

Ethno-tourism in Kazakhstan: Promoting intangible heritage in the global tourism market

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Abstract

Ethno-tourism is increasingly recognized as a vital tool for preserving and promoting intangible cultural heritage, particularly in countries seeking to diversify their tourism offerings. This study examines how ethno-tourism in Kazakhstan enhances the visibility of intangible heritage, focusing on national cuisine, music, and cultural traditions. A converged parallel mixed-methods design was employed, combining survey data from 200 international tourists with semi-structured interviews involving 15 tourism stakeholders. Findings show that 70% of tourists visited Kazakhstan primarily for cultural experiences, with 65% identifying national cuisine as the most appealing aspect of intangible heritage. Traditional music and folk performances were considered significant attractions by 55% and 48% of respondents, respectively. Stakeholder interviews revealed that community involvement in tourism activities supports the preservation of cultural practices. However, the study's scope was limited to two urban centers and excluded domestic tourists, which may affect generalizability. Overall, the results demonstrate that ethno-tourism contributes both economically and culturally by increasing tourism revenue and sustaining traditional culinary practices, music, and rituals. International tourists' interest in authenticity, cultural immersion, and gastronomy highlights ethno-tourism's value as a sustainable development strategy for Kazakhstan.

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1. Introduction

Tourism has become a leading economic driver worldwide and an indicator of sustainable development [1], [2]. Moreover, ethno-tourism has grown in popularity because it offers authentic cultural experiences [3]. This also ensures the economic betterment of the country as tourists make expenditures [4]. Ethno-tourism emphasizes

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engaging visitors with the traditions and practices of local communities [5]. Intangible cultural heritage is the collection of practices, demonstrations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that societies identify as integral to their cultural identity [6]. This contains the oral traditions, music, rituals, festivals, craftsmanship, and cuisine in any country [7]. Thus, ethno-tourism preserves intangible cultural heritage and also strengthens community identity and resilience. It is a mutually beneficial exchange in which cultural sustainability supports the economic growth and development of the nations. Kazakhstan offers a largely unexplored context for ethno-tourism, drawing from its rich nomadic traditions, oral heritage, music, and communal culinary practices [8], [9].

Some of the country's cultural expressions, such as the traditional musical composition Kuy and the spring festival Nauryz, have been recognized by UNESCO, which shows their global importance [10], [11], [12]. However, the intangible heritage of Kazakhstan extends well beyond culinary traditions and encompasses oral epics, music, festivals, and craftsmanship. These all define tourist experiences and cultural preservation. Cuisine is one of the most important elements of ethno-tourism. Kazakh cuisine, like Kazakh eti (meat) and kazy, does not solely allow preserving old traditions but also relates to the nomadic history of eating healthy [13]. The culinary tradition is currently a more appreciated phenomenon in the world, with over 50% of travelers saying they want to experience local cuisine upon visiting new destinations [14]. This will make Kazakh food one of the particular advantages in drawing tourists [15] outside.

Despite these advantages, existing studies on the tourism sector of Kazakhstan remain limited. Most research highlights conventional tourism or focuses narrowly on culinary heritage, while other equally significant dimensions, such as music, oral traditions, craftsmanship, and festivals, receive comparatively little attention. There is a lack of comprehensive valuation of both the socio-economic effects of ethno-tourism on society at the local level and foreign tourists' perceptions of Kazakhstan's intangible heritage. Moreover, strategies for marketing Kazakhstan's ethno-tourism internationally are still at the start of development. This study, therefore, addresses the broader research gap by analyzing how multiple components of intangible heritage of Kazakhstan interact within ethno-tourism and contribute simultaneously to socio-economic outcomes and global recognition.

