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ASSESSMENT OF THE FACTORS SHAPING THE TOURISM BRAND OF SMALL TOWNS IN THE TURKESTAN REGION

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Assessment of the factors shaping the tourism brand of small towns in the Turkestan region

Abstract. The article examines the factors influencing the formation of a tourism brand in small towns of the Turkestan region (Saryagash and Shardara). The purpose of the study is to identify the unique characteristics of tourist destinations and to propose a model for improving the tourism brand based on a comprehensive assessment of key factors that enhance the tourism image of these destinations. The research methodology is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 respondents, including tourists, local residents, and tourism business representatives. The results indicate that the towns of Saryagash and Shardara have strong potential for the development of health and wellness tourism as well as recreational beach tourism; however, insufficient infrastructure and a low level of digitalization limit the effective development of the tourism brand. The study proposes a "4D tourism brand model" aimed at increasing the competitiveness of small towns by promoting uniqueness, digitalization, service quality improvement, and diversification of tourism services. The findings can be applied in strategic planning processes for tourism brand development at the regional level.

Key words: tourism branding, small towns, place branding, destination management, qualitative research, regional tourism development, digitalization in tourism.

Нурмаганбетқызы Нурдана, Жакупов Алтынбек Аманжолович, Шарапайева Бота Жанабековна
Оценка факторов формирования туристского бренда малых городов Туркестанской области

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются вопросы оценки факторов формирования туристского бренда малых городов Туркестанской области (Сарыағаш и Шардара). Цель исследования заключается в выявлении уникальных особенностей туристских дестинаций и разработке модели совершенствования туристского бренда на основе комплексной оценки ключевых факторов, способствующих повышению туристского имиджа территорий. В качестве метода исследования использовано полуструктурированное интервью, проведенное среди 20 респондентов (туристов, местных жителей и субъектов туристского предпринимательства). Результаты исследования показали, что города Сарыағаш и Шардара обладают высоким потенциалом для развития лечебно-оздоровительного и рекреационно-пляжного туризма, однако недостаточный уровень инфраструктуры и цифровизации ограничивает эффективное формирование туристского бренда. В рамках исследования предложена «4D-модель туристского бренда», направленная на повышение конкурентоспособности малых городов и включающая развитие уникальности, цифровизации, качества услуг и диверсификации туристских услуг. Полученные результаты могут быть использованы при стратегическом планировании формирования туристского бренда на региональном уровне.

Ключевые слова: туристский брендинг, малые города, территориальный брендинг, управление дестинацией, качественное исследование, региональное развитие туризма, цифровизация туризма.

Нұрмағанбетқызы Нұрдана, Жакупов Алтынбек Аманжолович, Шарапайева Бота Жанабековна
Түркістан облысындағы шағын қалалар туристік брендін қалыптастыру факторларын бағалау

Аңдатпа. Аталған зерттеу жұмысында Түркістан облысындағы шағын қалалардың (Сарыағаш және Шардара) туристік брендін қалыптастыру факторларын бағалау мәселелері қарастырылады. Мақаланың мақсаты – туристік дестинациялардың бірегей ерекшеліктерін анықтау және олардың туристік имиджін арттыруға ықпал ететін негізгі факторларды кешенді бағалау негізінде туристік брендті жетілдіру моделін ұсыну. Зерттеу едістемесі ретінде 20 респонденттен (туристер, жергілікті тұрғындар, туристік кәсіпкерлік субъектілері) алынған жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбат әдісі қолданылды. Зерттеу нәтижелері көрсеткендей, Сарыағаш және Шардара қалаларының емдік-сауықтыру және рекреациялық-жағажай туризмі үшін әлеуеті жоғары болғанымен, инфрақұрылым мен цифрландыру деңгейінің жеткіліксіздігі туристік брендтің тиімді дамуын шектейді. Зерттеу аясында шағын қалалардың бәсекеге қабілеттілігін арттыруға бағытталған, бірегейлікке негізделген, цифрландыруды дамыту, қызмет сапасын жақсарту және туристік қызмет түрлерін әртараптандыруды қамтитын «4D туристік бренд моделі» ұсынылды. Зерттеу нәтижелері өңірлік деңгейде туристік брендті қалыптастыруды стратегиялық жоспарлау барысында қолданылуы мүмкін.

