

## **MODERN CHALLENGES OF CREATING TOURISM BRAND OF KAZAKHSTAN**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In a broad sense, the modern world tourist space is a clash of competitive brands of countries for the trust and attention of tourists, investment and income. Under such conditions, the problem of determining the positions of the national tourist market of a particular country in the system of international tourism, the strengthening of which is connected to the processes of formation and effective positioning of country's international tourist brand, acquires particular relevance.

Of particular importance is the problem of forming a positive perception of an international tourist brand for Kazakhstan, which is in the process of transformation and integration. Creating an effective international tourist brand for Kazakhstan is a tool for enhancing the country's international competitiveness and is an important factor in ensuring the growth of the income of the tourism business, replenishing the country's budget, and improving the well-being of its people.

Today, the prospects for the development of national tourism are associated primarily with the effective promotion at the international level of a single tourist brand of Kazakhstan, which determines an objective need to understand the modern challenges of creating tourism brand in Kazakhstan.

### **AIM AND METHODS**

The main objective of the research is to develop theoretical and practical recommendations on forming a model of the Kazakhstan's tourism brand on the basis of studies of the current state of its subjects' development and the use of marketing methodologies.

Studies have been conducted among foreign tourists to determine the attractiveness of Kazakhstan as a whole, as well as their capacity and preferences.

While conducting the research the following sources of information were employed:

- Secondary data from official sources – such as statistical digests, results of monitoring of the tourism industry development in Kazakhstan;
- Primary data obtained through the field research, including: tourists survey and the survey of tourism sphere experts in Kazakhstan.

To survey tourists a structured questionnaire was designed; 96 people were surveyed, including 55 women and 41 men as a random sampling. The aforementioned type of sampling is considered to be the most appropriate for studying behavioral phenomena since it excludes the possibility of bias [Gravetter and Forzano 2011]. The survey took place in June–July 2018 and covered tourist coming to the airport and railway station of Astana.

The experts' survey was conducted in free form, and eight experts were surveyed. This type of study was held in Astana during August 2018, involving the representatives of travel organizations, lodging establishments and local DMO.

The research pursued the following objectives:

- to reveal the real situation on the tourism market on its attractiveness;
- to define preferences for cultural and historic monuments;
- to identify the attractiveness of branded directions;
- to study the importance of significant events hold in Kazakhstan;
- to identify of the most significant historical and political figures;
- to study attractive dishes of the Kazakh cuisine;
- to determine the priority characters, traditions, and values.

## **MARKETING RESEARCH ON FORMATION OF KAZAKHSTAN'S TOURISM BRAND**

Scientific substantiation and review of scientific researches devoted to the development of a tourism brand show that significant contributions were made by scholars such as Aaker [1991, 1995, 2000], Keller [1993, 1998, 2003], Buhalis [2000], Anholt [2003], Kotler [2003], Caldwell and Freire [2004], Pike [2005], Tasci and Kozak [2006] and others.

Studies have shown that when creating a brand it is important to use an integrated approach and marketing tools, as well as emphasize tangible and intangible assets. At the present stage, issues of forming electronic branding which can affect not only the international tourist route, but also create the image of a region, are of current interest [Kavoura 2014]. In branding it is also recommended to use a strategic approach aimed at creating a positive image of a tourism country [Avraham and Ketter 2008]. Cultural heritage is an important part of branding and must be taken into account while developing tourism products [Mitsche et al. 2013].

As a result of the research conducted by the authors in the field of marketing and branding, a brand consists of three main components: identifiers, attributes, and associations [Sexton 2005]. Identifiers are signs by which a brand is recognized. In order to identify the signs of the tourism brand researches aimed at determining the image of the country by local and foreign tourists were conducted. The studies have shown that views of the country that have locals of Kazakhstan do not coincide with the views of foreign tourists. As

a result, a gap in the identification of the country by different target markets is appearing, i.e. the difference between what the local residents and authorities think about Kazakhstan and the foreign visitors' views (Table 1).

