

Building for whom? Urban tourism infrastructure quality, design image and community well-being in a Silk Road heritage city

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Abstract

Purpose – The study investigates how tourism-driven urban transformation impacts residents in the heritage city of Turkistan, Kazakhstan, and identifies the factors influencing their support for sustainable tourism development.

Design/methodology/approach – The research employs a sequential mixed-methods design, beginning with qualitative storytelling interviews followed by a quantitative survey of 425 residents. Data analysis used explanatory factor analysis to identify key dimensions for examining relationships between constructs.

Findings – Results reveal a complex picture of residents' experience of tourism-induced urban transformations. Residents positively evaluate macro-level improvements in urban tourism infrastructure and socio-cultural benefits, but these have not translated into improved material well-being. A significant discrepancy between high satisfaction with non-material quality of life (spiritual life and community) and dissatisfaction with material conditions (cost of living and income) creates an uneven development of urban tourism. Still, residents express strong support for the further development of urban tourism.

Originality/value – The current study provides an in-depth empirical analysis of residents' lived experiences of tourism-led heritage regeneration in a rapidly developing Central Asian city. It contributes a novel analytical framework that identifies and explains the contradiction between non-material satisfaction, material dissatisfaction and continued support for development. The work provides an essential perspective on equitable growth within the New Silk Road initiative and contributes directly to key debates on social sustainability in architecture and tourism planning.

Keywords Sustainable urban development, Cultural infrastructure, Tourism impact, City image, Quality of life, Community support, Heritage-led regeneration

Paper type Research article

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1. Introduction

In an era of intensified global competition, cities are increasingly leveraging iconic architecture and mega-infrastructure to craft a distinctive urban image and attract tourism investment (Abbas *et al.*, 2025; Mamirkulova *et al.*, 2020, 2025). Scholarly literature on tourism infrastructure has grown (Alcalá-Ordóñez and Segarra, 2023; Buhalis *et al.*, 2023), yet a critical question often remains unasked: For whom are these developments being built?

The central challenge of sustainable urban development lies not only in constructing grand tourism infrastructure but also in ensuring that the benefits of such growth are equitably shared (Moukoui *et al.*, 2025). In many cases, the pursuit of a modern, tourism-oriented identity results in spatial and socio-economic divides, where the infrastructural improvements in tourist zones starkly contrast with the conditions in surrounding residential neighborhoods (Wang *et al.*, 2022). This imbalance raises significant concerns regarding the social justice implications of urban redevelopment (Mamirkulova *et al.*, 2026), especially in cities with a rich cultural heritage, such as Turkistan, Kazakhstan.

Turkistan, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a key node on the revitalized Silk Road, presents a particularly compelling case study. Government-initiated tourism development programs promote rapid urban renovation to increase their attractiveness to tourists. For example, new museums, transport hubs, cultural complexes, and universities have emerged to position Turkistan as a global tourism hub (Çalışkan and Özer, 2021). However, as these modernization projects directly intersect with and change the daily lives of local residents, they create tension between the pursuit of economic growth and the protection of residents' well-being. This tension, in turn, can lead to public questioning of further pro-tourism development behavior (Mamirkulova and Ding, 2025). The construction of tourism infrastructure is primarily designed to cater to external visitors. The difficulties encountered by the local population, ranging from rising living costs to concerns about displacement, are often overshadowed in the discourse surrounding urban development.

Prior researchers have examined the broader implications of infrastructure development for urban growth based on objective analyses and survey-based studies (Çalışkan and Özer, 2021; Mamirkulova and Ding, 2025). Preliminary evidence, such as studies from Babao Town, indicates that distributive justice and the fair allocation of benefits are a primary concern for residents and a key factor in their perception of overall justice (Bai *et al.*, 2024). Yet, very few studies have employed mixed-methods approaches to systematically document how tourism-driven urban development impacts community well-being. Consequently, there is a critical lack of context-specific planning frameworks designed to prioritize equitable outcomes. This leads to a significant gap in understanding residents' lived experiences and the socio-spatial divides that emerge when infrastructure in curated tourist zones surpasses that in local neighborhoods.

