Brand assets: a prerequisite to promoting a developing destination

Zhansaya Turgambekova, Metin Kozak and Antonia Correia

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to develop and test a practical model to identify a developing destination's assets. Using the existing destination branding concepts and theories in the research, this study aims to identify how the assets of a developing destination differ from those of a developed destination.

Design/methodology/approach – The study followed the "practical model for determining destination assets" proposed in the article. The first stage includes collecting the information on the tourism potential of the destination. In the second stage, in-depth interviews were carried out with information carriers of a developing destination and analyzed by highlighting keywords in the responses. The following stages include the questionnaire survey, factor analysis and segmentation analysis.

Findings – The following conclusions can be drawn from the results of the study. First, the assets of a developing destination, recreation areas, attractive visitor facilities and obligatory additional services are rational. Second, the assets used for destination branding are based on their unique character. According to the analysis results, the Almaty region's unique character is associated with natural resources. The direction of recreation in the Almaty region boils down to two components: cognitive tourism and sports tourism.

Research limitations/implications – The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, given that external tourism faced significant constraints during the pandemic, we must acknowledge that a study of destination branding may be more appropriate before or after the pandemic. Second, the survey was conducted online in connection with the introduction of quarantine measures. Third, the assets of a developing destination were selected based on the results of the interviews. In future studies, including other attributes may allow the identification of new assets for branding.

Practical implications – The practical destination branding model presented in the study has practical implications for destination authorities. Using the proposed model, assets of other destinations can be identified. In addition, the results of the analysis of the Almaty region as a developing destination will be effective for destination authorities in developing their tourism programs. Recreation areas, attractive tourism facilities and obligatory additional services can be used in destination branding.

Social implications – This study drew on the experience of the population's ambassador activity. The in-depth interview was obtained from the destination's tourism informants, and the survey aimed to identify public opinion. The residents who participated in the interview and survey perform an ambassadorial function in strengthening the identified assets of the destination and implementing tourism programs. Accordingly, there is a growing sense of pride in being a resident of the destination.

Originality/value – The study has both theoretical and practical significance with the following results. First, it provides insights on enhancing public participation from the beginning of the destination branding process and respecting the continuation of its ambassadorial activities, provided that the identified destination assets are rational. Second, destination asset associations for developing destinations are presented. Third, the study creates a realistic picture of the Almaty region as a destination for visitors and destination authorities.

Keywords Destination marketing, Kazakhstan, Destination branding, Destination development, Destination assets

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Today, destination branding is used not only to attract investment for tourism development but also as a prerequisite in choosing where to live, attracting new employees to the

business and initiating cultural and sporting events (Hankinson, 2005). Using rational assets in destination branding makes it possible to attract relatively more active new residents (Dwyer, 2022) and tourists to the destination (Chen, Ryan & Zhang, 2022; Zhang & Xu, 2019). Destination-specific attributes and values are used to position a destination in the mind of its potential and actual visitors. Factors influencing a trip to a destination are also used in its marketing. As a result, depending on the demographic characteristics of people, destination assets also vary for each destination (Kozak, 2002).

Simultaneously, effective management of destination assets is vital for its branding (Kim, 2014). The assets stimulating visits to a destination may include various elements such as the historical and religious sites, climate, entertainment facilities, etc. (Kozak & Rimmington, 1998). As a result, shaped destination assets enable residents to live their daily lives per the environmental competencies and with a sense of security (Lai, Gudergan, Young & Lee, 2021). Any initiatives related to tourism in a destination, in addition to supporting from the public and private sectors, should also receive support from the residents (Butler, 2023). For residents to become brand advocates, they must constantly consolidate their assets.

It is possible to consider the assets of a rationally chosen destination brand as the key to its successful promotion (Laing, Wheeler, Reeves & Frost, 2014). However, no scholarly endorsed practical model for determining destination brand assets used for branding exists. While the scholarly literature describes that for successful destination branding, the chosen destination brand assets must be based on their unique character, the asset definition model must also be unique (Bragagnolo et al., 2021). That is, the assets proposed for successful branding will consist of different traits of individualized type for each destination. However, empirical studies have not determined the appropriate assets for each destination brand, which requires additions. This raises the question: Can we use specific attributes as brand assets for destination branding? What research practices should we use in identifying destination brand assets? These questions still need to be fully addressed in the literature on destination branding and form the basis of our research to fill the gap.

Therefore, the primary purpose of this paper is to develop and test a practical model for determining the brand assets of a destination by using the existing branding concepts and practices. Expressly, the following tasks were set:

■ to discover the attributes that make up the assets of a destination;

■ to find out the strengths of the sample destination;

■ to determine the advantages of the sample destination and its competitors;

■ to identify the type of tourism most effectively implemented in the sample destination; and

■ to reveal the problems of the sample destination and solutions in the tourism industry.

