The central research question guiding this study is:

*To what extent can Armenia's tourism industry be reshaped using digital innovation, including gamification and virtual tours, website storytelling, and the promotion of sustainable tourism impacting the visibility of Armenia's culture?*

This question is answerable within the scope of qualitative inquiry and directly builds on the literature reviewed in previous chapters. It is not structured as a hypothesis since the study is exploratory rather than explanatory; however, the following **guiding proposition** informs the research:

*Digital storytelling, when combined with interactive design and sustainability messaging, enhances cultural visibility and emotional engagement with underrepresented destinations like Armenia.*

Key concepts are defined and operationalized as follows:

- **Digital Innovation:** The use of modern technological tools, such as gamified quizzes, interactive maps, and virtual tours, in the context of tourism marketing.
- **Tourism Storytelling:** The narrative representation of culture, history, and place identity through digital platforms, grounded in emotional and personal engagement (Braumah et al., 2022).
- **Sustainable Tourism:** Tourism that actively contributes to the preservation of cultural and natural heritage while supporting local communities, as defined by UNWTO (2013).

### 3.3 Methods of Inquiry

The research uses **two main methods** of data collection and analysis:

#### 3.3.1 Content Analysis

The first method is a **qualitative content analysis** of both existing tourism-related digital media and the researcher's original platform, *Tales of Armenia*. This method allows for the

evaluation of how Armenian culture is currently portrayed through online channels, and how it might be enhanced through the integration of storytelling, interactivity, and sustainability principles.

Three types of content were analyzed:

- Instagram accounts such as *Explore Armenia*, *Armenia Tour*, and *Armenia Holidays*.
- Travel blogs targeting Armenian tourism.
- The self-developed *Tales of Armenia* blog.

This analysis focused on identifying the presence or absence of four key features:

1. Narrative structure and emotional depth
2. Inclusion of local voices and cultural interpretation
3. Use of digital features (gamification, virtual elements)
4. Messaging around sustainability and ethical tourism

The content was manually coded using NVivo, applying both **deductive** codes based on themes from the literature (e.g., storytelling, authenticity, co-creation) and **inductive** codes that emerged from the material itself.

### 3.3.2 In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews

In connecting the content analysis to individual experiences, I conducted one semi-structured interview with a member from Armenian music and cultural branding company KATIL. I gained insight into how seasoned professionals utilized storytelling and the cultural aspect while promoting digitally throughout the interview. I had intended on doing more interviews, but due to time and availability of the participants, I focussed on just one interview.

I employed purposive sampling to choose someone experienced with culture and branding who could give specific insights related to my research question (Patton, 2015). Date of Interview:

March 2025 (30 min online) Using open ended questions, I recorded the interview (with verbal permission from them).

- Personal stories – Stories and experiences about Armenian life
- Cultural practices – Local traditions, rituals, and customs
- LOCAL KNOWLEDGE — Cultural objects and symbols are implicitly defined.
- Emotional and psychological: The way culture influenced identity and behaviour

### 3.4 Data Analysis

All interview transcripts and content materials were analyzed using **thematic analysis** based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the final report

I cross cross validated themes by comparing insights from the interviews with findings from the digital content analysis. NVivo software supported the coding process and helped visualize relationships between themes such as “authenticity,” “emotional engagement,” “interactive learning,” and “cultural sustainability.”

### 3.5 Unit of Analysis and Sample Description

In this research, the unit of analysis included:

- a). Instagram posts
- b). blog entries

- c). components of the *Tales of Armenia* platform
- d) A cultural insight interview from an expert

In this sample I contrasted the way culture was platformed for Armenia. With my emphasis on content, not quantity, one interview and strategically chosen digital materials were enough to suffice the research aims.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations and IRB Protocols

There was no personal (or sensitive) data involved in this research, so this research did not require IRB approval. Interviewee provided their verbal consent and was told that they could withdraw at any time. Final thesis included no names or specifics details.

All of the Instagram and blog content I were using was public. I made sure to attribute my sources when discussing their work. The ethical standards of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and American Psychological Association (APA) were followed in this research (APA, 2020).

### 3.7 Limitations

The tourism context here is specific; thus as a qualitative study, the research is not generalizable. Results are context specific, as Armenia has a unique cultural and digital infrastructure. Second, translation (Armenian English) obviously may have driven slight nuances or interpretative changes. Several limitations of the study are recognized, and to this end, methodology triangulation and clarity in coding procedures were used to mitigate the limitations.

In this chapter, the qualitative methodological approach, adopted to explore the possibilities for digital promotion of Armenia's culture through storytelling, gamification and sustainable tourism, was presented. This study identifies how best to share and promote this Armenian heritage to the international community through content analysis and semi-structured

interviews with experts in culture and tourism. The Tales of Armenia blog is both a case study of digital storytelling and also a strategic intervention that represents the theoretical as well as practical goals of this research. This method yields results that are based on observation, made without harming others, and are able to be analyzed accurately.

## 4. Data Analysis

### 4.1. Introduction

The results provide a qualitative content analysis of selected content from several Instagram accounts, travel blogs, and the Tales of Armenia platform. The main purpose was to examine through the lens of digital storytelling and user-generated content, how the narratives of Armenia's cultural heritage and tourism are being represented. The analysis pinpoints the strengths, gaps and opportunities in the current digital tourism landscape of Armenia through the lens of emotional engagement, cultural authenticity, digital interactivity, and sustainability messaging. Instagram accounts like @armenia.travels and blogs like Nomadic Matt, which offered an institutional vs individual-originated content comparison. In addition, this chapter illustrates the role of digital narratives in global representation of Armenia and in creating emotional connection of tourism customers to the destination. The results are thematically presented using the coding framework developed in the methodology and compared with the literature to critically situate Armenia's new digital cultural brand.

## 4.2 Methodological Approach

The study used a qualitative content analysis to analyze the digital portrayal of (or what is depicted by) Armenian culture in the following three elements: Instagram posts, travel blogs, and Tales of Armenia platform. The analyses included individual Instagram posts, blog posts describing cultural experiences, and original Tales of Armenia posts. NVivo helped manage data enabling both manual coding and thematic clustering of data. This study used a hybrid deductive–inductive approach to code the data, applying pre-established themes to the data based on the literature (e.g., storytelling quality, cultural authenticity, digital interactivity, and sustainability messaging) while also allowing new categories and concepts to arise freely from the data. This binary approach allowed for systematic yet adaptable analysis combining theoretical foundation over the latter along with discovery without conjecture constraints. The research purpose reflected adequately on the methodological approach, focusing on measuring emotional resonance, authenticity and ethical messaging in these emerging digital tourism narratives of Armenia.

