

Co-Creation and Destination Image: A Bibliometric and Thematic Analysis Using CiteSpace

Tran Tuyen

University of Social Sciences and Humanities,

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

tuyentran@hcmussh.edu.vn

Co-creation has gained increasing scholarly attention as an approach for involving tourists, residents, and stakeholders in shaping destination image. However, existing research is fragmented, lacking an integrated review of its conceptual foundations, thematic evolution, and implications. This study aims to address this gap by mapping the intellectual structure and emerging trends of co-creation and destination images. A bibliometric and thematic analysis was conducted on 72 peer-reviewed publications indexed in Scopus, using CiteSpace for co-citation and keyword co-occurrence mapping, complemented by Scopus AI for trend identification. The analysis revealed four thematic clusters: destination branding, stakeholder engagement, emotional experience, and digital interaction. Results demonstrate that co-creation operates as a multidimensional, layered process, enhancing emotional attachment, destination loyalty, and brand value, rather than a single experiential design activity. The study concludes that co-creation plays a structurally significant role in destination branding and stakeholder engagement, as demonstrated by the dominant clusters in the bibliometric and thematic analyses. By synthesising existing knowledge and identifying research gaps, this paper offers a comprehensive reference for academics and practitioners, reinforcing the relevance of co-creation in destination management.

Keywords: co-creation, destination image, bibliometric analysis, destination branding, CiteSpace



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Introduction

In contemporary tourism, destination image is no longer shaped solely by formal marketing campaigns but is increasingly the result of multi-dimensional collaborative processes between multiple actors (Abbas et al., 2025; Frías-Jamilena et al., 2024). Among them, co-creation, the process in which tourists, local residents, and Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) jointly design and create tourism experienc-

es, has emerged as an influential approach (Pappas et al., 2024; Yin et al., 2024). Understanding the role of co-creation in shaping and transforming perceptions of destinations has become an essential requirement for destination branding and sustainable tourism development, especially in the context of global competition (Pham et al., 2022; Uslu & Tosun, 2024).

Beyond academic interest, the relevance of co-creation has intensified in practice as destinations con-

front rapidly shifting market dynamics, heightened visitor expectations, and increasing pressure to differentiate in a crowded global landscape (Campos et al., 2018; Pham et al., 2022). Tourists now demand meaningful, personalised, and emotionally resonant experiences rather than standardised offerings, making participatory value creation a central component of competitive positioning (Nangpiire et al., 2022; Uslu & Tosun, 2024). At the same time, digital platforms have amplified the influence of user-generated narratives, enabling tourists to shape destination meanings at unprecedented speed and scale (Fan et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2022). These transformations require destinations to understand not only how co-creation unfolds across physical and digital environments, but also how it contributes to brand resilience, community alignment, and long-term sustainability.

Despite the significant increase in the number of studies on co-creation in tourism, there are still some literature gaps in the field (John & Supramaniam, 2024; Solakis et al., 2024). First, there are few studies that systematically and visually synthesise the knowledge network related to co-creation and destination image (Glyptou, 2021). Second, the analysis of the theoretical evolution, thematic scope, and impact of co-creation, which combines quantitative scientific indicators and academic data visualisation, remains incomplete. Third, the role of emerging factors, such as digital platforms, co-branding, and emotional value, has not been fully explored in the overall research framework.

Building on this gap, the study pursues two objectives: (i) to map and systematise the knowledge structure surrounding co-creation in shaping destination image, and (ii) to identify research directions that can strengthen both theoretical development and managerial decision-making. Accordingly, the research question is, 'How has co-creation been conceptualised, applied, and positioned within academic discussions on destination image, and what future trajectories do they suggest?'

The contribution of the paper lies in consolidating a dispersed body of literature and clarifying the core thematic areas that structure current knowledge,

ranging from destination branding and stakeholder participation to digital interaction and experiential dynamics. Through this synthesis, the study highlights underexplored issues and provides a foundation for advancing future research agendas with clearer conceptual and practical relevance, particularly in a tourism landscape shaped by participatory and digitally mediated forms of value creation.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews existing studies on co-creation and destination image. Section 3 outlines the research design and analytical procedures. Section 4 presents the main results, including thematic clusters and emerging trends. Section 5 discusses these findings, draws theoretical and practical implications, and proposes future research avenues. Section 6 concludes with key contributions and implications for destination management and development.

Literature review

Co-Creation in Tourism

In the tourism field, co-creation is understood as a process in which tourists, local residents, and stakeholders participate in designing, creating, and enhancing the value of tourism experiences (John & Supramaniam, 2024; Pham et al., 2022). Unlike co-production, which focuses on customers' partial participation in predetermined service activities, co-creation emphasises open interaction, where parties share ideas, resources, and responsibilities to form new value (Borges-Tiago & Avelar, 2025). This concept is often associated with service-dominant logic, which assumes that value does not exist in products or services but is formed through experiences and interactions in specific contexts (Leal et al., 2022).

The process of co-creation in tourism occurs simultaneously at many levels (Borges-Tiago & Avelar, 2025; John & Supramaniam, 2024). At the individual level, it manifests itself in service moments when tourists engage in activities and interact with staff and the community to create personalised experiences. At the community and business levels, co-creation occurs through collaboration between DMOS, tourism businesses, and local communities to develop products, services, or events. At the system level, co-creation

involves the coordination of policies, infrastructure, and destination branding to facilitate participation and collaboration among all parties.

Beyond its functional role in experience design, co-creation has become central to understanding how destination image is formed and transformed in contemporary tourism systems (Camatti & Wallington, 2023; Giannopoulos et al., 2021). As tourists increasingly seek authenticity, emotional resonance, and personalised value, co-creation provides the mechanism through which these expectations are negotiated and materialised (Carvalho et al., 2023; Oliveira & Panyik, 2015). This makes co-creation not only an operational practice but also a lens through which scholars examine tourist behaviour, stakeholder relations, and the evolution of destination meaning.

The development of digital technologies, including social media, online review platforms, virtual/augmented reality, and, more recently, artificial intelligence, has expanded the space for co-creation from the offline environment to the online and hybrid environment (Costa et al., 2025; Wider et al., 2023). This not only increases the possibilities for interaction, personalisation, and emotional engagement but also allows for the participation of different groups of tourists, overcoming the limitations of time and space. However, current studies still face the challenge of clearly distinguishing between related concepts such as participation, engagement, and co-creation, leading to inconsistencies in measurement and analysis (Kumar & Malhotra, 2025). In addition, longitudinal studies are still limited, not fully reflecting the changing nature of co-creation in the tourism context.

Existing literature on co-creation in tourism spans several distinct strands, including service design, customer experience, branding, community participation, and digital interaction. While each strand contributes valuable insights, they often evolve in parallel rather than in dialogue. This fragmentation results in conceptual ambiguities; for example, whether co-creation should be treated as an individual behaviour, a relational process, or a governance mechanism. Strengthening the conceptual integration among these strands remains a key research challenge, par-

ticularly when applying co-creation to complex constructs such as destination image.

