



THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION IN PROMOTING VIETNAM'S TOURISM IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA

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Abstract. The tourism industry has long been one of Vietnam's key economic pillars, contributing significantly to the country's economic, cultural, and social development. However, the COVID-19 pandemic inflicted unprecedented disruption on global and Vietnamese tourism alike. In the post-pandemic context, social media communication has emerged as an indispensable tool for destination promotion and tourism recovery. This study employs qualitative content analysis, descriptive statistics, thematic analysis, and comparative methods to examine the role of social media platforms—particularly Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram—in promoting Vietnam's tourism from 2022 to 2025. The findings reveal that social media serves multiple strategic functions: as a rapid and wide-reaching information channel, as an inspiration and decision-support mechanism for travelers, as a tool for enhancing interaction and building trust, and as a vehicle for promoting sustainable tourism and cultural heritage values. The study concludes with policy recommendations for state management agencies and tourism enterprises aimed at maximizing the effectiveness of social media in destination marketing.

Keywords: covid-19, destination marketing, social media, tourism promotion, Vietnam

1 Introduction

Vietnam's tourism industry has long been recognized as one of the country's most important economic pillars, contributing to economic, cultural, and social development. With its diverse natural landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and hospitable people, Vietnam has become an attractive destination for both domestic and international tourists. However, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered profound and unprecedented impacts on global tourism, and Vietnam was no exception. Lockdowns, travel restrictions, and social distancing measures brought tourism activities to a near-complete standstill for an extended period. The consequences extended far beyond revenue and employment losses—they fundamentally altered traveler behavior and consumption patterns.

In this context, the recovery of the tourism sector became an urgent mission, requiring businesses, management agencies, and stakeholders to rapidly adapt and innovate their approaches to customer engagement and destination promotion. Social media communication has emerged as an indispensable tool in modern tourism marketing strategies. With the powerful growth of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, social media has transcended its role as a mere information channel to become an interactive space connecting tourism service providers with customers. Vivid images and experiential videos, authentic stories shared across social media, have contributed to creating a dynamic, appealing, and relatable image of destinations for travelers.

From a theoretical perspective, social media is not only viewed as an information dissemination tool but also as a space for co-creation and interaction among the various actors involved in tourism. This shift has led to the expansion of many traditional concepts—such as information-seeking behavior, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), destination image, and travel experience—when placed within digital environments and influenced by user-generated content (UGC). Following the trajectory of academic development, theoretical approaches to social media's role in tourism communication have gradually shifted from describing technological tools toward deeper analysis of the relationship between social media content and tourist consumer behavior. Theories of consumer behavior, social influence, and mass communication have been adapted to explain new phenomena in social media environments, where users simultaneously receive and produce content. Within this framework, destination image is no longer constructed unilaterally by management agencies but is collectively built through sharing, perceptions, and feedback from the tourist community itself on social media.

Nevertheless, existing theoretical frameworks have primarily been developed in the context of developed countries, where social media has been systematically integrated into destination marketing strategies. In developing countries such as Vietnam, the volume of specialized academic research on social media-based tourism communication remains limited—particularly within the context of tourism severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Extending research in this direction not only helps clarify the applicability of international theories to the Vietnamese context but also contributes to developing the theoretical basis for the application of social media in destination marketing strategies within transitioning economies.

Most previous studies were conducted during or before the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore do not fully capture the profound behavioral and communicative transformations of the post-pandemic period, during which travelers have become increasingly cautious, placing greater emphasis on safety, authentic experiences, and sustainable values. Furthermore, there remains a gap in theoretical research regarding users' role as "communication partners" in the

digital tourism ecosystem, where UGC may exert a greater influence than corporate-produced content in shaping destination image.

2 Literature review

2.1 Domestic scholars

In Vietnam, research on social media communication in tourism promotion has primarily focused on clarifying the relationship between communication factors and consumer travel intentions, particularly among younger travelers. Several recent studies [1–5] have applied quantitative methods using online survey data to examine the role of factors such as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), information quality and usefulness, and social media advertising. The findings indicate that social media exerts a positive influence on travel intentions, with eWOM and content quality identified as the primary drivers—enhancing trust, inspiring, and guiding destination choices among tourists, particularly Gen Z and Millennials. Social media does not merely function as an information channel; it also participates in the formation of emotional responses and consumption motivations in travel behavior.

In addition, studies by [6] and [7] emphasize the role of social media engagement levels—including likes, comments, and shares—as important factors that drive information dissemination and influence travel decisions. These studies indicate that highly interactive content not only strengthens the bond between consumers and tourism brands but also increases the level of trust and positive emotional associations with destinations.

Further quantitative studies [8–11] have similarly demonstrated the positive impact of social media on travel intentions, with eWOM and content quality identified as dominant factors. Social media is recognized not only as an information reception channel but also as a medium that shapes emotional responses and consumer motivation in travel behavior.

Furthermore, research by [12] analyzed trends in social media use for tourism promotion across provinces and cities such as Da Nang, Nha Trang, and Hoi An, revealing significant differences in communication effectiveness across platforms. TikTok was evaluated highly for its capacity to deliver short-form video content and attract younger audiences, while Facebook retained an important role in community building and detailed information sharing.

