

INTEGRATION OF THE LOCAL TOURISM BRAND INTO THE DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE: CASE STUDY OF PUHĂCENI VILLAGE, REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Purpose of the article: This study explores the process of building and digitizing the tourism identity of Puhăceni village in the Republic of Moldova, providing an innovative model of rural branding adapted to current trends in sustainable tourism. The village brand, based on the local legend and the ecological specificity of the "village of bicycles," has generated a distinct, coherent, and memorable identity, actively supported by the community.

Methodology: The SWOT and PESTEL analyses reveal the strengths of this approach: the uniqueness of the brand, community commitment, and the efficient use of modern technologies, as well as challenges related to digital infrastructure, technological literacy, and project sustainability.

Conclusions: The results demonstrate that the digitization of the tourism identity has contributed to increasing visitor flows, stimulating the local economy, and strengthening an authentic and ecological image of the village. The Puhăceni model provides a valuable example of integrating tradition with innovation, with replication potential.

Originality: An innovative model of rural branding, in which local tradition and ecological identity are integrated into an interactive digital infrastructure, transforming the tourism experience into a personalized dialogue.

Keywords: rural branding, digital identity, sustainable tourism, tourist chatbot, community involvement, ecological mobility, territorial marketing.

JEL Classifications: Z32, M31, O33

INTRODUCTION

The concept of brand has undergone continuous evolution in the specialized literature, being approached from multiple perspectives. Kotler defines it as an element of identification and differentiation of goods or services on the market (Kotler, 2016).

From an integrative perspective, the brand is more than just a visual identity – it represents a promise of unique experiences, built through repeated interactions, influencing consumer attitudes and behaviors. Its evolution is closely linked to the historical and social context. From marking property in ancient times to its use as a strategic tool during the Industrial Revolution, the brand has reflected the need for authenticity and trust (Vieira et al., 2023).

The 20th century strengthened the role of the brand in building trust and loyalty, with the emergence of modern advertising and legal protection of trademarks. Today, the brand has become a complex system of communication and experience, expressing values, emotions, and narratives that differentiate and position the product or destination on the market.

Technological development, especially the advent of the internet and social networks, has profoundly changed the way brands communicate and interact with the public. Today, the brand is the result of an ongoing dialogue between the organization and consumers, influenced by dynamic

perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. In this paradigm, the brand becomes not only a strategic construction but also a lived experience, co-created by both parties (Hasan et al., 2023).

A strong brand is defined by a series of fundamental components that work synergistically to shape a distinct and memorable identity on the market (Figure 1).

Name	Logo	Slogan	Graphics	Shape	Color	Sound
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the term used to identify the product, service, or organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the visual mark that ensures quick and consistent recognition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the concise message that summarizes the brand's values and promise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the visual and aesthetic elements that support the coherence of the visual identity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the distinctive design of the product or its packaging. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the color palette associated with the brand, serving to reinforce memorability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the sonic signature, including melodies or tones, used to enhance auditory recognition

Figure 1. The fundamental components of the brand

Source: elaborated by the authors.

All these components contribute to shaping a coherent and authentic image, which facilitates consumer loyalty and strategic market positioning.

Local branding is often based on traditional communication methods, such as regional festivals and community events; however, there is an increasingly strong trend toward adopting digital tools to expand visibility. Disparities in access to technological infrastructure represent a challenge for rural branding, limiting its ability to achieve the same visibility as urban campaigns. Nevertheless, the fact that rural branding relies on personal and authentic communication channels can cultivate stronger emotional connections with the target audience, especially with those seeking distinctive and authentic experiences (Jafarli, 2023; Jafarli & Canavari, 2025).

The local brand plays an essential role in the process of valorization and promotion of rural tourist destinations, contributing to shaping a distinct identity that differentiates a locality from other similar offers on the market (Figure 2). In the context of globalization and increasing competition in the tourism sector, building a coherent and authentic brand becomes a vital strategic tool for attracting visitors and supporting the sustainable development of local communities.



Figure 2. The role of the brand in the valorization and promotion of tourist destinations

Source: elaborated by the authors based on previous research (Jebbouri et al., 2022; Králiková et al., 2020).

A well-defined local brand reflects the values, traditions, cultural heritage, natural landscape, and lifestyle of the community. In the case of rural destinations, the brand can become an expression of the place's authenticity, highlighting its uniqueness in an attractive and easily recognizable way for the general public (Kucheriava, 2021). Thus, the brand becomes the bearer of a story – whether it refers to local legends, traditional crafts, or customs preserved over generations.

