

Digital Storytelling and Authentic Tourist Experiences: Evidence from Rijeka's Maritime Heritage

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This research examines the impact of digital storytelling about Rijeka's maritime heritage on the perceived authenticity of the tourist experience and the sharing of that experience through digital media. The paper addresses the empirical gap in the literature by focusing on the specific context of maritime heritage. A mixed-methods approach was used. Qualitative content analysis preceded quantitative research. Data were collected using an online questionnaire distributed to a convenient sample of N=150 tourists after they watched the storytelling video 'How to Read a Neighborhood: The First Port of Rijeka'. The instrument included three main scales based on previously validated questionnaires (Likert scale 1-5): storytelling of maritime heritage, authenticity of the experience and sharing of experiences. The data were analyzed using correlation analysis with IBM SPSS. The results show statistically significant positive effects: storytelling on authenticity ($r = 0.339$; $p < 0.001$), storytelling on sharing experiences ($r = 0.268$; $p < 0.001$) and authenticity on sharing ($r = 0.210$; $p = 0.010$). Storytelling had a stronger effect on authenticity than on sharing. The study provides empirical evidence on the role of digital storytelling in creating authentic experiences. It contributes to theory by extending Wang's typology of authenticity into digital heritage contexts. In practice, the study recommends that DMOs integrate digital storytelling of maritime heritage into their cultural tourism development strategies, invest in involving local communities and tourists as co-creators in disseminating heritage narratives, and monitor improvements in perceived authenticity and the effectiveness of sharing authentic tourist experiences.

KEY WORDS

- ~ Digital storytelling
- ~ Public space storytelling
- ~ Tourist experience
- ~ Tourism marketing
- ~ Quantitative research

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doi: 10.7225/toms.v15.n01.023

Received: 5 Jun 2025 / Revised: 10 Oct 2025 / Accepted: 27 Mar 2026 / Published: 20 Apr 2026

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1. INTRODUCTION

Although Rijeka has a long history of tourism, its development was initially limited to serving as a transit hub. However, lifestyles, patterns of tourist demand, and the use of urban space are constantly changing. The global trend toward the popularization of urban destinations (WTO, 2024) has spurred Rijeka's growth as a tourist destination and provides the city with the opportunity to offer the tourism market a wide and diverse range of cultural, architectural, business, natural and social resources. This dynamic growth in tourism poses challenges to urban development and quality of life, highlighting the need to shift the city's discourse toward more meaningful communication between tourists and the local community. In this context, storytelling gains importance as a tool for understanding and shaping a better city for all (Salim, n.d.).

Throughout history, storytelling has served as a foundation for transferring knowledge and cultural identity (Moreira et al., 2024), while in contemporary tourism it is recognized as a powerful tool for creating authentic experiences (Bassano et al., 2019; Latin et al., 2020; Bagarić, 2023), building identity (Katriel, 2008), and fostering destination sustainability (Solomon et al., 2022). However, its potential remains underutilized in the context of promoting Rijeka's maritime heritage, due to a lack of targeted digital initiatives. Unlike previous studies that generally investigate storytelling in tourism (Salim, n.d.; Wahyuningtyas et al., 2024), this study provides empirical evidence on how digital storytelling of maritime heritage affects authenticity and experience sharing in Rijeka. The research is organized around three questions: first, does storytelling help interpret or reinterpret the city's historical and cultural heritage by presenting historical facts in a way that is attractive, entertaining and accessible to tourists? Second, does storytelling trigger a different, authentic experience in tourists and creatively guide them to participate in sharing the 'story of the city' through poetic narrative? Third, does storytelling about Rijeka's maritime heritage influence the authentic tourist experience and the sharing of that experience, which is also the basis for effective promotion of the destination in the tourism market?

The aim is to explore the effectiveness of digital storytelling in promoting Rijeka's maritime heritage. Therefore, it is necessary to identify stories from Rijeka's cultural and historical heritage that best illustrate and contribute to the understanding of the city and have the potential to create an authentic experience. Cultural and historical facts, combined with a distinctive poetics and a new way of interpreting storytelling, can create a tourist experience that, with the involvement of all stakeholders, may develop into a recognizable tourist product that conveys the story of the city of Rijeka and its inhabitants. The tourist becomes a storyteller whose experience is shaped by a compelling narrative and interaction with local residents. Thus, it is necessary to examine tourists' attitudes toward the storytelling of Rijeka's maritime heritage, the authenticity of the tourist experience, as well as the relationship between the storytelling of the maritime heritage of the city of Rijeka, the authenticity of the tourist experience, and the sharing of that experience. The research hypotheses are:

H1: Digital storytelling of maritime heritage has a positive impact on the authenticity of the tourist experience.

H2: Digital storytelling of maritime heritage has a positive impact on the sharing of the tourist experience.

H3: The authenticity of the tourist experience has a positive impact on sharing the tourist experience.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Authenticity and authentic experience in tourism

The concept of authenticity, introduced into social research by MacCannel in the early 1970s, remains a central yet complex framework for understanding tourist experiences (Lu et al., 1999; Coşkun, 2021; Moore et al., 2021). Wang's (1999) typology, which distinguishes between the authenticity of the tourist experience and the authenticity of objects, has been widely applied in contemporary research through three key dimensions: objective authenticity, referring to the originality and truthfulness of physical objects, including cultural heritage and local activities (Jamaludin et al, 2012; Bašan et al, 2013; Tiberghien, Bremner and Milne, 2020), constructive authenticity, understood as authenticity shaped through interpretation that tourists and creators of the tourist experience project onto the destination (Dujmović, 2019; Vergopoulos, 2016; Rickly et al., 2023; He and Timothy, 2024), and existential authenticity, focusing on personal or intersubjective feelings, such as self-actualization in the search for a unique experience and liberation (Çevik, 2024).

