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YOUTH TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA: A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH TO RECREATIONAL CAPACITY

Abstract. *Youth tourism in Central Asia has strong potential for sustainable development, particularly in relation to the cultural heritage of the Great Silk Road. This article develops a conceptual approach to assessing the recreational potential of youth tourism in the region. As tourist flows grow, it is important to assess recreational capacity and to forecast the impact of tourism on the natural and social environment. The aim of this study is to propose a conceptual approach to understanding recreational capacity in the context of youth tourism development in Central Asia. The proposed framework integrates physical, infrastructural, environmental, social, and behavioral components, enabling a comprehensive analysis of territories that accounts for the specific characteristics of young tourists. The study does not aim to provide an operational measurement of recreational capacity; instead, it focuses on conceptualization and strategic interpretation based on secondary data and expert analysis. The findings can be used to develop regional strategies for the sustainable development of youth tourism and to manage tourist areas. The combined methodology enabled a comprehensive assessment of the current state and prospects of youth tourism as one of the economically promising areas of tourism development in the region.*

Keywords: *youth tourism, conceptual approach, Central Asia, Great Silk Road, recreational capacity.*

Introduction

Over the past few decades, youth tourism has emerged as a significant driver of sustainable development and a facilitator of intercultural exchange. Young travelers demonstrate dynamic mobility, a willingness to discover new destinations, and an interest in interactive and culturally rich travel experiences, characteristics that highlight their role as a significant consumer group in global tourism. According to UN Tourism estimates, youth tourism accounts for approximately 23% of all international travel, generating not only direct economic benefits but also cultural influence, destination promotion, and support for local entrepreneurship [1].

Youth tourism, typically defined as travel by individuals aged 15 to 30 (or up to 35), is one of the fastest-growing segments of the global tourism market [2]. This segment is characterized by a

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strong interest in unique cultural experiences, event tourism, active and adventure travel, and the use of digital technologies. As such, youth tourism holds particular promise for the Central Asian region, especially in the context of community-based tourism, Great Silk Road cultural initiatives, and interregional educational exchange. These areas offer both economic opportunities and avenues for strengthening intercultural dialogue.

Youth tourism is a rapidly growing segment of the tourism industry that has a significant impact on the socio-economic development of regions and promotes cultural exchange. Central Asia has great potential to attract young tourists because of its rich cultural heritage, diverse natural landscapes, and strategic location along the ancient Great Silk Road. However, the region faces several challenges that limit its development as a youth tourism destination, including insufficient infrastructure, limited availability of digital services, and weak promotion in the international arena.

Central Asia, comprising Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, is a region with a rich historical and cultural heritage, diverse natural landscapes, and a strategic location at the crossroads of East and West. UN Tourism recognizes tourism as a powerful driver of economic growth, inclusive development, and environmental sustainability, which aligns closely with the long-term priorities of the Central Asian states.

Despite these advantages, the tourism potential of Central Asia remains underdeveloped. The region faces a range of challenges, including poorly developed infrastructure, fragmented branding strategies, and limited cross-border cooperation. However, strategic shifts have begun to emerge. Initiatives led by UN Tourism and development partners such as the Asian Development Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development demonstrate a growing commitment to sustainable tourism planning, regional integration, and capacity building, all of which are essential for unlocking the full potential of youth travel [1].

Recent technical cooperation projects in the region, such as the development of a domestic tourism strategy in Uzbekistan, the creation of tourism satellite accounts in Tajikistan, and cross-border tourism planning along the Almaty–Bishkek corridor, highlight the relevance of youth-centered approaches to destination development [1]. Moreover, the future cooperation priorities outlined by UN Tourism emphasize the simplification of visa regimes, professional training, sustainable product development, and the promotion of tourism through digital platforms, all of which are particularly conducive to engaging young people as travelers and tourism entrepreneurs.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian republics initiated national strategies aimed at revitalizing their tourism sectors, focusing on infrastructure development and greater international visibility. Nevertheless, the region continues to face significant structural challenges, such as limited connectivity, inadequate service quality, and poorly coordinated regional promotion. Although some countries have made efforts to improve their tourism infrastructure and international profile, the youth segment remains insufficiently studied and poorly integrated into national and regional tourism strategies and state programs. There is therefore a clear need to develop targeted approaches to youth tourism development that are sustainable and inclusive and that reflect the unique characteristics of the region.

According to Ekonomist.kz, the region recorded a historic rise in tourist arrivals in 2024, with 28.6 million international arrivals across Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, an 11% increase compared with the previous year [3]. Kazakhstan recorded the largest absolute gain: 15.3 million international arrivals (up 13%), of whom 10.4 million stayed longer than 24 hours, with an average length of stay of four days. Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian state in which most tourists do not come from neighboring republics: 31.8% of arrivals are from Russia, 13.1% from China (following the Year of Kazakhstan Tourism in China), and 9.4% from India. Kyrgyzstan ranked

second with 8.6 million visitors, a remarkable figure for a country of 7.2 million inhabitants; 61.7% of these arrivals originated in Uzbekistan and 28.3% in Kazakhstan. Uzbekistan recorded the fastest growth, with arrivals increasing by 20.1% to 8 million; roughly 79% of visitors crossed the border on foot, underscoring the transnational character of regional land travel. In December 2024, Uzbekistan also endorsed the UN Tourism International Code for the Protection of Tourists, reaffirming its commitment to travelers' rights. This surge is largely attributed to simplified visa procedures, strategic marketing of cultural heritage, and continued investment in tourism infrastructure, factors that are especially relevant to the youth segment, which is typically more budget-conscious and responsive to overland and flexible travel opportunities [4]. Tajikistan received 1.6 million foreign tourists, 61% of whom arrived from Uzbekistan and 26.9% from Russia. Turkmenistan is excluded owing to the absence of publicly available statistics.