Түйін сөздер: туристік брендинг, шағын қалалар, аумақтық брендинг, дестинацияны басқару, сапалық зерттеу, өңірлік туризмді дамыту, туризмді цифрландыру.

Introduction. Currently, in the period of globalization, the competition of tourist destinations is growing not only between large giant countries, but also at the level of small peripheral regions and recreational centers. The formation of the tourist image of small towns in the Turkestan region, such as Sarygash and Shardara, forms the tourist image not only of these small towns, but also of the region as a whole. The tourism brand of small towns is closely linked to the formation of attractiveness for tourists and attracting investments from various stakeholders for the development of the tourism sector [1, p. 72]. Branding of small towns is also assessed as a marketing tool for shaping the unique specifics of the city and the emotional connection of the tourist region with the target audience [2, p. 7]. Despite the validity of the general state of development of the tourist potential of small towns in the Turkestan region, there are some barriers to the popularization of these small towns in the international tourism market. These barriers arise due to an incorrect assessment of the factors of tourism brand development in the region.

In modern regional development theory, tourism branding is considered not only as a marketing instrument, but also as an important strategic tool for strengthening the competitiveness of territories. Destination branding contributes to the formation of a stable associative perception of the territory, distinguishing it from competing destinations and shaping a recognizable image among tourists and investors. In the context of small towns, branding plays a particularly important role, since such territories often lack significant financial and infrastructural resources and therefore must rely on uniqueness, authenticity and emotional attractiveness as key competitive advantages. In this regard, the tourism brand can be considered an intangible asset contributing to regional competitiveness.

Place branding theory emphasizes that the image of a tourist destination is formed through the interaction of both tangible and intangible elements. Tangible elements include natural resources, infrastructure, quality of services and accessibility of transport networks, while intangible elements include emotional perception of the territory, local identity, authenticity of cultural traditions and hospitality of residents. The combination of these elements creates a holistic perception of the destination and influences tourists' behavioral intentions. Therefore, the tourism brand of small towns should be considered through an integrated approach that combines regional marketing, territorial development and social participation.

Another important theoretical aspect is the growing role of stakeholders in the formation of

a tourism brand. The effectiveness of branding strategies depends on the interaction between local communities, tourism enterprises, local authorities and visitors. The involvement of stakeholders contributes to the formation of a more authentic and sustainable tourism brand, reflecting the real characteristics of the territory and increasing trust in the destination. Cooperation between business structures and public institutions also creates conditions for improving tourism infrastructure and expanding the range of services. The participation of local communities in tourism brand formation strengthens social capital and contributes to the preservation of local identity, which is especially important for small towns seeking to maintain cultural authenticity in the context of globalization.

In recent years, the importance of digital technologies in the formation of tourism brands has increased significantly. Digital platforms, online navigation systems and social media content influence the level of awareness of potential tourists and determine the convenience of travel planning. Smart tourism technologies allow destinations to increase their visibility in the global tourism market and create a positive user experience even before visiting the destination. The availability of information in digital applications such as navigation services, booking platforms and online reviews contributes to the formation of trust in the destination and influences tourists' decision-making processes. Thus, digitalization becomes one of the key factors in increasing the competitiveness of small towns and improving the effectiveness of tourism branding strategies.

The concept of sustainable tourism also plays an important role in the formation of the tourism brand of small towns. Sustainable development involves balancing economic growth with the preservation of cultural heritage and environmental resources. Small towns often rely on unique natural landscapes, traditional lifestyles and cultural heritage as key elements of their tourism appeal. The integration of sustainability principles into branding strategies contributes to long-term competitiveness and reduces the risks associated with excessive tourist pressure on local ecosystems. Therefore, the development of tourism branding should consider environmental, social and economic aspects in order to ensure balanced regional development.