Research also notes that the application of social media in Vietnam’s tourism promotion still faces numerous challenges, including a lack of coherence in communication strategies, differences in engagement levels across platforms, and limitations in comprehensively measuring promotional effectiveness [13]. Content management and the control of misinformation on social media have also been flagged by researchers as a concern, as these issues affect the credibility and image of destinations.

The majority of current research continues to focus primarily on describing and analyzing influential factors within specific platforms, without deeply engaging with the construction and application of foundational theoretical frameworks. The application of consumer behavior models, viral marketing theories, or destination image-building theories remains limited, resulting in insufficient systematization and scholarly generalizability. Moreover, academic research lacks close alignment with market realities, despite reports from reputable organizations such as [14] and [15] clearly indicating trends in the use of social media in Vietnamese travel behavior. According to these reports, over 90% of tourists consult social media content before making travel decisions, with platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube highly rated for their ability to deliver short-form videos, visual content, and authentic experiential narratives.

However, studies also note that the application of social media in Vietnam's tourism promotion still faces considerable challenges—including a lack of strategic coherence, differential engagement levels across platforms, and limitations in comprehensively measuring promotional impact [10,16,11]. Content management and the control of misinformation remain concerns flagged by researchers as affecting destination reputation and image.

Overall, while domestic research has begun to affirm the important role of social media communication in shaping travel behavior, it still requires further development toward greater specialization, clearer theoretical frameworks, and stronger linkages to practical realities. This is necessary not only to address the urgent needs of tourism development but also to enrich the scientific knowledge base in the fields of communication and tourism.

2.2 International scholars

At the international level, social media communication is regarded as one of the key factors shaping modern travel behavior, particularly through user-generated content (UGC) and influencer effects. International studies [17–21] have approached this issue from multiple perspectives, asserting that social media is not merely a conventional communication channel but also plays a critical role in the co-creation of destination value, tourism branding, and the maintenance of sustainable bonds between destinations and tourists in volatile contexts—most notably during the global health crisis.

Specifically, Xu Han highlights the positive impact of user-shared social media content on the entire tourism decision-making process, from destination selection to place loyalty. Moreover, the sharing of personal experiences on digital platforms contributes to constructing destination value through the direct participation of tourists in shaping the tourism image [17].

In the context of the pandemic, Zenker et al. recorded a marked shift in destination social media communication strategies, with a trend toward more emotionally charged content and a

significant increase in user interaction levels in the post-COVID-19 period [18]. This demonstrates that social media functions not only as a promotional tool but also as a crucial emotional bridge between destinations and tourists—particularly during crises or periods of tourism reconstruction.

Seobgyu Song et al. found that linguistic choices and content type play a pivotal role in communication effectiveness [19]. Positive, clear, and friendly language tends to stimulate interaction, while diverse content—especially images, videos, and experiential narratives—enhances trust and attracts user attention. These findings reinforce the view that the selection of appropriate language and content presentation are essential factors in building a digital tourism marketing strategy.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ketter observed a strong shift in the communication strategies of destination management organizations (DMOs), with a marked increase in emotionally resonant, inspirational content that expressed empathy toward travelers [20]. Social media in this period served not only as a promotional tool but also evolved into an emotional connector, maintaining links between destinations and potential tourists during periods of social distancing and post-crisis recovery.

Furthermore, the systematic review by Dwivedi et al. identifies that social media communication effectiveness depends on multiple factors such as interactivity, content format, and language choice [21]. Positive, visually engaging content (particularly images and videos) tends to drive attention and increase sharing. Concurrently, the use of clear, friendly, and narrative-based language enhances persuasiveness and builds consumer trust. These factors demonstrate that selecting an appropriate content strategy is an essential element in constructing a digital tourism marketing strategy.

Overall, international research has provided a robust theoretical foundation for leveraging social media as a strategic tool in tourism. However, the majority of these studies focus primarily on the contexts of developed countries, such as Western nations, China, and South Korea. Extending the scope of research to developing countries such as Vietnam is therefore necessary to obtain a more comprehensive and contextually appropriate understanding.

3 Research methodology

This study employs qualitative content analysis to explore the role of social media communication in promoting Vietnam's tourism in the post-COVID-19 era. Specifically, data were collected from posts on popular social media platforms—including Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube—belonging to a number of representative localities and tourism enterprises. The

analysis focuses on identifying the communication strategies employed, the manner in which content is presented, and the level of user engagement. Through this approach, the study illuminates how social media contributes to shaping destination image and influencing tourists' destination choices.

Alongside qualitative methods for in-depth analysis of social media content and behavior, the study also applies descriptive statistics and comparative methods to enhance objectivity and comprehensiveness. Specifically, engagement metrics, follower counts, and response data from popular social media platforms such as Facebook and TikTok are collected and analyzed. This allows for an assessment of the popularity, development trends, and promotional effectiveness of each platform, while also supporting the verification of qualitative findings through empirical data. The specific methods employed include:

- Coding method :

+ Theoretical basis: Coding is a qualitative content analysis technique widely used in social media and behavioral research. In this study, the coding method follows the approach of Netnography [22]—the study of community behavior in digital environments—enabling the identification of how tourism messages are constructed and disseminated.

+ Implementation: Data were collected from major social media platforms in Vietnam, including Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube, focusing on tourism communication campaigns in the post-COVID-19 period (2022–2025). Posts, videos, and images were manually extracted from official accounts of tourism authorities, travel enterprises, KOLs/influencers, and travel community groups. After collection, data were classified according to recurring thematic categories such as “safety communication” (messages ensuring epidemiological safety), “unique experiences” (emphasizing personalization and novelty), “community interaction” (calls for sharing, and reviews), and “green and sustainable tourism.”

