



Original scientific paper

Received: August 28, 2021

Reviewed: October 12, 2021

Accepted: November 22, 2021

UDC: 911.3:338.48(58)

<https://doi.org/10.2298/IJGI2103311S>



## TERRITORIAL IMAGE AND BRANDING AS TOOLS FOR DEVELOPING WESTERN KAZAKHSTAN AS A TOURIST DESTINATION

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**Abstract:** With the development of tourism it has been necessary modernization of ways on being attended by tourists. Comparatively new method of influencing to a customer is branding, has been the most significant process in terms of promotion, which identify features of exact territory in contribution of competitive activities for being attractive for tourists. The article is aimed to identify the existing and promising tourist brands of Western Kazakhstan. Since territorial branding is a key factor in the development of tourism industry, the authors conducted a survey among respondents from different regions of Kazakhstan to identify potential tourist brands, main associations, as well as challenges and opportunities for recreation and tourism. The research was carried out using the Google Forms platform and sociological survey. The research results prove that there are unofficial leading brands in the region, which are likely to become the region's official tourist symbols. Besides, both favorable and unfavorable factors for recreation demonstrate the controversial development of tourism industry in the research area. Creation, development, and promotion of a tourist brand plays an important role in the tourism and recreation area. This contributes to strengthening the tourist destination image in the tourism market.

**Keywords:** territorial image and branding; historical and cultural brand; natural brand; tourist destination image; Western Kazakhstan

### Introduction

Territorial image is primarily based on territorial identity, which is determined by a set of visual and verbal laconic features. In point of fact, territorial identity depends on its particular characteristics and available natural resources, demographic characteristics of the population, ethnicity, historical heritage and cultural or symbolic resources, the level of social and economic development (industrial infrastructure, labor resources, employment, financial resources, and favorable business environment), living standards, as well as investment potential and innovative resources, etc. A territorial image is a pattern of individual characteristics and resources of a territory (natural and climatic, cultural and historical, ethnic, political, social, and economic ones, etc.) fixed in people's mind. According to Murphy, Moscardo, & Benckendorff (2007), destination branding is developing quickly as an approach to promoting tourist destinations. While the concept of destination branding has been acquired from the

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universe of general shopper products and applied in various public travel industry objections, scholarly investigation of the worth and adequacy of destination branding has slowly evolved. In light of this, Beerli & Martín (2004, p. 1) reported that brand image presents an integral role in the success of tourism destinations, since “image, seen as a mental picture formed by a set of attributes that define the destination in its various dimensions, exercises a strong influence on consumer behavior in the tourism sector.”

Tourist destination brand is a well-known object or a set of objects related to heritage of nature, heritage of culture, and heritage of history, in addition, route covering visits of tourists to these objects, unique events, crafts, services, activities that attract a large flow of tourists. One of the tools for the territorial development is the region’s successful positioning. Territorial branding is aimed at creating the region’s competitive advantages over other territories, as well as improving its image, increasing its popularity and fame among tourists. That is why it requires not only attracting potential consumers of a tourist product, but also making recommendations on how to increase a number of people interested in visiting a tourist area, which, in turn, will lead to the growth of tourist flows (Ashton, 2015; Chan, Suryadipura, Kostini, & Miftahuddin, 2021).

Currently, there is a set of various marketing activities for tourism development in any part of the world. It is therefore hardly surprising that territorial branding, which is defined as the formation of a positive attitude toward the region and its recognition, is gaining increasing popularity nowadays. Positioning a positive image of the region, which should be unique, becomes an essential condition for the development of a tourist destination brand (Anholt, 2013; Gajić et al., 2021).

Located at the junction of Europe and Asia, Western Kazakhstan lies between the relatively humid Eastern European steppes and the sultry deserts of Central Asia. Consequently, due to its geographical position, the region has a sharp continental and extreme arid climate, the predominance of deserts and semi-deserts throughout its vast territory. In this regard, Western Kazakhstan with its distinctive nature, history, culture, and ethnography has a unique opportunity to occupy its niche in the world tourism market. At this point, it is highly necessary to form an attractive image of the tourist country and create the most possible favorable conditions for tourists visiting Kazakhstan.

