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Editor's Note

As of February 2023, the global tourism industry continues its journey towards recovery from the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the sector has made significant strides, it remains in a state of flux, with several key trends and developments shaping its trajectory.

The tourism industry has shown resilience and adaptability in the face of the pandemic. Many countries have eased travel restrictions, leading to a gradual increase in tourism activities, both domestically and internationally. However, recovery rates vary across regions. Domestic tourism has been a lifeline for the industry. Travelers have been exploring their own countries, contributing to the revival of local tourism economies. This trend is expected to continue as people prioritize safety and convenience. The vaccination campaigns worldwide have been a critical factor in reopening borders and restoring traveler confidence. Vaccine passports and proof of vaccination are becoming commonplace for international travel.

The digital transformation of the tourism sector has accelerated. Online booking platforms, contactless payments, and virtual experiences have become standard, enhancing both convenience and safety for travelers. Environmental and social sustainability have gained prominence. Travelers are increasingly interested in eco-friendly and responsible tourism options, pushing the industry to adopt more sustainable practices.

Traveler behavior has shifted, with a greater emphasis on health and wellness. Wellness tourism, outdoor activities, and remote destinations have seen increased interest. The integration of technology, including artificial intelligence (AI) and augmented reality (AR), has enhanced the travel experience. AI-driven chatbots and AR-enhanced tours are examples of these innovations. The aviation sector has seen a gradual recovery in passenger numbers. Airlines have implemented safety measures, such as improved air filtration systems, to mitigate health risks during flights. Challenges persist, including uncertainty about the emergence of new variants, sporadic travel restrictions, and a need for industry-wide standardization of health and safety protocols.

The tourism industry's recovery journey is ongoing, marked by a mix of optimism and caution. While the path ahead may still be uncertain, the industry's ability to adapt, embrace sustainability, and prioritize traveler safety positions it well for future growth and resilience. Monitoring the evolving landscape and embracing innovation will continue to be essential in the months to come.

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Tourist Destination Assets as a Factor Influencing Traveler Feedback (The Example of Kazakhstan, Almaty Region)

Prashant Kumar Gautam

Abstract

The importance of branding strategy in the sphere of tourism, which demonstrates rapid growth, shows the experience of developed tourist countries. When implementing national and destination branding, different theoretical and practical branding models are used depending on the specifics of each territory. At the same time destination assets form the image about the territory. On the part of tourism destination managers it is important to choose destination assets that are rational. Accordingly, in this study, we tried to answer the question of what assets a developing tourist destination has. As a result of the destination branding strategy, we can note an increase in the number of tourists, their satisfaction with the trip, their desire to return and offer to others.

The steady economic growth caused by the development of tourism in the country, the employment of the population, the restoration of historical and cultural sites and their popularization as a national heritage encourage developing tourist destinations to use models of rational branding. Considering the effectiveness of the growth of the tourism industry for the developing tourist destination, an empirical experience in the Republic of Kazakhstan was conducted, a questionnaire survey and regression analysis was conducted to test the presented hypotheses. The hypotheses presented in the study are aimed at identifying the relationship between the assets of the developing tourist destination and the travelers' feedback. The article's review of the branding literature found that local residents are a significant participant in branding practices. When a branding strategy is supported by residents, residents execute it with a sense of patriotism. And if the locals find the destination branding strategy inappropriate for the image of the territory, they will not support it and destination branding will not be implemented. At the same time, the conducted study also includes the population's ambassadorial activity.

Keywords: Destination Branding, Recreation Areas, Tourist Facilities, Compulsory Activities, Destination Activities

National branding is usually implemented in one direction. However, there are individual destination and branding focused on several countries (Semone & Kozak, 2012). Policy makers at the national level understand better the power of branding to promote national goals (Dinnie, 2008). Tourism competition between cities, metropolitan areas, and countries has intensified. Thus, community leaders have begun to differentiate the perception of their territory and create brands of certain destinations (Hautbois C., 2019). Destination managers should keep in mind that the uniqueness of the effect generated by destination assets and the population is one of the factors influencing the promotion of a destination (Lai et al., 2021). In doing so, scholars emphasize differentiation and the unique nature of a destination as factors that reveal the nature of the destination brand and consider it the basis

of brand assets. This raises a reasonable question, what are the components of the assets of a tourist destination. It is obvious that the process of formation and branding of a destination brand will be associated with destination assets. Accordingly, we believe that a significant role in the process of destination branding is played by destination assets identified in the study. The factors influencing the customary branding process can include macro environmental factors, geographical constraints, history, influence of various and stakeholders, management and feedback (Balakrishnan, 2009). The task of the destination brand is to give the pre-selected market relevant and effective characteristics of the particular brand and to consolidate them (Morgan et al., 2011). Today, trends and research related to destination branding focus on

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the concepts of strategy, experience, consumer brand equity, compatibility (attachment) with the destination, destination loyalty, word-of-mouth distribution, media. (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). In addition, destinations should choose combinations of brand components that will promote rational decision-making by travelers and build loyalty to the tourist destination (Balakrishnan, 2009; Kladou & Kehagias, 2014). Branding is a form of essentializing the association and inclusion of part of the population within its own cultural identity, (Anderson & Morrison, 2002; Balakrishnan, 2009) also limit those who are not protected by the brand (L. V. Prott & P. J. O'Keefe, 1992).

