

## BRANDING STRATEGIES FOR NICHE TOURISM PRODUCTS: THE CASE OF “GASTRONOMIC TOURISM” AND “DIGITAL NOMAD DESTINATIONS”

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**Purpose of the article:** *This article aims to examine strategic approaches to branding niche tourism products, focusing on the cases of “gastronomic tourism” and “destinations for digital nomads.” The study highlights how brand strategies contribute to differentiation, competitive positioning, and the creation of unique value propositions in niche tourism markets.*

**Methodology:** *The research is based on a qualitative comparative case study approach. It combines desk research, analysis of secondary data, and content analysis of existing branding campaigns in both segments. The study also applies theoretical frameworks from destination branding and niche marketing to interpret the findings.*

**Conclusions:** *The study identifies key branding strategies that enhance the market visibility and attractiveness of niche tourism products. It concludes that successful branding in niche tourism relies on authentic storytelling, community engagement, and alignment with evolving traveler values such as sustainability, experience orientation, and digital mobility.*

**Originality:** *This article contributes to the literature by linking brand strategy development with emerging niche tourism markets and by providing comparative insights between two distinct yet growing segments—gastronomic tourism and digital nomad destinations. The findings offer practical implications for destination managers, tourism entrepreneurs, and policy-makers.*

**Keywords:** *niche tourism, brand strategy, gastronomic tourism, digital nomads, destination branding, experiential marketing.*

**JEL Classifications:** M31, Z32, L83

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, tourism has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from mass-market offerings toward more personalized and niche-oriented experiences. Travelers increasingly seek unique, authentic and meaningful interactions with destinations that reflect their lifestyle, interests and values. Two of the most rapidly growing segments in this context are gastronomic tourism and digital nomad destinations, both characterized by strong community identities and distinct psychographic profiles. These niches offer destinations an opportunity to differentiate themselves in an increasingly saturated global market.

Branding plays a central role in this transformation. As competition intensifies, niche branding strategies have become essential tools for establishing emotional connections with travelers and creating distinctive market positions. Existing literature on tourism branding highlights the importance of storytelling, identity-building and ecosystem development in attracting and retaining visitors. However, while many studies address tourism branding in a general context, targeted strategies for specific psychographic segments remain underexplored. This gap is particularly evident for smaller destinations seeking to capitalize on niche markets without the resources of major tourism hubs.

Gastronomic tourism has evolved beyond traditional culinary experiences, positioning food as a cultural and emotional anchor that connects visitors to local identity, heritage and sustainability values. In parallel, digital nomadism has emerged as a global lifestyle trend, driving demand for flexible, community-oriented destinations with strong digital infrastructure and supportive ecosystems. These segments require branding strategies that go beyond conventional promotion and focus on value co-creation, authentic narratives and immersive experiences.

Motivated by these dynamics, this study aims to analyze and compare branding strategies for gastronomic tourism and digital nomad destinations, focusing on how psychographic segmentation can enhance value proposition design, communication and brand identity. By integrating theoretical perspectives with case study analysis and expert insights, the research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how niche branding can strengthen the competitiveness of small and medium-sized destinations.

This research addresses a gap in tourism marketing literature by providing a structured framework for niche branding that aligns with evolving consumer behavior patterns. It offers both theoretical contributions to branding research and practical implications for destination managers aiming to position their products in highly competitive global markets.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The concept of niche tourism has gained increasing attention in tourism marketing literature as destinations face growing competition and the need for differentiation in the global travel market. Early definitions of this concept emphasize product specialization and small segments. Niche tourism is the development of specialized tourism products aimed at relatively small but growing groups of travelers whose interests are focused on specific activities or values (Hall, 1992).

In the 2000s, the emphasis shifted to authenticity, cultural identity and unique experiences. Niche tourism refers to the targeting of specific, well-defined traveler segments united by shared values, interests and lifestyles rather than broad demographic characteristics. This approach focuses on depth rather than breadth, aiming to create meaningful and authentic experiences that resonate with clearly identified audiences (Novelli, 2015).

Modern definitions emphasize sustainability, psychographic segmentation and branding, which are particularly important for positioning tourist destinations in the global market. Niche tourism as a "conscious shift away from mass tourism toward more individualized, specialized and sustainable tourism practices capable of satisfying the unique needs of target segments (Weaver, 2015).