Located in the west and southwest of the country, Western Kazakhstan includes four regions: West Kazakhstan, Aktobe, Atyrau, and Mangistau. The region can effectively attract tourists to enjoy its diverse and interesting landscapes. Due to the homogenous natural conditions typical for this area, there are good opportunities for making a comprehensive consideration of complex natural relationships, foreseeing direct and indirect consequences of anthropogenic impact on the environment. The promotion of this region directly depends on its attractiveness and the level of tourism development (local brands of nature, history, and culture).

Having analyzed Western Kazakhstan perception as a tourist destination, the authors of the article can safely assume that the development of an appropriate positioning strategy will allow to distinguish the region from other tourist destinations and attract tourists through the most effective communication channels. The research was mainly aimed at investigating the perception of Western Kazakhstan as a travelling territory. The study’s objectives were a making Western Kazakhstan a unique travelling region, as well as to gather information on possible ways of improving a tourist destination.

## Methods

According to Khazaei Pool, Hanifi, Mirabi, & Taghipourian (2018), brand sentiment occurs when a person has information on the highlights of the stimulants that have been assessed positively and he/she feel something new about them. In this way, the person is expected to move toward the stimulant. In the event, if the novelty is not perceived and the information on the stimulant has been assessed ineffectively or adversely, the propensity to move toward the stimulant may be diminished. At the point when a person is fulfilled with the stimulant, the apparent novelty will be decreased.

A tourist destination brand defines its place in the world hospitality industry and reveals potential tourists main preferences. As a result, a tourist area brand is considered an image fixed in consumers' mind. According to Vizgalov (2011), there are four basic parameters of a successful brand: uniqueness, ideology that converts uniqueness into history, validity of factors (formation and justification of one's expectations), and appropriate architecture. In our research, the appropriate architecture is considered to be the system-based tourist attractions that determine how a brand can interact with territorial products (Procas & Barroso, 2021; Vazhenina, 2010).

In order to develop a methodology for analyzing a tourist destination brand, it is necessary to select those indicators that will be applied for subsequent analysis. The process of their determination is based on the selection of those indicators that are most consistent with the peculiarities of the tourism market and can be used to analyze the tourist destination brand. Aaker (1996) distinguishes the following most desirable indicators for analyzing the tourist destination brand: consumer satisfaction, brand quality, brand leadership, brand identity, brand associations, and brand awareness. Indicators of consumer awareness of the brand itself, its quality and image are suitable for brand analysis (Aronczyk, 2013; Konecnik, 2004; Rein, Kotler, & Haider, 1993). Its image, investment, tourist and social attractiveness can be applied to promote a tourist region (Meshcheryakov & Tikhonova, 2008). The most suitable indicators for analyzing a tourist destination brand include the territorial attractiveness, perception, potential, people, and their background (Anholt, 2006).

Territorial branding is aimed at creating a region's competitive advantages over other territories, as well as improving its image, increasing its popularity, and fame among tourists. That is why it requires not only attracting potential consumers of a tourist product, but also making recommendations on how to increase a number of people interested in visiting a tourist area, which, in turn, will lead to the growth of tourist flows (Anastassova, 2011; Iordanova, 2017; Nghiêm-Phú & Bagul, 2020).

The peculiarities of a region, national traditions, historical memory of the people, ideology, and others create a complete image whereby a particular country can be identified among the entire world community. On the one hand, the components affecting the formation and perception of the tourist destination brand are interdependent, but on the other hand, they are hierarchically structured. Therefore, one can single out the basic factors forming a mainstay of the image core, which, once formed, do not change and provide an identification basis, i.e., representation of a society, country, and territory in the international environment (Hankinson, 2005; Moro & Rita 2018). The most important factor is the tourist destination brand that serves as a separate category of information types and plays a key role in determining tourist destination image attractiveness to potential tourists. Territorial image forms the tourist destination brand as a core containing information (on the country's unbranded objects, phenomena and events) sent through different communication channels.

