

How much pain is enough? Emotional framing and engagement mechanisms in short-form dark tourism video

Ha An Le (Dong-A University, South Korea)

Hae Jin Yoon (Dong-A University, South Korea)

INTRODUCTION

Tourism destination marketing has increasingly shifted toward short-form video content, where destinations must communicate complex meanings within highly constrained time formats. In such environments, emotional framing plays a central role in guiding how audiences interpret and respond to narrative information, as different emotional elements can be selectively emphasized within limited viewing time. Prior research suggests that storytelling can shape audience responses by immersing individuals into a narrative world, thereby enhancing the impact of emotionally framed content (Appel & Richter, 2010; Xu et al., 2022).

Prior research suggests that emotional framing can simultaneously generate affective and cognitive responses, such as emotional attachment and perceived learning value. Persuasion theory indicates that these responses emerge through both emotional engagement and cognitive processing during story experience (Van Laer et al., 2014). However, these responses are typically treated as parallel outcomes and are implicitly assumed to contribute similarly to behavioral engagement and intention. This assumption may be limited in short-form digital contexts, where user behaviors, such as liking, sharing, or exploring content are immediate, low-effort, and more likely driven by intuitive rather than deliberative processing.

This issue becomes particularly relevant in dark tourism storytelling, where narratives often integrate contrasting emotional elements such as pain (e.g., suffering and loss) and pride (e.g., resilience and collective identity). Prior research suggests that emotional intensity and experiential immersion play a critical role in shaping persuasive outcomes (Biran et al., 2011). Under constraints of time and attention, emphasizing one element inevitably reduces the salience of the other. Yet, it remains unclear how this emotional composition shapes audience processing and whether affective and cognitive responses are equally effective in driving engagement and subsequent behavioral intentions.

This study addresses this gap by examining how pain–pride framing influences self-attachment and perceived learning value, and how these distinct pathways differentially affect digital engagement and visit intention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Drawing from narrative persuasion theory, emotional framing is conceptualized as the relative dominance of pain versus pride within a narrative, operationalized through the proportion of narrative content devoted to each emotional element (Appel & Richter, 2010; Van Laer et al., 2014). From a dual-processing perspective, narrative experiences involve both affective and cognitive responses (Appel & Richter, 2010). The affective pathway is captured through self-attachment, conceptualized as a form of attachment in which the narrative becomes emotionally meaningful and integrated into the viewer's sense of self, consistent with attachment-based perspectives on emotional bonding and self-related internal models (Snyder et al., 2012). The cognitive pathway is represented by perceived learning value, referring to the extent to which the content is perceived as informative, meaningful, and capable of enhancing understanding (Poria et al., 2004). Emotional framing is expected to differentially activate these pathways (Nabi, 2003; Oliver, 2008). Pride-oriented framing is likely to enhance self-attachment by fostering emotional resonance (Van Laer et al., 2014), whereas pain-dominant framing increases perceived learning value by encouraging reflection (Poria et al., 2004; Biran et al., 2011). These patterns suggest that framing directs audiences toward experiential or analytical processing (Van Laer et al., 2014; Nabi, 2003).

In short-form digital contexts, engagement behaviors are immediate and low-effort, making them more responsive to affective responses than to cognitive evaluation (Xu et al., 2022). Thus, self-attachment is expected to positively influence digital engagement, also learning value may be effective in triggering immediate digital responses in short-form contexts (Dessart et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2022). Engagement, in turn, functions as a proximal mechanism linking psychological responses to visit intention (Brodie et al., 2011).

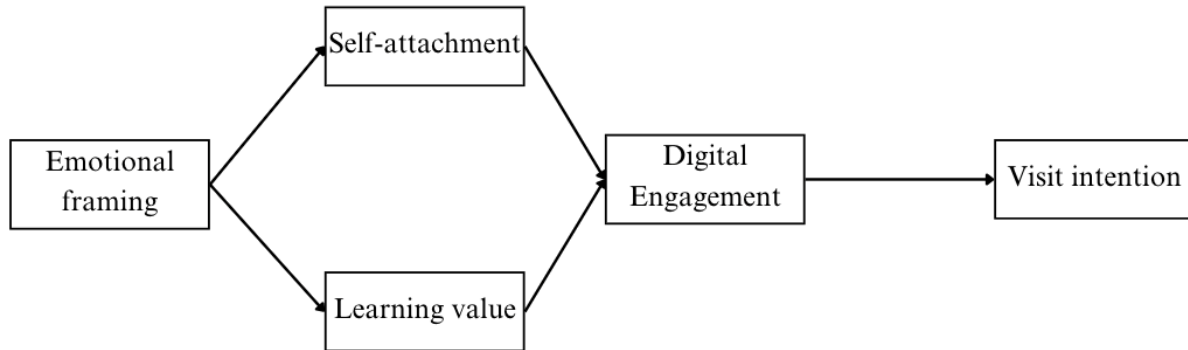


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

METHOD

A classroom-based experiment was conducted with 257 undergraduate students. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three video conditions that differed only in the proportion of pain and pride content within a 1.5-minute short-form video. The three conditions represented pride-dominant, balanced, and pain-dominant emotional compositions.

