

# **Institutional Credibility in Government-Managed Tourism Storytelling: A Systematic Review**

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## **Abstract**

This systematic literature review examines how institutional credibility, digital storytelling, and cultural identity have been conceptualized within government-managed tourism communication research. Despite growing attention to Destination Management Organization (DMO) digital communication, these constructs have been addressed in isolation: institutional credibility through crisis communication and brand trust frameworks, digital storytelling as a marketing mechanism, and cultural identity as narrative content disconnected from governance evaluation. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines and a PICO framework, Scopus searches identified 384 records, of which 35 met the inclusion criteria. Thematic analysis produced four clusters: institutional credibility and DMO crisis communication, digital storytelling and destination branding, digital storytelling and cultural identity, and DMO digital communication practice. Cross-thematic analysis revealed a structural dissociation, as only 10 of 35 studies (28.6%) addressed all three dimensions simultaneously. Interpreted through Fombrun's Institutional Credibility (IC) framework (encompassing competence, trustworthiness, reliability, and legitimacy),

findings show that existing studies engage with these dimensions selectively and without integration into a coherent governance communication account. Cultural identity emerges as an undertheorized credibility signal: when DMOs authentically integrate local heritage into storytelling, they implicitly invoke all four dimensions, yet the conditions under which audiences endorse, or contest such claims, remain untested. This review extends Fombrun's framework toward governance communication in digital tourism and proposes cultural identity authenticity as a mediating variable between storytelling and institutional credibility, reframing digital storytelling as a governance mechanism for trust-building. The most pressing gaps identified include the absence of validated IC measurement instruments and persistent Global North dominance in the literature.

**Keywords:** *Institutional Credibility; Digital Storytelling; Government-Managed Tourism Communication; Governance Communication; Systematic Literature Review*

## **1. Introduction**

The proliferation of digital communication platforms has fundamentally reshaped how government institutions engage with public audiences, particularly within tourism governance. Social media accounts managed by government agencies and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) now operate as more than promotional tools; they function simultaneously as governance mechanisms through which institutional competence, organizational values, and public accountability are communicated and evaluated (Martínez-Sala et al., 2017; Sigala et al., 2012). As Huynh et al. (2025) demonstrated in their study of DMO digitalization in developing regions, the digital communication strategies of these organizations carry distinct institutional implications that extend well beyond marketing effectiveness. In this environment, government-managed tourism accounts are increasingly recognized as carrying a dual mandate, simultaneously promoting destinations and signaling governance quality, making the study of how their digital content shapes audience perceptions of the institution itself a matter of growing scholarly importance (Casal-Ribeiro et al., 2025; Usui et al., 2018).

Within this context, institutional credibility has emerged as a critical lens for evaluating public perceptions of communicating organizations. Drawing on the foundational work of Fombrun (2018), institutional credibility can be understood as the composite of audience assessments

regarding an organization's competence, trustworthiness, reliability, and legitimacy in fulfilling its public responsibilities. Unlike destination image, which concerns perceptions of a place or tourism product, institutional credibility is directed at the organization responsible for managing and representing that place. This distinction carries particular weight for government-managed tourism accounts: their messaging shapes not only tourist behavior but also communicates governance values, policy alignment, and organizational integrity. Fu & Wang (2024) have established that digital communication practices contribute to institutional legitimacy through mechanisms such as information visibility, organizational responsiveness, and stakeholder engagement, yet the specific pathways through which storytelling content shapes these evaluations remain underexplored.

Despite growing scholarly interest in government-managed digital communication, tourism research has predominantly focused on destination-centered outcomes such as destination image, tourist engagement, and behavioral intention. Previous reviews of persuasive communication in tourism have examined these outcomes primarily from marketing and consumer behavior perspectives (Ahmed et al., 2024; Li et al., 2025; Mardhatilah et al., 2023), leaving the institutional and governance dimensions of DMO communication largely unaddressed. Studies examining DMO social media activity have largely been concerned with content performance, such as reach, engagement, and posting frequency, rather than with how audiences evaluate the institutions producing that content (Kumar et al., 2022; M. Lee et al., 2021; Polymeri et al., 2025). Crisis communication research represents a partial exception: scholarship by Mele et al. (2023), Taecharungroj & Pattaratanakun (2023), and Martínez-Sala et al. (2024) has examined how DMOs manage institutional messaging during disruption, revealing that communication choices in crisis contexts carry significant implications for perceived organizational legitimacy. Nevertheless, these studies address institutional credibility implicitly rather than treating it as an independent, theoretically grounded outcome, limiting both scholarly understanding and practical guidance for communication strategy design.

Digital storytelling has emerged as a central practice in government-managed tourism communication, offering narrative-driven content that engages audiences by constructing representations of place, heritage, and cultural identity. As Youssef et al. (2019) established through practitioner interviews, storytelling in destination marketing operates across cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions simultaneously, shaping destination awareness, fostering identification, and ultimately influencing travel

decisions. Research consistently demonstrates that storytelling is among the most effective mechanisms through which DMOs build and sustain destination brands: Lund et al. (2018) showed that social media storytelling by DMOs functions as a "technology of power" shaping audience perceptions beyond mere information transmission, while Lund et al. (2020) further established that storytelling can actively counter brand co-destruction in participatory digital environments. When storytelling incorporates cultural heritage and local identity, its institutional dimension deepens: Zins & Abbas Adamu (2024) found that heritage storytelling in destination marketing not only conveys information but also frames the cultural stewardship and institutional authority of the communicating organization. In this regard, Solomon et al. (2022) argue that destination storytelling is fundamentally linked to place identity and governance legitimacy, as DMOs must carefully curate narratives that reflect both cultural authenticity and institutional accountability. Despite these insights, the specific contribution of culturally grounded storytelling to institutional credibility as distinct from destination image or brand equity has not been systematically synthesized.