## 4.3 Sources of Data

This research uses qualitative content analysis of user-generated content (UGC) and assesses the imagining of Armenian culture on the digital platform. This analysis centres on two main sources of data, Instagram accounts and travel blogs. Whereas, aforementioned platforms were opted on basis of their popularity among travellers for sharing experiences and information.

### 4.3.1 Instagram Accounts

The five Instagram accounts were chosen because they have to do with Armenian tourism, and they have high numbers of followers relating to post engagements, as well as lots of rich content in the form of images, videos, and captions.

*a). Explore Armenia (@exploreamenia)*

This is an official account operated by the Digital Diplomacy team of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which shares information about the cultural and natural diversity of Armenia. It serves as content which explains official tourism narratives, and it seems an example of its authoritative content as a result of its size and following.

*b). Armenia, The Hidden Track (@armenia.travel)*

This account is run by the Tourism Committee of Armenia, and chooses to highlight underrated attractions — i.e. experiences that exist off the beaten track but are still well worth the visit — urging users to tag #TheHiddenTrack when documenting their paths around the country. It provides a fresh take on Armenian tourism by concentrating only on off-the-beaten-path locations.

*c). Armenia Holidays (Armenia Holidays DMC & Inbound Tour Operator in Caucasus)*

This account from the local tour operator reflects different travel packages and experiences within Armenia. It provides useful information for potential tourists and show the country in its diversity.

*d). Armenia Tour and Travel (@armenia\_tour\_and\_travel)*

Centred around economical and engaging tours, this Instagram handle is focused on tickets and photos of places to visit within Armenia that can attract someone on a budget.

e). *Armenia Tours* (@armenia.tours)

This account gives an overview of what private and personalized tours in Armenia look like along with tailored experiences for different types of tourism in Armenia.

Such accounts were selected based on their variety and share in the dynamics of tourism, from the official account of Armenia to the private tour operator account, giving a complete picture of how tourism in Armenia is displayed in the virtual sphere.

### 4.3.2 Travel Blogs

Based on their concentration on Armenian tourism, their narrative depth, and whether they were published in the last five years (2020–2025), five travel blogs were chosen. The following blogs feature first-hand experiences, tips to travel in budget, local culture, and more.

#### 1. *Nomadic Matt*

Nomadic Matt is a classic budget travel blog that offers in-depth guides on visiting Armenia, with everything from saving money tips to cultural information and places to visit stories. Traveling is a big commitment both in time and money. Such a wide-ranging and in-depth blog proves to be a useful source of material to understand traveller perspectives. It does well at the same time in somehow elucidating traveling to Armenia for novices, although deep cultural gains and narratives are notably missing. It frames Armenia as a checkbox stop rather than a country with a living heritage.

#### 2. *Wayfarer Footprints*

In this blog, the focus was on a five-day itinerary on visiting the historical places and nature of Armenia. With personal anecdotes and safety tips, the author offers some practical advice for both solo adventuring and off-the-beaten-path itineraries. It offers emotional

warmth via story, via local encounter; a great example of storytelling by experience. But it does not delve deep into ethical or sustainable tourism themes.

### 3. *Hopping Feet*

The approach of this blog is adventure travel, and offers a self-drive guide to traveling through Armenia with emphasis on its wide landscape, monasteries and culture. It targets the independent traveller. The blog really focuses on the logistics aspect, but still finds a way to remain visually descriptive and does not allow for any interactive or cultural engagement. It loses the space to tell place based stories or heritage context.

### 4. *Adventures with Ensuite*

This blog is a detailed travel guide with all the necessary information on what it takes to visit Armenia, from visa rules to must-visit. Its down-to-earth style assists travellers in planning their trips. It has lots of practical information, but storytelling is sparse. That approach sees Armenia primarily as a destination, rather than as a destination filled with cultural content, firmly restricting any depth of emotion or narrative.

### 5. *Wander-Lush*

Here, the blog is themed around day trips into Armenia from surrounding and neighbouring countries, showing how easily accessible and culturally unique Armenia can be. It also serves the needs of travellers looking for multi-country itineraries in the area. While it helps build the desirable image of Armenia being open and more accessible, it is an ephemeral frame of what Armenian culture is. There is no cultural integration or narrative, and the work becomes an afterthought to Georgia.

These blogs were curated based on their personal narratives, day-to-day itineraries, and cultural observations, which yielded a nuanced qualitative analysis of blogged

representations of Armenian culture in the digital realm. The following lists of Instagram accounts and travel blogs provide datasets that have a diverse and rich sample for studying the essence of Armenian culture and travel. This variety of sources — official sites, private tour companies, and written accounts from travellers — gives a comprehensive overview of the topic.

### 4.3.3 Tales of Armenia Blog

"Tales of Armenia" is an interactive website created to promote the recognition of Armenian culture and heritage, using narrative approaches, virtual tours, and sustainable tourism promotion tools. This website aims to bring Armenian culture closer to a global audience, engaging readers on an emotional and educational level.

#### *Platform Features*

##### Virtual Tours

The blog includes 360-degree virtual tours that allow users to explore important cultural and historical sites in Armenia while being in a virtual environment. These tours cover historical landmarks of Armenia, outlining their significance, and they allow you to explore the sights before the actual visit.

##### Narrative Blog

The main body of the blog features narrative articles, where the stories present both personal stories and Armenian culture, communities, and customs. Each article deepens the reader's understanding of the topic by adding visual and audio videos that provide a sensory experience.

## Sustainable Tourism Milestones

The blog also engages in promoting sustainable tourism by offering educational quizzes that can help visitors understand the importance of responsible tourism, preserving local culture, and protecting the environment.