According to Finprom.kz, consolidated figures from national statistical authorities reflect continued growth in the sector. In 2024, Kazakhstan attracted KZT 947.5 billion of public and private investment in tourism facilities [5]. In Uzbekistan, turnover in the HoReCa sector (hotels, restaurants, and cafés) grew by 10.6% in 2024, following growth of 13.5% in 2023 and 22.3% in 2022. Kyrgyzstan's inbound tourism receipts exceeded USD 1 billion (up 2.2%), while gross value added in the tourism sector rose by 21.7% and capital investment by 10.1%. Growth was broad-based across subsectors: transport services (+19.9%), retail trade (+19.4%), and food service turnover (+31.3%). Uzbekistan alone generated more than USD 3.5 billion in tourism revenue in 2024, exceeding earlier projections [6]. Regional forecasts project that Central Asia's tourism economy will expand from USD 1.81 billion in 2025 to USD 2.36 billion by 2029, reflecting an average annual growth rate of 7.2% [7].

Governments have responded with comprehensive strategies. Kazakhstan's Concept for the Development of the Tourism Industry for 2023–2029 prioritizes infrastructure modernization, digitalization, and international branding [8]. Uzbekistan's Youth and Tourism: Strategic Directions 2022–2025 emphasizes youth-focused programming, visa facilitation, and entrepreneurship [9]. At the regional level, UNESCO's Framework for Youth Engagement in Central Asia and the CIS Regional Mobility and Youth Development Strategy both promote cross-border mobility for young people. The CAREC Tourism Strategy 2030 offers a holistic framework for sustainable and inclusive tourism that stresses institutional coordination, product diversification, and digital solutions [7]. Donor-led research, such as JICA's Central Asia Regional Tourism Survey, likewise underscores the region's untapped assets and the need for data-driven planning. Comparative academic studies indicate that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan remain regional leaders in infrastructure quality and destination maturity [10]. These data highlight both the rapid expansion of tourism across Central Asia and the importance of cross-border visitor flows, factors that are especially relevant when designing a youth tourism development framework for the region. They also reveal the divergent market structures of the four countries, reinforcing the need for tailored yet cooperative policy measures.

One of the key drivers of this growth is the liberalization of entry visa policies in all countries of the region except Turkmenistan. Uzbekistan introduced electronic visas and expanded its visa-free list to 90 countries, while Kazakhstan extended visa exemptions to 73 countries. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have taken similar steps. Second, the region has seen active modernization of tourism infrastructure, including upgrades to airports, border checkpoints, and hospitality facilities, such as the Silk Road Samarkand tourism cluster and the renovation of 40 border crossings in Kazakhstan. Third, Central Asian countries have intensified international promotion through targeted marketing campaigns (e.g., the Year of Kazakhstan Tourism in China), participation in global tourism

exhibitions such as ITB Berlin and WTM London, and international media coverage, including features in National Geographic. A fourth important factor has been political stabilization and improved safety measures, including the introduction of tourist police, dedicated hotlines, and the resolution of border disputes. Finally, public investment and private-sector support, notably the entry of global hotel brands such as Hilton, Marriott, and Hyatt, have contributed to an overall improvement in service quality. Thus, a comprehensive approach to tourism development combining visa liberalization, infrastructure enhancement, strategic marketing, and institutional support laid the foundation for the region's tourism boom in 2024.

Youth tourism in Central Asia has significant potential for sustainable development, particularly in the context of the region's rich natural and cultural heritage, including sites along the Silk Road. The development of this tourism segment is seen not only as a tool for economic diversification but also as a means of promoting cultural exchange, environmental sustainability, and regional cooperation.

Growing interest in youth tourism presents new opportunities for inclusive development. However, the concentration of tourists in popular destinations intensifies pressure on natural ecosystems and recreational resources. One of the key limiting factors is the recreational capacity of a territory: exceeding this capacity leads to the degradation of natural landscapes, a decline in the quality of the tourist experience, and increased environmental risks.

Traditional methods for assessing the load on tourist areas are often static and do not allow seasonal fluctuations and the behavioral characteristics of the youth segment to be taken into account promptly. Under these conditions, a comprehensive approach to assessing and managing tourism is needed, one that integrates physical, infrastructural, environmental, social, and behavioral components.

In Central Asia, the sustainable development of youth tourism is of strategic importance owing to growing domestic and international tourist flows, as well as government support for digitalization and the green economy. At the same time, the region faces a number of challenges: limited access to tourism products, insufficient transport infrastructure, a lack of youth-oriented facilities, and weak intergovernmental cooperation in the tourism sector.

The aim of this study is to develop a conceptual approach to understanding recreational capacity in the context of youth tourism development in Central Asia by assessing its recreational potential, with a focus on the effective management of tourist flows, the preservation of natural resources, and the mitigation of environmental risks. To achieve this aim, the study analyzes international experience, current trends, and barriers and proposes an approach adapted to the conditions of the region and to the needs and preferences of the youth audience. The study does not aim to provide an operational measurement of recreational capacity; instead, it focuses on conceptualization and strategic interpretation based on secondary data and expert analysis.