TABLE 1. The attitude of authorities and residents of Kazakhstan versus foreign visitors to Kazakhstan

The official version	Foreign customers
“The new State”; the modern capital; has won the EXPO-2017; the Eurasian Center; a country with a great potential for tourism	The view of the Western media: resource-based economy; state between Russia and China; autocracy; the new capital in the steppe; the rich are buying villas around the world; human rights violations; environmental issues; corruption; exotics

Source: The Author.

Studies conducted among foreign tourists visiting Kazakhstan revealed that their views on Kazakhstan were peculiar and contradictory. In general, Kazakhstan is a country with [Schreiber 2008]:

- attractive open spaces, beautiful landscapes;
- friendly people;
- bad legacy (the GULAG, polygons, drying of the Aral Sea);
- oil and other raw materials with their pros and cons;
- prestigious projects (Astana);
- a multi-faceted country, contradictions (wealth and poverty, town and village);
- security, no fundamentalism;
- contaminated regions;
- corruption, autocracy.

Potential customers either do not know the country or are aware of it as a Soviet country that has oil, steppe, emptiness, Astana, Baikonur, and environmental problems.

In general, on the basis of the study, it was found that about 90% of (Western) foreigners have either scarce perceptions of the country or they do not have any. Kazakhstan for them is an unexplored country.

Those people who have some understanding of Kazakhstan (as they've read from books or visited Kazakhstan) have the image of the country which is very controversial.

That opinion is formed due to several reasons, namely:

- there are many contradictions within Kazakhstan such as the difference between conditions and opportunities in its big cities and villages;
- contradictions between how the country positions itself and what it really is.

The second component of the brand is attributes which are the characteristics of tourism products and their benefits and values. One of the most significant tourist-recreational attributes of Kazakhstan is the steppe. The visions of different tourists against the steppe resources are miscellaneous and foreign tourists' understanding can be formulated as follows:

- a space with a lot of potential for urban technocrats;
- void where there is nothing for urban tourists;
- the source of life for rural residents;
- the freedom and open spaces.

In designing the brand program Kazakhstan can position itself in different ways but it can lead to a situation that consumers would not understand why they have to visit Kazakhstan and what the key benefit is for them during their visit. It is therefore advisable to focus on the values that a potential customer expects while visiting the country. Particularly important, when building the brand, are emotional benefits as they are harder to copy by competitors [Kotler 2003].

The conducted analysis of tourist-recreational attributes of the country has identified the main specific images for the Kazakhstan tourism brand:

- steppe, horses, yurts (brand of Mongolia);
- shanyrak (brand of Kyrgyzstan);
- Silk Road (brand of Uzbekistan);
- Baikonur;
- Astana;
- clear blue sky, golden eagles.

The main advantage of the proposed specific images is that they are well rendered and cause positive emotions, but the main disadvantage is that they are too limited.

The third component of the brand is associations which are the link between identifiers and attributes. At creating a tourism brand the capitalization of attractive images and associations with Kazakhstan is very much significant.

The main visual images of Kazakhstan include: borderless, boundless Kazakhstan; hospitable Kazakhstan; unknown Kazakhstan; amazing Kazakhstan of the revelations.

The main plus of the abstract images is that there is no limit by a single aspect; the main minus is they are poorly visualized.

For Interactive images that are associated with Kazakhstan: Kazakhstan is not what you think; Kazakhstan – where the soul rests; be a nomad; perfect location to down-shifting.

The main benefit of the interactive images is that perception of the country depends on the target person who makes “own Kazakhstan”; the main disadvantage: they are poorly visualized.

A brand can and should vary, depending on the degree of the country’s development, the popularity of the country and of an offered tourism product [Tybout and Calder 2010].

On the basis of the obtained data on the results of the studies it is concluded that for 77% of respondents domestic tourists in Kazakhstan the most appealing were natural resources and natural reserves parks; the second, by importance were the Tien-Shan mountains and 45% of respondents noted this, and for the third (38.5% of respondents) was the Charyn Canyon (Fig. 1). All other natural resources also attract tourists, but those are of less importance for them.

