Co-Creation as a Destination Marketing Strategy for Community-based Tourism in Mai Châu

Phạm Trần Thăng Long*, **Nguyễn Phương Thảo***

Abstract: This paper investigates co-creation as a marketing strategy for community-based tourism (CBT) in Mai Châu (now in Phú Thọ province), with particular attention to implementation mechanisms, experiential value enhancement, and sustainable development tools. A qualitative case study approach was adopted, drawing on secondary data, field observations, and analysis of user-generated content on social media. The findings identify three distinct forms of co-creation in Mai Châu: (1) participation in ethnic cultural performances, (2) personalized tour design, and (3) digital experience sharing. Based on these insights, the paper introduces a "three pillars-three stages" model (experience, content, communication) to strengthen marketing effectiveness and addresses the theoretical gap regarding co-creation in Vietnam's ethnic minority regions. It also advances a new perspective on experiential tourism marketing by emphasizing mechanisms for sustainable local branding. The study concludes that Mai Châu can achieve brand repositioning, cultural dissemination, and sustainable development through coordinated collaboration among government, enterprises, and the community, supported by long-term policy measures.

Keywords: Community-based tourism, destination marketing, tourist experience, three-stage tourist journey, three-pillar model of co-creation.

Subject classification: Tourism.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the tourism industry has witnessed an increase in tourists' active participation in designing and co-creating tourism products. This is observed as a major transformation of the global tourism industry from passive consumption models toward interactive, personalized experiences (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). There is also noticeable emergence of co-creation as an innovative destination marketing strategy, enhancing tourist engagement and amplifying local communities' self-

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* Thăng Long University.

Email: longptt@thanglong.edu.vn

promotion capabilities (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). In Vietnam, CBT has been acclaimed as a sustainable model that delivers economic benefits while preserving the cultural heritage of ethnic minority regions (Phạm Thị Cẩm Vân & Đoàn Việt, 2022). Mai Châu (now in Phú Thọ province) exemplifies this approach with its distinctive Thái cultural identity, homestays, handicrafts, and traditional practices. Nevertheless, destination marketing there remains largely traditional, lacking innovation and alignment with growing personalized-experience trends (Achariya & Phạm Trần Thăng Long, 2024).

A defining feature of community-based tourism in Mai Châu is the high level of tourist-resident interaction through cultural activities. This distinctive characteristic creates fertile ground for applying co-creation in destination branding and communication (Phạm Trần Thăng Long, Phạm Thị Hạnh & Phan Hồng Đức, 2025). While tourists' personal experiences - often serving as organic brand ambassadorship - contribute to digital promotion, these efforts remain ad hoc and lack strategic coherence. The central challenge lies in transforming co-creation into a structured tool for community destination marketing, which is expected to enhance tourism visibility while advancing cultural, economic, and social sustainability (Timareva et al., 2015).

In an era marked by increasing personalization and customer-centricity, the limitations of traditional destination marketing are evident in its low interactivity, limited engagement, and weak transmission of authentic value (Swati, 2020). Co-creation, grounded in service-dominant logic, has therefore gained traction in community-based tourism. This is particularly visible in culturally rich areas such as Mai Châu, where ethnic minority communities have developed homestay models (Phạm Trần Thăng Long, Phạm Thị Hạnh & Phan Hồng Đức, 2025). In this context, tourists shift from passive consumers to active co-creators, becoming organic ambassadors who promote destinations through social media and personal networks, thereby contributing to sustainable competitive advantage.

Building on this foundation, the study proposes policy implications and practical frameworks for embedding co-creation into community-based tourism development in general, and into Mai Châu's destination marketing in particular. It contributes a new perspective on experiential tourism marketing and outlines strategies to harness community agency, improve destination communication, and strengthen stakeholder collaboration within the tourism ecosystem.

