

## Development of Tourism Services through Sacred Sites in Kazakhstan

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### Abstract

*The tourism industry is among the main elements of Kazakhstan's brand in the world arena and is one of Kazakhstan's economic constituents. Besides, tourism holds a powerful potential for the tourists to connect with the natural and cultural heritage values of the country. Therefore, the development of sacred sites in Kazakhstan as the priority direction to promote tourism services is becoming highly relevant. This study is necessitated by a range of existent scientific issues pertaining to the promotion of Kazakhstan's sacred sites, including how much the tourists are satisfied with the offered services, to the problems of travel agencies in promoting the tourism services, and to examining both the key prerequisites for domestic tourism development and evaluation methods of sacred objects in Kazakhstan as the promotion vector of tourism services.*

**Keywords:** *sacred Kazakhstan; Kazakhstan's sacred geography; tourism industry; tourism services; tourism services/products quality; tourism potential.*

### 1. Introduction

The tourism industry is not only among Kazakhstan's economic constituents but is also an essential element to promote the brand and image of the country in the world arena. Moreover, tourism carries a powerful potential for the tourists to connect with the natural and cultural heritage values of the country. In this regard, the development of Kazakhstan's sacred sites as the priority direction in promoting the tourism services is becoming topical. The domestic tourism acquires a special importance under the COVID-19 pandemic circulation, with the Kazakhstan State Initiative for Tourism Industry Development for the Years 2019-2025 stating: "The border closure impelled the Kazakh people to recreate inside the country...As the tourism is restoring, the international experts from the travel industry forecast a growth in domestic tourism and in demands for open-air and nature-based tourist events" [1]. In this respect, building and promoting the nationwide character of Kazakhstan's sacred objects and spiritual traditions, as well as creating a favorable travel industry, is becoming an important direction in the development of Kazakhstan's tourism industry. The in-demand comprehensive approach to addressing the above-referenced problematics dictates the need for in-depth studies using methodology and methods from economy, sociology and geography. Tourism is primarily geared towards achieving certain social goals such as providing the customer with intangible values in the form of services; building an educational, cultural and social level of the population; expanding the inter-ethnic and inter-personal relations; supporting

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the leisure and restoring the vital forces and health of the customers; and keeping the favorable ecological, social and cultural settings. Therefore, the evaluation of the tourism potential of the country and the tourist attraction require studying the problems and development directions of tourism in Kazakhstan's sacred and spiritual areas, which is of great importance for the culture protection and inheritance and for the formation of new cultural elements under the economic development of the country.

## 2. Aims of the Study

The present paper aimed to identify the factors and causes, and elaborate recommendations aiding in the development of tourism services through the means of Kazakhstan's sacred sites. The objectives of the present study ensue from the Kazakhstan State Initiative for Tourism Industry Development till the Year 2025, Special Project "Sacred Geography of Kazakhstan" under the Initiative "Spiritual Revival" [2], and Nursultan Nazarbayev's policy article titled "Looking into the future: modernization of the public conscience" [3].

## 3. Objectives of the Study

Specific objectives of the study are:

- (i) to evaluate prerequisites and factors for the development of sacral tourism in modern Kazakhstan and identify the motivations and motives for sacral tourism; and
- (ii) to substantiate the key directions in promoting the tourism services for Kazakhstan's sacred objects.

## 4. Literature Review and Methodology

Tourism is a multi-aspect phenomenon that encompasses multiple functions. Tourism is inter-linked with a lot of objects of the social-economic field (transport sector, hotel facilities, restaurant business, culture and leisure centers, research and education centers and so on). The Republic of Kazakhstan's Law "On the Tourist Activities in the Republic of Kazakhstan" puts down: "The tourism industry is an aggregate of tourist accommodation means, transport, public eating places, entertainment facilities and media, facilities of informative, recreational, business, sports-oriented and other purposes; and of organizations specializing in tourist activities and those providing tour services and guide services" [4].

The World Tourism Organization's reports that tourism is a key economic sector in many advanced and emerging economies worldwide (Figure 1).