The study is based on a mixed-method strategy that involves a blend of statistical analysis of tourism and economic data with qualitative data obtained through the interviews conducted with the tourists and the community stakeholders. An example includes the quantitative survey of 200 international tourists to identify which aspects of intangible heritage are most valued, whilst qualitative interviews with 15 stakeholders (tour operators, cultural practitioners, and community leaders) give a background of how these aspects are preserved, marketed, and incorporated as a part of community livelihoods. This triangulation will make the statistical tendencies have real-world views, hence improving the reliability and the cultural validity of the results. With the help of this methodology, the socio-cultural and economic aspects of ethno-tourism can be fully understood [16]. The results are added to the scholarly arguments and to policy suggestions on the applied level. In particular, the research aims at reinforcing the measures for the sustainable development of the intangible cultural heritage of Kazakhstan, specifically through gastronomic tourism, as well as to vocalize the possible input to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity of UNESCO. Table 1 presents the dimensions of the intangible cultural heritage in the ethno-tourism of Kazakhstan.

Table 1. Dimensions of intangible cultural heritage in Kazakh ethno-tourism

Dimension	Elements in Kazakhstan	Global significance
Music and Oral Traditions	Kuy performance, Epic storytelling	UNESCO-listed, central to preserving nomadic identity
Festive Events	Nauryz celebrations	Strengthens communal ties, fosters intercultural dialogue
Traditional Craftsmanship	Felt-making, Yurt construction	Represents sustainable and ecological craftsmanship

Dimension	Elements in Kazakhstan	Global significance
National Cuisine	Kazakh eti (meat), Kazy, Boursak, Kurt	Preserves nomadic food culture, strong global market appeal

Source: Author's conceptualization based on [17] and cited literature

After this introduction, Section 2 is a literature review about ethno-tourism and intangible heritage. Section 3 exhibits the methodology, data sources, and research design. Section 4 has results. Results are discussed in Section 5. Section 6 summarizes the present study and offers policy implications and constraints along with future research opportunities. The earlier researches present valuable information, although there are certain gaps that can be noted, particularly concerning the potential of Kazakhstan to sell its intangible heritage as a tourist destination to the world.

2. Literature review

2.1. Provide theoretical frameworks: Cultural tourism, Sustainable development, and heritage marketing

The realization of sustainable development is the major goal of any country [18], and it is also related to tourism [19], [20]. The theory of cultural tourism underlines that modern tourists are more and more in demand to explore unfamiliar practices and culture [21]. Cultural tourists contribute to the preservation of the intangible heritage as well as contribute to the sustenance of the local culture [22]. Such an opinion is in line with approaches to sustainable development, which focus on environmentally friendly economic growth that does not harm the culture [23]. Tourism researchers have emphasized that emphasis on sustainable tourism makes a difference of life and death in this balancing [24], [25], whereas [26] emphasizes that genuine interaction with communities of local culture is more empowering than shallow commercialization. In line with this, heritage marketing research states that branding of cultural resources should be performed based on emotional links between a tourist and a destination, as well as a substantial brand image, a particularly important factor to take into account in relation to developing countries, like Kazakhstan [27].

2.2. Ethno-tourism and heritage preservation: Global insights

It has been globally demonstrated that ethno-tourism is also widely applied as an instrument of preserving and marketing intangible heritage [28]. In Mongolia, festivals and food encourage nomadic culture, including buuz and airag [29], but scholars caution that this culture is in danger of being over-commercialized [30]. In Kyrgyzstan, the programs involving yurts, horseback games, and artisanship have grown [31], yet the prospects are poor due to infrastructural deficiencies and uneven marketing approaches [32]. Although these illustrations are very educational, there are limited studies about Kazakhstan. Intangible heritage, in particular, culinary traditions and ethnographic practices, remains unexplored, and most of the studies are dedicated to eco-tourism or adventure tourism [25]. Although the aforementioned several recent sources contribute to the discussion, they are nevertheless still new and have yet to be substantiated in the broader literature. This highlights why they must take care of drawing conclusions on the long-term implications of their application to the specific, and justifies the significance of the current research.

2.3. Economic and cultural effects of ethno-tourism

Ethno-tourism has also been known to be socio-economically viable. It brings revenues and jobs to the rural communities [33], as [34] reports that community tourism can boost household earnings by as much as 40 per cent in the developing world. Quechua weaving has also maintained tradition and generated financial gain in Peru [35]. Tourism may be a source of cultural pride and passing local knowledge through generations as well [36], though over-commercialization poses a threat of degrading authenticity [37]. Food tourism is a very powerful opportunity in Kazakhstan. The global food tourism sector brings about USD 1.5 trillion each year [17], and traditional foods like Kazakh eti (meat) and shubat may be the main components of the sustainable approach to gastronomic tourism.