In addition, as an important part of stakeholders, we test the theory of residents' ambassadorial activity (Lai et al., 2021; Uchinaka, Yoganathan & Osburg, 2019; Wassler, Wang & Hung, 2019), which leads to embedding the assets in a destination through their direct or indirect participation into the process. A practical model for determining destination brand assets was proposed and tested during the research work. Given its effectiveness on destination branding, the proposed practical model is based on systems analysis (Snepenger, Murphy, Snepenger & Anderson, 2004). According to the proposed model, systems analysis consists of a destination audit, stakeholder interviews (Yuksel, Bramwell & Yuksel, 1999), questionnaire surveys and segmentation analysis.

The assets of Kazakhstan's most popular tourist zone, the Almaty region, considered an object of research, will be determined. Thus, first, our scientific research complements the series of scientific studies of destination branding with an opinion on the assets of the

destination brand and offers a practical model on the relevant topic. Second, considering the Almaty region as an object of research fills the gap of the small number of studies on the states of the former USSR in the scientific literature of tourism. Third, the scholarly research allows the recognition of the Almaty region's tourist, natural, historical and cultural objects. In addition, according to the study's results, tourism stakeholders of the Almaty region are provided with the results in the form of brand assets used in destination branding. Finally, the research practices the ambassadorial activity, characterized by the participation of stakeholders in determining the destination brand assets.

Literature review

Brand assets consist of rational attributes used for branding, including unique identity, an advantage over competitors, emotional perception, know-how, perceived values and more (Kapferer, 2012). That is, they are unique and exciting attributes for each destination, revealing the meaning of the destination (Marques, Vinhas da Silva & Antova, 2021; Vinyals-Mirabent, Kavaratzis & Fernández-Cavia, 2019). While any place or region branding encompasses a holistic picture consisting of the political and cultural features of a state, region and city (Kladou & Kehagias, 2014), a destination, in turn, is an object for visitors (Braun, 2012). The assets that make a destination attractive to visitors include attractions, amenities, a wide range of services, activities and support services (Kim, Lee & Klenosky, 2003). However, influential factors in determining a destination's assets are the perceived vision, mission and cultural heritage (Kladou & Kehagias, 2014; Tasci & Kozak, 2006) as well as the human values and brand philosophy of the destination (Balakrishnan, 2009). The resources that reveal the different behavior of a destination, making it more attractive to visitors, can be divided into three parts:

1. inherited, cultural and natural resources;

2. generated resources, infrastructure, activities, and environment; and

3. supporting resources, quality, and accessibility, etc. (Gomezelj & Mihalič, 2008).

Accordingly, these values create the atmosphere and encourage visitors to repeat visits and make favorable offers (Kladou & Kehagias, 2014). However, not all of these values can be used in destination branding. In this case, there is a need to sort the destination brand assets that will be more effective for branding each destination. Suppose the unique feature of the intended image and the destination do not match, or the difference between them is enormous. In that case, it is necessary to identify the problem and try to eliminate it. This is because the visitor feels a discrepancy between the predicted picture and the accurate picture of their destination experience. This factor increases the likelihood that negative feedback about its image will spread by word of mouth (Qu, Kim & Im, 2011). Therefore, in destination branding, it is preferable to choose assets that reveal the exact meaning of a destination (Kapferer, 2012). Moreover, to identify assets that reveal a destination's meaning, we can rely on stakeholders' experiences, including professionals, public officials and residents (Perkins, Khoo-Lattimore & Arcodia, 2020).

Anholt (2009) identifies the stakeholders of a destination as a critical factor in the branding process (Anholt, 2009). As a result of constant discussions with stakeholders, it is possible to implement destination branding successfully. The primary purpose of destination branding is to form a favorable appearance of different market segments to the population, investors, specialists and tourists (Anholt, 2009). As one of the most important phenomena, branding has gained its scientific status in the field (Xu, Li, Belyi & Park, 2021). Stakeholders in successful destination branding assess not only brand assets but also the quality of activities to attract a new market. Therefore, new products and services are usually actively promoted. Consequently, new emerging destinations have more significant advantages than their counterparts and are increasingly being promoted in the media
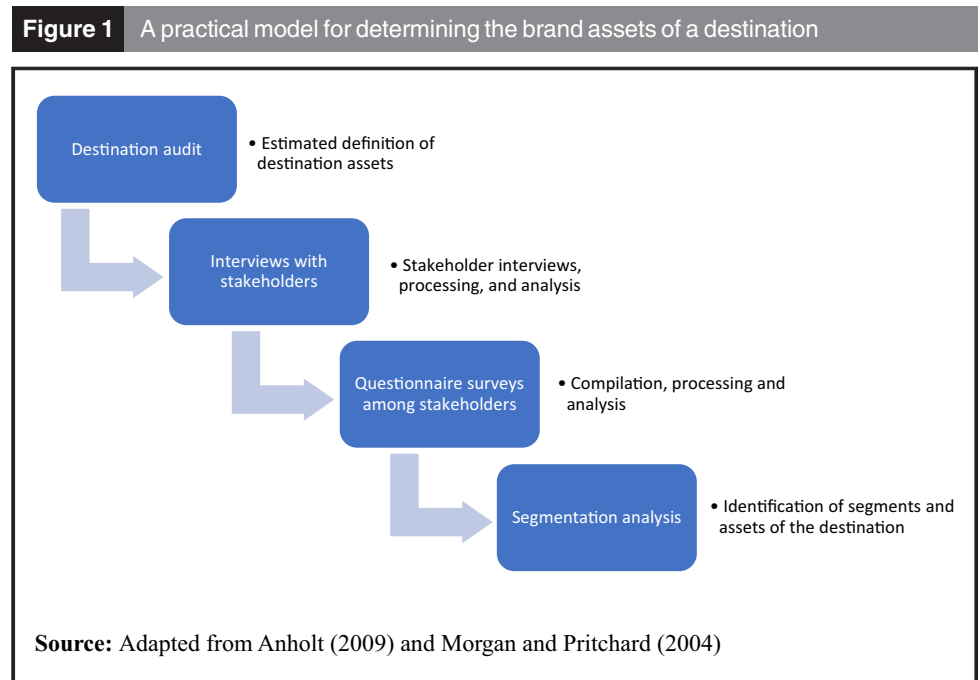
simply for being new. As the nature of the market in a developed destination prefers other attributes, older attributes become less attractive to the market (Butler, 2023).