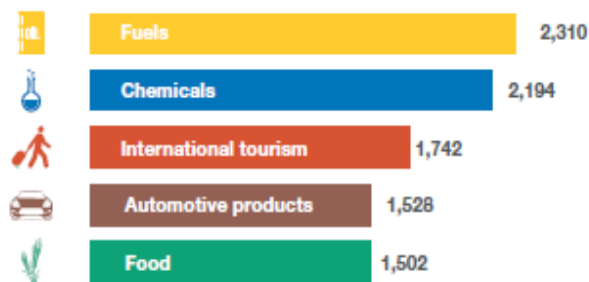


Figure 1 - Export revenues by commodity headings in 2019 ( billion \$US) [5]

However, the gross added value produced directly from tourism in Kazakhstan constitutes a minor percentage and was 410.5 billion KZT in 2020.

The scholars give different classifications of tourism. For instance, Artyomova and Vladimirov [6] classify tourism by travel purposes: holiday tourism (that includes cultural travel, visits to friends and family members), educational tourism, wellness tourism, sports tourism, religious tourism, and adventure tourism. Business tourism includes meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE tourism). Liu [7] classifies tourism into excursion tourism, vacation tourism, business tourism, conference tourism, official tourism, study tourism, family tourism, recreational tourism, adventure tourism, religious tourism, trade tourism, sports tourism, wellness and medical tourism, cultural tourism, festival tourism, eco-tourism, rural tourism, industrial tourism, Red tourism and so forth.

Article 6 of the Republic of Kazakhstan's Law "On the Tourist Activities in the Republic of Kazakhstan" [4] gives a classification of tourism, as shown in Figure 2.

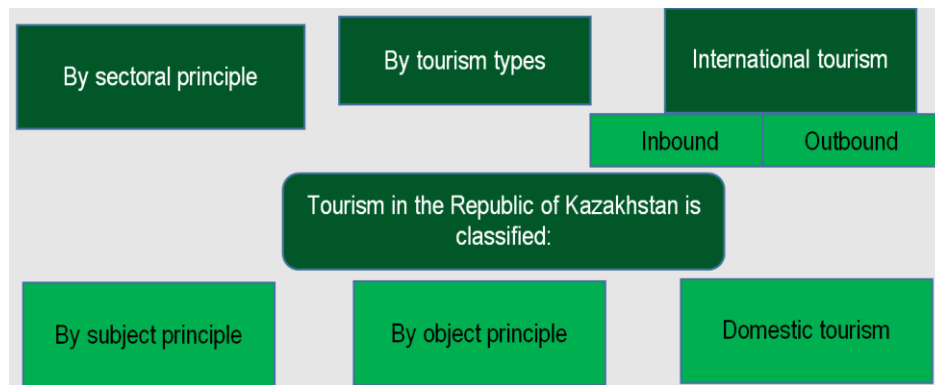


Figure 2 - Classification of tourism in the Republic of Kazakhstan (data taken from [4])

Sacral tourism is one of the types of modern tourism. The notion of "sacral", related to the holy, sacred, spiritual thing, is the most essential worldview category that delineates the beingness domains and the state of the things existent that are perceived by the mind as being conceptually distinct from the daily reality [8]. The understudied spiritual and sacral culture of Kazakhstan inspired the present study. The topic of sacredness has been explored by many sciences like religiology, culturology, tourismology, history, politology and the others. However, studies on the sacral tourism in Kazakhstan in the interscientific and interdisciplinary context are very rare.

The research on the sacral geography of Kazakhstan has received much attention quite recently, shortly after the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N.A. Nazarbayev released his policy article addressed to the Kazakh nation. The republic earlier implemented the Concept for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Republic of Kazakhstan, approved by the Republic of Kazakhstan's Government Resolution No. 408, as of April 29, 2013 [9].

Studies on the sacral geography were discussed by Dugin [10], Zavgorodnii [11], Ataman [12] and the others; however, it can be noted that this phenomenon is new enough to our culture and comprehension. The notion of "sacral tourism" is unexplored and timely.

A fair number of various contributions have been devoted to the problems of promoting tourism services in Kazakhstan and consider a cluster approach to the tourism management, organization and formation of the resource potential of tourism, and other aspects. Some studies uncover tourism from the standpoint of culture, economy, and interaction. Other studies investigated the features of agrotourism, event tourism, business tourism, wellness tourism and so on.