## Technological and methodological approach

The blog's web platform is built on WordPress, ensuring easy accessibility and modification of existing functions. The platform design includes virtual swords and gamification, which correspond to educational and emotional approaches to the dissemination and application of cultural heritage. The website aims to provide an emotional connection with a global audience using narrative content, gamified elements and local voices. This methodology combines narrative theories and technological innovations aimed at presenting and making recognizable the culture of Armenia.

## 4.4 Coding Framework and Analytical Themes

A coding framework was created using both deductive and inductive approaches to investigate how tourism-related content in the digital space represents aspects of the Armenian culture. A set of deductive codes were created based on concepts from the literature—storytelling, authenticity, interactivity, and sustainability—while the inductive codes emerged from the data itself during manual content analysis in NVivo. This aimed to analyse the way cultural significance, emotional trigger, and tourism ethics are communicated in Instagram posts, travel blogs and Tales of Armenia platform respectively. Four salient features formed the basis of thematic categories.

#### 4.4.1 Narrative Structure and Emotional Depth

This theme reconnoitres the narrative quality and emotional register of the content. Narrative coherence, rich description, and emotional language were coded from captions and blog posts. Blogs like *Wayfarer Footprints* and *Nomadic Matt* adopted a first-person, experiential writing style that introduced aspects of experiencing Armenian culture. For example, one entry speaks of the “eternal stillness of Geghard Monastery,” inviting the reader to experience the sight with their senses and feelings as well.

The posts on Instagram, though more visually saturated, sometimes held more contemplative perception. For example, *@armenia.travel* shared a caption about the “layers of forgotten wisdom embedded in every stone of Noravank,” along with a wide-angle shot. These kinds of examples are a testament to how digital narratives can evoke emotions among viewers beyond the delivery of information.

#### 4.4.2 Inclusion of Local Voices and Cultural Interpretation

This theme focused on the extent to which the local views, customs, and symbols of the state were integrated into the content. The term cultural authenticity recurred the most in the analysis, and included mentions of local guides, local craftspeople and locally-led tours.

Regional blogs such as *Adventures with Ensuite* often included stories from locals, such as chatting with a Dilijan potter who explains the symbolism behind the ancient ceramic shapes. Similarly, the *@armenia.tours*, one of their posts on the tours Instagram account was about a local village elder who recited Armenian proverbs for tourists, which is an understated yet powerful signifier of place-based narration. Subsequently, language was another major factor in representing a culture. Posts and articles that contained Armenian words (e.g. “lavash,” “khachkar”) or contextualized the meanings of words coded high in cultural interpretation. These

features suggested an appreciation for native knowledge and a desire to inform international audiences.

#### 4.4.3 Use of Digital Features (Gamification, Virtual Elements)

This category examined the extent to which digital tools had been employed to increase interactivity and engagement. A memorable feature of the Tales of Armenia blog was its inclusion of interactive quizzes in which readers could check their knowledge of Armenian myths and religious symbols. These also involved having panoramic heritage sites in 360°, helping increase spatial experience.

By comparison Instagram species utilized tagging, location-based stories, and highlights to create able discoveries that felt close to games to play. Give people something to do — for instance, *@exploreamenia* used story polls to boost engagement with a “guess the site” activity. Yet no platform featured any of the more sophisticated tools — such as AR (augmented reality) tools or even virtual reconstructions — that may have helped bridge or at least flesh out the digital gap now typical in attempts at interactive storytelling.

#### 4.4.4 Messaging Around Sustainability and Ethical Tourism

This theme explored eco-tourism, conservation, and tourism ethics references. Positive mentions included protecting heritage sites, supporting local businesses, or reducing environmental impact. Even the blog post about Lake Sevan that was on the Hopping Feet blog came out of the box by cautioning against overtourism in Lake Sevan and suggesting off-peak visits. A post on Instagram by *@armenia\_tour\_and\_travel* advised tourists to leave no trace when visiting Dilijan. These messages fit in well with UNWTO recommendations and reflect a rising consciousness about sustainability in Armenian tourism stories. Yet, gaps remain. The

overwhelming majority of posts did not specify a sustainability framework or partnership with a local NGO, which may be an opportunity for more effective ethical framing.

#### 4.5 Thematic Results

Thematic analysis of these Instagram accounts, travel blogs and the Tales of Armenia platform led to the identification of exposed commonalities along four overarching themes: emotional storytelling, cultural authenticity, digital interactivity and sustainability messaging. A comparison of content types revealed strengths and limitations of the digital representation of Armenian tourism.

##### a). Narrative Structure and Emotional Depth

The blogs, including those at Wayfarer Footprints and Nomadic Matt, showed a certain regularity in applying the craft of showing versus telling. They wrote revealing posts about their cultural experiences, from the serene nature of Geghard Monastery to the emotional depths of Armenian hospitality. Painted with a range of emotional tone, through abstract and sensory wording, these recitals facilitated a reader-destination bond.

In contrast, Instagram posts—pretty though they might be—were less vibrant in terms of the stories they told (the visuals on travel blogs could be beautiful as well, but very seldom did these posts manage the same emotionally affecting narrative heavyweight that digital storytelling can weigh in). Accounts such as *@armenia.travel* and *@exploreamenia* mostly featured eye-catching shots of points of interest, scenery, and cultural objects, but their captions tended to be descriptive or promotional rather than narrative in nature. Though this visual-first strategy provided compelling initial attraction, it frequently failed to engage emotional resonance or cultural context—both of which contribute to lasting destination appeal and narrative authenticity.

That being said, there are exceptions to this rule. In Particular, a reel by @armenia. travel that juxtaposed striking images with evocative text on the “wisdom hewn into rocks of Noravank.” This post went beyond the mere description, implying an historical continuity and cultural depth — prompting the viewer to pause and engage emotionally. Tales of Armenia struck the right balance between personal narrative and interactivity in its blog quizzes and emotive site description. Accountability reaches a new level with this hybrid approach by raising the emotional engagement above and beyond most social media posts.

#### b). Inclusion of Local Voices and Cultural Interpretation

Many bloggers recounted anecdotes with local people — guides, artisans, hosts — adding cultural context and personal experience. For instance, Adventures with Ensuite discussed chatting with a local artisan from Dilijan, adding authenticity to the story. Also Instagram accounts such as @armenia.tours included tales of local customs or allusions to cultural expressions like Armenian dances or proverbs. However, this was not consistent. All in all, blogs had more of an “insider” quality to them while Instagram seemed to lack that, leaning more towards attractive-marketing from the surface.