This provides the fundamental analytical framework for this study. Digital storytelling about Rijeka's maritime heritage can be analyzed through all three of Wang's (1999) dimensions: providing objective authenticity through credible interpretations of maritime heritage, shaping constructive authenticity through the narrative interpretation of Rijeka as a port city, and evoking existential authenticity. This three-dimensional approach enables the examination of the effects of digital storytelling, which is particularly important given the contemporary understanding of authenticity as a fluid and perceptual construct (Rickly et al., 2023).

Although a fairly solid theoretical framework has been established in the literature, there is a lack of research on how these concepts manifest in the creation of an authentic tourist experience through digital storytelling about Rijeka's maritime heritage. The empirical research aims to fill this gap by applying the theoretical framework to test whether digital storytelling of maritime heritage has a positive impact on authentic tourist experience (H1) and experience sharing (H2), and whether authenticity itself encourages the sharing of tourist experiences (H3).

2.2. Storytelling in the function of preserving and promoting maritime heritage

By incorporating storytelling into promotional strategies, destinations seek to gain a competitive advantage in the growing competition in the tourism market. Cultural- historical heritage plays a key role in this process, especially in coastal areas, where it is inextricably linked to activities related to the sea, the coast, and maritime tradition (Silva et al., 2022). Coastal and maritime heritage reflect the past, present, and future views on activities and interactions that take place in coastal and marine areas (Ounaian et al., 2021).

Given the negative impacts of tourism, which often lead to the marginalization of traditional activities, and the alienation of the local community from its heritage (Alvarez et al., 2016), the challenge is to use storytelling as a promotional tool for preserving maritime heritage (Latin et al., 2020) and for its reinterpretation for both tourists, and the local community. Digital storytelling is an effective approach to cultural tourism management (Cahyani et al., 2023). As a form of digital storytelling, it includes a range of alternative methods and tools (interactive stories, multimedia presentations, etc.) for presenting history, seeking to attract and engage the general public in innovative ways, including the preservation of cultural heritage (Psomdaki et al., 2019). Digital storytelling is considered a valuable tool for heritage sustainability (Podara et al., 2021).

Current research generally focuses on storytelling in tourism (Moscardo, 2020; Castro and Medina, 2022), with few empirical studies on digital storytelling of cultural heritage, especially maritime heritage. This paper seeks to fill this gap by using Rijeka as an example to explore how digital storytelling can be used as a promotional tool for the sustainable management of maritime heritage.

2.3. Storytelling in sharing tourist experiences

Literature established that there is a connection between storytelling and the tourist experience (Moscardo, 2020; Solomon et al., 2022), highlighting the multiphase nature of the tourist experience (MacKay and Vogt, 2012; Dorčić, 2024). Spatial-temporal factors and social interactions further shape these experiences (Vergopoulos, 2016).

Digital technology has transformed traditional storytelling, improving and redefining tourist experiences through innovative storytelling techniques (Karzen and Demona, 2020). It has also enabled various stakeholders (destination management organizations, destination marketing organizations, tour operators, commercial accommodation providers, local residents, etc.) to offer interactive and memorable experiences for tourists through storytelling, allowing tourists to share their experiences during their stay and to remember and communicate them after returning from their trip (Cutler and Carmichael, 2010). This transformation is particularly significant for interpreting Rijeka's maritime heritage, where digital formats such as apps, and virtual walks can present authentic narratives about the historic port, maritime tradition, etc., thereby redefining the tourist experience.

However, digital technology can also diminish the experience of the physical environment by immersing tourists in a virtual world with which they interact, and from which they receive sensory responses (Gibson and O'Rawe, 2018). The challenge is therefore to balance the authentic representation of Rijeka's maritime heritage with its potential commodification for tourism.

Although the literature provides a theoretical framework for digital storytelling, there is a lack of empirical studies exploring its role in inclusivity and the sharing of tourist experiences related to Rijeka's maritime heritage. Empirical research seeks to address this gap.

3. METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the connection between storytelling about maritime heritage, the authenticity of the tourist experience, and the sharing of that experience, using the city of Rijeka as an example. A mixed-method approach was employed, combining qualitative content analysis with quantitative survey research.

The questionnaire consisted of four groups of questions. The first group of questions covered respondent characteristics: age, gender, country of origin, education, length of stay and frequency of visits to the destination, travel

companions, travel motivation, use of the Internet during vacation and use of social networks. The second group of questions addressed respondents' attitudes toward storytelling about Rijeka's maritime heritage, the third group focused on the authenticity of the tourist experience encouraged by storytelling, while the fourth group examined activities related to sharing the tourist experience through digital media. The questions were based on previous research (Munar and Jacobsen 2014; Lu et al, 2015; Choi, 2016) and were closed-ended. In the first group of questions, respondents could select one of the answers offered. The statements related to storytelling about maritime heritage, the authenticity of the tourist experience, and sharing that experience were rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (1 – I strongly disagree with the given statement to 5 – I strongly agree with the given statement). Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to assess the reliability of the measurement scales: digital storytelling of maritime heritage ($\alpha = 0.455$), authenticity of the experience ($\alpha = 0.784$), and experience sharing ($\alpha = 0.801$). The digital maritime heritage storytelling construct showed low internal consistency (<0.6), indicating its multidimensional nature. However, it was retained within the context of this study.