Literature review

Youth tourism has attracted increasing scholarly attention over the past decades as a distinct and rapidly expanding segment of the global tourism market [11]. Young travelers typically stay longer, spend more time with local communities, and seek authentic, immersive experiences that align with the rise of the "experience economy" [12]. Research shows that this segment generates not only direct visitor spending but also substantial indirect and induced economic effects, especially in emerging destinations that are still developing youth-friendly infrastructure [13]. In addition, many young travelers later return as repeat visitors or investors, creating long-term value for host economies [14].

Governments in regions such as Europe, Southeast Asia, and Latin America have successfully

integrated cultural, educational, and volunteer programs into national strategies to foster youth tourism [15]. Best-practice cases from Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea demonstrate the effectiveness of working holiday visa schemes, partnerships with educational institutions, and investment in low-cost accommodation and digital services [16].

Strategic planning is vital to prevent youth tourism from evolving in a fragmented or unsustainable manner. Richards and Wilson [17] link youth tourism to identity formation, globalization, and urban cultural development, emphasizing the role of the creative industries in designing youth-oriented products. Other researchers highlight the intersections between youth mobility, informal learning, and policy, calling for inclusive, bottom-up planning approaches [18].

Although Central Asia possesses significant potential, youth tourism in the region remains understudied. Existing work has largely focused on cultural heritage and adventure markets without distinguishing age-specific segments. Recent studies, however, have begun to address youth-related opportunities and constraints, such as restrictive visa regimes, infrastructure gaps, and limited cross-border mobility [19]. National strategies in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan now refer to youth and educational tourism, yet concrete implementation measures remain limited [20]. Emerging initiatives, such as youth camps, student tourism programs, and social media engagement, signal shifting government priorities but require more coordinated, data-driven planning.

Lebedeva, Radygina, and Oshkordina added an important regional dimension by documenting the redirection of Russian outbound travel from Europe to Central Asia after 2022 and the simultaneous rise in Central Asian arrivals in Russia [21]. Between 2016 and 2022, the number of Central Asian guests staying in Russian collective accommodation facilities more than doubled; in 2022, over 64% of CIS visitors accommodated in such facilities came from Central Asia. The authors also note the growing presence of young and first-time travelers who rely on budget lodging and short-stay visits, patterns consistent with youth tourism behavior.

Existing Central Asian studies are largely descriptive and rarely apply comparative or theory-driven frameworks. Region-specific strategic approaches are lacking, and Western-derived frameworks often neglect post-Soviet institutional constraints. Empirically, mixed-methods designs that triangulate survey data, stakeholder interviews, and economic modeling are scarce. For instance, input–output analysis, which is effective for estimating the indirect and induced impacts of tourism, has yet to be widely applied in the regional youth tourism context [22].

Youth tourism can act as a catalyst for economic diversification, social inclusion, and innovation [23]. Nevertheless, Central Asia lacks an integrated, evidence-based strategy tailored to its unique demographic, cultural, and governance landscape. To address this gap, the present study proposes a conceptual approach to planning and expanding youth tourism in Central Asia that integrates global best practices with region-specific comparative advantages and challenges.

The literature review demonstrates that integrating the concepts of sustainable youth tourism and recreational capacity assessment offers significant theoretical and practical potential. To overcome existing limitations, interdisciplinary approaches are needed that integrate big data analysis, modeling, and environmental management within strategic destination development frameworks.

Recreational carrying capacity is traditionally defined as the maximum level of tourist load that an area can withstand without significant damage to the natural environment, the quality of recreation, and the well-being of local residents [24]. Classic assessment methods include normative-indicative approaches, expert surveys, visual assessment, and empirical observation [25]. The social component of recreational capacity, which relates to local residents' perception of tourist load and to the quality of the tourist experience, is also highly sensitive to the growth of youth tourist flows. The use of user-

generated content and sentiment analysis has revealed a correlation between the intensity of tourist activity and rising social tension. These results are consistent with the findings of Budeanu [26] and Higgins-Desbiolles et al. [27] on the need to consider social constraints when planning sustainable tourism.

An assessment of recreational capacity based on an integrated indicator revealed that acceptable levels of tourist load are most often exceeded during periods of peak demand driven by vacations, mass events, and active digital promotion of destinations. Analytical insights facilitated the timely identification of potentially critical periods and the development of scenarios for regulating tourist flows. These findings are consistent with the work of Manning [28] and Monz et al. [29], which emphasizes the importance of a dynamic approach to assessing recreational capacity, as well as with the research of Gretzel et al. [30], which demonstrates the effectiveness of analytical insights in tourism. According to Butler [31], exceeding recreational capacity leads not only to environmental degradation but also to a decline in the quality of the tourist experience, which makes it necessary to implement strategic approaches to managing tourist flows.

The literature also underscores the lack of comprehensive tourism strategies tailored to regional characteristics and the absence of integrated cross-border planning between the Central Asian states and Russia. While infrastructure improvements and digitalization are under way, coordinated tourism development that targets younger demographics and fosters intercultural exchange is still needed.

Methodology

The study used a mixed-methods approach [32], integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze youth tourism development and the motivations of young travelers in Central Asia. This design provided a holistic perspective by combining statistical data, expert assessments, and tourism policy analysis.

In the first phase, a systematic review of academic literature, policy documents, and institutional reports was conducted using the Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar databases. Case studies from countries with well-developed approaches to youth tourism, including Australia, South Korea, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, were also analyzed. The analysis covered institutional frameworks, visa policies, infrastructure development, youth engagement mechanisms, and marketing tools [17].