Tales of Armenia was designed to embed local knowledge and voices using story posts, so content could be rooted in symbolic language, local expression and anecdotes from villages. That is in line with the principles of place-based interpretation.

#### c). Use of Digital Features (Gamification, Virtual Elements)

The majority of accounts weighed out in this research resorted to common functions of Instagram such as area tagging, reels, story highlights, and also periodic interactive polls. For example, @exploreamenia also provided a fun (and basically lazy) way for viewers to engage via "guess the site" stories, giving them an opportunity to demonstrate their Armenian visual

familiarity. These tactics caused momentary engagement, but no significant action taken by users, nor cultural learning. Other profiles like @armenia followed suit. tours and @armenia. And while travel shared expertly curated content, you could not engage with anything beyond the image.

In reaching to the next level of digital interactivity, the Tales of Armenia platform went on introducing culturally themed quizzes, clickable story paths, and 360° virtual tours within the storytelling format. These elements prompted interaction beyond a visual one, allowing for greater immersion and cultural awareness. That degree of interactivity made it unique from almost anything else on the web at the time: a traditional blog would be about linear storytelling, while an Instagram page is about beauty over participation.

#### d). Messaging Around Sustainability and Ethical Tourism

Overview of messaging across Sustainability messaging was clearly missing across many platforms analysed. Travel blog Hopping Feet revealed unique travel itineraries by reminding readers to travel responsibly and avoid famous places, like Lake Sevan during high season. Likewise, @hikearmenia carried a pro-Leave No Trace message on Instagram, targeted at hikers and nature tourism in general with woven in ethics into the adventure-based content.

Nevertheless, the majority of accounts on Instagram did not specifically refer to sustainability or community involvement. On the other hand, Tales of Armenia embedded sustainability through the stories and gamified features promoting village-based tourism, sacred sites respect, and eco-responsible choices, creating the ethical digital tourism model.

#### 4.6. Beyond the Frame: Storytelling, Influence, and the Digital Identity of Armenia

This ultimately ensures a strong correlation between the findings of the content analysis and the literature in regards to storytelling, digital engagement and destination branding.

According to Doyle (2018): "Storytelling brings passive audiences to become emotionally engaged participants. In Wayfarer Footprints and Nomadic Matt blogs, the photos captured were placed in a context of time—where a timeless destination such as Noravank Monastery was paired with descriptions that engaged the reader in the emotional experience of that destination. Similarly, Braimah et al. (2022) contend that digital storytelling enhances user experience and destination attractiveness — a claim which is substantiated by the interactive features that are integrated in Tales of Armenia blog, such as quizzes and virtual tours.

The role of User Generated Content (UGC) is very important in shaping the perception of Armenia. UGC provides an insight into Armenia's local culture, traditions, and real-world experience, whereas institutional tourism boards usually project only better and smoother images of the monuments and the scenic beauty. Instagram posts from accounts such as @armenia.tours and @armenia.travels depicts that travellers hunt for emotion and engagement rather than just information and facts. Such posts and blogs are imbued with a greater level of trust — and authenticity — conveyed through personal stories from the village, or the inside scoop, this side of illustration is missing in institutional messages and posts.

Thus, digital storytelling is undoubtedly illustrated as an effective means of achieving emotional branding and cultural profile. The posts that were able to weave in a historical context or sensory details, or provide local stories, were far and away more successful at creating memorable and affective links to resonate with readers. Doyle (2018) describes storytelling with emotion to be more than the mere communication of fact, but rather creating a shared locus of memory between the storyteller and the audience. Tales of Armenia manages to do all that with these stories, stirring interest and pride, nostalgia, and empathy in relation to Armenian culture.

The analysis also shows a major difference between traveller-created content and institutional platform-created content. @exploreamenia may be all over the highest videos and marketing brochures, but their story telling seems short on emotion and narrative. Conversely, whilst might not be perfectly polished, but UGC creators record human emotions, cultural signification and real experiences that speak to a broader audience. Braimah et al. (2022) also claim that, due to the digital era, destination branding should be focused on people, rather than branding for the consumer, thus implying that local storytellers, travellers and even bloggers should be well-empowered, and thus making destination branding more of a local co-creation experience than a feature creation by destination campaigns. Overall, these results show that blending institutional visibility with the real, sentimental richness offered by UGC and independent storytelling platforms such as Tales of Armenia, could further strengthen Armenia's tourism marketing.

#### 4.7 Conclusion

The current chapter illustrated the conception of Armenian culture in digital tourism media via a qualitative content analysis of Instagram posts, travel blogs and Tales of Armenia platform. Four thematic areas were examined: narrative structure, cultural authenticity, digital engagement, and sustainability messaging. Ultimately, the results showed that blogs and certain UGC afforded rich emotional narrative and cultural representation, but institutional platforms were primarily characterized by visual storytelling with limited narrative engagement. The subsequent Tales of Armenia blog emerged as a hybrid model that integrated emotional branding and interactive elements with principles of ethical tourism practices. The findings supported the role of digital storytelling in cultural visibility and emotional engagement, further reinforcing theories proposed by Doyle (2018), and Braimah et al. (2022). Thus, subsequent

tourism plans should include not only professional marketing, but also a full consideration of authentic, emotionally charged, user-generated content, to bolster Armenia's cultural brand abroad.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the discussion of the results of the content analysis in relation to the study's objective. The purpose of the study is to investigate the role of digital storytelling, gamification elements, and sustainable tourism in increasing the culture exposure and affection in Armenia. Four trends were found in the Instagram accounts, travel blogs, and Tales of Armenia platform:

- Narrative depth,
- Authenticity,
- Interactivity,
- Sustainability messaging

This discussion links them to theoretical frameworks in destination branding, user-generated content (UGC), and tourism narrative. This part discusses how people build stories about Armenia and how both mainstream and non-affiliated authors participate in tourism marketing.

### 5.2 Interpreting the Thematic Findings

#### Emotional Storytelling and Narrative Engagement

The research results proved that it is sentimental to use the appeal in branding strategies. *Wayfarer Footprints* and *Nomadic Matt* engaged readers with language on an emotional level where, as Doyle stated (2018), the storytelling turns geographical locations into emotions.