From the authors' perspective, niche tourism in the contemporary context should be understood as a dynamic and adaptive system, where destinations position themselves not only as places to visit but as cultural ecosystems that offer immersive experiences aligned with travelers' lifestyles, values and aspirations. This evolution reflects the broader transformation of the tourism industry – from product-based competition to experience-based and meaning-driven value creation.

The formation and development of niche tourism are influenced by multiple interrelated factors (Buhalis, 2000):

- Sociocultural shifts reflect travelers' growing preference for authentic, meaningful, and personalized experiences that allow them to connect with local culture and communities rather than mass-market tourism products.
- Technological advancements provide destinations and businesses with powerful tools for targeted marketing, online community building, and immersive digital storytelling, enabling more precise engagement with niche audiences.
- Economic factors are shaped by the rise of the experience economy, where travelers value unique and memorable activities over material possessions, as well as by the diversification of travel motivations beyond traditional leisure.
- Global mobility trends, such as the spread of digital nomadism and slow travel movements, encourage longer stays, deeper cultural immersion, and new models of flexible, mobile lifestyles.
- Environmental and sustainability concerns drive destinations to adopt responsible tourism practices, focusing on ecological preservation, local community empowerment, and long-term resilience.

These factors redefine how destinations compete and position themselves in the global tourism landscape. Traditional mass marketing is no longer sufficient to create a distinct and memorable identity. Destination branding becomes a strategic tool for niche tourism development.

The development of destination branding as a field has been closely linked to classical branding theories in marketing. David Aaker emphasizes brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and loyalty as key drivers of brand value – principles increasingly applied to tourist destinations (Aaker, 2012). Kevin Lane Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework builds on this foundation, showing how strong brand knowledge and emotional connections shape visitors' perceptions (Keller, 2012).

Furthermore, Simon Anholt introduced the Nation Brand Hexagon, a multidimensional model integrating tourism, governance, investment, culture, people and exports (Anholt, 2006). These frameworks demonstrate that destinations, much like commercial brands, must strategically manage identity, positioning and stakeholder perceptions to achieve differentiation and build long-term loyalty. In tourism branding research, this shift marks a move from purely promotional activities toward strategic brand management, where destinations are conceptualized as complex, living brands with multiple interacting components.

Traditional destination branding focused primarily on mass tourism and broad market appeal. However, recent research emphasizes the importance of psychographic segmentation and tailored value propositions. Branding in tourism today must reflect the cultural narratives, emotional connections and lifestyle aspirations of target audiences (Morgan, 2011). This shift aligns with broader trends in consumer behavior, where travelers seek personalized, immersive and meaningful experiences rather than standardized products.

Gastronomic tourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic niche segments, with food functioning as both a symbolic and experiential asset. According to World Tourism Organization, gastronomic tourism involves travel motivated by the exploration of local food and beverage traditions (World Tourism Organization). Scholars highlight that culinary heritage enhances destination authenticity, stimulates emotional engagement and strengthens brand identity (Cohen, & Avieli, 2004) (Long, 2010). According to the authors, branding strategies in gastronomic tourism typically emphasize storytelling, regional specialties and partnerships with local producers to create memorable, multi-sensory experiences (Ceaikovskii, 2023). These strategies help destinations cultivate a distinct identity rooted in their culinary landscape.

While gastronomic tourism emphasizes cultural immersion through local culinary experiences, another rapidly expanding niche focuses on lifestyle and mobility rather than tradition and place. This shift is embodied by digital nomad destinations, which caters to a new generation of travelers seeking flexibility, community and seamless integration of work and travel. The rise of digital nomadism represents another rapidly growing niche, characterized by lifestyle mobility, technological connectivity and global community identity. Research highlights several key branding factors in this segment: digital infrastructure, affordability, lifestyle marketing and policy incentives such as nomad visas (Thompson, 2021). Unlike short-stay tourists, digital nomads seek destinations offering community-based experiences, co-living and co-working spaces and opportunities for cultural immersion. Branding strategies aimed at this segment rely heavily on online community building, lifestyle narratives and ecosystem development rather than one-time promotional campaigns. Destinations like Bali, Chiang Mai, or Lisbon have successfully positioned themselves as nomad hubs through a combination of policy, branding and community engagement.

