

INNER-DIRECTED EXPERIENCES AND THE CULTURAL-TOURISM INDUSTRY: A NEW PATHWAY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM

EXPERIENCIAS ORIENTADAS AL INTERIOR Y LA INDUSTRIA CULTURAL Y TURÍSTICA: UNA NUEVA VÍA PARA EL DESARROLLO SOSTENIBLE EN VIETNAM

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Abstract

This study proposes positioning inner-directed experiences as creative products within Vietnam's cultural and tourism industry. Inner-directed experiences are understood as tourism activities that encourage tourists to cultivate mindfulness, foster inner connection, and enhance both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of the experience economy and creative tourism, the paper analyzes the potential of cultural, religious, and artistic resources, including Buddhism, Catholicism, Caodaism, Mother Goddess worship, heritage architecture, performing arts, tea rituals, meditation, yoga, and mindful gastronomy. The study introduces a creative value chain model for inner-directed experiences, emphasizing the involvement of local communities, artisans, religious organizations, tourism enterprises, and digital technologies. Elements such as co-creation, virtual and augmented reality, and digital storytelling are highlighted as essential tools for enhancing authenticity, accessibility, and experiential depth. Policy implications are proposed for governments, communities, enterprises, and educational institutions to develop inner-directed experiences as a high-quality and sustainable product segment, with the potential to be scaled up and exported internationally.

Keywords

creative tourism, cultural industry, inner-directed experiences, sustainable tourism, well-being

1. INTRODUCTION

Vietnam's tourism industry is facing the need to shift from a quantity-based growth model to a quality-based development model, focusing on enhancing the value of experiences and ensuring sustainability (Ngo et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2023). In this context, a new trend is emerging in international research and practice: the growing interest in inner-directed experiences, that is, experiences that encourage tourists to turn inward, achieve a balance between body, mind and spirit, and increase the sense of well-being at both the pleasure and meaning levels (Chhabra & Kim, 2024; Sheldon, 2020).

Inner-directed experiences in tourism can be understood as experiences designed to encourage tourists to focus on mindfulness, nurture a sense of inner connection, and facilitate the process of transformation of consciousness through cultural, religious, and artistic activities (Chhabra & Kim, 2024; Kaya et al., 2024). This paper proposes to position inner-directed experiences as creative products in the culture and tourism industry, rather than considering them as a mere spiritual phenomenon or a niche form of tourism.

Inner-directed experiences can be formed from various creative resources in Vietnam, including religious and belief spaces such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Caodaism, Mother Goddess worship; sacred architecture and landscapes such as pagodas, towers, ancient houses; traditional and contemporary performing arts; as well as practices associated with spiritual life such as meditation, yoga, tea ceremonies, and culinary retreats. When designed as creative products, these experiences not only differentiate destinations but also have the potential to increase perceived authenticity and open up co-creative interactions between tourists and local communities.

Theoretically, this approach inherits and extends research frameworks on creative tourism and the experience economy. Previous studies have emphasized the shift from passive consumption to active participation, from tangible products to intangible values associated with meaning and emotions (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Richards, 2011; Richards & Wilson, 2006). In addition, recent studies have also shown the role of perceived authenticity in shaping tourists' experiences and attachments (Chai et al., 2022). Some other works affirm the potential of religious spaces, pilgrimage routes and ritual arts as important drivers of innovation and territorial development (Filho & de Bem, 2023; Karacaoğlu, 2025).

However, in the context of Vietnam, most cultural and religious resources are still exploited in a fragmented manner, leading to tourism products that are broad but lack meaningful depth and the ability to refine experiences (Ho et al., 2020; Thi & Trang, 2024). Therefore, this study pursues three objectives: first, to identify and develop an operational concept for inner-directed experiences as a creative product in the cultural and tourism industry; second, to map cultural, religious, and artistic resources that can be transformed into inner-directed products, and to indicate the mechanisms of their impact on tourist happiness; and third, to propose a creative value chain model for inner-directed products, which involves the participation of communities, artisans, religious organizations, and

tourism businesses, with the support of new technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and digital storytelling.