Tourism as an activity can successfully exist in the presence of two elements: natural attractions and cultural and historical monuments. Thus, the prerequisites for growth in demand for tourism and its maintenance on the highest level, are resources such as monuments of history, culture and archaeology. Figure 2 presents the results of the survey on the importance of historical and cultural attractions for tourists in Kazakhstan.

The most attractive monument for tourists in the country is the mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yassau (69.2%); for more than half of the respondents, 61.5%, the segment of the Great Silk Road seemed attractive, and 53.8% chose Baikonur Cosmodrome; 38.5% of tourists were interested in Tamgaly and 22% noted the mausoleum Aisha Bibi.

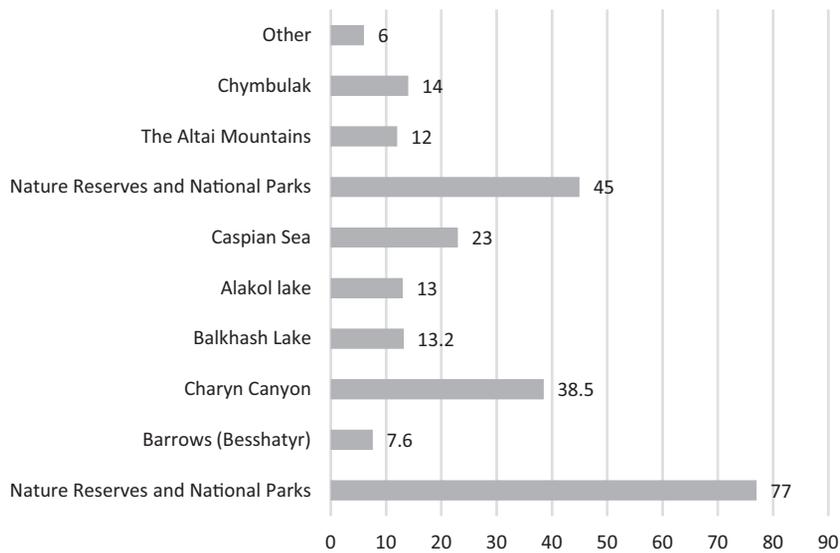


FIG. 1. Attractiveness rating of the natural attractions of Kazakhstan

Source: The Author.

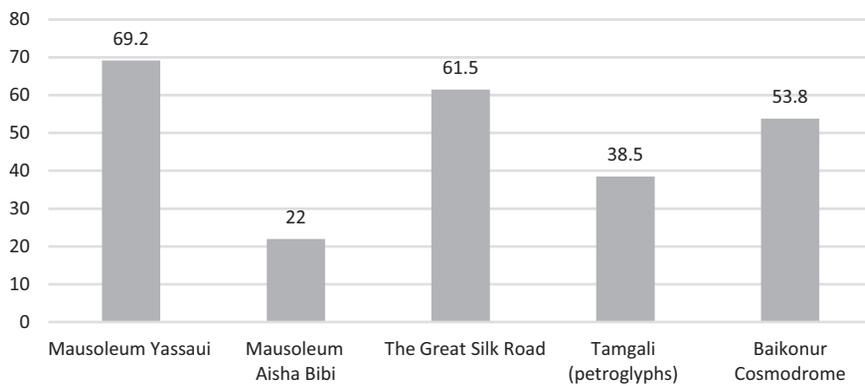


Fig. 2. Preference rating of historical and cultural attractions by consumers

Source: The Author.

One of the tasks in developing the tourism brand for Kazakhstan was to form attractive tourist products and create branded directions.

An important aspect when choosing a travel is a geographic focus. Motive for choosing the geographical areas can be uncertain and it greatly depends on the distance and the availability of touristic destination. Geographic direction may attract by the following: location (natural or artificial factors, cultural items, etc.), event (festivals, sports games), opportunities for certain activities (such as sports), and as well as the condition of the

material basis, transport infrastructure, etc. [Keller 1998]. The results of the branded destinations' evaluation are presented in Figure 3.

Consumers of Kazakhstan highlight two major branded destinations: the Tien Shan and Borovoye; the Eastern Kazakhstan with the Altai Mountains and lakes still remains attractive to tourists and only 23% of respondents are attracted by Sary-agash.