2. Literature review

2.1. Evolution of destination marketing

Destination marketing refers to the strategic process of shaping and promoting a destination's image to attract target tourist segments. This process encompasses

product planning, experience management, stakeholder collaboration, and brand development, all of which are closely tied to local cultural identity (Kotler et al., 1993; Pike & Page, 2014). Whereas traditional research emphasized the message-control capacities of tourism promotion organizations and travel companies, the rise of the Internet and social media has led to a significant paradigm shift. As Sujatha (2023) notes, tourists have evolved from passive recipients to active participants in constructing and disseminating destination images.

This transformation is particularly evident in open models, where tourists create and share content based on their personal experiences (Başarangil, 2022; Gulati, 2021). Within this shift, emphasis has increasingly moved from "destination promotion" to "experience building." In this context, a destination's value is defined not only by its natural resources or cultural heritage, but also by the quality of tourist experiences - encompassing emotions, interactions, and authenticity (Saputra & Nugraha, 2024). This evolution underscores the growth of experiential marketing, in which active tourist participation plays a central role, particularly in cultural, ecological, and community-based tourism.

2.2. Co-creation theory in tourism

The concept of co-creation originates from the Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic) proposed by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004). This framework argues that value is not created solely by firms but emerges through active customer interaction. In tourism, this is reflected in the collaboration between tourists and local communities to design, implement, and adapt experiences (Font et al., 2021; Romão et al., 2023). Binkhorst (2006) highlights the tourist's role in personalizing experiences, while Mohammadi et al. (2020) expand this perspective by emphasizing multi-dimensional collaboration involving tourists, communities, businesses, and tour guides.

The application of S-D Logic in tourism has since evolved beyond its original focus on value creation through service encounters. Romão et al. (2023) argue that co-creation in tourism encompasses not only physical interactions such as craft-making or production participation but also intangible dimensions, including storytelling, emotional exchange, social interaction, and service feedback. These processes foster personalized experiences, strengthen the bond between tourists and destinations, and enable communities to gather feedback for product development (Binkhorst, 2006). International scholars such as Prebensen et al. (2013) and Campos et al. (2015) demonstrate the effectiveness of co-creation in enhancing tourist loyalty; however, their research has largely concentrated on luxury tourism and resort contexts, a limitation explicitly critiqued by Shirazi and Som (2010).

2.3. The tourist journey and co-creation

With respect to the analytical framework, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) established the foundation for the three-stage tourist journey (pre-, during-, and post-trip) but did not integrate the concept of co-creation into this model. Building on this, Neuhofer et al. (2014) proposed an integrated approach, emphasizing that co-creation can and should occur across all three stages: pre-trip (planning, researching, proposing), during-trip (participating in experiences, interacting), and post-trip (evaluating, sharing, engaging in organic communication). The significance of co-creation in enhancing tourism experiences is further underscored by Andrade-Cunha et al. (2025), although their work does not explicitly address the marketing dimension or the context of community-based tourism in specific regions such as Vietnam. From a localized perspective, Trương Thị Xuân Đào (2022) argues that this three-stage model positions tourists not merely as consumers but as active partners in value co-creation. Collectively, these developments illustrate the evolution of customer journey research from a traditional linear model to a three-stage co-creation framework.

2.4. The three-pillar of co-creation

The "three-pillar" model - comprising experience co-creation, content co-creation, and communication co-creation - is synthesized from multiple research streams, with each pillar serving distinct yet complementary roles. Buhalis and Sinarta (2019) highlight how these forms of tourist participation collectively optimize destination marketing. In the case of Mai Châu, the three pillars represent mechanisms through which tourists actively contribute value: (1) co-experience, involving active physical and emotional participation; (2) co-content, referring to user-generated media based on those experiences; and (3) co-communication, defined as the organic dissemination of destination messages through personal networks. While experiential studies such as Campos et al. (2015) emphasize the tourist's active role in designing products and services, research on user-generated content (UGC) underscores tourists' creative and sharing capacities (Başarangil, 2022; Chatterjee & D'Silva, 2021). At the same time, social media communication studies, including Sugathan and Ranjan (2019), focus on the tourist's role as a "communication ambassador" in disseminating destination messages. Although international scholarship seldom explicitly refers to the "three-pillar model," these roles are widely discussed and considered essential for maximizing the impact of co-creation in tourism destination marketing.