Co-Creation and Destination Image

Destination image is the set of perceptions, impressions, and emotions that tourists and the public have about a tourist destination (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2024; Zhuo & Ueda, 2025). This is a key factor influencing the intention to choose a destination, satisfaction, and loyalty of tourists. Recently, co-creation has been considered a mechanism that directly affects the process of forming and transforming destination images (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2024; Pappas et al., 2024). If in the past, destination images were mainly shaped through promotional and communication campaigns implemented by DMOS, now they are created through the interaction and active contributions of many subjects, especially tourists and local communities (Amani, 2024).

Co-creation affects destination images in many ways. First, the process of participating in service design and experience helps tourists create personalised memories, thereby forming feelings of attachment and empathy with the destination (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2024). Second, collaboration between businesses, communities, and DMOS creates highly authentic tourism products and stories that meet the expectations of modern tourists for real experiences (Yin et al., 2024). Third, digital platforms and social networks have expanded the space for co-creation, allowing tourists to not only consume but also produce and share content, thereby influencing others' perceptions of the destination (Wei et al., 2023).

Beyond its communicative role, destination image operates as an asset that shapes competitiveness, differentiation, and long-term positioning (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2024; Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020). In this context, co-creation becomes a mechanism through which destinations can mobilise diverse voices to build more resilient and adaptable images (Amani, 2024; Bouchriha et al., 2023). This is particularly relevant in saturated tourism markets, where traditional branding tools are no longer sufficient to maintain distinctiveness and emotional relevance. Co-creation allows destinations to integrate lived experiences, lo-

cal narratives, and digital expressions into their brand architecture, thereby strengthening both cognitive and affective dimensions of image formation.

The link between co-creation and destination images is also evident in destination branding (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2024; Yin et al., 2024). When tourists become co-authors of their experiences and destination stories, the brand becomes more vibrant and flexible, able to adapt to changes in tourism trends and consumer behaviour. In addition, co-creation helps align the interests of stakeholders, reduce conflicts, and create shared values, thereby strengthening the reputation and sustainability of the destination image. However, this relationship also has potential challenges. Not all forms of co-creation are positive; without strategic coordination, co-created content and experiences can be inconsistent or even contradictory to the brand's vision. Therefore, the governance of co-creation needs to balance the openness of the interaction with the control needed to maintain the unity of the destination image.

Despite the increasing emphasis on co-creation, the literature still grapples with several challenges. One issue concerns the uneven power dynamics among stakeholders: not all groups contribute equally to co-created narratives, which can lead to dominant representations that overlook marginalised voices. Another challenge relates to message fragmentation, as user-generated content may produce multiple, and sometimes conflicting, representations of the same destination. These tensions highlight the need for more nuanced analytical frameworks that can capture both the enabling and constraining effects of co-creation on destination image.

Co-Creation in Tourism Marketing and Branding

In the context of an increasingly competitive global tourism market, destination marketing and brand management are no longer limited to one-way communication from managers to customers but require the active participation of tourists and stakeholders in the process of creating and spreading value (Abbas et al., 2025; Bui et al., 2025). Co-creation, by its nature a multi-dimensional collaboration, has become an important pillar in destination marketing and branding.

From a marketing perspective, co-creation extends the scope and depth of the brand experience by allowing tourists to participate in the design of products, services, and promotional content (Buhalis et al., 2023). These activities can take place directly at the destination through cultural events, festivals, or field experiences, as well as online through social media platforms, interactive websites, or mobile applications. This process helps create personalised brand narratives while increasing the ability to spread messages through tourists' own social networks (Nangpiire et al., 2022).

Beyond enhancing communication effectiveness, co-creation changes the very logic of how destinations build relationships with tourists (Bouchriha et al., 2023; Pappas et al., 2024). Instead of positioning visitors as passive recipients of marketing messages, co-creation frames them as active contributors whose interactions and expressions shape the perceived meaning of the brand (Pandey et al., 2025; Uslu & Tosun, 2024). This shift aligns with broader changes in consumer culture, where travellers increasingly seek participation, authenticity, and identity-affirming experiences. As a result, co-creation is no longer an optional marketing tool but a capability that determines how destinations compete and remain relevant.

In terms of branding, co-creation serves as a long-term approach to build and maintain a consistent yet flexible destination image. The participation of tourists, communities, and businesses in creating tourism products and stories helps brands reflect local identity while adapting to new market trends. Forms of co-creation, such as co-branding between destinations and tourism businesses or promotional campaigns based on user-generated content, can enhance reputation, expand reach, and create sustainable competitive advantages. However, co-creation in destination marketing and branding also requires close coordination. Co-created content and experiences can fragment, dilute messages, or create image conflicts without direction. Therefore, managers need to establish a clear integrated framework that defines the roles, powers, and responsibilities of each party and maintain a feedback mechanism to ensure harmony between participant creativity and the overall brand direction.