The empirical basis of the study comprised official tourism and socio-economic development statistics, environmental assessment data, and aggregated, anonymized digital data from online tourism platforms, mobile applications, and social media. These sources made it possible to account for the dynamics and seasonality of tourist flows, as well as for the behavioral characteristics of the youth segment.

Descriptive and comparative statistical methods, economic and statistical methods, and forecasting tools were used to analyze the data. Recreational potential was assessed using an integrated indicator comprising physical, infrastructural, environmental, and social parameters. The findings were summarized in a conceptual framework.

An exploratory online survey was conducted among young tourists aged 18–35 to identify general tendencies in youth travel motivations; the questionnaire included questions on travel motivations, preferred destinations, types of tourism, and the use of digital platforms. Data from social media and online booking services, as well as semi-structured interviews with tourism industry experts, were used to deepen the analysis.

The final stage of the study involved an analysis of tourism and youth policies in the five Central Asian countries, aimed at assessing institutional coherence, interdepartmental coordination, and the

degree of youth orientation [33]. Based on a synthesis of the empirical data and the results of the analysis, a conceptual approach to assessing the recreational potential of youth tourism was proposed, incorporating five key dimensions: management, marketing, education, infrastructure, and digital interaction.

The research methodology draws on theories of sustainable tourism and recreational potential, general tourism concepts, and the principles of innovation and the digital economy, which ensures the scientific validity and practical applicability of the proposed approach. The methodology of this study is conceptual and analytical in nature and does not aim to provide an operational measurement of recreational capacity. Instead, it focuses on synthesizing existing literature, policy documents, and secondary data to identify key dimensions relevant to youth tourism development.

Results and discussion

To attract young tourists effectively and increase tourist flows, it is important to consider the needs of this group and to develop a strategy based on their interests and expectations. In this context, it is necessary to take into account the behavioral characteristics of young tourists, as well as their preferences and requirements regarding travel convenience and safety. As part of the analysis of the characteristics of youth tourism, an illustrative conceptualization based on the survey results was compiled (Figure 1), modeled on Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

The results of this study are based on an online survey conducted in 2025 among young people aged 18–35 from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, China, Malaysia, Ukraine, Turkey, and Russia. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms and social media platforms, and a total of 250 valid responses were collected.

The findings demonstrate that youth travel motivation can be meaningfully understood within the framework of the hierarchy of needs, supporting all the proposed hypotheses (H1–H5). At the most fundamental level (H1), physiological needs were shown to play a decisive role in shaping tourist behavior: 81% of respondents identified affordable accommodation and convenient transportation as key prerequisites for travel, while 75% emphasized the importance of basic comfort and the availability of food. This suggests that, despite the widespread perception of young people as flexible and spontaneous travelers, basic travel conditions remain critically important.

Safety needs (H2) also proved to be a major motivational factor. According to the survey, 73% of respondents highlighted the importance of medical security, regulatory clarity, infrastructure reliability, and psychological confidence while traveling. This finding reflects the broader influence of the post-pandemic context, in which young travelers tend to be more attentive to risk management and safety assurances.

Social needs (H3) were likewise strongly pronounced: 60% of respondents expressed interest in group trips, volunteering initiatives, and participation in cultural activities that encourage communication and social engagement. These results indicate that youth tourism increasingly serves as a space for building social connections, strengthening communication skills, and creating shared experiences rather than being limited to leisure alone.

Hypothesis H4, related to esteem and recognition, was also supported. Approximately 48% of the participants stated that involvement in intercultural exchange programs, educational initiatives, and socially valuable activities influences their travel choices. Youth tourism therefore contributes to strengthening social identity, developing competencies, and enhancing self-confidence.

Finally, self-actualization needs (H5) were confirmed by 51% of respondents, who associated travel with opportunities for personal growth, emotional enrichment, new impressions, and unique experiences. This indicates that young people perceive tourism not only as recreation but also as a meaningful developmental practice.

Overall, the findings show that youth tourism is a multidimensional phenomenon that simultaneously addresses basic needs, safety, social interaction, esteem, and self-actualization. Accordingly, policies and programs targeting young travelers should take into account not only financial accessibility but also psychological comfort, opportunities for social engagement, personal development, and experience-oriented value creation.