2.5. Co-creation in community-based tourism

The application of co-creation in community-based tourism demonstrates characteristics distinct from those in traditional commercial tourism. While Islam (2020) highlights the potential of co-creation to promote sustainable community development, studies such as Prebensen et al. (2013) and Campos et al. (2015) focus primarily on resort and luxury tourism. Likewise, Shirazi and Som (2010) emphasize the limited scope of theoretical research on co-creation in community-based tourism, particularly within ethnic minority contexts.

This contrast becomes especially clear when compared with successful community-based tourism models such as Castelmezzano in Italy (Salvatore et al., 2021). These models typically depend on strong public-private partnerships and substantial institutional support. By comparison, destinations like Mai Châu and other ethnic minority regions face distinctive challenges, including cultural barriers, language differences, and limited resources. Consequently, a context-specific co-creation framework is needed - one designed to support sustainable branding while addressing the resource constraints characteristic of Vietnamese ethnic communities.

2.6. Previous studies, research gap and research questions

Vietnamese tourism research reveals notable gaps in applying co-creation as a destination marketing strategy within community-based tourism, particularly in ethnic minority regions such as Mai Châu. While studies by Phạm Hồng Long (2019) and Trương Thị Xuân Đào (2022) have begun to explore community roles and co-creation behaviors in tourism, research by Đào Minh Anh and Vũ Nam (2017), Phạm Thị Cẩm Vân and Đoàn Việt (2022), Phạm Trần Thăng Long, Phạm Thị Hạnh and Phan Hồng Đức (2025), and Hoàng Thị Thu Hương et al. (2025) has primarily concentrated on economic benefits, community participation, or customer satisfaction. Within this body of work, the marketing mechanisms and effectiveness of co-creation in sustainable branding remain insufficiently examined.

This gap is increasingly urgent as Vietnamese tourism faces challenges in competitiveness, product diversification, and human resource development. Despite the growing importance of co-creation, research on its role as a destination marketing strategy in community-based tourism remains scarce, especially in ethnic minority areas like Mai Châu. Existing studies predominantly highlight economic outcomes, community roles, or visitor satisfaction, leaving the marketing potential and sustainable branding implications of co-creation underexplored (Đào Minh Anh & Vũ Nam, 2017; Phạm Thị Cẩm Vân & Đoàn Việt, 2022; Hoàng Thị Thu Hương et al., 2025). To address this gap, the present study analyzes the role of co-creation in destination marketing in Mai Châu, a representative model of community-based tourism in the highlands of Northern Vietnam.

Mai Châu, as one of the leading community-based tourism destinations in Northern Vietnam, illustrates both the opportunities and challenges of applying co-creation as a marketing strategy. While the area has achieved notable progress in developing community-based tourism, research by Achariya and Phạm Trần Thăng Long (2024) underscores the complexities of commercializing cultural hospitality and constructing an ethnic tourism identity.

This discrepancy highlights the gap between success measured by visitor numbers and the quality of co-creation experiences. Recent evaluations further note that Mai Châu's tourism products remain limited in diversity and competitiveness (Minh Vu, 2025), reinforcing the urgent need for an integrated and sustainable marketing approach. Applying the "three pillars - three stages" theoretical model - linking co-experience, co-content, and co-communication with the planning, experiencing, and sharing stages - offers a pathway to examine how co-creation enhances experiential value, strengthens destination image, improves competitiveness, and supports sustainable local tourism branding.

The study addresses the following questions:

How is co-creation implemented in Mai Châu's community-based tourism sites?

Which forms of co-creation enhance experiential value and tourist attachment to Mai Châu?