+ Purpose: Coding enables the segmentation of data into a structured system, forming the basis for in-depth analysis. The coding process also identifies dominant content types shaping Vietnam's tourism communication in the post-COVID-19 era, reflecting the needs, trends, and information dissemination strategies operating within the digital environment.

- Thematic analysis :

+ Theoretical basis: Thematic analysis, systematized by Braun & Clarke, allows for the exploration of latent meanings within qualitative data through the identification, classification, and interpretation of recurring themes in messages [23]. This method is particularly suited to research on social media communication behavior—where users express emotions, perceptions, and behavioral choices in multidimensional ways.

+ Implementation: The authors conducted thematic analysis of the key themes identified through the coding process, focusing on the reach and diffusion of messages; how social media inspires travel; the construction of destination image through digital content; and the impact of online communities on travel decisions. These themes were analyzed across platforms to identify the distinctive characteristics of each channel, as well as to determine effective communication models in the post-COVID-19 context.

+ Purpose: Thematic analysis allows the study to investigate the role of social media in shaping destination image, building positive emotions, motivating travel, and stimulating tourism consumer behavior. This method also helps identify the most important factors influencing the tourism sector's recovery in the context of digital communication.

- Descriptive statistics:

+ Theoretical basis: Descriptive statistics is a quantitative tool used to summarize the basic characteristics of data. In social media research, it is commonly used to measure engagement—an indicator reflecting the reach and reception effectiveness of communication content [24].

+ Implementation: The authors collected quantitative indicators from tourism-related posts and videos on Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube, including views, likes, comments, shares, hashtags, video duration, and follower counts. Data were aggregated by specific campaign or by content type (provincial promotional videos, travel reviews, tourism KOL content, etc.) and presented in tables and bar or pie charts.

+ Purpose: Descriptive statistics provide an objective basis for assessing the relative popularity of each platform, measuring differences in communication effectiveness across content types, and supporting qualitative analysis in the evaluation of social media's practical effectiveness in tourism promotion.

- Comparative method:

+ Theoretical basis: The comparative method is used in case studies and communication research to juxtapose differences or similarities between phenomena across time or contextual conditions [25].

+ Implementation: The study compares communication effectiveness across platforms (Facebook, TikTok, etc.) based on engagement metrics and content delivery; it also contrasts shifts in communication behavior between the pre-pandemic period (2019–2021) and the post-pandemic period (2022–2025). From this, the authors identify key transitional trends such as from text-based content to short-form video, from one-way information delivery to two-way interaction, and from destination imagery to personal experiential narratives.

+ Purpose: To clarify the transformation in communication methods and social media users' responses to tourism content, to identify platforms with notable effectiveness that align with current content consumption trends, and thereby support the formulation of communication strategies for the recovery period.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Overview of Vietnam's tourism in the post-COVID-19 period

Following Vietnam's full reopening to international tourists in March 2022, the tourism sector recovered swiftly and achieved remarkable results. In 2022, Vietnam welcomed approximately 3.7 million international visitors—only about 20% of the 2019 pre-pandemic figure. Nevertheless, this year marked a critical starting point as Vietnam fully reopened its tourism sector in March. Domestic tourism, in contrast, surged dramatically to 101.3 million visitor-trips—substantially exceeding the 85 million recorded in 2019—and served as the mainstay sustaining the industry's operations and revenues during this difficult period.

In 2023, international arrivals skyrocketed to 12.6 million—more than three times the previous year's figure and equivalent to approximately 70% recovery relative to 2019. Domestic tourists also maintained steady growth at 108 million trips. Total tourism revenue reached 678 trillion VND, exceeding the planned target by 3.38%. However, this year also witnessed shifts in travel behavior, with a decline in packaged tour demand and a rise in independent travelers, placing growing pressure on traditional service enterprises.

The year 2024 proved another strong year, with international arrivals reaching 17.6 million—nearly 98% of the 2019 peak. Domestic visitors also increased slightly to 110 million trips. Total tourism revenue reached 840 trillion VND, an increase of approximately 24% over the previous year. This year marked near-complete recovery for the tourism sector, with many outstanding destinations, improved safety conditions, and noticeably enhanced services.

For 2025, Vietnam has welcomed 21.2 million international visitors, surpassing pre-pandemic figures, alongside approximately 135.5 million domestic trips—representing 20% growth over 2024. Total tourism revenue is projected to continue growing strongly, contributing directly 8–9% to GDP. In the first months of 2025 alone, international arrivals exceeded 4 million, setting a new record.

Table 1. Overview of Vietnam’s tourism statistics (2022–2025)

Year	International visitors (person)	Domestic visitors (person)	Revenue (trillion VND)	Growth rate (%)	Note
2022	3,662,222	101,300,000	495,00	175.0	2022
2023	12,599,145	108,200,000	678,30	37.0	2023
2024	17,583,900	110,000,000	840,00	23.9	2024
2025	21,200,000	135,500,000	937,000	22.1	2025

Source: Summarized by author

Tourism has become a key economic sector, making an important contribution to GDP and generating employment for millions. Total tourism revenue has grown continuously, from 495 trillion VND in 2022 to 840 trillion VND in 2024. In 2025, the tourism sector is projected to contribute approximately 8–9% of GDP and to sustain its growth trajectory in the coming years. Major localities such as Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, Da Nang, and Quang Ninh recorded strong growth in tourism revenues, driving local economic development and providing momentum for the expansion of related service sectors.