Qualitative analysis of the content served as the foundation for designing the quantitative part of the research. The analysis included the official websites of destination management and tourism business entities in the city of Rijeka, examining how stories about Rijeka's maritime heritage are presented in public discourse. The review revealed a lack of systematic digital presentation of Rijeka's maritime heritage, which directly influenced the selection of the storytelling piece 'How to Read the Neighborhood: The First Port of Rijeka' as the basis for primary research on tourists through a questionnaire. Themes identified in the public domain guided the formulation of specific statements in the questionnaire, ensuring that the quantitative instrument was grounded in the real context and stories used by the destination under investigation. The storytelling was presented by the Croatian Cultural Centre in Sušak on its YouTube channel with videos in Croatian¹ and English², lasting 6.14 and 6.26 minutes respectively. Respondents were given a link to watch the video before completing the online questionnaire. Data were collected using a convenience sampling method through an online questionnaire distributed via QR codes that directed respondents to the online questionnaire and the storytelling website. This approach is appropriate for an exploratory study aimed at identifying relationships between constructs within the specific context of Rijeka's maritime heritage. While this sample limits the generalizability of the research findings to a broader population, it provides useful data on the behavior of tourists who had direct contact with the digital storytelling of Rijeka's maritime heritage. The QR codes were distributed to potential respondents during walks around the city of Rijeka, in accommodation facilities, and in tourist groups on social networks. Throughout the research, the ethical standards of scientific work were fully respected. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the estimated time required to complete the questionnaire, and the use of the collected data. Their anonymity was guaranteed, and the collected data were used exclusively for the purposes of empirical research. The survey was conducted from September 1 to November 1, 2024. The survey involved 150 respondents who answered questions based on storytelling about the city of Rijeka and the tourist experience resulting from storytelling and stay in the city of Rijeka.

The correlation analysis examined the relationships between the constructs 'authenticity of the tourist experience', 'sharing the tourist experience' and 'storytelling about maritime heritage'. A statistical power analysis conducted using G*Power confirmed that the sample size ($N = 150$) ensured a minimum acceptable statistical power of 0.95 for detecting a medium effect size ($r = 0.30$), following correlation guidelines (Cohen, 1988, cited in Gignac and Szodorai, 2016), at a significant level of $\alpha = 0.05$, with the predictors (digital storytelling about maritime heritage and authenticity of tourist experience) for the dependent variable (sharing of the tourist experience). This confirms its suitability for this research. The correlations obtained through empirical research ranged from $r = 0.210$ to $r = 0.339$. The data were processed using the statistical program IBM SPSS 25.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The natural geographic and topographic conditions have shaped the development and functions of the city of Rijeka. The city is defined by the river around which it was formed and from which it takes its name - Rječina. It gives the city its distinctive character, reflected in the symbolism of the 'flowing city', where the river Rječina, flowing into the Adriatic Sea, represents the inexhaustible, dynamic energy of the city and its inhabitants, encapsulated in the term 'tireless' (meaning 'inexhaustible') (Đekić, 2014). Drawing on the work of academic Krešimir Nemeć 'Paths Past Signs: Portraits, Poetics, Identities' (2006) and 'Reading the City: Urban Experience in Croatian Literature' (2010), various reflections on the urban fabric are presented, uncovering latent and hidden points of attraction. The evolving methodology of reading the city broadens the understanding and interpretation of Rijeka's cultural and historical heritage through storytelling. The potential to preserve historical and cultural heritage lies in storytelling with an authentic background (Latin et al., 2020). In 2020, Rijeka

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POIFKCRjN2c&t=277s>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLgf1cW2u0o&t=61s>

implemented the European Capital of Culture 2020 project under the slogan Rijeka – Port of Diversity, which strengthened the city's cultural scene and involved a large number of people, institutions and associations in the joint design and creation of cultural events (Kardov et al., 2024). The motto Rijeka – Port of Diversity highlights Rijeka's maritime heritage and identity, marked by the development of the transit port and openness to diversity. Since 1913, the territory of Rijeka has changed hands among as many as 12 countries, contributing to a historical map rich with detail. Rijeka has a very significant and attractive maritime heritage, which is of interest for the development of sustainable tourism, and serves as a valuable resource for experiential interpretation through storytelling.