Despite the aforesaid, there are not so many studies on Kazakhstan's sacral tourism, and these studies are mainly of descriptive nature; one can note recent papers specifically by Uaisova et al. [13] and Ussubaliyeva et al. [14].

It is worth noting that a special project titled “Sacral Geography of Kazakhstan” under which a dedicated research center “Sacred Kazakhstan” was established at the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2017. Over 60 nationwide sacred objects have been rendered into a 3D format within this project. A full visualization of the sacred objects is available on the virtual map platform at qazmaps.kz. Ten study guides have been elaborated for school students, undergraduates, tourist guides and tourists; a tutorial guidance (Kazakh-Russian) has been elaborated for participants of field expeditions to investigate Kazakhstan’s sacred objects and territory. A field ethnographic program to investigate the sacral space of Kazakhstan has been prepared. Travel routes of field ethnographic, folklore and archeological expeditions across the North Kazakhstan Region, South Kazakhstan Region and West Kazakhstan Region have been prepared. Besides, the project participants have prepared 31 contributions to various international and Kazakhstan publications [11–16].

However, Bogdanovskaya [17] notes that those virtual projects have not provided a live influx of tourists onto those objects. This can in part be ascribed to the COVID pandemic that resulted in a 20% drop in the tourist industry last year worldwide. Nonetheless, the domestic tourism in many countries has improved just because of the restrictions on travel abroad.

As per the statistics, the visitors to Kazakhstan in 2021 numbered 1,330,169 people, which is 6,371,027 lower than those in 2017 (Figure 3).

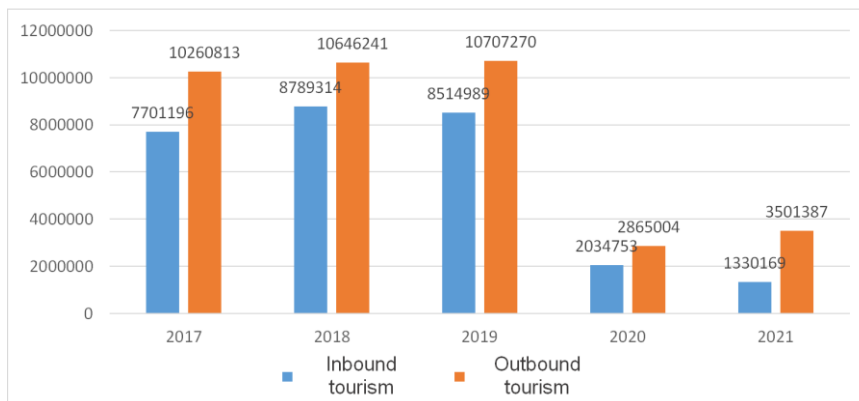


Figure 3 - Inbound and outbound tourists over years (data taken from [15])

Of course, the COVID pandemic that affected all the life spheres has played the greatest role in the traveler decline. However, it can be noted from Figure 3 that the outbound tourism prevailed over the inbound.

According to the UNWTO’s data, the travels to friends and family members, rather than medical or religious travels, are prevailing in the world tourism (Figure 4).

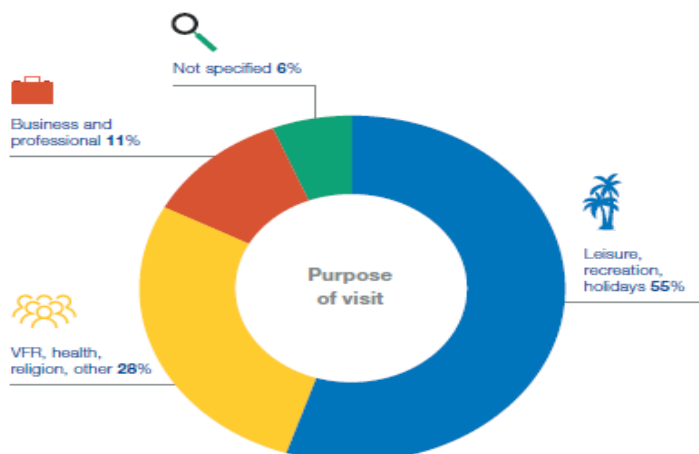


Figure 4 - Tourism in terms of travel purposes (percentage) [5]

Travels for business and professional purposes are also prevailing in the structure of inbound tourism to Kazakhstan, and most travels for a private purpose prevail among personal travels (Table 1).