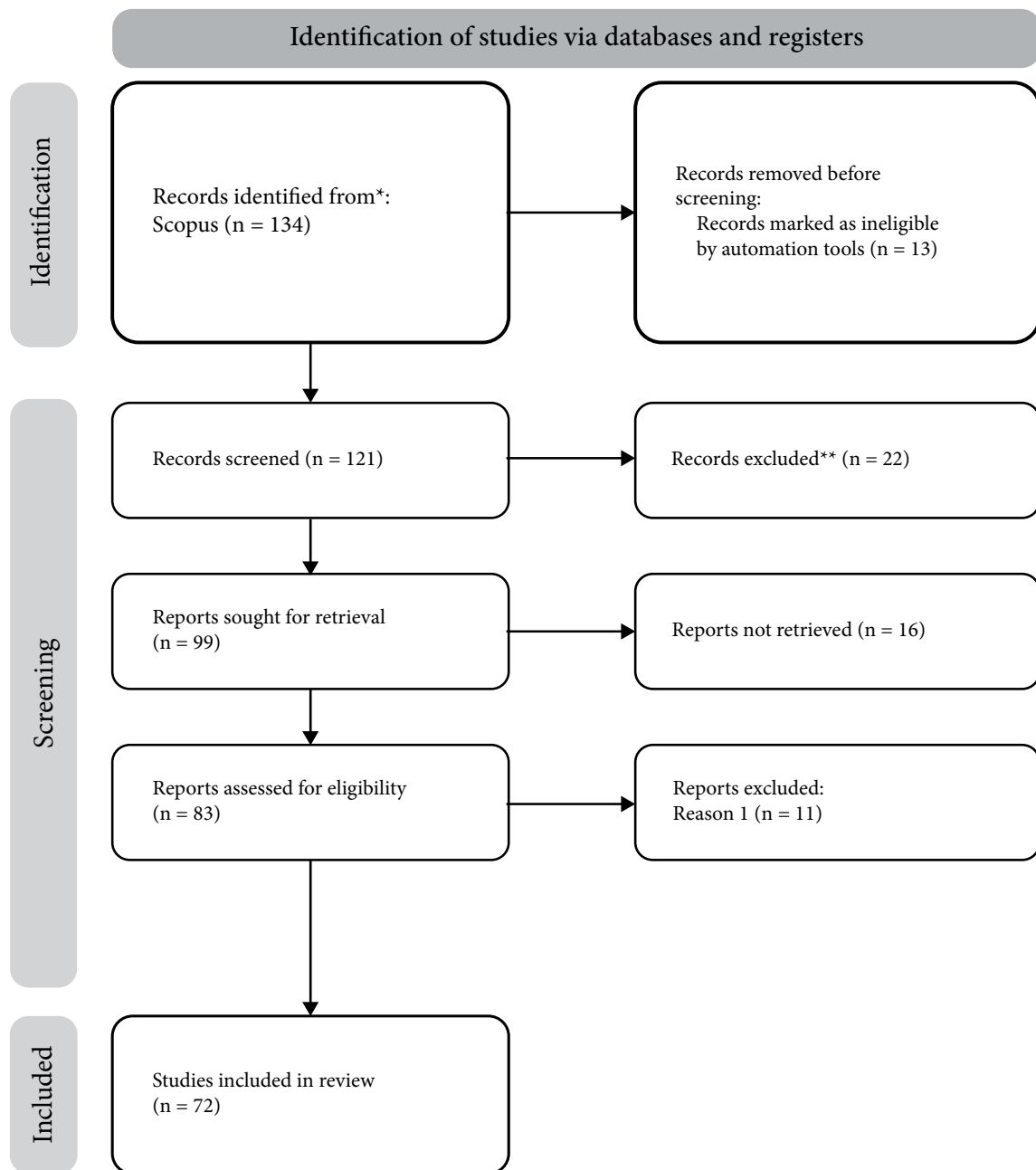


Figure 1 PRISMA Flow Diagram

Despite its potential, integrating co-creation into branding introduces a series of managerial complexities. When multiple actors generate brand-related content, the boundary between the official brand voice and user-created narratives becomes blurred.

This raises questions about message coherence, brand ownership, and the extent to which organisations should control or curate co-created representations. These challenges are amplified in multicultural destinations, where diverse visitor segments may co-create

divergent images that coexist but do not always align with positioning goals.

Methodology

This study applies bibliometric analysis, following the guidelines of the PRISMA process to ensure transparency, reproducibility, and systematisation in synthesising and analysing scientific publications related to the role of co-creation in destination image formation (Page et al., 2021). Following Figure 1, the methodology is implemented through three main stages: data collection, screening and selection, and data analysis.

Data Collection

The selected data source was the Scopus database, one of the most comprehensive indexing systems covering peer-reviewed publications in tourism, marketing, and destination management (Geng et al., 2024). The search was conducted on 24 April 2025 using the Scopus Title-Abstract-Keywords search field to ensure precise retrieval of studies directly relevant to the topic. The search strategy applied a combination of keywords: (co-creation OR collaboration OR participation OR joint creation) AND (destination OR tourism OR locale OR site) AND (image OR perception OR branding OR identity).

Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used to refine and optimise the search logic. The results were limited to English-language publications published between 2005 and 2024 to ensure both relevance and temporal consistency.

Screening and Selection Process

The initial search yielded 134 publications. A multi-stage screening procedure consistent with PRISMA guidelines was then applied. First, non-English publications and items that were not research-oriented documents, such as editorials, letters, notes, conference reviews, and other non-article materials, were excluded (13 publications removed). Only books, book chapters, conference papers, and articles were retained for further screening. Second, 22 publications unrelated to tourism or social sciences were removed based on scope relevance. Third, titles were screened to identify studies that did not address co-creation or destination

image, resulting in the exclusion of 16 additional publications. Finally, abstracts were reviewed to confirm conceptual and empirical relevance, leading to the removal of 11 further publications.

After completing all screening stages, 72 publications remained and were included in the bibliometric and thematic analyses.

Data Analysis

The final dataset extracted from Scopus was first organised and examined using Microsoft Excel to produce descriptive indicators, including the publication trend over time, the geographical distribution of research, and the list of most cited publications. These descriptive outputs provided an initial overview of the development and dispersion of scholarship on co-creation and destination image.

Subsequently, CiteSpace 6.3 (advanced) was employed to conduct the core bibliometric analyses, including authors' co-citation network analysis and keyword co-occurrence mapping. These techniques enabled the identification of intellectual linkages, thematic clusters, and structural patterns within the field (Geng et al., 2024).

To complement the structural mapping, Scopus AI was used to explore key thematic areas emerging from the dataset. As a recently introduced analytical feature, Scopus AI identifies central themes by synthesising conceptual patterns across Scopus-indexed publications (Aguilera-Cora et al., 2024). Although still not widely applied in tourism studies, this tool provides an additional lens through which to validate the thematic structure revealed by the bibliometric analysis.

By simultaneously using descriptive statistics, network-based bibliometric analysis, and AI-assisted thematic exploration, the study offers a robust and multi-layered assessment of the intellectual structure and emerging research trends surrounding co-creation and destination image.

Results and Discussion

Publication Trend over Time

Particularly in the past five years, academic interest in the role of co-creation in destination image has shown

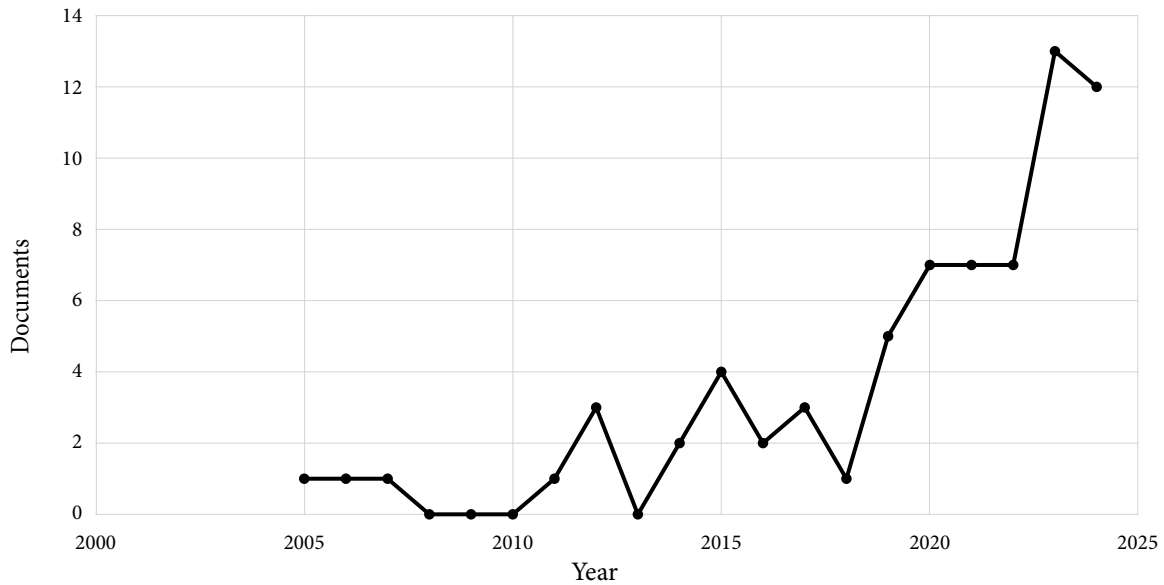


Figure 2 Annual Publications

a marked upward trend. Academic contributions on this subject remained inconsistent between 2005 and 2015, as shown in Figure 2; annual publications hardly ever exceeded three papers.