Which co-creation factors demonstrate the strongest impact on destination marketing efficacy in Mai Châu?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design, sampling and data collection process

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the application of co-creation as a marketing strategy in community-based tourism (CBT) in Mai Châu (being previously part of the former Hòa Bình, now part of Phú Thọ province). This method is particularly suited to the exploratory nature of co-creation research in Vietnam, as it enables an in-depth analysis of how co-creation practices emerge and how they influence destination marketing. To capture these dynamics, the study relies on qualitative analysis of user-generated content (UGC) alongside field observations and secondary data.

The fieldwork was carried out in Lác 1, Lác 2, and Pom Coọng villages, which represent the core of Mai Châu's CBT development. These villages are well known for their homestays, cultural performances, and traditional Thái ethnic handicrafts, making them focal points of tourist-resident interaction and co-creation

practices. Since the 1990s, they have cultivated a sustainable tourism ecosystem, frequently cited as a model of community development in Northern Vietnam (Achariya & Long, 2024).

Data for this study were obtained from three primary sources:

Documentary sources: Tourism development reports, promotional materials, and tourist reviews on platforms such as TripAdvisor, YouTube, and Facebook.

Field Observation: Conducted over a one-week period (26 April - 3 May, 2025) while staying in Lác 1, Lác 2 villages, Mai Châu. Non-participant observation was used to document homestay activities and tourist engagement in cooking, brocade weaving, folk arts, and culinary experiences.

Digital Content Analysis: Focused on user-generated content (UGC) - including images, videos, comments, and hashtags-collected from social media platforms to evaluate their role in destination brand construction and promotion.

Specific UGC sources analyzed included:

Reviews on TripAdvisor using targeted keywords.

Vlog content from TikTok and major YouTube travel channels (e.g., Chan La Cà, Khoai Lang Thang).

Posts on Instagram and Facebook tagged with relevant hashtags (e.g., #maichau, #maichautravel).

Personal travel blogs authored both domestically and internationally.

Content was selected through purposive sampling, prioritizing analytical depth over statistical representativeness. The selection criteria focused on instances of observable co-creation behavior and emotional engagement, including direct cultural participation and personal narratives. This approach emphasized content quality and levels of interaction, optimizing qualitative insights rather than population generalizability.

Initial data collection yielded 3,247 Instagram posts, 8,127 TikTok videos, and numerous Facebook and TripAdvisor reviews containing relevant hashtags and keywords (e.g., #maichau, #maichautravel) from 2019 to 2024. From this corpus, a purposive sample of 120 UGC items was selected for thematic analysis, comprising 40 Instagram posts, 40 TikTok videos, and 40 narrative reviews or blogs. Selection was guided by four criteria: (1) evidence of participation in local cultural activities, (2) inclusion of subjective experience descriptions, (3) a minimum of 10 shares or comments, and (4) posting dates within the 2019-2024 timeframe. Posts were chosen based on their relatively high interaction rates, as they best illustrate co-creation dynamics. While this sampling approach does not provide statistical representativeness, it enables in-depth analysis of high-engagement content that clearly demonstrates co-creation processes.

3.2. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted through three complementary approaches: thematic analysis, comparative analysis, and UGC-based interpretation.

Thematic analysis identified recurring themes related to participation level, experiential value, authenticity, and communication impact.

Comparative analysis contrasted high co-creation activities (e.g., cooking with locals) with lower-interaction tourism products (e.g., fixed-route sightseeing) to highlight differences in value creation.

Case study interpretation provided detailed illustrations of typical activities, emphasizing their processes and practical marketing impacts.

UGC content was further analyzed across the three stages of the tourist journey (pre-, during, and post-trip) and classified by:

Co-creation type: physical (participating in production, crafts), intellectual (sharing knowledge, providing feedback), and communicative (content creation, storytelling);

Reach: interaction metrics (likes, shares, comments) and visibility in search results;

Semantics: emotional expressions, perceived quality of experience, and recognition of cultural value.

Thematic analysis was employed to categorize activities within the purposively selected content. Using a case study lens, participation level and marketing impact were qualitatively assessed (Table 1). Participation level was evaluated by observing the depth of physical and emotional involvement during fieldwork, supported by semantic analysis of UGC narratives focusing on verbs of action and emotional intensity (e.g., "created," "immersed," "loved"). Marketing impact was measured through reach metrics (likes, shares, comments) and semantic analysis of digital content.