4.1. Storytelling about Rijeka's maritime heritage in public space

The Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral Rijeka, which holds a collection of Rijeka's historical and cultural maritime heritage, faces the challenge of adapting to the demands of the modern tourist. Drawing on the potential of museum resources to create an authentic tourist experience (Gajski et al., 2011), the museum has moved the exhibitions from the canonical spaces in the city center to Rijeka's Korzo, embracing the concept of 'space for the everyday life of residents' (Barrado-Timón and Hidalgo-Giralt, 2019). A series of initiatives represent an innovative approach to the interpretation of Rijeka's maritime heritage:

- In 2019, the exhibition 'The Port of Rijeka – An Overview of Historical Development' was set up on the exhibition panels on Korzo to mark the 300th anniversary of the Rijeka's proclamation as a free royal port. The exhibition highlighted significant moments in the history of Rijeka as a coastal and maritime city at the mouth of the Rječina River (My Rijeka, 2019).
- As part of the EU TEMPUS project, the 'Flows' exhibition was set up in 2021, telling the story of the development and history of the port of Rijeka. The exhibition explored the port's evolution through four flows: the flow of goods, technology, people and culture, allowing visitors to understand the scale and importance of the port throughout history, its development, and its future prospects. The first edition, in January 2021, was displayed virtually due to Covid-19 movement restrictions, on the website <http://myportheritage.eu/>. The use of public space seeks to revitalize parts of the city, giving them new social, cultural and educational functions, as well as new roles in gathering and participation (City of Rijeka, 2021). The exhibition was physically set up on August 10-14, 2021.
- In 2023, exhibition posters on Korzo conveyed to the public space the story of the development of the port of Rijeka from the late 16th century, through its great expansion in the second half of the 19th century, to its peak in the 1990s and early 21st century, as well as the construction of the future Rijeka Gateway container terminal on the Zagreb coast (City of Rijeka, 2023). The exhibition was set up on September 12, 2023.
- In 2024, the exhibition 'Carpathia – the Pride of the City of Rijeka' opened on Korzo. The ship Carpathia, known for rescuing survivors from the Titanic, which also operated on the Rijeka-New York route, employed crew members from Istria and the Croatian Littoral. Records show there were 84 such crew members. At that time, Rijeka was the most important port of migration, with approx. 500,000 people emigrating to North America from the city (City of Rijeka, 2024). The exhibition was on display from August 27 to September 10, 2024.
- The 11th Kvarner Festival of the Sea and Maritime Tradition – Fiumare 2024 opened on September 11, 2024. As part of the festival, the exhibition 'On the Routes of Maritime Heritage' was displayed on pedestals along the promenade. The exhibition highlighted the maritime tradition woven into the identity of Rijeka, the city of the sea, shipbuilders, sailors and seafarers, and included workshops on traditional maritime skills.

The basis of the above initiatives is the objective authenticity (Wang, 1999) found in authentic historical photographs, maps, plans, and documents that have been repackaged in an accessible format to reach the general public. Constructive authenticity - through the choice of topics, panel design, and location - is added to objective authenticity, while the format (public space) enables existential authenticity - through the visitor's personal experience in contact with the everyday context. By moving the exhibition content from the museum to the street, the interpretation of maritime heritage was activated. Tourists and local residents do not just look at a passive object, but participate in the creation of meaning (the development of the port of Rijeka) and become part of their own experience of the city. This is consistent with the thesis that authenticity is fluid and dependent on perception (Rickly et al., 2023). At the same time, the initiatives provide an opportunity for existential authenticity by creating an authentic experience for tourists and a sense of 'being', of direct participation in the urban fabric and its stories. The experience becomes personally empowering. Tourists not only 'learn about Rijeka' and satisfy their cognitive needs (He and Timothy, 2024), but also experience it. However, the short-term format, for instance the 'Flows' exhibition which lasted only four days, limits its potential impact and prevents evaluation of its actual effect on the formation of an authentic experience.

Tourist guides play an important role in sharing the stories of Rijeka's maritime heritage by leading free city tours (Rijeka Free Tour) during the summer months, bringing the history and culture closer to both residents and tourists through engaging stories and anecdotes. The initiative was launched by the Association of Tourist Guides of Kvarner and the City of

Rijeka Tourist Board to improve the quality of the tourist offer (City of Rijeka Tourist Board, n.d.). Despite this, the role of tourist guides remains confined within institutionally defined narratives, representing a form of participatory co-creation where the community participates in the performance, but not in the conceptualization of the content. These findings expand the theoretical understanding of co-creation in the context of cultural heritage and tourist experience (Moscardo, 2020) by revealing a hierarchy of narrative control. An example of using digital storytelling to deepen the experience of the environment (Gibson and O'Rawe, 2018) was organized through interactive benches placed on the Andrija Kačić Miošić Promenade in 2021, as part of the 'How to Read the Neighborhood' project. This project was a component of the broader 'Kortil Live' project and part of the Sweet and Salty, Rijeka 2020 – European Capital of Culture program, which introduces visitors to the history of the city of Rijeka. Six stories were staged: A Tale of Two Cities, The First Port of Rijeka, Traditional Maritime Heritage, Upstream to Hartera, Along the Rječina Ružičeva and Along the Rječina Vodovodna. QR codes were placed on the backs of the benches, leading the listeners to content available live on the website of the Croatian Cultural Center Kortil (City of Rijeka, 2024b), seamlessly blending the physical environment with digital narrative. This approach allows tourists to remain immersed in the physical space (Kačić Miošić Promenade) while technology adds a deeper layer of meaning, thereby preserving the authentic context of the experience.

These initiatives are particularly significant because they have the potential to engage local people in spreading local knowledge through storytelling. This approach also avoids commodification and helps preserve living heritage (Alvarez et al., 2016), create an authentic tourist experience and facilitate the sharing of the destination experience. However, it is important to distinguish whether local people act as true co-creators of narratives or primarily as performers of prefabricated stories. When local people take on the role of storytellers - whether as tour guides or by sharing stories - authenticity is no longer just a product for tourists, but becomes part of the continuous regeneration of urban culture. Yet, the narrative remains institutionally determined (by museum resources), excluding the local population from genuine co-creation and keeping them in the role of performers of a pre-shaped narrative.