Hence, to address the research gap, the study is guided by three specific objectives:

- (1) To document and analyze the spatial and socio-economic impacts of tourism-driven urban development on the lived experience of the local community.
- (2) To evaluate the relationship between the quality of built infrastructure, resident well-being, and the perceived value of cultural heritage within the urban fabric.
- (3) To propose a framework for urban planning and heritage-led development that prioritizes equitable benefit distribution and community well-being alongside cultural asset conservation.

To achieve these objectives, the study is conducted in Turkistan city and explores its tourism potential and experience related to the revival of the Silk Road. The following sections detail the current tourism and infrastructural context of Turkistan. In addition, it illustrates why it presents a critical case for investigating the complex interplay between mega-infrastructure and community well-being.

1.1 Case study area and descriptions

Turkistan is a city of profound historical and religious significance in Kazakhstan, and it has recently been designated the administrative center of the Turkistan Region. It is a revered Muslim shrine, “Yassawi Mausoleum,” a significant pilgrimage site. It is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Historically, the city sustained a prosperous economy supported by textile and industrial enterprises. However, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Nandy and Das, 2025), most small- and medium-scale enterprises ceased operations, triggering out-migration and forcing the remaining population to rely on government jobs, agriculture, and livestock. Despite national efforts to promote tourism, Turkistan lagged for decades due to outdated infrastructure, a poor tourism image, and a lack of expert planning.

The launch of the New Silk Road (NSR) mega-infrastructure initiative in 2013 opened new opportunities for tourism development (Abbas *et al.*, 2025; Mamirkulova *et al.*, 2020). This state-driven intervention aims to reverse the city’s decline, leveraging its architectural heritage and building new urban infrastructure to shape its future tourism growth. The region covers approximately 24,000 square kilometers and a population of about 165,000, comprising a diverse mix of Kazakh, Uzbek, Russian, and other ethnic groups (Worldometers, 2019).

1.2 Current urban tourism and infrastructural development

As a focal point of Kazakhstan’s ambitions to become a tourism and financial hub, according to the First President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, Turkistan has undergone transformative infrastructural development driven by the New Silk Road project. This includes the Western China-Western Europe (WC-WE) international highway and the Hazret Sultan airport. Urban greening initiatives have planted more than 30 million trees and created numerous new public squares, landscaped parks, and fountains.

The tourism infrastructure program plans to construct 257 facilities, including the “Kazakh Venice” Karavan-Saray complex and the Altyn Samruk Theater (see Figure 1). As shown in Figure 1(a) a water channel connects all architectural sites in the Karavan-Saray complex. As shown in Figure 1(a), a water channel connects all architectural sites (Official Information Source of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 11 April 2021). Figure 1 (b) illustrates that the ancient trade route traversed Turkistan, connecting China with the West and facilitating the exchange of goods (Turkistan Region Tourism Department, 2024).

In parallel, large-scale healthcare, education, and energy projects have been implemented to revitalize the city. A free economic zone with tax and customs exemptions has also been established to support economic growth (Kazportal.Kz, 2015).

Tourism attractions can be classified into cultural and natural features (Mamirkulova *et al.*, 2025, 2020), with four main cultural routes along the Silk Road:

- (1) The archaeological site of the ancient city of Otrar,
- (2) The Arystan Bab mausoleum,
- (3) The Khoja Ahmed Yassawi mausoleum,
- (4) The archaeological site of Sauran ancient city.

This state-driven development has made Turkistan a prime candidate for studying the initial benefits of infrastructure investment. However, rapid physical reconstruction raises questions about how it translates into sustainable tourism growth and social benefits (Mamirkulova *et al.*, 2026). The next section examines this contradiction, focusing on the growth of tourism and its related issues.

