



**International journal of basic and applied
research**

www.pragatipublication.com

ISSN 2249-3352 (P) 2278-0505 (E)

Cosmos Impact Factor-5.86

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19512261>

Enhancing Tourism Competitiveness through Strategic Positioning: The Case of Central Asia

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Abstract: This article examines how strategic positioning can enhance tourism competitiveness in Central Asia. Focusing on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the study analyzes the relationship between destination competitiveness, destination image, branding, accessibility, governance, and regional cooperation. Methodologically, the article is based on a qualitative approach combining a semi-systematic literature review with secondary-source analysis of scholarly works on tourism competitiveness, destination positioning, and tourism development in Central Asia. The findings indicate that the region possesses substantial comparative advantages, including Silk Road heritage, rich cultural resources, diverse natural landscapes, and strong potential for heritage, community-based, ecotourism, and cross-border tourism. The analysis shows that the Silk Road remains the most effective umbrella narrative for promoting Central Asia internationally, but that long-term competitiveness requires a hybrid positioning model combining regional visibility with clearer national and local differentiation.

Keywords: Central Asia, tourism competitiveness, strategic positioning, destination branding, destination image, Silk Road, regional tourism

Introduction

In the contemporary global tourism economy, destinations compete under conditions of expanding mobility, greater consumer choice, and increasing pressure to distinguish themselves in markets. These dynamics have become particularly significant in the context of post-pandemic recovery. According to UN Tourism, international tourist arrivals returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2024, with additional growth expected in 2025, indicating that competition among destinations has once again intensified. Destinations are evaluated not only by the quantity of their attractions or the extent of their infrastructure, but also by the degree to which they are visible, recognizable, and meaningfully differentiated from competing places. Therefore, tourism competitiveness has become a major concern in both academic research and policy practice. (UN Tourism, 2025)



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ISSN 2249-3352 (P) 2278-0505 (E)

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Competitiveness is generally understood as a destination's ability to attract visitors, generate satisfying experiences, and maintain favorable performance relative to competitors over time. Foundational scholarship has shown that competitiveness cannot be explained by natural and cultural resources alone. Rather, it depends on how effectively those resources are translated into market advantage through management quality, supportive policy, accessibility, service standards, and destination image. More recent reviews confirm that competitiveness remains one of the most significant and conceptually broad themes in tourism research, encompassing both comparative and competitive advantage as well as the long-term sustainability of destination performance. This perspective is especially relevant for regions whose tourism potential is evident, but whose market position remains weak or insufficiently consolidated (Crouch et al., 1999).

In this setting, strategic positioning assumes particular importance as a means of strengthening tourism competitiveness. In tourism, positioning extends beyond promotion in the narrow sense. It refers to the process through which a destination defines its identity, communicates its value to selected target markets, and differentiates itself from competing locations. Research on destination image and destination branding demonstrates that travel decisions are influenced not only by functional attributes, but also by symbolic meanings, perceived uniqueness, and the overall coherence of destination identity. Qu, Kim, and Im show that destination branding shapes revisit and recommendation intentions through the development of a distinctive image, while broader branding scholarship emphasizes that destinations require a clear and recognizable identity in order to compete effectively. Competitiveness and positioning are therefore closely connected: destinations are unlikely to perform strongly in international markets if they are weakly defined, poorly differentiated, or inconsistently perceived (Qu et al, 2011).

Central Asia provides an especially useful case for examining these issues. Commonly understood to include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the region combines a strong historical legacy with a highly diverse tourism resource base. The literature points to Silk Road heritage, renowned historic cities, mountain and desert landscapes, community-based tourism opportunities, and strong potential for cultural, nature-based, and experience-oriented travel. Research on Uzbekistan has shown that heritage-related attractions, hospitality, and culturally grounded experiences contribute significantly to memorable travel and destination loyalty, while studies on community-based tourism across the region highlight the role of local culture, sustainability, and host-guest interaction in shaping tourism appeal. At the regional level, the Silk Road has usually been identified as the most recognizable symbolic framework through which Central Asia can be presented to international audiences (Raimkulov et al, 2021).

However, the existence of considerable tourism assets does not automatically translate into strong competitiveness. The literature frequently describes Central Asia as a region with substantial promise, yet one whose presence in international tourism remains comparatively weak



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ISSN 2249-3352 (P) 2278-0505 (E)

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relative to its resource base. Recent research on Uzbekistan reveals a significant gap between residents' positive perceptions and the more uncertain or negative images held by non-visitors, while earlier work on Central Asia identified notable discrepancies between projected and perceived destination images among first-time visitors (Eitzenberger & Thimm, 2024).