To enhance the scientific rigor, marketing impact classification (e.g., very high, medium, low) was supported by calculated quantitative indicators, including the average engagement rate (AER = Total Likes + Comments + Shares/ Total Followers) and content reach (average views/ impressions) within the sampled UGC. For instance, "very high" impact was assigned to content with an AER exceeding 5%, reflecting exceptional content reach (e.g., high average views per post). Specific UGC channels analyzed included prominent travel channels such as Chan La Cà and Khoai Lang Thang on YouTube, in line with the purposive sampling focusing on high-impact domestic KOL content.

This study is limited to Mai Châu and may not fully capture the diversity of co-creation practices in other destinations. Furthermore, reliance on secondary data

and field observations restricts insights into tourists' underlying motivations for content sharing. Nevertheless, the findings provide an important theoretical foundation and strategic guidance for leveraging co-created content in destination marketing for community-based tourism in Vietnam.

4. Results

4.1. Forms of co-creation in community-based tourism at Mai Châu

This study identified three main forms of co-creation in Mai Châu: (1) tourist participation in ethnic cultural performances, (2) personalized tour design, and (3) experience sharing on digital platforms. The qualitative ratings of participation level and marketing impact presented in Table 1 are elaborated in the following discussion. These findings reinforce the three-pillar co-creation model proposed by Buhalis & Sinarta (2019), while also revealing notable differences from the contexts examined by Prebensen et al. (2013) and Campos et al. (2015) in luxury tourism destinations. This underscores that co-creation within community-based tourism demonstrates distinct dynamics compared to commercial or resort-oriented settings.

Table 1: Classification of Co-Creation Forms in Community-based Tourism at Mai Châu

No.	Co-creation Form	Tourist Role	Participation Level	Experiential Value	Marketing Impact (UGC, Word-of-Mouth)
1	Cooking with locals	Participate in preparing traditional dishes	High	Emotional, educational, direct interaction	Very high (highly shared photos/ videos; AER > 5%)
2	Learning ethnic weaving/ handicrafts	Practice under artisan guidance	High	Authenticity, cultural value	High (take-home products, personal reviews; AER 3-5%)
3	Joining ethnic cultural performances	Participate in Xoè dance, wear traditional costumes	Medium-High	Emotional bonding, community integration	Medium (highly personalized photos/ videos; AER 1-3%)

4	Designing personalized tours	Actively create itineraries with homestays/ tour operators	Medium	Autonomy, freedom of choice	High (blog/ YouTube communication; High average view count)
5	Providing service feedback/ new product suggestions	Directly exchange feedback with homestay hosts	Low	Indirect contribution, limited emotional engagement	Low (minimal ripple effect; Primarily internal feedback)
6	Sharing experiences on social media (UGC)	Voluntarily create content, photos, reviews	Variable (Post-Experience)	Reflection of genuine satisfaction	Very high (destination brand amplification; High volume/ reach)

It is crucial to clarify the methodological classification for Row 6 (Sharing experiences on social media (UGC)). The Participation Level is designated as Variable (Post-Experience). This designation is necessary because, unlike activities 1-4 (e.g., Cooking with locals) which require simultaneous physical interaction at the destination, UGC creation occurs primarily in the post-trip stage, detached from the on-site service encounter. Despite this temporal separation, this behavior delivers significant destination brand amplification (Very High Marketing Impact). This impact is evidenced by the substantial volume of UGC (e.g., over 3,000 Instagram posts and over 8,000 TikTok videos tagged #maichau observed in 2024 as previously mentioned), and high observed engagement rates.