Infrastructure investments changed tourism demand between 2013 and 2018 (see Figure 2). Still, it has successfully boosted tourism with inbound and domestic tourists skyrocketing from 62,527 in 2019 to 558,881 in 2023 (see Figure 3) and (see Table 1) (Bureau of National

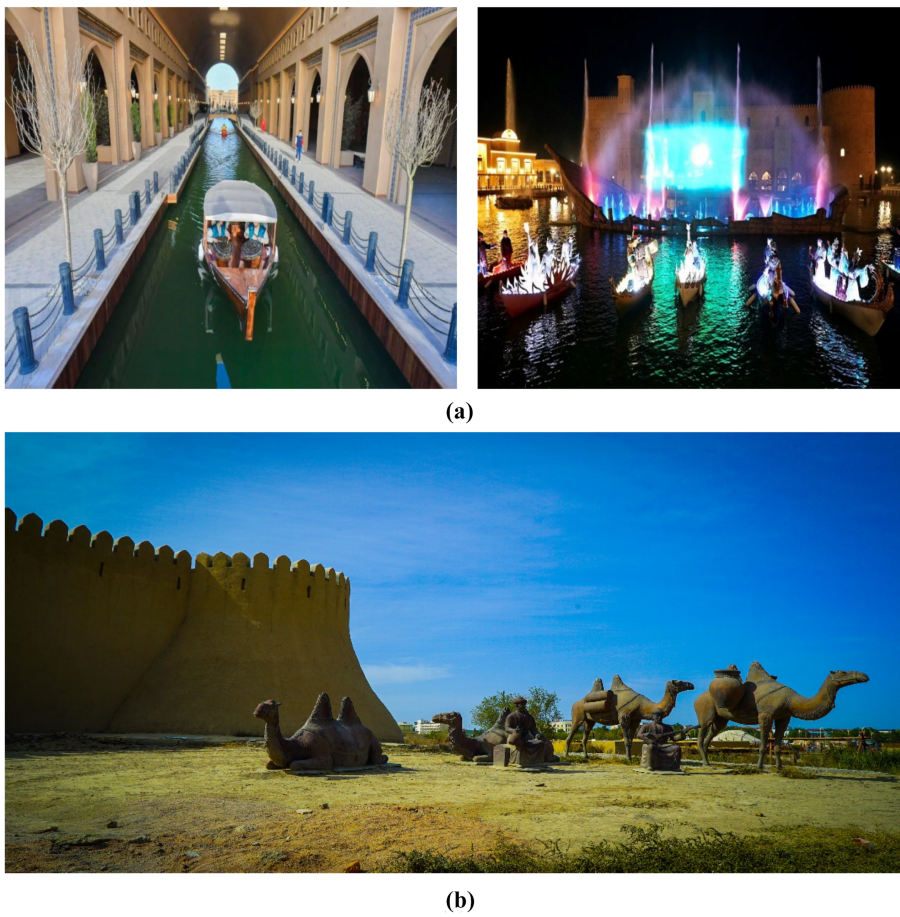


Figure 1. Tourism Attractions in Turkistan. (a) shows the Keruen-Saray tourism complex; (b) displays the Ancient Silk Road trade route. Source: [Turkistan Region Tourism Department \(2024\)](#)

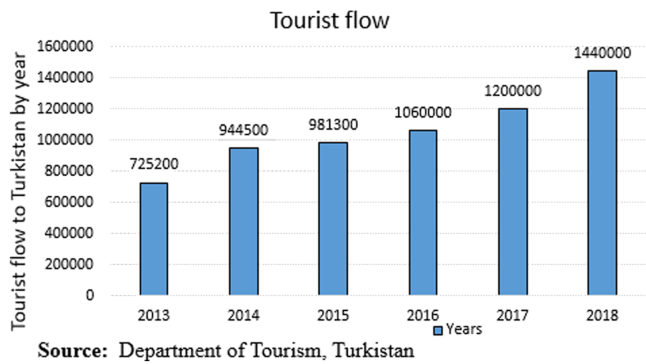


Figure 2. Tourist flow to Turkistan by year. Note: RK Republic of Kazakhstan. Source: [Turkistan Region Tourism Department \(2024\)](#)