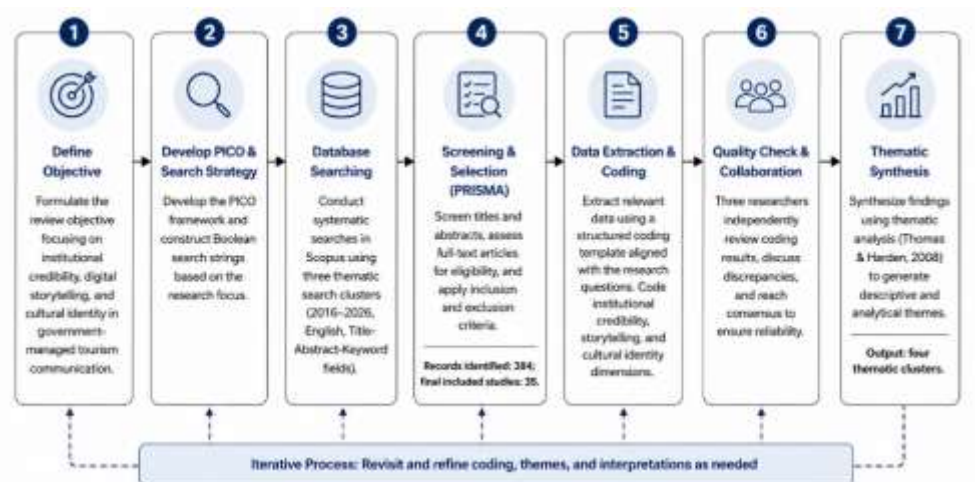
Cultural identity constitutes a further dimension of this communicative landscape that warrants closer examination. Storytelling content frequently incorporates local traditions, indigenous narratives, and heritage elements that position destinations within broader cultural frameworks. Studies such as those by Campillo-Alhama & Martínez-Sala (2019) on transmedia branding of World Cultural Heritage Sites, Jo et al. (2022) on tourism storytelling and destination brand value, and Bagarić et al. (2026) on digital storytelling and authentic tourist experiences collectively indicate that cultural identity functions as both affective content and an evaluative frame through which audiences assess institutional legitimacy. Beyond the included corpus, Kasemsarn & Nickpour (2025) further highlight that current digital storytelling frameworks exhibit significant limitations in addressing the unique demands of social media platforms for cultural tourism contexts, particularly in maintaining cultural authenticity while achieving institutional communication objectives. When a government agency or DMO invokes cultural heritage in its storytelling, it implicitly claims the authority to represent, interpret, and steward that heritage, a claim that audiences may endorse or contest based on their perceptions of institutional credibility. The interplay between cultural identity, digital storytelling, and institutional credibility thus constitutes a theoretically significant but empirically underexplored domain within tourism communication research.

Given these gaps, conducting a systematic literature review (SLR) is both timely and necessary. By synthesizing evidence across empirical and conceptual studies, an SLR allows for the consolidation of fragmented knowledge, the identification of consistent patterns across contexts, and the mapping of theoretical and methodological gaps that individual studies cannot reveal in isolation. This is particularly important because the integration of storytelling, cultural identity, and institutional credibility has not been examined as a coherent cluster in existing literature, a gap that limits both the theoretical understanding of governance-oriented communication and the practical capacity of DMOs to design strategies that reinforce public trust. This review integrates insights from institutional credibility theory, digital storytelling scholarship, and cultural identity research to provide a holistic account of how government-managed tourism communication shapes public trust and organizational legitimacy in digital environments, equipping government agencies and DMOs with evidence-based guidance for communication strategy design.

This review is guided by three research questions: (Q1) How has institutional credibility been conceptualized in government-managed tourism storytelling? (Q2) How do storytelling practices and cultural identity influence audience perceptions of institutional credibility? (Q3) What theoretical and methodological gaps remain in integrating storytelling, cultural identity, and institutional credibility within government-managed tourism communication studies? By synthesizing evidence across these intersecting domains, this review establishes a theoretical foundation for governance-oriented communication research and equips DMOs with evidence-based guidance for narrative strategy design.

## **2. Method**

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to synthesize existing evidence regarding institutional credibility in government-managed tourism storytelling. To provide an overview of the overall research design and analytical procedures, Figure 1 illustrates the methodological workflow applied throughout this review, beginning with research objective formulation and concluding with thematic synthesis and framework development.



**Figure 1.** Methodological workflow illustrating research objective formulation, search strategy development, screening procedures, coding processes, and thematic synthesis. Source: Authors (2026)

As shown in Figure 1, the review process comprised sequential stages including research objective formulation, PICO development, search strategy implementation, PRISMA screening, coding procedures, and thematic synthesis. To structure the review focus and search strategy, this study adopted the Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome (PICO) framework. In this review, Population referred to audiences or stakeholders interacting with government-managed tourism communication platforms; Intervention included digital storytelling, narrative communication, and social media content by DMOs; Comparison involved variations in communication approaches; and Outcomes included IC, organizational reputation, governance legitimacy, engagement, and destination perception. Following Frandsen et al. (2020) PICO guided keyword development and study selection rather than functioning as a rigid filter. The PICO framework is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** PICO Framework

Component	Description
Population	Audiences or stakeholders interacting with government-managed tourism communication platforms
Intervention	Digital storytelling, narrative communication, and social media content produced by DMOs or government tourism agencies

<b>Component</b>	<b>Description</b>
Comparison	Variations in communication approaches or storytelling strategies are treated as contextual rather than mandatory, given the integrative nature of this review
Outcome	Institutional credibility, organizational reputation, governance legitimacy, engagement, and destination perception

Source: Authors (2026)

Systematic searches were conducted exclusively within the Scopus database, selected for its broad coverage of peer-reviewed interdisciplinary literature across communication, tourism, and social sciences. Searches were performed in May 2026 using three thematic Boolean search clusters applied to the Title-Abstract-Keyword fields, restricted to English-language peer-reviewed publications published between 2016 and 2026, indexed within the Social Sciences, Business, and Management subject areas. The three clusters and their Boolean combinations are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Search Clusters and Boolean Components

<b>Search Cluster</b>	<b>Boolean Components</b>
Cluster 1	(“institutional credibility” OR “organizational credibility” OR “source credibility” OR “organizational legitimacy” OR “DMO credibility” OR “destination credibility”) AND (“tourism” OR “destination” OR “DMO” OR “destination marketing”)
Cluster 2	(“digital storytelling” OR “narrative communication” OR “storytelling”) AND (“tourism” OR “destination” OR “cultural tourism”)
Cluster 3	(“cultural identity” OR “heritage” OR “local culture” OR “indigenous culture”) AND (“tourism” OR “destination” OR “storytelling”)

Source: Authors (2026)