This issue provides the central rationale for this study. Although scholarship on tourism in Central Asia has expanded in recent years, it remains uneven across countries and themes. Existing studies variously address destination image, heritage tourism, community-based tourism, infrastructure, and regional integration, yet relatively few integrate these strands into a coherent discussion of how strategic positioning may enhance tourism competitiveness at the regional level. This gap is important because the future of tourism in Central Asia depends not only on the resources available, but also on the extent to which those resources can be organized into a coherent, credible, and differentiated market proposition. It also raises a broader strategic question: should Central Asia be positioned primarily through a shared regional narrative, most notably the Silk Road, through distinct national tourism identities, or through a combination of both? While the literature provides support for each of these possibilities, the relationship between competitiveness and positioning in the Central Asian context remains insufficiently synthesized (Koh & Kwok, 2017).

The aim of this article is to examine how strategic positioning can contribute to strengthening tourism competitiveness in Central Asia. More specifically, the article addresses four interrelated questions:

- how tourism competitiveness is conceptualized in relation to destination positioning, branding, and image; what competitive strengths and weaknesses characterize Central Asia as a tourism region?
- how the region is currently positioned, implicitly or explicitly, in the international tourism market; and which strategic directions emerge for improving its competitive standing.

By addressing these questions, the article seeks to contribute both to theoretical discussions of destination competitiveness and to practical debates on how emerging regions can improve their international tourism position through more coherent and differentiated strategies (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999).

The article proceeds as follows. The next section discusses the theoretical foundations of tourism competitiveness and strategic positioning and is followed by a review of the relevant literature and an explanation of the methodological approach. Then the article considers Central Asia as a tourism region, evaluates its competitive profile, and examines the role of strategic positioning in shaping its international market presence. The final sections synthesize the main challenges and opportunities identified in the study analysis and outline strategic directions for improving the region's tourism competitiveness.



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Theoretical Foundations of Tourism Competitiveness and Strategic Positioning

In tourism studies, competitiveness is generally understood not as a single outcome, but as a multidimensional capacity through which a destination attracts visitors, satisfies them, and sustains performance relative to competitors over time. Early and influential work by Crouch and Ritchie (1999) placed tourism competitiveness within a broader developmental framework, arguing that destinations cannot be assessed solely by visitor numbers or revenue, but also by their ability to convert tourism into wider prosperity. This perspective moved the discussion beyond simple destination attractiveness and toward a more integrated understanding in which resources, management, policy, and long-term development are closely linked.

A major theoretical advance in this field came from Dwyer and Kim (2003), who proposed a model of destination competitiveness based on both comparative and competitive advantage. Their approach is important because it distinguishes between the resources a destination possesses and the way those resources are mobilized through management, policy, infrastructure, and market performance. In this framework, inherited resources and created resources are necessary but not sufficient. To become competitive, destinations must also benefit from supporting factors, destination management, demand conditions, and situational influences. Enright and Newton (2004) reached a similar conclusion by arguing that tourism competitiveness should include not only destination-specific features, but also broader business-related factors that shape the performance of tourism providers.

Within this broader debate, strategic positioning functions as one of the principal mechanisms through which destinations transform tourism potential into competitive advantage. In tourism, positioning refers to the deliberate effort to define a destination's distinctive value, communicate that value to target markets, and secure a favorable place in the minds of potential visitors.

Buhalis's (2000) work on the competitive destination remains particularly significant here because it treats destination marketing as inseparable from strategic management. The author argues that destinations must differentiate themselves, coordinate public and private stakeholders, and align marketing with regional development goals if they are to compete effectively. This means that positioning is not simply about visibility. It is about constructing a coherent market identity that reflects both what the destination is and how it wants to be perceived.

From a theoretical perspective, positioning matters because tourism demand is shaped under conditions of informational complexity. Travelers typically choose among multiple destinations offering partially similar experiences, and they rely on simplified mental associations in order to reduce uncertainty. As Qu, Kim, and Im (2011) argue, destination branding becomes important precisely because destinations need not only to be known, but to be known for something distinctive. Their model links brand associations to overall image and then to behavioral intentions such as revisit and recommendation. The implication is that positioning operates at the intersection of perception and competition: a destination cannot establish a strong market presence if it is



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ISSN 2249-3352 (P) 2278-0505 (E)

Cosmos Impact Factor-5.86

visible but indistinct, or distinctive but poorly understood. Strategic positioning therefore serves as the bridge between destination identity and market selection.

The theoretical importance of positioning is closely related to the extensive literature on destination image. Baloglu and McCleary (1999) demonstrated that destination image is shaped by both stimulus factors and tourist characteristics, while Beerli and Martin (2004) later showed that information sources, prior experience, motivation, and socio-demographic variables all influence how destinations are perceived. The study established that image is not a passive reflection of objective reality, but is a constructed perception shaped through communication, experience, and interpretation. Pike's (2002) review of 142 studies further confirmed that destination image had become one of the most developed areas in tourism research because of its explanatory power in relation to destination choice, expectations, and post-visit evaluation. From the standpoint of competitiveness, this is a critical insight: destinations do not compete only through what they possess, but through the meanings attached to what they possess.