From 2016 on, though, there is a clear change as publication frequency rises consistently. Between 2022 and 2024, the most notable increase happened; this resulted in a peak of 13 documents in 2023 and

12 documents in 2024. This reflects growing scholarly agreement on the contribution of co-creation in forming cognitive as well as experiential aspects of destination image. The development also points to a congruence with worldwide patterns in digital transformation, stakeholder involvement, and consumer empowerment in tourism.

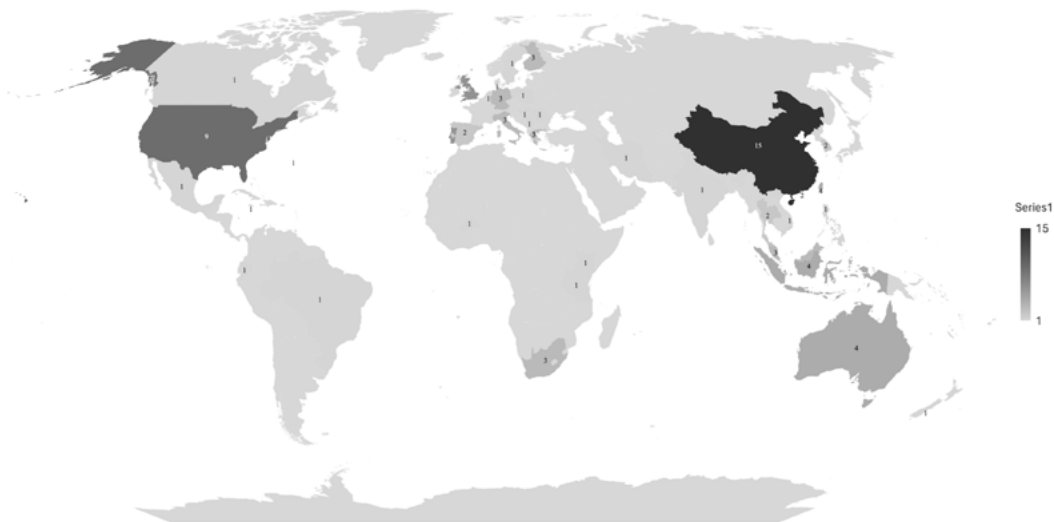


Figure 3 Publications by Countries

Geographic Distribution of Research

The research on this subject is mostly conducted by China (15 documents) and the United States (9 documents), as shown in Figure 3, thus stressing the world-wide relevance of co-creation, particularly in major, diverse tourism economies.

The major contributions from Portugal and the United Kingdom (6 each) highlight robust academic activity in Europe, presumably connected to active heritage tourism, cultural interaction programmes, and smart tourism projects stressing co-created experiences.

Australia, Indonesia, and Taiwan each contributed four publications, reflecting the Asia-Pacific's increasing curiosity in participatory tourism development models. Completing the list with three papers apiece are Finland, Germany, and Greece, highlighting the worldwide reach of this research theme.

This wide geographic dispersion points to an emerging scholarly discourse that goes beyond regional boundaries and local tourism agendas. Although early co-creation publications were mostly written in Western academic settings, more recent contributions from Asia and the Global South show a variety of uses for co-creation, including digital storytelling, smart tourism ecosystems, and community-based tourism.

Academic focus on cooperative, inclusive, and experiential tourism models seems to be changing in publication trends. Rising interest following 2020 shows a growing awareness of the transforming potential of co-creation not only for improving tourist experiences but also for redefining destination branding in ways that are resilient, flexible, and inclusive.

Most Cited Publications

This subsection highlights the publications that have had the strongest influence on research about co-creation and destination image. Based on Scopus citation data, Table 1 presents the most cited studies, reflecting both their overall impact and their continuing relevance to the field.

With 367 citations, an average of 45.88 citations annually, the top-ranked paper by Rasoolimanesh et al. (2017) stands out noticeably. An important component of stakeholder-based co-creation, this paper looks at resident impressions in urban versus rural

Table 1 Most Cited Publications

Rank	Author(s)	Total Citations	TC per Year
1	Rasoolimanesh et al. (2017)	367	45.88
2	Oliveira and Panyik (2015)	162	16.20
3	King et. al. (2015)	101	10.10
4	Iglesias-Sánchez et al. (2020)	79	15.80
5	Gardiner and Kwek (2016)	78	9.75
6	Campos et al. (2018)	75	7.50
7	Sigala (2012)	74	5.69
8	Sims (2009)	73	4.29
9	Choi and Sirakaya-Turk (2016)	71	7.89
10	Buhalis and Amaranggana (2014)	69	5.75

locations. Its high leading citation count emphasises the scholarly acceptance of community involvement and views in forming destination image.

Oliveira and Panyik (2015) and King et al. (2015) also stand out for their emphasis on digital challenges and the phenomenon of image degradation, respectively (King et al., 2015; Oliveira & Panyik, 2015). These pieces show early awareness of the online and cognitive aspects of destination branding, essential components for co-creation in contemporary tourism. Investigated by Iglesias-Sánchez et al. (2020), Instagram as a co-creation platform shows the influence of social media in tourism narratives, thus stressing a rising digital trend in co-creation (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020).

Collectively, these highly cited publications provide a solid foundation for developing integrated models of destination co-creation and open up many avenues for further research. They suggest potential topics such as: how to measure the emotional resonance of co-created experiences; the long-term impact of digital co-creation on destination loyalty; and how resident-tourist collaboration transforms local identity.

Authors' Co-Citation Network Analysis

CiteSpace's generated co-citation network exposes the intellectual basis and thematic clustering within the literature on co-creation and destination image. Three

