

Digital Storytelling in Hospitality and Tourism Education: An Interactive Pedagogical Approach

Mrs. Priyanka S. Shetty

Research Scholar – MGM University, Chhatrapati Sambhajanagar

Dr. Ghousia Imam

Assistant Professor – IOMR, MGM University, Chhatrapati Sambhajanagar

Abstract

Traditional, lecture-based pedagogy in higher education creates a critical competency gap, leaving hospitality and tourism graduates ill-prepared for today's rapidly digitizing, story-driven industry. To bridge this academic-industry divide, this paper proposes an interactive digital storytelling (IDST) framework as an active, constructionist learning strategy for tertiary programs. Grounded in constructivist and experiential learning theories, IDST transitions undergraduates from passive information consumers into active multimedia creators. The framework operates on five structural pillars: core narrative arcs, choice architecture, multimodal media integration, contextual authenticity, and platform-specific engagement. Through structured applications such as using ArcGIS StoryMaps for customer journeys, launching mobile-first food and culture showcases, and using platforms like ThingLink for branching crisis-management simulations students directly merge abstract hospitality theory with digital media production.

To ensure successful implementation, a scaffolded curriculum design is provided to help educators guide students through the technical learning curve and reduce technology anxiety. Ultimately, IDST provides a holistic toolkit that fosters crucial digital literacy, multi-modal communication, and cross-cultural empathy. By leveraging this framework, higher education institutions can effectively prepare an agile, industry-ready workforce equipped to thrive, differentiate, and innovate within the modern global Experience Economy.

Keywords: Interactive Digital Storytelling, Hospitality Education, Experiential Learning, Tourism Marketing, Pedagogical Framework, Customer Journey.

1. Introduction and Background

The international hospitality and tourism sector is undergoing a radical structural reorganization propelled by pervasive digitalization, shifting consumer paradigms, and persistent human resource deficits (Tiwari, 2026; Yi, 2025). Contemporary travelers are bypassing standardized corporate transactions in search of highly customized, emotionally impactful, and culturally authentic engagements (Darmawan, 2024). Simultaneously, the digital marketplace has pivoted destination marketing toward experiential branding, influencer-driven narratives, and viral multimedia messaging that govern global booking intentions (Bhatnagar & Shah, 2026; Fonseca et al., 2024). Consequently, industry stakeholders demand an agile workforce capable of synthesizing technical proficiency and digital literacy with human-centric soft skills to manage interconnected smart tourism ecosystems (Cassim, 2024; Tyagi, 2025). This evolution necessitates a foundational paradigm shift in higher education curricula. Conventional, passive pedagogical methodologies characterized by an overreliance on lecture-based delivery and rote memorization are increasingly critiqued for their inability to reconcile the widening competency gap between academic metrics and authentic corporate environments (Jain & Saxena, 2026; Stylianou & Pericleous, 2025). To cultivate "future-ready" practitioners, universities must transition toward active, experiential learning structures that develop key transversal capabilities, including creative problem-solving, cross-cultural empathy, and multi-modal communications (Cassim, 2024; Fonseca et al., 2024). Integrating interactive digital storytelling (DST) into the curriculum addresses this educational mandate directly. DST repositions students from passive informational recipients to active multimedia content developers (Kasemsarn, 2025; Mallawaarachchi, 2019).

2. Problem Statement: The Imperative for Interactive Pedagogy

Empirical sector assessments confirm that while graduates routinely demonstrate baseline theoretical knowledge, they lack modern digital capabilities, multi-modal communication proficiency, and the creative agency required to navigate contemporary destination marketing and customer relations spheres (Cassim, 2024; Tiwari, 2026). Passive learning environments fail to cultivate the advanced critical thinking, cross-cultural empathy, and cognitive elasticity that corporate stakeholders now prioritize over static retention (Fonseca et al., 2024; Yi, 2025).

Moreover, current curriculum design frequently restricts the use of digital software to rudimentary presentation applications rather than employing them as dynamic, creative media (Bhatnagar & Shah, 2026; Darmawan, 2024). This superficial integration fails to replicate actual corporate settings, where public engagement is driven by sophisticated, fluid digital stories (Kasemsarn, 2025; Tyagi, 2025). As a result, classroom motivation continues to decrease because university coursework feels estranged from the immersive environments of modern enterprise (Fonseca et al., 2024). Without a deliberate pedagogical shift toward interactive, constructionist frameworks, tertiary institutions risk producing a workforce whose skills are effectively obsolete at graduation (Mallawaarachchi, 2019; Tiwari, 2026).