Participation in ethnic cultural performances illustrates a clear shift from passive consumption to active engagement, aligning with Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) Service-Dominant Logic theory. In Mai Châu, co-creation is rooted in tourists' direct involvement in activities such as *Xòe* and *Sạp* dances, courtship singing, and performances with traditional Thái ethnic musical instruments. Tourists not only observe but also actively participate by performing, wearing traditional costumes, and engaging with local residents, thereby immersing themselves in the cultural life of the community. These activities evoke emotions of joy, curiosity, and appreciation, reinforcing the memorability of the experience. This finding is consistent with Romão et al. (2023), who argue that co-creation extends beyond physical participation to encompass emotional and social dimensions. It also supports Binkhorst's (2006) perspective on the role of personalization in tourism experience design, whereby tourists actively shape their interactions with the destination.

Unlike Mohammadi et al.'s (2020) analysis of multi-dimensional collaboration among stakeholders, co-creation in Mai Châu often emerges spontaneously and depends heavily on the enthusiasm of the local community. This dynamic resonates with Islam's (2020) argument regarding co-creation's potential to promote sustainable development. Moreover, while differing from models characterized by strong institutional intervention, such as Castelmezzano in Italy (Salvatore et al., 2021), the Mai Châu case contributes to addressing Shirazi and Som's (2010) critique of the limited application of co-creation theory in ethnic minority contexts.

Personalized tour design demonstrates the proactive role of tourists in shaping their own experiences through non-fixed-schedule activities such as homestays, streamside picnics, cooking with locals, visiting markets, or engaging in traditional handicraft making. These choices not only enhance flexibility but also foster a sense of autonomy and emotional connection. This finding aligns with Font et al. (2021), who argue that active participation increases experiential value and strengthens attachment to the destination, a theme widely emphasized in experiential marketing research. Moreover, integrating co-creation as a dynamic process across all stages of the tourist journey - particularly during on-site interactions - challenges the linear model of Lemon and Verhoef (2016) and resonates with Neuhofer et al.'s (2014) framework, which situates co-creation across the pre-, during-, and post-trip phases.

In Mai Châu, however, this flexibility is primarily facilitated by local households rather than professional tour operators, diverging from the structured models described by Neuhofer et al. (2014) in developed destinations. This context underscores both the potential and limitations of co-creation in community-based tourism: while it empowers authentic, personalized engagement, it also highlights barriers related to limited resources and language. These constraints suggest the need to critically reassess the universal applicability of co-creation frameworks in resource-constrained, culturally specific settings.

Tourist digital content sharing and social media interaction with stakeholders (businesses and the community) represent a relatively new yet increasingly critical form of co-creation in Mai Châu's tourism development. The rise of social media has transformed tourists into active content creators, exerting significant influence on destination marketing outcomes.

Analysis of user-generated content (UGC) across platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook reveals clear content trends that serve as measurable indicators of marketing effectiveness. For instance, in 2024 alone, more than 3,000 Instagram posts tagged #maichauvietnam and over 8,000 TikTok videos tagged #maichau highlight the scale of organic brand amplification. The predominance of rustic aesthetics and authentic representations of local identity in this content further illustrates the strength of "bottom-up communication" as described by Sugathan and Ranjan (2019).

These findings highlight Mai Châu's distinctive cultural character and reinforce the argument that UGC enhances destination marketing through authentic, emotion-rich narratives (Chatterjee & D'Silva, 2021; Gulati, 2021). Building on this perspective, the analysis categorizes high-impact UGC into three forms-experiential (e.g., cultural participation), aesthetic (e.g., landscape photography), and reflective (e.g., personal storytelling). This typology provides a qualitative framework for assessing brand credibility and fostering tourist loyalty, particularly relevant for community-based tourism destinations operating with limited marketing budgets.

The emotional authenticity observed in Mai Châu's UGC contrasts with Shirazi and Som's (2010) claim that co-creation in ethnic minority regions is limited, suggesting that digital platforms can help bridge cultural gaps when local communities actively participate. Furthermore, several homestays in Mai Châu have begun reusing UGC-such as photos, videos, and reviews-for promotional purposes, creating an indirect but valuable form of co-creation. This practice reflects the three-stage tourist journey model proposed by Neuhofer et al. (2014), in which tourists engage in value creation across the pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip phases.