Considering the multifaceted branding services, destination branding can be defined as both a differentiating activity, an identifying activity and a means of communication with consumers (Aaker, 1991; Anderson & Morrison, 2002; Balakrishnan, 2009). The continuous improvement of brand image shapes the inimitable uniqueness of a brand (Rodrigues, Correia & Kozak, 2012) based on consumers' memories (Qu et al., 2011). Accordingly, to create a harmonious branding image, destination branding should be strong enough to evoke visitors' opinions before, during and after the trip (Kim, Stepchenkova & Babalou, 2018). In their study, Morgan and Pritchard suggest that a destination brand should be rich in individual qualities and not include artificial attributes (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2004). Their benefits pyramid harmoniously combines issues defining a destination's unique qualities and the consumer gaze. Nevertheless, although there may initially be many ideas about the brand architecture, destination assets are a decisive factor for a successful destination brand in the final version.

Considering the theories and practices of destination branding in the literature, this study aimed at determining its assets supported by the role model of Anholt (2009) and *the destination brand benefit pyramid* proposed by Morgan et al. (2004). As a result of applying the construction of these models, with its significant four steps, Figure 1 presents a practical model to determine the brand assets of a destination, to be followed alongside the study: destination audit, interviews with stakeholders, questionnaire surveys with stakeholders and segmentation analysis.

Step I – destination audit

The model is a systematic analysis consisting of four stages. The work according to each stage leads to the determination of brand assets of a tourist destination. According to the model, the first stage of the study involved a content analysis of the object of study of the Almaty region, located in the southeast of Kazakhstan. The main factor causing interest in the country remains the vast natural landscape, including the steppe zone and high

| **Figure 1** | A practical model for determining the brand assets of a destination |

Source: Adapted from Anholt (2009) and Morgan and Pritchard (2004)

mountains (Sarmento & Serikboluly, 2013). Kazakhstan's steppes reflect the centuries-old historical connection between nature and man (Tiberghien, 2020). At the same time, Kazakhstan can use its scenic nature as a tourist destination (Daye, Charman, Wang & Suzhikova, 2020). The national parks, medical and health centers and more than nine thousand historical and archaeological monuments have the potential to attract domestic and international tourists (Abubakirova, Syzdykova, Kelesbayev, Dandayeva & Ermankulova, 2015). In this regard, forming an optimal tourist image (Smykova, 2015) is one of the Almaty region's main tasks in the tourism field as a developing tourist destination. One of the hindrances in developing tourism in the country is insufficient infrastructure. In addition, the need for qualified specialists also hinders the development of the tourism industry. The quality of service is also one of the issues requiring development (Kenzhebekov, Zhailauov, Velinov, Petrenko & Denisov, 2021).

The second folk name of the Almaty region comes from the confluence of the words "Zhetysu," "zhety - seven" and "su – water," which means a valley with seven rivers. In addition, there is a famous saying, "Zher Zhannaty – Zhetysu," which means Zhetysu – paradise on earth. This comparison-people's price given to this area's incredibly beautiful and comfortable nature.

According to the results of the destination audit, anyone may find reasons to visit the region, and they include the following priorities of the region:

- The historical and cultural heritage of the Almaty region is of interest to fans of ethnographic tourism. Zhetysu is home to UNESCO World Heritage Sites, such as the Tamgaly petroglyphs and the Great Silk Road sites.

- Tourism is a promising sphere of business with vast opportunities for active recreation: ecological adventures, mountaineering, skiing, water and extreme tourism.

- The availability of health centers and sanatoriums for strengthening and maintaining health. Healing waters and clays have a healing effect on many body systems.

- Of the ten most visited places in Kazakhstan on video hosting sites Google, Yandex and YouTube, five are in the Almaty region.

The location of the city of Almaty on the territory of the destination and the presence of an international airport is an advantage of the region as a tourist destination.