The paper is expected to contribute three main points: to establish a specific concept of inner-directed experiences as a creative segment in the cultural and tourism industry, to develop a product design framework based on the creative value chain, and to propose a policy roadmap to pilot and replicate this model in the context of Vietnam. Thereby, the study paves the way for future empirical tests of the impact of inner-directed experiences on tourist happiness, and suggests possible policy directions for sustainable development.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Creative tourism and the experience economy*

The concept of the experience economy proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1999) has created a turning point in the approach to economic value (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Instead of just stopping at producing goods or providing services, organizations can create higher value through staging complete experiences, where emotions, participation and meaning become the focus. Experience in this framework is not just an addition to the product or service but an independent layer of value, in which the individual participating is considered a co-author of the experience (Campos et al., 2018). This thinking has deeply influenced the tourism industry, which takes experience as the core to increase the attractiveness and differentiate the destination.

On that basis, Richards and Raymond (2000) introduced the concept of creative tourism, defining it as a form of tourism that allows tourists to develop their own creative capacity through direct participation in activities associated with the cultural characteristics of the destination (Richards & Raymond, 2000). The novelty of creative tourism is to shift the role of tourists from passive observers to active participants, while creating conditions for them to experience authenticity and real learning in the local cultural environment. Subsequent developments emphasize that creative tourism is not only about product innovation but also about restructuring the relationship between tourists, communities and service providers in a co-constructive direction (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009; Richards & Wilson, 2006).

A series of international studies have shown that engaging tourists in creative processes brings values beyond pure consumption. Filho and de Bem (2023) examine handicraft and pilgrimage tourism programs in South America, particularly Brazil (Filho & de Bem, 2023). The study shows that this participation has a dual value: tourists have a unique, meaningful experience, while the local community affirms its cultural identity and increases its income. Li and Shaw (2022) emphasize the co-creation element that increases the authenticity and depth of experiences, contributing to increased satisfaction and return intention (Li & Shaw, 2022). Cabeça et al. (2020) argue that it is the engagement between tourists, communities

and businesses in a flexible creative value chain that allows creative tourism to reach its full potential (Cabeça et al., 2020).

The most important implication of the experience economy and creative tourism is the shift from passive consumption to active experience, from short-term satisfaction to long-term meaning creation (Cabeça et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2013). This paves the way for a new approach to inner-directed experiences. Rather than viewing cultural and religious practices as activities to be observed, they can be redesigned as participatory experiences where tourists learn, practice, and build connections with themselves and their communities. The combination of the experience economy and creative tourism therefore not only provides a solid theoretical framework for this study but also points to the potential for inward-looking products to become a creative segment, contributing to the quality and depth of the cultural and tourism industry.

2.2. Inner-directed tourism and well-being

In recent decades, tourism is no longer understood solely as sightseeing, entertainment or service consumption, but is increasingly seen as a process of searching for inner balance, self-development and restructuring of life meaning (Sheldon, 2020; Thimm, 2021). On that basis, a number of new research directions have been formed around the concepts of inner-directed tourism, mindfulness tourism and transformative tourism (Iacob et al., 2024; Zhao & Agyeiwaah, 2023).

Inner-directed tourism can be defined as experiences that encourage tourists to turn inward, focusing on the process of self-reflection and connection between body, mind and spirit. Unlike traditional tourism that emphasizes external observation, inner-directed tourism prioritizes internal experiences, where tourists actively participate in cultural, religious and artistic practices to achieve peace and spiritual development. Mindfulness tourism, often associated with meditation, yoga, and mindfulness rituals, provides a foundation for this approach by viewing the tourism experience as an opportunity to pause, be present, and increase self-awareness (Chan, 2019; Chen et al., 2017). Meanwhile, transformative tourism emphasizes the profound transformational potential of the tourism experience, not only creating temporary satisfaction but also leaving a lasting imprint on the individual's perception and actions (Kirillova et al., 2017; Lean, 2012).

The link between these forms of tourism and human well-being is confirmed by many works. Well-being is divided into two basic dimensions: hedonic well-being, reflecting positive emotions, relaxation, and enjoyment in the present; and meaningful well-being, reflecting personal growth, a sense of purpose in life, and a deep connection with spiritual values (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Inner-directed tourism has the potential to impact both of these dimensions. Practices such as meditation, yoga, or mindful eating bring about calm, reduce stress, and create a sense of well-being, contributing to increased hedonic well-being. At the

same time, attending religious ceremonies, learning traditional arts, or engaging in symbolic activities can stimulate reflection, open up opportunities for personal growth, and foster meaningful well-being.