4.2. The "three pillars - three stages" model in the community-based tourism context of Mai Châu

Based on the analysis, this study proposes an integrated marketing strategy model that applies Buhalis & Sinarta's (2019) "three-pillar co-creation" framework - experience, content, and communication - within the "three-stage tourist journey" model of Neuhofer et al. (2014).

As synthesized in Table 2, experience co-creation is manifested through cultural performances and personalized tours, which enhance satisfaction and loyalty, consistent with Prebensen et al. (2013). Content co-creation, facilitated through UGC, amplifies the Mai Châu brand on digital platforms, aligning with Andrade-Cunha et al. (2025) on experiential marketing while extending its scope into the digital space. Communication co-creation, realized via tourist reviews and hashtags, fosters organic promotion and supports Trương Thị Xuân Đào's (2022) view of tourists as active value co-creators.

This integrated model directly addresses the research gap identified by Phạm Hồng Long (2019) and Hoàng Thị Thu Hương et al. (2025), who note the absence of structured co-creation strategies in Vietnamese community-based tourism. Moreover, it helps reconcile the core challenge of balancing economic feasibility with cultural preservation at ethnic destinations (Romão et al., 2023). By foregrounding the community's proactive role, Mai Châu exemplifies the "socio-cultural focus" advocated by Stojanović et al. (2022).

In contrast to studies that privilege economic outcomes, this research underscores the cultural and emotional value of co-creation, offering a sustainable marketing framework adaptable to similar destinations. The findings resonate with Islam's (2020) argument that community-based tourism should be viewed not only as an economic practice but also as a vehicle for socio-cultural development.

Table 2: The "Three Pillars - Three Stages" Model in Community-based Tourism Destination Co-creation

Tourism Stage	Co-creation Pillar	Specific Manifestations	Marketing Role	Illustrative Indicators (UGC-based)
Pre-trip	Content Co-Creation	Itinerary research/suggestions on Facebook, Reddit, travel blogs	Boost destination awareness through social dissemination	Number of searches/clicks on official hashtags; Frequency of pre-trip inquiry posts on travel forums (e.g., TripAdvisor)
During-trip	Experience Co-Creation	Participating in weaving, cooking, *Xoè* dance; journey documentation	Generate authentic, emotional communication content	Depth of emotional semantics in content (e.g., "authenticity," "loved"); Average session time on content (video completion rate)
Post-trip	Communication Co-Creation	Sharing videos, photos, reviews, experiences	Enhance brand credibility, stimulate repeat consumption	Rate of repeat hashtags use; Average engagement rate (AER) of review content; Intent-to-(re)visit comments

5. Discussion

Despite positive outcomes, Mai Châu's co-creation model faces three main challenges. First, there is a lack of systematic integration between UGC and official communication channels, reflecting the technical barriers in destination marketing identified by Jabreel et al. (2018). Second, language barriers and limited communication skills within the local community constrain the potential to fully leverage co-creation, consistent with Shirazi & Som's (2010) observations in other

ethnic minority destinations. Third, the risk of cultural commodification (Achariya & Phạm Trần Thăng Long, 2024) presents the most critical threat to brand equity. When cultural activities risk being reduced to stereotyped performances for transactional gain, the authenticity that sustains high-impact UGC and tourist attachment is undermined. This process can transform co-creation from a sustainable marketing strategy into an inauthentic product, echoing Font et al.'s (2021) caution that co-creation is not a guaranteed panacea. These challenges underscore the need for a careful balance between maximizing economic benefits and safeguarding cultural integrity.

Overall, this study demonstrates that co-creation is a transformative marketing strategy for community-based tourism in Mai Châu. It contributes theoretically by showing the applicability of co-creation in resource-constrained contexts (Gulati, 2021) and ethnic minority regions (Shirazi & Som, 2010), challenging the high-end tourism bias highlighted by Campos et al. (2015) and Prebensen et al. (2013). The research also introduces a novel classification of UGC content - experiential, aesthetic, reflective - which enriches Buhalis & Sinarta's (2019) three-pillar framework.