Based on the analyzed theoretical material, the authors conclude that niche branding involves more than communication – it represents a strategic and co-creative process between destinations and their target segments. Strategic brand management underscores that strong brands are built through consistent, meaningful interactions rather than isolated marketing actions (Keller, 2012).

Scientific literature identifies the following key elements of niche branding:

- Psychographic segmentation for precise audience targeting (Aaker, 2012);
- Authentic storytelling and cultural narratives that foster emotional attachment (Morgan, 2011).
- Service ecosystem development ensuring consistent experience delivery (Anholt, 2006);
- Community engagement to enhance credibility and co-creation (Thompson, 2021);

- Distinctive visual identity systems aligned with niche values and aesthetics.

Despite the growing body of research on niche tourism branding, comparative studies focusing on specific segments – such as gastronomic tourism and digital nomad destinations – remain limited. Existing literature often addresses these niches separately and tends to focus on established tourism hubs, leaving small and medium-sized destinations underrepresented (Чайковский & Корецкий, 2019). Additionally, there is a lack of integrated frameworks that link psychographic segmentation, value proposition design and ecosystem thinking within niche branding strategies. This research by the authors aims to address these gaps by analyzing and comparing branding strategies in two distinct niche segments, providing a structured framework for targeted branding that responds to evolving traveler motivations and values in the contemporary tourism market.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study employs a qualitative research design aimed at exploring and comparing branding strategies in two distinct niche tourism segments: gastronomic tourism and digital nomad destinations. The qualitative approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth understanding of how destination branding is constructed, communicated and experienced within specific cultural and psychographic contexts. This methodological choice is aligned with recent trends in tourism research that emphasize the importance of contextual interpretation, stakeholder perspectives and narrative analysis rather than purely quantitative indicators.

Data collection was conducted by the authors over a six-month period (January – June 2025) and included two main sources:

- comparative case studies of selected niche destinations;
- semi-structured expert interviews with tourism branding specialists.

The cases analyzed in this article were selected based on their relevance, visibility in international tourism markets and the clarity of their niche positioning strategies. In the field of gastronomic tourism, destinations such as wine and gastronomic routes (Moldova), Emilia-Romagna (Italy) and the Basque Country (Spain) were analyzed due to their distinct culinary identities and well-developed branding ecosystems. For digital nomads, Chiang Mai (Thailand) and Lisbon (Portugal) were chosen as internationally recognized hubs for location-independent professionals.

The method of comparative case analysis made it possible to examine branding strategies across several parameters, including the development of value propositions, visual and narrative identity, communication channels, stakeholder engagement and ecosystem integration. Each case was analyzed using publicly available branding materials (official websites, campaigns, promotional videos and social media accounts), policy documents and additional academic literature. This analytical approach made it possible to identify both common mechanisms and distinctive branding features characteristic of each niche segment.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, which involved coding and categorizing recurring themes, patterns and strategic approaches. Particular attention was given to identifying psychographic targeting, storytelling methods and ecosystem-building strategies that distinguish niche branding from traditional destination marketing. By combining comparative case analysis with expert insights, this study aims to provide both a theoretical contribution to the field of niche tourism branding and practical recommendations for destination managers seeking to position their territories in competitive global markets.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The research findings reveal both converging patterns and distinctive features in branding strategies for the two analyzed niche tourism segments – gastronomic tourism and digital nomad destinations. The results are presented by the authors in a structured manner, focusing on value propositions, branding and communication strategies, ecosystem development and stakeholder engagement.

The results of the in-depth expert interviews with specialists in destination branding are presented through the identification of key respondent insights. The study involved 12 experts from five countries – Italy, Spain, Portugal, Thailand and Moldova – representing destination management organizations (DMOs), consulting firms and private operators. All participants had at least five years of professional experience in destination branding, place marketing and niche segments such as gastronomic tourism and digital nomad tourism. The average professional experience was 10.5 years. The geographic diversity of the sample made it possible to cover both mature tourism markets and emerging destinations. The interviews were conducted individually in an online format, with each session lasting between 45 and 70 minutes.

