

THE PERCEPTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA'S IMAGE AS AN INTERNATIONAL TOURIST DESTINATION

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Abstract

The Republic of Moldova has the potential to become an even more internationally recognized tourist destination due to its authenticity, hospitality, sustainability, and ability to surprise visitors with unique experiences. This paper aims to analyze the distinctive elements of the country's tourism brand and identify target markets for positioning Moldova on the global tourism map. The research represents a continuation of efforts to promote Moldova internationally and to establish a long-term vision for its tourism sector. The study provides an overview of Moldova's main tourism promotion strategies, emphasizing its competitive advantages and attractions from a global perspective. It also highlights the integration of emerging trends, such as evolving tourist preferences, the digitalization of travel planning, and the role of sustainability in tourism products.

Keywords: *tourist destination; identity; brand; perception; inbound tourism; sustainability.*

JEL Classification: *M, M16, M31, Z32*

INTRODUCTION.

The image of a destination is a key element in attracting tourists. It is based on individuals' perceptions of a location, which influence their travel behavior and ultimately determine their choice of destination (Woodside & Lysonski 1989; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). Travel is often seen as an escape, allowing individuals to break from routine or explore and discover new cultures. However, travelers need a reason to visit a destination - places with no unique offerings are rarely considered. Each destination thus develops an image shaped by both positive and negative associations (Brezovec et al., 2004). Recently, Moldova has increasingly gained recognition on the global tourism map. The country's tourism image has seen remarkable development due to improved infrastructure, strategic tourism branding, international cultural promotion, and geopolitical changes. Despite challenges, particularly the impact of the war in Ukraine, Moldova's tourism sector has shown resilience. Recent achievements, such as the designation of Văleni village as the "Best Tourism Village" by UNWTO and Moldova's ranking as a top wine tourism destination, further enhance its international appeal (<https://www.gov.md>).

The aim of this research is to explore how Moldova's distinctive cultural, gastronomic, and oenological features contribute to shaping its image as an international tourist destination, and to assess the perceptions of foreign visitors and diaspora travelers regarding Moldova's tourism appeal, based on recent survey data. Global tourism trends indicate that travelers increasingly seek unique experiences and opportunities to break away from conventional tourist routes. Popular activities include hiking, food tourism, and cycling, while many travelers avoid overcrowded and overly commercialized destinations.

To achieve this aim, the research pursues the following specific objectives:

1. To identify the main attributes associated with the Republic of Moldova as perceived by foreign tourists and members of the diaspora;
2. To evaluate the role of wine tourism, gastronomy, and cultural heritage in the formation of Moldova's destination image;
3. To propose strategic directions for enhancing the international positioning of Moldova as a competitive and authentic tourist destination.

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the contemporary tourism literature, the concept of destination image has evolved from a peripheral concern to a pivotal determinant in influencing travel behavior. The image perceived by prospective visitors plays a decisive role in shaping their preferences, expectations, and eventual choice of a tourism destination. As Pike (2007) underscores, these mental representations are instrumental throughout the destination selection process, serving as both a filter and a motivator. The notion of destination image has been subjected to multidisciplinary investigation since the latter part of the 20th century. Scholars have aimed to conceptualize it not merely as a static portrayal but as a dynamic and multi-layered cognitive and affective construction. Lee (2009) conceptualizes destination image as “the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country,” implying an integrated synthesis of factual knowledge and emotionally charged impressions. Cazacu (2017, p. 50) further refines this understanding by defining destination image as “a set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that people have of a place or destination.” These beliefs and impressions are often influenced by a combination of direct experiences, mediated content (e.g., advertising, social media, travel blogs), and interpersonal communication. Tourists interpret and re-interpret these signals to construct a coherent image of a place, often filling informational gaps with assumptions or mental associations (Hosany, Ekinci & Uysal, 2007). A foundational contribution to this field is the dual-component model proposed by Baloglu and Brinberg (1997), which differentiates between cognitive and affective evaluations in the formation of destination image. The cognitive component is informed by a person’s knowledge, beliefs, and perceptions about the tangible attributes of a place (e.g., safety, climate, infrastructure), while the affective dimension captures the emotional responses or feelings evoked by the image (e.g., excitement, tranquility, nostalgia). This duality is further elaborated by Beerli and Martín (2004), who argue that both dimensions interact to generate a holistic image that ultimately guides behavior.