Tourist destination image has a number of features. Some of them may become obvious when a tourist country's brand is compared with a country-specific image. The latter gives an overall picture of the country, reflects its characteristic and typological features, while tourist destination image

serves as a kind of “visiting card”. It focuses on the originality of the territory, its unique features and objects, corresponding to the country’s fragmentary perception. It is another matter that a tourist destination image should not only be visual and recognizable, but also well-advertised. It is also characterized by a special dynamism and can be updated taking into account the tourism seasonality, as well as the tourist destination development or changes in the tourists’ needs (Sergeyeva et al., 2020). Having analyzed the tourist image of Western Kazakhstan, the authors of the research can conclude that it is necessary to improve and create new attractive places of tourism industry that will be preferred by tourists not only from different parts of the country but also from all around the world. Consequently, the advancement of hospitality industry in Western Kazakhstan region will have a favorable impact on the formation of its territorial image in general. Attracting a large flow of tourists requires the creation comprehensive tourist territorial picture and its regional tourism policy inclusion. At the same time, it is important to create a routing framework not as it were for allocation of image resources, but also for thematic variability of tourist product offers and packages. There is a need to take the systemic project activities focused on the practical integration of the described tourist areas into a single whole. Within the framework of tourism policy, the development of specific measures for the project implementation would require the active participation of various sectors of society.

The article includes the findings of a sociologically relevant survey aimed to recognize Western Kazakhstan territorial image peculiarities. The authors of the research tried to find out whether the formed image of Western Kazakhstan geospace coincides with the reality. In our research, we also conducted a survey among the respondents based on Google Forms platform. The use of the internet platform made it possible to alert social network users to the alarming questions about tourism development in Western Kazakhstan region and to get the most honest answers to them. The survey results have shown that there is some discrepancy between the territorial image, perceived by the respondents, and the direction for its development.

## Results and discussion

Taking into account the status of tourist resources and survey findings, 48 different types of tourist attractions have been analyzed in this research. According to the analysis results, tourist resources can be grouped as follows:

- territorial brand-leaders and objects that provide high quality services;
- potentially branded objects that require significant marketing promotion strategies; and
- unpopular objects of local significance that may form an attractive image of the territory.

Based on the results obtained, it has been revealed that the branding policy strengthening requires the following measures to be taken:

- the development of social advertising aimed at promoting the competitive position of Western Kazakhstan in the tourism market;
- the use of creative marketing activities such as event marketing; and
- the use of social networks to promote the national tourist product.

If a territory is considered as a tourist product, it will definitely undergo branding. A tourist destination brand may be represented by a well-known set of objects related to cultural, historical, or natural heritage, as well as a route covering visits of tourists to these objects, unique events, and acquaintance with national traditions, and life, which will attract a large flow of tourists. A tourist destination brand is a collection of those attractions that are primarily shown to tourists.

Getting acquainted with the territory without visiting these popular places is considered incomplete.

A brand can only exist if the region has its historical and cultural potential, and it is one of the most important and promising resources for the tourist destination development. By entering a new information field, each tourist will eventually get acquainted with different aspects of a destination country's culture and way of life. Even a tourist with low cultural motivation will be included in the cultural environment, getting to know the so-called "cultural minimum". It goes without saying that the development of cultural tourism is a promising trend for a region with a rich historical and cultural heritage (Table 1).

Table 1  
*Assessment scale for Western Kazakhstan branding*

Assessment criterion	Point scale				
	1	2	3	4	5
Historical and cultural brand component $k = 1.5$					
Number of monuments of republican significance (items)	1–4	5–9	10–14	15–19	$\geq 20$
Number of monuments of local significance (items)	100–400	401–600	601–800	801–1000	$\geq 1000$
Attractiveness of the region's historical and cultural brand (average point score of respondents)	1	2	3	4	5
Natural brand component $k = 1$					
Recognition (item)	1	2	3	4	5
Organization of sightseeing tours (item)	1	2	3	4	5
Leadership of the region's natural brand (average point score of respondents)	1	2	3	4	5

In the current investigation, a survey was conducted among the respondents to evaluate the historical, cultural, and natural brands of the territory. The survey comprised 106 respondents, and they noted an essential role of historical and cultural sites in creating the territorial brand (attractiveness of natural objects – 39.83%, historical and cultural objects – 60.17%). The following popular tourist attractions related to the natural and historical brands of Western Kazakhstan have been investigated:

- in Aktobe region—Eset Kokiuly Memorial Complex, Kotibar Basenuly Mausoleum, Abulkair Khan Memorial Complex, Kobylandy Batyr Memorial Complex, Abat-Baytak Necropolis, Daumshar Necropolis;
- in Atyrau region—Saraishyk Ancient Settlement, Imangara Cave, Karashungil Necropolis,
- Akmeshit Necropolis, Makhambet Mausoleum, Aktobe Settlement;
- in West Kazakhstan region—Uralsk's Architectural Buildings and Museums, Zhaiyk Settlement, Zhangir Khan Mausoleum, Zhumagazy Khazret Mausoleum, Bokey Orda Historical Complex, Taksai Barrow Complex (the 6th–5th centuries BC); and
- in Mangistau region—Beket Ata Underground Mosque, Shakpak Ata Cave Mosque, Shopan Ata Mosque, Mangistau Regional Underground Mosques, Mount Otpan, Petroglyphs on Mount Airakty.