3. Theoretical Frameworks

Digital Storytelling (DST) as an interactive instructional mechanism does not function in isolation; rather, it is anchored within established educational frameworks that advocate for student autonomy, active knowledge production, and continuous self-reflection. To evaluate how DST reconfigures hospitality and tourism training, it must be analyzed through two foundational educational theories: Constructivist Learning Theory and Experiential Learning Theory.

3.1. Constructivist Learning Theory and Constructionism

Fundamentally, DST represents a practical execution of constructivism, which maintains that individuals build internal frameworks of knowledge by interacting with and reflecting upon their experiences (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978). This concept is further advanced by Papert's (1991) theory of constructionism, which asserts that optimal learning occurs when individuals are actively tasked with producing a tangible, public artifact. When tourism students physically and digitally engineer a multimodal piece of media, this production process forces them to internalize abstract commercial principles, negotiate underlying conceptual meanings, and articulate their comprehension through unified visual and verbal channels (Fonseca et al., 2024; Jonassen, 1999).

3.2. Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)

DST maps directly onto David Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). Kolb's instructional framework progresses through four distinct iterations:

Concrete Experience: Students actively engage with authentic hospitality environments, sector case studies, or field investigations (e.g., auditing local cultural assets or property operations).

Reflective Observation: During the scriptwriting and storyboarding steps, students analyze these external observations critically, identifying the precise narrative elements required to captivate an audience (Anshari et al., 2023).

Abstract Conceptualization: Students integrate their observational insights with broader hospitality management theories, including service quality metrics, destination positioning systems, or emotional intelligence matrices (Tiwari, 2026).

Active Experimentation: By finalizing and distributing the digital story, students deploy their conceptual constructs within simulated or public digital ecosystems, measuring how specific media configurations alter consumer impressions (Darmawan, 2024).

By iterating through this educational cycle, DST reconciles theoretical instruction with professional reality, transforming abstract syllabus metrics into deeply embedded operational capabilities.

4. Digital Storytelling as a Multi-Disciplinary Pedagogical Tool

Characterized by its integration of traditional oral narrative structures with modern multimedia assets (graphics, audio engineering, cinematography, and digital publishing tools), DST shifts the classroom environment to learner-centric media production (Fonseca et al., 2024; Robin, 2016). Research indicates that the educational efficacy of DST stems from its structural requirement that students synthesize multi-faceted data sources into a logical, concise narrative structure rather than merely reproducing raw information (Anshari et al., 2023; Lambert & Hessler, 2018). This intellectual exercise directly engages the upper-tier cognitive operations of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy: synthesis and creation (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Robin, 2016).

Furthermore, the writing and editing process naturally necessitates multi-phase peer evaluations, script critiques, and collaborative technical troubleshooting (Jain & Saxena, 2026; Kasemsarn, 2025). Because the ultimate capstone is an accessible, distributable digital asset rather than an insular term paper, students display a deeper sense of personal accountability, professional pride, and intrinsic motivation regarding their output (Anshari et al., 2023; Fonseca et al., 2024).

5. The Role of Narrative in the Hospitality and Tourism Industry

Within the modern experience economy, marketing strategies have evolved from presenting tangible assets to curating intangible, emotionally charged experiences (Darmawan, 2024; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Because tourism products cannot be physically inspected prior to consumption, consumers face a substantial degree of perceived risk. Strategic narrative construction mitigates this psychological hesitation by allowing potential visitors to cognitively pre-experience the vacation, which increases booking conversions (Moin et al., 2020; Woodside, 2010).

Modern travelers routinely reject overt, sales-driven corporate promotions, seeking instead genuine human-interest pieces distributed via digital videos and experiential travel blogs (Bhatnagar & Shah, 2026; Fonseca et al., 2024). Narratives possess a unique psychological advantage termed narrative transportation—a cognitive state where consumers become so completely absorbed in a story that they experience genuine emotional responses, suspend critical counter-arguing tendencies, and exhibit greater long-term brand alignment (Green & Brock, 2000; Lund et al., 2018). Executing sophisticated narrative campaigns is now a foundational requirement for market differentiation and competitive longevity (Darmawan, 2024).

6. Practical Applications and Emerging Technologies

Instructors across diverse academic fields use DST to substitute traditional assessments with creative projects that require students to translate complex academic concepts into narrative structures (Anshari et al., 2023). In nursing and social work, students create digital reflections documenting clinical placements to promote professional empathy and emotional regulation (Robin, 2016). In teacher education, pre-service educators practice translating dense lesson plans into engaging formats for pupils (e-journal umm, 2026). Within business administration and digital marketing curriculums, students design brand rollouts and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives using advanced digital video suites, balancing classic story structures with automated design platforms, generative AI imaging software, and immersive 360-degree virtual media environments (Atlantic International University, 2026; SMF Multimedia, 2026).