2.4. Global marketing of intangible heritage

Global marketing research also focuses on the need for innovative yet culturally sensitive approaches. It has been demonstrated that digital storytelling, immersive cultural experience, and heritage branding contribute to international recognition [6], [38]. The example of Washoku, acknowledged as traditional Japanese cuisine by UNESCO, shows how heritage branding can boost the international image of a country and empower tourism and food industries [39]. Nevertheless, not many studies examine the possibility of using similar strategies in Central Asia. The study of branding of the intangible heritage of Kazakhstan is a comparatively rare topic, and it has lately seen the onset of studies that have shown the possible impact of the brand on the decision-making of tourists [40].

2.5. Addressing the gaps

The current research exhibits significant gaps. Compared to Mongolia, where ethno-tourism is actively marketed [30], or Kyrgyzstan, where infrastructure remains too weak to sustain tourism development [32], Kazakhstan represents a country that integrates nomadic traditions with advanced tourism logistics. However, the absence of systematized branding (e.g., “Visit Georgia” campaign) limits its potential. This study represents the first attempt to measure the extent to which gastronomy can serve as an entry point for promoting Kazakh culture in the global arena. Furthermore, there has been a lack of sufficient research investigating cultural tourism in Kazakhstan, particularly its culinary traditions and intangible heritage. Moreover, few studies have examined how ethno-tourism can preserve cultural values while enhancing economic development in Central Asia. This paper addresses these gaps by systematically exploring the role of Kazakhstan's intangible heritage in ethno-tourism. It evaluates how this heritage contributes to sustainable development and assesses its potential positioning within global tourism markets, thereby establishing the foundation for the methodological approach presented in the following section.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate how ethno-tourism in Kazakhstan promotes intangible heritage in the global tourism market and to evaluate its influence on cultural and economic development.

2.6. Research hypotheses

Based on the literature review and the research gaps identified, the following research questions have been developed in the present endeavor:

- What elements of Kazakhstan’s intangible heritage are most actively utilized in ethno-tourism?
- How does ethno-tourism affect the economic welfare of local communities and the development of Kazakhstan’s tourism industry?
- How do foreign tourists perceive ethno-tourism in Kazakhstan, and how does this influence their choice of Kazakhstan as a tourism destination?
- What marketing strategies are most effective in promoting Kazakhstan’s ethno-tourism globally?

3. Research method

3.1. Research design

A convergent parallel mixed methods design was used to design the research. This implied collection of quantitative and qualitative data. The data analysis was subsequently done individually, and the findings were combined during the concluding interpretation stage [16]. The design given represents a best practice in tourism research in that it gives an opportunity to identify not only generalizable trends but also detailed indicators [41], [42].

3.2. Participants and sampling

The quantitative sample involved 200 international tourists who were identified through stratified random sampling based on nationality, so as to have a variety of views. The criteria used to select the participants were that they had to be a foreign visitor and had to have used at least one of the ethno-tourism activities available. The surveys were carried out on major tourist attractions in Almaty, including the Shymbulak Mountain Resort

and the cultural villages in Almaty. In the qualitative sample, 20-ish stakeholders were sampled out using purposive sampling. These were local artisans, tour operators, policymakers, as well as leaders of cultural associations. This made sure that voices that were directly concerned with heritage promotion and tourism management were included. Surveys were administered in Month 2, while stakeholder interviews were conducted in Month 3, following pilot testing in Month 1.

3.3. Measures and instruments

In the quantitative instrument, a structured Likert-scale questionnaire was used to measure perceptions of authenticity, satisfaction, and cultural engagement. Example items included:

- “Rate the authenticity of your cultural experience” (1 = Not Authentic, 5 = Highly Authentic).
- “Rate how much you learned about Kazakh traditions” (1 = Nothing, 5 = A Lot).