According to some foreign practices of tourism branding in small towns, brand formation is widespread through entrepreneurial services starting in the neighborhood. This is due to the fact that small towns lack certain types of resources to

implement regional integrated branding. In these regions, the focus is on partnerships and marketing activities, and local active resources are being used to create a unique feature that attracts the tourism business – a guarantee of economic development [3, p. 309]. In some regions, the main strategy for creating a tourism brand is formed in connection with such unique resources as cultural and historical features. This is the only way that has a significant impact on solving the socio-economic problems of the region and shaping the tourist image of cities, creating close ties with the local community [4, p. 35]. Also, not only natural resources, but also tangible and intangible factors play an important role in shaping the tourist image of small towns. Material factors include simple needs such as digital accessibility for tourists, convenient parking, etc., while non-material factors include qualities such as the quality of life of local residents and hospitality. That is, it is important to consider the tourism branding of small towns in a broader concept through a synthesis of urban marketing and regional branding [5, p. 112].

The cultural diversity and traditional food art of the region, as well as the priority given to natural landscape resources, make a great contribution to the formation of the tourism brand of small towns. In addition, improving the quality of public services, improving digital services, and involving members of the local community in the brand formation process play an important role in creating a successful travel brand. These actions not only form the tourism brand of cities, but also improve the quality of life of the local population by developing features that attract the attention of tourists [6, p. 108]. Branding of small towns involves creating a unique feature to attract city residents and stakeholders, while the dominant role in this process is played by partnership between the values of society and business entities [7, p. 465].

In forming the tourism brand of small towns, not only cultural heritage and social capital are used, but also aspects of sustainable tourism. This affects the development of society and the economic improvement of the region, while preserving the local identity [8, p. 98]. The experience of local community representatives and the involvement of stakeholders in brand creation also play an important role in the branding of small towns. It also characterizes the strongest understanding and perception of a small town by members of local society [9, p. 100]. Also relevant nowadays is the widespread use of natural elements and unique architectural structures to enhance the attractiveness of small towns. Cities, being attractive to tourists, can also influence economic growth, which will be due to the fact

that cities combine historical features, local natural landscapes and landscape design [10, p. 118].

Therefore, the need arises to identify empirically grounded factors influencing the formation of a tourism brand in small towns of the Turkestan region and to develop a conceptual model for strengthening their competitive positioning.

The purpose of the study is to develop scientific and practical recommendations on the formation of a competitive destination brand, identifying the main branding factors affecting the tourist image of small towns (Saryagash, Shardara) in the Turkestan region.

Scientific novelty of the study is that the key indicators determining the tourist image of small towns in the Turkestan region are identified, and the optimal model of effective management of tourist destinations is substantiated. This method allows to turn into a “tourism brand» those regions that, being rich in tourist resources on the tourist map of the Turkestan region, but are not recognized as a tourist route.

Objectives of the study. To achieve the goal of the study, the following tasks were set:

1. To define the characteristics of the concept of “Tourist brand of small towns” and theoretically substantiate the importance of creating a tourist brand based on international experience.
2. Identification of factors (cultural, historical, environmental) affecting the general state of small towns based on a survey, as well as an assessment of the attitude of tourists and local residents to the existing tourist potential of selected small towns.
3. Based on the results of the research, to propose an optimal model for the development of the tourism brand of small towns in the region and to prepare practical advice on destination management policy.

Materials and methods. Based on the identified theoretical approaches to destination branding and stakeholder interaction, the study applies qualitative methodology to explore the perceptions of key actors involved in the tourism system of small towns. Given the limited empirical research on the formation of a tourism brand in small towns of the Turkestan region, qualitative analysis was selected as the most appropriate approach. This method makes it possible to study complex socio-economic phenomena in depth, identify respondents’ perceptions and reveal relationships between factors influencing the formation of a tourism brand, which is particularly important in the context of limited statistical data.

The choice of qualitative methodology is justified by the exploratory nature of the research, aimed at identifying the key determinants influencing the perception of small towns as tourist destinations.

The qualitative approach allows not only to identify factors shaping the tourism image, but also to analyze the interaction between stakeholders, including local residents, tourism business representatives and tourists. This makes it possible to assess the tourism brand as a multidimensional construct that reflects both economic and socio-cultural characteristics of the territory.

Primary data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews. This method allows combining a structured set of questions with the flexibility necessary to clarify respondents' opinions and interpretations. Semi-structured interviews make it possible to obtain more detailed answers and identify aspects that may not be reflected in standardized questionnaires. In addition, this format allows the interviewer to adapt the sequence of questions depending on the level of respondents' awareness of tourism branding and their professional experience in the tourism sector.