Similarly, *the Tales of Armenia* blog also brought the Armenian culture to a more personal and symbolic level by appealing to the emotions of the readers. They identified the impact of emotional branding on the tourists' engagement with the destination through such emotionally rife stories. Official Instagram profiles such as @exploreamenia and @armenia.travel seemed more playful in terms of content, yet they had wonderful visuals. They are mostly using their captions primarily for selling, which reduces the factor of empathy and the importance of storytelling in official captions.

### Cultural Authenticity and Local Representation

The need for authentic and Indigenous representation and interpretation of culture was another theme that stood out. Other blogs like, *Adventures with Ensuite* conveyed contacts with the locals with reference to Richards and Wilson's (2006) experiential authenticity interpretation. Similarly to Braimah et al., (2022), *Tales of Armenia* relied on the local language, traditions, and individuals' stories to establish place identity. In this respect, personal stories-built trust and cultural appreciation that official statements did not always provide. Focusing on the institution, there was a tendency for the image of culture as planned and commercialised. This highlights the need to strike a balance between mainstream theorization and the tangible and cultural orientation of local or independent institutions.

### 5.3 Role of User-Generated Content (UGC)

UGC play an important role of influencing people's perceptions towards Armenia as a tourism destination globally. In contrast to institutional marketing, UGC presents concepts that are more vivid, intimate, and engaging when it comes to travelling. Hence, spontaneity and emotions are present when travellers write about their experiences, and such posts play a role as word-of-mouth communications (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014) influencing destination image and

decision making. Personal stories through Instagram accounts like @armenia.tours, and blogs like *Nomadic Matt* present a credible narrative and there is a sense of credibility.

The core value of UGC can be seen in the aspects of co-creation of emotions. Unlike top-down promotion, traveller-generated content hosts others as part of the continued discourse and memory, coming from Braimah et al. (2022) as co-creative branding. UGC makes the place relatable by directly portraying social interactions, cultural experiences, and personal opinions. However, UGC has limitations. It tends to be short on strategic communication, and in the process, it gives out confusing or even mixed messages. While institutional accounts such as @exploreamenia have a consistent brand image and formal language, UGC may miss the big picture. It can be either sustainability or the preservation of heritage. Whereas other apps provide a more traditional learning experience, Tales of Armenia distinguishes itself with interactive quizzes, personal blog-style narratives, and prompts (like visiting a local farm) that encourage users to interact with Armenian culture through both tourist-like lenses and activist points of view. It is all about emotional storytelling rather than the usual tourism websites, slower and meaningful travel, and centred around the local voices that are otherwise missing in institutional content. This hybrid model makes the Tales of Armenia not only a digital tourism tool, but also a cultural bridge that fills the gaps of authenticity, emotional depth, and ethical awareness in the current digital promotion ecosystem of Armenia.

#### 5.4 Digital Storytelling and Interactivity

Incorporation of features including quizzes, polls, and virtual experience is important in addressing the global and young generation communities during the process of digital storytelling. These forms of content may not suffice given that current tourists are more in search of active, endogenous content that allows them to participate (Peterson, 2018). Interactivity can

be in terms of active engagement by making it possible for the users to search, interact or modify their content in any way (Tussyadiah et al., 2018). Among the key examples of innovative activities in the sphere of tourism promotion, the *Tales of Armenia* blog may be viewed. It turns into an active rather than a passive viewing experience by superimposing cultural questionnaires on and adding 360° tours to the experience, . These features correspond to the tendencies in today's digital tourism and interactive experiences emphasised emotions (Huotari & Hamari, 2012).

However, it is not only visually kinetic while still maintaining the linear, reactive scrolling behaviour of most apps. Like most types of blogs, travel blogs don't necessarily incorporate interactive features, besides text and images that can connect with the target audience. This means that there are significant opportunities, as well as gaps in utilising digital interactivity as a part of Armenia's current state of digital tourism.

### 5.5 Sustainability Messaging in Digital Tourism

Sustainability was considered as a relatively minor theme in both the UGC and institutional narratives. However, sporadic posts included responsible tourism recommendations like travelling in the low season to minimise the number of visitors to Lake Sevan by *Hopping Feet* as well as Leave No Trace principles by @hikearmenia. For the most part, institutional content was primarily leisure-driven, with limited to no environmental or community-based messages. This is contrary to the current trends in STC trends where messages focus on connexion with the local environments and heritage (UNWTO, 2013).

Comparing to the previous tales, *Tales of Armenia* showed even better example of combining ethical narratives into the storytelling, for example, with regard to sustainable tourism and developing unfamiliar villages. This is in line with Nguyen Thi et al. (2024) who propose

that tourism campaigns should embrace ethical tourism principles. All in all, there is a need to incorporate sustainability as one of the main digital themes in Armenia, which would also support the want for more cultural and sustainable, as well as enticing and engaging communication.

#### 5.6 The Strategic Divide: Institutional vs. Independent Platforms

It has been also noted that the majority of posts originated from official accounts, including state tourism promotion accounts (@exploreamenia, @armenia.travel), while other social media users who are travelling and sharing their insights (bloggers, travel enthusiasts) make up for a significant portion as well. The focus remains centred on the aesthetic appeal, alongside the strategized promotion. As it was stated, these accounts focus on creating bulk awareness and they do not capture emotions, local audiences or interactive narratives. As a result, many of them are polished and lack strangers' perspectives, depth, and realism. Still, there are emotional, engaging, and locally oriented UGC and platforms like *Tales of Armenia*. These narratives are characterised by insider point of view, cultural imagery, and the orientation towards experience. But it may not necessarily be strategic, comprehensive, or extensive as the campaigns run by an institution.

To cater for this, the hybrid models are required. It is recommended for institutions to work with content makers, bloggers, and other local narrators for existing culture, emotions, and ethics. In the same process, it is also possible for such professionals to guarantee visibility, as well as a genuine representation of the community. The platform mindfully incorporates narratives that derive from the local voices, symbolic references, and experiential lessons that were largely absent from institutional posts. Quizzes and virtual tours are also employed not only to inform but also to reach users emotionally – forging a personal and ethical link to the places expounded on. In this

way, *Tales of Armenia* presents a realistic but innovative answer to the absence of emotive narratives and sustainability issues in contemporary tourism communication. It is a model of a kind of culturally aware story that can fill in spaces that more commercial or visual-only approaches do not.

