

CULTURAL NARRATIVE-BASED URBAN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT MODEL IN THE KESAWAN AREA OF MEDAN

Zakaria Siregar^{1*}, Nurindah Mas Yusdi Putri², Siti Rahmah Putri³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara (UISU), Medan, Indonesia

Corresponding author: zakariasiregar.2020@gmail.com

Abstract

This study discusses urban tourism as an alternative development for the tourism sector in urban areas. The current direction of tourism development prioritizes the ability of tourism destination actors to build meaningful tourist experiences through cultural narratives. The Kesawan area of Medan is an urban tourism destination because it preserves multicultural traces, colonial architectural heritage, and the history of Medan's development. The development of this area still tends to rely on physical aspects and has not optimally utilized cultural narratives as the main tourist attraction. This study aims to formulate a model for urban tourism development based on cultural narratives in the Kesawan area of Medan using a qualitative approach through a literature study method from relevant scientific articles, books, and research reports. Data analysis was carried out through the stages of data reduction, interpretation, and conceptual synthesis into a new, complete and comprehensive concept. The results show that cultural narratives have a strategic role in strengthening destination identity, enhancing tourist experiences, and creating differentiation in urban tourism destinations. This study produced a novelty in the form of an urban tourism development model based on cultural narratives called Integrated Cultural Narrative Tourism (ICNT) with four main components: identification of cultural assets, narrative construction, narrative digitization, and tourism experiences. This model can be an alternative strategy for developing sustainable urban tourism destinations that requires the participation of multiple actors.

Keywords: Urban Tourism; Cultural Narrative; Development model; Kesawan Medan

1. Introduction

The development of the global tourism industry shows a shift in tourist preferences from mass tourism activities to authentic, culture-based, and socially meaningful tourism experiences. In this context, urban tourism is one of the sectors experiencing significant growth because it offers a combination of history, culture, the creative economy, and urban life. (Henche et al., 2020) Medan City is one of the largest metropolitan cities in Indonesia with a strong multicultural character. (Weng et al., 2022) The history of Medan City's development cannot be separated from the presence of various ethnicities such as Malay, Chinese, Indian, Arab, and European who shape the city's identity to this day. One area that represents this dynamic is the Kesawan area. (Wandini, 2024) Kesawan is known as a center of trade and business since the Dutch colonial era (Tambunan, 2022). This area is home to

various historic buildings such as the London Sumatra Building, Tjong A Fie Mansion, the Medan Post Office, and several other colonial buildings that symbolize the economic development of East Sumatra in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This potential makes Kesawan a worthy area for development as a heritage-based urban tourism destination, similar to Jakarta's Old Town. (Permana et al., 2025)

Various revitalization programs still emphasize the physical aspects of an area rather than strengthening its cultural significance (Fahmi, 2024). Yet, the primary appeal of modern urban tourism lies not only in the objects seen, but also in the stories that connect tourists to a place's identity. (Bonifasia Yuniar Rifani, 2021)

Previous research has largely addressed urban tourism from the perspectives of spatial planning, the creative economy, and heritage preservation. On the other hand, studies on cultural narratives have focused more on cultural communication and destination branding. Few studies have integrated these two perspectives in the context of developing the Kesawan area in Medan. Based on these conditions, this study aims to formulate a model for urban tourism development based on cultural narratives in the Kesawan area of Medan as a strategy to increase the competitiveness of sustainable urban tourism destinations.

2. Literature Review

Urban tourism is a tourism activity that takes place in urban areas, utilizing various cultural, historical, economic, entertainment, and lifestyle attractions. (Trispa et al., 2021) Urban tourism is growing because cities have the ability to provide complex experiences through the interaction of physical space, social activities, and cultural identity. From a contemporary perspective, urban tourism not only showcases tourist attractions but also narrative experiences that enable tourists to understand the character of a city. (Richards, 2022)

Cultural narrative is the process of conveying cultural values, history, identity, and experiences through socially constructed stories. In the context of tourism, narrative serves as an interpretive medium that connects tourists with the meaning of a destination. Currently, tourists tend to remember stories rather than factual information, making narrative an important instrument in shaping tourism experiences. One of these is through cultural narratives, which can be realized through: 1) Destination storytelling; 2) Heritage interpretation; 3) Digital media; 4) Cultural festivals; and 5) Thematic tourism experiences. (Dionisio & Nisi, 2021). Research on urban tourism and cultural narratives has been fragmented. Researchers have yet to find a conceptual model that specifically integrates cultural narratives as the primary basis for urban tourism development in urban heritage areas in Indonesia, particularly Kesawan, Medan.

3. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a literature review method to develop a conceptual model of cultural narrative-based urban tourism in the Kesawan area of Medan. A qualitative design was selected because the objective of the study was not to measure statistical relationships but to interpret and synthesize existing scholarly knowledge in order to formulate a comprehensive conceptual framework. This approach is particularly appropriate for examining cultural narratives, heritage tourism, and urban identity, as these phenomena are socially constructed and require interpretive analysis.