4.2 Current status of social media communication in Vietnam’s tourism promotion in the post-COVID-19 period

In 2022, social media as a tool for reactivating domestic tourism.

In 2022, social media became the primary communication channel for reviving Vietnam’s tourism after the COVID-19 disruption. Platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube were leveraged to the fullest to deploy creative communication campaigns, organize online events, and disseminate interactive content to attract public attention. The explosion of these platforms not only helped connect communities but also opened up opportunities for efficiently and rapidly promoting tourism images, particularly as travel demand began to recover after a prolonged period of restriction.

Tourism enterprises and local authorities utilized social media to launch dynamic summer campaigns, attracting domestic public interest. Notable examples include Sun Group’s “Take me to the sun” campaign, Vinhomes’ “Hello summer ocean park,” and SOJO Hotels’ “Stay to connect—summer is the game” (“Ở là kết – Hè là game”). These campaigns not only focused on promoting famous tourist destinations but also integrated diverse activities such as

event organization, the inauguration of new entertainment facilities, short video production, live event streaming, and community interaction across social media platforms.

The Vietnam National Administration of Tourism also continued its “Vietnam: Go to Love!” (“Việt Nam: Đi Để Yêu!”) program on YouTube, presenting a wide range of tourism products from coastal tourism and traditional culture to adventure sports. Ho Chi Minh City also pioneered the application of modern technology, using 3D technology and digital platforms such as Google and CNN to promote its tourism image, while establishing a tourist support hotline to improve visitor experience and enhance customer trust.

Thanks to strong investment in social media communication campaigns, in just over two months during the peak summer period of 2022, more than 111,000 discussions about tourism were generated on these platforms, according to YouNet Media [27]. Domestic tourist arrivals exceeded 101 million, surpassing the previous record and contributing significantly to total revenue of 495 trillion VND—exceeding the planned target by 23%. Social media demonstrated its critical role in maintaining customer interest—particularly among young people, the primary social media user segment—while laying a solid foundation for the sustainable recovery of Vietnam’s tourism in the post-pandemic period.

In 2023, social media supporting market expansion and destination brand consolidation.

The year 2023 continued to affirm the important role of social media in driving tourism, with particular emphasis on short-form video, livestreams, and user-generated content. Platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok were maximized, together with social media-integrated booking platforms such as Traveloka and Klook, which facilitated direct connections between enterprises and customers. The development of these tools not only enhanced reach but also created a two-way communication channel where tourists could share real experiences and influence the decisions of others.

The “National Tourism Year 2023” event in Binh Thuan province, themed “Green Convergence” (“Hội tụ xanh”), was widely promoted through social media using modern communication methods. Activities such as festival livestreams, experiential videos produced by KOLs and micro-influencers, and interactive online programs generated powerful viral effects. Tourism enterprises also proactively produced content introducing new products, promotional programs, and short-duration tours aligned with modern travel trends. Authentic experiential videos and genuine customer reviews not only created a sense of authenticity but also enhanced the credibility of tourism products.

The year 2023 marked a major milestone as Vietnam’s tourism sector welcomed 12.6 million international visitors—an increase of nearly 3.5 times over 2022, reaching approximately 70% of the pre-pandemic level. Domestic visitors also reached 108 million, reflecting a recovery

rate superior to the regional average across Asia. Key localities such as Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, Da Nang, and Binh Thuan recorded remarkable growth in both revenue and visitor numbers. Social media not only created powerful diffusion effects for destination image but also helped enterprises adapt to new trends in travel behavior, such as a preference for independent, short-duration, and cost-conscious trips.

In 2024, social media as a multi-channel platform for comprehensive tourism promotion.

In 2024, Vietnam's tourism communication further advanced the integration of social media with cutting-edge technologies such as virtual reality (VR), 3D technology, international event livestreams, and popular social platforms including Facebook, TikTok, Zalo, and YouTube. This convergence not only enhanced customer experiences but also broadened the reach to international markets. Modern technologies enabled authentic recreations of destinations, creating the sensation of a direct experiential visit without physical travel.

Promotion campaigns such as "Vietnamese People Travel Vietnam—My Beloved Vietnam" ("Người Việt đi du lịch Việt") were deployed synchronously across multiple platforms, concentrating on promoting new experiences, safe and friendly destinations, and personalized tourism products. Content was produced in modern formats—short clips, infographics, reels, vlogs—suited to the fast-paced information consumption habits of social media users. Vietnam's tourism sector also actively participated in international trade fairs such as ITE HCMC and WTM London, integrating social media communication before, during, and after events to maximize outreach. Livestreaming, 3D recreation of trade fair experiences, and post-event videos helped extend the communicative reach to the international community, attracting the attention of potential markets.

In 2024, Vietnam's tourism sector welcomed 17 million international visitors and 110 million domestic trips—nearly equivalent to the 2019 pre-pandemic figures. Social media communication not only sustained the domestic communication effect but also enhanced national tourism brand recognition in international markets. The application of advanced technologies in communication strongly attracted younger visitors, contributing to the diversification of tourism products, the enhancement of service quality, and the affirmation of Vietnam's position on the global tourism map. The combination of tradition and modernity in campaigns created a tourism image of Vietnam that is simultaneously familiar and contemporary, attracting interest from all corners of the world.