Based on the thematic analysis of the interviews, the authors identified four key themes emphasized by the experts:

1. “authenticity as value” – experts in gastronomic tourism highlight the importance of local identity and storytelling as a fundamental element of the brand.
2. “community and flexibility” – experts in digital nomad tourism emphasize the role of community, infrastructure and freedom.
3. “ecosystem building over promotion” – for both segments, what matters most is not advertising but the systematic development of the destination’s ecosystem.
4. “governance and leadership” the key difference lies in management approaches: centralized governance in gastronomic tourism versus network-based governance in digital nomad destinations.

Based on the analysis and interpretation of expert responses, four key themes were identified, reflecting different approaches to brand positioning and management in the gastronomic and digital nomad tourism segments. These themes formed the basis for the comparative analysis presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with experts in the field of destination branding**

Topics	Gastrotourism (Italy, Spain, Moldova)	Digital Nomads (Thailand, Portugal)	Example of an expert quote
Authenticity as value	“Our brand is built on local products and traditions”	Less emphasis	“We don't sell food, we sell the history of the region”
Community and flexibility	Secondary	“People come for community and a free atmosphere”	“The main thing is the feeling of belonging to a global family”
Ecosystem/ promotion	Strong focus on local supply chains	Strong focus on infrastructure	“Advertising is the tip of the iceberg. The ecosystem decides everything”
Governance and leadership	Centralized management	Flexible, decentralized governance	“Everything is decided online here, without a single center”

*Source: elaborated by the authors.*

An analysis of expert interviews revealed that authenticity and local identity are key in the branding of gastronomic destinations, while for digital nomad destinations, community, infrastructure and management flexibility are the determining factors. In both cases, experts emphasize that brand success depends not on the volume of advertising campaigns, but on the strength and integrity of the destination ecosystem, as well as the brand's alignment with the values of the target audience.

The results of the thematic analysis of in-depth interviews indicate that for the Republic of Moldova, the development of destination branding requires a strong foundation built on authenticity, local identity and the creation of a sustainable ecosystem of collaboration between public institutions, businesses and local communities. Gastronomic tourism, one of the most promising segments for Moldova, should be centered around the uniqueness of local products, traditional techniques and cultural practices, fostering an emotional connection with tourists through the region’s stories and flavors. At the same time, the country’s potential to attract digital nomads can be unlocked by developing flexible digital infrastructure, creating creative hubs and fostering a culture of open

communities. Thus, the strategic priority for Moldova's branding lies not in large-scale advertising campaigns, but in strengthening a holistic destination ecosystem capable of reflecting the country's authentic values and meeting the expectations of diverse segments of the modern tourism audience.

For the empirical analysis of niche tourism branding strategies, a review was conducted of five destinations representing two key segments – gastronomic tourism and digital nomad tourism. The gastronomic destinations included Italy (Emilia-Romagna region), Spain (Basque Country) and Moldova (wine and gastronomic routes), while the digital nomad destinations comprised Thailand (Chiang Mai) and Portugal (Lisbon). This selection made it possible to cover both mature and emerging tourism markets with varying levels of institutional maturity and market positioning.

The key principle for selecting the cases was the presence of a distinct niche strategy focused on a specific target audience and its psychographic characteristics. Gastronomic destinations (Italy, Spain, Moldova) demonstrate the use of cultural heritage to create a unique image, while digital nomad destinations (Thailand, Portugal) demonstrate targeted positioning within the global mobile lifestyle ecosystem. The second criterion was the availability of branding materials, which allowed for the analysis of both formal marketing communications and informal channels such as community content, reviews and online media. The third criterion was international recognition and community activity, reflecting brand sustainability. The gastronomic regions of Italy and Spain are internationally recognized, Moldova is developing a wine and gastronomic image and Chiang Mai and Lisbon consistently rank among digital nomads. Thus, the presented cases reflect two types of strategic positioning – culturally oriented and lifestyle-oriented – which allows us to identify sustainable mechanisms for brand formation in niche tourism.