According to the survey, the largest historical and cultural monuments of Mangistau region are Beket Ata underground mosque and Petroglyphs on Mount Airakty. Beket Ata underground mosque is considered the architectural and engineering masterpiece of Mangistau. It is located in the foothills of the Ustyurt plateau. One can admire the unusual acoustics of the mosque where the amazing audibility of recited prayers is preserved in all the rooms. Scientists have put forward an interesting hypothesis that Beket Ata mosque used to be an observatory, in which a Sufi observed the celestial motion. A distinctive feature of the mosque is its location, visitors can get inside if they descend about 1,500 m underground (Koshim, Sergeyeva, Bexeitova, & Aktymbayeva, 2020).

In Mangistau region, some parts of petroglyphs are confined to the table mountains such as Mount Airakty, which is located in the east of the Western Karatau ridge in the Kurtumas tract. "World Picture" is the name of the petroglyph found in the southeast of Airakty, and it has the size of 84.5 × 107 m. This is a piece of material made by Aday nomads in the 18th–19th centuries. It should be pointed out that this gravure reflects ancient people's worldview. Images of horses, mouflons, and birds are engraved on the round rock in various planes as if superimposed on each other. Diagonal straight lines go along the entire plane of the petroglyph, creating an extraordinary composition density. The space between large figures of animals is filled with many small figures. This style is typical only for the Mangistau petroglyphs. Most of the petroglyphs depict the real-life objects and events. The ancient artists of Mangistau could easily work both on the architectural plane and natural outcrops. Besides, figures on the rock plane shows us the preservation of a strict regularity (Astafiev & Petrov, 2017).

According to the survey, Kobylandy Batyr Memorial Complex (60 survey respondents) and Abat-Baitak Necropolis (56 respondents) scored the highest ratings in Aktobe region. Kobylandy Batyr Memorial Complex is located in Zhirenkopa village and occupies an area of 2.06 ha along the left bank of the Great Kobda River. The complex consists of a mausoleum, a hall of fame, and an obelisk. It looks like a helmet with a shield and a bow put down together. The height of the mausoleum is 17.5 m, and its inner diameter reaches 16 m (Beknazarov, 2019). Originally founded in the 18th–20th centuries, Abat-Baitak Necropolis is of great importance for the Kazakhs. Except the Abat mausoleum, it includes one mazar built of raw bricks and more than 200 kulpytas (gravestones), located on the western side of the graves. Abat-Baitak grave stones are distinguished by various patterns, compositional and design solutions, as well as incredible stone carving. For example, a gravestone made of petrified wood (found in the western part of the necropolis) has attracted a great deal of attention due to its unusual simplicity. Many monuments were carved with texts and signs written in the Kazakh language of the Arabic script. They have a very important historical and ethnographic significance (Azhigali, 2014).

West Kazakhstan region has such outstanding historical sites as Bokey Orda Complex (59 respondents) and Zhangir Khan Mausoleum (52 respondents). Bokey Orda is a unique architectural monument dating back to the 19th century. At the present time, there is a city-museum on the site which used to be the khan's headquarters. It consists of five parts: the Museum of Bokey Orda History, the Museum of Independence, the Armory Chamber of the Khan's Palace, the Museum of Bokey Orda Public Education, and the Museum of the First Kazakh Printing House. Based on the study of Karagojshin et al. (2012, p. 366) "the history of the museum complex dates back to 1962. It was originally called the Orda Historical and Revolutionary Museum, and a few years later it was given the status of a state museum. In the early 2000s, the territory of the museum was significantly expanded, and it became known as the Bokey Orda Historical and Museum Complex." Zhangir Khan Mausoleum is located in the khan's cemetery in the north-west of Khan Ordasy village. In 1849, Zhangir Khan was reburied in a wooden-made mausoleum. In 1933, this mausoleum was adapted for the needs of agricultural sector. In 1997, a

new mausoleum with high white-stone domes was built at the request of local citizens and with the support of the regional administration. The historical and museum complex also includes a memorial pantheon with three mausoleums of Zhangir Khan, Dauletkerei (the khan's cousin, musician), and Mukhamedsalyk Babadzhanov (the khan's student, historian and ethnographer, whose ashes were reburied from the territory of a military training ground) (Karagojshin et al., 2012).