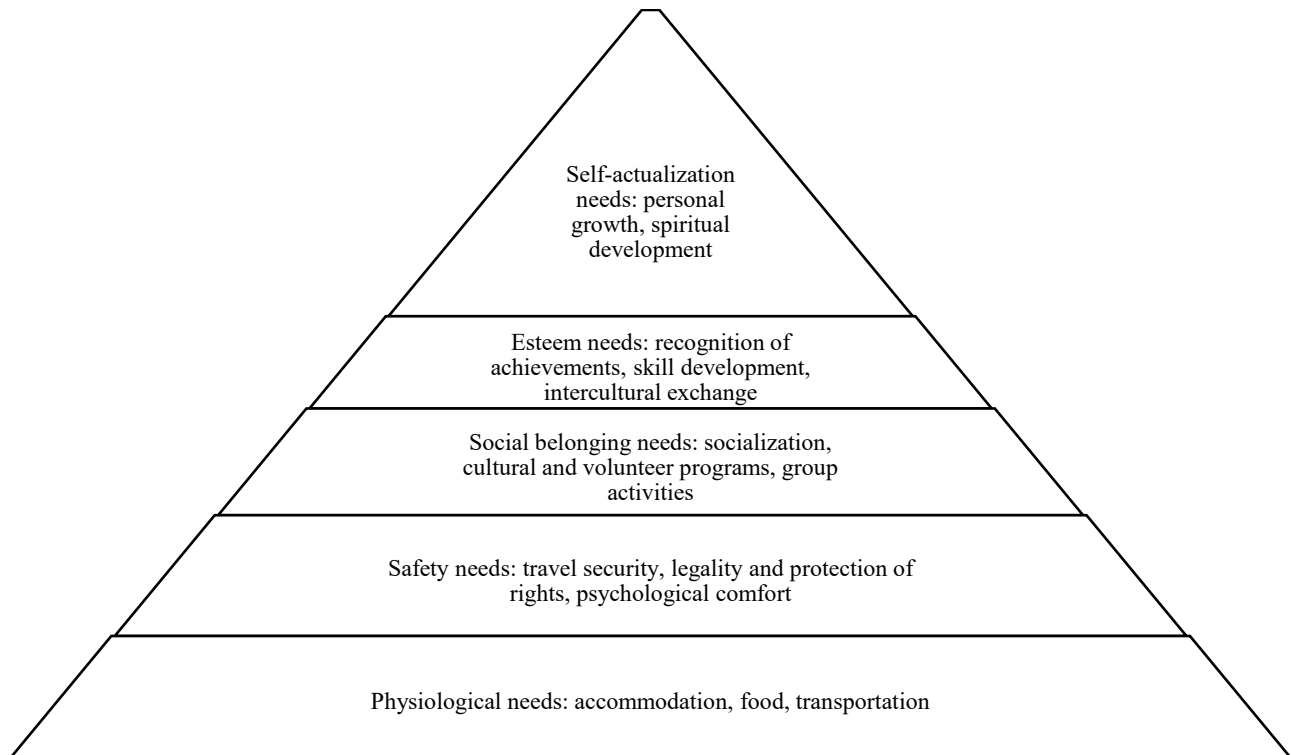


Figure 1 – Hierarchy of needs of young people during travel

Note – Compiled by the authors based on the survey results

Taken together, the analysis indicates that youth tourism serves not only recreational and entertainment functions but also plays a significant role in the educational, cultural, and personal development of young people. Integrating survey-based motivational priorities into the conceptual approach allows youth-focused tourism programs to align better with demand patterns and facilitates more balanced management of recreational opportunities by predicting behavior patterns and the spatial concentration of tourist flows.

For the successful development of youth tourism in Central Asia, it is important to adapt these motivational factors to the specifics of the region. An essential element of strategic tourism planning is understanding the factors that influence tourists' choice of a particular destination and creating an effective tourism offer on this basis. Youth tourism is an important driver of tourism industry development in Central Asia. To attract young tourists, it is necessary to create modern and affordable infrastructure, develop digital services, and adapt tourism products to the needs of the youth audience. A conceptual approach based on the preferences and interests of young tourists will allow Central Asia to become a competitive and attractive tourist destination.

To contextualize the conceptual approach, a comparative overview was conducted (Table 1) to identify international best practices and highlight structural gaps in youth tourism development across Central Asia. The overview reveals several critical success factors that underpin effective youth tourism strategies globally. These include the integration of youth-oriented policies into national tourism frameworks, flexible visa arrangements, inclusive engagement mechanisms, investment in affordable infrastructure, and the application of digital tools tailored to young people's needs.

Table 1 – Comparative overview of international best practices and gaps in youth tourism in Central Asia

Dimension	International best practices	Current gaps in Central Asia
Institutional support	National youth tourism strategies integrated into broader tourism policies (e.g., Australia’s Working Holiday Maker program, the Korea Tourism Organization’s youth programs)	Fragmented or absent national strategies specifically targeting youth; weak inter-agency coordination
Visa and mobility schemes	Flexible visa options for young travelers (e.g., working holiday visas, youth mobility agreements)	Complex and restrictive visa regimes, especially for intra-regional travel; lack of multilateral youth mobility agreements
Affordable infrastructure	Extensive networks of hostels, youth camps, and low-cost transport (e.g., Interrail in Europe)	Shortage of budget accommodation and limited public transport connectivity between and within countries
Youth engagement and participation	Inclusion of youth voices in tourism planning through forums, advisory councils, and co-creation projects	Minimal involvement of young people in policy development; lack of platforms for youth-led tourism initiatives
Digital and marketing tools	Interactive digital platforms, gamified travel apps, and targeted social media campaigns (e.g., VisitBritain’s youth campaigns)	Outdated tourism websites; limited use of digital media and platforms tailored to youth preferences
Education and volunteer programs	Integration with educational travel, internships, and volunteer tourism (e.g., Erasmus+, WWOOF, AIESEC)	Underdeveloped educational tourism offerings; limited partnerships with universities and NGOs for volunteer travel
Sustainability and social impact	Emphasis on responsible travel, community engagement, and intercultural learning (e.g., New Zealand’s sustainable tourism certification for youth operators)	Weak focus on sustainability; limited awareness and promotion of ethical travel among young people and tour operators
Assessment and data collection	Disaggregated data on young travelers; regular surveys and impact assessments	Lack of age-specific tourism statistics; absence of regular assessment and impact evaluation mechanisms

Note – Compiled by the authors based on the literature review

The Central Asian region exhibits considerable structural and policy-related gaps. While national tourism strategies in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan increasingly acknowledge the potential of youth tourism, concrete implementation mechanisms remain underdeveloped. Institutional fragmentation, the absence of age-disaggregated data, limited youth involvement in planning processes, and visa-related barriers hinder the region’s ability to attract and retain young travelers. Moreover, there is a lack of affordable, youth-friendly infrastructure, especially in rural and cross-border areas.