During the formation of the country's and the state brand issues like which events and international activities are carried out in the country remain relevant. The survey results on this issue are presented in Figure 4.

As it can be concluded from Figure 4, the main significant event is the organization of the "Expo 2017" exhibition, as it was noted by 84.7% of the respondents; 48% of respondents highlighted Asian Games; 37% noted Universiade, and only 7% chose the OSCE Summit.

A specific factor influencing the formation of the tourism brand is the national cuisine. The influence of this factor is evident in a sense that national cuisine is specifically important for food experts and extroverts.

As a result of the survey, it was found that the highest preference is given to such dishes as beshbarmak, kumys and kazi. However, one can select those dishes that are less important for consumers, but were still noted: they were shubat, kurt, kuyrdak, shelppek (Fig. 5).

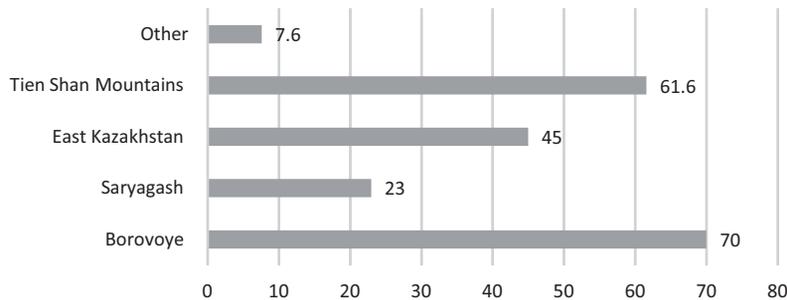


FIG. 3. Attractiveness rating of branded tourist destinations in Kazakhstan

Source: The Author.

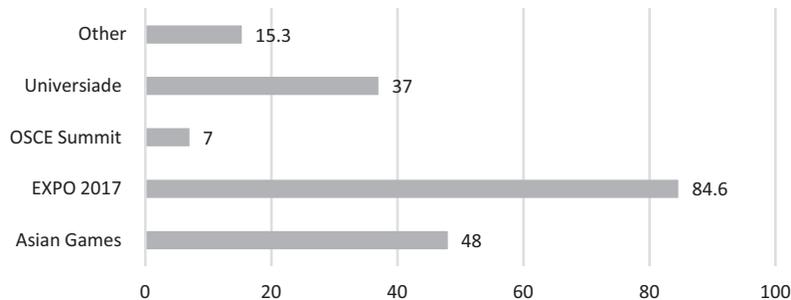


FIG. 4. Importance of significant events in Kazakhstan

Source: The Author.

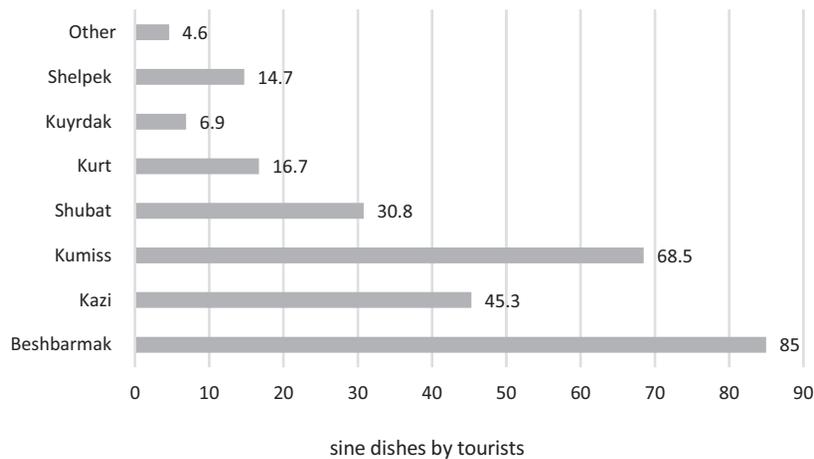


FIG. 5. Preference rating of Kazakh national cuisine dishes by tourists

Source: The Author.