The brand contributes to the strategic positioning of the rural destination in relation to other similar offers. In a competitive tourism environment where tourists have multiple options, a clear and coherent brand allows the destination to stand out and attract target segments interested in authentic, sustainable, and personalized experiences. In this context, we support the view of several authors who argue that there is a clear link between the perception of a place (the perceived image of the destination) and the desire to visit it. Especially when tourists have little information about the place and have never visited it, they tend to prefer destinations with a stronger and more positive image (Rodrigues et al., 2023).

The process of building a local brand often involves collaboration between authorities, entrepreneurs, non-governmental organizations, and residents, which contributes to the strengthening of social capital and the development of a sense of belonging. A collectively assumed brand can become a catalyst for community initiatives, stimulating the development of local products and services integrated into a common vision (Rinaldi & Bekhuis, 2024).

In the digital age, a well-constructed brand is easier to promote through online platforms, social networks, and tourism applications. The visual identity (logo, slogan, colors, symbols) and the associated narrative can be integrated into interactive tools such as websites, tourism chatbots, or storytelling campaigns, as demonstrated by the example of Puhăceni village.

A strong local brand can attract investment, increase the flow of tourists, and generate income for the community without compromising natural and cultural resources. By promoting responsible tourism and local products (gastronomy, handicrafts, thematic tours), the brand contributes to the sustainable economic development of the region (Balakrishnan et al., 2021).

Therefore, the local brand is not just a marketing tool, but a complex expression of rural identity with cultural, social, and economic functions. It creates a bridge between the community and visitors, between the past and the future, contributing to the revitalization of the village and the creation of memorable and authentic tourist experiences.

Against the background of these trends, this research aims to investigate the construction of the tourist identity of the village of Puhăceni (Republic of Moldova), focusing on the combination of traditional elements – the local legend and ecological mobility – with the digitalization of content through the implementation of a dedicated chatbot, *VillageTravelBot*. The goal of the research is to determine to what extent participatory branding and interactive digital tools can stimulate tourism promotion, increase online visibility, and strengthen community cohesion. The specific objectives are: to identify and analyze the authentic identity elements integrated into the brand, to assess the effectiveness of the chatbot in facilitating the tourist experience and generating feedback, and to outline a territorial marketing model replicable in other rural communities.

The novelty of the study lies in presenting an integrated model that unifies tradition and digital innovation, in which the rural brand is co-created with community involvement and supported by interactive conversational technologies, generating a dialogic and sustainable tourist experience. This endeavor brings an original contribution to the specialized literature by highlighting how the village of Puhăceni becomes a relevant example of innovative rural branding.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

To carry out the research, a mixed methodological approach was used, combining qualitative content analysis with field research in the context of the village of Puhăceni, Republic of Moldova, chosen as a case study due to recent initiatives in rural branding and tourism digitalization. The study was conducted between March 2024 and May 2025 and aimed to examine how local identity is integrated into the process of building the tourism brand, as well as the impact of using a tourism chatbot (*VillageTravelBot*) on visitors' experiences. The stages of the research included: document analysis; qualitative content analysis of the local brand; direct field observation; interviews with the leaders of the *InnoVillage – Talent Scaling for Sustainable Business* project, with the founders of the chatbot, with key actors involved in the branding process, with representatives of local authorities,

tourism entrepreneurs, volunteers, and users of the tourism chatbot; testing the functionality and impact of the chatbot.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The application of the brand concept is not limited to commercial products or international corporations but is gaining increasing relevance in the context of the sustainable development of local communities, especially in the field of rural tourism. A clear illustration of this trend is the village of Puhăceni in the Republic of Moldova, where branding has been used as a strategic tool for enhancing local heritage and increasing tourism attractiveness.

In order to achieve the goal of developing tourism in the locality, local entrepreneurs adopted a collaborative approach, joining efforts in a model of “diversity for unity.” This initiative was supported in 2023 through the *InnoVillage – Talent Scaling for Sustainable Business* project, funded by the Polish Innovation Fund under the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland.

In the current context of digitalization and the promotion of rural heritage through branding, the village of Puhăceni in the Republic of Moldova stands out as a good practice example in developing a local tourism brand. In 2023, with support from UNDP and the Polish Innovation Fund through the “InnoVillage – Talent Scaling for Sustainable Business” project, the community was empowered to capitalize on its local identity through innovation and entrepreneurship.

Through this program, digital solutions were developed that significantly contributed to increasing the online visibility of Puhăceni, facilitating the initiation and strengthening of tourism promotion activities. One of the remarkable results of this initiative was the creation of a distinctive local brand, based on authentic elements of the community’s cultural and social identity.