Step II – interviews

The stakeholders of a destination are divided into two groups: tourists and locals. While the former is the people visiting the destination, the latter includes the residents, shopkeepers, decision-makers, specialists, civil servants, employees, etc. (Mason, 2003). In the *study's second phase*, we identified a group of stakeholders (Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002; Semone & Kozak, 2012) with information and vision about the tourism industry. As interviews are usually used to obtain extensive information on a particular topic (Lin et al., 2021; Spasojevic & Lohmann, 2022), destination stakeholders were interviewed, asking basic and additional questions. There are several features of using interviewing in tourism research. For example, an interview study may have a small number of interviewees. This is because interviewing requires much time and financial support. Also, interviewers express stakeholders' views in each area and have as many interviewees as the number of stakeholder groups in the destination (Singleton & Straits, 2017). Interviews are more effective research to identify the issues in the area and collect baseline data (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008; Warnaby, Stubbs, Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2015; Yuksel et al., 1999).

A total of 12 persons participated in the interview, lasting from March 29 to April 16, 2021. Interviews were in-person by appointment at the interviewees' offices and by telephone. Telephone interviews were held with those working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the participants of the interviews were residents of the Almaty

region and had academic or practical knowledge of the destination. To detail and determine the information that each interviewee knows about the destination and by area of activity, a structured interview was chosen. The questions were prepared beforehand, and no time constraints were set (Singleton & Straits, 2017). The region's tourism information actors hold the following positions: travel agents, managers of ecotourism facilities; employees of natural parks, specialists of the state, regional departments on culture, sports and tourism; professors of a territorial university and specialists of the Visitor Information Center.

Interviews were tape-recorded with an average time of 35 or 40 min. After each interview, the audio recording was transcribed on the computer. For analysis, the interviews were tabulated. The questions and the interviewees' responses were categorized into two columns in the table. Later, a column labeled "response code" was added (Walters, 2016). In this column, the reference and keywords in answer to the question posed were selected and considered the code of the question. The codes of all interviewees' responses to the same question were summarized, and the frequently occurring words were perceived as an answer to the question posed. According to the proposed practical model, we become familiar with the circumstances of destination development through responses from interviews with the owners of information about the destination.

During the interviews with stakeholders, the interviewees noted that ecotourism in the Almaty region is well developed and constantly in demand because of the unique manifestations of natural landscapes. Inbound visitors show a great interest in ecotourism. This phenomenon is one of the characteristics of the European citizens. In addition, according to the heads of visitor centers and travel agencies, the formation of visitor flow will contribute to developing active forms of ecotourism, trekking and camping in the Almaty region (see Table 1).

During the study, the Almaty region was considered a favorable destination for tourism. Due to its geographical location, tourism has a seasonal nature. In the winter season, it is mainly the entrepreneurs in the mountainous area who offer visitor services. In spring and autumn in the steppe areas, and in the summer, water-based tourism activities accelerate on the banks of rivers and lakes. The location of the Almaty region along the medieval, logistic "Silk Road" and the revival of this route today under the name of the "New Silk Road" allows the region to serve as a transit corridor and develop tourism.

The main feature of the Almaty region's destination, in addition to other regions and bordering states, has been its natural diversity. According to the participants, visitors can see nature from the Alpine mountains to the desert landscape and feel the temperature contrasts in the summer. It is a unique attribute of the destination. Natural objects of interest for visitors to the Almaty region are the Kolsay Lake, Charyn Gorge Canyon, Aigaykum and Lake Alakol. Furthermore, other attractions are the Burkhan Bulak, Turgen Gorge, Tamgaly tas, Balkhash, Kayindy and the Altyn-Emel National Natural Park. While some visitor groups are interested in the mountainous areas of the destination, others are particularly impressed by the plains and steppes stretching to the horizon. Given the scale of the Almaty region's destination, it can be seen as both an opportunity and a cause of road problems.

Private entrepreneurs operating in tourism claim that it is possible to visit the natural sites by jeep because of the poor quality of the roads and remoteness of sites. Upon arrival at the designated site, visitors feel tired and often complain of a bad mood. All travel agencies use transportation services when delivering visitor groups to their destination due to the need for more buses. In this case, the cost of transportation is high and unprofitable for both the tour operator and the visitor. The seasonality of tourism also has two aspects. An entrepreneur engaged in tourism is active only during a certain period of the year; for the rest of the time, they must be engaged in other economic activities.