Destination branding extends this argument by focusing on the deliberate organization of those meanings. In branding theory, the destination is treated not merely as a geographical space, but as a symbolic entity that must project a recognizable and credible identity. Qu, Kim, and Im (2011) make an especially important contribution by introducing the idea of unique image as a central component of destination brand associations. Their work suggests that competitive strength depends not only on positive evaluation, but also on memorability and differentiation. This argument is especially relevant in tourism, where many destinations compete on similar functional attributes. Branding becomes strategically effective when it gives coherence to destination identity and helps translate image into behavioral loyalty. Therefore, in theoretical terms, image and branding should be understood as foundational components of positioning rather than as secondary promotional instruments.

A further issue in the literature concerns how tourism competitiveness should be assessed and measured. Theoretical models have increasingly moved toward the use of indicator-based frameworks that combine resource endowment, destination management, infrastructure, enabling conditions, and market performance. Dwyer and Kim (2003) explicitly proposed a set of indicators to operationalize competitiveness across destinations, while Enright and Newton (2004) showed the value of measuring both tourism-specific and generic business factors in empirical analysis.

More recently, the World Economic Forum's Travel and Tourism Development Index has continued this line of thinking by benchmarking countries through a multidimensional framework that includes enabling conditions, policy, infrastructure, sustainability, and demand-related factors. Although such indices are not substitutes for context-specific analysis, they remain useful because they demonstrate that competitiveness is now understood internationally as a broad policy and development issue rather than a narrow marketing outcome.



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ISSN 2249-3352 (P) 2278-0505 (E)

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This theoretical foundation is an important implication for this study. If competitiveness is multidimensional and positioning is strategic rather than merely promotional, then enhancing tourism competitiveness in Central Asia cannot be reduced to advertising or image-building alone. It requires an analytical framework that connects destination resources with perception, accessibility, infrastructure, governance, and regional coordination. That is, strategic positioning should be understood as a mechanism through which comparative advantages are translated into competitive ones. This interpretation is especially relevant for emerging destinations, where the problem is often not the absence of tourism assets, but the weak organization of those assets into a coherent and differentiated market proposition (e.g., in Central Asia). On that basis, the next section turns to the literature review in order to examine how these theoretical debates have been applied to tourism research generally and to Central Asia in particular.

Literature Review

The literature on tourism competitiveness has developed into a substantial field concerned with why some destinations outperform others in attracting visitors, generating value, and sustaining tourism over time. Earlier scholarship focused largely on destination resources and comparative advantage, but later work broadened the concept to include management, institutional quality, infrastructure, innovation, and market performance. Reviews of the field show that competitiveness is now treated as a multidimensional construct rather than a simple reflection of visitor numbers or resource abundance (Cronjé & du Plessis, 2020; Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). In this body of work, competitiveness is generally linked to a destination's capacity to transform inherited and created resources into durable market advantage.

Recent studies have also emphasized that competitiveness should be understood as both structural and relational. Structural factors include infrastructure, accessibility, governance, and service capacity, while relational factors concern how destinations compare with rivals in the minds of tourists and investors. González-Rodríguez et al. (2023), for example, re-affirm the distinction between comparative and competitive advantage and show that competitiveness depends not only on resource endowment, but also on the way destinations organize and deploy those resources in changing market conditions. This literature is especially relevant for emerging regions, since it suggests that tourism potential alone is not enough; destinations become competitive only when assets are supported by effective management, favorable enabling conditions, and strategic differentiation.

Another important development is the growing interest in measurement. Competitiveness has increasingly been analyzed through multidimensional indicator systems, synthetic indices, and comparative benchmarking frameworks. While such approaches have improved analytical clarity, they have also revealed that tourism competitiveness remains difficult to reduce to a single metric, because it combines tangible assets, policy conditions, stakeholder coordination, and visitor



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ISSN 2249-3352 (P) 2278-0505 (E)

Cosmos Impact Factor-**5.86**

perceptions (Fernández et al., 2020; León et al., 2022). This has encouraged a broader understanding of competitiveness as a dynamic and context-dependent process rather than a fixed rank in an international table.

Within destination studies, strategic positioning has become one of the principal concepts used to explain how destinations seek competitive advantage in crowded tourism markets. The destination-marketing literature consistently argues that destinations do not compete only through what they physically offer, but also through the meanings, associations, and distinctions they establish in the minds of target audiences. Pike (2017) and Rodríguez-Molina et al. (2019) explicitly note that achieving a competitive market position is a central goal of destination marketing organizations, while related work on brand equity and destination branding shows that positioning affects how destinations are remembered, compared, and chosen (Pike, 2017; Pike, 2009; Rodríguez-Molina et al., 2019). Positioning is not merely promotional. It is a strategic process that links identity, communication, and market selection.