Recent studies have deepened this understanding by exploring online information ecosystems as influential factors in image construction. For instance, Styliadis (2020) emphasizes that residents’ perspectives, user-generated content, and real-time digital storytelling have a profound impact on shaping potential tourists’ perceptions. Moreover, Kim, Sun, and Fesenmaier (2018) highlight the growing relevance of visual imagery—particularly on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok—in triggering affective engagement and influencing perceived destination authenticity. Additionally, destination image is no longer viewed solely from the standpoint of the tourist. Scholars such as Kislali, Kavaratzis, and Saren (2020) advocate for a co-creative approach, wherein multiple stakeholders—including residents, tourism authorities, and even tourists themselves—participate in the image-building process. This paradigm shift emphasizes the performative and negotiated nature of destination branding and aligns with postmodern perspectives on tourism experience.

Destination image is a crucial factor in tourists’ decision-making (Govers & Go, 2003). Studies suggest that it is difficult for travelers to form a clear image of a destination without prior experience (Govers, Go & Kumar, 2007). When travelers lack firsthand experience, three key factors influence their perception: motivation, demographic characteristics, and available information about the destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004). Sources of information - such as magazines, influencers, television, and the internet - ultimately shape the image potential tourists form about a destination (Govers, Go & Kumar, 2007).

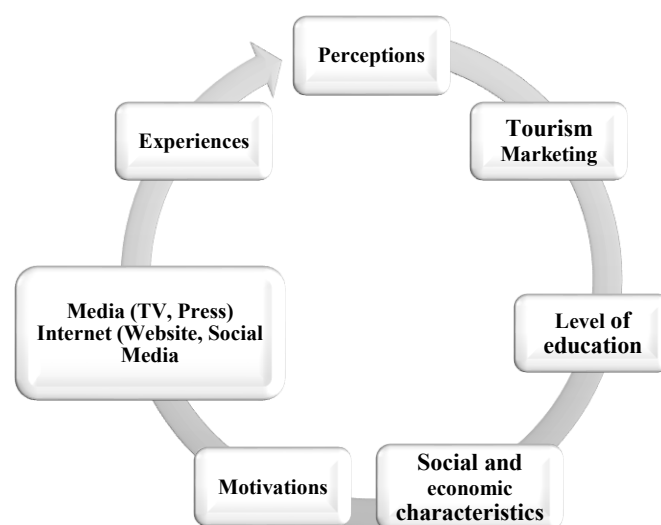


Figure 1. Factors Influencing the Formation of the Tourist Destination Image.

Source: Adapted by the author from source (Echtner, C.M. & Ritchie, J.R.B. 1993).

In sum, the destination image remains a critical construct at the intersection of perception, emotion, and experience. Its formation is contingent not only upon internal cognitive-affective processing but also upon external stimuli, socio-digital influences, and participatory narratives. The theoretical complexity of this concept demands continuous refinement as the global tourism landscape becomes increasingly dynamic and interconnected. In general, tourists construct their perception of a destination based on their knowledge, experiences, feelings, and perceptions. This process is influenced by external factors such as recommendations from friends and relatives, advertisements, intermediaries, or personal past experiences. These factors play a crucial role in determining both the level of tourist satisfaction with the destination and their intention to revisit it. Consequently, the image projected by tourist destinations is of significant interest to travel agencies operating within these locations. In conclusion, the analysis conducted outlines the internal and external factors influencing the formation of an individual's perception of a destination, as presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Internal and External Factors Influencing the Image of a Tourist Destination.