**The first case examined by the authors is the Emilia-Romagna region**, one of Europe's most renowned gastronomic destinations, with a strong brand identity based on its culinary heritage and local products (Parmigiano Reggiano, Prosciutto di Parma, Aceto Balsamico di Modena). The region's brand is built around the "Via Emilia" concept, which unites gastronomic routes, festivals, markets and wineries. A key focus of the brand strategy is conveying authenticity through a cultural narrative and integrating gastronomy into the tourist experience. Regional DMOs, international gastronomic exhibitions, culinary festivals and online platforms are used for promotion, combining institutional communication with local stories. The result is high brand recognition: the region is part of the European Region of Gastronomy program and is regularly featured in World Tourism Organization reports as an example of a successful gastronomic destination (World Tourism Organization). A strong ecosystem – from producers to the restaurant business – ensures the brand's sustainability and international recognition.

**The second case analyzed is the Basque Country**, as one of the most striking examples of combining traditional gastronomic identity with elements of innovation and haute cuisine. The region actively uses its unique culinary culture (pintxos, sidrerías, farmers' markets and the Rioja Alavesa wine routes) as a strategic foundation for its brand (Martinez & Florek, 2021). The brand's communications strategy is based on positioning the region as a destination for authentic yet dynamic gastronomic experiences. Particular attention is paid to international festivals, collaborations with world-class chefs, culinary schools and media. The branding is reinforced through cultural events, reaching both gourmets and the general tourist audience. The region holds a strong position in international gastronomic rankings and the Basque Culinary Academy is recognized as one of the most influential schools in Europe. This demonstrates that a brand built on a culinary identity can be globally competitive while maintaining local roots.

**The third case is Moldova: Wine-Gastronomic Routes and Emerging Branding Practices.** Moldova represents a developing example of gastronomic branding, where wine and culinary routes are a key element of positioning. The brand is based on the "Wine of Moldova" concept and a national gastronomic tourism development program supported by the state and private sector (Wine of Moldova). The strategy is focused on creating an authentic wine and gastronomic experience, combining tastings, rural tourism and traditional cuisine. Visual branding, participation in

international wine festivals and collaboration with regional producers and travel agencies play a key role (Чайковский, 2022). Although Moldova does not enjoy the same level of international recognition as Italy or Spain, the country is gradually entering international wine routes and strengthening its presence in the niche tourism market, focusing on authenticity, the natural environment and local communities.

The authors then examined case studies related to digital nomads. The first case was **Thailand**, a popular destination for this type of traveler. Chiang Mai is one of the first and most well-known hubs for digital nomads in Asia. Its brand strategy is based on lifestyle positioning, emphasizing an atmosphere of freedom, accessibility, a favorable climate and community. The key element of the brand is not a physical product, but an "ecosystem for remote living and working" – a developed network of coworking spaces, coliving spaces, events and online communities. Promotion is largely based on peer-to-peer communication, user-generated content, ratings and digital platforms such as Nomad List (Zhou, 2024). Unlike gastronomic destinations, the Chiang Mai brand is not centralized: it is shaped by entrepreneurs, digital communities and travelers. This ensures the brand's flexibility and dynamism, but also increases its dependence on reputation and digital presence.

The second case is **Lisbon**, which represents an example of an institutionally supported digital nomad brand, in which the city administration and national agencies play an active role in promotion. The city's brand is based on high-quality infrastructure, climate, safety, transport accessibility and a developed digital environment. Since 2022, Portugal has been implementing the Digital Nomad Visa program, which has increased international interest in the country. The communications strategy combines official campaigns, digital platforms and community engagement. Lisbon consistently ranks among the top 10 Nomad List cities for comfort, infrastructure and quality of life (Nomads list). Unlike Chiang Mai, Lisbon's brand is more structured and institutionalized, ensuring stable positioning and predictable growth. This case illustrates how the combination of institutional support and a strong ecosystem creates a sustainable competitive advantage. The Lisbon case clearly illustrates how a combination of institutional support, strategic infrastructure development, and community engagement can shape a strong and resilient destination brand. The city's approach highlights the importance of policy instruments, such as the Digital Nomad Visa, in creating a favorable regulatory and operational environment for attracting international remote workers.

Based on the studied cases of gastrotourism and digital nomad destinations, the authors conducted a comparative analysis of the strategic characteristics of destination branding, reflecting the key elements of positioning in each segment, the results of which are presented in Table 2.