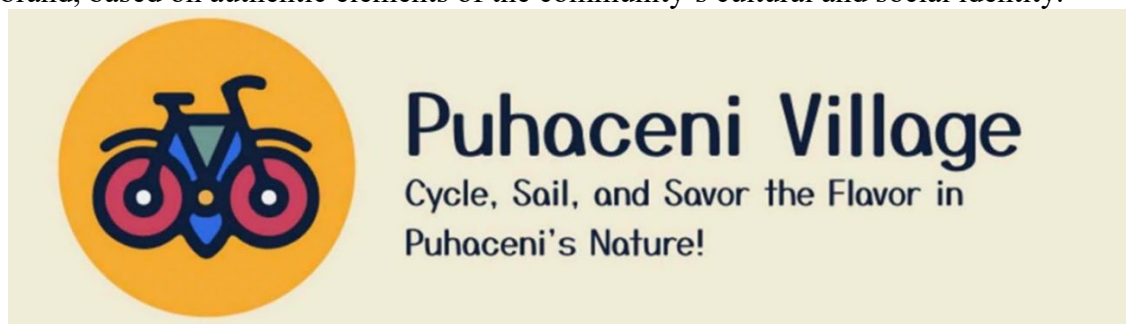


Figure 3. The tourism brand of Puhăceni village

Source: (AgroExpert, 2024).

In the process of building the local brand (Figure 3), both the legend of the village’s name and its contemporary specificity — the status of the “village of bicycles” — were taken into account. This unique attribute reflects an ecological and community-oriented lifestyle, as each household owns at least one bicycle, and the use of this means of transport is a common practice regardless of the season. Thus, the bicycle has become not only a symbol of sustainable mobility but also a central identity element of the promoted tourism image. The local brand of Puhăceni exemplifies how a coherent set of values, customs, and symbols can be transformed into an effective territorial marketing tool, with the potential to attract visitors and drive economic revitalization through responsible tourism.

In the context of consolidating the tourism brand of Puhăceni, the implementation of interactive digital tools represented an essential step in improving communication with potential visitors. A remarkable example in this regard is the integration of the brand identity into the conversational flow of *VillageTravelBot* – a virtual assistant dedicated to promoting rural and community-based tourism (VillageTravelBot, 2025).

Thus, when users request information about Puhăceni, the chatbot is configured to provide a personalized identification message that reflects the essence of the local brand. The bot’s functionality

is enhanced through interactive structures that enable quick access to relevant information, organized by themes. Users can navigate through various sections dedicated to cycling tours (including itineraries, duration, difficulty level), local experiences (such as visits to beekeepers, traditional workshops, or tastings of local products), as well as the village story, which includes the founding legend and details about cultural heritage. The bot also allows quick reservations, facilitating interaction between visitors and local service providers.

To assess the impact and continuously improve tourism services, the chatbot is equipped with feedback collection functionalities. At the end of the experience, users are invited to complete a short questionnaire aimed at gauging perceptions of service quality, the effectiveness of the brand's visual communication, and overall satisfaction. The responses contribute to the foundation of strategic decisions regarding the development of the local tourism offer.

Moreover, the bot supports brand promotion through automated social campaigns, encouraging users to post images from Puhăceni with specific hashtags (e.g., #BikePuhăceni). In this way, authentic content is generated, contributing to the expansion of the village's digital visibility and attracting a broader audience, especially among young people active on social networks.

Therefore, the integration of *VillageTravelBot* into the branding strategy of Puhăceni demonstrates how digital technology can support the efficient promotion of rural tourism, contributing to the consolidation of a coherent, interactive, and sustainable identity in the online space. Through this integration, the *Puhăceni Village* brand comes alive in tourist conversations, helping generate bookings, assess impact, and authentically promote the community.

The local brand and the digitalization of the tourism identity have played a crucial role in the transformation and sustainable development of Puhăceni as a rural tourism destination (Figure 4).

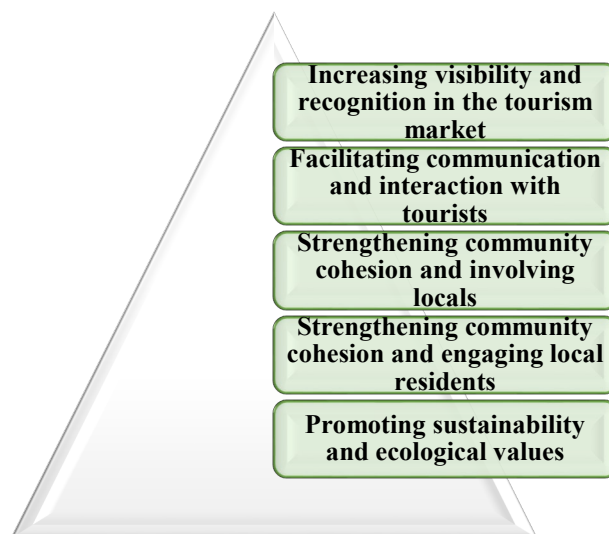


Figure 4. The impact of the local brand and the digitalization of tourism identity

Source: elaborated by the authors.