External Factors	Internal Factors
• Natural and cultural attractions of the destination; • Political, economic, and technological environment; • Quality of products and services; • Tourists' satisfaction during the travel experience; • Social interactions (word-of-mouth marketing, phone calls, emails); • Climatic conditions; • Presence of a brand; • Media sources and the Internet; • Marketing and advertising activities; • Postcards and brochures; • Films and events.	• Geographical origin; • Social and cultural environment; • Motivations and expectations; • Personal sentiment (favorable vs. unfavorable); • Perceived risks; • Familiarity with a destination; • Experience at the destination; • Reports on previous trips and experiences in other destinations; • Lack of information.

Source: Adapted by the author based on source Di Marino, E. (2008).

Tourism activities in Moldova have seen significant growth in recent years. In 2022, Moldova was visited by 4.7 million foreigners, including 162,000 tourists. In the same year, tourism generated 317 million USD, which represents 2.2% of Moldova's GDP. In 2023, the number of tourists increased by 110% compared to the period of January-June 2022. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, during the first 6 months of 2023, our country was visited by over 91,000 tourists, with an average stay duration of 4-5 days. This upward trend continued into 2024. In the first nine months of 2024, tourist accommodation establishments recorded a 23.6% increase in the number of accommodated tourists and a 9.4% rise in tourist overnight stays compared to the same period in 2023. In 2024, the revenues of travel agencies and tour operators totalled 4,622.1 million lei (10.4% more than in 2023), of which: from inbound tourism – 66.5 million lei (+45.8%), from outbound tourism – 4,343.0 million lei (+10.7%), from domestic tourism – 212.6 million lei (-1.5%) (www.statistica.gov.md).

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research utilizes quantitative data collected by Magenta Consulting, which conducted a study on the "Perception of Moldova as a Tourist Destination by Foreign Visitors." The survey was conducted on a sample of 606 respondents, including foreign tourists and the diaspora (individuals originally from the Republic of Moldova living abroad). These respondents were interviewed at key locations such as Chisinau International Airport, the Romania border, Cricova Winery, and the Great National Assembly Square. Data was collected between October 7-21, 2023, including during the National Wine Day and City Day celebrations. According to the survey results Consulting.md. (www.consulting.md):

The main areas of interest for tourists were:

- Leisure activities (33%);
- Visiting family and friends (17%);
- Professional or business activities (18%).

The 2023 study indicates an interesting shift in the tourism behavior of the Moldovan diaspora. In 2018, 60% of them visited Moldova to see relatives and friends, while this year, only 27% stated that this was their primary reason for coming. An increasing number of compatriots from the diaspora are choosing to spend their vacations in Moldova, focusing more on exploring the country and enjoying leisure activities.

Among the factors that motivate visitors to come to Moldova for tourism are:

- Personal recommendations from family, friends, and relatives (41%);
- Affordability of travel to Moldova (27%);
- Desire to taste Moldovan wine (25%);

- Desire to visit Moldovan wineries and cellars.