Research in such areas as destination image and destination branding has shown that tourists rely on simplified images and symbolic cues when selecting destinations, especially under conditions of incomplete information. Branding scholarship (Hanna et al., 2021; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020) therefore treats destinations as symbolic entities that require a recognizable and credible identity if they are to compete effectively. Reviews of destination branding emphasize that the field has expanded from a narrow focus on slogans and logos toward broader concerns such as identity, stakeholder alignment, communication, and digital representation. This shift is important because it places positioning within a wider framework of destination management rather than reducing it to advertising alone.

A further strand of the literature highlights the need to connect positioning with actual destination experience. Studies of destination branding increasingly warn that positioning becomes fragile when projected identity diverges from visitor experience or stakeholder understanding. Simplified messages may attract attention, but they are less effective when they fail to resonate with residents or when they produce unrealistic expectations among tourists (Zenker et al., 2017).

More recent work by Confetto (2023) on digital destination branding adds that online communication has made image formation more interactive and less controllable, since user-generated content now contributes significantly to brand meaning (Confetto et al., 2023). As a result, the literature increasingly treats successful positioning as a function of coherence: destinations must align projected image, lived experience, and stakeholder identity if they are to sustain competitive advantage.

Compared with the broader tourism literature, scholarship on Central Asia remains relatively limited; however, it has expanded in recent years and has become more conceptually diverse. Existing studies generally describe Central Asia as an emerging tourism region consisting of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. A recurring theme is that the



International journal of basic and applied research

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ISSN 2249-3352 (P) 2278-0505 (E)

Cosmos Impact Factor-5.86

region possesses substantial cultural, historical, and natural resources, but remains less researched and less visible than more mature destinations (Kantarci et al., 2014).

Within studies on Central Asian tourism, the Silk Road concept occupies a central place. Regional studies repeatedly present it as the strongest symbolic and strategic framework for understanding Central Asia in international tourism. Koh and Kwok (2017) argue that regional integration could allow the Silk Road to function as a unifying tourism platform, enabling Central Asia to be marketed as a connected macro-destination rather than as five weakly linked national cases. Other scholarship similarly treats the Silk Road as a narrative that links heritage, geography, and cross-border mobility while making the region more legible to foreign audiences. This line of work is significant because it frames Central Asia not only as a geographic region, but also as a shared tourism proposition.

Country-level studies show that Central Asia cannot be reduced to a single regional image. Research on Uzbekistan has demonstrated that destination image is heavily shaped by references to Silk Road heritage, ancient cities, and historical continuity, while more recent studies reveal notable differences between residents' positive perceptions and the weaker or more uncertain images held by non-visitors (Eitzenberger & Thimm, 2024; Fayzullaev et al., 2021). Other work by Lee (2012) on the region shows that image incongruence is also a broader Central Asian issue, since pre-travel and post-travel perceptions do not always align among first-time visitors. These studies indicate that the region's challenge is not simply underdevelopment, but also the instability and incompleteness of its projected image.

The Central Asia literature also increasingly addresses competitiveness through empirical and policy-oriented lenses. Research on inbound tourism has shown that infrastructure plays a significant role in tourism development in the region. Gravity-model studies suggest that tourism flows are affected by distance, prices, language ties, borders, and political conditions (Haq et al., 2024; Ibragimov et al., 2022). Related work on governance quality points in the same direction, indicating that institutional conditions affect international arrivals. Together, these studies reinforce a broader conclusion: Central Asia's tourism future depends not only on symbolic capital and heritage value, but also on infrastructure, facilitation, and governance quality.

Scholarship on Central Asia has become more visible, however, the literature still shows several clear limitations. First, coverage across the region remains uneven. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan receive more attention than Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and especially Turkmenistan, and many studies focus on individual products or country cases rather than on integrated regional comparison. Second, the relationship between tourism competitiveness and strategic positioning has not been sufficiently synthesized (for Central Asian regions). Competitiveness, branding, destination image, and regional cooperation have each been studied, but they are often treated as separate themes rather than as interconnected dimensions of market performance.



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ISSN 2249-3352 (P) 2278-0505 (E)

Cosmos Impact Factor-5.86

Another gap concerns perception-based research. Existing studies have identified image incongruence, stereotype effects, and differences between residents' and non-visitors' perceptions, but there is still limited work on how foreign markets actually interpret Central Asia before travel, how such images vary across source markets, and how digital media influence those perceptions. This is important because positioning depends not only on how destinations describe themselves, but also on how they are understood by external audiences. The growing digital-branding literature suggests useful analytical directions in this context; however, these approaches have not been fully developed in Central Asia-focused tourism research (Confetto et al., 2023; Eitzenberger & Thimm, 2024).