The important significance of these approaches is to show that tourism can act as a space for healing and spiritual development, beyond its economic function. When placed within the framework of experiential economy and creative tourism, inner-directed tourism not only satisfies individual needs but also opens up the possibility of creating new products based on cultural - artistic - religious resources. Thus, inner-directed tourism becomes a bridge between personal experiences and community values, between hedonic happiness and meaningful happiness, contributing to affirming the profound humanistic role of tourism in the modern context.

2.3. Cultural and religious resources as creative assets

Cultural and religious resources have long been considered an important foundation for cultural tourism development (Chugh, 2018; Richards & Wilson, 2006). However, in a creative approach, these resources are not only heritage to be visited or consumed, but can also become creative assets capable of creating new experiences, increasing the depth of meaning and promoting active participation of tourists.

Practices associated with spiritual life can also be upgraded into creative products. Tea culture, with its tea drinking rituals and quiet philosophy, has the ability to create experiential spaces associated with mindfulness (Guo & Rato, 2019; Tiwari et al., 2023). Meditation, yoga, art therapy, and culinary retreats also offer new forms of tourism that connect directly with tourists' introspection and self-development needs (Alneng, 2009; Wu et al., 2023). International studies have shown that when these elements are designed into creative products, they have the ability to both maintain identity and respond to the global trend of tourism seeking meaning and happiness (Kasemsarn, 2024; Menezes & de Sousa Batista, 2024; Wu et al., 2023).

However, in Vietnam, the exploitation of these cultural and religious assets is still largely fragmented, tending to perform for tourists to observe rather than encourage them to participate. Existing products mainly emphasize heritage and landscape values, while the ability to transform into inner-directed creative experiences has not been systematized. This poses an important research gap: there is currently no work that has built a theoretical framework and specific application model to position inner-directed experiences as a creative segment in the cultural and tourism industry. Filling this gap will not only help develop unique products, enhance the depth and quality of Vietnamese tourism, but also contribute to affirming the role of tourism as a space for creativity and spiritual development in the global context.

2.4. Sustainable tourism development

The concept of sustainable tourism development emerged in the late 1980s, based on the principle of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations (Geng et al., 2024). In the tourism sector, this concept has been expanded to include three main pillars: economic sustainability, social-cultural sustainability and environmental sustainability (Khalid, 2024; Srivastava, 2024). Studies emphasize that tourism is only truly sustainable when it creates economic benefits for local communities, preserves cultural identity and minimizes negative impacts on the natural environment (Ngo et al., 2024; Quang et al., 2023; Tuyen, 2025).

Over the past two decades, sustainable tourism development has shifted from a conservation-focused approach to an integrated approach, considering people and experiences as the center of sustainability. Many scholars have pointed out that factors such as happiness, satisfaction, cultural awareness and community are essential for the long-term development of tourism (Coghlan, 2015; Lin et al., 2022; Rubi & Sharma, 2024). Tourism is not only seen as an economic sector but also as a space to create relationships between people, culture and the environment.

Vietnam is also shifting in this direction. The national tourism development strategies for the period 2020-2030 identify the goal of developing high-quality, environmentally friendly and culturally connected tourism. However, most current programs still focus on ecological and economic factors, while the spiritual and inner experience of tourists - factors that can help complete the concept of comprehensive sustainability - are less focused.

In this context, developing inward-looking experiences as creative products is of strategic significance. It not only expands the connotation of sustainable tourism development by adding spiritual and cultural depth, but also contributes to shifting development thinking from external sustainability to internal sustainability, towards harmony between economy, community and people.

3. INNER-DIRECTED EXPERIENCES IN VIETNAM'S CULTURAL AND TOURISM INDUSTRY

3.1. Religious-spiritual experiences

Religion and belief have long played a central role in the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people, both as a spiritual refuge and as a cultural and artistic space rich in symbolic value. In tourism, these elements are not only present in the form of tangible and intangible heritage but can also become inner-directed experiences, where tourists directly participate in the process of practice, reflection and connection with themselves.

Buddhism, with its system of temples spread across the country, creates a rich foundation for meditative and mindful experiences. Spaces such as Thien Mu Pagoda in Hue,

Yen Tu Pagoda in Quang Ninh or the Truc Lam Pagoda system are not only tourist attractions but can also be designed as places for tourists to participate in short-term meditation courses, practice chanting or learn about Buddhist philosophy. These experiences help tourists temporarily escape the hustle and bustle of modern life, focus on their inner self and feel the tranquility, thereby enhancing happiness in both pleasure and meaning.