According to the survey, the following brands were identified in Atyrau region: Akmeshit Necropolis (54 respondents) and Makhambet Mausoleum (50 respondents). Akmeshit is a historical and spiritual monument of architecture translated as the "White Mosque". This is a complex that includes chalk buildings, located on the earth's surface, an underground temple, and a necropolis. In total, there are 32 kulpytas (gravestones), 13 of which have historical and architectural value, two koitas (boulders), two domed mausoleums, and one saganatam (domeless mausoleum). The religious building was constructed in the 19th century and named after the famous scientist and religious figure Beket Ata (Azhigali, 2002). Makhambet Mausoleum is the gravesite of the great Kazakh poet of the 19th century, freethinker and uprising leader Makhambet Utemisov. It is located in the Inder district of Atyrau region, 40 km southeast of the Inderbor village. The poet's grave is a cultural monument and dates back to 1846. Initially, there was a large octahedral sarcophagus covered with a massive gravestone. After its complete renovation in 1995, a white stone mausoleum was erected on the site of the poet's last repose. Since then, the poet's grave has been an architectural monument. This is now an impressive building which comprises a multifaceted tower topped with a massive dome and decorated with overlaid bas-reliefs. The height of the structure is 6.4 m, the height of the dome is 1.8 m, the outer diameter of the dome is 5.2 m, and the total height is 12.2 m (Kenzhegaliev, Diarov, & Kulbatyrov, 2019). Historical and cultural sites are the main brand objects of West Kazakhstan region.

In order to determine the level of the territorial branding development, it is necessary to assess and identify the leading tourist attractions in Western Kazakhstan. The assessment criterion includes 2 components: the historical and cultural brand of the territory and the natural brand of the territory. The authors of the article selected different objects for each component from each region and developed an assessment scale (Table 2). The results obtained are calculated using the following formula:

$$L_{br} = H_b + N_b \quad (1)$$

where,  $L_{br}$ —Level of branding,  $H_b$ —Historical and cultural brand component,  $N_b$ —Natural brand component

Each of the data blocks is calculated by the following formula:

$$B_c = \sum k \times a \quad (2)$$

where,  $B_c$ —Block components,  $a$ —Assessment components,  $\sum k$ —Coefficient of significance of block assessment components;

$$a = (V_1 + V_2 + V_3 + \dots + V_n) \quad (3)$$

where,  $V_n$ —Value of block component parameters,  $n$ —Number of assessment component parameters.

Table 2  
*Historical and cultural brand component of Western Kazakhstan*

Region	Number of monuments of republican significance (items)	Number of monuments of local significance (items)	The attractiveness of the region's historical and cultural brand (average point score of respondents)	K = 1.5	(%)
Aktobe region	2	3	4	13.5	26
Atyrau region	1	1	2	6	11
West Kazakhstan region	2	5	3	15	29
Mangystau region	5	2	5	18	34
Total	10	11	14	52.5	100

According to the survey, Mangystau region scored the prevailing points for its historical and cultural brand component, since there is a number of monuments of republican significance, as well as outstanding historical and cultural sites. West Kazakhstan region scored the highest number of points assessed by the second block, i.e., the number of monuments of local significance.

The following natural heritage sites from each region of Western Kazakhstan have been investigated to assess the natural brand of the territory:

- in Aktobe region—Irgiz-Torgai Nature Reserve, Zhamanshin Crater, Mugodzhary Mountains, Aidarlyasha Geological Section, South Aktolagai Chalk Plateau, Ashelisiai Waterfall (Wolf Waterfall);
- in Atyrau region—Akkegershin Plateau, Inder Lake, Munaily-Mola Deposit, Akzhaiyk Nature Reserve, “Lotus Valley” in the Kigash River Delta, Novinsky Nature Reserve;
- in Mangystau region—Kendirli Recreation Center, Torysh Valley of Spherical Nodules, Ustyurt Nature Reserve, Bozzyra Canyon, Karakiya-Karakol Reserve, Aktau-Bozashy Reserve; and
- in West Kazakhstan region—Shalkar Lake, the Zhaiyk River, the Chagan River, Kirsanovsky, Budarinsky and Zhaltyrkulsky Nature Reserves.