From 2022 to 2024, social media has proven its indispensable role in restarting and developing Vietnam's tourism sector. Flexibility in platform usage—from conventional promotion to the integration of advanced technology—has helped the sector not only recover but also achieve remarkable development. The results attained reflect not only the success of campaigns but also the immense potential of social media in shaping future tourism trends.

With continued innovation and technological application, Vietnam's tourism sector is poised for further breakthroughs, positioning itself as a leading global destination.

4.3 The role of social media communication in promoting Vietnam's tourism in the post-COVID-19 period

4.3.1. Social media as a rapid and wide-reaching information channel

In a context of rapidly developing digital communication and an increasingly "short-fast-personalized" shift in public information reception behavior, social media has emerged as an effective information dissemination tool, especially in the tourism sector. From a platform primarily used for personal connection and sharing everyday life, social media has now become a strategic communication channel in tourism promotion—particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, when the need to explore and reposition destination image became urgent.

According to the Digital 2024 Report by We Are Social [26], Vietnam has over 78 million internet users, with approximately 73% using social media daily—equivalent to 56.9 million people. This figure is not merely a statistic; it reflects an extremely large, dynamic, and highly interactive information-reception market—an ideal condition for the tourism sector to leverage in disseminating destination communication campaigns at optimal cost. Since the pandemic, many destinations have utilized livestream features, reels, and short videos (Shorts, TikTok) to promote their images. Particularly, thanks to high interactivity and instant sharing capability, social media allows potential tourists to access new information within seconds—far superior to traditional media such as television or print.

One clear illustration of social media's information diffusion power is the digital campaign "Live Fully in Vietnam," launched by the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, which garnered millions of views on YouTube and TikTok within just one week of release. The campaign maximized the use of short video formats (Shorts, Reels)—content forms that are currently dominant due to their rapid consumption, visual appeal, and ease of sharing. Additionally, collaboration with KOLs and travel influencers enhanced the campaign's viral potential and credibility, especially among younger audiences, who represent a high proportion of social media users.

Compared to traditional media, social media is superior in terms of transmission speed, cost, and two-way interactivity. Whereas television has fixed broadcast schedules and print media has long publication cycles, social media content is produced and disseminated continuously 24/7. According to a survey by Vietnam Insider, the cost of reaching 100,000 audiences on Facebook is only one-fifth of the cost of broadcasting on national television. Furthermore, digital advertising tools such as Facebook Ads, YouTube Ads, and TikTok

Promote allow tourism promotion agencies to precisely target audiences by age, geographical location, interests, and travel behavior—capabilities that television and print media cannot deliver. For example, an ecotourism promotion campaign can be boosted to reach users who are explorers, and nature lovers and exhibit content-seeking behavior related to trekking and hiking. This demonstrates that social media communication is not only effective in terms of reach but also helps reduce the budgetary burden on tourism promotion campaigns—a critically important factor as the sector seeks to recover after the pandemic.

A particularly powerful trend on social media is the development of User-Generated Content (UGC). Rather than waiting for information from management agencies or travel enterprises, users now proactively share travel experiences through videos, images, livestreams, and reviews—creating secondary information streams with high credibility and strong diffusion.

Through UGC, many previously unknown destinations have unexpectedly “exploded” within the tourism community. Notable examples include Ta Dung (Dak Nong)—dubbed the “Ha Long Bay of the highlands”; Hang En (Quang Binh)—the world’s third-largest cave; and Binh Hung Island (Khanh Hoa) with its crystal-clear waters and pristine scenery. These places went viral not through large communication campaigns but through hundreds of thousands of review videos from TikTokers, travel bloggers, and ordinary users. Unlike television, which “broadcasts one message to all,” social media operates on the principle of personalization. Content distribution algorithms—such as those used by TikTok and Facebook—help the system understand users’ preferences and suggest content aligned with their needs. This means each user experiences a distinct, personalized stream of tourism communication, tailored to their lifestyle, financial capacity, and travel behavior.

While print media publishes only once a day and television has fixed broadcast times, tourism content on social media can be created, shared, and disseminated 24/7—with the average Vietnamese spending 2 hours and 38 minutes on social media per day [26]. This demonstrates that social media has become an indispensable component of Vietnam’s tourism destination communication ecosystem, contributing to the reduction of traditional communication costs while expanding reach to target audiences. This reality clearly reflects social media’s role as an information “launchpad,” helping reshape the domestic tourism map of Vietnam in the post-COVID-19 era.

4.3.2. Social media in inspiring travel and supporting tourism decisions

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the social life and consumption behavior of Vietnamese people underwent profound transformation—especially in the tourism sector. One of the most notable shifts was a marked change in travel information-seeking behavior.

Previously, consumers actively searched for information through conventional channels such as travel company websites or official information portals. However, in the post-COVID-19 era, this trend has transitioned to a new model: passive discovery of information on social media platforms.

Rather than actively searching, many people now begin their travel journey through spontaneous encounters with inspirational content on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube. Widely shared images, short videos, and compelling narratives have become powerful sources of inspiration, profoundly influencing people's decisions.