Table 1 Results of interviews	
Questions	*Answers*
What associations make up the brand assets of a destination as a tourist destination?	■ Destination attractions ■ Recreational activities at the destination ■ Type and quality of service ■ Philosophy of experience
How strong is the Almaty region as a destination?	■ Ideal for tourism ■ The land is very productive ■ The pandemic period has created an internal flow of visitors ■ Vast territory ■ Transit corridor ■ Natural diversity ■ It has seasonal features depending on geographic location ■ The trail is paved to all visitor sites ■ Five national natural parks ■ Many rivers and lakes ■ Historical and cultural sites ■ The work of ethno-auls is being developed
What advantages does it have over its competitors?	■ Unique objects of tourism ■ The country's cultural capital, Almaty, is in the region's territory ■ Availability of the international airport in Almaty ■ The first place in the development of tourism in the Republic ■ The water has medicinal properties ■ Zhetysu, travel visitor platform ■ Location of the Eastern Gate of Khorgos ■ The location along the Great Silk Road ■ Location of the visitor cluster of Almaty
Which direction of tourism will be most effective in the Almaty region?	■ Ecotourism, ethnotourism and gastrotourism ■ Trekking and camping routes ■ Active types of tourism
What are the main problems of tourism development in the Almaty region, and how do you see solutions?	■ Low quality of roads ■ No large visitor location ■ Recreation areas are far from the visitor site (Sharyn *et al.*) ■ Few additional services ■ High cost of delivery of visitor groups ■ Roadside infrastructure is at a low level ■ Low quality of service ■ The local population has not mastered tourism as a profession ■ Individual entrepreneurs are focused on getting a one-time high profit ■ The souvenir market is haphazard ■ Seasonal nature of tourism ■ A small number of ethno-auls

Source: Authors' own creation

Participants noted that the tourism industry is developing at a slow pace. Nevertheless, the flow of visitors is significant; interest is high and, as a result, visitors come to the destination of the Almaty region. According to the interviewees, however, they not only come to see the region's natural objects but also leave garbage, contributing to the deterioration of the environmental situation. In the development of tourism leading to sustainable development (Beritelli & Laesser, 2016), given the need for constant supervision of the development of environmental, economic and social areas, the development strategies should be applied without prejudice to tourism and related industries (Koens, Smit & Melissen, 2021). The infrastructural facilities of a destination closer to natural tourism resources often provide only boarding and essential catering services. As a result, the only revenues from the tourism industry come from delivery, lodging and essential food services.

The quality and types of services also need improvement and development. It was proposed to professionally train region residents, young people and potential investors in the intricacies of tourism by creating a long-term strategy. Such initiatives included the organization of horseback riding, cycling, guided tours, observance of the environment and implementation of the requirements of the circular economy. Mastering these abilities is realized in the long-term strategy by looking at other destinations and benchmarking their best practices.

Stage III – questionnaire surveys

The analysis of the data obtained during the interviews allowed us to determine the brand assets of a destination under four categories: recreation areas, attractive facilities, additional services and philosophy of destination impressions. In addition, in line with the earlier studies (Garau-Vadell, Orfila-Sintes & Rejón-Guardia, 2023; Ruiz-Real, Uribe-Toril, de Pablo Valenciano & Gázquez-Abad, 2020a), a questionnaire survey was followed among residents to determine the significance of these four brand assets in the example of the Almaty region. The ability of the residents to carry out ambassadorial activities has yet to be fully addressed (Lai et al., 2021). When residents believe that the survey results and destination brand assets are rational, their pride in being residents of the destination increases, and they continue their ambassadorial activities with respect (Lai et al., 2021). Suppose the destination assets selected through the institution of destination management and the branding process are not supported by the population. Regardless of the money and time spent, the assets may not gain a foothold in the destination. The survey was amended by three domestic and two international professors, all in tourism. The target group in the study are the citizens of the Republic, who obtain information about the Almaty region and residents of the region.

Research related to destination branding has been conducted primarily in large metropolitan areas and centers. It has been recommended that research be conducted in small towns and remote regions to fill this gap (Dimitrovski, Todorović & Valjarević, 2012; Ruiz-Real, Uribe-Toril & Gázquez-Abad, 2020b). Accordingly, the study covers different settlements of the region, and the survey was conducted among the residents of districts and villages. The survey was conducted by sending personal invitations electronically between May 1 and 30, 2021. To ensure that the information collected was based on extensive experience, a purposeful and evaluative selection was made (Hankinson, 2005); the selection of respondents for the survey was calculated against the total population of the Almaty region over 16 years old. That is, the number of respondents needed for the study is 1,383,054 (Demographic yearbook of Kazakhstan, 2023). The reliability level is 95%, and the failure rate is 5% (O'Leary, 2017). As the minimum number of respondents needed was 384, the answer of 497 respondents was deemed suitable for the survey. The confidence interval is 4.4.

Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. They are represented mainly by the younger generations who are female, holding either a colleague or bachelor's degree and with a lower-income group.

According to the third step of the proposed model (see Table 3), the survey aimed to determine the existing recreation areas in the Almaty region. Recreation activities in nature received the highest score, followed by "meals, acquaintance with local cuisines" and "swimming, relaxing on the beach." The two main components were used to determine the factors.