Through the use of public space, new cultural and tourist content is created in the city of Rijeka, and authentic storytelling enriches Rijeka's tourist offer and helps create an authentic tourist experience. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives in encouraging deeply authentic tourist experiences, rather than commodification, remains an empirical question. The short duration of the exhibitions (2-4 weeks) and their passive format (posters) can offer tourists only fragmented information, raising doubts about their ability to encourage lasting reflection. This approach prioritizes the visual over the meaningful experience. Incorporating more interactive elements would provide greater opportunities for tourists to establish a personal connection with maritime heritage.

The main challenge is the sustainability of these innovative practices, as many initiatives are related to one-off projects (e.g., TEMPUS). This raises questions about long-term strategies for their institutional maintenance and integration into a permanent tourist offering that extends beyond temporary events. The reliance of these projects on temporary funding suggests they function more as cultural experiments than as an integrated part of Rijeka's tourism development strategy and policy. Their sustainability is closely linked to their inclusion in cultural tourism development documents, educational programs for local population in storytelling, and ongoing funding for projects related to Rijeka's maritime heritage.

4.2. Digital media as storytelling, communication channels about Rijeka's maritime heritage

Digital media, including the Internet, social networks, streaming platforms and mobile applications, are widely used in tourism, creating new forms of cultural heritage promotion and tourist storytelling. They enable the creation of user-generated content in various forms, such as videos, blogs, discussions, digital images, etc. An increasing number of tourists are using *online* services, and digital storytelling is becoming an important segment of destination's promotional strategy and the creation of tourist experiences. *The website* of the Rijeka Tourist Board (visitrijeka.hr) invites visitors to an *experience*, and offers opportunities to participate in various experiences during their stay. Visitors can access various *stories* that tell the history of the city and its curiosities, including the *Titanic-Carpathia-Rijeka story*, which highlights the connection between Rijeka and the ship Carpathia, as well as the importance of the port of Rijeka in European migrations in early 20th century. Examples of storytelling about Rijeka's maritime heritage are provided in Table 1.

Stakeholder	Social Media	Story
Rijeka Tourist Board	https://www.visit.hr	The <i>Titanic-Carpathia-Rijeka Story</i>
Botel Marina	https://www.botel-marina.com/history/	The story of the history of <i>the Marina</i> from its construction in Frederikshavn, Denmark to the present day.
Croatian Cultural Centre	https://hkd-rijeka.hr/galerija-kortil/kortil-uzivo/	Story about traditional maritime heritage... <i>Guc, gajeta, pasara...</i> and how to tell them apart (live on YouTube) The story of the first Port of Rijeka... You have to sail... Forever (live on YouTube)

Table 1. Examples of storytelling about Rijeka's maritime heritage on digital media (Source: Authors.)

A review of the Internet using Google search reveals only a small number of *websites* that use storytelling about Rijeka's maritime heritage to promote accommodation facilities or the destination itself. A positive example is the stories told as part of the 'How to Read the Neighborhood' project. The effectiveness of promoting Rijeka's maritime heritage through digital media was assessed solely by reviewing the content published on YouTube. An overview of YouTube users' reactions to storytelling about Rijeka's maritime heritage does not indicate greater effectiveness of promotional activities related to maritime heritage (Table 2).

Storytelling	Number of subscribers	Number of views	Language
How to Read the Neighborhood: Traditional Maritime Heritage	396	78 (November 12, 2021)	English
How to Read the Neighborhood: Traditional Maritime Heritage	396	564 (November 12, 2021)	Croatian
How to Read the Neighborhood: The First Port Of Rijeka	396	3.3 thousand. (February 25, 2021)	Croatian
How to Read the Neighborhood: The First Port Of Rijeka	396	143 (February 25, 2021)	English

Table 2. Overview of storytelling about Rijeka's maritime heritage on YouTube (Source: Authors.)

The analysis also raises key critical questions. The data reveal a fundamental dilemma: while digital platforms theoretically democratize maritime heritage by making it accessible beyond museum spaces, the low level of engagement (Table 2) calls into question whether these initiatives risk creating an illusion of participation rather than fostering authentic co-creation. Storytelling becomes predominantly shaped by institutions, positioning tourists as consumers of pre-packaged narratives rather than active participants in content creation. Although digital storytelling is presented as a tool for promoting maritime heritage, its actual effectiveness and impact remain questionable. The low number of views on YouTube, especially those in English, raises the question of whether these initiatives truly reach a wider audience. Furthermore, it is necessary to critically examine whose voices are amplified in these stories and whose are marginalized – are these exclusively official, institutional perspectives, or is there space for the authentic voices of the individuals and community to whom this heritage belongs? The analysis of represented voices indicates a clear hierarchy: institutional perspectives (Museum, Tourist Board) dominate, while the lived experiences of local fishermen, dockworkers, and others remain largely absent. This clearly emphasizes the institutional perspective, resulting in the exclusion of authentic, living voices from the maritime heritage narrative. However, it needs to be pointed out that initiatives, such as the 'How to Read the Neighborhood' project, consciously strive to include authentic community voices. As stated in the project description, the activities involved numerous stakeholders beyond the institutional framework, such as: various educational institutions (the Civil Engineering and Technical School, students, TRY Theatre), civil society organizations (the Club of Citizens of Sušak), and individuals (volunteers, citizens through their 'memories'). This project is a conscious effort to present maritime heritage through the perspective of the neighborhood and its inhabitants, representing a step towards heritage democratization. Although analysis of the digital presence (Table 2) shows that the reach of such initiatives may still be limited, the project itself serves as a valuable model for future efforts that could shift the narrative from exclusively institutional to truly participatory. Finally, this approach also raises the question of commodification: does it risk reducing Rijeka's maritime heritage to superficial, algorithmically shaped narratives that serve market logic, leading to a loss of its complexity and authentic social value?