Eligibility criteria were predefined to ensure conceptual relevance and methodological consistency. The inclusion and exclusion criteria applied throughout the review process are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

<b>Category</b>	<b>Inclusion Criteria</b>	<b>Exclusion Criteria</b>
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference proceedings, theses, editorials, opinion papers, and non-peer-reviewed publications
Publication Period	Published between 2016 and 2026	Published before 2016 or after 2026
Language	Publications written in English	Publications in non-English languages, including those with only translated titles in Scopus
Research Context	Studies examining digital communication by official tourism institutions (DMOs, government tourism agencies, national/regional tourism boards)	Studies focused solely on individual communicators (influencers, UGC, traveler reviews) with no institutional communication dimension
Theoretical Focus	Studies addressing institutional credibility, organizational legitimacy, destination credibility, brand trust, crisis communication, or governance communication in tourism contexts	Studies with no conceptual connection to institutional or organizational evaluation
Methodological Scope	Empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods) and systematic/narrative reviews	Conceptual papers without empirical grounding, studies lacking methodological transparency
Accessibility	Full-text accessible	No full-text access, retracted articles

Source: Authors (2026)

Initial searches identified 384 records across three clusters (Cluster 1: n=101; Cluster 2: n=193; Cluster 3: n=90). After removing 5 duplicates,

379 records were screened at the title and abstract stage; 50 were excluded (non-English: n=9; out-of-scope: n=41), yielding 329 for full-text assessment. Full-text evaluation excluded 294 studies for lacking an IC dimension (n=168), absence of a DMO/government actor (n=68), low methodological transparency (n=33), or inaccessibility (n=25). Consequently, 35 studies met the eligibility criteria. The complete selection procedure is illustrated in Figure 2.

PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews which included searches of databases and registers only

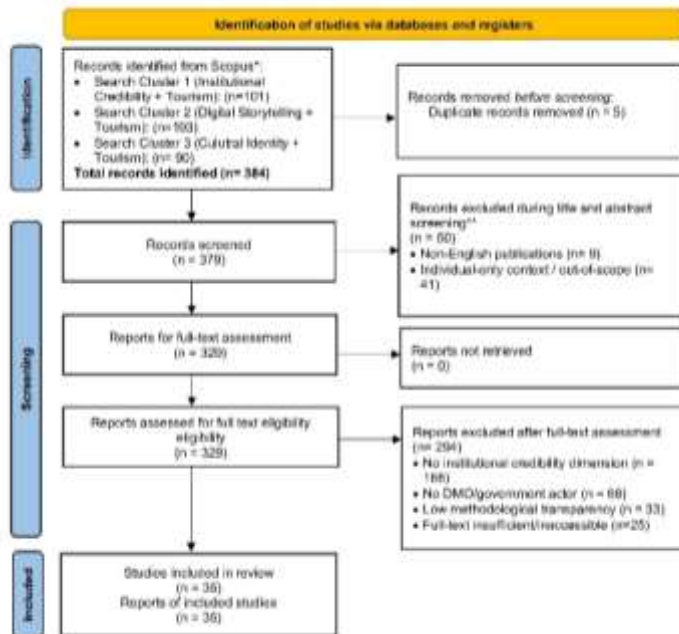


Figure 2. PRISMA 2020 Flowchart (Source: Authors, 2026)

Data extraction used a structured coding template capturing bibliographic, methodological, theoretical, and thematic characteristics. Coding was conducted collaboratively by three researchers (P1, P2, P3) functioning as investigator triangulation. Disagreements were resolved iteratively until consensus was achieved. The extracted data were subsequently organized into predefined coding categories, including institutional credibility coverage (direct, indirect, partial, or absent), storytelling emphasis (present, partial, or not present), and cultural identity dimensions (present, partial, or not present). The coding framework applied throughout the review process is summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Coding Framework

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Coding Category</b>	<b>Description</b>
Institutional Credibility	Direct / Partial / Indirect / Absent	Governance-related outcome coverage
Storytelling	Present / Partial / Not present	Narrative communication emphasis
Cultural Identity	Present / Partial / Not present	Scopus Cultural elaboration component

Source: Authors (2026)

Thematic synthesis followed Thomas & Harden (2008) three-stage procedure: initial line-by-line coding, development of descriptive themes across included studies, and generation of analytical themes through cross-study synthesis. This process produced four thematic clusters used to organize findings and identify broader theoretical and methodological implications.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Characteristic of Included Studies

The 35 studies included in the final synthesis span publication years from 2016 to 2026 and reflect considerable diversity across geographic context, research design, and coverage of the three primary coding dimensions: institutional credibility (IC), storytelling (ST), and cultural identity (CI). Table 5 presents the complete characteristics of the included studies, organized by thematic cluster.

**Table 5.** Characteristics of Included Studies (n = 35)

<b>N</b>	<b>Author(s) &amp; Year</b>	<b>Geographic Context</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>IC</b>	<b>ST</b>	<b>CI</b>	<b>Thematic Focus</b>
<i>Cluster A: Institutional Credibility &amp; DMO Crisis Communication</i>							
1	Mele et al. (2023)	Italy / Intl.	Empirical	Direct	Not Present	Absent	DMO crisis communication & institutional legitimacy

<b>No</b>	<b>Author(s) &amp; Year</b>	<b>Geographic Context</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>IC</b>	<b>ST</b>	<b>CI</b>	<b>Thematic Focus</b>
2	Oliveira & Huertas-Roig (2019)	Spain	Empirical	Direct	Not Present	Absent	Crisis communication & destination image recovery
3	Casal-Ribeiro et al. (2025)	Portugal	Empirical	Direct	Not Present	Absent	DMO crisis communication & institutional legitimacy
4	Jiménez-Barreto, Rubio, Campo, et al. (2020)	Spain / Finland	Empirical	Direct	Not Present	Absent	Destination brand credibility & behavioral intentions
5	Jiménez-Barreto, Rubio, & Campo (2020)	Spain	Empirical	Direct	Not Present	Partial	Destination brand authenticity & official DMO platforms
6	Pappas (2019)	International	Empirical	Indirect	Not Present	Absent	Tourism crisis & risk communication in events
7	Taecharungroj & Pattarata nakun (2023)	Intl. (113 DMOs)	Empirical	Direct	Not Present	Absent	DMO crisis communication patterns