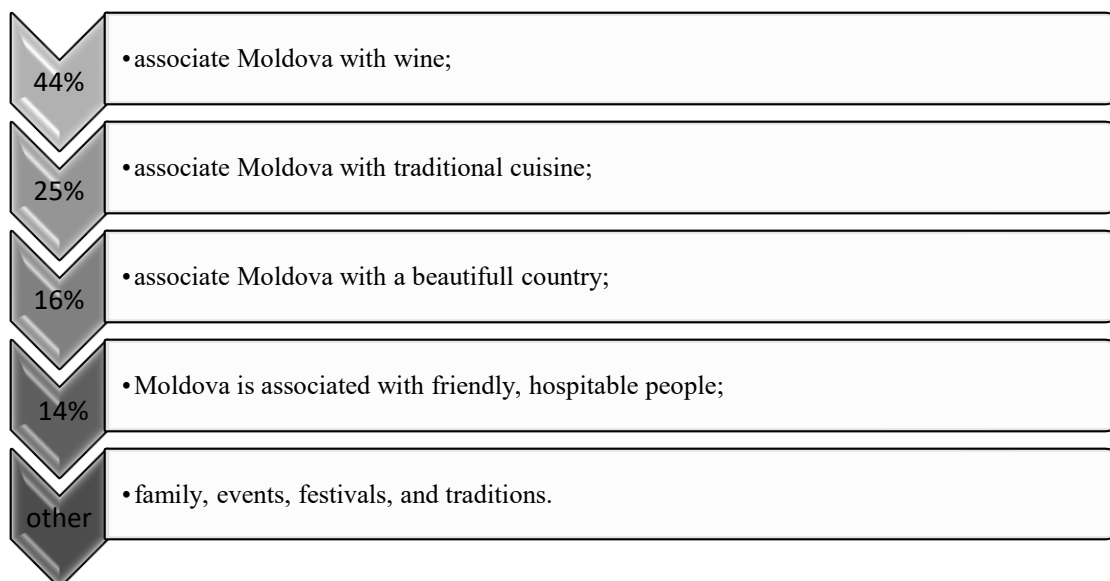


Figure 2. What tourists associate with the Republic of Moldova.

Source: Created by the author based on source Consulting.md(. <https://consulting.md/rom/statistici-si-publicatii/cine-sunt-turistii-care-vin-in-moldova>)

The fact that Moldova is a wine-producing country has a significant impact on tourists. The majority of them (44%) associate Moldova with wine. 25% associate it with traditional dishes, 16% with a beautiful country, and 14% with friendly people. Other associations mentioned include family, respect, events, festivals, and traditions. Most of the diaspora (48%) still associate Moldova with family/homeland. 73% of tourists organize their trip independently. The most frequent difficulties they encounter are mainly related to transportation and prices. The majority (28%) mentioned the lack of direct flights, while 62% of visitors from the diaspora reported high prices. The study also revealed that tourists prefer relatively short stays, with 69% of respondents staying in the country for less than a week. 18% stay for one to two weeks, and 6% mentioned a month.

Although it might seem that Moldova's geographical proximity to the war in Ukraine could raise concerns about the safety of visitors, nine out of ten tourists stated that they still feel safe in the Republic of Moldova. Chişinău was the main tourist destination for 87% of tourists. Nearly half of them visited restaurants, wine shops, or clubs (49%), wineries (39%), and national festivals/holidays (30%). Other places and events mentioned by tourists included Orheiul Vechi, churches and monasteries, natural reserves, museums, theaters, and concerts. Tourists expressed a high level of satisfaction with the hospitality and kindness of locals (91%), traditional food (90%), food quality in restaurants (89%), wines (86%), and natural landscapes (85%). 68% of respondents mentioned that they would definitely visit Moldova again. The proportion of those who mentioned they would revisit Moldova has significantly increased compared to 2018 (54%) and 2016 (50%) (www.consulting.md).

The following strategic directions are derived from the analysis of survey data and reflect a comprehensive vision for positioning the Republic of Moldova as a competitive, authentic, and attractive destination on the international tourism market. These strategies are aligned with principles of sustainable tourism, innovation, and place branding. The results of the survey are essential in the decision-making process regarding the creation and development of new tourism products, the development of a strategic marketing and promotion framework, aiming for the sustainable growth of tourism at the national level. Based on the analysis of the data presented above, the author can propose several strategic directions for developing and enhancing the image of the Republic of Moldova as an international tourist destination:

1. *Cultural and Historical Promotion:* Emphasizing the cultural and historical richness of the Republic of Moldova by promoting its cultural heritage, traditional festivals, music, and folk dance. Participation in international tourism fairs and cultural events can also be effective. The promotion of Moldova's cultural and historical heritage serves as a cornerstone for building a unique destination identity. This strategy involves highlighting the richness of intangible cultural assets - such as folk music, traditional dance, handicrafts, and local customs - alongside tangible heritage sites, museums, and historical landmarks. Participation in international tourism exhibitions and cultural events (e.g., ITB Berlin, FITUR Madrid) can strengthen Moldova's visibility and cultural diplomacy. Creative storytelling and the use of national symbols can reinforce emotional connections with international tourists.