7. The Interactive Digital Storytelling (IDST) Pedagogical Framework

To build an impactful interactive digital storytelling (IDST) framework for tourism education, the pedagogical strategy must synthesize classic story elements with modern digital features. Unlike conventional linear video projects, interactive storytelling invites active audience participation to shape how the narrative unfolds, closely mimicking the open-ended decisions travelers make on actual journeys. When students develop these initiatives, they focus on four intersecting domains:

Digital Storytelling (DST) methodology, Cultural Tourism (CT) contexts, Social Media (SM) platform mechanics, and the unique perspectives of the contemporary Youth/Traveler demographic (Y).

This matrix is operationalized within the curriculum through five core structural components:

1. **The Core Narrative Arc (The Dramatic Element):** Every digital tourism initiative requires an explicit story framework. Drawing from classic scriptwriting principles, this necessitates an overarching emotional hook (e.g., exposing an unchronicled regional culinary custom), an explicit thematic perspective, and a meaningful resolution (Lambert & Hessler, 2018). Within tourism marketing, the script must avoid copying standard promotional brochures. Instead, it must spotlight human experiences—such as the legacy of a local craftsman, a chef's ingredient-sourcing path, or a visitor navigating an unfamiliar environment—to establish an immersive viewer experience (Moin et al., 2020).
2. **Choice Architecture (The Interactive Element):** Interactivity differentiates IDST from passive video consumption. Students engineer alternative narrative trajectories using structured choice trees. For example, an interactive historical tour might prompt the user: *"Would you prefer to examine the classical architecture of this monument, or enter the kitchens to witness the preparation of the ceremonial feast?"* This architectural constraint forces students to study user experience (UX) design, requiring them to map and construct branching alternative plot lines that adapt to viewer selections (Darmawan, 2024).
3. **Multimodal Media Integration (The Technological Element):** Students weave together disparate media formats to cultivate a layered sensory environment. This involves incorporating original high-definition photography, targeted video b-roll, ambient audio captures (such as authentic kitchen noise or urban sounds), synchronized spoken-word voiceovers, and strategic typography overlays (Fonseca et al., 2024). These media components must cooperate to convey the authentic atmosphere of a locale or hotel asset, ensuring the final deliverable displays professional-grade production values.
4. **Contextual Authenticity (The Tourism Element):** To ensure the output serves as a viable piece of destination marketing, the story must be anchored in factual accuracy and cultural sensitivity (Kasemsarn, 2025). Students must investigate historical archives, culinary histories, and community values prior to drafting their scripts. This component preserves the educational integrity of the project, ensuring the digital story acts as an ethical representation of a locale while honoring community heritage.
5. **Platform-Specific Engagement (The Social Media Element):** The final digital product must be optimized for the viewing habits of contemporary social media audiences. This includes formatting media for vertical mobile viewports, embedding direct interactive prompts (such as call-to-action buttons or clickable choices), and engineering concise scripts designed for fast-paced attention spans (Bhatnagar & Shah, 2026). This operational phase instructs students on how to format and distribute media effectively within professional digital tourism ecosystems.

8. Strategic Directives and Guidelines for Educators

Implementing Interactive Digital Storytelling (IDST) requires instructors to pivot from traditional instructional lecturers to facilitators of media production. This pedagogical shift requires a highly structured timeline to prevent students from becoming overwhelmed by technical demands, keeping the learning focused on core hospitality objectives. The following strategic directives are designed to help educators integrate IDST frameworks into existing tourism and hotel management curricula:

1. **Define Clear Hospitality-Centric Learning Objectives:** Before introducing any multimedia software, establish the core hospitality competencies the assignment is designed to evaluate. The digital project must remain a channel for demonstrating academic command, not merely technical skill. Align the project to established syllabus benchmarks, such as assessing a destination's service delivery components, promoting a unique regional culinary legacy, or charting an interactive consumer touchpoint map for a boutique lodging module (Jain & Saxena, 2026; Tiwari, 2026).