The survey results showed that the respondents pointed out the leading natural brands from each region in Western Kazakhstan. In Aktobe region, there are two natural sites: Ashelisiai or Wolf Waterfall (65 respondents) and South Aktolagai Chalk Plateau (60 respondents). Ashelisiai Waterfall is one of the most beautiful places in Aktobe region, located about 120 km from Aktobe. The waterfall was created by humans in the gorge of the Ebita River to divert water from the Great Ashelisiai Sea. Wolf Waterfall is the second name of this wonderful place. Aktolagai Plateau was formed during the Jurassic period. Its mountain cover is extremely sparse and has a wide range of herbs. The southern slope of Aktolagai Plateau has breathtaking landscapes where long sheer chalk walls turn into snow-white ridges. And hereupon, the multi-colored layers of rocks end in shell rock crumbling. Aktolagai Chalk Plateau is of national and international significance, being a geological object of the state reserve fund (Baymagambetov, 2012).

The diversity of nature in Mangystau region is inspiring. The respondents noted the following sites in this region: Aktau-Bozashy Reserve (59 respondents) and Ustyurt Nature Reserve (55 respondents). Aktau-Bozashy is a zoological reserve of republican significance. It was organized in 1982 in Mangystau region. The total area of the territory is 170 thousand hectares. It includes the southwestern part of Bozashy peninsula, the northwestern part of the North Aktau ridge and the adjacent plain coast of the Caspian Sea (Kolotova & Kondratieva, 2017). Ustyurt Nature Reserve is located on the southwestern side of Ustyurt plateau in the Karakiya district of Mangystau region. There are not any rivers or lakes in the reserve, but its territory is relatively well watered by the available wells and springs. All of them are fed by groundwater

and surface water and have a different degree of mineralization—from 3 to 15 g/l of dry residue. One of the most attractive tourist routes in the territory of Ustyurt National Biosphere Reserve is the Journey along the Great Silk Road, stretching across Mangistau region from south to north, and further to northwest of Ustyurt plateau and through the Shetpe Gates to the Caspian coast. This is the place where the transshipment of cargoes from land to sea and vice versa was performed. The revival of caravan trade contributed to the development of such towns as Sarytash, Ketyk, Kabakly, Alta, and Sherkala. Kabakly and Karagan wharves had been engaged in active trade with Russia until the 17th century (Koshim, Sergeyeva, Saparov, Berdibayeva, & Assylbekova, 2021; Plokhikh, Nikiforova, & Smykova, 2019).

The Zhaiyk River (59 respondents) and Shalkar Lake (58 respondents) were identified as the leading natural brands of West Kazakhstan region. The Zhaiyk is a river in Eastern Europe which runs through Russia and Kazakhstan and flows into the Caspian Sea. Shalkar Lake occupies a vast circular basin 18 km long and 15 km wide in the center of the salt massif. The average depth of the lake is 7 m, the greatest water depth is 12 m. The lake is somehow squeezed from the north and south by the scenic Santas and Sasai mountains. The salt steppe lake Shalkar itself is a mystery that science is yet to explain. Its level rises and falls simultaneously with the Caspian Sea. This may indicate the relevance of underground fractured waters in the permeable zones of the tectonic faults connecting the water area of Shalkar Lake and the Caspian Sea (Akhmedenov, 2020).