Key actions:

- ✓ Develop thematic cultural routes (e.g., "Heritage Villages of Moldova");
 - ✓ Launch campaigns like "Living Traditions of Moldova" across digital platforms;
 - ✓ Support traditional festivals with international promotion.
2. *Development of Tourism Infrastructure:* Investments in tourism infrastructure, including hotels, restaurants, roads, and transport facilities, to facilitate access to the country's tourist attractions. A reliable and accessible tourism infrastructure is fundamental for improving the visitor experience. Investments should target both physical infrastructure—such as accommodation facilities, road networks, public transport, and signage—as well as digital infrastructure, including online booking platforms and mobile tourism apps. This strategic direction aims to eliminate logistical barriers and increase competitiveness by aligning with international service standards.
- Key actions:
- ✓ Upgrade rural accommodation to meet eco-tourism standards;
 - ✓ Improve access roads to key attractions (e.g., Orheiul Vechi, Saharna);
 - ✓ Develop multilingual tourist information centers.
3. *Promotion of Rural and Ecotourism:* Promoting rural and ecotourism in Moldova's picturesque regions, such as tours in traditional villages, agritourism activities, hiking, bird watching, or visits to natural reserves. Rural tourism and ecotourism are strategic assets that differentiate Moldova from mass-market destinations. The development of immersive experiences in traditional villages - such as agritourism, nature-based activities, and community-based tourism - provides tourists with genuine, sustainable, and slow-travel options. Ecotourism initiatives should prioritize environmental conservation and local participation, ensuring long-term value for both tourists and host communities.
- Key actions:
- ✓ Create eco-routes and nature trails in Codrii and Nistru Valley;
 - ✓ Offer farm-stay packages and culinary workshops;
 - ✓ Train rural hosts and guides in sustainable tourism practices.
4. *Local Gastronomy and Wine tourism:* Capitalizing on traditional Moldovan cuisine and promoting internationally recognized local wines by organizing gastronomic festivals and vineyard tours. The Moldovan culinary identity—rooted in rustic recipes, seasonal ingredients, and artisanal techniques—represents a strong branding element. Additionally, Moldova's reputation as a wine-producing country offers significant potential for thematic tourism development. This strategy aims to create sensory-based experiences that connect tourists with local producers, traditions, and stories behind food and wine.
- Key actions:
- ✓ Organize annual wine and food festivals (e.g., "Moldova Wine Days");
 - ✓ Develop regional gastronomic maps and wine tours;
 - ✓ Support wine routes linking key wineries (e.g., Purcari, Cricova, Castel Mimi).
5. *International Partnerships and Joint Promotion:* Developing international partnerships for mutual tourism promotion, including cultural exchanges and joint marketing campaigns with other popular tourist destinations. Establishing bilateral and multilateral tourism partnerships can facilitate access to broader markets and build credibility through association with well-established destinations. This may include shared marketing campaigns, exchange programs, and joint thematic itineraries with neighboring countries or regions that share cultural or natural affinities.
- Key actions:
- ✓ Collaborate with Romania and Ukraine on cross-border cultural routes;
 - ✓ Join regional tourism alliances in Eastern Europe;
 - ✓ Engage in twinning programs with European cultural capitals.
6. *Improving International Accessibility:* Improving air and road connectivity with other countries by opening new routes or increasing the frequency of flights to key destinations. Ease of access is a key determinant of destination attractiveness. Improving air connectivity, visa facilitation, and cross-border mobility is essential for attracting tourists, especially from Western and Northern Europe. Strategic cooperation with low-cost carriers and regional airlines can enhance frequency and affordability of travel to Moldova.
- Key actions:
- ✓ Open new direct flight routes to key hubs (e.g., Vienna, Warsaw, Amsterdam);
 - ✓ Negotiate agreements with airline operators for tourism bundles;
 - ✓ Improve border infrastructure for international road access.
7. *Business Tourism and MICE Development:* Encouraging the organization of international conferences, symposia, and corporate events in Moldova, highlighting the modern infrastructure and high-quality services

available. The promotion of Moldova as a venue for business events, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE) can diversify the tourism portfolio and reduce seasonality. Moldova's capital, Chișinău, in particular, has the infrastructure and service capacity to host international symposia and corporate retreats.

Key actions:

- ✓ Position Moldova as a boutique destination for conferences;
- ✓ Incentivize international academic and business events;
- ✓ Partner with universities and chambers of commerce for event bids.