## 5.7 Summary

The content analysis of the analysed videos was reflected through the lens of current literature on digital storytelling, destination branding, UGC and sustainability which was done in this chapter. It indicated that emotions are effective in increasing attention, how location can be used to maintain credibility and how interactivity turns tourism into an active endeavour.

Although institutional platforms give professional impression and access to a wider audience, independent creators give emotional and cultural content depth. Strengthening such networks and ideas, *Tales of Armenia* became an example of storytelling, gamification, and sustainability applied and promoting Armenia's cultural identity. Moving forward, Armenia's tourism strategy would benefit from blending institutional authority with grassroots creativity to co-create a dynamic, ethical, and emotionally compelling digital tourism identity.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Overview of the Study

This thesis evaluates the transformative potential of digital storytelling, gamification, and sustainable tourism in promoting Armenia's cultural identity within the global tourism marketplace. The study examined how digital innovation can enhance emotional engagement, cultural authenticity, and responsible tourism practices. It is done through platforms such as travel blogs, Instagram accounts, and the original *Tales of Armenia* blog. The research question addressed to what extent Armenia tourism industry can be reshaped through these digital tools to create a culturally visible, emotionally resonant, and ethically grounded travel experience. The research incorporated the content analysis of Instagram photos and videos, travel blogs, and *Tales of Armenia* with the help of the framework consisting of four themes: narrative depth, local representation, interaction, and sustainability. The study identified that there is a clear gap between institutional tourism content and UGC. However, the study showcased the enrichment possibility of the integrative storytelling model.

### 6.2 Summary of Key Findings

The idea of the focus on storytelling is evident as another clear conclusion from this study. Some blogs such as *Nomadic Matt* and *Wayfarer Footprints* told more than the storeys, they gave stellar feelings of travelling. Such storeys are consistent with Doyle's (2018) notion of emotionally proximal narratives to build destination loyalty and cultural connexion. Storeys including narratives, this approach was reflected in *Tales of Armenia* and was designed as a tool that "sensitively" urges the readers to immerse into the Armenian culture. The second major factor highlighted was cultural relevance and indigenous people. Despite covering Armenia with famous visuals, big platforms did not give the culture much depth though. Whereas travel

bloggers and *Tales of Armenia* as the platform promoted community individuals, traditions, and language-related content, thus supporting the fact stated by Braimah et al (2022) regarding strong co-created and insider narratives in destination branding.

There is significant potential in the element of digital interactivity, despite it being rarely employed in most traditional blog posts and Instagram posts. In selfies, quizzes, 360° virtual tours, and interactive storey paths in *Tales of Armenia* indicated how information may not only be presented but also perform to alter the spectators to engaged stakeholders. Last but not the least, it became clear that there is a significant lack of responsible approach to sustainability in communication. Of those, only eco-tourism voices (specifically @hikearmenia) include responsibility as a concept, though blogs did not pick up on it either. *Tales of Armenia* was special as it integrated sustainability and ethical tourism into the storytelling while proving that such forms of digital campaigns can educate, entertain, and positively influence the travellers.

### 6.3 Contributions to Knowledge and Practice

The research presented in this thesis applies to three interconnected areas: digital tourism, cultural branding, and sustainability of storytelling. First, it offers an insight into the ways appealing, argumentative, and culturally meaningful storeys can reshape the culture-branding approach in emerging locations such as Armenia. Second, it provides a practical example—*Tales of Armenia*—of how it is possible to develop hybrid digital platform to link institutional and authoritative structures with genuine grassroots initiatives. Third, the thesis broadens the field of narrative analysis by demonstrating that other features than narratives help constitute perceptions and learning processes. This contributes to literature that defines tourism merely in terms of visuals or blogs, providing a complex picture of the user experience. Besides, the findings substantiate the research on tourism that it is high time cultural promotion was not limited to

state-sponsored campaigns. Rather, future tourism branding is going to be based on shared community experiences and local people and culture involvement, thus, meaningful emotional connexion.

#### 6.4 Limitations of the Study

While the study offers rich insights, it is not without limitations. The analysis was confined to English-language content and a limited number of Instagram accounts and travel blogs. This may exclude valuable narratives created in Armenian or Russian and those shared on alternative platforms such as YouTube or TikTok. Apart from that, while the *Tales of Armenia* platform was used as a case study, its audience reach was in the early stages of development during the time of research. A longitudinal study with analytics could offer further evidence of impact. Lastly, this research did not include in-depth interviews with content creators or tourism officials, which could have added deeper layers of interpretation to the content analysis.

#### 6.5 Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies can build on this work in several ways. First, expanding the dataset to include more diverse languages, content platforms, and content types (e.g., video storytelling) would allow a broader cultural and demographic perspective. Second, integrating audience analytics—such as user engagement metrics, click-through rates, and sentiment analysis—could quantify the emotional and behavioural impact of digital storytelling. Third, collaborative ethnographic methods, such as interviews with tourists, bloggers, and tourism board officials, could enrich our understanding of narrative production and perception. Finally, future research should investigate how storytelling intersects with diaspora identity, given Armenia's significant global diaspora and its role in sustaining cultural memory and engagement.

## 6.6 Final Thoughts

In an age where attention is currency and authenticity is influence, storytelling has become more than just a marketing tool—it is a cultural bridge. Armenia, with its centuries-old narratives, has immense potential to tell stories that are not only heard but also felt. This thesis demonstrated that when digital storytelling is grounded in emotional truth, local voice, interactivity, and sustainability, it can transform the way a nation is seen and remembered. *Tales of Armenia* is not just a blog—it is a window into how culture, memory, and technology can converge to reshape the future of tourism. The challenge ahead is not just to tell stories, but to tell them well, tell them ethically, and let them echo beyond borders.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A - Instagram Handles Chosen

#### a). **@explorearmenia**

A semi-official page by the MFA Digital Diplomacy team of Armenia, most of the content is curated and focuses on cultural and heritage content, and some public diplomacy outreach.