Social media is no longer merely a provider of dry data or information about destinations. It has become a vibrant space, full of emotion and visually immersive travel experiences. A slow-motion video of a brilliant dawn over Mu Cang Chai, or a vlog capturing authentic experiences at the Phu Quoc night market, not only describes a destination but also awakens positive emotions in viewers: relaxation, excitement, a sense of closeness to nature and local culture. These elements play a pivotal role in shaping travelers' preferences and destination choices.

According to a Q&Me [28], as many as 71% of young people aged 18 to 34 in Vietnam reported planning travel after viewing content on social media—particularly short videos on TikTok and Instagram Reels. In contrast, the proportion relying on conventional channels such as travel websites or guidebooks fell to only approximately 18%. These figures reflect a profound shift in how people seek inspiration and information to support travel decisions.

Social media users are not merely content consumers; they are also creators who disseminate their experiences through UGC. Travel influencers—individuals with significant influence in the travel domain—are increasingly occupying an important role in shaping trends and inspiring the community.

Unlike corporate-produced content, the videos, images, and narratives from influencers such as Khoai Lang Thang, Chan La Ca, and Nguyen Tung Lam bring authenticity, relatability, and personalized emotion. They not only share beautiful imagery but also recount exploratory journeys from a unique perspective, accompanied by practical information such as prices, transport options, budget tips, local culture, and even warnings about potential risks.

A Nielsen Vietnam [29] found that as many as 83% of young people trust content from influencers or friends shared on social media, while only 37% trust content on commercial websites or television advertising. This clearly demonstrates the trend toward information decentralization and the new role of social media as an "inspiration ecosystem"—where users are simultaneously consumers, producers, and disseminators of experiences.

According to statistics from Decision Lab and YouNet [30], TikTok and Instagram are currently the two most popular social media platforms for inspiring travel in Vietnam. Specifically, 64% of TikTok users have saved videos about destinations for consideration in future trips, while 59% of Instagram users use the platform as a “visual inspiration” tool for selecting locations, restaurants, or hotels.

The distinctive strength of these two platforms lies in their highly visual nature, concise video formats, and rapid diffusion capabilities—well-suited to the “snackable content” consumption habits of Gen Z and Millennials. User behavior-based recommendation algorithms enable a single travel video to reach millions of people within hours—an effect that television and print media can scarcely match.

Table 2. Percentage of users selecting information sources when planning tourism in Vietnam (2023)

Information source	Share of users (%)
TikTok/Instagram	~63%–65%
YouTube	~54% (based on popularity and video role)
Travel agency websites	~26%
Travel guides/brochures	~7%
Friends and acquaintances	~48%

Source: Summarized by authors

This data demonstrates that social media is not merely a supplementary channel—in many cases it has replaced traditional information sources and become an important pillar in the travel decision-making process of modern users. The appeal of social media lies in its ability to enable users to “travel emotionally before taking action physically.” In the digital space, each experience is recounted like a vivid story, where images, sound, and expressions create a far more powerful psychological effect than pure numbers or information. As a result, viewers not only understand a destination but also feel deeply connected to it, curious, and eager to explore. Social media is therefore progressively replacing part of the role traditionally played by conventional travel agencies—no longer the sole venue for “designing” itineraries, but becoming a space for “suggesting” them, allowing each individual to freely personalize their travel experience from hundreds of thousands of online recommendations.

4.3.3. Social media in enhancing interaction and building trust

In the era of digital communication, interactivity has emerged as a key factor in shaping perceptions, building trust, and stimulating consumer behavior—particularly in tourism, where personal experience plays a decisive role in destination choice. With its characteristic as a multi-directional communication platform, social media is gradually replacing the traditional one-way communication model and becoming an important bridge between tourism stakeholders and the customer community, especially in the post-COVID-19 context—when trust and engagement have become preconditions for recovery and development.

Previously, destination promotion activities were primarily conducted through channels such as television, print media, or official websites—all of which lacked direct interaction with consumers. However, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a rapid shift toward more flexible communication channels, with social media standing out for its capacity to establish dialogue among stakeholders: from state management agencies, travel enterprises, and destinations, to consumers. According to the Digital 2024 Report by We Are Social [26], 73.3% of Vietnam’s population uses social media daily—approximately 57 million people—creating an enormous space for communication, sharing, and interaction.

The strength of social media lies not only in its rapid content dissemination capability but also in the flexibility of feedback, allowing enterprises to promptly address inquiries, handle crises, or simply respond to a customer’s compliment. This interaction creates a sense of being heard—an important factor in building brand trust.

In practice in Vietnam, many large enterprises in the tourism sector have recognized the role of social media as an essential tool for enhancing interaction and customer engagement. Brands such as Vietravel, Saigontourist, Vinpearl, and Flamingo Group not only maintain professional fanpages but also invest in content management teams, building strategies for timely and effective customer responses. For example, Vietravel’s fanpage regularly updates seasonal tour promotions, organizes interactive mini-games, posts tour experience videos, and notably maintains response times for comments and messages of under two hours. This enables the brand to project a friendly, professional, and dedicated image—foundational values for consolidating customer trust in a fiercely competitive market.

In addition, premium hotels and resorts such as FLC Sam Son and Vinpearl Nha Trang also leverage livestreams to promote new amenities, organize online interaction sessions, and address queries from the online community. Research indicates that Vietnamese consumers report highly valuing tourism brands with positive social media engagement and are willing to choose products and services from these brands over those with no clear interaction.