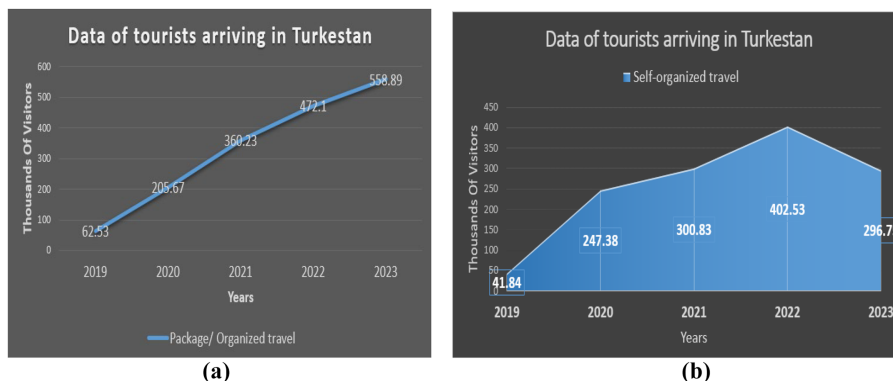


Figure 3. Number of Tourists arriving in Turkistan by thousand: (a) shows Tourists of Organized Travel; (b) specifies Self-organized tourists. Source: (Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan, 2023)

Table 1. Number of inbound and domestic tourists

Years	Region	Including				2) Number of “self-organized” inbound and domestic visitors (estimate)
		1) Number of inbound and domestic tourists	Staying in accommodation (a)	Resting in health resort organizations (b)	Tours to specially protected natural areas (c)	
2020	Turkistan	8,081,504	6,266,563	313,316	1,501,625	4,519,336
		62,527	11,554	50,973	—	41,836
2021	RK Turkistan	4,786,130	3,581,340	218,893	985,897	4,460,287
		205,679	103,747	77,864	24,068	247,388
2022	RK Turkistan	7,347,042	5,474,971	319,960	1,552,111	5,229,815
		360,221	206,398	117,459	36,364	300,825
2023	Turkistan	9,800,133	7,335,162	379,555	2,085,416	6,147,881
		472,094	253,454	142,476	76,164	402,528
	RK Turkistan	10,978,555	8,139,270	413,344	2,425,941	6,180,424
		558,881	272,937	163,288	122,656	296,741

Statistics of Kazakhstan, 2023). However, this rapid growth has created a tourist-to-resident ratio of 7 to 1, pushing Turkistan into a critical stage of development.

2. Research design

In this study, we employed a descriptive quantitative methodology and a sequential mixed-methods approach to investigate residents’ experiences with tourism infrastructure, its impacts on quality of life, design of city image, and support for tourism development. Qualitative data was collected between February and May 2024. A sequential mixed-methods design is a research design in which a researcher collects and analyzes one type of data first (qualitative or quantitative) and then proceeds to the other, with the second phase building on or explaining the results of the first. This study adopted a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design,

beginning with qualitative data collection through storytelling interviews and photo documentation to explore residents’ lived experiences and identify key themes. The analysis of qualitative data directly informed the second phase, which focused on the detailed concerns and constructs emerging from the interviews (such as spatial inequity, material cost or benefit, structural quality), which were used to contextualize and adapt existing measurement scales for the quantitative survey. It ensures its relevance to the local context of Turkistan. Subsequently, the quantitative phase tested the prevalence and relationships of these identified themes across a broader population. Further, analyzing the collected data provided evidence that served as a foundation for the first quantitative validation. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative evidence, we developed a strategic model for promoting sustainable tourism in Turkistan, a city with over 2,500 years of history and deep connections to Silk Road heritage (Haq *et al.*, 2024). The model emphasizes Turkistan’s unique identity while striking a balance between economic growth and cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and enhanced tourism services and visitor experiences. Importantly, this research places residents at the center of tourism development, an aspect often overlooked in studies that focus primarily on tourists (Ap, 1992; Gursoy and Rutherford, 2004).

3. Study 1: qualitative study

3.1 Ethical approval and informed consent to participate

This research was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Review Committee of Shandong Xiehe University, China (Approval No: LLSC-KY03-2025028). Before participation, informed consent was obtained from all subjects. Data were collected anonymously through an online survey platform to ensure participant confidentiality. All data is held securely and will not be disclosed to any third party.