2. **Scaffold the Technical Learning Curve:** Students regularly exhibit "technology anxiety" when required to engineer multimedia content without prior training (Stylianou & Pericleous, 2025). To prevent this friction from compromising the assignment's quality, deconstruct the project into incremental, progressive benchmarks. Do not demand a finalized video at the close of the academic term. Instead, require students to submit components for formative review across distinct developmental milestones, separating the workload into low-stakes deadlines as outlined below:

Phase	Milestone Deliverable	Educational Objective
Phase 1	Narrative Concept & Research Outline	Ensures factual precision, cultural consideration, and intellectual depth prior to active production (Kasemsarn, 2025).
Phase 2	Branching Script & Storyboard	Visualizes and maps out the choice trees, user paths, and planned visual assets on paper (Darmawan, 2024).
Phase 3	Rough Media Draft & Peer Review	Facilitates early technical troubleshooting, sound mixing adjustments, and constructive peer evaluation (Fonseca et al., 2024).

3. **Emphasize Contextual Authenticity and Ethics:** In an era dominated by viral media, educators must instruct students on the legalities and ethical obligations of content creation within commercial destination promotion. Demand strict alignment with copyright statutes and digital privacy standards. Instruct students to use original digital assets, self-captured field photography, or explicitly licensed, royalty-free audio tracks. Furthermore, train students to respect local community identities, ensuring their narratives avoid stereotypical or superficial depictions of cultural heritage assets (Kasemsarn, 2025).
4. **Foster Collaborative Peer-Review Ecosystems:** Interactive instruction draws heavily from social constructivist models, where students refine their work through continuous discussion and shared analytical viewpoints (Anshari et al., 2023). Allocate specific classroom hours for script table-reads and rough-cut viewings. By critically evaluating each other's choice paths and narrative continuity, students practice evaluating media from a consumer's perspective. This builds critical thinking skills that are highly prized within corporate tourism marketing and public relations departments (Bhatnagar & Shah, 2026).
To appreciate how digital storytelling impacts hospitality and tourism students, we must look closely at how it transforms their cognitive processing, design thinking, and collaborative work models. When students engage with these methods, they are not simply editing videos or building web layouts—they are mastering how to manage the emotional responses, decisions, and experiential pathways of modern travelers.

9. Methods, Media Channels, and Industry Translation

Below is an in-depth breakdown of how these specific storytelling methods and applications prepare students for corporate sectors:

9.1. Deep Dive into the Customer Journey Story

The Customer Journey methodology demonstrates to students that hospitality is not a discrete transaction, but rather an interconnected sequence of experiential touchpoints. Within real-world hotel groups or travel agencies, administrators utilize journey maps to audit guest emotions throughout every stage of an itinerary. When students construct a digital assignment around this concept, they visually plot the exact chronological trajectory of a traveler.

By deploying cloud-based website architecture tools (such as Canva for Websites) or geographic narrative platforms (such as ArcGIS StoryMaps), students write targeted copy and select media assets that correspond to each operational touchpoint:

Pre-Arrival: Students engineer promotional teaser videos or digital collateral to illustrate how a property builds brand anticipation, manages web booking workflows, and transmits pre-trip communications.

Arrival & Stay: Students employ curated visuals and audio files to guide a user through front-desk operations, room flow, and on-site culinary options. They learn to focus on nuanced details such as lobby lighting or plate presentation that heavily influence guest satisfaction metrics.

Departure & Post-Stay: Students frame the narrative arc around checkout operations and long-term customer retention strategies, such as managing online review platforms or developing targeted post-stay loyalty emails (Fonseca et al., 2024).

This strategy prompts students to evaluate a hospitality asset from the customer's perspective, helping them see how sound service-design practices secure customer satisfaction and brand loyalty.

9.2. Transforming Culture into Modern Digital Marketing

The Food and Culture Showcase addresses a dominant shift in contemporary travel behavior: modern travelers consistently reject standardized, mass-produced holiday packages. Instead, they seek out authentic regional food ways, historical legacies, and unique cultural histories (Kasemsarn, 2025). When students employ mobile-first video production applications such as CapCut or Instagram Reels for these assignments, they practice high-value, contemporary marketing skills:

Micro-Storytelling: Students learn to capture viewer attention within the vital first three seconds. They practice distilling hours of secondary research on local markets, artisanal food preparation, or historical monuments into an impactful, high-velocity 60-second video asset.

Media Production Competencies: Students secure practical experience filming with mobile devices. They learn to capture macro food imagery, record isolated voice tracks, utilize graphic text overlays for accessibility, and select soundtracks that reflect the cultural setting they are profiling (Bhatnagar & Shah, 2026).

Brand Voice Articulation: Students practice writing concise, high-engagement digital copy and employing strategic metadata tags, mirroring the exact methods deployed by contemporary Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) and luxury resorts to captivate younger consumer demographics.

9.3. Developing Leadership Skills Through Interactive Choices

The Choose-Your-Own-Journey methodology utilizes interactive media applications (such as ThingLink or Adventr) to challenge students past basic fact retention and push them into real-world crisis management. Within the hospitality industry, staff must think on their feet and stay calm during unexpected situations. This storytelling style lets students simulate those tough scenarios safely.