According to the factors influencing the destinations of recreation in the region, in the *first* component, "rafting," "jeep tours" and "trekking" showed high rates among the destinations, respectively. The second component is "recreation in nature," "swimming, relaxing on the beach" and "meals, acquaintance with local cuisines." These corresponded

Table 2 The demographic profile of the participants

Description	Unit of measure	Quantity	%
Age	18–24	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	176	35.4
	Female	321	64.6
Education	High school	74	14.9
	College degree	117	23.5
	Bachelor's degree	257	51.7
	Master's degree	34	6.8
	PhD or similar	15	3.0
Income level	US$186 and below	87	17.5
	US$186–US$437	111	22.3
	US$437–US$926	149	30.0
	US$926–US$1,310	71	14.3
	US$1,310–US$2,183	56	11.3
	US$2,183 and up	23	4.6
Frequency of travel	I do not 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

Source: Authors' own creation

Table 3 Results of factor analysis for recreation areas

Recreation areas in the Almaty region	Mean	Component 1	Component 2	Kaiser-varimax rotation 1	Kaiser-varimax rotation 2	SD
Recreation in nature	3.11		0.533		0.825	1.18
Meals, acquaintance with local cuisines	2.95		0.493		0.820	1.33
Swimming, relaxing on the beach	2.87		0.419		0.773	1.17
Shopping	2.45		0.161		0.573	1.34
Sightseeing of historical and cultural monuments	2.32	0.733			0.527	1.17
Trekking (walking through particular terrain)	2.11	0.795		0.628		1.28
Stay in ethnic villages	2.08	0.753		0.575		1.29
Rock climbing, mountaineering	2.06	0.748		0.610		1.32
Skiing	1.88	0.767		0.690		1.22
Jeep tours	1.84	0.850		0.802		1.26
Rafting (sports rafting on mountain rivers)	1.84	0.824		0.749		1.24
Business travel	1.83	0.761		0.770		1.25
Gamble	1.39				0.817	0.97
Extraction of the sum of the squares of the loads. Total		7.037	1.301			
Variance %		54.13	10.007			
Cumulative %		54.13	64.138			

Note: Cronbach's alpha = 0.928
Source: Authors' own creation

to the three recreation areas, the average values of which, according to respondents, were higher.

The two components are also identified in the varimax rotation, one of which combines more sport-oriented destinations in the Almaty region, such as jeep tours, rafting, skiing and

business trips. The second component prefers less relaxing leisure activities like outdoor recreation, beach holidays, meals and shopping. Moreover, the variance was D[X] = 54.13% for the first component and D[X] = 10.007% for the second component (Table 4). According to the results of the interviews in the first stage of the study, priority was given to visitor objects of the destination as brand assets. The following four sites have captured the highest interest for a potential visit: Alakol Lake, Balkhash Lake, Lakes Kaindy, Kolsay and "Shymbulak ski resort."

Table 5 presents the types of additional services in the destination and the average assessment and factor analysis results. The factor analysis of visitor objects was conducted, and only one component was revealed. National parks "Ile-Alatau" and "Zhongar-Alatau" show a higher coefficient of 0.94, and all objects received results above 0.700. The additional services to be received on a tourist trip to the Almaty region include the observance of safety precautions as an additional activity photo shooting and compliance with sanitary and medical requirements.

According to Snepenger et al. (2004, Snepenger, Snepenger, Dalbey & Wessol, 2007), residents and visitors revealed the meaning of the place and offered the destination as the keeper of the meaning of specific experiences. They emphasized that living in a destination, using services and goods and interacting with others creates meaning for the place, a parable of sorts. This study shows the importance of recreation and services provided in a destination, presented as the assets of the evolving destination brand. In addition, Snepenger et al. (2004, 2007) view that attractions, compared to activities, evoke much more vivid emotions for tourists and residents, also justify our suggestion of attractions as destination brand assets. As one of the survey tasks, we asked a question aimed at

Table 4 Attractive visitor sites in the Almaty region			
Attractive visitor sites in the Almaty region	Mean	Component 1	Extract Initial
Alakol lake	3.75	0.845	0.714
Balkhash lake	3.67	0.842	0.709
Lakes Kaiyndy, Kolsay	3.58	0.911	0.830
Shymbulak ski resort (Medeu Skating Rink, Kok-Tobe)	3.55	0.869	0.755
National parks «Kolsay lakes»	3.51	0.927	0.859
National Park «Charyn»	3.47	0.922	0.850
The waterfall «Burhan-Bulak»	3.43	0.927	0.859
National park «Altyn-Emel»	3.42	0.923	0.852
National cuisine	3.42	0.881	0.777
Cuisines of other nations	3.40	0.857	0.734
Mountains, including the «Khan-Tengri peak»	3.40	0.895	0.800
The cuisine of Turkic-speaking countries	3.39	0.881	0.775
National park «Zhongar-Alatau»	3.39	0.940	0.884
National park «Ile-Alatau»	3.39	0.940	0.883
«Issyk burial mounds», «The Golden Warrior»	3.29	0.861	0.742
UNESCO sites (Silk Road: Kayalyk, Talkhiz (Talgar), Karamergen)	3.28	0.894	0.800
Central State Museum of Kazakhstan, located in the Almaty	3.22	0.833	0.694
Fast food	3.20	0.729	0.531
The flowering of the apple tree «Sievers»	3.20	0.920	0.846
UNESCO sites, including «Tamgaly» petroglyphs	3.18	0.899	0.808
Festival of national cuisine «Toikazan»	3.16	0.903	0.816
Ethnic villages (Ethnoauls), acquaintance with traditions, customs, crafts and theatrical performances, including Ethnoaul «Gunny»	3.16	0.897	0.804
«Besshatyr burial mounds»	3.16	0.871	0.758
Ethnic villages (Ethnoauls), acquaintance with traditions, customs, crafts and theatrical performances, including Ethno Center «Nomad»	3.13	0.898	0.806
The Ascension Cathedral (located in Panfilov Park)	3.02	0.825	0.680