This critical examination reveals the paradoxical role of digital storytelling in Rijeka's maritime heritage. Conceptualizing digital storytelling as a contested cultural practice reveals its dual nature: it simultaneously facilitates authentic engagement through emotional connection (e.g., the Carpathia human story) and introduces new forms of algorithmic superficiality. This duality positions digital storytelling not merely as a promotional tool, but as a site of continuous

confrontation between heritage democratization and digital commodification. Only the inclusion of diverse community voices will enable the true democratization of Rijeka's maritime heritage.

4.3. Storytelling about maritime heritage, authenticity of the tourist experience and sharing of that experience

For this paper, a survey was conducted with 150 tourists who, after watching the storytelling video about Rijeka's maritime heritage *How to Read the Neighborhood: The First Port of Rijeka*, and experiencing the city during their trip, provided their opinions on the storytelling about the maritime heritage, the authenticity of the tourist experience and sharing their tourist experience. The characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 3.

	Variable	N	Share in %
Gender	Male	66	44.0
	Female	84	56.0
	Don't want to say	0	-
Age	under 25	6	4.0
	26-39	64	42.7
	40-49	14	9.3
	50 and older	66	44.0
Education	Secondary school	105	70.0
	Higher education	9	6.0
	University education and above	36	24.0
Country of origin	Italy	11	7.3
	Germany	22	14.7
	Slovenia	17	11.3
	Hungary	13	8.7
	Poland	12	8.0
	Austria	19	12.7
	NOW	12	8.0
	Netherlands	4	2.7
	France	2	1.3
	Croatia	16	10.7
	Russia	4	2.7
	Ukraine	4	2.7
	Serbia	6	4.0
Other	8	5.3	
Length of stay	Three nights or less	123	82.0
	More than three nights	27	18.0
Frequency of arrival	First	96	64.0
	Two or more times	54	36.0
Travel accompaniment	Family	88	58.7
	Friends	34	22.7
	Groups	26	17.3
	Individual	2	1.3
Travel motivation	Natural landscape	53	35.3
	Cultural and historical heritage	39	26.0
	Hanging out with friends and family	32	21.3
	Recreation and entertainment	21	14.0
	Business trip	2	1.3
	Other	3	2.0
Using the Internet during your vacation	Yes	150	100.0
	No	0	0.0
Use of social networks	Yes	150	100.0
	No	0	0.0
Using information from social networks to travel and make decisions	Yes	150	100.0
	No	0	0.0
Total respondents		150	100.0

Table 3. Descriptive analysis of respondent characteristics (Source: Results of the survey questionnaire processed in IBM SPSS.)

The analysis of respondents shows a higher representation of men compared to women (56% vs. 44%) (Table 3). The largest age group among respondents are those aged 50 and older (44.0%), who, together with respondents aged 26 to 39, account for almost 87% of the total respondents. Regarding education, the majority of respondents (70%) had a high school diploma.

The storytelling about the maritime heritage of the city of Rijeka is...	Opportunity to experience	Attraction	Characteristic of uniqueness	Story about the city of Rijeka	Acquisition of knowledge
N	150	150	150	150	150
Mean	4.07	4.03	4.13	4.09	4.59
Std. deviation	0.299	0.230	0.688	0.292	0.494
Variance	0.089	0.053	0.474	0.085	0.244
Minimum	3	3	3	4	4
Maximum	5	5	5	5	5
The authenticity of the tourist experience is the result of...	Historical architecture being well preserved in the city of Rijeka	The city of Rijeka being an authentic representation of the city developed around the port	The city of Rijeka representing maritime heritage very well.	Storytelling awakening a sense of authenticity of maritime heritage	
N	150	150	150	150	
Mean	3.88	4.09	4.04	4.08	
Std. Deviation	0.326	0.335	0.197	0.272	
Variance	0.106	0.112	0.039	0.074	
Minimum	3	3	4	4	
Maximum	5	5	5	5	
To share the tourist experience...	I use email/text messages/mms to tell the story of a trip.	I share a photo album/video for acquaintances, on Facebook, Instagram, etc.	I use reviews on the Internet (TripAdvisor, Booking.com etc.)	I use a blog/diary for acquaintances, on Facebook, etc.	I use Twitter to talk about a travel experience.
N	150	150	150	150	150
Mean	3.88	4.08	4.04	3.13	2.86
Std. deviation	0.326	0.272	0.197	1.072	1.159
Variance	0.106	0.074	0.039	1.150	1.343
Minimum	3	4	4	1	1
Maximum	4	5	5	4	4

Table 4. Storytelling about Rijeka's maritime heritage (Source: Results of the survey questionnaire processed in IBM SPSS.)