Caodaism, which originated in Tay Ninh, is a special case in the Vietnamese religious landscape. The ceremonies at the Tay Ninh Holy See, especially the Holy Banquet for the Great Mother and the Nine Goddesses, offer tourists a space to immerse themselves in solemn rituals, music and symbolic art. When approached in a creative experiential way, these ceremonies go beyond mere observation and can open up opportunities for tourists to participate indirectly through storytelling, virtual reality reenactments, or participate in community activities associated with Caodaism life.

Christianity has also left a deep mark on Vietnamese culture, reflected in the system of churches with unique architecture such as Notre Dame Cathedral in Ho Chi Minh City or Phat Diem Cathedral in Ninh Binh. Rituals such as Mass, choirs or hymns are clearly inner-directed, evoking a sense of spiritual connection. Creative tourism can transform these spaces into places where tourists can experience religious music, learn about Gothic architecture or participate in community activities associated with parishes.

In addition to official religions, Vietnamese folk beliefs, especially Mother Goddess worship, also create unique experiential opportunities. Hau Dong trance ritual, with its combination of music, dance, costumes and spiritual state, is a form of performance that is both sacred and artistic. When designed as an inner-directed product, tourists can not only observe but also participate in activities to learn about symbolic meanings, learn to sing Chau Van or attend workshops on performing arts.

These religious-spiritual experiences show great potential in becoming creative products in the cultural and tourism industry. They open up forms of tourism that transcend the boundaries of sightseeing, allowing tourists to participate proactively, co-create and seek deeper meaning. However, most religious tourism activities in Vietnam currently remain at the level of sightseeing, group pilgrimages or short-term worship, lacking products designed to encourage inner-directed experiences. This is an important gap that the development of creative tourism can fill, while contributing to increasing the depth and quality of the tourism industry in the future.

3.2. Artistic and performative practices

Art and performance practices are important elements in Vietnamese cultural life, and are also potential creative assets for developing inward tourism. Unlike the traditional approach to tourism, which often sees art as a performance for tourists to observe, the inward approach

sees art as a participatory process, where tourists directly experience, learn and co-create meaning.

In the treasure trove of traditional art, forms such as *đờn ca tài tử*, *ca trù*, *hát chầu văn*, *dân ca quan họ*, or Hue royal court music all contain certain symbolic values and sacredness. When performed within the framework of creative tourism, tourists can not only listen but also participate in learning about musical instruments, learn a few tunes, or practice basic rituals with the artists. This helps tourists understand the cultural context more deeply, while also evoking a spiritual connection that goes beyond a purely aesthetic experience.

In addition to traditional art, contemporary art and art therapy also open up new possibilities. Installation art programs, contemporary performances, or community art workshops are often highly interactive, allowing tourists to express their emotions, reflect, and find spiritual balance. These activities are in line with the trend of tourism seeking personal development and meaningful happiness.

Architecture is also a form of art that can be exploited for inner-directed experiences. Visiting relics such as Cham temple, Hoi An ancient houses or traditional village communal houses is not only for contemplation but can also become a creative experience through interpretive activities, handicraft practices, or reenactments of cultural life associated with the works. There, tourists are invited to participate in the cultural life, instead of just observing from the outside.

In general, art and performance practices, when placed within the framework of creative tourism, have the potential to become a powerful means of connecting tourists and cultural identity. Instead of passive consumption, tourists are encouraged to take on a co-creative role, thereby achieving meaningful experiences that contribute to fostering long-term attachment to the destination.

3.3. Tea rituals and gastronomy

Tea and culinary culture associated with tranquility is one of the unique aspects of Vietnamese spiritual life, and is also an important resource for developing inward-looking tourism products (Guo & Rato, 2019; Lee et al., 2024). Tea is not only a popular drink but also associated with rituals, life philosophies and meditative communication spaces. In many cultural regions, the art of making and enjoying tea is seen as a means to practice patience, concentration and mindfulness, thereby creating conditions for tourists to experience a state of peace in daily life (Tiwari et al., 2023).

Tea rituals in Vietnam are often associated with natural landscapes or specific cultural spaces such as ancient houses, communal houses, or traditional tea gardens. When included in the creative tourism framework, tourists can not only observe but also directly participate in the brewing process, learn the philosophy behind each operation, and experience the connection between people and nature through each cup of tea.

