










The Role of Socio-Economic Factors in Sustainable Urban Development

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to explore the integration of sustainable development principles into the management of urban tourism. The research seeks to identify and analyze the socio-economic, geographical, and environmental factors that influence the development of urban tourism, and to propose strategic planning approaches that enhance sustainability in these rapidly growing megapolises. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. The research involved a comprehensive review of existing literature on urban tourism and sustainable development, followed by an expert survey conducted among key stakeholders in the tourism industry of Kazakhstan. The survey results were analyzed using statistical methods, including the Kendall concordance coefficient, to assess the consistency of expert opinions. The findings reveal that sustainable urban tourism in Kazakhstan's major cities can be optimized by tailoring tourism development strategies to the unique characteristics of each city. The analysis highlighted the need for targeted infrastructure development and strategic planning to balance tourism growth with environmental sustainability. By aligning tourism development with sustainable urban planning principles, cities like Astana and Almaty can enhance their appeal as tourist destinations while contributing to broader goals of environmental sustainability and economic resilience. This research provides a novel contribution by integrating sustainable development principles into urban tourism management in the context of developing countries, with specific insights into the distinctive urban environments of Kazakhstan. The study's focus on the unique socio-economic and environmental factors of Astana and Almaty offers valuable strategies for policymakers and urban planners aiming to promote sustainable tourism in similar developing urban contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Major cities in any country are important landmarks for tourists. While earlier they were perceived primarily as places of emission of tourist flow, now they are becoming the main places of reception of tourists, i.e., a tourist product [1], or so-called tourist destination. Although cities have always been a destination for tourist trips, especially for educational (cultural and historical) and religious tourism [2, 3], in postmodern times, tourism in cities has acquired a different character compared to the industrial era [4]. New forms of individual and business tourism are developing (like congresses, conferences, fairs, and exhibitions) [5]. As a result, more people are focused on urban tourism [6, 7].

From the point of view of city authorities, tourism is perceived as an important tool for revitalizing urban centers and/or post-industrial areas [8], as it provides an opportunity to attract external investors and stimulate economic growth [9],

as well as modernize and, more broadly, change the image and enhance its marketing potential [10, 11]. Mass tourism, intensively using urban space, changes its landscape and, in addition to its undoubted benefits, can cause many negative phenomena, especially if its development is spontaneous and is not included in the framework of the policy of an integrated urban environment [12, 13].

Moreover, urban tourism can significantly influence the socioeconomic fabric of cities. The influx of tourists brings both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it generates substantial revenue for local economies by driving demand for services like hospitality, retail, and transportation. It can also foster job creation and cultural exchange, enriching the social and cultural life of cities. However, if not properly managed, the concentration of tourists in urban areas can lead to overcrowding, strain on public services, and the displacement of local populations due to rising living costs and gentrification.

Our study is focused on determining the optimal management policy for various forms of urban tourism, depending on the characteristics of the territory where the city is located. First, these are historical, natural, and geographical features that must be considered by city authorities and businesses in their activities. It is possible to adapt to these features and interpret them based on the problems necessary to solve in the framework of the tourism development policy, but these are the conditions for the development of tourism that can be considered objective [14]. Second, we must consider the socio-economic features that exist at the moment. These are both the conditions for the development of the megapolis itself [15] and the interests of tourists [16, 17]. Socio-economic features are subject to change over time [18, 19]. For city management policy and business initiatives, it is important to predict changes in socio-economic conditions for the development of new forms of tourism.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The analysis of research showed that in a broad sense, the concept of urban tourism can be understood as a) all forms of tourism carried out in urban areas [20], b) forms of tourism related to tourist attractions and the development of urban areas [21], and c) tourism the purpose of which is to visit and explore the city considered a cultural heritage and an integral element of the tourist space [22]. Kurniati and Suryanto [23] expand on this by exploring digital entrepreneurship strategies within the tourism industry in the era of Tourism 4.0. Their study highlights the rapid growth of digital entrepreneurship, driven by factors such as high internet penetration, favorable demographics, and the digitization of tourism services. The research underscores the importance of digital transformation in enhancing business efficiency, reaching more consumers, and fostering innovative tourism experiences.

According to researchers, the modern mass tourist is more focused on impressions that are the subject of tourist consumption [24]. Therefore, the latest research indicates that the main directions of tourism development in cities and megapolises are the following:

- the discovery of new tourist spaces that give unique impressions [25];
- development of new forms of tourism that give unique emotions [26];
- enrichment of old tourist product forms with elements of impressions and emotions [27];
- the transformation of the tourist infrastructure into unique attractions [28];
- new forms of exchange of tourist experience [29];
- creation of augmented reality in the smart city concept [30-32].