According to country of origin, the majority of respondents came from Germany, Slovenia, Austria, and Italy, which is understandable given that the majority of tourists visiting Croatia have traditionally come from these countries. For comparison, data from the Tourist Board of the City of Rijeka (2024) for 2023 show that tourists from Germany account for the majority of overnight stays in Rijeka, followed by visitors from Italy, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Austria, and Poland. The share of domestic respondents is 10.7%. Their significant representation (12.9%) was also recorded in tourist overnight stays in Rijeka (Rijeka Tourist Board, 2024). The majority of respondents stayed in Rijeka for up to three nights (82.0%), which is consistent with the data on the average stay of tourists in the city (3.18 nights for foreign tourists and 2.06 nights for domestic tourists). Regarding frequency of arrival, most respondents were visiting Rijeka for the first time (64%) with their family (58.7%). Although the primary motivation for visiting Rijeka is natural landscape (35.3% of respondents), cultural and historical heritage also play an important role (26.0%). All respondents stated that they use the internet and social networks during their vacation, as well as information from social networks to plan travel and make decisions about the destination.

Respondents indicated that storytelling about maritime heritage contributes to the following attributes: 'acquiring knowledge', 'characteristic of uniqueness', 'story about the city of Rijeka', 'an opportunity for an experience' and 'attraction'

and evokes an authentic tourist experience for them (Table 4). According to respondents, storytelling primarily has an educational component, tells a story about Rijeka and provides an opportunity to create an authentic tourist experience based on the city's maritime history. Respondents prefer to share their experience by 'sharing photo albums/videos to acquaintances on Facebook, Instagram, etc.' and 'using reviews on the Internet' (TripAdvisor, Booking.com, etc.) compared to other ways of sharing their tourist experience through digital media. Compared to previous research (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014), significant shifts were found in the increased use of social networks and online reviews.

Table 5 shows the correlation matrix for constructs 'Storytelling about maritime heritage', 'Authenticity of the tourist experience' and 'Sharing the tourist experience'.

		Storytelling about maritime heritage	Authenticity of the tourist experience	Sharing the tourist experience
Storytelling about maritime heritage	Pearson correlation	1	0.339**	0.268**
	sig. (2-tailed)		<0.001	<0.001
	N	150	150	150
Authenticity of the tourist experience	Pearson correlation	0.339**	1	0.210**
	sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001		<0.001
	N	150	150	150
Sharing the tourist experience	Pearson correlation	0.268**	0.210**	1
	sig. (2-tailed)	<0.001	0.010	
	N	150	150	150

** The correlation is significant at the level of 0.01 (two-sided).

Table 5. Correlation matrix for constructs 'Storytelling about maritime heritage', 'Authenticity of the tourist experience' and 'Sharing the tourist experience'. (Source: Results of the survey questionnaire processed in IBM SPSS.)

The correlation analysis (Table 5) showed a statistically significant, positive impact of *maritime heritage storytelling* on creating tourist experiences ($r=0.339$, $p<0.001$), confirming the H1 hypothesis. The results are consistent with previous studies that emphasize storytelling as a key component in creating tourist experiences (Moscardo, 2020; Costa and Pereira, 2022). *Storytelling*, furthermore, has a statistically significant and positive impact on sharing the tourist experience ($r = 0.268$, $p<0.001$), confirming the H2 hypothesis. Finally, the authenticity of the tourist experience has a statistically significant and positive impact on sharing the tourist experience ($r = 0.210$, $p<0.001$), confirming the H3 hypothesis. The correlation matrix indicates that storytelling has a stronger influence on the perception of authenticity than on sharing the experience itself. Although the correlations between the examined constructs are statistically significant, their relatively weak to moderate strength (ranging from 0.210 to 0.339) suggests the existence of numerous other factors that shape these relationships. These findings confirm previous research. Stepchenkova et al. (2025) cite tourists' culture of origin, demographics, understanding of authenticity, and personal attitudes towards authenticity as factors influencing its perception. The perception of authenticity is only one dimension of a complex tourist experience, which competes with other motivations such as relaxation, pleasure, entertainment, and social interaction. Similarly, the digital sharing of tourist experiences is strongly influenced by gender, age, perceived ease of use, prior travel experience, and other factors (Lin and Rasoolimanesh, 2023). These limitations do not diminish the value of the results but rather highlight the complexity of the phenomenon.

Storytelling and the authenticity of the tourist experience in the city motivate tourists to share their experiences through digital media. For example, tourists sharing their experiences in Rijeka through reviews on the Tripadvisor portal (2025) demonstrate this internalization. One review mentions the storytelling surrounding the Adria Palace: '*...The Adria Palace is a beautiful and worth seeing building in the port area of Rijeka. It was built in 1895 and was formerly the headquarters of the Adria shipping company. The lettering 'Jadrolinija' from this time can still be seen on the facade.*' A post on Facebook in the group Croatia Travel – 2025, stating 'Rijeka is a big port on the Adriatic Sea,' shows tourists sharing their travel experience in Rijeka, emphasizing its identity as a port city (Rjontouruk, 2025). Such statements not only confirm the theoretical assumptions of this research but also demonstrate how tourists internalize and reproduce narratives about maritime heritage and the city of Rijeka, actively participating in its promotion and preservation. By sharing their travel experiences, tourists become co-creators who promote Rijeka's maritime heritage and the destination as a whole.