Moreover, the literature still leaves unresolved the question of scale. It remains unclear whether Central Asia should be positioned primarily through a unified regional brand, through distinct national brands, or through a hybrid model that combines both. Existing scholarship provides arguments for each approach, but comparative work capable of testing these alternatives remains limited. The literature supports a clear conclusion: Central Asia is now well established as a meaningful subject of tourism research, yet the field still requires stronger comparative, perception-based, and strategy-oriented studies if it is to explain how the region can improve its international competitiveness through positioning.

These aforementioned research gaps provide the foundation for the methodological and analytical sections that follow.

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative analytical design that combines a literature review with a comparative regional assessment of Central Asia as a tourism destination. The chosen approach is appropriate because the article seeks to examine how strategic positioning can contribute to enhancing tourism competitiveness, rather than to test a narrowly defined causal hypothesis through primary field data. In tourism research, such an approach is especially useful when the objective is to synthesize conceptual discussions, interpret regional patterns, and evaluate destination challenges and opportunities through existing scholarly and policy-related evidence (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016). The research methodology is designed to connect theoretical perspectives on competitiveness, branding, and positioning with the specific regional conditions of Central Asia.

More specifically, the article adopts a semi-systematic literature review supported by secondary-source analysis. This design allows the study to integrate different types of material, including academic works on tourism competitiveness, destination image, and destination branding, as well as studies focused directly on Central Asia and its tourism development. A semi-systematic approach is suitable where the field is interdisciplinary and fragmented, and where the goal is not to aggregate identical empirical findings, but to identify major themes, recurring



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ISSN 2249-3352 (P) 2278-0505 (E)

Cosmos Impact Factor-**5.86**

arguments, and analytical gaps across a dispersed body of scholarship (Snyder, 2019). In this article, the purpose is therefore interpretive and synthetic: to evaluate how tourism competitiveness has been discussed in relation to strategic positioning and how these ideas apply to the Central Asian case.

The empirical basis of this study consists of secondary data and documentary sources. These include peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, edited volumes, book chapters, and selected analytical publications relevant to tourism development, destination competitiveness, and regional tourism policy. The analysis draws particularly on sources addressing destination competitiveness models, strategic positioning, destination image, destination branding, and tourism development in the five Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Selected policy and institutional documents were considered where they offered analytical insight into tourism infrastructure, accessibility, regional cooperation, or destination development. The use of secondary material is justified by the article's aim, which is to interpret and synthesize existing knowledge rather than generate primary survey or interview data.

The source-selection process was guided by thematic relevance and academic credibility. The main analytical clusters are:

- I. tourism competitiveness,
- II. strategic positioning and destination branding,
- III. destination image and market perception, and
- IV. Central Asia as a tourism region.

These clusters reflect the conceptual structure of this article and ensure that the analysis remains closely aligned with the research problem (and the research context). Sources were selected on the basis of their relevance to at least one of these themes, their analytical depth, and their contribution to understanding how Central Asia is discussed in relation to international tourism competition. Priority was given to sources that offered theoretical models, comparative insight, or direct application to Central Asian tourism. Descriptive travel materials, promotional publications, and texts lacking analytical substance were excluded.

The analysis also incorporates a comparative regional perspective. Although the article is not based on a formal quantitative comparison of the five Central Asian states, it treats the region as both a shared tourism space and a set of distinct national destinations. This perspective is methodologically important because the core question of the article concerns not only whether Central Asia is competitive, but also how it should be positioned: as a unified regional destination, as a group of separate national brands, or through a hybrid approach. The regional comparative lens therefore makes it possible to assess both common structural patterns and country-level differentiation. It also reflects a recurring issue in the literature, namely the unresolved relationship between regional identity and national tourism positioning.



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From an analytical standpoint, the study is organized around a framework linking tourism competitiveness and strategic positioning. Competitiveness is assessed in relation to several recurring dimensions identified in the literature, including tourism resources, infrastructure, accessibility, governance, image, and market differentiation. Strategic positioning is examined through destination image, branding narratives, symbolic frameworks, and comparative distinctiveness in international tourism markets. By bringing these dimensions together, the methodology allows the article to evaluate not only what tourism assets Central Asia possesses, but also how effectively those assets can be translated into a coherent and competitive destination position. The study draws on the conceptual distinction between comparative advantage and competitive advantage frequently used in tourism research (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). Comparative advantage refers to the region's inherited and created assets, while competitive advantage concerns the ability to organize, communicate, and manage those assets effectively in the market.

The methodological approach is primarily qualitative and interpretive rather than statistical. The article does not seek to build an econometric model or calculate a competitiveness index for the region. Instead, it uses thematic synthesis to identify how the literature explains Central Asia's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and positioning challenges. This choice is justified by the current state of the field. Research on Central Asia remains uneven across countries and topics, which makes a purely quantitative comparative design difficult without a much larger and more standardized data base. A qualitative method is therefore more appropriate for capturing conceptual complexity, regional diversity, and the interaction between symbolic and structural factors in tourism development.