There is still a number of factors that influence the development of the tourism brand. One of which is the formation of the slogan and the logo. The survey revealed that consumers assumed the slogan to be associated with the following aspects:

- snow leopard or animals;
- steppes;
- mountains;
- nomadic civilization;
- shanyrak;
- sky and stars;
- national characteristics;
- horses;
- Baikonur.

As it can be seen Kazakhstan is associated with a diverse variety of directions and subjects by the depicted attributes; so it is quite difficult to choose something definite and for this it is necessary to conduct deep and comprehensive studies of both foreign and domestic tourists.

The cities symbolizing Kazakhstan, as stated by the majority of the survey respondents, were Astana (77%) and Almaty (69%).

None of tourism brands will perform its functions without an interesting and attractive slogan. Based on the conducted research among foreign tourists a recommended expression for the slogan which is “Kazakhstan is not what you think about it” was noted. This slogan is currently suitable and “perfect” because it excites the curiosity, the desire to discover the country, but makes no promises. It can even serve as “apology” or “excuse” when people are arriving here with too high positive expectations. However, the main disadvantage of the slogan is that it does not reflect the positioning of Kazakhstan.

Respondents from Kazakhstan were asked an open-ended question on developing a slogan and a number of responses in the form of slogans were received. They were: “Have a rest with soul in Kazakhstan” and “Kazakhstan is open soul, high skies”, “Kazakhstan is the country of steppes and warm hospitality”, “There, where your roots are”.

As it is evidenced from the slogans’ proposals, one can conclude that the emphasis is on Kazakh hospitality and the beauty of the country.

Foreign tourists are attracted by the alternative and new culture. Therefore, a survey was conducted, which determined what traditions and values are important in the formation of the brand (Fig. 6).

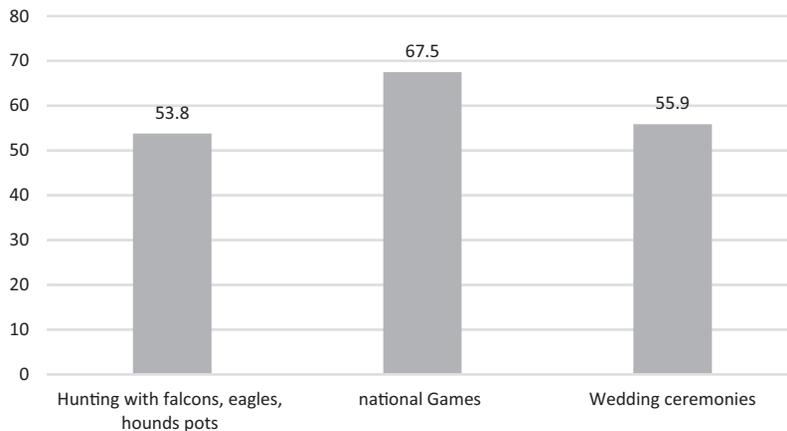


FIG. 6. Attractiveness rating of traditions and values in Kazakhstan

Source: The Author.

As can be seen, the most interesting for respondents were national games, with a small margin marked the wedding traditions and hunting with Falcons.

Based on the results of the study it was found out that to the symbols of country the snow leopard, Baiterek, and the “Golden man” can be referred. Among the listed above symbols the most significant one for Kazakhstan is the “Golden man”. The survey results are presented in Figure 7.

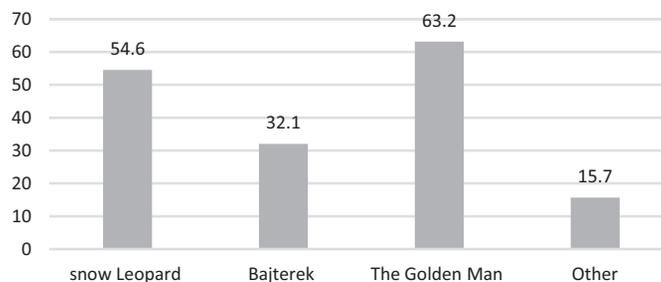


FIG. 7. Consumer preferences by choosing the symbol of Kazakhstan

Source: The Author.