3.2 Materials and methods

This study used a qualitative approach to understand how mega-infrastructure projects under the New Silk Road initiative shape sustainable tourism development in Turkistan. Data were collected through on-site observations, storytelling interviews, and photo documentation. During our investigation, we observed and recorded the benefits and costs of infrastructure development, focusing on its impact on tourism, residents’ quality of life, and the city’s image. We conducted storytelling interviews with a purposefully selected sample of 10 residents representing a variety of occupations (see Table 2). The sample size was deemed sufficient to achieve thematic saturation in an in-depth, exploratory study aimed at capturing a wide range of perspectives and lived experiences. We acknowledge that the observed tendency toward greater participation of female residents may introduce bias, potentially emphasizing perspectives from

Table 2. Participants profile

Participant	Age	Gender	Occupation
1	35–44	F	Doctor
2	35–44	M	Bus Driver
3	26–34	F	School Teacher
4	45–55	F	Tourism Official
5	35–44	M	Tour Agent
6	19–25	M	Shopkeeper
7	26–34	F	Restaurants Chef
8	35–44	M	Hotel Manager
9	45–55	F	University Professor
10	26–34	F	Housewife

the social and domestic spheres. To mitigate this and ensure broad coverage, the purposive sampling strategy actively recruited male key informants in positions such as bus drivers, travel agents, and hotel managers. The final sample reflects this balance, and the analysis consciously considers how gender and professional roles shape diverse experiences of urban development.

These interviews encouraged participants to share their personal stories and everyday experiences with tourism development. Conversations were held face-to-face in an open, conversational style, typically lasting 30–45 min, which allowed participants to speak freely and in detail. Alongside the interviews, photographs were taken to document changes in the physical environment and everyday life in Turkistan. These visual records helped illustrate issues that might otherwise be overlooked in written accounts. All the stories and photos were then reviewed and analyzed for recurring themes and contrasting views. Ultimately, the results of a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) highlighted both the opportunities and challenges associated with tourism development in the region.

3.3 Data analysis and results

3.3.1 The positive outcomes of Turkistan tourism development. Interviews reveal that residents and officials perceive significant benefits from the tourism development driven by the New Silk Road initiative. These positive outcomes are categorized into three main areas: major infrastructure development, direct local employment, and new opportunities for the younger generation.

3.3.1.1 Infrastructure development and architectural iconography. The development of Turkistan as a national tourism hub is anchored by large-scale strategic infrastructure projects that are fundamentally reshaping the city's regional connectivity and urban identity. A cornerstone of this strategy is Kazakhstan's participation in the Western Europe–Western China (WE-WC) Economic Corridor. This transnational route spans 2,787 km within Kazakhstan, crossing five regions and creating a logistical framework for a national tourism cluster.

Significant architectural investments within Turkistan itself complement this macro-scale land infrastructure. The city has witnessed the rapid construction of new cultural and transportation monuments, including the Hazrat Sultan International Airport, the first airport built from scratch in post-Soviet Kazakhstan; a new train station; museums; a congress hall; and theaters. Collectively, these structures form a curated portfolio of architectural iconography designed to project a modern, globally oriented image (see [Figure 4](#)).

The transformative intent of this built environment was emphasized by a tourism official, who stated:

... Architectural buildings such as museums, congress halls, theaters, as well as the new airport, train station, and highways, have entirely changed how tourists experience Turkistan. Now, it is easy to reach here, which makes our World Heritage site more attractive (P4, Tourism Official).

3.3.1.2 Direct local employment. One of the key advantages has been a conscious decision to hire local specialists. Tourism administration representatives report that local workers occupy a variety of positions, from officials and cleaners to administrators, cooks, and sales staff. For example, 9% of local workers in the sector, or approximately 18 people, are employed in such positions. Contracts are divided into long-term and temporary, and monthly salaries typically range from 150,000 to 300,000 KZT ([Turkistan Region Tourism Department, 2024](#)).

We are also prioritizing locals in new jobs, from hotel staff to guides, so that people in the region directly benefit from tourism (P4, Tourism Official).

Human capital development as the “soft infrastructure” essential for sustainable urban development:

The initiative is fostering a central element of sustainable development as a specialized human capital. Along with physical construction, the project invests in the “soft infrastructure” of the region by providing fully funded scholarships for youth to study urban planning, architecture, and sustainable tourism management both domestically and abroad. A university professor highlighted the long-term strategic value of this, stating:



Figure 4. Urban architectural and tourism infrastructural objects. Source: Authors' own work

For young people, these projects mean more than jobs. Scholarships and internships linked to this initiative are cultivating future leaders and professionals for the built environment. This represents a critical shift from mere construction to building local capacity for the long-term stewardship of our urban and cultural assets (P9, University Professor).