This qualitative example also illustrates the statistical relationships observed in Table 5. The tourist's detailed description of Adria Palace shows that maritime heritage storytelling triggers the authenticity of the tourist experience ($r=0.339$) by connecting personal observation with historical narrative. Their decision to share this experience publicly exemplifies *how* authenticity translates into digital sharing ($r=0.210$), through emotional resonance that motivates communication. The relatively weak to moderate correlations reflect the uneven engagement of tourists in sharing their travel experiences, as the primary travel motivation of respondents, such as 'natural landscape' (35.3%), may have a competitive advantage over exploring historical and cultural heritage (26.0% of respondents). This pattern aligns with Wang's

(1999) concept of constructive authenticity, where tourists actively reinterpret heritage through personal engagement with narratives, though to varying degrees depending on their primary travel motivations.

5. CONCLUSION

This study provides insight into the potential of maritime heritage to generate an authentic story for an authentic tourist experience by examining its representation in Rijeka's public space, and digital media as a promotional channel. Drawing on the attitudes of tourists who visited Rijeka and watched a video on its maritime heritage storytelling, the study explored the interrelationships between the authenticity of the tourist experience, storytelling, and experience sharing.

The research provides empirical evidence on the role of digital storytelling in shaping authentic tourist experiences within the context of Rijeka's maritime heritage. The results show how digital narratives can serve as a bridge between the objective authenticity of maritime heritage and the subjective tourist experience, complementing Wang's (1999) typology of authenticity in a digital context. More specifically, the findings advance the theoretical understanding of authenticity as a relational construct, demonstrating how it is dynamically co-created through the interaction between maritime heritage, the digital narrative, and the tourist personal interpretation. The research shows how tourists, by sharing their experiences, become co-creators of maritime heritage storytelling, expanding the theoretical frameworks of Moscardo (2020) and Solomon et al. (2022). Thus, this study frames co-creation not merely as a marketing tool, but as a form of participatory heritage mediation, where tourists actively shape and convey the cultural meaning of maritime heritage. A link between the use of digital narratives and the preservation of intangible heritage was also confirmed, contributing to theories of sustainable tourism (Silva et al., 2022) in the context of urban coastal destinations. In doing so, this study positions digital storytelling as a sustainable communication practice that contributes to broader heritage awareness and engagement without physical strain on the destination.

The practical contribution is twofold: (1) it provides new knowledge applicable to other DMOs as a basis for developing effective digital strategies that integrate authentic maritime narratives (e.g., virtual walks), and (2) it emphasizes the importance of involving the local population in creating digital content to ensure an authentic representation of maritime heritage.

The results of the correlation analysis indicated a statistically significant, and positive, albeit low influence of maritime heritage storytelling and the authenticity of the tourist experience on sharing the tourist experience through digital media. The city of Rijeka has rich maritime heritage that can be transformed into an attractive story, enhancing and authenticating the tourist experience through digital technologies. Revitalizing tourist storytelling by highlighting maritime heritage contributes to its preservation and creates opportunities to promote Rijeka as a destination with rich maritime heritage, with tourists participating as co-creators of an authentic experience and new technologies serving as communication channels for sharing these experiences.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of a convenient sampling method, while practical, may limit the generalizability of the findings, as the sample may not fully represent the broader tourist population in Rijeka. Second, reliance on closed-ended Likert-scale questions, though efficient for quantitative analysis, restricted the depth of insights; future studies could benefit from incorporating open-ended questions to capture qualitative nuances. Third, the analysis of digital media presence, although included, was not exhaustive; a more in-depth examination of user engagement and content across various social media platforms could yield richer insights. Fourth, the sample size was determined without a prior power analysis. The underrepresentation of Generation Z in the sample also presents a challenge for fully understanding the digital habits of different age groups.

Empirical results indicate that the sample was sufficiently large to detect statistically significant relationships between the examined constructs. Specifically, correlation analysis revealed weak to moderate positive correlations ($r = 0.210 - 0.339$), all statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. These correlations have a sufficiently large effect size to be reliably observed even with this sample size. Therefore, despite the methodological limitation in sample size planning, the findings of this study can be considered robust within the framework of the established relationships. However, for future research aiming to investigate more subtle relationships or moderating effects, it is recommended to conduct a power analysis to ensure an appropriate sample size. Despite these limitations, this study provides a valuable foundation for understanding the role of storytelling in the tourist experience within the context of Rijeka's maritime heritage.

Future research should include in-depth interviews and focus groups to further explore the dimensions of authenticity experience and the mechanisms of co-creation not captured by quantitative methods. A comparison with other Mediterranean cities could reveal the specific features of the Rijeka model and the universal principles of digital storytelling about maritime heritage. To situate these findings more firmly within scholarly debates, specific methodological approaches are recommended: longitudinal studies could track how co-created narratives evolve over time, while broader comparative

studies across different cultural contexts could test the transferability of the Rijeka model. Future research can also focus on specific groups, such as Generation Z, and their preferences for using digital content about maritime heritage, which would provide new insights into sharing tourist experiences through digital media.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was supported by the EU Project Smart Blue Tourism - the smart marina of the future and Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management projects ZIP-FMTU-023-5-2023 and ZIP-FMTU-1-5-2024.

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