Besides tea, spiritual cuisine is an area that can be directly linked to the experience of introspection. Vegetarian meals, meditation menus or traditional culinary art can create a space of calm, where eating is not only to satisfy physical needs but also to experience stillness and spiritual connection. Activities such as vegetarian cooking workshops, participating in preparing a meditation meal with the community or experiencing cuisine associated with religious rituals can help tourists learn, practice and co-create cultural values.

Experiences associated with tea and cuisine therefore do not stop at the aspect of culinary tourism but can become a tool to help tourists practice mindfulness, nurture pleasure and meaningful happiness. This is a clear demonstration of the ability to transform elements of daily life into creative products, contributing to improving the quality and depth of cultural tourism.

3.4. Wellness-oriented practices

Practices that focus on body-mind-spirit health are becoming a global trend in tourism, reflecting the growing need for balance and personal development in modern society. Vietnam, with its rich natural system and tradition of practicing meditation, yoga and art therapy, has great potential to develop inner-directed tourism products associated with holistic care.

Meditation and yoga have gradually become popular in urban life in Vietnam and are also beginning to be integrated into tourism products. Meditation centers and retreats in Da Lat, Sa Pa or Con Dao not only provide a quiet space in the middle of nature but also organize short-term training programs to help tourists practice mindfulness, improve concentration and restore energy. These are experiences that have a direct impact on the feeling of happiness and pleasure, while nurturing meaningful happiness through personal development and inner connection.

In addition to meditation and yoga, art therapy is also being exploited as a means of tourism. Workshops on meditative painting, music therapy or dance therapy are held at some destinations to allow tourists to express their emotions, relieve stress and open up the process of self-reflection. These experiences are highly interactive, helping tourists become co-creators in their journey to find balance.

Nature also plays an important role in health-oriented practices. Activities such as meditative walks in the forest, bathing in mineral springs or immersing themselves in the island space not only have physical value but also evoke a sense of spiritual connection with the environment. When combined with cultural and ritual elements, these experiences can become unique creative products, contributing to the diversification of sustainable tourism.

However, health tourism products in Vietnam today mainly stop at spa services or simple physical care, have not fully exploited the cultural and spiritual depth and have not created an inward-looking product framework. This shows great room for developing creative

products combining meditation, yoga, art therapy and natural space, to meet the increasing demand of international and domestic tourists for meaningful health tourism.

4. PROPOSED CREATIVE VALUE CHAIN MODEL

4.1. Stakeholder involvement

A prominent feature of creative tourism products is the multidimensional participation of many different subjects in the value chain. With inward-looking experiences, the product creation process cannot rely solely on tourism businesses or accommodation establishments, but needs to mobilize and connect many related groups. First of all, the local community is the subject that plays a central role because they own and practice cultural, religious and artistic resources. Direct community participation not only ensures the authenticity of the experience but also helps maintain social and cultural sustainability.

Besides the community, artisans, monks, priests, ritual masters or art leaders play the role of knowledge keepers. They are both a source of inspiration and a guide for tourists to participate in cultural and spiritual practices. Tourism businesses have the task of connecting, designing products and bringing them to market, while coordinating with cultural entities to ensure a balance between commerciality and sacredness.

Local authorities and cultural-religious management organizations are also indispensable actors. They create legal frameworks, ensure policy consistency and control exploitation to avoid over-commercialization. Finally, technology and supporting service providers (digital technology, media platforms) also need to be included in the value chain to increase accessibility and expand the audience.

The creative value chain model for inward-looking experiences therefore requires coordination between communities, artisans, businesses, management agencies and supporting parties, in which each entity plays a separate role but aims at the common goal of creating profound, sustainable and meaningful tourism experiences.

4.2. Co-creation process

Co-creation is a core principle in creative tourism development, and is also the foundation for designing inner-directed experiences. This process occurs when tourists do not just consume available services but directly participate in creating experiences with the community and cultural subjects. This participation helps increase authenticity, opening up depths of meaning that traditional tourism products can hardly achieve.

In the context of inner-directed experiences, co-creation can be done in many forms. With religious-spiritual activities, tourists not only observe the ritual but can participate in the preparation process, learn the symbolic meaning and practice basic movements. In traditional arts, they can learn to sing a ca trù song with the artisan, try to dance a movement

in a hau dong ritual or practice traditional musical instruments with the community. In culinary and tea ceremonies, tourists can participate in the preparation process, learn about philosophy and enjoy it in a meditative space.