The questionnaire was pilot-tested with 20 respondents to ensure clarity and internal reliability. In the qualitative instrument, a semi-structured interview guide was used to capture stakeholder perspectives. Example questions included:

- “What aspects of Kazakh culture are most attractive to tourists?”
- “How has ethno-tourism affected your community’s cultural practices?”

The interviews have been audio-taped with the consent of the said individual, transcribed verbatim, and coded thematically. To triangulate the marketing strategies with the stakeholder narratives, as additional resources, the promotional content (brochures, websites, social media) was studied.

3.4. Data collection procedures

- Surveys were distributed on-site to eligible tourists.
- Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via online calls, depending on participant availability.
- Tourism statistics (annual visitor numbers, revenue per tourist, length of stay) were obtained from the Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan [43].

3.5. Analytical tools

The data were analyzed through SPSS v.28.0, and descriptive, t-tests, and ANOVA were used to evaluate the difference between groups. NVivo v.14 was used to process qualitative data based on thematic examination to establish repetition of cultural and economic themes. The process of integration was by a side-by-side comparison method, in which qualitative arguments were employed to elaborate on the quantitative trend.

3.6. Reliability and validity

Internal consistency was measured through Cronbach's alpha (>0.7) of quantitative reliability. Pilot testing and review of survey questions by experts enhanced validity. The triangulation (interviews, content analysis, and statistics) and the validation of participants allowed increasing the credibility of the qualitative findings. The method used in this work has some strengths and weaknesses. The mixed-methods research offered depth (stakeholder interviews) and breadth (generalizable survey data), which made the research have a comprehensive view on ethno-tourism. One of the strengths is the incorporation of various sources of data. Yet, some of the limitations comprise the possible bias in responses in self-reported surveys and a lack of extrapolation of the qualitative results because of the rather narrow sample size.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Quantitative results

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics of survey responses from 200 tourists. The findings indicate consistently high ratings across perceived authenticity, cultural learning, and overall satisfaction. The mean authenticity score was 4.2 (SD = 0.7), while overall satisfaction averaged 4.3 (SD = 0.6).

Table 2. Descriptive results of the tourist survey (N = 200)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Perceived Authenticity (1–5 scale)	4.2	0.7	2	5
Learning About Kazakh Traditions (1–5 scale)	4.0	0.8	2	5
Overall Satisfaction (1–5 scale)	4.3	0.6	3	5

Additional percentages from survey responses showed that 70% of tourists indicated that Kazakhstan's cultural heritage was their primary reason for visiting. Also, 85% reported high or very high satisfaction with their ethno-tourism experiences. And 65% rated the preservation of traditional crafts as “excellent.”

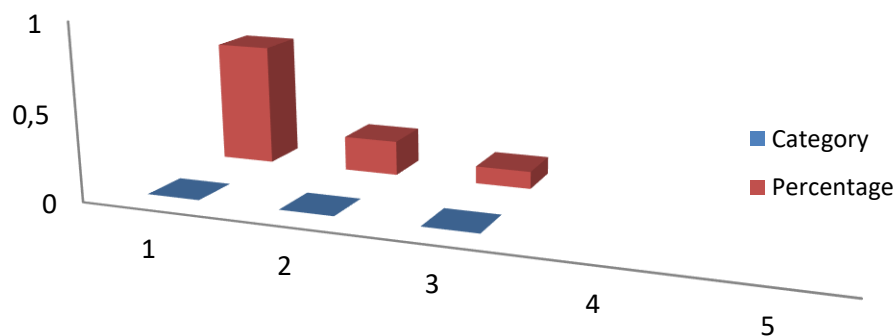


Figure 1. Distribution of tourists' perceptions of cultural authenticity in Kazakhstan

Source: Kazakhstan Tourism Authority (2024). Survey on tourist preferences in Kazakhstan

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of tourists' perceptions regarding the authenticity of cultural experiences in Kazakhstan, which is based on a 5-point Likert scale. A majority (50%) rated the authenticity as 5 (very authentic), followed by 30% rating it 4, and progressively fewer at lower ratings.