The unique brand of the village, built on representative elements such as the local legend and the bicycle culture, has provided Puhăceni with a distinct, easily recognizable, and memorable identity. The digitalization of this brand through interactive platforms and tools such as *VillageTravelBot* has enabled efficient online promotion, facilitating quick access to information and attracting a wider audience, including tourists interested in eco-friendly and sustainable experiences.

By integrating the brand into the conversational flow of *VillageTravelBot*, the village offers visitors an interactive and personalized digital experience. This type of communication facilitates access to tourism offers, themed itineraries, information about events, and local experiences, thereby strengthening the connection between visitors and the destination. Thus, digitalization has transformed the traditional information process into a continuous and dynamic dialogue.

The effective promotion of the brand and the facilitation of access to tourism services through digital channels have contributed to the increase in tourist flows, generating economic opportunities for entrepreneurs and the community. Themed offers related to cycling tours, traditional workshops, or tastings of local products have been better valorized, supporting local businesses and maintaining the authentic character of the tourism offer.

The process of building and promoting the brand involved local entrepreneurs and authorities, creating a shared sense of pride and responsibility towards the village's image. The digitalization of the identity has enabled community involvement in promotion and feedback, supporting continuous development and the adaptation of the tourism offer to the needs of both visitors and locals.

By highlighting Puhăceni as the "village of bicycles," the brand promotes an ecological lifestyle and responsible tourism, capitalizing on environmentally friendly means of transport. Digitalization facilitates the communication of these values to an audience sensitive to sustainability, contributing to the development of a sustainable tourism model that respects the natural and cultural heritage of the area.

This strategic approach, focused on building an authentic brand and on the digitalization of the tourism identity through *VillageTravelBot*, clearly reflects the strengths highlighted in the SWOT analysis (Table 1), such as the uniqueness of the brand, community engagement, and the use of modern technologies. At the same time, transforming the tourist experience into a continuous digital dialogue addresses the identified opportunities, such as the growing interest in sustainable and interactive tourism.

Table 1. SWOT analysis of the digitalization process of the tourism identity of puhăceni village

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong and authentic local brand • Interactive digital presence • Quick access to information • Constant and automated promotion • Feedback collection tool 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low level of digital literacy among some locals • Limited technical resources • Dependence on connectivity
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing interest in rural and sustainable tourism • Access to funding for rural digitalization • Partnerships with tourism platforms and influencers • Expansion of chatbot functionalities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competition from other digital destinations in the region • Cybersecurity and data protection • Changes in tourist behavior

Source: elaborated by the authors.

The digitalization of the tourism identity through *VillageTravelBot* represents an innovative initiative tailored to the current demands of tourists. It brings visibility, coherence, and efficiency to the promotion of the "*Puhăceni Village*" brand. However, long-term success depends on community involvement, continuous content updates, and technological adaptation to visitor needs.

To fully understand the potential and strategic directions of the digitalization of Puhăceni village's tourism identity, it is useful to correlate the internal SWOT analysis with the external PESTEL factors (Table 2). These two perspectives complement each other, providing a comprehensive framework for interpreting the current context.

**Table 2. PESTEL analysis of the digitalization process of the tourism identity of
Puhăceni village**

Nature of factors	Positive factors	Negative factors
P - political	-Institutional support: UNDP, Polish MFA, local authorities open to rural digitalization; -National strategies for sustainable tourism and regional development.	-Excessive bureaucracy, lack of clear regulations for the official integration of conversational technologies in tourism; -Political instability that may affect project continuity.
E - economic	-Increased local economic potential through attracting tourists and consumption of traditional products and services; -Low operating costs for <i>VillageTravelBot</i> .	-Limited funds for maintenance and local digital innovation; -Regional economic vulnerability (inflation, decline in tourism consumption).
S - social	-Increased interest in ecological, sustainable, and authentic tourism; -Community and academic involvement in defining the local brand (bicycles, stories, honey, traditions).	-Low level of digital literacy, especially among elderly residents; -Youth migration limits the local capacity to adapt to digital changes.
T - technological	-Increasing access to mobile internet and chatbot applications in tourism; -Automation and personalization in communication with tourists.	-Unstable digital infrastructure in some households; -Continuous need for system and content updates of the bot.
E- environmental	-Promotion of eco-transport (bicycles), sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage; -The village is already perceived as “eco-friendly” – a competitive advantage in tourism branding.	-Increased tourist flow may put pressure on the environment if not managed responsibly; -Lack of complementary ecological infrastructure (recycling stations, charging points for electric bicycles, etc.).
L – legal	-Possibility of registering the local brand for identity protection; -Existing initiatives to create policies favorable to rural and digital tourism.	- Lack of specific legislation on personal data protection in bot interactions; -Copyright, international regulations that may require local adaptation.