One of the most notable characteristics of social media communication is the emergence and strong development of user-generated content (UGC). Rather than merely receiving information from enterprises, today's consumers tend to place greater trust in authentic sharing from individuals with real experiences. Community groups such as "Check-in Vietnam," "Love Vietnamese Tourism" ("Yêu Du lịch Việt Nam"), and "Viet Nam Oi" on Facebook, alongside review channels on TikTok and YouTube, now attract millions of active members who share travel experiences, service reviews, risk warnings, or simply spread positive emotions from each trip.

According to a Booking.com survey [16], Vietnamese tourists report trusting user-generated content on social media more than advertising messages from enterprises themselves. This demonstrates the power of personal experience in forming trust, while affirming that social media is not merely a promotional space but also a transparent and democratic ecosystem in tourism communication.

The COVID-19 pandemic not only froze the tourism sector but also intensified feelings of anxiety and eroded consumer trust. In this context, using social media to communicate transparently, update information, and flexibly support customers became the key to maintaining loyalty. Enterprises such as BestPrice Travel, Traveloka, and Agoda proactively leveraged social media to post guidance on ticket handling, refunds, and tour cancellation/postponement policies, while responding rapidly to customer requests.

An important consideration is that compared to television, print media, or email marketing, social media has clear advantages in direct interaction capability, low cost, and rapid response speed. According to a Statista report, the average engagement rate on Facebook for the tourism sector is 0.12%—higher than the average for email marketing (0.05%) and conventional display advertising (below 0.02%) [31]. Furthermore, metrics such as likes, shares, and comments enable enterprises to immediately assess campaign effectiveness, adjust content appropriately, and respond in a timely manner to public reactions—capabilities that one-way communication channels cannot provide.

4.3.4. Social media in promoting sustainable tourism and communicating cultural values

In a global tourism landscape deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and simultaneously confronted with global challenges of climate change, resource depletion, and cultural preservation pressures, the concept of "sustainable tourism" is no longer optional but has become an inevitable trend. In Vietnam, social media has emerged as a strategically important tool in orienting community awareness, promoting responsible travel behavior, and widely disseminating indigenous cultural values.

Social media today is not merely a space for sharing personal images or promoting products; it has become a “digital public square” where messages on sustainable development are rapidly disseminated with great influence on community behavior. Campaigns such as #SaveSonDoong, #KeepVietnamClean, and #SayNoToPlastic have demonstrated the powerful effectiveness of social media communication in raising community awareness about protecting the natural environment and preserving heritage landscapes. A prominent example is the “Zero Waste Tourism” campaign launched by the “Check-in Vietnam” group in 2022, which attracted tens of thousands of shares on Facebook and TikTok and disseminated specific actions such as no littering, bringing reusable bags on trips, reusing water bottles, and limiting plastic consumption. Notably, these campaigns were primarily driven by the user community—individuals with authentic travel experiences who were willing to share responsible travel practices—creating a broad social impact.

One of social media’s outstanding advantages is its ability to bring latent cultural values closer to the public through vivid, visual storytelling. Without requiring large budgets like traditional marketing campaigns, user-created and shared content (UGC)—including vlogs, photographs, and review posts—has contributed to promoting cultural values in an authentic, accessible, and highly diffusible manner.

Exemplary instances include a series of content pieces introducing the Lung Tam weaving village (Ha Giang), the Kate Festival of the Cham people (Ninh Thuan), and Bat Trang pottery village (Hanoi)—all of which spread widely on TikTok and YouTube through travel bloggers and culturally engaged tourists. These contents not only attracted the interest of Vietnamese audiences but also made a deep impression on international tourists through bilingual subtitles, high-quality imagery, and emotionally authentic storytelling. Vietnamese aged 18 to 35 report that social media is where they discover local customs, festivals, and culinary traditions they had previously never encountered. These figures clearly reflect a change in how tourists approach and perceive cultural identity, where social media functions as a “cultural window” opening to the community to explore the diverse and vibrant beauty of Vietnam.

Beyond content dissemination, social media is also a powerful educational tool, particularly in the post-COVID-19 context, when people are more attentive to social responsibility in travel activities. Many NGOs, community development projects, and social enterprises have actively used Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram to communicate about tourism models linked to cultural and ecological conservation.

It is precisely this humanistic content that has helped change tourist behavior—rather than choosing mass commercial tourism services, an increasing number of people are turning to

support community tours, traditional homestays, and local handicraft products, directly contributing to the goal of sustainable tourism development in Vietnam.

Generation Z and Millennials—the primary customer base of the future—are increasingly concerned with spiritual, cultural, and environmental values when choosing destinations. They not only seek experiences but also desire travel journeys that carry meaning and generate positive impacts on host communities. Social media is where this trend is most visibly expressed through hashtags such as #ResponsibleTravel, #EthicalTourism, and #SustainableVietnam, used by young people to express their conscious lifestyles.

According to a Booking.com report [16], the majority of young tourists in Vietnam are particularly interested in tours linked to environmental conservation and prioritize accommodation establishments with sustainable development policies. Social media also plays an important role in influencing their choices of responsible and environmentally friendly tourism products. Social media is not merely a destination promotion tool; it also plays a profound role in advancing sustainable tourism and preserving indigenous cultural values, simultaneously creating spaces for awareness dissemination and encouraging communities and tourists alike to act in support of a humane, responsible, and enduring tourism sector.