However, the study remains analytically structured rather than purely descriptive. The literature is examined in terms of recurring patterns, areas of agreement, and unresolved debates. Particular attention is given to how scholars describe the relationship between destination image and competitiveness, the strategic role of the Silk Road narrative, the significance of regional cooperation, and the barriers created by infrastructure, governance, and market perception. This thematic method makes it possible to move beyond summary and toward interpretation. In other words, the aim is not simply to report what previous studies have said, but to organize those findings into a coherent analytical argument about the competitiveness of Central Asia in international tourism.

Central Asia as a Tourism Region

In tourism scholarship, Central Asia is generally understood as a five-country regional space comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Although these states differ considerably in territorial scale, political context, infrastructure, and tourism specialization, they are frequently examined together because of their shared historical linkages,



International journal of basic and applied research

www.pragatipublication.com

ISSN 2249-3352 (P) 2278-0505 (E)

Cosmos Impact Factor-5.86

overlapping cultural references, and common association with the Silk Road (Kantarci et al., 2014; Koh & Kwok, 2017). From an analytical standpoint, this regional framing is important because it allows Central Asia to be approached not only as a set of separate national destinations, but also as a broader tourism macro-region with a partially shared identity.

A recurring point in the literature is that Central Asia occupies a strategic position between Europe and East Asia and benefits from a historical image shaped by movement, exchange, and connectivity. This location has contributed to the persistence of the Silk Road as the region's most recognizable symbolic frame in tourism research. At the same time, the literature does not reduce the region to geography alone. Rather, it treats geography as inseparable from cultural routes, transport corridors, and cross-border mobility, all of which shape how Central Asia can be positioned in international tourism markets (Koh & Kwok, 2017). In this sense, the region's geographical profile is not merely descriptive; it is central to how its tourism potential is interpreted and marketed.

The literature consistently presents Central Asia as a region with a broad and diverse tourism resource base. Its attractions extend well beyond one product category and include historic cities, UNESCO-linked heritage, Islamic architectural monuments, mountain landscapes, deserts, sacred sites, nomadic traditions, and rural communities. This diversity is especially significant because it suggests that the region's tourism identity should not be reduced to heritage alone, even if heritage remains the dominant frame in academic and policy discourse (Kantarci et al., 2014; Usmonova et al., 2022). Moreover, the region combines cultural, natural, and experiential resources in ways that could support a more differentiated tourism offer.

Country-level studies reinforce this point by demonstrating that the five states do not contribute equally or identically to the regional tourism profile. Uzbekistan is most often associated with historic urban heritage and Silk Road destinations such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are more frequently connected with mountains, outdoor recreation, and community-based tourism. Kazakhstan is often discussed in relation to scale, transport corridors, sacred tourism, and mixed urban-natural attractions, whereas Turkmenistan tends to remain less visible in the literature despite its historical and landscape-based potential (e.g., Merv). Taken together, these differences indicate that Central Asia is not a uniform tourism space, but a region whose diversity may itself be a strategic advantage if properly organized within a broader positioning framework (Rybina, 2010; Usmonova et al., 2022).

This historical framing is especially visible in research on Uzbekistan, where destination image is strongly connected to Silk Road heritage, monumental architecture, and historical continuity. Studies of World Heritage Site tourism and destination loyalty in Uzbekistan suggest that heritage remains one of the most important drivers of tourist interest and attachment, especially among international visitors attracted by the region's historical depth (Juraturgunov et al., 2023).



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The literature also emphasizes that cultural tourism in Central Asia is closely linked to authenticity. Visitors are attracted not only by historic sites, but by the sense of continuity between landscape, memory, and living tradition. This is particularly relevant in regions where local culture remains visible in everyday practice rather than being confined to heritage displays.

Research on destination image confirms this under-consolidated position. Studies of first-time visitors have shown that projected and perceived images of Central Asia do not always align, while more recent work on Uzbekistan identifies significant differences between residents' positive self-perceptions and the weaker or more uncertain views of non-visitors abroad (Lee et al., 2012). These findings are important because they suggest that the region's role in contemporary international tourism is shaped not only by material assets, but also by the degree of clarity and credibility with which those assets are communicated. Therefore, Central Asia's challenge is not simply to attract attention, but to convert symbolic appeal into a stable and intelligible market image.

Finally, the literature portrays Central Asia as a region with substantial tourism promise, grounded in a combination of historical symbolism, cultural diversity, and natural variety, yet still in the process of consolidating its international role.

Assessment of Tourism Competitiveness in Central Asia

From a resource perspective, Central Asia possesses many of the attributes commonly associated with tourism competitiveness. The literature consistently identifies the region's comparative advantages in terms of Silk Road heritage, historic cities, sacred sites, mountain and desert landscapes, and culturally embedded forms of travel. In addition, community-based tourism research suggests that local culture, host-guest interaction, and sustainability-oriented experiences strengthen the region's appeal beyond conventional sightseeing. These features give Central Asia a broad tourism base and support several market segments at once, including heritage, cultural, nature-based, and experiential tourism. In this respect, the region's fundamental problem is not a lack of tourism assets, but the uneven conversion of those assets into stronger market performance (Raimkulov et al., 2021; Usmonova et al., 2022).