Table 1 - The number of inbound travelers by the purposes

Travel purpose	year 2017	year 2018	year 2019	year 2020	year 2021	years 2021 to 2017
Total	7, 701,196	8, 789, 314	8, 514, 989	2, 034, 753	1, 330, 169	-6, 371, 027
Including business and professional	1, 186, 542	1, 223, 324	1, 453, 440	743, 187	719, 784	-466, 758
Personal	6, 514, 654	7, 565, 990	7, 061, 549	1, 291, 566	610, 385	-5, 904, 269
Of which						
Tourism	81, 635	65, 822	76, 203	15, 942	19, 405	-62, 230
Private	5, 853, 816	6, 865, 255	6, 341, 598	1, 134, 928	574, 865	-5, 278, 951
Transit	579, 203	634, 913	643, 748	140, 696	16, 115	-563, 088

Source: [15]

The analysis showed that 38.3% guest visitors to Kazakhstan in 2021 were from Russia, 29.8% were from Uzbekistan, and the fewest were from Armenia and Turkmenistan, 0.2% and 0.1%, respectively (Figure 5).

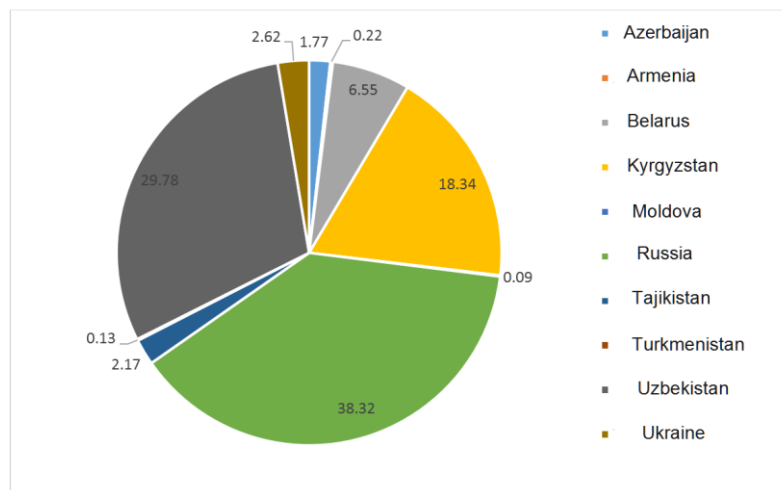


Figure 5 - The number of inbound travelers from the CIS countries (data taken from [15])

From among non-CIS countries, most of the guests in 2021 were from Turkey (80, 771 people), Germany (19, 527 people), and Georgia (12, 334 people). The fewest visitors to Kazakhstan were from Monaco, Madagascar, and Jamaica (1 person each). There are countries whose citizens did no travel to Kazakhstan in 2021, these are Laos, Lesotho, and Christmas Island.

It can be concluded from the number of visits by foreign tourists that the foreign tourists are little familiar with sacral tourism, and this tourism destination needs to be developed in the context of domestic tourism. It can be noted by analyzing the number of inbound and domestic travelers across the Republic of Kazakhstan regions in 2021 that the majority visited the city of Almaty and the Almaty Region, 17.16% and 17.08%, respectively, and the fewest travels were to the Atyrau Region and the North Kazakhstan Region, 0.66% and 1.11%, respectively (Figure 6).