3.3.2 Challenges of urban tourism and infrastructure buildings. The findings reveal several interconnected challenges that threaten the sustainability of tourism development in Turkistan and the support of its local community. These challenges are categorized below.

3.3.2.1 Low participation from residents. In our research, which aimed to examine residents' perspectives on tourism destinations in Turkistan. The interview process shows that residents are not actively interested in participating in the questionnaire (mostly females are). University Professor (South Kazakhstan University) notes that, in Kazakhstan, research contexts typically feature low public willingness to participate in questionnaires. This phenomenon aligns with findings from other centralized or politically constrained contexts, where building public trust for participatory processes is a recognized challenge (Aldahmashawi, 2025). Similarly, a shopkeeper noted,

Honestly, we do not really get involved in tourism projects. Most of the time, women like me who work in tourism-related areas are the only ones who participate in surveys or discussions (P6, Shopkeeper).

3.3.2.2 Dissatisfaction with material life. A primary source of resident dissatisfaction is the perceived disconnect between macro-level tourism growth and the personal financial implications for residents. Respondents consistently reported that tourism-driven

development has increased the cost of necessities without a corresponding increase in their income.

The cost of food, transportation, and even housing continues to rise. Tourism brings money to the city, but we don't really see it in our pockets (P2, Bus Driver).

Tourism makes Turkistan look modern and busy, but for ordinary people like me, life is still expensive . . . I struggle to afford basic things (P6, Shopkeeper).

Even though the city is developing, my family still faces high prices for daily necessities . . . it's hard to feel satisfied with material life (P10, Housewife).

This has created an inconsistency: residents acknowledge the positive economic impacts on the city but feel personally burdened by the rising cost of living, which weakens their support for tourism.

3.3.2.3 Structural deficiencies and declining built quality. Beyond service-level complaints, the study uncovered more fundamental concerns regarding the construction quality and material durability of recently built tourism infrastructure. Evidence suggests that rapid development has, in some cases, compromised the structural integrity and long-term performance of buildings, raising concerns about public safety and the lifecycle of these structures.

This is vividly illustrated by a local shopkeeper's account of material failure:

. . . It has only been around five years, but the buildings have started to crack, and slices of facade cladding are falling off. I don't know the construction terminology, but we can see the changes, and it's really not safe and looks poor (P6, Shopkeeper).

This testimony points to potential failures in building envelope performance, material specification, and construction oversight. These observed deficiencies, such as cracking and spalling, are not merely esthetic; they indicate systemic issues that can affect structural stability and occupant safety.

These foundational problems in the built environment are compounded by poor service quality, which collectively undermines the tourist experience. Industry professionals reported:

Tourists want to visit, but high accommodation and ticket prices, along with poor service, often discourage them (P4, Tour Agent).

Even along key routes, road and service infrastructure is poor; rest stops are dirty and lack modern facilities (P8, Hotel Manager).

From an architectural and urban perspective, these findings reveal a critical disconnect. The region has invested in the symbolic capital of new buildings but has failed to ensure their functional performance or the quality of the interstitial spaces that connect them. The poor condition of roads, the lack of modern rest stops, and the premature decay of building fabrics indicate a model that prioritizes immediate visual impact over long-term sustainability, maintenance, and user safety. This approach ultimately threatens the economic returns on these architectural investments by degrading the very visitor experience they were meant to create.

3.3.2.4 Spatial inequity in urban infrastructure and poor road accessibility and transport justice. An apparent disparity in the quality of public infrastructure exists between the curated tourist zones and the everyday residential neighborhoods. [Newisar \(2025\)](#) analysis of Liverpool reveals how governance that treats heritage primarily as an economic brand leads to institutional misalignment and marginalizes community needs, resulting in well-maintained access to sites alongside systemic neglect of local roads. This demonstrates a clear spatial bias in urban investment.