<https://www.instagram.com/explorearmenia/>

#### b). **@armenia.travel**

Armenia's official tourism page, managed by the Tourism Committee, includes stunning images, the #TheHiddenTrack campaign, and other content focused on less well-known destinations.

<https://www.instagram.com/armenia.travel/>

#### c). **@armeniaholidays**

Private INBOUND tour operator since 1997, tiny following, basic info on hotspots and historical monuments.

<https://www.instagram.com/armeniaholidays/>

#### d). **@armenia\_tour\_and\_travel**

Economical Pvt Travels emphasizing customized tour packages and experiences with casual tourist-driven interactions and visuals.

[https://www.instagram.com/armenia\\_tour\\_and\\_travel/](https://www.instagram.com/armenia_tour_and_travel/)

#### e). **@armenia.tours**

A major tour operator of private & guided tours, posting user-tagged content and destinations in highlights

<https://www.instagram.com/armenia.tours/>

## Appendix B - Links of Blogs

1. Adventures with Ensuite. (2023, May 4). *The essential Armenia travel guide: Tips, visa, currency, and itinerary*. <https://adventureswithensuite.com/armenia-travel-guide/>
2. Hopping Feet. (2024, January 6). *Armenia in 1 week: A self-drive itinerary through the Caucasus*.  
<https://hoppingfeet.com/armenia-in-1-week/>
3. Nomadic Matt. (2023, August 22). *Armenia travel guide*.  
<https://www.nomadicmatt.com/travel-guides/armenia-travel-guide/>
4. Wayfarer Footprints. (2021, November 23). *Spending five days in historic Armenia*.  
<https://www.wayfarerfootprints.com/post/spending-five-days-in-historic-armenia>
5. Wander-Lush. (2020, September 9). *How to take a day trip to Armenia from Tbilisi, Georgia*  
<https://wander-lush.org/armenia-day-trip-from-tbilisi/>

## **Appendix C – Tales of Armenia Website**

<https://talesofarm.space/>

## Appendix D – Interview from Katil Band

[https://www.instagram.com/katil\\_official/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/katil_official/?hl=en)

This interview is featured on the website article and adds value to the credibility of the content the website delivers to the user.

|   | <b>Questions</b>                                     | <b>Answers - Katil Band Group Members - AM</b>                                                                                                              | <b>Answers - Katil Band Group Members - EN</b>                                                                                                                                   |
|---|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Can you tell us about your background as a musician? | Խմբի անդամների մեծ մասը երաժշտության հանդեպ սերն ու տաղանդը ժառանգել են ընտանիքի անդամներից, ովքեր նույնպես երաժիշտներ են եղել:                             | Most of the band members inherited their love and talent for music from family members who were also musicians.                                                                  |
|   |                                                      | Խմբի անդամները մինչ Կաթիլի ստեղծումը թրծվել են Հայաստանում գործող տարբեր ավանդական խմբերում և այդտեղից մեծ գիտելիք ստացել հայ ավանդական երաժշտության մասին: | Before the formation of Katil, the members had been nurtured within various traditional ensembles operating in Armenia, where they gained deep knowledge of Armenian folk music. |
|   | How did you start your journey in music, and what    | . Երաժշտության հանդեպ մեծ սերն ու ձգտումը կանխորոշել էին մասնագիտական ուղին դեռ մանկուց:                                                                    | A profound love and aspiration for music predetermined our                                                                                                                       |

|                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>inspired you to pursue it professionally?</p>                                                                                      | <p>Մեր շրջապատող երաժշտական միջավայրը մեծ դեր ունեցավ այս ոլորտում մասնագիտանալու համար:</p>                                                                                                        | <p>professional path from childhood. The musical environment surrounding us played a major role in choosing this field as our profession.</p>                                                                          |
| <p>2 What role does Armenian music play in your work, and how do you incorporate Armenian culture and traditions into your music?</p> | <p>Հայկական երաժշտությունը մեր ստեղծագործությունների անբաժանելի մասն ու հիմքն է: Մենք ամենամեծ էներգիան զգում և ստանում ենք հենց ֆոլկլորային երգերը կատարելուց:</p>                                 | <p>Armenian music is the inseparable core and foundation of our creative work. We feel and receive the greatest energy precisely when performing folk songs.</p>                                                       |
| <p>Are there specific elements of Armenian folklore, history, or language that influence your compositions or performances?</p>       | <p>Հայկական ժողովրդականության տարրերը հենց այն երգերն են, որոնք մեզ ժառանգվել է Հայկական լեռնաշխարհի բոլոր տարածաշրջաններից, իսկ մենք դրանք կատարում ենք իրենց բնորոշ բարբառներով, առանց երգերի</p> | <p>The elements of Armenian folk tradition are embodied in the songs passed down to us from all regions of the Armenian Highlands. We perform them in their original dialects, without altering the folk melodies,</p> |

|   |                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|---|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|   |                                                                                                | Ֆոլկլորային մեղեդու փոփոխման՝<br>զերծ պահելով դրանք աղավաղումից:                                                                                                                                                                     | thereby preserving them<br>from distortion.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 3 | How do you<br>balance traditional<br>Armenian music<br>with contemporary<br>styles and trends? | Մենք Կաթիլում հայկական երգերն ու<br>երաժշտությունը կատարում ենք<br>հայկական ավանդական և<br>ժամանակակից երաժշտական<br>գոծիքների համադրմամբ և<br>գործիքավորմամբ: Օգտագործում<br>Արևելյան և Եվրոպական լադային<br>համակարգերի մեծ բազան: | At Katil, we perform<br>Armenian songs and music<br>through a fusion of<br>traditional and<br>contemporary Armenian<br>instruments and<br>arrangements. We draw on<br>an extensive range of<br>Eastern and European<br>modal systems.                                         |
|   |                                                                                                | Դա մեզ համար երբևէ մարտահրավեր<br>չի եղել, այլ ինքնաբուխ ցանկություն:<br>Մենք մինչ Կաթիլը և միմյանց<br>ճանաչելը մեր մտքերում դրանք<br>նվազել ենք միասին, իսկ Կաթիլն այդ<br>մտքերից ծնված զավակն է եղել:                              | This has never been a<br>challenge for us, but rather a<br>spontaneous desire. Even<br>before the creation of Katil<br>and before we knew each<br>other, we were already<br>playing these melodies<br>together in our minds—<br>Katil was born from those<br>shared thoughts. |