Source: elaborated by the authors.

The local brand and the digitalization of the tourism identity have had a significant impact on the village of Puhăceni, transforming it into a competitive tourist destination, recognized for its authenticity, interactivity, and sustainability. This integrated model demonstrates the potential of combining tradition with digital innovation in the development of rural tourism.

The research results highlight not only the efficiency of an authentic and participatory brand in promoting local identity but also the transformative potential of digital technologies in the tourism communication process. Compared to the specialized literature, these findings align with the trends identified by Jafarli and Canavari (Jafarli & Canavari, 2025), who emphasize that effective rural branding requires community involvement and the valorization of local specificity as a differentiating element in the context of globalization.

The novelty brought by this research lies in the functional integration of local identity into a conversational chatbot (*VillageTravelBot*), which transforms the tourist experience into a personalized, interactive, and dynamic digital process. This result supports the conclusions of Hasan and Qayyum (Hasan & Qayyum, 2022), who demonstrated the importance of using digital tools to strengthen the perceived authenticity of tourism brands. Moreover, the digital storytelling approach applied in the case of Puhăceni resonates with the study conducted by Cahyani and Mardani (Cahyani & Mardani, 2023), who analyzed how cultural narratives integrated into digital environments can contribute to the sustainable development of tourism.

The use of a digital infrastructure focused on interaction and feedback responds to the need for personalization and co-creation of the tourist experience, as highlighted by Tran and Rudolf (Tran & Rudolf, 2022). While many rural brands limit themselves to a visual identity and promotion through social networks, the present study demonstrates how a chatbot can become a strategic vector for information, promotion, booking, and evaluation, creating an integrated system of tourism communication.

However, the identified challenges — such as the low level of digital literacy, dependence on technological infrastructure, and lack of a clear legislative framework — are similar to those mentioned in the research of Kucheriava (Kucheriava, 2021), and (Malska et al., 2020), who emphasize the difficulties faced by rural destinations in adapting to the demands of digital tourism. This outlines the need for coherent public policies aimed at supporting the digitalization of rural tourism through training, infrastructure, and specific regulations.

The study opens valuable perspectives for future research, inviting deeper exploration of topics such as: the effectiveness of tourism chatbots in increasing visitor satisfaction, the sustainability of rural brands in digital environments, and the role of public-private partnerships in the development of territorial identity.

CONCLUSIONS

The research results highlight an innovative model of sustainable rural development through the combination of local tradition with modern digital tools, applied in the case of the village of Puhăceni in the Republic of Moldova. It is confirmed that the process of building and promoting a local tourism brand, based on authentic identity and supported by technology, can contribute significantly to the revitalization of rural communities.

One of the main merits of this approach is the participatory strategy, involving the active engagement of authorities, entrepreneurs, and residents in shaping and assuming the “*village of bicycles*” brand. This brand reflects the ecological and traditional values of the community and has materialized into a coherent, distinct, and memorable identity.

The integration of the brand into the *VillageTravelBot* virtual assistant enabled the efficient digitalization of the tourist experience, facilitating interactive communication, quick access to information, direct bookings, and feedback collection. This tool has contributed not only to the visible and constant promotion of the destination but also to engaging tourists in creating authentic content through social networks.

The SWOT and PESTEL analyses highlighted both strengths (brand uniqueness, community engagement, interactive digital presence) and challenges related to digital literacy, technological infrastructure, or project continuity. At the same time, the identified opportunities — such as the growing interest in sustainable tourism and access to international funding — provide favorable premises for the expansion and replication of the model.

The example of Puhăceni demonstrates that a local tourism brand, collaboratively built and intelligently integrated into digital infrastructure, becomes a catalyst for sustainable development, community involvement, and the increased international visibility of a rural destination. The proposed model can serve as a source of inspiration for other localities in Eastern Europe seeking a competitive and sustainable tourism identity.

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