The combined analysis demonstrates that gastronomic destinations are characterized by a stable identity, strong cultural specificity and a high degree of institutional support, which ensures their stability and recognizability at the international level. However, these destinations display lower flexibility in updating strategies and adapting to rapidly changing tourism trends. In contrast, digital nomad destinations exhibit high adaptability, decentralized management and active community participation, but their resilience largely depends on digital reputation and online communications.

For both segments, the key factor behind a successful brand is not the intensity of advertising campaigns but the presence of a strong ecosystem that delivers a holistic and appealing tourist experience (Trifonova, 2024). The optimal strategy combines an authentic value proposition with targeted lifestyle branding, tailored to the psychographic characteristics of the target audience, which helps strengthen tourist loyalty and enhance the competitiveness of the destinations.

**Table 2. Comparative characteristics and strategic features of branding niche tourist destinations**

Country/ type of tourism	Core brand value	Level of government support	Target audience	Main message	Communication channels
Italy / Gastronomic	Heritage + Food Routes	High	Cultural travelers	Authenticity and tradition through the taste of the region	Tourist boards, gastronomic routes, international exhibitions
Spain/ Gastronomic	Authenticity + Festivals	High	Gourmets, middle-aged tourists	A celebration of taste and culture	Culinary festivals, gastronomic events, collaboration with chefs
Moldova/ Gastronomic	Wine tourism+Local identity	Average	Regional tourists	Local identity and wine culture	Wine routes, local media, regional tourism websites
Thailand/ Digital nomads tourism	Community+Cost efficiency	Average	Young nomads	Freedom,community and an affordable lifestyle	Social media,online forums and platforms for digital nomads
Portugal / Digital nomads tourism	Infrastructure+ Lifestyle	High	European freelancers	Comfort, digital mobility and flexibility	Official programs, digital platforms, co-living/coworking networks

*Source: Elaborated by the authors.*

Based on the analyzed cases and in-depth interviews with experts, the authors came to conclusions about the effectiveness of branding strategies for niche tourism products presented in Table 3.

**Table 3. Comparative branding strategies for niche tourism products**

Branding dimension	Gastronomic tourism	Destinations for digital nomads
Target audience	Food enthusiasts, culture seekers, domestic and international tourists interested in culinary experiences	Remote workers, freelancers, entrepreneurs, digital nomads seeking long-term stays and connectivity
Core value proposition	Authentic local cuisine, immersive culinary experiences, cultural heritage	Reliable digital infrastructure, flexible living, global networking opportunities, lifestyle appeal
Brand identity and image	Emphasis on tradition, authenticity, regional diversity, storytelling about food origins	Modern, flexible, innovation-driven, community-focused, showcasing digital lifestyle
Brand communication channels	Food festivals, travel blogs, gastronomic routes, partnerships with chefs and restaurants	Online communities, co-working platforms, digital nomad forums, social media campaigns
Key marketing strategies	Culinary tours, regional branding (e.g., "wine routes," "farm-to-table"), influencer collaborations in food sector	Promotion of co-living/co-working spaces, visa programs, partnerships with tech brands, remote-work oriented content marketing
Brand personality	Traditional yet innovative, sensorial, cultural, experience-rich	Cosmopolitan, mobile, creative, tech-savvy, lifestyle-driven
Engagement and community building	Culinary workshops, farm visits, collaborative events with local producers	Meetups, skill-sharing events, local integration programs for nomads, networking events
Sustainability focus	Farm-to-table initiatives, supporting local producers, reducing food waste	Promoting slow travel, integrating local economies, encouraging low-impact lifestyles
Brand differentiators	Regional specialties, chef-driven experiences, authenticity and tradition	Mobility-friendly policies, international community hubs, tech-enabled services

*Source: elaborated by the authors.*

The comparative analysis presented in table highlights both convergences and divergences in branding strategies between gastronomic tourism and destinations for digital nomads. While both niches emphasize authenticity, experience orientation and community building, they diverge in their

core value propositions and communication approaches. Gastronomic tourism brands focus on cultural heritage, sensory experiences and partnerships with local producers, whereas digital nomad destinations prioritize digital infrastructure, lifestyle flexibility and global networking. These distinctions suggest that successful branding in niche tourism requires not only alignment with target audience expectations but also the ability to leverage each segment's unique strengths – tradition and locality in the case of gastronomy and innovation and mobility in the case of digital nomads.