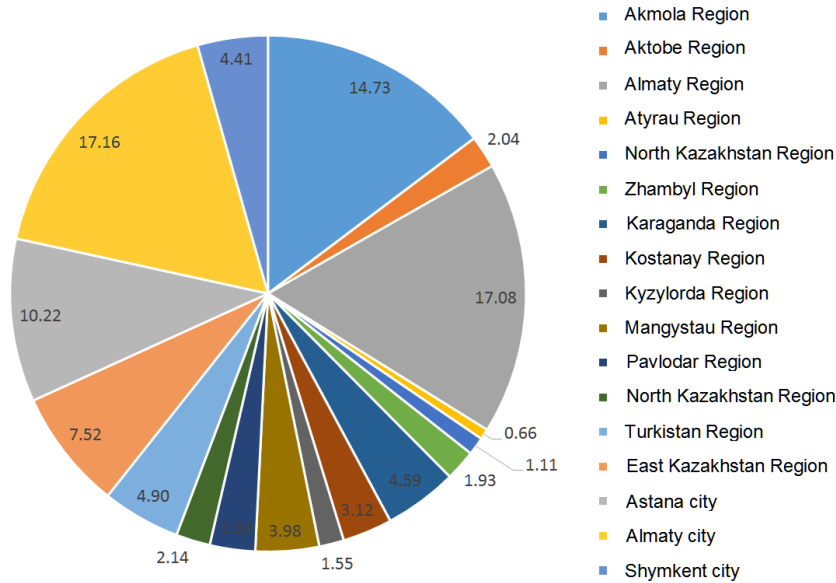


Figure 6 - The number of inbound and domestic travelers across the Republic of Kazakhstan regions in 2021 (data taken from [15])

The analysis of travelers to the sacred objects of Kazakhstan is difficult due to scarce statistical data. Therefore, we performed a questionnaire survey among the residents of Kazakhstan and Turkey regarding how much Kazakhstan’s sacred sites are popular and famous. The survey was performed in two directions by examining the domestic tourists and travel agencies separately in Kazakhstan.

Among the Kazakhs, 350 people took part in the questionnaire survey, most of the respondents aged 35 to 44, and the fewest were under the age of 18 (Figure 7).

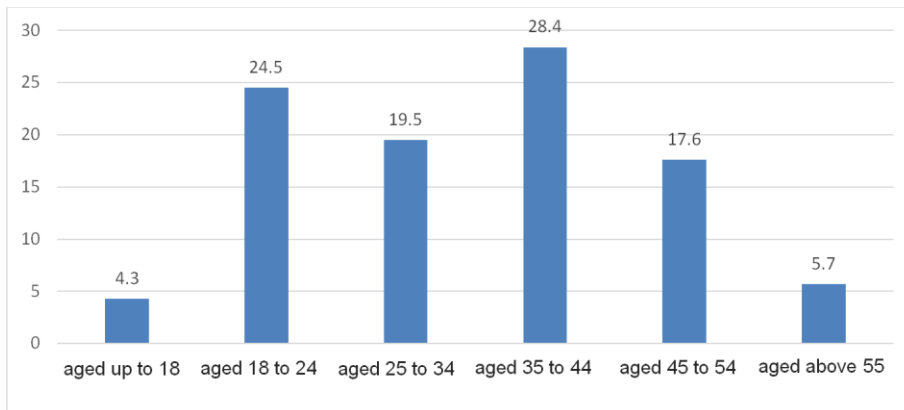


Figure 7 - Age-wise grading of respondents (Kazakhstan) in percentage

Among the respondents, there were 41.3% males and 58.7% females, most of them being married. The respondents mainly resided in the city of Astana, the city of Almaty, the city of Karaganda and the Akmola Region, with most respondents being middle-rank managers, learners and private entrepreneurs. The survey has shown that most of the respondents (73.5%) are visiting the other regions of Kazakhstan. That said, the respondents are, however, not enough familiar with the sacred sites of Kazakhstan (Figure 8).

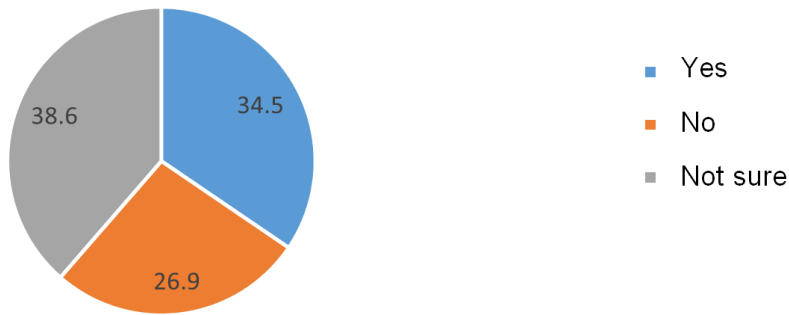


Figure 8 - Respondent responses to the question: “Are you familiar with the sacred objects of Kazakhstan?” (by the authors’ data)

The main sources by which the respondents find out about the sacred sites of Kazakhstan are television, social media outlets, casual friends and family members who visited any particular sacred objects (Figure 9).