<b>No</b>	<b>Author(s) &amp; Year</b>	<b>Geographic Context</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>IC</b>	<b>ST</b>	<b>CI</b>	<b>Thematic Focus</b>
8	A. M. Martínez-Sala et al. (2024)	Spain / Intl.	Conceptual	Partial	Not Present	Absent	during COVID-19 Crisis & resilience communication framework
<b><i>Cluster B: Digital Storytelling &amp; Destination Branding</i></b>							
9	Zins & Abbas Adamu (2024)	Malaysia	Empirical	Direct	Present	Present	Heritage storytelling & destination branding
10	Bagarić et al. (2026)	Croatia	Mixed methods	Partial	Present	Present	Digital storytelling & tourist experience authenticity
11	Campillo-Alhama & Martínez-Sala (2019)	Spain (UNESCO)	Empirical	Direct	Present	Present	Transmedia branding & cultural heritage sites
12	Lund et al. (2020)	Denmark	Netnography	Direct	Present	Present	Storytelling & destination brand co-creation
13	Jo et al. (2022)	South Korea	Quantitative	Partial	Present	Present	Tourism storytelling

<b>No</b>	<b>Author(s) &amp; Year</b>	<b>Geographic Context</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>IC</b>	<b>ST</b>	<b>CI</b>	<b>Thematic Focus</b>
14	Lever & Elliot (2023)	Canada	Computational	Direct	Present	Present	g & destination brand value Visual storytelling & destination co-creation
15	Lund & Kimbu (2021)	UK / South Africa	Conceptual	Direct	Present	Present	Hollywood-formula storytelling & destination branding
16	Zhao & Agyeiwaa h (2025)	Macau, China	Mixed methods	Partial	Present	Present	Visual storytelling & destination co-creation
17	Lund et al. (2018)	Denmark / UK	Netnography	Direct	Present	Present	Social media storytelling & destination branding
18	Alegro & Turnšek (2021)	Europe (DMOs)	Qualitative	Direct	Present	Present	DMO promotional video creativity & storytelling

<b>No</b>	<b>Author(s) &amp; Year</b>	<b>Geographic Context</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>IC</b>	<b>ST</b>	<b>CI</b>	<b>Thematic Focus</b>
19	Homeghi et al. (2025)	Romani	Content analysis	Partial	Present	Present	Gastronomic storytelling & online destination branding
20	Irimiás & Volo (2018)	International	Netnography	Partial	Present	Present	Heritage narrative: UGC vs. institutional communication
<b><i>Cluster C: Digital Storytelling &amp; Cultural Identity</i></b>							
21	Chang et al. (2025)	Malaysia	Experimental	Indirect	Present	Present	Digital storytelling & cultural heritage tourism
22	Q. Y. Lee et al. (2026)	Malaysia (Sarawak)	Empirical	Direct	Present	Present	Digital storytelling & cultural heritage destination marketing
23	Barbu Kleitsch & Bader-Jurj (2026)	Romani	Empirical	Partial	Present	Present	Dark tourism storytelling & trauma narratives
24	Dinis et al. (2024)	Portugal / Iberia	Empirical	Partial	Present	Present	Podcasting as a cultural

<b>No</b>	<b>Author(s) &amp; Year</b>	<b>Geographic Context</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>IC</b>	<b>ST</b>	<b>CI</b>	<b>Thematic Focus</b>
25	S. Lee & King (2025)	International	Review	Indirect	Present	Present	heritage storytelling tool AR/VR as immersive cultural heritage storytelling
26	Tsilimpou et al. (2025)	Greece	Empirical	Indirect	Present	Present	Photo storytelling & intangible cultural heritage
27	Saxena & Rishi (2025)	India / Intl.	Computational	Indirect	Present	Present	AI vs. human content in tourism storytelling
28	Tan et al. (2025)	China	Computational	Indirect	Not Present	Present	AI, tourism communication & cultural continuity
<b><i>Cluster D: DMO Digital Communication Practice</i></b>							
29	Polymeri et al. (2025)	Mexico	Content analysis	Direct	Partial	Present	DMO visual content strategy & destination image gap

<b>N o</b>	<b>Author(s) &amp; Year</b>	<b>Geogra phic Context</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>IC</b>	<b>ST</b>	<b>CI</b>	<b>Thematic Focus</b>
30	Huynh et al. (2025)	Vietnam	Empirical	Parti al	Not Pres ent	Abs ent	DMO digitalizat ion barriers in developin g regions
31	Kumar et al. (2022)	India	Empirical	Dire ct	Not Pres ent	Parti al	DMO Facebook content & destinatio n promotio n
32	Zhang et al. (2016)	China	Empirical	Parti al	Not Pres ent	Abs ent	DMO microblog ging & consumer informati on needs
33	M. Lee et al. (2021)	Intl. (72 DMOs)	Empirical	Dire ct	Not Pres ent	Abs ent	DMO social media efforts & audience engagemen t
34	A.-M. Martínez-Sala et al. (2017)	Spain	Empirical	Dire ct	Not Pres ent	Abs ent	DMO relational digital communi cation strategy
35	Hansen-Magnusson & Gehrke (2023)	Arctic / Nordic	Computa tional	Indir ect	Not Pres ent	Pres ent	Tourism governanc e & stakehold er

N o	Author(s) & Year	Geogra phic Context	Method	IC	ST	CI	Thematic Focus
							communi cation

Source: Authors' coding results (2026). IC = Institutional Credibility; ST = Storytelling; CI = Cultural Identity.

*Abbreviations — IC coding: Direct = IC explicitly addressed as primary variable; Partial = IC partially or implicitly addressed; Indirect = IC only implied as background. ST coding: Present = storytelling is a key theme or variable; Partial = storytelling mentioned as implicit context; Not Present = no storytelling discussed. CI coding: Present = cultural identity explicitly examined; Partial = cultural identity mentioned as background; Absent = no cultural identity discussed.*

Temporally, most studies were published between 2021 and 2025 (n=22), with three in 2026 and ten between 2016 and 2020, reflecting growing scholarly interest coinciding with accelerated DMO social media adoption and COVID-19 governance challenges. Geographically, European contexts dominate (n=14), followed by Southeast and East Asian (n=8) and multi-country settings (n=8), indicating limited representation from the Global South. Methodologically, qualitative and interpretive studies constitute the largest group (n=11), followed by conceptual reviews (n=8), quantitative/experimental designs (n=9), and mixed-methods (n=7); computational methods appear in five studies, reflecting an emergent trend.