The conceptual framework for niche destination branding proposed by the authors goes beyond classical brand management models and incorporates multi-level, dynamic elements reflecting the specifics of niche tourism. The conceptual framework for niche destination branding proposed by the authors goes beyond classical brand management models by integrating multi-layered and dynamic components that reflect the specific characteristics of niche tourism. Unlike traditional models, which emphasize promotional strategies and positioning, this framework adopts a systemic and adaptive perspective, acknowledging that niche destinations operate in more fluid and complex environments.

At its foundation, the model places authentic brand identity, emphasizing the importance of unique cultural narratives, local values, and targeted lifestyle positioning. This identity acts as a strategic anchor for all subsequent layers. The next layer—the micro-environment—encompasses governance structures, stakeholders, and cultural-lifestyle orientations, ensuring that branding strategies are grounded in the real socio-institutional context of the destination.

A crucial element of the framework is the brand ecosystem, which functions as a mediating and adaptive layer, linking internal resources with external influences. It integrates innovation capacity, data systems, experience design, and community co-creation, allowing destinations to remain responsive and resilient. Finally, the macro-environmental layer incorporates global trends, technological shifts, and PEST factors, shaping the external conditions to which niche brands must continuously adapt.

The interaction between these layers is dynamic and cyclical, creating feedback loops that strengthen brand identity, enhance stakeholder collaboration, and increase the competitiveness of the destination. This approach moves beyond static branding tools, highlighting the importance of ecosystem thinking, stakeholder engagement, and cultural authenticity as strategic assets in niche tourism branding. The conceptual framework for niche destination branding developed by the authors is presented in Figure 1.

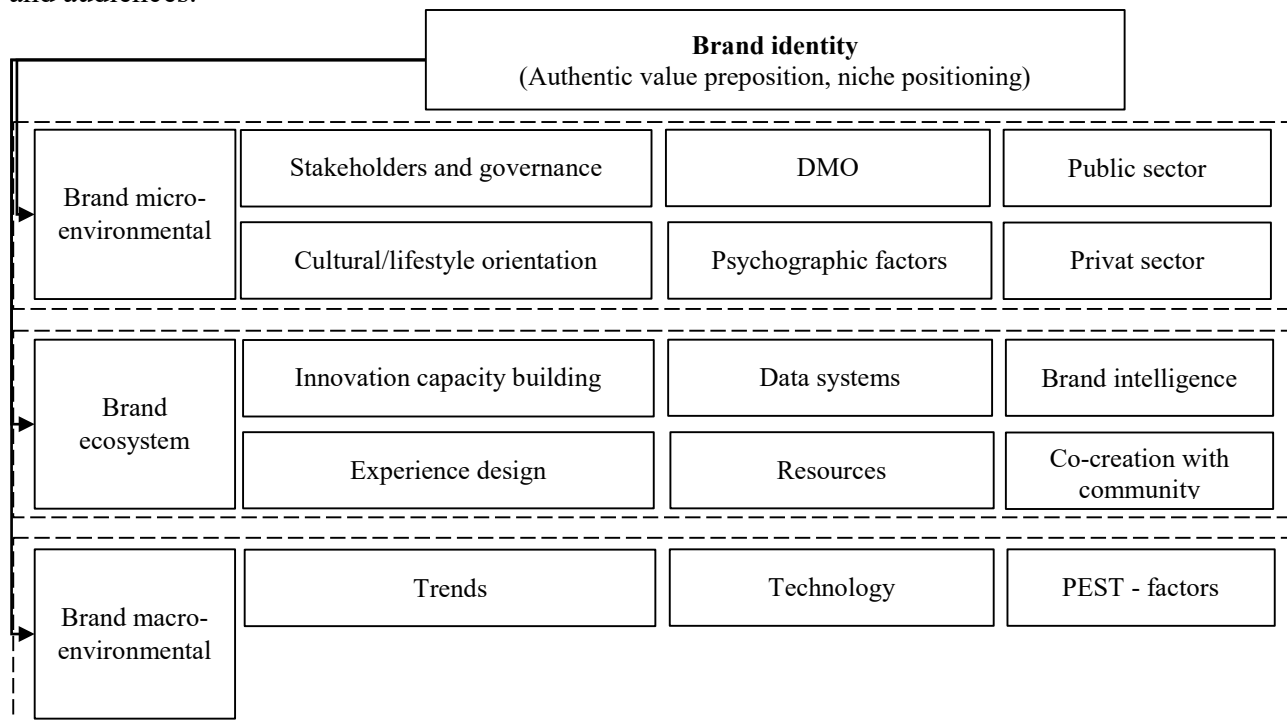
Structure showing the relationship between value proposition, communication, ecosystem and stakeholders. The concept explains niche destination branding as a dynamic, ecosystem-based process based on authenticity, psychographic alignment and adaptive co-creation (Trifonova, 2025). It emphasizes the importance of continuous feedback between stakeholders, travelers and the technological environment to ensure brand sustainability and long-term competitiveness.