8. *Digital Marketing and Smart Promotion*: Effectively using digital marketing and social media to promote Moldova's tourist attractions, targeting various market segments and demographic groups. Effective destination branding in the digital era requires strategic use of online channels (Gretzel, Xiang, & Fesenmaier 2015). Moldova should invest in content marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), influencer partnerships, and targeted social media campaigns. Customized digital content must be adapted to different source markets and demographic profiles.

Key actions:

- ✓ Launch an interactive tourism website and mobile app;
- ✓ Collaborate with travel influencers and vloggers;
- ✓ Use analytics to monitor campaign impact and optimize outreach.

While Moldova is increasingly recognized for its natural landscapes, quality wines, and rich cultural heritage, several challenges remain. These include underdeveloped tourism infrastructure, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and concerns about corruption. Nonetheless, continuous promotional efforts aim to enhance Moldova's visibility and diversify its tourism offerings. Together, these strategic directions form a coherent roadmap for transforming the Republic of Moldova into a distinctive and competitive destination. By aligning traditional values with modern marketing tools and sustainable development principles, Moldova can capitalize on its unique assets and build a resilient tourism sector with long-term international appeal.

III. RESULT AND DISSCUSION

The issue of strengthening the image of the Republic of Moldova as an international tourist destination is extensively researched and analyzed by researchers, stakeholders, and authorities. In this context, we can mention the National Tourism Development Program "Tourism 2026" *Guvernul Republicii Moldova*. (<https://particip.gov.md>), a document that includes strategic planning in this sector, redefining public policies to support the dynamic development of the tourism industry and to increase the attractiveness of the Republic of Moldova as a tourist destination, formulated and presented through the lens of global development trends in this sector.

One of the main objectives of this program is the *Development and Strengthening of Tourist Destinations*, with the following key areas of action:

1. *Stimulating the development of tourism in important regional leisure areas in the Republic of Moldova, achieved through*: the analysis of the potential of tourist destinations in regions such as Orheiul Vechi, Căușeni – Ștefan Vodă, Anenii Noi – Criuleni – Dubăsari, UTA Găgăuzia, Cahul – Giurgiulești, Soroca – Rezina, Hîncești – Leușeni, Călărași – Ungheni, Glodeni – Costești, Edineț – Râșcani, etc.; arranging and developing tourist facilities in selected regional leisure zones; promoting tourist objectives and routes to connect these areas into a national network of developed leisure zones; and developing a financial support mechanism for the identified tourist development zones in the analysis and feasibility study.
2. *Providing support for the creation and development of destination management and marketing organizations, achieved through*: the development of a regulatory framework for destination management; the creation of a pilot program for the establishment and operation of destination management and marketing organizations (OMMDs); assistance in initiating and creating public-private partnerships for the creation of these organizations.
3. *Development of local tourism products (key attractions) on the platforms of destination management and marketing organizations, which will be implemented through*: assistance in the development of tourism products based on cultural and natural resources, including investment in existing resources that need modernization; the adoption and implementation of international/European tourism standards.
4. *Encouraging the creation of tourism product packages for tourist destinations*, supported by the production of marketing materials about key tourist destinations, as well as joint structuring of packages that include the attractions of cities, areas, and regions.
5. *Promotion of tourist destinations, achieved through the planning and implementation of promotional actions for these destinations* – stimulating participation in trade exhibitions, festivals, cultural events, workshops, business visits to attract travel agencies and tour operators, organizing familiarization trips to tourist destinations for tour operators and journalists specializing in tourist destinations, etc.