Despite these challenges, several trends suggest a favorable environment for youth tourism development in Central Asia:

- *demographic advantage*: with a high proportion of the population under the age of 30, the region has a large potential base of domestic young tourists and future tourism entrepreneurs;
- *growing infrastructure investment*: major cities such as Almaty, Tashkent, and Bishkek are

investing in tourism infrastructure, including new transport hubs, budget accommodation, and cultural centers;

– *digital and social media use*: young people in Central Asia are increasingly active on platforms such as Instagram, Telegram, and TikTok, which creates opportunities for cost-effective, high-impact destination marketing;

– *youth policy alignment*: regional development strategies are placing greater emphasis on youth engagement, job creation, and international mobility (e.g., Kazakhstan’s Youth Development Index and Uzbekistan’s youth volunteer initiatives).

These trends suggest that a cohesive regional youth tourism strategy is both timely and feasible, especially if it leverages cross-border cooperation and public–private partnerships.

Accordingly, the conceptual approach to youth tourism in Central Asia should integrate four core pillars (Figure 2):

– *policy and institutional coordination*: establishing a regional youth tourism task force or coordination mechanism among the Central Asian tourism ministries to oversee joint initiatives, data sharing, and the harmonization of youth-friendly policies;

– *infrastructure and accessibility*: investing in multi-use, low-cost infrastructure such as hostels, intercity transport passes, and youth camps, particularly near cultural and ecological tourism zones; public–private partnerships and donor funding can play a catalytic role in expanding such infrastructure;

– *digital innovation and marketing*: developing multilingual digital platforms tailored to young travelers, including interactive itineraries, peer-generated content, virtual tours, and gamified exploration tools; campaigns should be co-created with local youth influencers to ensure authenticity and relevance;

– *youth engagement and capacity building*: creating platforms for youth participation in tourism design and governance (e.g., regional youth tourism councils) and offering training in hospitality, intercultural communication, and sustainable tourism practices through schools, NGOs, and digital formats.

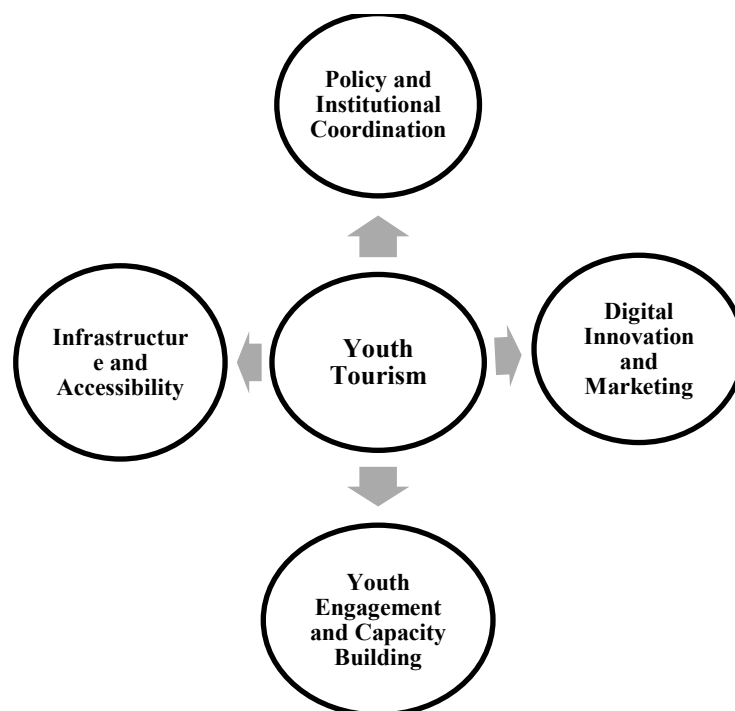


Figure 2 – Conceptual framework of youth tourism development and recreational capacity

Note – Compiled by the authors

Each of these pillars must be embedded in a sustainability framework that ensures economic, cultural, and environmental integrity. Furthermore, the development of youth-specific indicators and the integration of tourism satellite account methods can help measure the sector's direct and indirect contributions to national economies. The proposed approach is aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDGs 8, 10, and 12 [34], the UNWTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, and the UNESCO Framework for Youth Engagement. It also complements regional initiatives such as the Silk Road Tourism Programme and the CIS Youth Mobility Framework.

The study proposes a conceptual approach to assessing the recreational potential of youth tourism in Central Asia that integrates physical, infrastructural, environmental, social, and behavioral components (Figure 3). The approach enables a comprehensive assessment of tourist areas, the identification of congestion zones, and the formulation of recommendations for managing youth tourist flows.