When architecting a branching, choice-driven media piece, students must adopt a management perspective to construct realistic operational crises, such as:

A front-office simulation where a guest arrives late at night only to find their reservation has been lost.

A food and beverage simulation where an asset faces severe service delays or critical allergen complaints during peak dining hours.

A tourism agency simulation where an outdoor excursion is cancelled unexpectedly due to severe weather.

Students map these complex logic models using digital canvas environments like Miro, charting multiple operational outcomes based on the user's choices. One path might detail an incorrect response (such as defensive communication with a guest), resulting in customer dissatisfaction and a negative online review. Conversely, an alternative path demonstrates best practices (such as active listening and immediate compensation), leading to consumer recovery and brand loyalty.

By building and auditing these interactive logic models, students practice vital interpersonal communication, operational conflict resolution, and emotional self-regulation before entering corporate hotel or resort internships (Cyber-world settings; Anshari et al., 2023; Darmawan, 2024).

10. Future Horizons: Generative AI and Immersive Technologies

As the digital landscape evolves, DST in higher education is poised to expand through integration with emerging technologies, transforming how narratives are built and experienced.

10.1 Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI)

The rise of Generative AI tools (such as advanced Large Language Models and text-to-image/text-to-video architectures) is reshaping creative media production. In a modern DST classroom, GenAI can serve as an onboarding partner for student ideation. Students can leverage AI assistants to brainstorm narrative themes, generate early-stage storyboard concepts, refine script dialogue, or create custom, copyright-free background music tracks.

However, this technological shift requires a strong emphasis on ethical digital literacy. Educators must teach students how to verify AI-generated assertions against reliable primary data, ensuring corporate narratives remain accurate, ethical, and authentic.

10.2 Immersive Realities: Virtual, Augmented, and Extended Reality (XR)

The future of storytelling is increasingly spatial and immersive. The traditional 2D flat video format is expanding toward Extended Reality (XR) frameworks, which combine Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) to offer deep immersion and interaction (Lacet, n.d.; Mandalia, 2023).

In advanced tourism education, students can design 360-degree interactive virtual tours, embedding contextual hot-spots, historical pop-up narrations, and audio cues directly into virtual space (Lacet, n.d.). This allows remote audiences to simulate physical site visits, dramatically altering how cultural museums and hospitality destinations market their physical properties (Lacet, n.d.). By mastering spatial storytelling, students prepare themselves to lead destination marketing strategies on next-generation web platforms.

11. Conclusion

The integration of interactive digital storytelling (IDST) frameworks within higher hospitality and tourism education provides a critical solution to the widening competencies gap between traditional academic pedagogy and the realities of a digitally-driven corporate landscape. By moving past static lecture-based models and transforming undergraduates from passive information consumers into active multimedia content creators, this constructionist approach ensures that future graduates possess the precise technological, communication, and creative literacy required by modern industry executives. Through the systematic execution of customer journey narratives, localized cultural showcases, and branching choice architectures, students gain comprehensive exposure to multi-modal content creation, user experience parameters, and modern digital platform distribution. This instructional strategy effectively bridges the conceptual gap between management theory and market application, helping students link abstract operational structures such as service blueprinting, emotional intelligence frameworks, and destination positioning with the fluid, emotionally persuasive narratives that govern contemporary traveler decisions.

Furthermore, anchoring the IDST process within constructivist, constructionist, and experiential learning principles encourages deep cognitive synthesis, shifting student focus from basic academic comprehension to upper-tier critical processing and professional self-reflection. When students navigate the practical complexities of multimedia authorship, technical troubleshooting, and structured peer evaluations, they actively cultivate durable soft skills such as flexible decision-making under operational constraints, cross-cultural empathy, and collaborative conflict management long before entering commercial properties or corporate marketing environments. Crucially, the formulation of a highly structured, scaffolded developmental curriculum shields students from digital

production anxieties while establishing an educational space that replicates real-world administrative standards, accountability, and professional project execution. Ultimately, as global destination marketing organizations and luxury resort brands increasingly leverage dynamic, human-centric narratives to build sustainable brand equity and mitigate psychological purchasing risks, the academic adoption of interactive storytelling emerges as an essential pedagogical mandate. By prioritizing this integrated toolkit of persuasive communication, technical competency, and critical analysis, higher education institutions can successfully develop agile, industry-aligned graduates who are uniquely equipped to steer, optimize, and innovate within the modern, digitally transformed global experience economy.

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