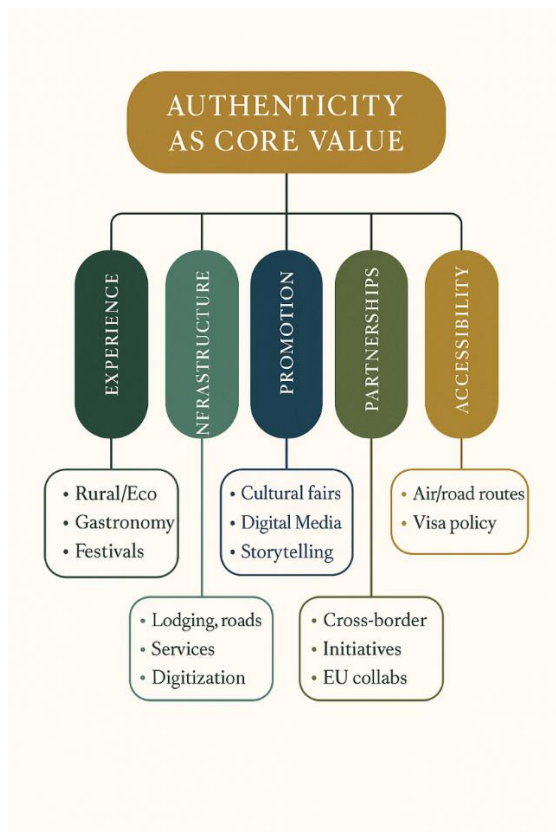


Figure 3. Strategic Framework for Branding Moldova as an Authentic and Sustainable Destination.

Source: Created by the author, after Richards (2014).

The analysis of strategic priorities for enhancing the image and development of tourism reveals *authenticity* as the core value guiding all efforts. This central tenet informs five major strategic pillars: **Experience**, **Infrastructure**, **Promotion**, **Partnerships**, and **Accessibility**. Each of these pillars encompasses targeted areas of action that reflect both the current state and the future potential of tourism development.

The strategic areas outlined converge to form an integrated and holistic approach to tourism development, all anchored in the value of authenticity. This alignment enhances the coherence of tourism branding and development efforts, ensuring that growth is sustainable and reflective of local identity. Moreover, the interconnectivity of pillars suggests that progress in one area (e.g., infrastructure) is likely to positively influence others (e.g., accessibility and experience), thereby reinforcing the entire tourism ecosystem. These findings support the proposition that an authenticity-driven model can serve as a competitive advantage for emerging destinations such as the Republic of Moldova.

In conclusion, the efforts to enhance the image of the Republic of Moldova as an international tourist destination are progressing through strategic initiatives that focus on developing infrastructure, promoting local tourism products, and fostering public-private partnerships. The National Tourism Development Program "Tourism 2026" outlines a comprehensive approach to strengthening tourist destinations, supporting destination management organizations, and improving the accessibility and quality of tourism offerings. These initiatives aim to not only attract international tourists but also to create a sustainable and well-rounded tourism industry in Moldova. With continued investment and collaboration, Moldova has the potential to increase its visibility on the global tourism map and diversify its tourism appeal.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Tourism is one of the largest economic sectors worldwide, and its significant contribution to regional and national development is widely recognized. Therefore, the Republic of Moldova must fully leverage its tourism potential, and destination marketing professionals must develop effective marketing strategies to face the fierce competition in attracting tourists. The image of a destination is a key concept that must be managed correctly. Furthermore, the image of a destination is a critical factor in travelers' motivation to visit that destination. This research addresses the distinctive elements of a destination's image that align with tourist behavior. Thus, the purpose of the research is to revitalize the positive image of the Republic of Moldova as a tourist destination. The study allowed us to highlight the primary factors that shape the country's tourism image and influence the decision-making process of both foreign and domestic tourists when choosing a travel destination. Based on the research, we can affirm that measuring the image of a destination remains a complex phenomenon, characterized by multiple attributes and inferences. The creation and evolution of this image depend on several factors. To address this complexity, the research first emphasizes the importance of a destination's image in both the decision to visit and the intention to return to the destination. This study has met its stated objectives by offering a multidimensional view of Moldova's image as a tourist destination. Firstly, it identified the dominant associations visitors have with Moldova—such as wine, traditional food, hospitality, and natural landscapes—highlighting their importance in shaping destination image. Secondly, it confirmed the central role of cultural and gastronomic experiences in influencing tourists' satisfaction and return intentions. Lastly, the study proposed strategic directions—ranging from infrastructure development to digital promotion—that align with sustainable tourism principles and aim to strengthen Moldova's visibility on the global tourism market.

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