Akzhaiyk Nature Reserve (57 respondents) and “Lotus Valley” in the Kigash River Delta were marked as the main natural brands of Atyrau region. It is located at the confluence of the Ural River and the Caspian Sea. There are several routes which have been developed for tourists: water and land. The reserve lies on one of the main migratory paths of summer birds. In spring and autumn, one can observe the incredible bird colonies. The islands, located a few kilometers from the coast, can be successfully used as rest areas. The northern part of the Caspian Sea, covered with swampy terrain and dense reed growth, is the best place both for resting and nesting of summer birds. Several migratory paths of birds, flying from Africa and Asia to Siberia and back, cross here. The rest are found only during autumn-spring migration period. A very large population of birds gathers during the summer molt. The Kigash River Delta is considered as the mini Red Book, which includes the thickets of blooming lotus and water chestnut, as well as a real swan’s paradise. The unique natural areas attract an increasing number of tourists who come here with their cameras and drones. There are five recreation centers on the coast that are open to visitors all year round (Salmurzauly et al., 2019). According to the assessment results, Aktope and Mangistau regions are considered as the leading natural brands of Western Kazakhstan (Table 3).

Table 3  
*Natural brand component of Western Kazakhstan*

Region	Recognition (item)	Organization of sightseeing tours (item)	Leadership of the region’s natural brand (average point score of respondents)	k = 1	(%)
Aktobe region	5	4	5	14	30
Atyrau region	4	3	2	9	20
West Kazakhstan region	4	2	3	9	20
Mangystau region	5	5	4	14	30
Total	18	14	14	46	100

According to the final assessment results, Mangistau and Aktope regions are regarded as the leading brands of Western Kazakhstan. The results of historical and natural brand component analysis were taken into account for assessing the level of the regional branding development (Table 4).

Table 4  
*Final assessment of Western Kazakhstan branding development*

Region	Historical and cultural brand component	Natural brand component	Level of branding territory	(%)
Aktobe region	13,5	14	27,5	28
Atyrau region	6	9	15	15
West Kazakhstan region	15	9	24	24
Mangystau region	18	14	32	33
Total	52.5	46	98.5	100

Western Kazakhstan has unique natural and historical sites, which is proved by the survey and assessment results. On the one hand, the region has a high potential for increasing the number of outbound tourists, expanding the tourism geography, and providing a variety of services. On the other hand, consumers may increase their requirements in accordance with the quality and price of the services provided. That is why it is necessary to increase tourist destination efficiency in Western Kazakhstan. In this regard, the respondents identified the following effective ways to develop the tourist destination: creation

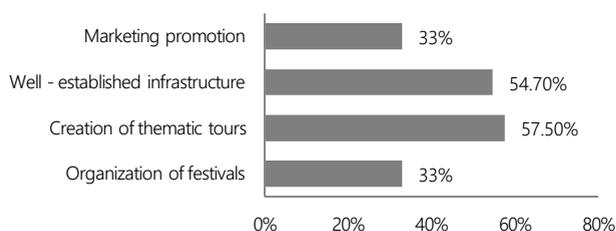


Figure 1. Ways to improve tourist destination efficiency in West Kazakhstan region.

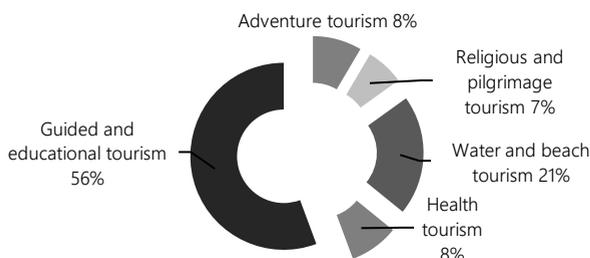


Figure 2. Priority areas for tourism development in West Kazakhstan region.

of thematic tours, well-established infrastructure, organization of various festivals, and marketing promotion (Figure 1).

According to the survey, there are various priority areas for tourism development in the region. A large number of respondents believe (56%) that the development of guided and educational tours may attract tourists to the region. In addition, the region can be distinguished by water-beach, adventure, religious, and health tourism. The historical and cultural sites such as various underground mosques and necropolises make the region a unique brand. What is more, diverse landscapes of the natural brand allow to develop these tourist destinations as the priority areas for tourism development in Western Kazakhstan (Figure 2).

Environmentally-friendly tourism provides the overall comfortable conditions for the tourism development in the region. Natural and recreational resources are the environmental conditions and phenomena which create comfortable conditions for recreation and tourist activities, as well as for health improvement. The main natural and recreational resources are the climate, water areas, landscape, and some natural sites that have both educational and entertaining features. Taking into account the above mentioned, the respondents rated Western Kazakhstan as a favorable and comfortable region to visit (Figure 3).