Source: Authors' own creation

Table 5	Types of additional services in a destination			
Additional types of services in the Almaty region	Mean	Component 1		Retrieved from Initial 1
Observance of safety precautions	3.77	0.888		0.789
Photo shooting	3.74	0.859		0.738
Compliance with sanitary and medical requirements	3.72	0.911		0.830
Compliance with environmental requirements	3.67	0.915		0.837
Guided tour	3.66	0.893		0.797
Availability of Internet	3.66	0.846		0.716
Provision of services by professionals	3.57	0.905		0.818
Roadside infrastructure (bio-toilets, food outlets, etc.)	3.55	0.894		0.798
Entertainment evenings	3.53	0.848		0.719
Availability of the system "All inclusive"	3.49	0.875		0.766
Horse and camel rides	3.42	0.760		0.578
Souvenir purchasing	3.40	0.829		0.687
Source: Authors' own creation				

determining the slogan for branding – i.e. a phrase that reveals the meaning of the destination: *To what extent do you compare the destination of the Almaty region with the following comparisons*? The comparisons were made according to the results of the interviews conducted in the first stage of the research. Table 6 illustrates the comparisons and the average score of the respondents.

The highest scores gained by the slogans "a beautiful natural land," "the land of beautiful lakes and high mountains" and "area along the Great Silk Road," respectively. Only one component was identified. Regarding the influential factor, the "land of unforgettable travel" had the highest score. Because visitors ask for accurate information about a destination, it is crucial that tourism information and marketing advertisements are appropriate and do not violate laws and regulations (Liu, Yao & Fan, 2019).

The brand image of a destination is set not only by marketing communications but also by advertising in education, literature, arts and media (Hankinson, 2005). Regarding the rational social network platforms for destination branding (Kaushik, 2012; Norfazlina, Akma, Adrina & Noorizan, 2016), the respondents indicated Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, Telegram, TikTok and BeToBe. They were asked to rate the usability and effectiveness of each platform for destination branding between 1 and 5. In this case, the average ranked scores for Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Tik-Tok, Telegram, Facebook and BeToBe were 4.1, 3.9, 3.6, 3.5, 3.4, 3.3 and 3.3, respectively. Usually, visitors inform and show what awaits them in the destination, form thoughts and participate in the branding process aimed at other visitors (Kim et al., 2018). The social networks evaluated above also

Table 6	Philosophy of the destination experience			
Statistics	Mean	SD	Factor Component 1	Extract Initial 1
Land of beautiful lakes and high mountains	4.10	1.423	0.950	0.903
Beautiful natural land	4.10	1.362	0.937	0.878
The area along the Great Silk Road	3.99	1.435	0.945	0.893
Hospitable land	3.99	1.397	0.938	0.879
Land of unforgettable travels	3.93	1.490	0.948	0.898
Land of bright cities	3.93	1.415	0.939	0.883
Safe travel area	3.88	1.519	0.908	0.824
Land of diverse cuisines	3.87	1.461	0.917	0.840
Land of nomadic culture	3.82	1.471	0.908	0.824
Source: Authors' own creation				

contribute to repeat visits and recommendations to others by reading and discussing comments about the trip.

Responses to the question aimed at identifying the recreation areas were classified into two components. The first component is "exploratory tourism destinations" such as outdoor recreation, catering, acquaintance with local cuisines, recreation on the beach, shopping and acquaintance with historical and cultural monuments. "Active tourism destinations," including rafting on mountain rivers, mountaineering, trekking and skiing, scored high in the second component. In the following research stage, 13 types of destinations as destination assets, 25 types of facilities and 12 types of additional services were presented to the respondents during the survey. Table 7 shows the assets of the destination brand of the Almaty region for strategic positioning according to the respondents' feedback.

Step IV – segmentation analysis

As noted in the model, analyzing the results obtained at different stages of the study, such as destination audit, interviews and questionnaires, two main segments of destination branding of Almaty region as a destination can be named. The first combines eco- and ethno-tourism, including natural recreation and exploring historical and cultural sights. The second is an active destination involving sports such as trekking, rafting and skiing, which can be practiced in nature. Nevertheless, outdoor recreation and experiences, prioritized at all stages of the study, are the main segment of destination branding. We associate the priorities of this segment over others with the unique features of nature, which include mountains and deserts, rivers and lakes. The location of attractive tourist objects and historical and cultural sights in nature increases the priority of this segment over others. That is, the study found that the tourist demand of Almaty region prefers recreation in nature, is not indifferent to environmental situations, likes to capture the landscapes of nature and shares the impressions of what they have received. Spending time in nature is very relevant to tourists to this destination. We prioritize that stakeholders will be in demand to link their tourism products with outdoor recreation. The main segment in destination branding should be natural.