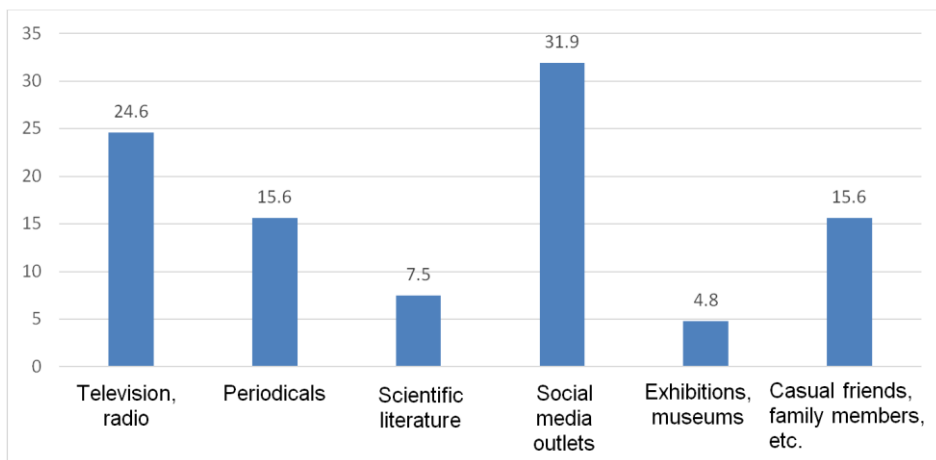


Figure 9 – Respondent responses to the question: “How did you know about the sacred sites of Kazakhstan?” (by the authors’ data)

The main reasons behind why the sacral tourism has no proper development are the insufficient awareness of the sacral tourism in Kazakhstan, the absence of infrastructure, and insufficient offers from the travel agencies, the respondents believe (Figure 10).

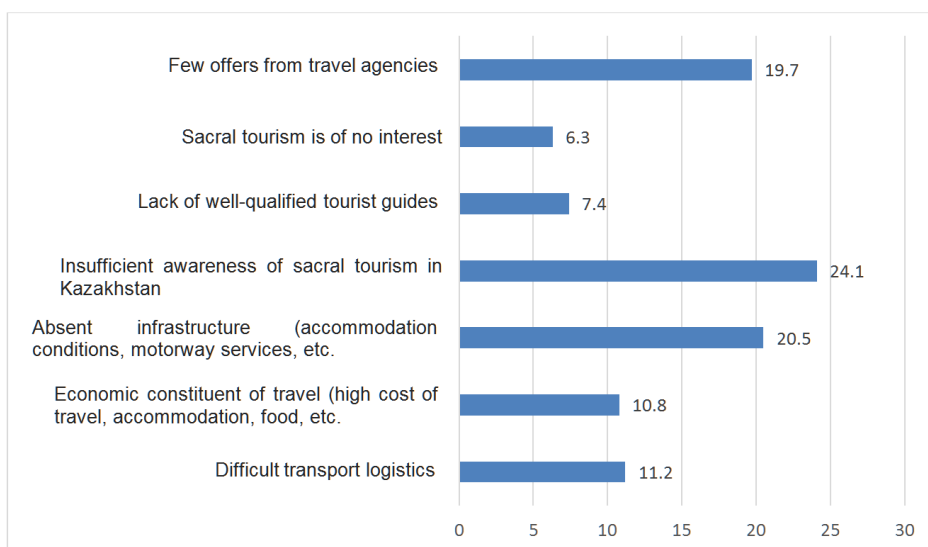


Figure 10 – Respondent responses to the question: “What do you think hinders the development of sacral tourism in Kazakhstan now?” (by the authors’ data)



The most important things for the contemporary domestic tourist in travel are the quality-to-price ratio of the travel product, nourishment quality, weather, and nature.

The positive aspect is that most of the respondents are interested in visiting the sacred objects of Kazakhstan if the tourism services are at the appropriate level and the cost is acceptable. The respondents noted that the knowledge of Kazakhstan’s sacred sites is only limited by their residence region; many respondents are not enough informed of spiritual objects of the country in the other regions.