Regarding the three coding dimensions: 18 studies (51.4%) addressed IC directly, 10 (28.6%) partially, and 7 (20.0%) indirectly. Storytelling was explicitly present in 19 studies (54.3%), partially present in 1 study (2.9%), and absent from 15 (42.9%). Cultural identity was explicitly examined in 22 studies (62.9%) and absent from 11 (31.4%). Although each dimension is individually well-represented, their simultaneous integration within a single study remains limited.

### **3.2. Theme 1: Institutional Credibility as an Explicit Governance Outcome in DMO Crisis Communication**

The eight studies in Cluster A consistently frame DMOs as primary actors responsible for constructing and restoring institutional image, particularly in crisis contexts, and operationalize IC directly (n=6 of 8). Mele et al. (2023) showed that pro-social behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic functions as a signal of institutional competence; Casal-Ribeiro et al. (2025) demonstrated that crisis response strategy directly shapes

audience evaluations of DMO legitimacy using the SCCT framework; and Oliveira & Huertas-Roig (2019) found that response speed, message clarity, and framing consistency are pivotal in restoring public trust following terrorist incidents in Barcelona and Cambrils. Taecharungroj & Pattaratanakun (2023), analyzing 250,979 tweets from 113 DMOs worldwide, identified four communication patterns in crisis: degrade, disseminate, engage, and elevate, affirming that DMOs actively shape public opinion regarding tourism governance quality. Martínez-Sala et al. (2024) proposed a conceptual model of communication resilience as the foundation of post-crisis reputational recovery, though without incorporating narrative mechanisms.

A critical finding across this cluster is the complete absence of storytelling in all eight studies: IC is conceptualized exclusively as a product of crisis management and reactive image repair rather than as an outcome built cumulatively through proactive narrative communication. (Jiménez-Barreto, Rubio, & Campo, 2020; Jiménez-Barreto, Rubio, Campo, et al., 2020) introduce brand credibility within online destination experiences, and while cultural authenticity emerges as an implicit contextual factor, it is not systematically examined. Theme 1 thus reveals that the studies most explicit in examining IC do so in deliberate isolation from storytelling and cultural identity, a departure point for the conceptual gaps identified in subsequent themes.

### **3.3. Theme 2: Digital Storytelling and Cultural Destination Perception**

The twelve studies in Cluster B demonstrate the strongest integration across the three coding dimensions: eight simultaneously exhibit IC Direct and ST Present, while ten also address cultural identity explicitly. Lund et al. (2018) established the foundational argument that DMO social media storytelling operates as a 'technology of power' shaping audience perceptions beyond information transmission; through the Visit Denmark case, they showed that strategically managed narratives build emotional bonds that reinforce the DMO's institutional position as a legitimate representational authority. Lund et al. (2020) extended this by demonstrating that storytelling can counter destination brand co-destruction, positioning DMOs as active narrative protectors in participatory digital environments.

Several studies illuminate specific storytelling mechanisms. Lever & Elliot (2023) found that Destination Canada's cohesive visual content curation rebuilt international demand post-COVID while simultaneously strengthening the national DMO's identity as the legitimate destination steward. Campillo-Alhama & Martínez-Sala (2019) showed that transmedia branding at UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Sites reinforces

DMO online reputation while consolidating cultural authority. Jo et al. (2022), in a quantitative study of 259 respondents, found that narrative uniqueness, informational appeal, and educational value significantly influence destination brand value. Zins & Abbas Adamu (2024) make the most directly relevant contribution: heritage narratives managed by DMOs position the organization as the legitimate custodian and interpreter of local heritage, an implicit claim that shapes audience evaluations of institutional legitimacy across all four of Fombrun's (2018) dimensions.

Zhao & Agyeiwaah (2025) and Alegro & Turnšek (2021) Add a co-creation dimension: the former found that symbolic convergence among DMO content, tourist uploads, and operator narratives creates a narrative ecosystem reinforcing DMO representational claims, while the latter identified a paradox of homogeneity in European DMO promotional videos that may weaken institutional differentiation. Irimiás & Volo (2018) further illustrate this dynamic by comparing UGC with DMO institutional communication on war heritage sites, finding that DMOs function as curators of trauma narratives and collective cultural identity, a role that carries implicit but consequential implications for how audiences perceive DMO representational authority, even when IC is not the primary analytical focus. Collectively, Theme 2 reveals that digital storytelling functions as a mechanism for constructing DMO institutional authority, yet the majority of studies operationalize IC implicitly through brand trust and destination reputation rather than as a standalone governance construct.

### **3.4. Theme 3: Cultural Identity as a Narrative Frame in Digital Storytelling Practices**

All eight studies in Cluster C exhibit both ST Present and CI Present simultaneously, confirming cultural identity as the defining characteristic of this cluster's storytelling discourse. However, only one study Lee et al. (2026) examines IC directly, two code it as Partial, and five as Indirect, identifying the most significant gap in the literature: rich cultural-narrative discussion does not consistently translate into analysis of institutional evaluation. Lee et al. (2026) represent the benchmark: their exploration of heritage-based digital storytelling for Sarawak's destination marketing found that DMOs integrating deep local cultural elements into digital content strengthen audience perceptions of authenticity and institutional representational legitimacy, directly connecting cultural narrative to DMO institutional evaluation.

The remaining studies illuminate different facets of cultural storytelling. Chang et al. (2025) demonstrated experimentally that digital storytelling enhances narrative transportation and message persuasiveness

in cultural heritage contexts among Generation Z audiences. Dinis et al. (2024) and Lee & King (2025) respectively showed the potential of podcasting and AR/VR as immersive cultural heritage storytelling tools. Homeghi et al. (2025) found that local gastronomy functions as a regional branding vector communicating cultural identity; Barbu Kleitsch & Bader-Jurj (2026) identified four typologies of dark tourism storytelling in which trauma and memorial narratives involve institutional co-production. Saxena & Rishi (2025) found that human-generated content outperforms AI content in cultural authenticity and emotional engagement. Tsilimpokou et al. (2025) demonstrated that participatory photo storytelling positions cultural identity as a contested representational object among DMOs, tourists, and communities. Theme 3 collectively reveals that cultural identity is richly operationalized as narrative content, yet its function as a dimension shaping audience evaluations of the institutions claiming to represent that culture has not been systematically articulated.