Co-creation also opens up opportunities for local communities to become equal partners. People not only provide services but also share knowledge, guide and accompany tourists on their journey to find inner balance. Tourism businesses have the role of designing the program framework, creating conditions for this interaction to take place in a safe, harmonious and mutually respectful environment.

This approach transforms tourism from a passive observation activity into a process of exchanging knowledge and experience, where both tourists and communities receive value. For tourists, it is a unique and meaningful experience; for the community, it is an opportunity to affirm identity and develop the economy associated with culture. This is an important mechanism for inward-looking products to become a creative, sustainable and scalable segment.

4.3. Role of technology

Technology plays an increasingly important role in expanding access and enhancing the quality of creative tourism experiences, especially for inner-directed products. The essence of inner-directed experiences is personalization, tranquility and depth of meaning. However, in order for these experiences to be widely spread and reach more groups of tourists, the application of technology is necessary.

Virtual reality and augmented reality can be used to recreate religious and artistic spaces that are difficult for tourists to access directly. For example, tourists can experience a meditation session in an ancient temple through virtual reality technology, or attend a religious ceremony through immersive images and sounds. This helps preserve sacred spaces, avoid the pressure of overcrowding, and allows those who live far away to still have the opportunity to access the experience.

Digital storytelling is also an important tool. Through digital platforms, tourists can learn about the history, symbolism, and spiritual significance of rituals, architecture, and art before they participate in them. This enhances preparation, allowing them to approach the experience with a more proactive mindset. Mobile applications can integrate interpretive information, short meditation exercises, or guided tours of the festival, thereby enriching the on-site experience. Technology also supports the co-creation process by connecting tourists and communities even after the experience is over. Online platforms can maintain discussion forums, online art classes, or meditation, helping to prolong the positive impact of the experience. In this way, technology does not replace physical presence, but complements it to make inner-directed experiences more flexible, engaging, and sustainable.

4.4. Evaluation and risk governance

For inward-looking experiences to develop sustainably, the development of an evaluation system must go hand in hand with a risk control and management mechanism. Not only measuring economic efficiency or tourist satisfaction, but also monitoring potential impacts on cultural resources, spiritual values and the sacredness of the practice space.

First, it is necessary to establish multidimensional evaluation indicators, including: (1) tourist experience - measured by the level of active participation, authentic feelings and cognitive transformation; (2) community - measuring the level of participation, distribution of benefits and maintenance of identity; (3) environment - measuring the ability to reduce pressure on exploitation and maintain cultural space. This index system helps to orient development without damaging core values.

Second, it is necessary to apply a mechanism to control excessive commercialization. Turning sacred spaces or religious rituals into "performance products" can undermine authenticity and offend the community. Management agencies need to coordinate with communities and religious organizations to determine the level of permission to attend, regulate the scale of exploitation, and develop ethical standards for promotion and organization.

Third, there needs to be a two-way feedback system between tourists and communities to detect early signs of exploitation. Digital technology can support this process through feedback platforms, tracking tourist data, and assessing impacts in real time.

Overall, this control and assessment mechanism is not intended to limit creativity but to maintain a balance between development and conservation, between the economic and the spiritual. This is a prerequisite for introverted experiences to become sustainable creative products, both preserving cultural values and creating long-term benefits for the community and the tourism industry.

5. DISCUSSION

This study engages with four main research streams and identifies the novelty of the approach.

First, creative tourism research has traditionally emphasized skill acquisition and workshop participation (Richards & Raymond, 2000; Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009). This paper expands on this by focusing on intrapersonal creativity: experiences that go beyond skill development to self-reflection, body-mind-spirit balance, and long-term well-being.

Second, mindfulness and transformative tourism have been recognized for their therapeutic and personal transformational roles (Kirillova et al., 2017; Lean, 2012), but have rarely been associated with the cultural industry. This study fills this gap by considering intrapersonal experiences as a product segment that can be designed, commercialized, and integrated into industry strategies.

Third, studies on religious and art tourism often focus on heritage as objects of visitation (Filho & de Bem, 2023). This paper repositions them as creative assets that can be transformed into co-creative inner-directed experiences where tourists not only observe but also participate and create meaning.

Fourth, the application of technology in tourism is mainly associated with the promotion or re-enactment of heritage (Li & Shaw, 2022). Here, technology is seen as a tool that directly supports the inner-directed process, helping to expand access, prepare the mind and prolong the impact after the trip.