The interview guide was developed on the basis of a literature review on tourism destination branding and place branding theory. Particular attention was paid to identifying factors related to the perception of the city image, tourism infrastructure, digital accessibility and the role of the local community in creating the tourism brand. The interview questions were formulated in a way that allowed respondents to express their own understanding of the tourism potential of small towns and identify the most significant attributes influencing the attractiveness of destinations.

The interview structure consisted of three main thematic blocks: 1) image attributes of the city; 2) factors influencing the formation of the tourism brand; 3) prospects and sustainability of the tourism brand. The structure of the interview made it possible to consistently assess both existing characteristics of tourist destinations and future opportunities for strengthening the tourism image of small towns. The interview guide was initially prepared in Kazakh and then translated into Russian to ensure accessibility for all respondents. The use of two language versions made it possible to reduce interpretation bias and improve the reliability of responses.

In order to test the clarity and logical consistency of the questions, a pilot interview was conducted in two cities included in the study (Saryagash – one tourist, Shardara – one local resident). Based on the results of the pilot interview, minor adjustments were made to improve the clarity of wording and eliminate potential ambiguities in the interpretation of questions. The pilot study allowed to ensure the relevance of the questions and their correspondence to the objectives of the research.

Respondents were selected using purposive sampling, which allows selecting participants with relevant experience and knowledge related to the research topic. The sample included representatives of three key stakeholder groups: local residents, tourists and representatives of tourism enterprises. This approach made it possible to obtain diverse perspectives on the formation of the tourism brand and assess differences in the perception of small towns depending on the role of respondents in the tourism system.

The selection of Saryagash and Shardara as research objects is due to the fact that these cities belong to the category of small towns in the Turkestan region and have significant tourism potential. Saryagash is characterized by the development of health and wellness tourism based on mineral water resources, while Shardara has opportunities for the development of recreational and beach tourism. The comparative analysis of these destinations makes it possible to identify common and specific factors influencing the formation of the tourism brand of small towns.

The main stage of data collection was conducted in April 2025 in Saryagash and in April–May 2025 in Shardara. A total of 20 respondents participated in the study, including 11 respondents from Saryagash and 9 respondents from Shardara. Interviews were conducted in locations convenient for respondents, including tourism facilities, workplaces and public spaces. Each interview lasted on average 30–35 minutes and was audio recorded with the consent of respondents. The total number of interview questions was 12, which ensured sufficient coverage of research topics while maintaining respondents' engagement throughout the interview process.

Before data collection, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and guaranteed confidentiality of the information provided. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents had the opportunity to refuse participation at any stage of the interview. All respondents were provided with an informed consent form explaining the objectives of the study and the use of collected data exclusively for scientific purposes.

The interviews were conducted in Kazakh and Russian languages, depending on respondents' preferences. The collected materials were fully transcribed into Kazakh, which allowed ensuring consistency of interpretation and facilitating subsequent analysis. The results of the pilot interview were not included in the final dataset. Data analysis was carried out through thematic coding, which allows grouping respondents' answers into categories

reflecting key factors influencing the formation of the tourism brand.

To ensure reliability and transparency of the research process, all stages of data collection and analysis were documented in a research log. The use of a unified protocol for recording interview results made it possible to increase the accuracy of interpretation and ensure consistency of analytical procedures. The synthesis of data was carried out jointly by members of the research team, which allowed reducing subjectivity in the interpretation of qualitative information.

All ethical requirements were observed during the research process. Participation in interviews was voluntary, respondents were informed about their rights and confidentiality conditions, and the collected data were used exclusively for scientific purposes. Respondents were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without providing reasons.

The applied methodological approach allowed obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the formation of the tourism brand of small towns in the Turkestan region and

ensured the reliability of the obtained results for further interpretation and development of practical recommendations.

Results. According to the results of the study, it turned out that for the formation of a tourism brand in the small towns of the Turkestan region, first of all, there are sufficient reserves of natural resources in the region. This region is characterized by warmth in winter and hot in summer. Special excursions are organized in the vicinity of Saryagash for vacationers who come to resorts in picturesque places. And the natural conditions of Shardara are favorable for organizing a pleasant stay for any age segment of tourists. Also, the hospitality of the locals will allow tourists coming to the city to form a good opinion of the city and visit it again as a tourist (Table 2).