A manipulation check indicated no significant difference between the pride-dominant and balanced conditions. Therefore, these two conditions were combined into a single pride-oriented group and compared against the pain-dominant condition to enhance contrast.

All constructs were measured using established 5-point Likert scales, including self-attachment, perceived learning, digital engagement, and visit intention. Data were analyzed using independent samples t-tests, structural equation modeling (SEM), and mediation analysis with bootstrapping.

FINDINGS

The results reveal a clear different between affective and cognitive processing mechanisms. Group comparisons indicate that participants in the pain-dominant condition report significantly higher perceived learning value than those in the pride-oriented condition ($M_{\text{pain}} = 3.34$ vs. $M_{\text{pride}} = 2.84$, $p < .001$), whereas pride-oriented framing generates higher self-attachment ($M_{\text{pride}} = 3.24$ vs. $M_{\text{pain}} = 2.67$, $p < .001$), supporting H3a and H3b.

Structural model results further show that content framing significantly increases self-attachment ($\beta = .340$, $p < .001$) while negatively influencing perceived learning value ($\beta = -.318$, $p < .001$), supporting H1 and H2. In turn, self-attachment has a significant positive effect on digital engagement ($\beta = .235$, $p = .005$), whereas perceived learning value does not ($\beta = .131$, $p = .105$), providing support for H4 but not H5. Digital engagement strongly predicts visit intention ($\beta = .464$, $p < .001$), supporting H6.

Table 1. Structural Model Results

	Path	β	S.E.	t / C.R.	Result
H1	Framing $\rightarrow$ Self-attachment	.340***	.113	4.704	Supported
H2	Framing $\rightarrow$ Learning Value	-.318***	.121	-4.470	Supported
H4	Self-attachment $\rightarrow$ Online Engagement	.235**	.081	2.794	Supported
H5	Learning Value $\rightarrow$ Online Engagement	.131	.072	1.622	Not supported
H6	Online Engagement $\rightarrow$ Visit Intention	.464***	.113	4.757	Supported

Notes: Standardized coefficients are reported. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$



Mediation analysis confirms this mechanism. The indirect effect of framing on engagement through self-attachment is significant (indirect = 0.1086, 95% CI [0.0338, 0.1975]), supporting H7, whereas the pathway through learning value is not (indirect = -0.0388, 95% CI [-0.1156, 0.0287]), providing no support for H8.

Sequential mediation results further show that framing influences visit intention through self-attachment and engagement (indirect = 0.0361, 95% CI [0.0095, 0.0728]), supporting H9, while the cognitive pathway through learning value and engagement remains insignificant (indirect = -0.0132, 95% CI [-0.0405, 0.0100]), providing no support for H10.

Table 2. Indirect and Sequential Effects

	Path	Effect	Boot SE	95% CI	Result
H7	Framing → Self-attachment → Online Engagement	0.1086	—	[0.0338, 0.1975]	Supported
H8	Framing → Learning Value → Online Engagement	-0.0388	—	[-0.1156, 0.0287]	Not supported
H9	Framing → Self-attachment → Online Engagement → Visit Intention	0.0361	0.0161	[0.0095, 0.0728]	Supported
H10	Framing → Learning Value → Online Engagement → Visit Intention	-0.0132	0.0125	[-0.0405, 0.0100]	Not supported

IMPLICATIONS

The findings show that emotional framing produces asymmetric effects. Pride-oriented framing enhances self-attachment, whereas pain-dominant framing increases perceived learning value. This supports the view that emotional framing operates as a compositional structure, directing audiences toward different modes of processing rather than generating uniform responses (Van Laer et al., 2014). However, these pathways differ in their effectiveness. While self-attachment significantly increases digital engagement, learning value does not. This suggests that in short-form digital contexts, where user responses are immediate and low-effort, engagement is more strongly driven by affective reactions than by cognitive evaluation (Xu et al., 2022). Furthermore, digital engagement is found to positively influence visit intention, indicating that it serves as a key mechanism linking psychological responses to behavioral outcomes (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017). Mediation results further confirm that only the affective pathway (via self-attachment) translates framing effects into engagement and intention.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that short-form tourism videos should prioritize emotional connection when the goal is to stimulate user interaction. Content that emphasizes pride, meaning, and collective identity is more effective in fostering self-attachment, which in turn drives digital engagement. In contrast, while pain-oriented content enhances perceived learning, it is less effective in generating immediate interaction. Given the time and attention constraints of short-form platforms, informational elements should therefore support, rather than dominate, the emotional narrative. Overall, designing content around a clear and emotionally resonant storyline appears more effective than attempting to balance multiple emotional elements.

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