Literature Review

The lifecycle of a destination image can be placed as follows: image structure, information processing theory, information sources, behavioral component, image level, formation process (Rodrigues et al., 2012). However, the occupation of branding, the activity associated with the creation of a logo, is still purely technical (Anholt, 2007). According to the research of Yang Xu, Jingyan Li, Alexander Belyi, Sangwon Park, the questions of determining the national image included «Which aspects positively influence the state image and which hinder the interest of tourists?», «How much the common image about the state matches the image that the state wants to form?», «What principles should be considered when making up the state brand in the tourist destination?» (Xu et al., 2021). From the above questions, it follows that the main influences on the country branding process are internal and external factors. The idea that states position themselves as brands is most familiar to marketers today, as well as to many economists and politicians (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002). As a result, international marketers have understood how to attract capital to their brands in terms of effective use of domestic destinations (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002). In doing so, it can be seen that the parties leading destination branding in brand equity offer consumers an initiative role and put it at the center of the strategy (Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). It is important to note that brand loyalty, suggestion expression, and return depend on quality (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010; Kladou & Kehagias, 2014). The existing mechanisms of destination branding consist of the following components: perceived approach, stakeholders, target market, marketing activities, communication, positioning, differentiation, feedback (Aaker, 1991). It is assumed that the drivers of strategic planning for destination branding include economy, service, transit hub, retail and tourism (Balakrishnan, 2009; Braun, 2012; Kim et al., 2018). Branding strategy is the formation of a strong brand (Kotler et al., 2013) and is related to a destination's reputation activities: if a destination has a good reputation, it can attract investors and tourists

(Jiménez-Esquinas & Sánchez-Carretero, 2018).

Brand theory in its development has reached the commercial experience and realized mainly in two areas: tourism (Balakrishnan, 2009) and export marketing. There has been an active exchange of best practices in commercial marketing and "target marketing" for many decades, and in fact the term "destination branding" has been used for at least a decade (Anholt, 2010).

Kavaratzis and Mihalis construct a five-step model of destination branding. Firstly, the researchers look for answers to such questions as destination resources, the current state of development. Secondly, the stakeholders share their vision of the destination brand, revealing the essence of the proposed branding strategy. At the third stage of consultations dialogues about the set goal and tasks are built, residents' views and their perceptions depending on the chosen brand assets are discussed. Fourthly, work is done to bring the above processes to the chosen destination. In the fifth stage of model, it is found out what opportunities the destination has in terms of investment, work force, education, recreation, and the need to implement them arises. However, it is believed that all stages can be carried out simultaneously (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2021). As seen from the research, when determining the factors revealing the nature of the destination brand, it is necessary to pay attention to the differentiation and uniqueness of the destination, and the factors identified have been called the basis of brand assets (Brent Ritchie & Ritchie Brent Ritchie, 1998; Cathy H. C. Hsu et al., 2008; Tasci & Kozak, 2006). In addition, tourist destinations must constantly monitor how much of the destination's image has taken hold in the minds of tourists. This is because consistent and systematic implementation of the positioning strategy extends the duration of successful destination branding practices (Qu et al., 2011).

Feedback

A country's tourism planning strategy and range of services should be based on the preferences of foreign travelers. Nevertheless, depending on the geographical location, the origin and culture, religious views of the nations may be one of the reasons why tourists come (Xu et al., 2021). According to Koens et al., 2021 research, today, researchers and destination managers need to pay special attention to the ways of destination activities that create demand according to supply. In addition, access to tourist sites, attractions, and cultural events leads to a much more frequent pairing of supply and demand (Koens et al., 2021). The content of destination branding research is related to concepts related to consumer behavior. For example: stability, satisfaction, application, gaining experience, acceptance, motivation, choice, intention, interest. In addition, the terms «quality of service» and

«communication through consumers», including «word-of-mouth» and «suggestions» are often used (Hankinson, 2005). Although an element of a destination has no effect on satisfaction, it can have a significant impact on an individual’s future actions.