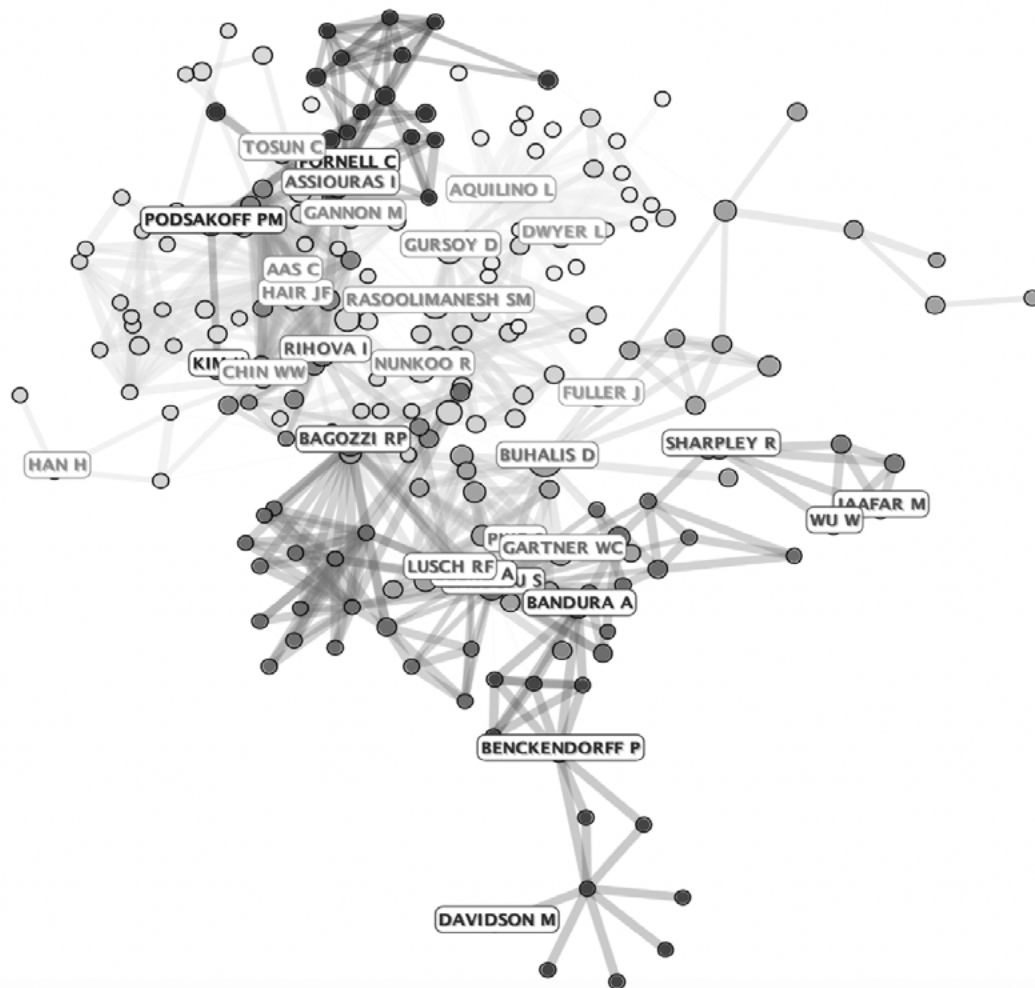


Figure 4 Cluster of Authors' Co-Citation Network

main clusters as shown in Figure 4, each reflecting a unique body of research influencing the theoretical and methodological development of the field, are found visualised here.

Cluster 1: Foundations in Destination Marketing and Branding

This cluster comprises fundamental academics including Buhalis, Law, Gretzel, and Kotler, who have been instrumental in combining co-creation into digital marketing and smart tourism models (Buhalis & Inversini, 2014; Gretzel & Jamal, 2009; Hjalager & Konu, 2011). Strong theoretical contributions to des-

tinuation image creation and consumer-based brand equity reflect the frequent co-citation of authors such as Baloglu and Pike. By means of branding, digital storytelling, and experiential marketing, this group has set the stage for how co-creation shapes opinions.

Cluster 2: Stakeholder Engagement and Quantitative Methodologies

Featuring major contributors like Rasoolimanesh, Ringle, Sarstedt, and Hair, this cluster marks a methodological turn in tourism research. These academics underline quantitative modelling, e.g. structural equation modelling and PLS-SEM, and investigate

how co-creation activities among residents and tourists affect perceived destination value, satisfaction, and loyalty (Tasico & Del Rosario, 2022). This cluster firmly supports empirical, measurement-based methods of stakeholder-based value co-creation.

Cluster 3: Cultural and Event-Based Co-Creation

Scholars of cultural and creative tourism such as Richards, Ritchie, and Getz form the cluster, often anchored in cultural immersion and heritage experiences; their studies centre on festival and event co-creation (Santoro et al., 2021). This cluster emphasises the increasing importance of community-driven tourism, in which tourists co-create destination images by engaging in cultural exchanges, thus helping to shape narratives.

Keyword Co-Occurrence Network

This study employed a bibliometric and thematic analysis using CiteSpace to explore the evolving role of co-creation in shaping destination image. The clustering analysis yielded 12 distinct themes based on citation and keyword co-occurrence (Figure 5). These themes were then grouped into four broader clusters relevant to our research objective.

Cluster 1: Co-Creation and Destination Marketing

This theme is anchored by cluster 1 (value co-creation), where seminal authors emphasise the role of stakeholders, including tourists, local businesses, and governments, in collaboratively shaping the destination value proposition (Buhalis et al., 2023; Giannopoulos et al., 2021; Yin et al., 2024). This cluster intersects with cluster 5 (resident participation) and cluster 0 (social identity), revealing how local engagement and identity construction are foundational to co-creation. The research in this domain highlights how co-created experiences enhance destination branding, increase tourist satisfaction, and foster loyalty (Cao et al., 2023; Rita et al., 2024).

Furthermore, cluster 4 (service ecosystem perspective) complements this view by introducing a systems-thinking lens, positioning co-creation within a network of interactions that collectively form the destination image. The alignment between co-crea-

tion and marketing is especially visible in how service providers tailor offerings based on real-time tourist feedback and participatory design (Oliveira & Panyik, 2015).

This cluster represents the convergence of co-creation and destination marketing, in which multi-actor collaboration not only creates experiential value but also acts as a long-term brand positioning tool. When stakeholders, from among tourists, communities, businesses, and governments, participate in building the value proposition, marketing strategies can shift from product orientation to experience orientation, while increasing the ability to adapt to market fluctuations. In particular, the service ecosystem approach helps marketing strategies not be fragmented but become a continuous process of coordination between product design, communication, and brand management, based on real feedback from tourists and communities.

Cluster 2: Tourist Experience and Emotional Perception

Cluster 2 (local perception) embodies this thematic category, focusing on the affective and cognitive responses of both tourists and local residents (Oliveira & Panyik, 2015; Yin et al., 2024). The role of emotions, memory, and place attachment emerges strongly, highlighting how tourist experiences are co-constructed and deeply personal (Čivire et al., 2024). The bridging between clusters 0, 2, and 5 illustrates how perceptions are not formed in isolation but are influenced by local interactions and socio-cultural exchanges. The notion of behavioural participation (cluster 6), although more distanced in the network map, contributes a psychological dimension by examining how intentions and actual behaviours during co-created experiences shape long-term perceptions and revisit intentions (Giannopoulos et al., 2022).