The conceptual framework of niche destination branding presented in Figure 1 illustrates the multi-layered and systemic nature of branding strategies for niche tourism segments. At its core lies brand identity, which embodies the authentic value proposition and niche positioning of a destination. This element defines the strategic direction of the entire branding process, serving as a foundation for communicating distinctive values, cultural narratives and lifestyle appeals to specific target audiences.

The brand micro-environmental layer encompasses the key actors and cultural factors directly involved in brand formation. It includes stakeholders and governance structures, destination management organizations (DMOs) and both the public and private sectors. Cultural and lifestyle orientations, together with psychographic factors, reflect the intrinsic characteristics of the destination and the behavioral profiles of the target market. This layer forms the operational base of the brand, ensuring alignment between strategic positioning and stakeholder engagement.

The brand ecosystem functions as an adaptive and mediating layer, connecting the internal and external dimensions of destination branding. It comprises innovation capacity building, data systems, brand intelligence, experience design, resource allocation and co-creation with communities. These components provide the mechanisms through which destinations can innovate, manage brand

narratives and design coherent tourist experiences while fostering collaboration among local actors and audiences.



**Figure 1. Conceptual framework of niche destination branding**

*Source: elaborated by the authors.*

The brand macro-environmental layer represents the external forces shaping the branding context. It includes global tourism and societal trends, technological advancements and PEST factors (political, economic, social and technological). These drivers exert continuous influence on destinations, requiring adaptive strategies to maintain competitiveness and relevance in a dynamic global market.

The interconnections between these layers are crucial. Macro-environmental factors shape the strategic direction of the brand, while the micro-environment provides the cultural and institutional foundation. The ecosystem layer ensures the translation of external pressures and internal capacities into coherent branding strategies. Feedback loops reinforce brand identity, enhance stakeholder involvement and strengthen the destination's competitive position. Overall, this framework highlights that successful niche destination branding relies not merely on promotional campaigns but on the integration of authentic identity, systemic ecosystem development and adaptive responses to global trends. Such an approach is particularly relevant for segments like gastronomic tourism and digital nomad destinations, where value is created through meaningful narratives, community engagement and sustainable ecosystem building.

## CONCLUSIONS

The authors' research (expert interviews and case studies) complement each other logically. The former presents insights from professionals, the latter empirical evidence. Together, they form the basis for meaningful proposals for niche branding strategy in tourism:

1. The results of expert interviews and case studies confirm that successful destination branding is based on clear positioning and authenticity, reflecting the unique cultural, gastronomic and social characteristics of the territory. For the Republic of Moldova, this necessitates a systematic approach to promoting local identity as a key element of competitive advantage.

2. Empirical data demonstrate that, in today's environment, a destination brand is formed not only through communication tools, but primarily through the quality and integrity of the tourism ecosystem – infrastructure, service level, community engagement and coordination among sector participants.

3. The integration of niche strategies, such as the development of gastrotourism and destinations for digital nomads, opens up opportunities for Moldova to achieve sustainable positioning in the international tourism market. The priority is to create a flexible management and promotion model capable of combining traditional values with innovative forms of tourist experience.

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