### **3.5. Theme 4: DMO Digital Communication Practice Institutional Presence Without Narrative Integration**

The seven studies in Cluster D examine DMO digital communication from the perspective of content distribution efficiency and audience engagement rather than narrative or institutional evaluation. Five of the seven do not incorporate the storytelling dimension, and three do not address cultural identity. Lee et al. (2021) found that posting frequency, content format variety, and information richness positively influence engagement across 72 DMO Facebook event pages, but without engaging with storytelling or institutional evaluation. Kumar et al. (2022) found cultural content functioning as a promotional element in Indian DMO Facebook activity, but not as an identity dimension shaping institutional legitimacy. Zhang et al. (2016) revealed that only 13% of DMO microblog content on Sina Weibo contained substantive tourism information, exposing a reactive rather than strategic communication orientation disconnected from narrative approaches.

Martínez-Sala et al. (2017) found that DMO relational strategy emphasizes two-way communication rather than institutional narrative construction. Polymeri et al. (2025), the most relevant contribution within this cluster, identified a gap between Mexican DMO visual representations and tourist expectations, with cultural identity elements present in content but absent from a structured narrative strategy. Huynh et al. (2025) positioned DMOs in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta as digital transformation actors constrained by human resource and financial barriers. Theme 4 confirms that DMO digital communication practice is dominated by content-centric approaches, and that the gap between

practice and narrative potential for building governance legitimacy has not yet been fully investigated.

### 3.6. Cross-Thematic Pattern: The Structural Dissociation Between Institutional Credibility, Storytelling, and Cultural Identity

Cross-cluster analysis of the 35 included studies reveals a theoretically significant pattern: there is a structural dissociation among the three primary dimensions that constitute the focus of this review. The distribution of coding across clusters is presented in Table 6.

**Table 6.** Cross-Tabulation of IC × ST × CI by Study Cluster

Cluster (n)	IC Direct (%)	ST Present (%)	CI Present (%)	All Three Present (%)
(A) IC & DMO Communication (n=8)	6 (75.0%)	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)
(B) Storytelling & Destination Branding (n=12)	8 (66.7%)	10 (83.3%)	10 (83.3%)	8 (66.7%)
(C) Digital Storytelling & Cultural Identity (n=8)	1 (12.5%)	8 (100%)	8 (100%)	1 (12.5%)
(D) DMO Digital Communication Practice (n=7)	4 (57.1%)	1 (14.3%)	3 (42.9%)	1 (14.3%)
Total (n=35)	18 (51.4%)	19 (54.3%)	22 (62.9%)	10 (28.6%)

Source: Authors' coding results (2026). IC = Institutional Credibility; ST = Storytelling; CI = Cultural Identity.

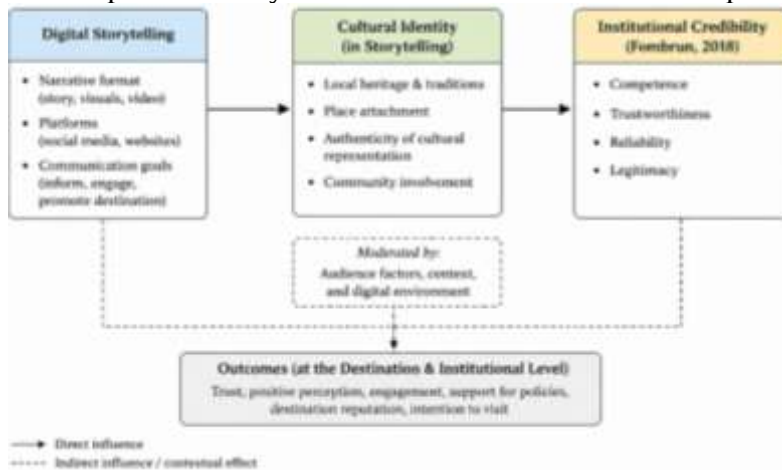
Based on Table 6, three dissociation patterns are particularly prominent. First, nine studies (IC Direct + ST Not Present, predominantly from Cluster A) demonstrate that IC is examined explicitly yet entirely detached from narrative mechanisms. In these studies, IC functions as a reactive outcome of crisis management rather than as a construct built through storytelling practices. Second, eight studies (IC Direct + ST Present, predominantly from Cluster B) show that IC and storytelling co-

occur, but IC tends to be operationalized implicitly through brand trust and destination reputation rather than as a standalone governance construct. Third, although all eight studies in Cluster C exhibit ST Present and CI Present simultaneously, only one examines IC directly, indicating that the rich cultural-narrative discourse in the literature has not been consistently translated into analyses of institutional evaluation.

In aggregate, only 10 of the 35 studies (28.6%) simultaneously exhibit all three dimensions, IC, ST, and CI, at the Direct or Present coding level. This figure indicates that analytical integration between culturally grounded narrative persuasion mechanisms and governance credibility outcomes remains an underexplored domain within digital tourism communication scholarship. These cross-thematic findings constitute the analytical foundation for the discussion that follows, particularly in identifying the theoretical and methodological gaps that warrant sustained scholarly attention.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings indicate that government-managed digital tourism communication operates through structurally separated pathways in the literature, even though these pathways interact dynamically in practice. The discussion integrates findings from the four thematic clusters and cross-thematic pattern analysis to address the three research questions.



**Figure 3.** Conceptual framework of the reviewed evidence: institutional credibility in government-managed tourism storytelling. Source: Authors' synthesis (2026)

#### **4.1. Conceptualizing Institutional Credibility in Government-Managed Tourism Storytelling**

The findings indicate that IC has been conceptualized along two largely unconnected pathways: a reactive pathway through crisis communication and reputation management, and an implicit pathway through destination brand trust and brand credibility.

The reactive pathway, dominant in Cluster A, positions IC as an outcome of how DMOs respond to disruptive events, engaging primarily with Fombrun (2018) competence and trustworthiness dimensions. Mele et al. (2023) and Casal-Ribeiro et al. (2025) demonstrate that empathetic and accountable crisis communication shapes DMO institutional responsibility perceptions consistent with trustworthiness and reliability, while Oliveira & Huertas-Roig (2019) show that message clarity reinforces competence perceptions. This pathway is bounded: IC is treated as a product of reactive response rather than a construct built cumulatively through sustained narrative engagement.