The content of this cluster affirms that the destination image development strategy cannot be separated from the emotional and cognitive factors of both tourists and local residents. Emotional attachment and tourism memory play a key role in maintaining loyalty and intention to return. Therefore, the destination strategy needs to design highly personalised touchpoints where tourists and residents can co-cre-

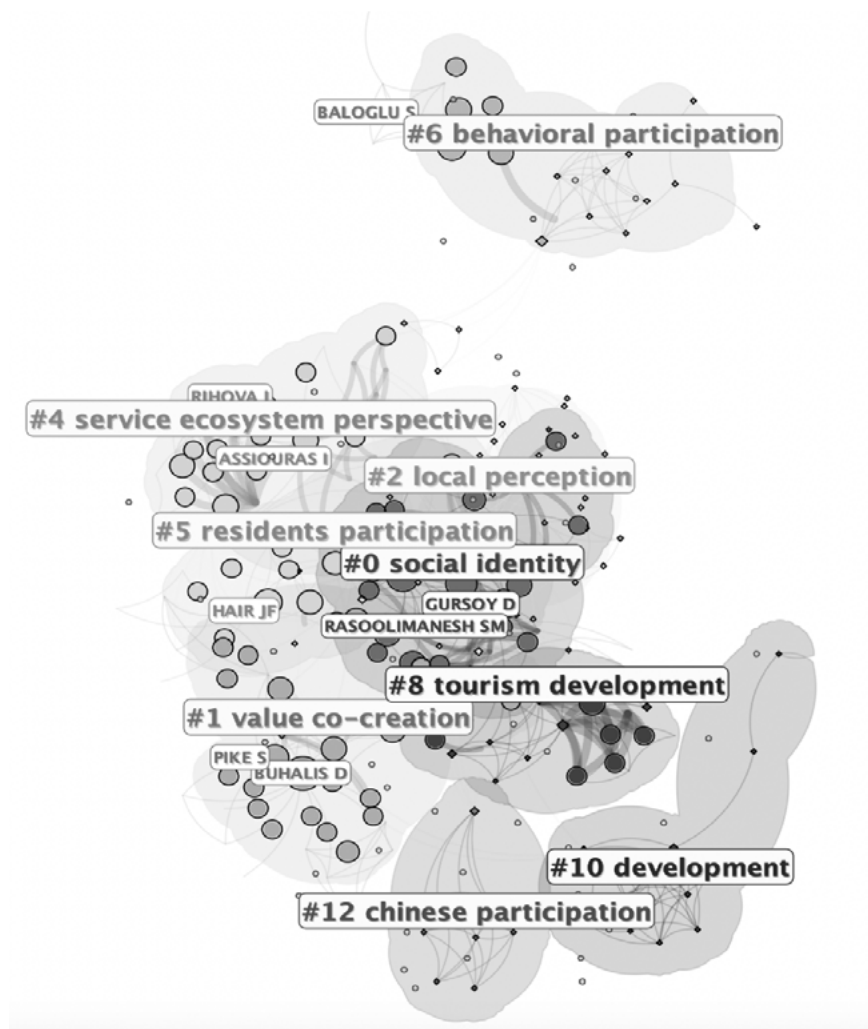


Figure 5 Cluster of Keyword Co-Occurrence Network

ate meaningful experiences. At the same time, understanding the motivations and behaviours of tourists in the context of co-creation allows destination managers to develop appropriate communication and product strategies, ensuring resonance between the actual experience and the desired brand image.

Cluster 3: Digital Co-Creation and Social Media

The digital transformation of tourism is encapsulated in cluster 6 (behavioural participation) and cluster 8 (tourism development). These clusters explore how user-generated content, online reviews, and social media platforms allow tourists to actively partic-

ipate in shaping destination narratives (Giannopoulos et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2022). Research within these clusters shows how virtual co-creation extends the tourist experience beyond the physical trip and contributes to digital destination image formation.

The publications in Cluster 6 reinforce the idea that behavioural patterns online (e.g. sharing photos, writing reviews) are integral to shaping how destinations are perceived globally (Liu & Meng, 2024; Shin et al., 2020). Cluster 10 (development), while broader in focus, occasionally touches on the implications of digital tools for sustainable tourism and stakeholder engagement in developing regions.

This cluster highlights the strategic role of the digital space as a new front in destination image management. User-generated content, online reviews, and social media sharing not only reflect personal experiences but also become strategic data sources to predict market trends and adjust brand messaging. Encouraging digital co-creation allows the lifecycle of tourism experiences to extend beyond the trip, while creating a viral effect that expands the brand's reach. From a strategic perspective, managing digital co-creation requires a balance between user creative freedom and consistent image direction, especially in a context where destination competition is increasingly based on online reputation.

Cluster 4: Destination Image, Management, and Communication

This final theme encapsulates how co-creation influences broader governance and communication. Cluster 4 (service ecosystem) and cluster 8 (tourism development) feature prominently here, with contributions that discuss how destination managers utilise co-created content to align with tourist expectations (Frow et al., 2015; Shin et al., 2020).

Cluster 12 (Chinese participation) adds a geo-cultural dimension, illustrating how co-creation and image perception vary across contexts. Studies in this cluster highlight unique dynamics in Asian tourism markets, particularly how government-led initiatives and cultural values shape both co-creation practices and image interpretation (Ji et al., 2018). Additionally, cluster 10 (development) and cluster 3 (not labelled explicitly in the image but potentially represented by overlapping nodes with social identity and tourism development) suggest how public health, environmental sustainability, and crisis communication now intersect with co-creation practices. These aspects have become particularly salient post-COVID-19, where destination image is increasingly tied to health safety, resilience, and ethical responsibility.

This cluster shows that co-creation not only impacts products and experiences but also becomes an important element in destination management. Exploiting co-created content to adjust and reinforce communication messages allows managers to main-

tain the compatibility between tourist expectations and the development direction of the destination. In particular, the geo-cultural context factor suggests that co-creation needs to be customised to suit each market, such as the difference in the role of government and cultural values in Asian countries compared to the West. In addition, the connection between co-creation and issues such as environmental sustainability, health safety, and crisis communication suggests that modern destination management strategies need to integrate co-creation into the framework of risk management and social responsibility, especially in the post-COVID-19 period.

Key Themes in Co-Creation and Destination Image
Scopus AI's thematic analysis reveals four main thematic branches arising from co-creation in destination image, as shown in Figure 6: these are consumer-centric approaches, destination marketing, event tourism, and experience tourism. Every branch has sub-themes corresponding with different conceptual, empirical, and pragmatic contributions to the literature. These ideas also strongly relate to the clusters found in the co-citation and keyword co-occurrence studies.

Cluster 1: Destination Marketing and Management

This cluster highlights how DMOS, authorities, and tourism businesses, together with tourist motivations, shape co-created destination images. A body of relevant studies has established how destination management practices and branding strategies align with co-creation processes, providing the conceptual foundations that later research has expanded (Hjalager & Konu, 2011; King et al., 2015). Emphasising destination branding and stakeholders, cluster 1 in the keyword network directly fits this theme and shows how co-creation improves marketing communication, differentiation, and loyalty in competitive tourism settings.