Thus, the research found out that consumers of tourism services prefer natural resources such as mountains and the beauty of the nature, in particular Borovoye. Among the historical monuments the greatest attention deserve the Silk Road and the mausoleum of Yassavi; and the most significant event for Kazakhstan is “Expo-2017”. Within the national cuisine tourists highlight such dishes as beshbarmak, kumys and kazi. In general, symbols of our country should be considered while its slogan is formed.

However, as the analysis shows, the main features of Kazakhstan are performed by hospitality, culture, natural wealth, beauty, and originality; and all these are traditional values which are supposed to be used in the development of the brand.

On the basis of the analysis, it was revealed that the basic motivations for travelling to Kazakhstan were culture, nature, and business trips.

To the primary target market of Kazakhstan’s tourism the following categories of tourists can be referred:

- couples of both family and not family ;
- groups of friends or students;
- businessmen from Russia, China, and Korea.

The process of the tourism brand formation is associated with the positioning of Kazakhstan as a tourism region. In the milieu of the current situation Kazakhstan can be presented on the tourism market as a comprehensive product with several destinations. The distinctive features of tourist destinations and target customer profile was identified with the aim of defining particular directions of tourism development in Kazakhstan (Fig. 8).

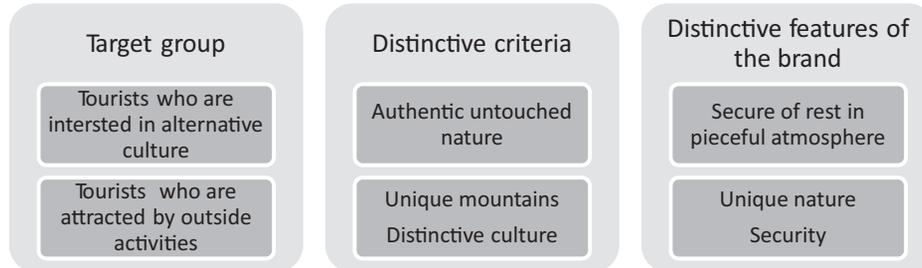


FIG. 8. The basis for the formation of the Kazakhstan’s tourism brand

Source: The Author.

The study has identified factors that constrain the further development of tourism in Kazakhstan and its promotion in the international market [Overview... 2012]:

- lack of investment needed for the development of tourist regions;
- high cost of services, inflexible price policy in the tourism sphere;
- legal and administrative barriers (particularly visa procedures);
- low level of tourist products and infrastructure development;
- non awareness of the country abroad;
- high level of competition in the international segment.

For Kazakhstan, taking into account the suggested positioning the following tours can be relevant:

- cultural and educational tours;
- activities connected with the traditions and customs of the Kazakh people.
- ski tourism;
- ecological tourism.

An effective method of building brands to attract tourists is also a technology of “events” organizing, when a tourist arrives in a new country to visit and participate in any significant event after which he comes back here as an ordinary tourist, trying to learn more about the country. EXPO 2017 and Universiade 2017 could serve as such events for Kazakhstan; these also provide an opportunity to get additional information and draw attention to Kazakhstan.

Gradual development of tourism can be successful only if the development itself will happen on the basis of a systemic, comprehensive, in-depth-thought strategy, which is laid on the consistent working out of new attractive tours.

In general the concept of the tourism brand of Kazakhstan should be positioned on the competitive advantages of the country, benefits that a tourist might receive, and attributes that exist in Kazakhstan. The Table 2 shows the positioning option of the tourism brand in Kazakhstan developed on the base of the conducted analysis.