It is also important to note that for tourism development it is essential for policymakers to recognize the direct correlation between infrastructure quality and tourism success, advocating for well-planned infrastructure projects to enhance tourism experiences, attract visitors, and drive sustainable economic growth [33]. Thus, our study was focused on the major cities of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as they have distinctive features that will allow us to analyze the possibilities of urban tourism better.

Astana and Almaty, the two largest cities of Kazakhstan, can be considered peers in a historical sense, as Akmolinsk (now Astana) received city status in 1862, and Verniy (now

Almaty) received it in 1867. In terms of attractiveness for tourists, there are significant differences between them. Astana, which became the capital of Kazakhstan in 1997, has been actively developing over the past decades following the Master Plan developed by Japanese architect Kise Kurokawa. Monumental buildings and structures of the 21st century are organically combined in Astana. Almaty mainly developed following the ideas of architects of the second half of the 20th century about the preservation of architectural heritage, and almost no one protected the old buildings, which hindered the development of the principles of achieving sustainable development attractive to tourists in developed countries.

As the analysis of the distinctive features of Kazakhstan's megapolises shows, city authorities and businesses are aware of the need to develop modern forms of tourism in the context of the prevailing objective conditions of urban development. Therefore, based on the established trends in the field of urban tourism, we believe it is necessary to develop the following areas:

- gastronomic tourism, or getting to know the features of the cuisine of Kazakhstan, the local recipes, and food preparation culture, i.e., acquaintance with the country through the prism of national gastronomy [34];

- event tourism, which means traveling to participate in organized cultural and entertainment events in a certain place and at a certain time, since Almaty and Astana are focused on holding various events that would be of interest to both European countries and China, as well as other Asian countries [35, 36];

- sports tourism, the purpose of which is to cover tourist routes and sports destinations, as well as sports fan tourism, which means individual or group trips of sports fans to various competitions [28]. This is a new field for Astana. Almaty, in turn, has been developing in this aspect for a long time due to the development of hiking trails, mountain tourism, and ski tourism;

- creative tourism, which is understood as "the ability to develop creative talents through active acquisition of knowledge, including participating in courses and other educational activities, especially those that use the potential of the visited city" [22]. This type of tourism is promising for Astana due to its geographical features, as the steppe relief allows for developing new territories by attracting human capital, large multinational companies, and modern technologies [37, 38].

Thus, the purpose of our study is to identify new tourist and recreational spaces and new forms of urban tourism in cities and megapolises of Kazakhstan using the example of Astana and Almaty.

3. METHODS

To achieve the purpose of the study, we chose a qualitative and quantitative approach.

In the first stage, according to statistical data from the Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, two of the most popular urban tourism destinations in Kazakhstan were selected, namely, Astana and Almaty.

In the second stage, an analysis of scientific sources on urban tourism development was carried out to prepare for an expert survey. This involved analyzing academic articles, reports, and case studies relevant to urban tourism in

developing countries. Keywords used for the search strategy included "urban tourism," "tourism development," "megapolises," "Astana tourism," "Almaty tourism," "tourist destinations," "socio-economic impact," and "tourist and recreational spaces".

In the third stage, respondents were selected from employees of travel companies specializing in domestic tourism in Kazakhstan. A total of 67 experts were invited via email to ensure a diverse and knowledgeable sample. Out of these, 62 respondents agreed to participate, providing a sample size for the survey.

In the fourth stage, the expert survey was conducted. As a result, 62 respondents took part in the survey, having received e-mails indicating program of the study. All experts were informed about the purpose of the study and were aware that the results would be presented in a generalized form to ensure confidentiality and unbiased feedback. The survey was conducted from July 25 to September 25, 2023. The following research questions were posed to the experts:

(1) Which tourist and recreational spaces in Astana and Almaty can contribute to the multiplication and intensification of the tourist experience?

(2) What forms of urban tourism in such megapolises of Kazakhstan as Astana and Almaty can contribute to the multiplication and intensification of the tourist experience?

After receiving the expert answers, a second e-mail was sent to the experts where the respondents were asked to arrange their answers on a scale, assigning points depending on their level of significance. After that, their rank and weights were determined, and the final values of those determined the significance of a particular aspect.

In the fifth stage, for a more objective analysis of the data obtained during the expert survey, the degree of consistency of expert opinions with mathematical processing of the results was measured using the Kendall concordance coefficient.

4. RESULTS

Statistical data from the Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan show that the tourism industry in Kazakhstan has regained growth rates that it had before the period of restrictions caused by the spread of COVID-19. Thus, by the end of 2022, the number of domestic (Kazakh) tourists amounted to 6.4 million people (served by hotels and visitors to national parks), which exceeds the figures of 2019, when the number of Kazakhs who traveled inside the country amounted to 5.3 million people.