Given the above grounds, we assume that the «Recreation areas», «Attractive tourist facilities», and «Compulsory activities» as presented by destination managers, are important components of destination brand assets. If one of the objectives is to increase tourists’ desire to return or recommend to others, the relationship between individual destination attributes and the desire to return and the desire to offer to others should be determined (Kozak, 2003). Well Hosany & Gilbert reasoned that the feeling of satisfaction from visitors’ experiences with the destination gives an impetus to present to others (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010). In addition, the relationship between current performance and satisfaction needs to be determined in order to determine the factors that influence satisfaction. In destination management, we prioritize the process by determining in advance which criteria are important (Kozak, 2003). The presence of consumer feedback in the process of destination branding is one of the main goals. Accordingly, the existence of a link between the assets of a destination and the types of consumer feedback led to the following hypotheses.

- H 1: The offered leisure destinations by destination managers influence the level of satisfaction, the desire to return and to offer to others;
- H 2: Visits to attractive tourist destinations offered by destination managers affect the level of satisfaction, the desire to return and offer to others;
- H 3: The use of compulsory additional services provided by destination managers affects the level of satisfaction, the desire to return and offer to others;

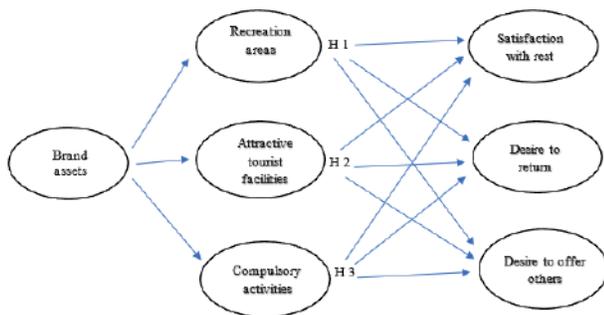


Fig. 1 Hypothetical model of destination branding for developing tourist destinations

To test the hypotheses presented in the study, an empirical experience was conducted in the Almaty region of the Republic of Kazakhstan, located in the center of the Eurasian continent. A positive image of the state

is a favorable tool to attract investment in the tourist infrastructure of the country and the sale of Kazakhstan as a tourist destination. Besides, it will be profitable to present and promote Kazakhstan’s tourist goods to the world market and increase their competitiveness. Tourist interest arises due to various factors of tourist destination in regions. These factors can include increased interest of Western Europe and the USA in alternative cultural products of Asian countries; business and investment attractiveness of the country; assessment of the tourism sphere in Kazakhstan as one of the priority directions; historical and cultural values and special traditions of the Kazakh people; diversity of tourist and recreational resources for recreation (Smykova, 2015). The ancient trade route Silk road, which connected Europe and China and crossed the southern part of modern Kazakhstan, Almaty region, is a historically important factor (Kantarci, 2007). Even though Kazakhstan obtains large reserves of natural resources, it still cannot form the tourist image of the country. In this regard, the formation of an optimal tourist image (Smykova, 2015) is one of the main tasks of the Almaty region in the field of tourism as a developing tourist destination.

Results

Research Tools

According to the study, a survey was conducted. The survey questions include nineteen questions, which are divided into three sections. The first section contains demographic questions such as age, gender, place of residence, acquired knowledge and is presented in the table below.

Table 1 Demographic information about the survey participants

	Unit of measure	Quantity	Percent %
Age	16-24	290	58,4
	25-34	103	20,7
	35-44	66	13,3
	45-54	5	1,0
	55-64	29	5,8
	65 +	4	0,8
Gender	male		35,4
	female		64,6
Education	High school	74	14,9
	college graduate	117	23,5
	Bachelor’s degree	257	51,7
	Master’s degree	34	6,8
	Academic degree (PhD, Candidate of Sciences, Doctor of Sciences)	15	3,0

Income level	\$ 186 and below	87	17,5
	\$ 186-437	111	22,3
	\$ 437-926	149	30,0
	\$ 926-1310	71	14,3
	\$ 1310-2183	56	11,3
	\$ 2183 and up	23	4,6
Frequency of travel	I don't travel at all	197	39,6
	rarely	119	23,9
	sometimes	111	22,3
	often	40	8,0
	very often	30	6,0
Total		497	100

The second part of the questionnaire, questions related to the unique image of the destination and desired additional types of services were asked, while the third part identified recommendations and attitudes toward returning, giving feedback and recommending to others. The scores according to the questions were based on a Likert scale. In the second part «How often do you associate your vacation with the following destinations in the Almaty region?» the question offered 1 to 5 ratings in thirteen categories. Where 1-not at all, 2-rarely, 3-infrequently, 4-frequently, 5-very often.