From a practical perspective, the study provides a scalable co-creation framework for community-based tourism, addressing gaps identified by Trương Thị Xuân Đào (2022) and Hoàng Thị Thu Hương et al. (2025) in Vietnam. By linking co-creation with sustainable destination branding, the research offers a tourist-centric marketing model that balances economic and cultural priorities. The "three pillars - three stages" framework further provides a replicable blueprint for destinations such as Mộc Châu and Hà Giang (now Tuyên Quang province), demonstrating that sustainable branding emerges not from top-down campaigns but from co-created narratives between communities and tourists.

Consequently, the Mai Châu case illustrates how community-centered tourism can be reshaped in the digital era, positioning co-creation as both a marketing tool and a pathway toward sustainable socio-cultural development.

6. Conclusion

This study supports the role of co-creation as an effective destination marketing strategy, based on the case of community-based tourism in Mai Châu. Analysis of UGC data from TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and TripAdvisor reveals that co-creation takes place through cultural activities, physical experiences, and communication sharing, generating authentic, emotional promotional content that is superior to traditional communication methods. Tourists become "organic communication ambassadors," contributing to destination branding linked to

cultural identity and authenticity. Therefore, the "three pillars - three stages" model (experience, content, and communication co-creation before, during, and after the trip) is evaluated as feasible and sustainable with coordinated community-management collaboration. Co-creation transforms destinations into shared creative spaces, enhancing engagement and social significance, while providing practical data to support services improvement and policy adjustment.

For local authorities, it is necessary to establish an official digital platform to aggregate, curate, and disseminate UGC, and provide training for local communities in communication techniques and effective tourist interaction strategies. It is necessary to develop a content creation ecosystem featuring photo spots, experience boards, and official hashtags to encourage sharing, prioritize investment in high-value co-creation activities (e.g., cooking, ethnic weaving, 1-3 hour standardized personalized tours). Essential materials and co-creation guides in storytelling and basic communication skills should be supplied. Digital communication into experiences: promotion of standard hashtags, support to homestays in utilizing UGC, and organization of "Co-creation Ambassador" programs with domestic KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) should be integrated, as well as community transition mechanisms through experience-design workshops, integrated vocational tourism training, and group-based revenue-sharing models to encourge collaboration. Authenticity of the regions may be better safeguarded by developing criteria for genuine experiences and supporting intergenerational households in preserving traditional crafts to prevent over-commercialization.

Tourism enterprises should design flexible tours that allow tourists to customize their activities and personalize their experiences, collaborate with KOLs and travel bloggers to amplify reach, and incentivize experience sharing through rewards and creative promotions.

Resident communities need to raise awareness of the value of co-creation in promiting culture and building brands, strengthen community social media communication initiatives, and preserve cultural authenticity by avoiding commodification and staged performances.

Future research may advance in two main directions. First, adopting mixed-methods approaches-combining quantitative surveys with qualitative in-depth interviews-would provide a more comprehensive understanding of tourist perceptions and motivations for engaging in co-creation. Quantitative studies, in particular, could measure the correlation between levels of co-creation participation (as defined by the mentioned-above three pillars model) and outcome indicators such as destination brand equity, tourist loyalty, and intention to revisit. Second, conducting comparative studies across other community-based tourism destinations (e.g., Mộc Châu, Hà Giang, Bắc Hà) would help assess the universality of the Mai Châu model while identifying context-specific dynamics. Such cross-case analyses

could clarify whether co-creation strategies can be generalized across different ethnic minority contexts or require tailored frameworks for sustainable application.

In summary, co-creation represents not only a behavioral trend but also a powerful and effective marketing strategy (Liu et al., 2025). By strategically adopting this approach through coordinated collaboration among government, enterprises, and communities -supported by long-term policies - Mai Châu can achieve brand repositioning, cultural dissemination, and sustainable tourism development.

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