The data sources consisted of national and international journal articles, academic books, research reports, and other scholarly publications relevant to urban tourism, cultural narratives, heritage interpretation, destination storytelling, and sustainable tourism development. The selected literature was required to have conceptual or empirical relevance to the research objectives, ensuring that the resulting synthesis reflected current academic discussions in these fields.

Data collection was conducted through three systematic stages. First, relevant literature was identified and inventoried based on predetermined thematic criteria related to urban tourism and cultural narratives. Second, the collected sources were classified according to key analytical dimensions, including historical heritage, multicultural identity, heritage architecture, digital tourism, and narrative-based tourist experiences. This classification facilitated the comparison of ideas across different studies and enabled the identification of recurring themes and conceptual relationships.

The data were analyzed using an interactive qualitative analysis process consisting of data reduction, thematic categorization, conceptual interpretation, and model synthesis. During the data reduction stage, information that was directly relevant to the research objectives was selected, while overlapping or less relevant findings were excluded. Subsequently, thematic categorization was employed to identify patterns concerning the role of narratives in strengthening destination identity and enhancing visitor experiences. These themes were then interpreted within the broader theoretical perspectives of urban tourism and cultural narratives before being integrated into the proposed Integrated Cultural Narrative Tourism (ICNT) model. Through this process, the study generated a conceptual framework that combines previous theoretical insights into a more complete and context-specific model for the sustainable development of the Kesawan heritage area.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 The Potential of Cultural Narratives in the Kesawan Area

The results of the study show that Kesawan has four main sources of cultural narratives and these narratives are cultural capital that can be developed into unique tourism experiences.

Table 1. Sources of Kesawan Cultural Narratives

DIMENSIONS	NARRATIVE FORM
Colonial History	Deli trading and plantation companies
Multiculturalism	Malay, Chinese, Indian, Arabic
Heritage Architecture	Colonial buildings and old shophouses
Historical Figures	Tjong A Fie and Medan's economic elite

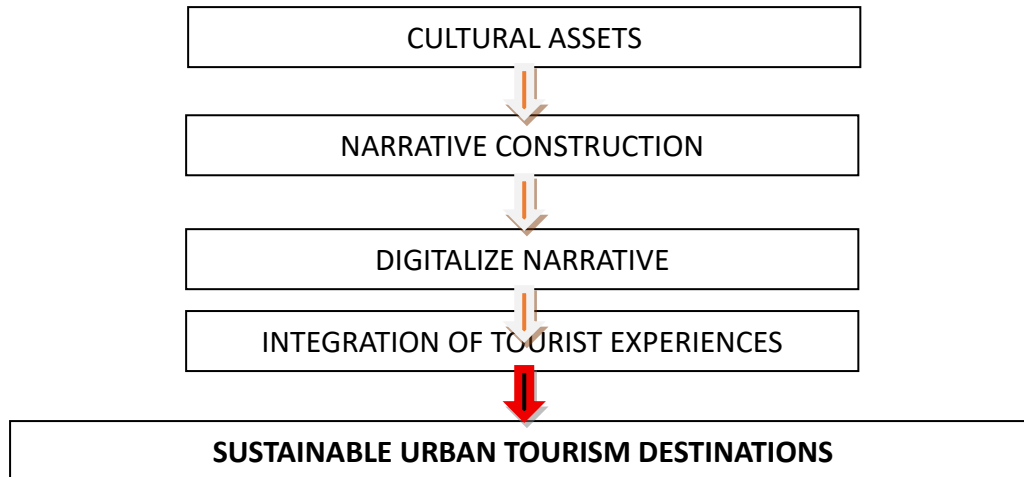
Table 2. Level of Cultural Narrative Potential of Kesawan

DIMENSIONS	POTENTIAL PERCENTAGE
Architectural Heritage	35%
City History	25%
Multiculturalism	22%
Traditional Culinary	18%

4.2 Integrated Cultural Narrative Tourism (ICNT)

These findings demonstrate that the primary problem lies not in the lack of tourist attractions, but rather in the suboptimal management of the narratives attached to those attractions. The primary contribution of this research is to offer a conceptual model the authors call Integrated Cultural Narrative Tourism (ICNT).

Figure 1. ICNT Development Model



The ICNT model begins with Cultural Asset Identification. This initial stage requires an inventory and mapping of heritage buildings, historical figures, local traditions, culinary delights, and cultural communities in the Kesawan area of Medan. The second stage involves constructing a narrative based on historical authenticity, cultural values, regional identity, and direct tourist experiences. The narrative at this stage should not simply explain historical facts but also create an emotional connection with visitors.

The next stage is narrative digitization, meaning strengthening narratives through digitization, which can be achieved using the heritage QR Code method. A heritage QR code is the use of two-dimensional barcodes (QR codes) at tourist destinations and historic buildings to provide instant access to historical digital information. The term "heritage" itself refers to cultural or historical heritage. When tourists scan the QR code using their mobile phones, they are directed to a link containing information about the historic building or site, architectural specifications or relics, and documentary photos or videos. This technology is widely used to transform ordinary tourist attractions into interactive and environmentally friendly educational tours by reducing the use of printed brochures. Furthermore, narrative digitization can also utilize virtual tours, interactive simulations that allow someone to explore a location digitally without having to be physically present. Typically, these tours use a combination of 360-degree panoramic photos, videos, floor plans, text, and audio narration accessed via computer or mobile phone. Another method is utilizing social media to convey the profile, uniqueness, and advantages of a tourist destination.