The cumulative effect of the country’s combined attributes helps to strengthen the competitive position of the brand as a whole. Promotion of the tourism brand is an important, multifaceted, and long-term event. It requires, in addition to the brand itself that influences on the visual aspect of perception, to use sound dimension to the picture, which

TABLE 2. Positioning of Kazakhstan’s tourism brand

Indicators	Description
Slogan	Kazakhstan is a country of steppes and warm hospitality
Symbol of the country	Snow Leopard
Mission	We encourage tourists to the contemplation of the exceptional virgin beauty of the Kazakh landscapes, the unity with the spirit of the national integrity, and introduction with the rich culture and history of the ancestors.
The objective of the development of the brand (product/company, organization)	The main goal: to maintain and protect the integrity of the unique nature An additional purpose: to share the traditions, culture and way of life of the Kazakh people
Objectives of the brand development (product/company, organization)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Development of unique nature tours</li> <li>– Full immersion into the Kazakh life</li> <li>– Dive into the wild nature and its beauty</li> <li>– Provide direct human contact with flora and fauna</li> </ul>
Positioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Located within a clean, untouched nature</li> <li>– Contact with the national and cultural traditions with national games and rituals</li> </ul>
Uniqueness	The tourism brand that offers an integrated approach in the wild outdoors with the opportunity to come into contact with the attributes of national culture of the Kazakh people
The attributes of the country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– National hunting with Falcons</li> <li>– National Games</li> <li>– The Steppe</li> <li>– Untouched landscapes</li> </ul>

Source: The Author.

is in the imagination of potential tourists, be the most complete. So, to support the tourism brand of Kazakhstan it is important to support it with advertising and promotion tools.

Over time, when the Kazakhstan tourism brand will have been well promoted, there can be less attention paid to the advertising and only the brand itself is to be displayed, which by itself will cause the association and be less in need of advertising. Highly publicized slogan or the brand image becomes a part of the public domain, that is making a huge contribution to the formation of positive public opinion about the country or a resort or a tourist object in it. Tourism brands of a country change an attitude of international consumers, bringing to the forefront of it their tourist potential and make possible the identification of tours in the market.

Promotion of the tourist brand is the next step after the development of the logo, slogan and corporate style. Promotion is a complex process. Selection of promotion tools should be based on their effectiveness.

Undoubtedly, a differentiated approach to promotion tools is important, but the question remains how to introduce the tourist positioning of Kazakhstan to the international market, how to attract tourists and provide just such conditions that they expect.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The development of tourism in Kazakhstan is only possible if the tourism brand will have been formed. The developed brand will increase the recognition of Kazakhstan in the market and define the values that consumers expect from their visit to the country. Based on the research, it was found that for Kazakhstan the tourism brand can be built on such benefits as the unspoiled nature and cultural traditions and customs. As a result of the proposed positioning of Kazakhstan two main target markets have been revealed: tourists who are interested in alternative culture and tourists who prefer a vacation in the bosom of nature.

The results of the conducted survey have shown that consumers are interested in such tourist-and-recreational resources such as natural reserves and national parks and monuments, the Yassavi mausoleum, the branded direction - Borovoye and the mountains, as well as the symbol of the country could become the Golden man or the snow leopard.

In general, it should be noted that Kazakhstan needs a systemic integrated approach when forming the tourism brand. Initially it is important to determine the positioning that should be reflected in the elements that would disclose that positioning and subsequently work out an effective promotional campaign.

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**Summary.** The article is dedicated to studying contemporary situation and problems of tourism brand development in Kazakhstan. The results of the conducted survey have shown that consumers are interested in such tourist-and-recreational resources as natural reserves and national parks and monuments, the Yassavi mausoleum, the branded direction – Borovoye and the mountains, as well as the symbol of the country could become the Golden man or the snow leopard. The research is based on authors own empirical research on the issues regarding tourists awareness and preferences, as well as experts' survey. The empirical research was provided based on literature review, primary data (in form of tourists surveys), secondary data collection, analysis and synthesis. To survey tourists a structured questionnaire was designed; 96 people were surveyed, including 55 women and 41 men as a random sampling.

The experts' survey was conducted in free form, and eight experts were surveyed. As was evidenced by the study results, international tourists are particularly interested in authentic cuisine as well as activities. Moreover, the research revealed that a gap between the way Kazakhstan officially defines its identity and the actual brand image the country has for now as a tourist destination.

**Key words:** tourism, brand, Kazakhstan, challenges

**JEL:** M31, L83, Z33

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