“As a tour guide, I take our vacationers who have come to our Saryagash sanatorium on day trips. Besides nature, our vacationers do not hide their special delight from the large number of cultural and historical places that we have. I believe that this is an indispensable opportunity to create a unique travel brand for us” (R10).

Table 1 – Respondents’ profile

Respondent's code	City	Respondent category	Age	Status
R1	Saryagash	Tourist	65	Retired (Taldykorgan)
R2	Saryagash	Business entity	43	Health resort manager
R3	Saryagash	Local resident	38	School Teacher
R4	Saryagash	Tourist	23	Student
R5	Saryagash	Local resident	52	Individual entrepreneur (agriculture)
R6	Saryagash	Tourist	45	School Teacher (Almaty)
R7	Saryagash	Local resident	20	Student
R8	Saryagash	Business entity	38	Hotel manager
R9	Saryagash	Local resident	43	Specialist in crop production
R10	Saryagash	Business entity	28	Guide
R11	Saryagash	Tourist	48	Doctor (Shymkent)
R12	Shardara	Local resident	54	Fisheries specialist
R13	Shardara	Tourist	22	Student (Shymkent)
R14	Shardara	Business entity	39	Restaurant owner
R15	Shardara	Tourist	42	School Teacher (Zhetysai)
R16	Shardara	Local resident	45	School Teacher
R17	Shardara	Business entity	44	Mini hotel owner
R18	Shardara	Local resident	36	Doctor
R19	Shardara	Tourist	25	Individual entrepreneur (Shymkent)
R20	Shardara	Local resident	32	Doctor

As we can see in Table 1 above, a total of 20 respondents participated in the overall interview. 11 of them are from Saryagash, and 9 are from Shardara. The respondents consisted of a total of three categories. They are: local residents, tourists

and tourist subjects. The youngest respondent is 20 years old, while the oldest respondent is 65 years old. This made it possible to analyze the possibilities of acceptance and popularity in various age segments of small towns.

Table 2 – Main attributes of tourism brand of small towns based on respondents' answers

Key Quote ID	Tourist image of the city	Respondents' answer
R1	Climate comfort	"In fact, I visit the sanatoriums of Saryagash every year. What I like the most is that the weather in this city is always warm. Especially in the sanatoriums from March to June there are the most comfortable sunny days. It is a good opportunity to return to rest and restore the strength that you have exhausted as much as possible"
R4	Hospitality of people	"I am grateful for the hospitality that people in this city always smile warmly. A different atmosphere is felt. And then it gives the mood that next time you want to come again"
R13	Natural resources	"I like the natural state of this city. The beautiful beauty is especially impressive in the summer months. We often come and rest with our families every year during the summer holidays"
R20	Abundance of cultural and historical sites	"I think We have in our city the main attribute that attracts tourists is its abundance of cultural objects and historical sites, in addition to our climatic features. I know that we have a lot of demand for such places from tourists. Special excursions are also organized in our city to such places"

Based on the features of Saryagash and Shardara, which we note as branding factors for the formation of a tourism brand, there are noted some negative disadvantages. Among them, such factors as poor quality of roads between cities, disappointing quality of service, low level of digital accessibility are mentioned.

"I come to Saryagash every year in the summer months to relax. But what I notice with each visit is not to say that the quality of the roads is very good. It takes a long time to get to the destination. In my opinion, if the focus was on improving the quality of the road, this would also be the basis for developing the tourist brand" (R6).

"I would call the shortcomings of the network infrastructure as an obstacle to the proper formation and development of the tourism brand in the city. That is, the development of digitalization. I often noticed that data on some hotels, catering establishments in this city is not included in digital applications such as 2GIS, Google Maps. We did not find the current prices in hotels and catering establishments in a timely manner. It seems to me that this would cause discomfort for any tourist" (R19).

"Sometimes, if you break into a catering facility or visit other tourist facilities, we witness negligent treatment on the part of the staff. Of course, in these cities, the hospitality of people is great. However, even the fact that some employees' smiling is difficult" (R15).

However, if these negative factors are improved, this, on the contrary, can open up new opportunities, taking into account the tourist potential of small towns. These opportunities include such important aspects as the possibility of broad involvement of investors, the search for new partners in tourism brand projects, the development of ecotourism and the formation of a digitalization system in tourism (Figure 1).