Besides polling the Kazakhs, we questioned the travel agency employees in order to find out the basic factors influencing the development of sacral tourism in Kazakhstan. The travel agencies participated in that questionnaire survey were from the cities of Astana and Almaty. Most of the travel agencies participated in the study have been operating on Kazakhstan’s travel market for over 5 years. Most of the respondent agencies are providing services for both domestic and outbound tourism, with only the minority (81.0%) having special programs across the sacred sites of Kazakhstan. This study has revealed that a minor proportion of customers are ordering sacral tourism (Figure 11).

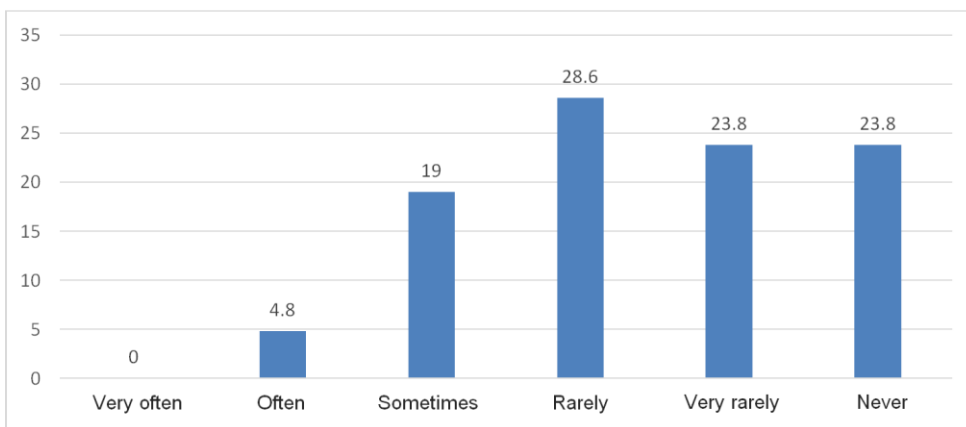


Figure 11 – Respondent responses to the question: “How often the customers take interest (order tours) in sacred sites of Kazakhstan?” (by the authors’ data)

The experts from the travel agencies in Kazakhstan believe that the most promising are wellness tourism, cultural tourism, and active tourism (Figure 12).

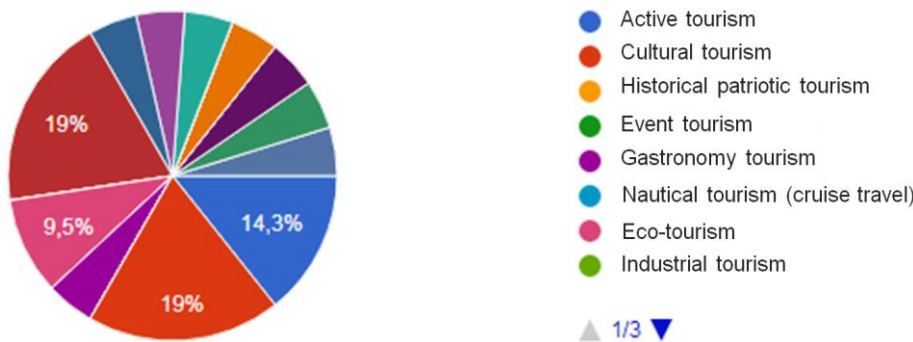


Figure 12 – Respondent responses to the question: “How often the customers take interest (order tours) in sacred sites of Kazakhstan?” (by the authors’ data)

Unfortunately, in the opinion of the travel agencies, sacral tourism is not attractive to the present-day tourist. The travel agents note that there are customers who develop a demand when they are told about Kazakhstan, Kazakhstan’s nature, service, and wellness tourism. The travel agents believe the domestic tourism needs development.

The travel agents think that the main reason behind why sacral tourism is not developing in Kazakhstan is the weak social infrastructure at the tourist locations, weak marketing and branding, and insufficient information support (Figure 13).





Figure 13 – Respondent responses to the question: “What factors do hinder the development of sacral tourism?” (by the authors’ data)

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## 5. Results and Discussion

The analysis performed herein demonstrates that the current stage of the tourist industry development in Kazakhstan is characterized by the outbound tourism prevailing over the inbound. The attractiveness of Kazakhstan for the outbound tourism is governed by diverse cultural heritage that combines the historically established harmony of the existence of dramatically differing cultures with the cultural heritage objects of different periods of time, greatest wellness and recreational potentialities of the country, and exceptional landscape beauty.