This cluster demonstrates the relationship between co-creation and destination management, in which DMOS play a guiding and coordinating role, and tourists are the source of inspiration and motivation for product innovation. Integrating co-creation into mar-

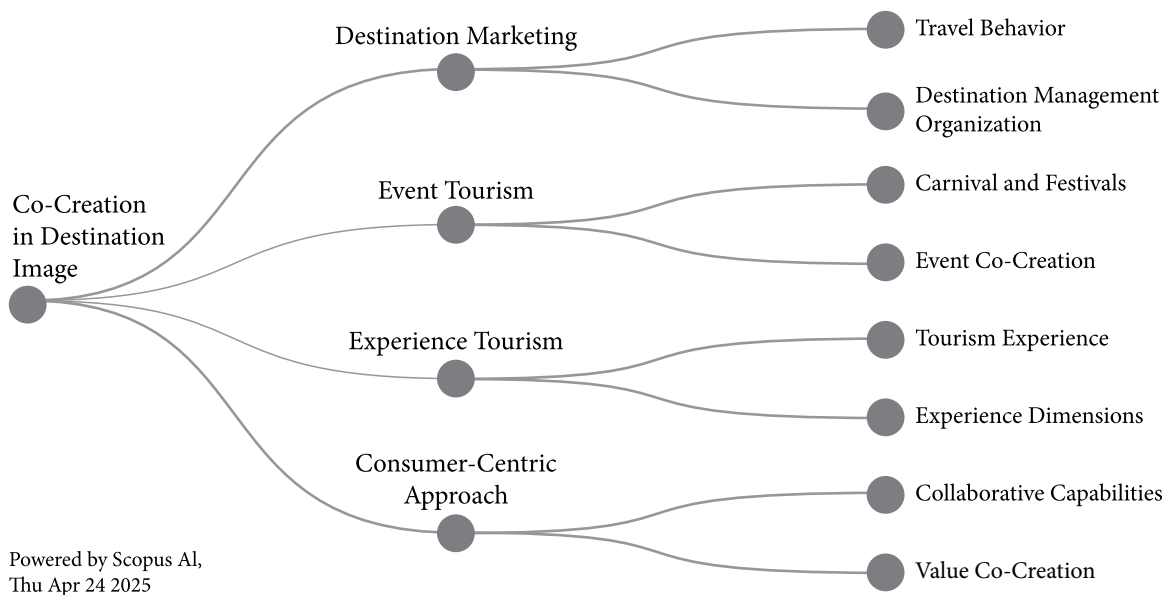


Figure 6 Key Themes in Co-Creation and Destination Image by Scopus AI

keting strategies helps increase differentiation and strengthen competitive advantage in an increasingly fierce global tourism environment. Through the participation of many stakeholders, destination brand strategies are not only built from a management perspective but also reflect the voices and real experiences of communities and tourists, creating a more vibrant and sustainable brand image.

Cluster 2: Event Tourism and Participatory Experience

Corresponding to cluster 3 in the co-citation network, the second branch incorporates event co-creation and carnivals and celebrations. In event-based settings, this literature investigates how tourists start as co-producers of meaning (Pappas et al., 2024). Events provide forums for the creation of experiential value whereby residents and tourists coexist to shape stories. Emphasising the socio-cultural results of co-created events, this participatory model also finds support in the keyword cluster involving community participation and emotional solidarity.

Research in this cluster shows that tourism events are not only cultural and entertainment products but also a strategic space for implementing co-creation. When tourists and local residents participate in the

organisation, storytelling, and experience of events, the experiential value becomes multi-layered and richer. From a strategic perspective, co-created events have the potential to strengthen community engagement, enhance destination authenticity, and create a distinct impression in the tourist's memory. This approach is especially important for destinations that compete on the basis of cultural identity and iconic activities.

Cluster 3: Exploratory Tourism and Experiential Aspects

Consistent with keyword cluster 3 (e.g. tourist destination, tourism management, value co-creation), this theme, covering tourism experience and experience dimensions, is fundamental to modern tourism theory. Previous research in this field looks at how behavioural, emotional, and cognitive aspects support unique and customised experiences (Campos et al., 2018). These results cross with quantitative contributions from Hair and Rasoolimanesh, who track co-creation's impact on destination loyalty and satisfaction.

This cluster highlights the central role of tourism experiences in destination development strategies. Behavioural, emotional, and cognitive factors not

only shape individual experiences but also directly influence tourist loyalty and satisfaction, important metrics in brand management. Applying co-creation to experience design and management helps create tourism products that are more relevant to the needs, desires, and cultural context of each tourist group. At a strategic level, such an approach helps destinations maintain their ability to adapt to changing consumer trends and build long-term relationships with their target markets.

Cluster 4: Consumer-Centric Approach and Value Co-Creation

Finally, the consumer-centric approach and associated sub-themes like value co-creation mirror a paradigm change from passive consumption to active involvement. This fits cluster 1 in the keyword co-occurrence network, highlighting ideas like perception, residents, self-efficacy, and sustainable tourism, as well as cluster 2 in the co-citation network. Taken together, these studies show that co-creation helps both tourists and residents to influence tourism offers depending on personal, cultural, and emotional relevance (Tasico & Del Rosario, 2022).

This cluster represents a shift from a passive consumption model to an active engagement model, in which tourists and residents participate in shaping tourism products and services. Putting consumers at the centre not only improves the relevance of products to individual needs but also increases the cultural and emotional significance of the experience. This approach helps destinations build sustainable partnerships with communities, raise awareness of sustainable development, and reinforce the destination's image as an open, friendly, and socially responsible space.

Discussion and Implications

Discussion

This study provides several new findings that contribute significantly to the academic and managerial understanding of co-creation and destination image.

First, the analysis of publication trends shows a clear increase in the number of studies since 2016, especially in the period 2022–2024. What is noteworthy

is not only the quantitative growth but also the qualitative shift: co-creation has been repositioned from an activity supporting experience design to a strategic component of destination management, linked to long-term goals of branding and sustainability. Linking this trend to the context of digital transformation and the rise of consumer power shows that current research is reflecting new market and technological dynamics, rather than simply reproducing traditional theoretical frameworks (Buhalis et al., 2023; Solakis et al., 2024).

In terms of scope, the geographical distribution map shows that the topic is no longer concentrated mainly in Western academia but is expanding strongly to Asia and the Global South. This expansion is not simply about adding more case studies but rather about the emergence of new strategic variations, from digital storytelling applications and smart tourism ecosystems to community-based tourism models, that require adjustments and extensions to existing theories. This also raises the need to more clearly identify cultural-institutional factors as moderating variables in order to explain why and under what conditions co-creation creates a positive destination image.

Another new point is the identification of complex relationships between research streams through co-citation networks and keyword cluster analysis. The results show that the four main content areas, destination marketing and management, tourist experience and emotion, digital and social media co-creation, and image and communication management, do not operate in isolation but are closely linked into a knowledge ecosystem. This helps overcome the fragmented approach of previous studies, opening up the possibility of developing integrated models that reflect both the internal dynamics of co-creation and external environmental factors such as technology and stakeholder structure.

In addition, the analysis of the most cited publications shows that co-creation does not only create one-way benefits. Foundational studies have highlighted the risks of the digital environment and the potential for image degradation without appropriate governance (John & Supramaniam, 2024), but most previous studies have not delved into the mechanisms of

adverse co-creation or the imbalance of participation. Adding this perspective shifts the discussion away from the linear assumption that co-creation automatically leads to a more positive destination image and instead emphasises the need to consider contextual conditions and moderating variables that determine whether co-creation generates sustainable value.

The analyses from Scopus AI and CiteSpace show that the current study has moved beyond the stage of describing the phenomenon to move closer to building a clear framework. The similarities between the thematic clusters from the two analytical sources show that co-creation has become the intersection point between many separate fields such as strategic marketing, customer experience, tourism technology, and community management. This is a solid basis for developing co-creation management models according to the life cycle of destination image, from building to expanding to consolidating.