The implicit pathway, dominant in Cluster B, operationalizes IC through brand credibility and destination brand trust, engaging primarily with the legitimacy dimension. (Lund et al., 2018, 2020) demonstrate that DMO storytelling builds emotional bonds, reinforcing the DMO's institutional position as a legitimate destination representative. Zins & Abbas Adamu (2024) come closest to articulating the full scope of Fombrun (2018) framework: heritage storytelling positions DMOs as cultural custodians with interpretive authority, a claim encompassing competence to interpret heritage, trustworthiness to represent it faithfully, reliability to sustain that representation, and legitimacy to govern cultural meaning-making.

What is absent from both pathways is a conceptualization of IC as a governance-related outcome engaging all four of Fombrun (2018) dimensions simultaneously within a storytelling context. As Solomon et al. (2022) argue, destination storytelling is fundamentally linked to governance legitimacy, requiring DMOs to curate narratives reflecting both cultural authenticity and institutional accountability. The governance dimension of IC, particularly the interplay between reliability, legitimacy, and culturally grounded narratives, remains undertheorized within tourism communication scholarship.

#### **4.2. How Storytelling Practices and Cultural Identity Influence Institutional Credibility Perceptions**

Across Clusters B and C, storytelling consistently operates as a mechanism through which DMOs construct and signal IC dimensions. Jo et al. (2022) demonstrate that narrative appeal and educational value shape

brand evaluations corresponding to institutional competence and reliability. Lever & Elliot (2023) show that cohesive visual storytelling reinforces the DMO's identity as a credible steward, engaging the legitimacy dimension directly. Lund et al. (2018) establish that sustained narrative production signals organizational reliability, as audiences recognize the DMO as the authoritative source of destination meaning.

Cultural identity functions as a particularly consequential dimension. When DMOs integrate local cultural heritage into storytelling, they implicitly claim all four of Fombrun (2018) credibility dimensions simultaneously: competence to understand and interpret local culture, trustworthiness to represent it authentically, reliability to sustain that representation across communication touchpoints, and legitimacy to act as an institutional guardian of cultural meaning. Zins & Abbas Adamu (2024) illustrate this most directly through their Malaysian heritage storytelling analysis.

A significant tension emerges from within the corpus itself: Lee et al. (2026), whose findings represent the most direct integration of cultural narrative and institutional evaluation in this review, demonstrate that deep engagement with local cultural elements strengthens audience perceptions of authenticity and institutional representational legitimacy, implying, conversely, that surface-level incorporation of cultural symbols without substantive community grounding risks undermining rather than reinforcing these same perceptions. This aligns with Fombrun (2018) emphasis on trustworthiness and reliability as dimensions audiences evaluate through consistent organizational behavior over time, not surface-level cultural symbol adoption. DMO storytelling prioritizing aesthetic appeal over cultural depth may generate short-term engagement without building durable institutional credibility.

#### **4.3. Theoretical and Methodological Gaps in Integrating Storytelling, Cultural Identity, and Institutional Credibility**

The third research question identifies the theoretical and methodological gaps remaining in research that integrates storytelling, cultural identity, and IC within government-managed tourism communication. Synthesis across the four themes and cross-thematic pattern reveals three interrelated clusters of gaps.

The first theoretical gap concerns the partial operationalization of Fombrun's (2018) institutional credibility framework in the reviewed literature. As demonstrated across all four themes, studies that examine IC directly (n=18) engage predominantly with only one or two of the four credibility dimensions, most commonly trustworthiness in crisis communication studies (Cluster A) and legitimacy in storytelling studies

(Cluster B). No study systematically examines all four dimensions of competence, trustworthiness, reliability, and legitimacy simultaneously as outcomes shaped through narrative communication. This partial operationalization limits the theoretical scope of IC as a governance construct, reducing it to either a reactive reputational measure or a marketing-adjacent brand perception indicator. Future research should develop integrated frameworks that examine how storytelling practices and cultural identity contribute to each of Fombrun's dimensions across different temporal and communicative conditions.

The second theoretical gap concerns the relationship between cultural identity and institutional legitimacy, which emerges as a recurring but underarticulated theme across Clusters B and C. Studies including (Campillo-Alhama & Martínez-Sala, 2019; Lee et al., 2026; Zins & Abbas Adamu, 2024) implicitly suggests that cultural identity functions as both the content and the evaluative frame of institutional credibility claims, a relationship that has not been formally theorized within the IC literature as applied to tourism governance. Specifically, the conditions under which audiences accept or contest DMO claims to cultural representational authority remain empirically untested. This gap is particularly consequential given Solomon et al. (2022) argument that destination storytelling is inseparable from governance legitimacy, and Fu & Wang (2024) finding that stakeholder engagement constitutes a core mechanism of institutional legitimacy construction. Theoretical development articulating the mediating role of cultural identity authenticity in the relationship between storytelling practices and IC represents a priority for future scholarship.

The primary methodological gap identified by this review is the absence of validated IC measurement instruments within tourism storytelling contexts. Among the 18 studies with Direct IC coverage, most rely on content analysis, case studies, and proxy measures such as engagement metrics or brand perception indicators. No study develops or applies a psychometric scale measuring IC as a multidimensional construct encompassing all four of Fombrun's (2018) dimensions within a single instrument adapted to tourism governance communication contexts. This contrasts with IC research in political communication and organizational studies, where validated multi-dimensional scales have been developed and applied. The absence of such an instrument makes it impossible to assess whether narrative characteristics and cultural identity systematically predict audience IC evaluations, or to compare IC levels across different DMO communication strategies. Developing a contextually appropriate

measurement instrument represents a pressing methodological priority for the field.

The contextual gap is equally significant: the dominance of Global North contexts among the included studies constitutes a systematic limitation on the scope of findings. Of the 35 included studies, 14 originate from European contexts, while representation from Africa, Latin America, and Oceania remains negligible. This imbalance is conceptually consequential because all four of Fombrun (2018) Credibility dimensions, competence, trustworthiness, reliability, and legitimacy, are evaluated by audiences through culturally embedded expectations of what responsible institutional behavior looks like. DMOs in developing countries, such as those examined by Huynh et al. (2025) In Vietnam, the operation under governance structures and cultural communication norms is fundamentally different from those of Western European DMOs. Whether the patterns of IC operationalization and the mechanisms linking storytelling to institutional evaluation identified in this review hold across diverse geopolitical contexts remains an open empirical question that comparative research should address.