The development of the Kazakh sacral tourism will open up new considerable opportunities; more specifically, it will make it possible to:

1. broaden the information field regarding the tourism and cultural potentialities of the country on the international market;
2. draw additional financial flows and investments in the tourist industry;
3. build a friendly tourist image of the country and its culture;
4. concentrate the resources and pick technologies for the promotion of the culture under specific programs.

The development of sacral tourism must aim at making Kazakhstan recognizable as the brand. The main objective facing the tourist industry is that the tourist when comes back home would be willing to share the experienced feelings about the impressions, travel, sightseeings, hotel and culture of our country with the family members and colleagues. Today, a trend is being seen that the aspiration to share one’s own gathered experience is becoming a key factor for many people in the social setting by using different social media outlets (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Odnoklassniki, etc.).

Using different ways of communication, the tourists broaden the information dissemination channels and hence increase the number of potential visitors. That said, positive and sometimes negative impressions and feedbacks serve as an advertisement for the country, thereby influencing the country image.

The major drawback of the domestic tourism, in our view, is that the international customers perceive it in a blurry and patterned manner, and the Kazakh people themselves are not enough informed of unique tourist destinations, which adversely affects the stimulation of both internal and external tourist flows.

In our opinion, the exclusiveness and identity of touristic-cultural Kazakhstan must become a premise for generating a tourism offer in order to promote the Kazakh national culture.

That said, tourism administrations and national travel offices must play a key role in building and implementing strategies for the promotion of the national image because they predetermine a uniform and coordinated development strategy in line with the economic, political and social interests of the whole country and its regions in particular. Undisputable is the fact that the unity of development and promotion strategies for tourism in the country must be provided through efficient communication channels and both internal and external communication relations.

In our view, the issue consists in the national prioritization. As of now, strengthening the reputation of our country in the eyes of the global community is a national public objective. The lack of an information policy to strengthen Kazakhstan's reputation abroad seriously hinders the advancement of our national interests. This manifests itself in many fields, including attraction of investments, creation of tourism infrastructure, and development of international communications. In this situation, the development of a serious information concept that will help build a positive image of the country must become the first step of works towards improving Kazakhstan's image. The key priorities of the national public information policy: a more adequate and advantageous representation of the nation as an intellectual, culturally developed country and a science-technology leader with rich history and great future.

The concept of the national public information policy to promote the national culture abroad is a constituent of the general concept of information policy for strengthening the international reputation of the country.

In our opinion, to promote the modern Kazakh culture and achieve a positive effect from its promotion, it is required that media communications and media resources be chosen correctly, depending on the organizational goals and interpretation of communication campaigns. This is because the choice of optimum media communications (fiction, research publications, news and thematic messages in mass media, movies, audio products and so on) predetermines the effect from perception of any particular cultural products by the audience. Moreover, the realization of the specifics, weaknesses and strengths of any particular way of familiarization sometimes have bearing on dramatic moments of transnational relations, proneness to conflict or tolerance in relations between the nations.

In the contemporary world, media communications in promoting the contemporary Kazakh culture must fulfil certain goals and functions, as systematized and illustrated in Figure 14.



Figure 14 – Basic goals and functions of media communications when promoting the modern Kazakh culture (data taken from [16,17])

## 6. Conclusion

In our view, the key objective of media communications is to investigate and analyze the national and regional peculiarities of the audience in which the modern Kazakh culture is supposed to be promoted, namely to measure the audiences on various websites, social media outlets, search pages and so forth. Such studies identify the audience size and make-up, as well as the behavior and information perception. Due to the ongoing changes in the information and technological environment, technological progress and globalization, the communication types and interaction principles have undergone a transformation to form global social media. In light of this, it is fundamentally important for Kazakhstan to create its own media space, given the media reality. Kazakhstan's media space must be upbuilt on the principles of scientificity, rationality, publicity and veracity, and should carry axiological information on the activities and achievements of the institutes of culture, arts, religion, and science of the republic.

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