Next question: as a destination brand on a tourist trip, rate your interest in visiting the following sites? The questionnaire presents tourist sites of Almaty region, including Historical Culture Monuments, Natural Parks, UNESCO sites. Respondents were able to rate their interest in visiting the objects, the total number of which is 25, ranging from 1-5 based on the Likert scale. 1-very low, 2-low, 3-medium, 4-good, 5-very good. In order to find out what additional services respondents are interested in during a tourist trip to a destination, 12 types of additional services were offered to choose from, 1 - fundamentally no, 5 - on a highly probable scale.

The third section, called «Your Opinion», is aimed at obtaining information about residents' ambassadorial activities related to the tourist destination, i.e. satisfaction, the desire to return and to offer to others. The survey was conducted on an electronic platform, May 2021. The information obtained was processed by IBM SPSS 28.

Regression analysis was performed to test the hypotheses presented. The analysis was conducted among the properly selected vacation destinations as assets of the destination's evolving tourism brand, attractive tourist attractions, obligatory activities and satisfaction with rest, desire to return, desire to offer others. In particular, how satisfied are you with your trip to a developing tourist destination? Is it possible to return to the Almaty

region as a tourist destination? Can you introduce the Almaty region to others as a tourist destination? - the relationship between the issues and the assets of the destination has been revealed. Regression analysis conducted to determine the relationship between the recommended vacation destinations, attractive tourist attractions, compulsory additional activities and the level of satisfaction, the desire for repeat visits, the provision of others is presented in the following table.

Table 2 Results of regression analysis reflecting the relationship between Destination brand assets and respondents' feedback

Recreation areas				
	R	R-square	Regression	Remainder
Satisfaction level	165 ^a	0,027	14,489	515,203
Desire to return	215 ^a	0,046	14,145	291,492
Desire to recommend to others	196 ^a	0,038	16,224	405,525
Attractive tourist facilities				
Satisfaction level	229 ^a	0,052	27,681	502,010
Desire to return	224 ^a	0,050	15,361	290,275
Desire to recommend to others	215 ^a	0,046	19,438	402,312
Compulsory activities				
Satisfaction level	242 ^a	0,058	30,928	498,764
Desire to return	232 ^a	0,054	16,398	289,239
Desire to recommend to others	312 ^a	0,098	41,150	380,599

According to the results of the regression analysis conducted to determine the extent to which offered vacation destinations by destination managers affect satisfaction and desire to return, to offer to others, R was 165^a; 229^a; 242^a and the regression equals 14.489; 27.681; 30.928. In the analysis conducted to determine the relationship of visitation to offered tourism sites with measures of trip satisfaction, re-visitation, recommendation to others, R was 229^a; 224^a; 215^a ke, and the regression was 27.681; 15.361; 19.438. In the regression analysis results on the extent to which the use of compulsory extras offered by destination managers affects satisfaction and desire to return, to offer to others, R 242^a; 232^a; 312^a. The regressions were 30.928; 16.398; 41.150.

Conclusion

In order to test the hypotheses presented in the second stage of the study, a regression analysis was conducted between the assets of the developing tourist destination brand and the desire to be satisfied with the trip, return, offer to others. In particular, the level of correlation was determined with the following questions «How satisfied are you with your trip to the developing tourist destination?», «Is it possible to return to the Almaty region as a tourist destination?», «Can you introduce the Almaty region to others as a tourist destination?». Nevertheless, the evidence of the above-mentioned links in this study was examined from the perspective of the population's Ambassador activity and was based on the views of Lai et al. that the population proudly performs Ambassador activity if they find destination brand assets rational, if they are involved from the beginning of the destination branding process. The average indicators of the population's assessment of destinations, facilities, and types of services in a destination showed a high level and coincided with the indicator of the population's patriotic feelings towards their place of residence. The views of Lai et al., that the population can carry the ambassador activity of a destination worthily if it considers destination branding rational were tested in this study in developing a practical model of destination branding.

According to Snepenger et al., 2004, 2007, residents of the region and visitors revealed the meaning of the place and offered the destination as the keeper of meaning of certain experiences. They emphasized that living in a destination, using services and goods, and interacting with others creates meaning of the place, a parable. Accordingly, this study shows the importance of destinations of recreation and services provided in a destination, presented as assets of the evolving brand of the destination. In addition, Snepenger et al., 2004, 2007 views that attractions, compared to activities, evoke much more vivid emotions for tourists and residents also justify our suggestion of attractions as destination brand assets in our study. Kladou & Kehagias, 2014 found that brand assets have a positive effect on awareness and quality, while awareness affects quality and associations (imagination), in addition, quality and associations (imagination) affect loyalty (Kladou & Kehagias, 2014). Accordingly, we believe that the relationship presented in the study between level of satisfaction, the desire to return and to offer to others and recreation areas, attractive tourist facilities, compulsory activities as assets of the developing tourist destination brand can be used in the theoretical and practical model of destination branding.

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