4.4 Policy recommendations

4.4.1. For state management agencies

State management agencies play a pivotal role in guiding and creating a favorable environment for promoting Vietnam's tourism through social media. First and foremost, it is necessary to develop and refine the system of policies and legal regulations related to digital tourism development and communication on social media platforms. This encompasses regulations on digital copyright, the protection of users' personal data, and the management of communication content to prevent misleading or distorted information that could negatively affect the national tourism image. Simultaneously, policies should encourage innovation and creativity in the digital communication sector, providing conditions for organizations and individuals to develop diverse, high-quality promotional content.

Additionally, management agencies should prioritize investment in information technology infrastructure—particularly big data systems, artificial intelligence, and supporting technologies such as virtual reality and augmented reality—to enhance digital promotion effectiveness and tourism experiences. The development of national digital tourism platforms, integrating social media channels and official information portals, will help concentrate resources, unify information, and enhance interaction with domestic and international tourists.

Management agencies also need to proactively develop national-level communication campaigns, with close coordination between localities, enterprises, and social organizations to

maximize regional distinctiveness. These campaigns should be designed based on in-depth market research, analyzing social media user behavior to select appropriate content and delivery formats, thereby generating powerful diffusion effects that arouse national pride, curiosity, and a desire to experience among tourists.

Furthermore, training and capacity building for tourism management staff and sector personnel are central solutions. Training programs should focus on digital skills, social media management, digital content creation, and data analysis to meet the requirements of development in the digital technology era. This not only enhances management effectiveness but also drives innovation in tourism promotion activities.

Finally, it is necessary to strengthen international cooperation in the field of digital tourism promotion, learning from the experiences of countries with advanced tourism industries, while leveraging international communication channels to more widely promote Vietnam's image. This contributes to elevating Vietnam's tourism on the global tourism map while attracting high-quality investment and visitors.

4.4.2. For tourism enterprises

Tourism enterprises are the primary force in operationalizing social media-based tourism promotion strategies and therefore need to develop practical and creative solutions to enhance competitive capacity and expand markets. First, enterprises should proactively develop systematic digital marketing strategies, focusing on developing diverse, engaging communication content suited to the distinctive characteristics of each social media platform. For example, on Facebook, enterprises can exploit posts combining images and videos to tell destination stories; on TikTok, creative short videos aligned with trending content will attract younger visitors; on Instagram, artistic imagery and strategic hashtags enhance reach; and on YouTube, in-depth documentaries and vlogs provide authentic and vivid experiences.

Collaborating with content creators, influencers, and travel bloggers is also an important solution that helps enterprises expand their reach and build customer trust. These individuals have significant influence on social media and possess the ability to convey authentic experiences in a genuine, engaging manner, creating organic viral effects. Enterprises should develop long-term collaboration programs while ensuring transparency and professionalism in promotional activities.

Furthermore, enterprises should apply digital technology in customer management and care. The use of AI-based data analysis tools enables the personalization of experiences, thereby enhancing advertising effectiveness and improving customer satisfaction. Social media response and customer care systems should be professionally established, ensuring rapid handling of feedback and complaints, contributing to the building of brand reputation.

Enterprises should also organize interactive activities such as mini-games, livestreams, and online events to strengthen engagement and expand the community of loyal customers.

Another important point is that enterprises need to build a collaborative linkage model within the tourism service supply chain—from travel agencies, accommodation, and transport to entertainment services—on digital platforms in order to optimize customer experience and enhance business efficiency. This coordination helps create comprehensive, diverse tourism products that meet the increasingly demanding needs of modern travelers.

Finally, enterprises should focus on brand development based on the distinctive cultural and social values of Vietnam, while ensuring sustainability in business operations. Promotion should aim to build a destination image that is friendly, safe, diverse, and unique, contributing to the enhancement of Vietnam’s tourism position in the international market.

5 Conclusion

This study, employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, has highlighted the important and irreplaceable role of social media communication in the recovery and development of Vietnam’s tourism sector following the COVID-19 pandemic. In a context where tourism was profoundly affected by social distancing measures and travel restrictions, social media emerged as the primary communication channel, rapidly disseminating information about destinations, reopening policies, and creating an image of Vietnam’s tourism as safe, attractive, and diverse.

The study demonstrates that social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have contributed to transforming how tourists engage with and interact around Vietnam’s tourism products. The exploitation of digital communication tools, combined with creative, highly interactive content, has attracted particular attention from younger travelers—a segment with significant influence in shaping modern travel trends. Effective promotion campaigns, such as collaborative programs between the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism and social media platforms, generated powerful viral effects that contributed to the growth of both domestic and international tourist arrivals.

In addition, the study emphasizes the necessity of applying advanced digital technology and developing communication content suited to the distinctive characteristics of each social media platform in order to enhance user experience and build Vietnam’s tourism brand sustainably. Simultaneously, close coordination among state management agencies, tourism enterprises, and communities is a decisive factor in optimizing the effectiveness of social media communication in tourism promotion.

Social media has become and continues to be an indispensable strategic tool in promoting and developing Vietnam’s tourism in the post-COVID-19 era. Effectively leveraging this

communication channel will make an important contribution to rapid recovery, enhanced competitiveness, and the building of the national tourism brand, while also laying a solid foundation for the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the future.

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