Conclusion and implications

This study focuses on how a destination could be differentiated from its peers and also how it can strengthen its unique character. The sense of difference results from the differentiation strategy; the brand originates from the homeland, motivates the visit and accompanies the visitor throughout the journey without losing power, even in the memories of the destination (Balakrishnan, 2009). This study includes developing and testing a practical model for determining the brand assets of a tourist destination in the example of the Almaty region. The study has addressed three gaps in the literature. *First*, the

Table 7 Strategic positioning of the Almaty region's assets as a destination brand			
Recreation areas	*Attractive facilities*	*Additional services*	*Philosophy of experience*
■ Recreation in nature ■ Swimming, relaxing on the beach ■ Meals, acquaintance with local cuisines ■ Types of outdoor activities: jeep tours, trekking, rafting	■ Alakol lake ■ Balkhash lake ■ Kolsai Lakes National park, Kaindy, Kolsai lakes ■ Shymbulak ski resort (Medeu Skating Rink, Kok-Tobe)	■ Photo shooting ■ Compliance with sanitary and medical requirements ■ Observance of safety precautions ■ Compliance with environmental requirements	■ Beautiful natural scenery ■ Land of beautiful lakes and high mountains ■ The area along the Great Silk Road
Source: Authors' own creation			

ambassador activity of the population in the process of destination branding and the ability of residents to engage in ambassador activities has been insufficiently addressed in the tourism literature (Lai et al., 2021; Uchinaka et al., 2019; Wassler et al., 2019). Therefore, this study provides insights to enhance public participation from the beginning of the destination branding process and respectful continuation of its ambassadorial activities, provided that the identified destination's brand assets are rational. *Second*, destination brand asset associations are provided for developing destinations. *Third*, the study creates a realistic picture of the Almaty region as a destination.

As confirmed, 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 form *the basis of brand assets* (Cathy et al., 2008; Tasci & Kozak, 2006). The destination is a holistic entity that develops one destination over others, and among destinations and services within itself, there are also dominant destinations and demanded services (Correia & Kozak, 2012). Destination image consists of fragments and associations about the region, which arises from the desire of our consciousness to differentiate the "right thing" from a multitude of information (Kotler, Haider & Rein, 1993). One of the tasks of this study was to define the tourism assets of the Almaty region as a developing destination. The interview results suggest four destination brand assets: recreation, beautiful visitor objects, obligatory additional services and experience philosophy.

According to the study's first-phase results, the timing of the pandemic significantly boosted domestic tourism. The fact is that before the pandemic, domestic visitors, the majority of Kazakhstanis, chose to vacation abroad. With the idea that it was safe in the countryside, and because of the closed borders, the hotels in the countryside and the places of rest felt the influx of domestic visitors. All the visitor facilities of the Almaty region, such as fishing, honey, agriculture, horse riding and places to relax on the banks of the river, were in demand, as were the cultural and unexplored places in the countryside. There was also an increased demand for the national drinks, *koumiss* and *saumal*. Furthermore, inbound visitors wishing to get acquainted with Kazakh people's traditions, customs and culture were the customers of ethnotourism.

Opinions about linking the destination's brand with the Silk Road were expressed during the interviews. Camel trekking, horse caravans, international sports and trade festivals are all needed to unlock the brand's essence. The main artery of the northern route, which runs through Kazakhstan, the Great Silk Road, is a medieval logistic route but has also developed culture in these places. The significance of the Silk Road brand is more profound than just knowing a single historical, cultural or natural site. However, there were opinions that to choose the Silk Road as a destination brand, a visitor location reflecting medieval life, culture and everyday life must be built.

In addition, as to the practical implications, there is also a need to improve the skills and knowledge of young people about the tourism business. Entrepreneurs desire to make a quick and easy profit, and currently, tourism in Kazakhstan is a seasonal business. Therefore, creating a long-term strategy within the given season and teaching the possibilities of its realization is required. The presence of an exciting destination rich in resources increases visitors' desire to explore the destination further to experience different effects (Wang, Liu, Huang & Chen, 2019). Authorities should conduct extensive research before introducing their potential branding programs. As branding is necessary to distinguish one thing from another, a sustainable branding strategy may identify one key element for each brand (Tasci & Kozak, 2006). The unique features of the Almaty region as a developing destination are related to natural resources. The fact that it is possible to walk from high mountain peaks to desert steppes in a day may not leave anyone indifferent to its diversity.

Finally, as to the study's limitations, we can list surveying the COVID-19 pandemic. *First*, given that external tourism faced significant constraints during the pandemic, we

acknowledge that destination branding research may be more rational in the period before or after the pandemic. In future studies, surveying external customers (visitors) may prioritize other attributes of destination asset identification. *Second*, the survey was conducted online due to the introduction of quarantine measures in different areas and at times. *Third*, the assets of a destination were selected based on the results of interviews. Accordingly, only leisure destinations, additional services and attractions, philosophy of experience was considered the assets of the Almaty region. In future studies, including other attributes can make it possible to identify new assets for branding.

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