"I think that in addition to large hotels, we often need small ethno-villages that are less harmful to nature. I think it will be environmentally friendly and interesting for visitors. Moreover, our natural conditions and climate are also comfortable in it" (R8).

"If the city still has more conditions for the implementation of investment projects for various entrepreneurs who are engaged in tourism, this would improve investment indicators not only in our city, but also in the Turkestan region as a whole" (R14).

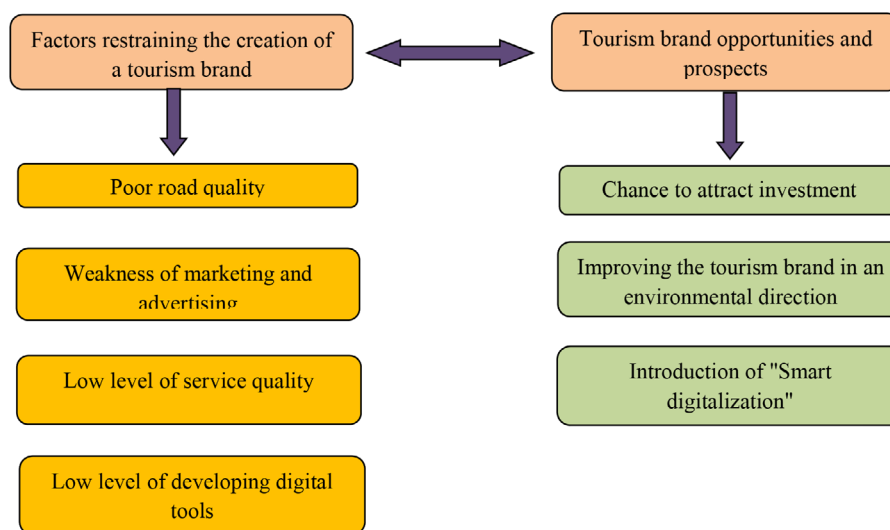


Figure 1 – Negative factors and future prospects

The identified factors demonstrate that the tourism image of small towns is shaped by a combination of natural, cultural and managerial characteristics, which requires conceptual interpretation within the framework of destination branding theory.

Discussion. Interview results show that representatives of tourism businesses and local residents tend to perceive the tourism brand of small towns primarily through historical and cultural attributes, while tourists visiting the destinations for recreational purposes emphasize the need to improve the quality of services and infrastructure. This demonstrates the existence of a gap between the perceived image of the destination and the actual level of service delivery. Such discrepancies often reduce the effectiveness of branding strategies, as the symbolic attractiveness of the destination is not always supported by the real experience of tourists. The results confirm that the formation of a tourism brand requires not only the identification of unique territorial characteristics, but also the development of supporting infrastructure and service quality that correspond to the expectations of visitors.

The results of the interviews show that the tourism brand of small towns is formed through a combination of natural, cultural, social and managerial factors. The importance of cultural heritage and natural resources is complemented by the growing role of service quality, accessibility of information and digital communication channels. This confirms the theoretical assumption that tourism branding should be considered as a multidimensional process combining elements of place marketing, destination management and stakeholder interaction. The findings

also demonstrate that tourists increasingly evaluate destinations not only based on the availability of attractions, but also based on the overall quality of the tourist experience, including comfort, accessibility and informational transparency.

The model for the development of a tourism brand of small towns studied in the article can be presented below, taking into account the results of the interview. The proposed 4D model is aimed at the systematic formation of a tourism brand in small towns, taking into account the restraining factors identified during the qualitative analysis. The model integrates both traditional branding elements and modern approaches related to digital transformation and sustainable tourism development.

1D: Distinctiveness. The first dimension of the model is associated with the identification and promotion of the unique characteristics of the destination. Distinctiveness plays a key role in differentiating small towns from competing destinations and strengthening their position in the regional tourism system. In the case of Saryagash, the uniqueness of the tourism brand is associated with the positioning of the destination as a complex of health resorts based on mineral water resources. In Shardara, the tourism brand is linked to beach recreation and fishing tourism. The formation of a clear positioning strategy allows small towns to create a recognizable image and increase their attractiveness for specific target segments of tourists.