The quantitative indicators of 2022 for foreign tourist visits were almost equal to the ones before the period of restrictions caused by the spread of COVID-19. Thus, at the end of 2022, 927.8 thousand people visited Kazakhstan, which is comparable to the indicator of 2019, when 979.8 thousand people visited the country. According to the National Bank, the average expenditure of 1 foreign tourist from abroad is 1.5 thousand US dollars.

The analysis of data on the domestic tourist flow leads to the conclusion that the most popular urban tourism destinations are such regions as Almaty (on average, visited by 954 thousand tourists per year) and the Almaty (790 thousand) and Akmola regions (1,015 thousand). The rest in the top 5 most visited regions are Astana (748 thousand) and East Kazakhstan region (568 thousand). The presence of large

cities that provide an influx of tourists is of great importance for the development of tourism.

The expert survey showed exactly which new tourist and recreational spaces and new forms of tourism should be sought and developed in Astana (Tables 1 and 2) and Almaty (Tables 3 and 4), which will provide their visitors with original impressions and heightened emotions.

Table 1. New tourist and recreational spaces in Astana

New Tourist and Recreational Spaces	Rank	Weight
artificially created tourist attractions	1	0.41
natural urban environment	2	0.34
new religious (tourist pilgrimage) spaces	3	0.24
abandoned post-industrial territories	4	0.01

Note: compiled based on the expert survey; the value of the concordance coefficient $W = 0.73$ ($p < 0.01$), which indicates a strong consistency of expert opinions.

Table 2. New forms of tourism in Astana

New Forms of Tourism	Rank	Weight
event tourism	1	0.39
creative and business tourism	2	0.31
sports tourism (fan tourism)	3	0.23
gastronomic tourism	4	0.09

Note: compiled based on the expert survey; the value of the concordance coefficient $W = 0.69$ ($p < 0.01$), which indicates a strong consistency of expert opinions.

Table 3. New tourist and recreational spaces in Almaty

New Tourist and Recreational Spaces	Rank	Weight
natural urban environment	1	0.38
new religious (tourist pilgrimage) spaces	2	0.29
artificially created tourist attractions	3	0.22
abandoned post-industrial territories	4	0.11

Note: compiled based on the expert survey; the value of the concordance coefficient $W = 0.71$ ($p < 0.01$), which indicates a strong consistency of expert opinions.

Table 4. New forms of tourism in Almaty

New Forms of Tourism	Rank	Weight
sports tourism (fan tourism)	1	0.37
gastronomic tourism	2	0.33
event tourism	3	0.25
creative and business tourism	4	0.05

Note: compiled based on the expert survey; the value of the concordance coefficient $W = 0.74$ ($p < 0.01$), which indicates a strong consistency of expert opinions.

5. DISCUSSION

Until recently, urban tourism was limited almost exclusively to visiting historical centers, where the most important tourist attractions were located. However, in recent years, tourists have become increasingly interested in going beyond the traditional tourist areas. Therefore, it is important for the administration of any modern city focused on attracting tourists to understand the features and possibilities of urban space development. Tourism destinations in Almaty and Astana are generally consistent with the results of previous studies [39, 40].

Astana is often distinguished by its modern infrastructure, significant urban development, and a symbol of Kazakhstan's identity after gaining independence at the end of the 20th

century. The tourist attractions of the city are its futuristic architecture, cultural institutions, and the presence of international forums and events. Therefore, the city authorities pay attention primarily to the development of attractions of the modern period of Kazakhstan, as well as the holding of various professional and business events.

Almaty, on the contrary, is known for its natural beauty, historical sites, ski resorts, and mountainous areas of the region. The development of tourism is focused on active recreation, gastronomic tourism, and religious pilgrimage events.

Studies on Astana, as well as the results of our study, show that Astana is primarily focused on event tourism, which includes business tourism, MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions), and the development of new, artificially created tourism facilities focused on the development of Kazakh identity through architecture and urban planning. Therefore, the main focus is made on the development of infrastructure and services to support business and international tourism, which corresponds to the vision of the city as a modern global capital.

Almaty, being the former capital of Kazakhstan and a larger industrial city, but with a special geographical location, offers a wider range of tourist experiences based on the natural environment. As the results of our research showed, the task of the authorities of Almaty is to find a balance between urban development and the preservation of natural and historical sites. The city is working to improve its hotel and tourism services to increase tourist satisfaction and promote sustainable tourism methods that make the most of its unique environmental and cultural values while developing modern forms of tourism (like sports or gastronomic tourism).