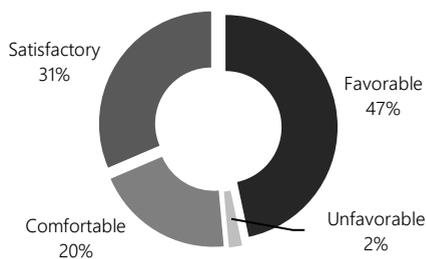


Figure 3. Assessment of region comfortableness by respondents.

The most important objective component of Western Kazakhstan branding is the analysis of positive and negative factors for recreation and tourism, which reflects its competitive advantages and disadvantages. They are determined by the economic, social, natural, and cultural characteristics of the region, its territorial remoteness and transport accessibility, infrastructure, production, and investment potentials. It is obvious that competitive advantages contribute to strengthening the competitive position of Western Kazakhstan in the tourism market, and competitive disadvantages, on the contrary, make the process of its inclusion in the tourism space more complicated. The respondents' opinions are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

*Favorable and unfavorable factors for tourism development in Western Kazakhstan (according to the respondents)*

Regions of the territory	Favorable factors	Unfavorable factors
Aktobe region	Favorable transport and geographical position; rare and unique geological natural monuments (Zhamanshin Crater, Aydarlyasha Geological Section, Shuyldak paleovolcano, Aktolagai Chalk Plateau).	Cold winter; harsh climate; many industrial enterprises; high vacation prices; landscape places far from the center of Aktobe, poor environmental conditions of the city; and undeveloped river network.
Atyrau region	Rich historical and cultural heritage (Saraishyk Settlement, Akmeshit Necropolis); Atyrau region is located on the territory of the Caspian lowland and the Ural delta, allowing it to develop different types of tourism on its territory (Inder salt lake, "Lotus Valley" on the Kigash River Delta, Akkegershin Plateau).	Poor environmental conditions; underdeveloped infrastructure; unpopularity of some of the region's tourism brands; prevalence of fishing tourism; and tightening of fishing legislation.
West Kazakhstan region	Favorable geopolitical position at the junction of Europe and Asia; sharing borders with economically developed countries such as the Russian Federation; diverse landscapes, developed river network (the Chagan River, the Ural River); Shalkar salt lake; availability of facilities for water and ski tourism; and historical and cultural heritage of Uralsk.	Unfavorable weather conditions for tourism in winter and autumn; non-compliance of the region's tourism products with international standards.

Table 5  
 Continued

Regions of the territory	Favorable factors	Unfavorable factors
Mangystau region	Positive dynamics in the development of location areas; a wide range of cultural and natural monuments; unique natural conditions of the region (the Caspian Sea, Ustyrt plateau, Karakiya-Karakol and Aktau-Bozashchy Reserve); and cultural and historical attractions.	Lack of external infrastructure for newly created and existing tourist facilities; undifferentiated travel services; poor quality of tourist services; poor coordination of tourism entities; high pricing policy; deterioration of the ecological situation due to "historical" industrial pollution and accumulated waste.

## Conclusion

The integrity of a national brand is an effective way of attracting tourists to Western Kazakhstan and a prerequisite for the growth of tourist flows. The value of a national brand implies not only providing the opportunities to create a positive image, increasing the usefulness of activities in the regional, and national markets, but also strengthening the country's position on a global scale.

From an economic and geographical point of view, it is impossible to create an expensive and profitable tourist destination and increase tourists' loyalty without an attractive and distinctive brand. A brand is considered a competitive advantage. Both an image and a brand are related to the region's perception as a tourist destination, thus influencing investment proposals, potential visitors, etc.

The coexistence of several brands in a territory requires the rebranding launch. This research contributed to providing some key elements and offers that would lead to the successful implementation of an improved base for building a new brand. Besides, this study gives a clear idea of identification between the residents and the brand of Western Kazakhstan. Thus, the research results can be useful to the tour operators. It should be noted that traditional studies of Western Kazakhstan did not take into account the internal point of view of its residents. Thus, as long as tourist destinations compete with each other, it is necessary to develop a reliable brand that can not only attract tourists all year round, but also maintain economic growth and promote peaceful coexistence.

The dominant influence of a brand is due to a set of its identity contexts: natural, cultural, economic, and value-based. This made it possible to designate an integrated approach to a brand identity as a set of unique characteristics, which gives guaranteed benefits to the target stakeholders.

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