The fourth stage is a crucial stage that completes the ICNT model in the Kesawan Medan area. This stage, known as the integration of the tourism experience, is crucial because it bridges or transforms the narrative into a tourist experience in the Kesawan Medan area. This narrative stage of the integration of the tourism experience is translated into 5 forms: First, a walking tour, which involves exploring a specific destination or area on foot. Generally, this tour is guided by a local guide (or uses an audio guide/map) with a duration of around 2 to 3 hours and an average distance of 3 kilometers; Second, a heritage trail is a special route designed to connect various historical objects, cultural heritage sites,

or natural heritage sites. This path serves as an educational tourism facility that allows visitors to explore and understand the historical value of an area in depth; Third, a celebration or public event held to preserve, celebrate, and promote the heritage of traditions, arts, and values of a community. This event serves as an important forum for strengthening social ties, educating the younger generation, and celebrating the diversity of local identities; Fourth, culinary tourism, which is a tourist trip whose main objective is to enjoy, explore, and understand the culture of a region through food and drink. This activity is not just about eating, but includes the experience of seeking authentic local flavors, participating in food festivals, visiting production centers, and learning to cook. Finally, fifth is Storytelling performance, namely the art of telling a story in front of an audience using a combination of voice, intonation, facial expressions, body language, and props. The goal is to entertain, convey a moral message, educate, and build a strong emotional connection between the storyteller and their audience.

These four stages can ultimately serve as a model for developing sustainable urban tourism based on cultural narratives in the Kesawan area of Medan. The resulting model, in principle, will expand theoretical studies that emphasize the importance of city identity not only being realized through physical buildings but also being translated into narratives that tourists can consume. These findings also support Fisher's (1987) narrative paradigm theory, which explains that humans understand the world through stories. In the context of tourism, tourists consume destinations not only as geographic spaces but also as narrative spaces. This study academically contributes to integrating the concepts of urban tourism and cultural narratives, producing a new conceptual model and strengthening the communication perspective in tourism studies. Practically, it is hoped that it will serve as a consideration or reference for the development of the Kesawan area, support heritage revitalization policies, and encourage the development of digital tourism.

5. Conclusion

This research shows that the Kesawan area of Medan has great potential to be developed as an urban tourism destination based on cultural narratives. This potential stems from its historical heritage, colonial architecture, cultural diversity, and important figures who shape the region's identity. The research results produce a four-stage urban tourism development model based on cultural narratives that places cultural narratives at the core of destination development so that tourists not only enjoy physical objects but also understand the meaning contained within them. This research confirms that the future of urban tourism depends not only on infrastructure development, but also on the destination's ability to effectively manage and communicate cultural stories to every visitor.

This study demonstrates that the Kesawan area of Medan possesses substantial potential to be developed as a cultural narrative-based urban tourism destination. Its historical heritage, colonial architecture, multicultural identity, and prominent historical figures constitute valuable cultural assets that extend beyond physical attractions and serve as meaningful resources for constructing authentic tourism experiences. The findings indicate that the principal challenge lies not in the absence of tourism resources, but in the limited integration of cultural narratives into destination management and visitor interpretation.

The main contribution of this research is the formulation of the Integrated Cultural Narrative Tourism (ICNT) model, which consists of four interconnected stages: Cultural Asset

Identification, Narrative Construction, Narrative Digitization, and Integration of Tourist Experiences. Unlike conventional urban tourism approaches that primarily emphasize physical revitalization, the ICNT model positions cultural narratives as the central mechanism for connecting visitors with the historical and cultural meanings embedded within the destination. Consequently, tourists are encouraged to engage with Kesawan not merely as a collection of heritage buildings but as a narrative landscape that communicates the city's collective memory and identity.

From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches the discourse on urban tourism by integrating the concepts of heritage interpretation, destination storytelling, and cultural narratives into a unified conceptual framework. It also reinforces Fisher's Narrative Paradigm by illustrating how stories function as interpretive instruments through which visitors construct meaning during tourism experiences. Practically, the proposed model offers strategic guidance for local governments, tourism managers, cultural communities, and heritage stakeholders in designing sustainable tourism policies that combine heritage preservation with digital innovation through initiatives such as QR-code interpretation, virtual tours, and storytelling-based tourism programs.

Nevertheless, this study remains conceptual in nature because it is based on a literature review. Future research is therefore recommended to validate the ICNT model through empirical studies involving tourists, local communities, tourism practitioners, and policymakers in the Kesawan area. Such investigations would provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of narrative-based tourism strategies in enhancing visitor engagement, destination competitiveness, and the long-term sustainability of urban heritage tourism.

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