#### **4.4. Theoretical Implications**

This review demonstrates that Fombrun (2018) IC framework, while foundational in organizational reputation research, has been applied only partially and non-systematically within tourism communication scholarship, with studies engaging individual credibility dimensions in isolation rather than integrating them into a coherent account of how narrative communication shapes IC as a governance outcome.

A specific theoretical proposition emerging from this review concerns the role of cultural identity as a credibility signal operating across all four of Fombrun (2018) dimensions. When DMOs produce culturally grounded storytelling that authentically represents local heritage, they signal competence in cultural understanding, trustworthiness in cultural representation, reliability through sustained cultural engagement, and legitimacy as institutional stewards of community identity. This multi-dimensional signaling function of cultural storytelling has not been previously articulated in the literature, representing a contribution that future empirical research should test.

#### **4.5. Practical Implications**

For DMOs and government tourism agencies, the findings underscore the need for a strategic reorientation: from content-for-promotion toward narrative-for-legitimacy. Communication practices focusing primarily on reach and engagement without considering how narratives shape audience assessments of institutional competence, trustworthiness, reliability, and

legitimacy fail to address the governance dimension of digital tourism communication.

Concretely, DMOs should design storytelling strategies that explicitly engage all four IC dimensions. Signaling competence requires demonstrating genuine cultural understanding in narrative content, not merely adopting cultural symbols aesthetically. Building trustworthiness requires accurate, respectful representations co-developed with heritage communities. Establishing reliability requires maintaining narrative consistency across platforms and over time. Sustaining legitimacy requires that storytelling reflects the DMO's public governance mandate, communicating organizational values such as cultural stewardship, transparency, and accountability. These implications carry particular relevance for DMOs in developing countries with rich cultural heritage but limited digital communication capacity, as identified by Huynh et al. (2025) in the Vietnamese context.

#### **4.6. Limitations**

This review is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, systematic searches were conducted exclusively within the Scopus database, potentially missing relevant studies indexed in Web of Science, EBSCO, or regional databases. Although Scopus was selected for its broad interdisciplinary coverage, high-quality studies in journals not indexed in Scopus may not be captured in this synthesis.

Second, the restriction to English-language publications may exclude important research published in other languages, particularly studies on DMOs and tourism communication in non-Anglophone contexts that could offer distinct perspectives on IC in tourism governance. Third, the search timeframe, limited to 2016–2026, may have omitted foundational studies prior to 2016 that established important conceptual groundwork regarding the relationship between destination communication and organizational credibility. Fourth, the thematic nature of this synthesis does not permit testing of effect strengths or causal directionality between variables; findings should therefore be understood as a conceptual mapping of the existing literature rather than as evidence of confirmed causal relationships.

#### **4.7. Future Research Directions**

Four prioritized research directions emerge from the identified gaps. First, empirical studies should develop and validate a multidimensional IC measurement scale for DMO digital communication contexts, explicitly incorporating Fombrun's (2018) four dimensions as subdimensions operationalized through indicators appropriate to tourism governance

communication. Second, qualitative and mixed-methods studies should investigate audience interpretations of DMO cultural credibility claims, examining how stakeholders accept, negotiate, or contest the representational authority DMOs assert through heritage storytelling. Third, comparative studies across geopolitical contexts should examine how IC dimensions are constructed differently across Global North and Global South DMO settings. Fourth, longitudinal studies should track how the sustained consistency of DMO cultural narrative shapes audience IC evaluations over time, given Fombrun's (2018) emphasis that institutional credibility accumulates through repeated interactions rather than isolated communication episodes.

## **5. Conclusion**

This systematic review synthesized evidence from 35 peer-reviewed studies to examine how institutional credibility, digital storytelling, and cultural identity have been conceptualized within government-managed tourism communication research published between 2016 and 2026. Rather than confirming a coherent body of integrated knowledge, the review reveals a field characterized by productive fragmentation: each construct has been examined with increasing sophistication in isolation, yet its analytical integration within a governance communication framework remains largely absent.

With respect to Q1, IC has been conceptualized along two dominant but disconnected pathways as a reactive construct through crisis communication and reputational recovery, and as an implicit correlate of destination brand trust. No study simultaneously operationalizes all four dimensions of Fombrun (2018) framework within a storytelling context, constituting the central theoretical gap identified by this review.

With respect to Q2, digital storytelling and cultural identity influence audience IC perceptions through mechanisms present in the literature but not yet systematically theorized as credibility-building processes. Storytelling functions as a vehicle through which DMOs signal competence, legitimacy, and reliability, performing the organizational capacity to represent and steward cultural heritage responsibly. When integrated authentically, cultural identity amplifies this credibility-signaling function; when incorporated superficially, credibility claims risk contestation, as audiences evaluate consistency between institutional claims and communication behavior over time, a dynamic corresponding directly to the reliability and trustworthiness dimensions of Fombrun (2018) framework.

With respect to Q3, three interrelated gaps are identified. Theoretically, no existing study applies Fombrun (2018) framework in its entirety to tourism governance communication. Methodologically, the absence of validated multidimensional IC measurement instruments prevents rigorous empirical testing. Contextually, the dominance of European study settings limits the generalizability of findings across diverse governance structures and cultural heritage contexts, particularly across the Global South.

Taken together, this review establishes Fombrun (2018) IC framework as a more governance-appropriate analytical lens for tourism communication research than destination image or brand equity constructs, and proposes that culturally grounded storytelling functions as a multidimensional credibility signal simultaneously engaging all four credibility dimensions. Practically, the findings reframe digital storytelling as a governance mechanism for institutional trust-building rather than solely a destination marketing instrument. These contributions are necessarily provisional: the structural dissociation between IC, storytelling, and cultural identity identified across the 35 included studies reflects not the absence of relevant phenomena in practice but the absence of research designs capable of capturing their integration. This review should therefore be understood as a foundational mapping exercise upon which more rigorous, empirically grounded, and globally inclusive research on institutional credibility in government-managed tourism communication can be built.

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