We also observed paradoxical facts, namely, that the most neglected, degraded areas may also be of interest to tourists, so the authorities of Almaty are trying to use this factor to the benefit of the city. People enter those territories to visit abandoned objects, i.e., "places that do not fulfill their original function, are not used for commercial purposes, have an uncertain or difficult to determine ownership status, are widely accessible and are characterized by a progressive process of degradation" [41]. Thus, in the case of Almaty, this is an abandoned and destroyed Krasny Trudovik bio-processing plant. According to urban legends, components for chemical weapons were once produced there and sent to a test site in the Aral Sea. When the company was liquidated, all the equipment was taken out of the workshops, and the workshops themselves were destroyed by directional charges. Currently, it is a picturesque place, the surroundings of which convey a post-apocalyptic atmosphere.

The attractiveness of such places for tourists is determined primarily by architecture (preserved details and interior decoration), the history of buildings, objects found there, and a special atmosphere of decomposition and transience. The landscape of old, ruined buildings offers unusual activities related to the search for extreme sensations and emotions.

The differences between urban tourism in Astana and Almaty are rooted in the unique geographical, historical, and socio-economic context of each city, which affects the appropriate ways and proposals for tourism development. While Astana strives to position itself as a modern, futuristic city with a focus on business and cultural tourism, Almaty benefits from its rich natural landscape and cultural heritage by offering a wide range of recreational and historical tourism.

Based on this, we can draw several practical conclusions

that can be considered universal from the point of view of tourism management and that can be used by managers, researchers, and specialists for the development of urban tourism.

First, we believe that when planning and managing tourist flows in conditions of limited infrastructure, it is necessary to consider the identified regional factors and develop various forms of tourism in different territories. This is especially true in megapolises which are always experiencing a difficult process in development since they must consider the multiplicity and diversity of stakeholders and their special interests [42].

Second, effective tourism management will help business development. Excessive competition for some tourist flows and the impossibility or lack of conditions for the development of other forms of tourism will deplete urban resources, which can lead to conflicts that are often difficult to avoid and predict since they can arise at various stages of city development [43, 44].

Third, as our study showed, in particular, Astana and Almaty are characterized by significant fragmentation of the tourism economy and the corresponding fragmentation of institutional responsibility. This proves the non-existent or weak relationship between the tourism sphere and tourism development policy. As the research results show [11, 37], with which we fully agree, problems can be overcome through planned actions and support from local authorities. This is especially true in busy urban centers and areas where economic and social problems accumulate, which are difficult to solve in a short time. For tourism to effectively support the development of the city, this must be accompanied by an awareness of the huge variety of local conditions, and the decision on its development must be preceded, on the one hand, by political will and, on the other hand, by the interests of investors [45]. Trust between the parties will help to develop long-term projects and not only focus on individual event events or the tourist ski season.

Compliance with these principles will allow us to approach the problem more critically since too often tourism is uncritically considered an easy way to solve individual problems in a separate period [46].

The findings of this study have significant practical implications for tourism management in the megapolises of Astana and Almaty. For Astana, the emphasis on event and business tourism underscores the need to invest in modern infrastructure and services that cater to international forums and conferences. This strategic focus can enhance Astana's global identity and economic growth. In contrast, Almaty's rich natural landscape and cultural heritage suggest a diversified approach, promoting sports, gastronomic, and creative tourism. This requires balancing urban development with the preservation of natural and historical sites to maintain sustainable tourism practices.

Effective tourism management in these cities can drive economic development, attract external investment, and improve the overall quality of life for residents. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of addressing fragmented tourism economies and fostering strong collaborations between local authorities and businesses.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study has identified and proposed tailored

development strategies for urban tourism in the megapolises of Astana and Almaty, emphasizing the importance of considering geographical, historical, and socio-economic characteristics in tourism management.

An analysis of the prospects for the development of the tourist space and new forms of tourism in cities and megapolises of Kazakhstan allows us to conclude that not only the boundaries of the territory used by tourists are changing, but also the forms of their recreation. The larger the city, the more opportunities it creates for the development of various forms of modern tourism; the greater its role and position in the region, the country, and the world, the better developed urban infrastructure (technical and social) and transport accessibility it has. Tourists, like city residents, benefit from urbanization and the positive externalities created by the city. This research underscores the necessity of addressing fragmented tourism economies and fostering collaborations between local authorities and businesses to optimize tourism potential and drive sustainable economic growth.

The principles we highlighted will help the development of urban tourism not only in Kazakhstan but also in other developing countries with similar geographical, natural, social, and economic conditions.

The limitations of this article lie in the fact that the expert pool primarily consisted of professionals directly involved in tourism, which may have restricted the diversity of perspectives. Future research could benefit from including a broader range of experts, such as those from related industries (e.g., urban planning, environmental sciences) or academic backgrounds with expertise in socio-economic and sustainable development.

Future research could explore detailed case studies of other cities with similar profiles to validate and refine the proposed strategies. Additionally, longitudinal studies could assess the long-term impact of these tailored tourism development strategies on economic growth and urban sustainability.

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