At the same time, the region's resource base is internally differentiated. Uzbekistan tends to dominate the heritage (historical) narrative through its internationally recognizable Silk Road cities, whereas Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are more closely associated with mountain landscapes, community-based tourism, and adventure travel. Kazakhstan occupies a more mixed position, combining large territorial scale, transport potential, urban destinations, and natural attractions, while Turkmenistan remains comparatively underrepresented in the academic and market literature (even if it possesses culturally rich sites). This diversity can be interpreted as a competitive strength, since it allows the region to offer a varied tourism portfolio. However, it also



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ISSN 2249-3352 (P) 2278-0505 (E)

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complicates positioning, because competitiveness depends not only on the existence of assets, but on how clearly they are organized, managed and communicated.

A second key dimension of competitiveness concerns infrastructure and accessibility. Both the general tourism literature and recent Central Asia-focused studies indicate that transport connectivity, tourism infrastructure, and related enabling systems are indispensable for transforming resource potential into actual demand. Several authors (e.g., Haq et al. (2024)), using regional empirical data, found that infrastructure is positively associated with inbound tourism in Central Asia, which strongly suggests that infrastructure deficits remain a binding constraint on competitiveness. In practical terms, this means that the region's symbolic attractiveness cannot compensate for shortcomings in transport networks, accommodation systems, service facilities, and broader visitor-support structures. Ibragimov et al. (2022) show that tourism flows to the region are sensitive to shared borders, common language, and political stability, while distance has a dampening effect. Accessibility is not a secondary issue. It is one of the core mechanisms through which Central Asia's competitiveness is either enabled or constrained.

The institutional environment constitutes another important dimension of regional tourism competitiveness. International benchmarking frameworks such as the Travel and Tourism Development Index assess destination performance through broad sets of conditions, including policy, infrastructure, enabling environment, and resilience. This is particularly relevant to Central Asia, where the literature repeatedly indicates that tourism development is shaped not only by attractions and image, but also by governance quality, cross-border regulation, and coordination capacity (World Economic Forum, 2024).

Country-level evidence also points to governance-related weaknesses. Recent work by Sakypbek et al. (2025) on Kazakhstan highlights persistent barriers such as inadequate digital integration, weak online visibility of tourism services, and limited stakeholder participation, all of which affect the credibility and operational quality of destination development. Although this study focuses on one national case, its implications are wider: uneven governance reduces the effectiveness of tourism branding, slows modernization, and makes it more difficult to sustain a coherent destination strategy. For a region like Central Asia, where international familiarity is still developing, such institutional weaknesses can significantly erode competitiveness.

Competitiveness also depends on the quality of tourism services and the overall attractiveness of the destination environment for both visitors and investors. Research on Silk Road tourism in Uzbekistan shows that cultural attractiveness, hospitality, and elements of superstructure such as accommodation contribute directly to tourist satisfaction and memorable experience, which implies that service quality remains a key component of competitive performance (Raimkulov et al., 2021).

Image-related competitiveness is especially important in the Central Asian case. Studies on destination image indicate that the region continues to face significant perception gaps. Lee et al.



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(2012) found incongruence between pre-travel and post-travel images among first-time visitors to Central Asia. Eitzenberger and Thimm (2024) identified a clear disparity between the positive image of Uzbekistan held by residents and the more uncertain or stereotyped perceptions of non-visitors. These findings suggest that market competitiveness is weakened when external audiences lack a clear, favorable, and differentiated understanding of the destination (which means, service quality and investment conditions matter, but they must be accompanied by stronger image coherence if they are to generate sustained competitive benefit).

Strategic Positioning, Key Challenges, and Strategic Directions for Enhancing Tourism Competitiveness

The literature suggests that Central Asia occupies an ambiguous position in the international tourism market. On the one hand, the region possesses a strong symbolic and resource base: Silk Road heritage, historic cities, sacred landscapes, mountain environments, and culturally embedded forms of travel. These advantages have not yet produced a correspondingly strong, stable, or clearly differentiated position in global tourism. In most academic discussions (as we have noticed previously), Central Asia is treated as an emerging destination whose comparative strengths are evident, but whose competitive standing remains only partially realized. From the perspective of strategic positioning, this means that the region is not competing from a position of resource scarcity, but from a position of incomplete market consolidation.