Thus, the theoretical contribution of the study is to establish the concept of inner-directed experience as a creative product, connecting creative tourism, the experience economy and happiness research. In practice, the study proposes a creative value chain model and specific strategic directions for Vietnam, thereby opening up the possibility of developing a high-quality, sustainable tourism segment that can export the model internationally.

6. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

Positioning inner-directed experiences as creative products in the cultural and tourism industries requires specific policy directions and development strategies. Rather than just stopping at the level of general recommendations, this section focuses on three core questions: who is the actor, what should be done, and what results are expected?

6.1. Government and culture-tourism management agencies

The government plays a role in creating a legal framework and development orientation. It is necessary to integrate inner-directed experiences into the strategy for sustainable cultural and tourism industry development at the national and local levels. Specifically, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism can issue a pilot program for inner-directed product development in key destinations such as Hue, Tay Ninh, Da Lat, and Con Dao. Local authorities are responsible for creating conditions in terms of infrastructure and organization space while ensuring a balance between commerciality and sacredness. The expected outcome is the formation of prototype product clusters, which serve as a basis for replication and export of the model.

6.2. Local communities and cultural-religious entities

Local communities, religious organizations, artisans, and artists are the keepers of knowledge and cultural practices. They should be empowered to directly participate in the design and delivery of products. This can be done through cultural tourism cooperatives, co-management models, or community-enterprise projects. The expected outcome is increased

economic benefits for the community, while strengthening cultural pride and identity, helping the co-creation process take place in a sustainable manner.

6.3. Tourism enterprises and creative startups

Tourism enterprises have the role of connecting the market and bringing products to tourists. Tourism businesses, hotels and creative startups need to invest in personalized product design, apply technology to support inner-directed experiences, and develop integrated service packages (retreats, art workshops, meditation - tea - culinary retreat tours). The expected result is to create differentiated products, enhance the image of the destination and expand the high-quality tourism market.

6.4. Education and human resource training facilities

Universities, research institutes and training centers need to include in their curricula content related to creative tourism, art therapy, cultural management and spiritual experience leadership skills. At the same time, it is necessary to build short-term training programs for tour guides, young artisans and the community. The expected result is to form a team of human resources capable of designing, coordinating and inspiring, thereby ensuring the quality and professionalism of inner-directed products.

6.5. The role of technology and media company

Technology companies and media agencies can develop digital platforms to promote, guide, and maintain post-experience connections. Virtual reality, augmented reality, and digital storytelling can be deployed to expand access while supporting the preparation and reflection process for tourists. The expected outcome is to create a digital ecosystem that accompanies tourists, enhancing the impact and prolonging the positive effects of the experience.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has proposed to position inner-directed experiences as a creative product in the Vietnamese cultural and tourism industry. Based on the theoretical frameworks of experiential economy and creative tourism, the paper points out that Vietnam's cultural, religious and artistic resources, including the system of pagodas, religious rituals, performing arts, tea culture, meditation, yoga and culinary retreats, have great potential to be restructured into meaningful products. These products not only help tourists achieve a state

of body-mind-spirit balance and enhance both hedonic and meaningful happiness, but also open up new directions for improving the quality and depth of the tourism industry.

The main contributions of the study are threefold. First, conceptually, the study has identified and described inner-directed experiences as a creative product segment, beyond the scope of heritage tourism or traditional religious tourism. Second, in theory, the study builds a creative value chain model for inner-directed experiences, emphasizing the role of co-creation, community participation and technology integration. Third, in practice, the study provides specific policy directions and development strategies for the state, community, businesses, educational institutions and the technology - communication sector, thereby providing a feasible roadmap to realize this model.

However, the study still has some limitations. The article only stops at the level of proposing a theoretical framework and analyzing potential, without empirical data to test the real impact of inner-directed experiences on tourist happiness. The illustrative examples are still biased towards theoretical analysis and have not gone into specific field cases. In addition, the problem of over-commercialization and the risk of fading sacred values when developing inner-directed products also need to be carefully considered.

Therefore, future research directions should focus on three points: conducting qualitative and quantitative surveys to measure the impact of inner-directed experiences on hedonic happiness and meaningful happiness; specific case studies at potential destinations such as Hue, Tay Ninh, Da Lat, Con Dao to verify the feasibility of the model; and further analysis of the balance mechanism between commercial development and cultural and spiritual value preservation. These efforts will contribute to perfecting the theoretical framework while supporting the practice of policymaking and implementing the strategy to develop inner-directed tourism as a creative product of Vietnam.

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