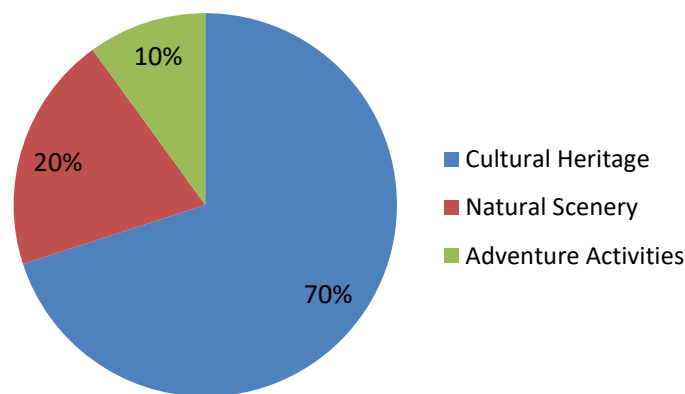


Figure 2. Main reasons for visiting Kazakhstan among surveyed tourists

Source: Kazakhstan Tourism Authority (2024). Survey on cultural and heritage tourism in Kazakhstan

It is evident from Figure 2 that 70% of tourists cited cultural heritage as their primary reason for visiting Kazakhstan, compared to 20% who favored natural scenery and 10% interested in adventure activities.

4.2. Qualitative results

Semi-structured interviews with 20 stakeholders yielded three major themes:

Theme 1: Authenticity of Experience. Stakeholders highlighted the genuine appeal of hands-on and traditional activities:

“Tourists love participating in real yurt-building workshops, not staged performances,” noted a local artisan.

“The kuy music performances are especially moving for foreign visitors,” reported a cultural tour operator.

Theme 2: Accessibility Challenges. Practical barriers were noted:

“Transport to remote ethno-villages is still a major problem,” stated a tourism official.

“Better signage and English-speaking guides would greatly enhance access,” mentioned a hotel manager.

Theme 3: Economic Benefits for Communities. Stakeholders emphasized positive local impacts:

“Income from selling traditional crafts has tripled since ethno-tourism became popular,” claimed a local craftswoman.

“Young people are returning to villages because they see opportunities in cultural tourism,” explained a mayor.

Content analysis of 50 brochures and websites further confirmed the prominence of authenticity-related promotion: 95% emphasized yurt stays, 80% highlighted traditional sports (e.g., kokpar), and 70% mentioned Kazakh music.

4.3. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings

The consistency of survey data and interviews was supported by triangulation. The qualitative results, including the high ratings of authenticity ($M = 4.2$) and satisfaction (85%), were reflected in the stakeholder stories that emphasized the need to engage in authentic cultural activities. Equally, survey reports on accessibility impediments (30%) were consistent with the concerns of transport and infrastructure by the interviewees. Overall, the convergent results demonstrate that while Kazakhstan’s ethno-tourism is highly valued for authenticity and cultural immersion, practical challenges remain in ensuring accessibility and inclusivity. The paper has discussed the role of intangible heritage elements of Kazakhstan in ethno-tourism, economic potential, and position in the world map. The general results confirm that the original hypotheses are mostly valid by the fact that cultural assets, including traditional music, cuisine, and crafts, are the main focus when creating positive tourist experiences and sustainable development.

Results of the survey showed that the most common elements of the Kazakhstan cultural heritage are surveyed as the traditional music (kuy), national cuisine, and nomadic crafts, which is consistent with [3], who focused on the appeal of the traditional culture in new tourist destinations. Specifically, the Kazakh cuisine received a high score ($M = 4.5/5$), which supports the fact that the cuisine is also a significant cultural and experiential tourist driver. This observation is also in line with comparative research in Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan, where food and festivals have also enabled ethno-tourism markets to thrive [44]. Food items like Kazakh eti (meat), kazy, and boursaks are therefore open to high international branding.