Overall, the above findings confirm the novelty of the study in three points: repositioning co-creation as a strategic element, expanding the theoretical scope to diverse cultural-institutional contexts, and building a foundation for multidimensional integration models. This is an important premise for developing theoretical and managerial implications in the next section, aiming both to contribute to academic knowledge and to create practical application value for destination management in the digital age.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study collectively reposition co-creation from a narrow operational activity to a mechanism embedded in destination image management. Across the CiteSpace co-citation clusters and keyword co-occurrence patterns, co-creation consistently appears not as an isolated interactional practice but as a structural component of destination branding, stakeholder governance, and long-term competitiveness. This strategic repositioning extends existing theories by linking tourist engagement directly to the broader trajectories of sustainable tourism development and destination brand evolution.

The results also underscore the need for stronger contextualisation in co-creation theory. The geo-

graphical distribution of publications, especially the increasing contributions from Asia and the Global South, demonstrates that cultural norms, institutional arrangements, and market maturity shape how co-creation is practiced and how it influences destination image. The mismatch between global theoretical assumptions and localised empirical realities suggests that cultural-institutional moderators should be incorporated explicitly into theoretical models, ensuring greater sensitivity to context.

In addition, the convergence across three analytical layers, keyword co-occurrence, thematic clustering, and co-citation networks, reveals that co-creation is inherently multi-layered and interdisciplinary. The clusters identified in this study link domains that are often examined separately in the literature, including strategic marketing, experiential design, digital participation, and community-based governance. Theoretical models should therefore reflect interactions across micro-level tourist emotions and engagement, meso-level stakeholder and community networks, and macro-level technological and policy environments.

The study also brings attention to the concept of adverse co-creation. Several clusters, especially those tied to digital participation and user-generated content, point to the possibility that co-creation can generate negative image spillovers when governance is weak. This challenges the dominant linear assumption that 'more co-creation leads to a better destination image', suggesting instead that risk, resilience, and content governance should be incorporated into future theoretical formulations.

Practical Implications

Taken together, the findings suggest that DMOS should move beyond viewing co-creation as a marketing tactic and instead embed it as a long-term investment. Because the dominant clusters in the co-citation and keyword analyses highlight branding, stakeholder collaboration, and digital engagement, integrating co-creation into brand strategy, policy implementation, communication, and event programming becomes essential for achieving sustained competitiveness.

The strong geographical diversity observed in the dataset also highlights that co-creation cannot follow a universal template. Differences in cultural norms, governance capacity, and technological readiness mean that DMOS must adapt co-creation to local conditions if initiatives are to resonate authentically with residents and remain appealing to tourists. Tailoring these strategies ensures that co-creation contributes meaningfully to both community identity and visitor experience.

The thematic clusters further reveal multiple strategic entry points for implementing co-creation, from experiential branding and participatory event design to personalisation and digital interaction. Selecting among these pathways should depend on the destination's stage in its brand life cycle, its positioning in the competitive landscape, and the resources at hand. A careful alignment between cluster-specific insights and managerial priorities can increase strategic coherence.

At the same time, recognising that co-creation can also generate unintended or negative outcomes requires DMOS to integrate risk management into their strategies. The prominence of digital and social media-related clusters suggests the importance of monitoring user-generated content, anticipating potential negative narratives, and establishing rapid-response mechanisms. Ensuring balanced representation among community groups can also prevent resident fatigue and mitigate identity distortion associated with over-commercialisation or uneven participation.

Finally, the convergence of bibliometric and AI-based thematic analyses illustrates the practical value of data analytics in managerial decision-making. Because both approaches independently highlight similar emerging topics and structural patterns, DMOS can adopt comparable analytic tools to track evolving trends, benchmark their destination against competitors, and adapt strategies proactively in a fast-changing tourism environment.

Future Research Agenda

Future research should first explore how multi-stakeholder co-creation initiatives shape key components of destination brand equity, such as brand love, brand

identification, and brand attachment. This direction aligns with the clusters emphasising stakeholder collaboration and experiential branding, and is especially relevant in collectivist cultural contexts where social identity may moderate co-creation outcomes.

Second, the temporal and spatial dynamics of co-creation merit closer empirical investigation. The cluster structures suggest that co-creation unfolds not only at the point of consumption but also across pre-trip, on-site, and post-trip phases. Comparative research across service environments, including hotels, attractions, and mobility services, and longitudinal or mixed-method designs combining surveys with digital trace data (e.g. social media interactions or app-based behaviour) would yield deeper insights into these dynamics.

Third, the growing relevance of co-branding in tourism, hinted at in several thematic clusters, deserves more systematic theorisation. Future studies could examine how collaborations between destination brands and local businesses generate interbrand trust, shape perceived authenticity, and influence loyalty and purchase intentions. Applying frameworks such as brand alliances or signalling theory can help clarify these mechanisms.

Finally, the expansion of virtual co-creation environments, including augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), metaverse (and social media-based collaborative platforms), opens a promising research pathway. Because digital co-creation emerged strongly in the keyword and thematic clusters, future research should investigate how immersive digital spaces influence tourism intentions, perceived co-creation value, and cross-cultural differences driven by digital literacy or cultural orientation.

Across all these directions, interdisciplinary approaches, spanning marketing, sociology, psychology, communication, and technology studies, will be essential. At the same time, participatory and qualitative methods such as ethnography and action research can help capture the lived experiences of tourists and residents. Ultimately, future work should frame co-creation not only as a lever for destination competitiveness but also as a contributor to community well-being and alignment with global sustainability

objectives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Conclusion

This study has provided an integrated perspective of how co-creation impacts the process of destination image formation and transformation, based on a bibliographic analysis of CiteSpace and Scopus AI. The results indicate that co-creation is not a single activity but a multi-layered and evolutionary process that connects institutions, businesses, communities, and individual tourists. Through co-citation and co-occurrence networks, the study identifies four main thematic clusters: destination branding, stakeholder engagement, emotional experiences, and digital interactions.

In terms of theoretical implications, the results reposition co-creation as a mechanism in destination image management, connecting the micro (emotional, cognitive), meso (community and business networks), and macro (policy, technology) levels. At the same time, the study points out the need to adapt existing theory to better suit diverse cultural-institutional contexts, especially in Asia and the Global South. In terms of managerial implications, the findings suggest that co-creation can become the foundation of long-term brand strategy but requires close coordination and risk management, especially in the digital environment, to avoid negative impacts such as negative information or community fatigue. DMOS can exploit co-creation through multiple entry points, from cultural events and personalised experiences to digital interactions, depending on the stage of brand development and resource conditions.

This study also has some limitations. First, the data were collected only from the Scopus database and were limited to English-language publications, which may have missed important studies from other sources or in other languages. Second, the bibliometric analysis provided an overview and knowledge structure but did not go into depth to assess the content quality or empirical results of each study. Given these limitations, future research directions could expand the scope of data to different databases and languages and combine mixed-methods and longitudinal stud-

ies to capture the evolution of co-creation over time. In addition, integrating qualitative data from field observations, expert interviews, and digital content analysis will provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms, conditions, and impacts of co-creation on destination image.

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