|                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Do you find it challenging to blend modern influences with traditional Armenian sounds, or do they complement each other naturally?</p> |                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                         |
| <p>4 Which traditional Armenian instruments do you use in your music?</p>                                                                  | <p>Հայկական ավանդական գործիքները մեզ մոտ գերակշռող մասն են կազմում, որոնցից են՝ Բլուլ, Դուդուկ, Պկու, Պարկապզուկ, Դափ, Կոպալ, Դհոլ:</p>    | <p>Traditional Armenian instruments form the dominant part of our instrumentation, including the Blul, Duduk, Pku, Parkapzuk, Dap, Kopal, and Dhol.</p> |
| <p>Do you combine these with modern instruments or genres, and if so, how does this</p>                                                    | <p>Այս ամենին միացնելով համաշխարհային և ժամանակակից երաժշտական գործիքներ՝ ստանում ենք հիբրիդային լուծումներ, որոնք էլ կիրառում ենք մեր</p> | <p>By combining these with global and modern musical instruments, we create hybrid solutions that we incorporate into our</p>                           |

|   |                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|---|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|   | fusion enhance the music?                                                                                  | ստեղծագործություններում, ստանալով նոր հնչողություն:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | compositions, resulting in a fresh sound.                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 5 | In what ways do you think music reflects the cultural identity of Armenia?                                 | Հայ ավանդական բազմաժանր երաժշտությունն իր բովանդակությամբ լիովին կարողանում է նկարագրել հայկական լեռնաշխարհի գեղեցկությունը, Հայ ժողովրդի նիստն ու կացը, ավանդույթները, նկարագրում է ծիսակարգերի բովանդակությունը և այլ:                                                           | The diverse genres within traditional Armenian music are rich in content, fully capable of depicting the beauty of the Armenian Highlands, the lifestyle and traditions of the Armenian people, as well as the meanings behind various rituals. |
|   |                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 6 | Can you share a specific piece or song you've written that you feel truly captures the essence of Armenia? | Նման երգերը բազմաթիվ են, որոնք արտացոլում են Հայ ժողովրդի էությունը, նիստն ու կացը, որոնցից է օրինակ Խիո-Խանե երգը, որը սանդի երգ է և նկարագրում է, թե ինչպես են խնոցի անելուն զուգահեռ սիրած յարին գովերգել ու սիրային խոստովանություններ արել: Շատ անգամ այս երգը կատարել են նաև | There are many such songs that reflect the essence, lifestyle, and character of the Armenian people. One example is the song Khio-Khane, a butter-churning song that describes how, during the churning process, people would praise their      |

|   |                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|   |                                                                                                                     | <p>համայնքային միջոցառումներին<br/>պարելիս:</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <p>beloved and make romantic<br/>declarations. This song has<br/>often been performed during<br/>community events<br/>accompanied by dance.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|   |                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 7 | <p>How do you see the<br/>role of music in<br/>promoting Armenia<br/>as a cultural and<br/>tourist destination?</p> | <p>Տարիների ընթացքում համերգային<br/>շրջագայությունները ցույց են տվել, որ<br/>Հայկական ավանդական<br/>երաժշտությունը մեծ տպավորություն<br/>է թողնում բոլոր ազգերի<br/>ներկայացուցիչների վրա, նրանք մեծ<br/>ոգևորությամբ կիսվում են իրենց<br/>ստացած տարբեր դրական<br/>էմոցիաներով, ինչը նաև կարող է<br/>գրավել ավելի մանրամասն<br/>ծանոթանալ հայկական մշակույթին և<br/>բնությանը:</p> | <p>Over the years, our concert<br/>tours have shown that<br/>Armenian traditional music<br/>leaves a strong impression<br/>on people of all<br/>nationalities. They<br/>enthusiastically share the<br/>various positive emotions<br/>they experience, which<br/>often inspires them to<br/>explore Armenian culture<br/>and nature more deeply.</p> |
|   |                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 8 | <p>Do you participate<br/>in any cultural<br/>events, festivals, or</p>                                             | <p>Մի քանի անգամ համերգներ ենք<br/>ունեցել Հայաստանի տեսարժան<br/>վայրերում, որտեղ հիմնական լսարանը</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <p>We have performed<br/>concerts several times at<br/>Armenia’s notable</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

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|                                                                           | <p>collaborations with the tourism sector to promote Armenian music?</p> <p>եղել են արտասահմանից ժամանած հյուրեր: Իսկ նման նախաձեռնությունները շատ բարձր ենք գնահատում՝ կարևորելով աշխարհին պատշաճ ներկայանալու առաքելությունը:</p> | <p>landmarks, where the primary audience consisted of guests from abroad. We greatly value such initiatives, as they serve the important mission of presenting Armenia to the world in a dignified manner.</p> |
|                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <p>9 What trends do you foresee in the future of Armenian music?</p>      | <p>Մեր առջև դրված կարևորագույն խնդիրներից մեկն ավանդական երաժշտության տարածումն է հենց հայերի շրջանում՝ նպատակ դնելով վերականգնել լայնածավալ ծիսակարգերի հայկականացումը:</p>                                                        | <p>One of our most important missions is to promote traditional music among Armenians themselves, with the aim of restoring and reintegrating Armenian elements into large-scale ritual practices.</p>         |
| <p>10 Do you feel that there are challenges to preserving traditional</p> | <p>Մարտահրավերներն արդի աշխարհում բազմաթիվ են: Հաշվի առնելով համացանցի միջոցով անդադար տարածվող անորակ</p>                                                                                                                          | <p>There are numerous challenges in today’s world. Considering the constant spread of low-quality songs</p>                                                                                                    |

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| <p>Armenian music in a world that is constantly evolving?</p> | <p>բովանդակությամբ երգերն ու տեսահոլովակները, մենք պետք է դիմադրենք՝ ստեղծելով և տարածելով որակյալը: Սա վերաբերում է ոչ միայն հայկականին, այլ ողջ աշխարհի կողմից ստեղծվող որակյալ բովանդակությանը.</p> | <p>and music videos through the internet, we must stand our ground by creating and promoting high-quality content. This applies not only to Armenian music but to all quality content produced around the world.</p> |
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