Another aspect that could be regarded as an economic gain was the fact that 85% of the tourists were ready to pay the premium prices in order to experience authentic cultural experiences. This promotes the framework of sustainable tourism development presented by [26], where cultural tourism is viewed as the driver of local economic development. These results are in line with [45], who established the multiplier impacts of cultural tourism on artisans, musicians, and food producers. However, the small size of current activities in Kazakhstan restricts wider income distribution, with the solution being the need to enhance community-industry alliances.

The feelings of the tourists were more than positive, especially with regard to hospitality and authenticity. These findings are consistent with those of [46], who established that positive perceptions are the driving force of destination loyalty and repeat visits. Nevertheless, accessibility issues, as well as the lack of information about the visitors, are still impediments. The results are aligned with those of [47], who found that Central Asian

destinations do not always have sufficient global marketing and multilingual resources. In the case of Kazakhstan, one of the weaknesses identified was a lack of English-language materials in the cultural sites.

The data has provided marketing insights which include the effectiveness of online campaigns, digital storytelling, and utilization of cultural ambassadors. These measures align with [48] who emphasized that cultural tourism was more attractive with the help of heritage-based storytelling and emotional branding. Moreover, the paper indicates that incorporating the tradition of Kazakhstan into the UNESCO activities may contribute to the increase of international awareness and visits, especially by nominating the national cuisine and music cultures.

Practically speaking, the suggestions can be as follows: (a) tour operators should focus on genuine experiences in their campaigns, with special attention to food and music; (b) government bodies need to improve infrastructure and offer multilingual informational sources; (c) communities need to be empowered by means of training and enterprise development; and (d) promoting should be based on the use of digital storytelling, which will help to convey individual cultural experiences.

Studying has weaknesses, even though it is contributing. The sample size was reduced to 200 foreign travelers and is mainly based in Almaty and Nur-Sultan; this may be limited to generalization. In addition to that, no domestic tourism and its effects on the national identity were explored. Further research ought to be geographically increased, including local tourists, and monitor the changes in perceptions over time.

5. Conclusions

This paper has discussed how the intangible cultural heritage of Kazakhstan has contributed to the development of ethno-tourism, both in terms of its economic potential and tourism experiences. Evidence shows that the cultural tourism products in the country focus on traditional music, national food, and crafts that are always appreciated by foreign tourists due to their authenticity and interaction. The results of the quantitative surveys and qualitative insights of the stakeholders agree that these factors not only bring tourists to the region but also help in retaining and exposing the culture. The engagement of local communities in economic activities like crafts production and cultural performances portrays that ethno-tourism not only gives the communities some tangible advantages but also keeps their cultures alive. The areas of concern that have been identified by the tourists and stakeholders are challenges in accessibility, which implies that the tourism infrastructure can be enhanced further. Generally, the conclusion on the synthesis of the results is that the ethno-tourism concept in Kazakhstan is a combination of cultural authenticity, economic, and social well-being, which supports the importance of intangible heritage in the world tourism economy. This study has helped to realize the interaction between cultural assets and tourist interaction by illustrating how ethno-tourism can effectively enhance economic growth and cultural heritage at the same time. The study can be extended in the future to international tourism, analyze other areas as well as monitor the changing preferences of tourists, further influencing policy on promoting the country as a prime destination in seeking out cultural authenticity.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known financial or non-financial competing interests in any material discussed in this paper.

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Author contribution

Conceptualization, Z.A. and B.S.; Methodology, Z.A. and A.T.; Software, B.S.; Validation, Z.A., A.T., and S.S.; Formal Analysis, B.S. and A.K.; Investigation, Z.A., B.S., and A.T.; Resources, Z.A. and S.S.; Data Curation, B.S. and A.K.; Writing – Original Draft Preparation, B.S. and A.K.; Writing – Review & Editing, Z.A. and A.T.; Visualization, B.S.; Supervision, Z.A. and S.S.; Project Administration, Z.A.

Ethical approval statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to the fact that the research involves surveys and interviews with international tourists and tourism industry stakeholders, which do not deal with vulnerable groups or sensitive personal information beyond standard tourism research protocols.

Data availability statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author (Z.A.). The data are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions related to participant responses and confidentiality agreements with tourism industry stakeholders.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study, including all survey respondents and interview participants.

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