The dominant positioning framework in the literature is the Silk Road. It remains the most recognizable narrative through which Central Asia can be presented to international audiences, since it links history (culture, heritage), mobility, exchange, and civilizational depth within a single symbolic frame. This gives the region a clear advantage in terms of initial visibility and interpretive accessibility. However, the same literature also indicates that the Silk Road narrative is insufficient on its own. While it can attract attention, it does not automatically provide the level of differentiation required for actual destination choice (Koh & Kwok, 2017).

The literature also identifies several challenges that continue to weaken the region's competitiveness. The first is limited international visibility and image inconsistency. Studies show that Central Asia remains insufficiently defined in the minds of many foreign audiences, and that projected images do not always align with visitor perceptions or local self-understanding (Lee et al., 2012; Eitzenberger & Thimm, 2024). The second is infrastructure and accessibility. Resource richness alone does not generate competitiveness where transport systems, visitor services, and cross-border mobility remain uneven or cumbersome (Haq et al., 2024; Ibragimov et al., 2022). The third challenge is fragmented governance and coordination. Tourism development across the region is still shaped by uneven institutional quality, inconsistent policy implementation, and limited cross-border integration (and consistent policy), all of which weaken the credibility and



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effectiveness of destination positioning. In combination, these factors explain why the region is frequently described as promising, yet under-consolidated (eventually, under-estimated).

The literature points to several strategic directions through which tourism competitiveness could be strengthened:

1. Central Asia would benefit from a more coherent regional branding strategy built around the Silk Road, but supported by differentiated country-level identities. This would allow the region to capitalize on its strongest shared narrative without sacrificing specificity.

2. The region should continue to develop forms of tourism that align with its strongest comparative advantages, especially heritage tourism, community-based tourism, ecotourism, sacred tourism, and cross-border route tourism (Usmonova et al., 2022; Raimkulov et al., 2021). These segments are particularly suitable because they rely on authenticity, cultural depth, and experiential value rather than on the mass-tourism model in which Central Asia is **less competitive**.

3. The literature makes clear that infrastructure, accessibility, and travel facilitation are not secondary issues but core conditions of competitiveness. Improvements in transport connectivity, border procedures, service quality, and destination management are essential if symbolic attractiveness is to be translated into actual visitation.

4. Fourth, stronger digital communication and image management are needed. Because one of the region's main weaknesses is low familiarity, digital platforms provide an important means of improving visibility and correcting outdated or stereotyped perceptions. However, the literature also emphasizes that digital promotion must remain credible and consistent with visitor experience if it is to support long-term positioning rather than short-term curiosity.

Discussion & Conclusion

The analysis suggests that Central Asia occupies a complex position in international tourism. The region is widely recognized in the literature for its rich historical legacy, cultural diversity, and varied natural landscapes, yet these advantages have not produced a similarly strong or stable position in foreign tourism markets. This confirms a central argument in tourism studies: destination competitiveness depends not only on resource endowment, but also on the ability to organize, communicate, and support those resources through effective infrastructure, governance, and market strategy. In the case of Central Asia, comparative advantages are evident, but competitive advantages remain only partly realized.

A major conclusion of this study is that strategic positioning should be understood as a core element of tourism competitiveness rather than as a narrow promotional activity. The literature consistently shows that the region's international performance is shaped not only by attractions, but also by image clarity, accessibility, institutional quality, and regional coordination. This means that stronger branding alone cannot resolve the region's tourism challenges. Destination image



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must be credible, clearly differentiated, and supported by the practical conditions that influence tourist experience and confidence. Positioning functions as a strategic bridge between what the region offers and how that offer is interpreted in international markets.

Our findings also confirm that the Silk Road remains Central Asia's most effective umbrella narrative. It provides the region with a recognizable symbolic framework and gives foreign audiences a historically grounded point of entry. The literature also makes clear that this narrative is not sufficient on its own. If used too broadly, it may create a generalized image that attracts attention without offering enough specificity for actual destination choice. Therefore, the most defensible interpretation is that Central Asia would benefit from a hybrid positioning model: a shared regional narrative for visibility and international recognition, combined with more distinct national and local identities for differentiation and market precision.

Another important implication is that Central Asia's strongest prospects lie in forms of tourism based on heritage, authenticity, community interaction, nature, and experience. The region is not best placed to compete with highly standardized mass-tourism destinations. Its comparative strength lies instead in cultural tourism, community-based tourism, ecotourism (e.g., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan), sacred tourism (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan), and cross-border route development. These segments align with both the region's resource structure and contemporary demand for meaningful, experience-oriented travel. The literature repeatedly emphasizes that authenticity must remain credible (for all countries of Central Asia). A disconnect between projected image and actual experience would weaken rather than strengthen long-term competitiveness.

Finally, we conclude that Central Asia does not suffer from a lack of tourism value, but from the incomplete transformation of that value into a coherent and competitive international market position. The region already possesses a strong historical and cultural foundation. However, its long-term success will depend on how effectively this foundation is supported by infrastructure, mobility, governance, coordinated branding, and market-specific communication.

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