2D: Digital systems. The second dimension reflects the growing role of digital technologies in shaping the tourism image of destinations. The creation of a unified digital ecosystem, such as

the proposed “Smart Turkestan” platform, allows integrating information about tourist attractions, accommodation facilities and services. Digital accessibility plays a crucial role in forming the first impression of the destination, as modern tourists actively use online navigation tools, booking platforms and social networks when planning their trips. The presence of reliable information in digital applications contributes to increasing trust in the destination and improves communication between tourism service providers and visitors. The integration of digital tools into the tourism brand development strategy also contributes to increasing the visibility of small towns in the international tourism market.

3D: Delivery – quality of service. The third dimension of the model emphasizes the importance of maintaining high service standards. The tourism brand should be supported by the actual quality of services provided in accommodation facilities, catering establishments and tourism infrastructure. The introduction of standardized service quality indicators allows ensuring consistency of the tourist experience and forming positive emotional associations with the destination. The quality of service is directly related to the perception of the tourism brand, as tourists tend to associate the level of comfort and hospitality with the overall attractiveness of the destination. Therefore, improving service quality is one of the key conditions for strengthening the competitiveness of small towns in the tourism market.

4D: Diversification. The fourth dimension of the model is associated with the diversification of tourism services and the reduction of seasonality risks. Small towns often face the problem of uneven distribution of tourist flows during the year. The diversification of tourism services makes it possible to expand the range of tourism products and ensure the sustainability of tourism demand throughout the year. For example, beach tourism in Shardara can be complemented by cultural events and fishing festivals during the off-season, while Saryagash has opportunities for the development of medical and rehabilitation tourism outside the peak season. The expansion of tourism products allows increasing the duration of tourists’ stay and contributes to the development of related sectors of the regional economy.

The results of the study also emphasize the importance of developing a “hospitality culture” among local residents. The formation of a positive emotional atmosphere in the destination significantly influences tourists’ perceptions and their intention to revisit the destination. Training programs, seminars and awareness activities aimed

at improving the understanding of the importance of tourism development among local communities can contribute to strengthening the tourism brand. The involvement of residents in tourism development processes increases the level of social responsibility and contributes to the formation of a positive image of the destination.

The study revealed several limiting factors affecting the development of tourism brands in small towns. Among them are insufficient digital representation of tourism services, uneven quality of service and limited marketing activities in social media. According to the responses of some respondents (R5, R19), the lack of digital information about tourism services reduces the visibility of destinations and complicates the planning of tourist trips. The absence of up-to-date information about accommodation facilities, catering services and tourist routes may create additional barriers for potential visitors.

In addition, the results indicate that the formation of a tourism brand requires the creation of a favorable overall atmosphere in the destination. The perception of the destination is influenced not only by the availability of natural and cultural resources, but also by the emotional comfort of tourists and the friendliness of the local population. Respondents (R15, R13) noted that improving the level of service culture and communication with tourists can significantly strengthen the tourism brand of small towns.

Thus, the proposed 4D model provides a conceptual framework for transforming small towns of the Turkestan region from destinations with tourism potential into territories with a fully developed tourism brand. The integration of uniqueness, digitalization, service quality and diversification into a unified strategy contributes to strengthening the competitiveness of small towns and increasing their attractiveness in the regional tourism system. The implementation of the model can also contribute to the development of sustainable tourism and the formation of a positive long-term image of the region.

Conclusion. Research has shown that the tourism brand of small towns of the Turkestan region (Saryagash, Shardara) is still at the stage of formation. As it turned out as a result of the conducted qualitative research, the potential of Saryagash “medical and recreational” and Shardara “beach and recreational” is strong, but due to the lack of uniform standards in the field of infrastructure and services, to some extent hinders the full formation of a tourism brand.

The 4D tourism brand model proposed on the basis of the conducted study is aimed at organizing

the uniqueness, digital development of small towns, the quality of service and the expansion of the range of services provided. The introduction of this model in the system of Destination Management will increase the competitiveness of small towns in the region and make them an international tourism brand.

The practical significance of the study is that the proposed ways for developing a tourism brand can serve as a basis for regional tourism development programs in the Turkestan region. A promising area of research is the need to quantitatively assess the effectiveness of public-private partnerships in developing tourism brand in small towns.

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