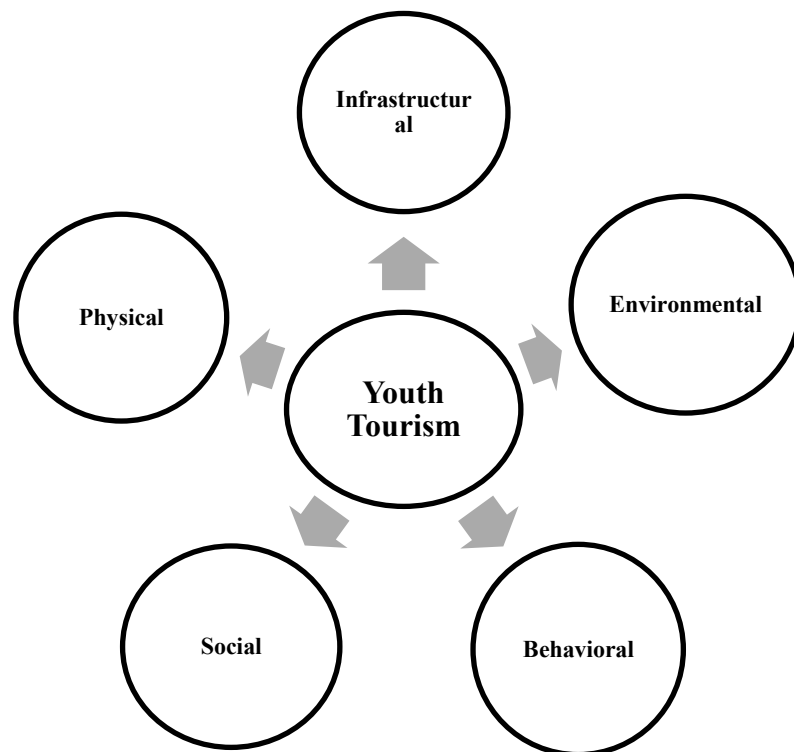


Figure 3 – Key components of the youth tourism recreational capacity framework

Note – Compiled by the authors

The physical component reflects the spatial characteristics of areas, including route lengths, the size of recreational areas, and the accessibility of facilities. It sets the basic planning parameters for the use of areas without harming the natural environment. The infrastructure component considers the availability and quality of tourism infrastructure, transport accessibility, accommodation, and service facilities. The analysis showed that even where natural potential is high, a lack of infrastructure limits the development of youth tourism. The environmental component assesses the resilience of ecosystems to tourism pressure, identifies sensitive areas, and predicts potential environmental risks. The social component focuses on local communities' perception of tourism, the level of public participation, and the social acceptability of tourism activities. The findings suggest that ignoring the social aspect can reduce the sustainability of tourist areas. The behavioral component includes an analysis of seasonality, flow intensity, and the preferences of young tourists. Taking these data into account allows for tailored flow management and the distribution of tourist loads across the

territory.

One of the key findings of the study is the systematization of the factors that determine the recreational capacity of tourist areas. Unlike traditional approaches based primarily on physical limitations, the proposed approach treats recreational capacity as a comprehensive category that includes the environmental sustainability of areas, the social receptivity of local communities, and the behavioral characteristics of young tourists. This allows for a more accurate assessment of acceptable levels of tourist load and helps prevent the degradation of natural and recreational resources.

The comparative regional overview revealed that the Central Asian countries possess significant, although unevenly realized, potential for youth tourism development. Key strengths include a rich natural and cultural heritage, young people's growing interest in ecotourism, ethnocultural tourism, and adventure tourism, and the expansion of digital tourism services. Drawbacks include poor transport links between the countries, fragmented tourism policies, a shortage of youth-oriented infrastructure, and limited cooperation between the states of the region.

Given the concentration of flows in the region's most popular destinations, the findings suggest that, without proper management, there is an increased risk of exceeding recreational carrying capacity, with negative consequences for both the natural and recreational environment and the overall quality of the tourist experience. These results are in line with the international literature on sustainable tourism and destination management.

Furthermore, the framework can be used to advance youth and sustainable tourism strategies at various levels of governance. At the national level, it can inform strategic planning; at the regional level, it can support the coordination of cross-border tourism; and at the local level (e.g., municipalities), it can help manage visitor flows to national parks and other recreational areas. The framework thus supports a shift from reactive to proactive, preventive, and adaptive management of tourism pressure.

From a scientific perspective, this paper contributes to theoretical knowledge on youth tourism by proposing that recreational capacity be assessed dynamically and that the behavioral and social characteristics of the youth segment be incorporated into such assessments. This is especially relevant for Central Asia, where youth tourism could contribute considerably to a more sustainable and inclusive model of regional development.

Conclusion

Youth tourism is now one of the fastest-growing segments of the global tourism industry, providing economic benefits as well as opportunities for cultural exchange, skills development, and regional integration. While many countries have leveraged this potential through cohesive policies and innovative programs, Central Asia is still in the early stages of recognizing and utilizing the opportunities offered by youth travel.

This study identifies key challenges that hinder the region's ability to attract and serve young travelers, including weak policy coordination, underdeveloped infrastructure, limited digital engagement, and insufficient youth inclusion. However, international best practices show that these barriers can be overcome, and the existing gaps offer strategic opportunities to design a youth tourism framework suited to the specific context of Central Asia.

Each component of the proposed framework addresses current weaknesses and aligns with regional and global priorities, including youth empowerment, cross-border connectivity, and

sustainable tourism. To implement this framework, policymakers and tourism stakeholders should integrate youth-centered objectives into national tourism strategies, promote regional cooperation mechanisms, and invest in youth-friendly infrastructure and digital platforms. It is essential to recognize young people not only as consumers but also as active contributors to, and future leaders of, tourism development.

The study highlights the significant potential of youth tourism in Central Asia to support sustainable socio-economic development. Greater youth mobility, interest in cultural heritage and natural areas, and increased digital engagement are creating new opportunities for tourism growth but are also placing additional pressure on recreational resources and ecosystems.

This article proposes a conceptual approach to assessing the recreational potential of youth tourism in Central Asia that integrates physical, infrastructural, environmental, social, and behavioral components. This approach enables a shift from fragmented assessments to the integrated and adaptive management of tourist areas, taking into account the specific characteristics of the youth segment. The approach is highly adaptable and can be applied to various national parks and tourist sites with due regard for local conditions. The results highlight that sustainable youth tourism development is possible only through a combination of quantitative analysis of territorial capacity, analysis of tourist behavior patterns, and modern digital assessment tools.

The findings suggest that institutional fragmentation, uneven infrastructure development, limited intergovernmental coordination, and insufficiently youth-focused tourism policies remain key constraints on the sustainable development of youth tourism in the region. At the same time, significant prospects have been identified in the development of accessible tourism products, digital platforms, cross-border routes, and forms of tourism focused on sustainability and cultural interaction.

The practical significance of the study lies in the potential application of the proposed conceptual approach by government agencies, regional tourism administrations, and tourism development organizations to monitor recreational potential, regulate tourist flows, and minimize environmental risks. The approach can also serve as a basis for developing coordinated regional strategies for youth tourism development in the Central Asian countries.

The limitations of the study relate to the availability and comparability of statistical and digital data, as well as to the dynamic nature of youth tourist behavior. Future research should expand the empirical base through in-depth field studies and cross-border comparative analyses and should test the proposed framework in specific tourist areas. A promising direction for further research is the development of tools for the operational assessment of recreational loads and the integration of the conceptual approach into long-term sustainable tourism planning in the region.

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ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДАҒЫ ЖАСТАР ТУРИЗМІН ДАМУ: РЕКРЕАЦИЯЛЫҚ СЫЙЫМДЫЛЫҚҚА ТҰЖЫРЫМДАМАЛЫҚ ТӘСІЛ

Аңдатпа. Орталық Азиядағы жастар туризмі, әсіресе Ұлы Жібек жолының мәдени мұрасы тұрғысынан, тұрақты даму үшін зор әлеуетке ие. Мақалада аймақтағы жастар туризмінің рекреациялық әлеуетін бағалаудың тұжырымдамалық тәсілін әзірлеу мәселесі қарастырылады. Туристік ағындардың өсуіне байланысты рекреациялық сыйымдылықты бағалау мен туризмнің табиғи және әлеуметтік ортаға әсерін болжаудың маңызы арта түседі. Зерттеудің мақсаты – Орталық Азиядағы жастар туризмін дамыту жағдайында рекреациялық сыйымдылықты түсінудің тұжырымдамалық тәсілін ұсыну. Ұсынылған құрылым физикалық, инфрақұрылымдық, экологиялық, әлеуметтік және мінез-құлықтық компоненттерді біріктіреді, бұл жас туристердің ерекшеліктерін ескере отырып, аумақтарды кешенді талдауға мүмкіндік береді. Зерттеу рекреациялық сыйымдылықты жедел өлшеуді мақсат етпейді, ол қайталама деректер мен сараптамалық талдауға негізделген концептуалдауға және стратегиялық интерпретацияға бағытталған. Зерттеу нәтижелерін жастар туризмін тұрақты дамытудың өңірлік стратегияларын әзірлеуде және туристік аумақтарды басқаруда пайдалануға болады. Біріктірілген әдістемені қолдану

жастар туризмінің қазіргі жағдайы мен даму перспективаларын аймақтағы туризмнің экономикалық тұрғыдан перспективалы бағыттарының бірі ретінде жан-жақты бағалауға мүмкіндік берді.

Кілт сөздер: жастар туризмі, тұжырымдамалық тәсіл, Орталық Азия, Ұлы Жібек жолы, рекреациялық сыйымдылық.

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РАЗВИТИЕ МОЛОДЕЖНОГО ТУРИЗМА В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ: КОНЦЕПТУАЛЬНЫЙ ПОДХОД К РЕКРЕАЦИОННОЙ ЕМКОСТИ

Аннотация. Молодежный туризм в Центральной Азии обладает значительным потенциалом для устойчивого развития, особенно в контексте культурного наследия Великого Шелкового пути. В статье рассматривается разработка концептуального подхода к оценке рекреационного потенциала молодежного туризма в регионе. По мере роста туристских потоков возрастает значимость оценки рекреационной емкости и прогнозирования воздействия туризма на природную и социальную среду. Цель исследования – предложить концептуальный подход к пониманию рекреационной емкости в контексте развития молодежного туризма в Центральной Азии. Предлагаемая модель объединяет физический, инфраструктурный, экологический, социальный и поведенческий компоненты, что позволяет проводить комплексный анализ территорий с учетом особенностей молодых туристов. Исследование не ставит целью оперативное измерение рекреационной емкости: основное внимание уделяется концептуализации и стратегической интерпретации на основе вторичных данных и экспертного анализа. Результаты исследования могут быть использованы при разработке региональных стратегий устойчивого развития молодежного туризма и управлении туристскими территориями. Применение комбинированной методологии позволило провести комплексную оценку современного состояния и перспектив молодежного туризма как одного из экономически перспективных направлений развития туризма в регионе.

Ключевые слова: молодежный туризм, концептуальный подход, Центральная Азия, Великий Шелковый путь, рекреационная емкость.