Qualitative data confirms this divide. One resident noted,

For example, the roads near my home are always busy, and there aren't enough traffic lights, especially around schools. I feel that the government focuses more on tourist areas. Still, some local neighborhoods are neglected" (P1, Doctor).

This sentiment is echoed in the experience of public transport: I often wait a long time for buses that are overcrowded or in poor condition . . . Meanwhile, tourists can easily reach heritage sites, which makes us feel left out (P3, School Teacher).

Field observations confirm this socio-spatial schism. A comparative spatial analysis of [Figure 5](#) reveals the material and planning disparities. Image (1) of the city center showcases broad, paved, and unobstructed roads designed for efficient vehicular access to administrative and heritage sites, symbolizing order and state priority. On the other hand, image (2) of a residential micro-district shows narrow and congested lanes with irregular surfaces and absent pedestrian infrastructure, reflecting systemic neglect. These physical contradictions in road geometry, material quality, and design intent manifest the spatial injustice discussed earlier. They result from an approach that actively curates spaces for tourist consumption while passively neglecting the quality of everyday residential spaces.

3.3.2.5 The social cost of image-building. The quantitative findings, which reveal a contradiction between macro-level satisfaction and micro-level material dissatisfaction, are brightly illustrated by the lived experiences of residents. The city's strategic focus on



Figure 5. Comparison of roadside conditions in Turkistan and Residential Areas: (a) Condition of the roadside within the center of Turkistan; (b) Condition of the roadside within micro districts of Turkistan. Source: Authors' own work

constructing high-profile tourism buildings has come at a direct social cost, resulting in a stark disparity in the quality of essential social infrastructure.

While significant public investment is directed toward enhancing the city's image, basic services such as community healthcare and schools are critically underfunded. This local neglect occurs despite national recognition of the problem. As the President of Kazakhstan has stated, the shortage of pupil places remains a major issue, with hundreds of new schools planned under the "Comfortable School" project aimed at eliminating persistent multi-shift schooling systems ([Kazakhstan Today, 5 October 2023](#)).

This gap between national policy and local implementation in Turkistan creates daily hardships for families. One mother of four explained the healthcare shortfall:

It's difficult to get all the treatment in the community hospital due to a lack of check-up equipment. Mostly, we have to go to private hospitals, which are expensive and financially difficult for me with four kids (P10, Housewife).

This testimony highlights a spatial injustice where the right to accessible healthcare is compromised by a lack of investment in local medical facilities, in stark contrast to the well-developed tourism infrastructure.

The crisis in educational infrastructure is equally severe and reflects the very issue the national project seeks to solve. The same mother highlighted the safety and logistical concerns caused by overcrowded schools operating on shift systems:

My older son and daughter need to attend school in the afternoon, as morning is reserved for primary or high school classes. They return late at 6–7 in the evening. In winter, it is dark, and I really worry for their safety (P10, Housewife).

This situation reveals a critical failure in urban planning and social infrastructure design. The lack of school capacity and the resulting multi-shift system have direct consequences for child welfare, family anxiety, and the social fabric of the neighborhood, directly impacting nighttime safety and urban mobility for children.

3.3.2.6 Poor service quality and visitor experience. Industry professionals identified high prices and low service quality as significant deterrents to tourist satisfaction and destination competitiveness.

Tourists want to visit, but high accommodation and ticket prices, along with poor service, often discourage them (P4, Tourism Official).

Some service facilities are outdated, guides are not always professional, and promotional materials are inadequate, which affects tourists' experiences (P5, Tour Agent).

Even along key routes, road and service infrastructure is poor; rest stops are dirty and lack modern facilities (P8, Hotel Manager).

From an academic perspective, the quality of services and infrastructure is below expectations for a major tourism hub, which could limit sustainable growth (P9, University Professor).

Specific problems include outdated vehicles, unprofessional guides, a lack of international hotel chains, and poor road conditions between Shymkent and Turkistan. Service areas along the Silk Road route were described as having poor sanitation and being technologically backward.

3.3.2.7 Legal and other administrative barriers (the visa system). Despite visa-waiver agreements designed to foster international travel, administrative inefficiencies persist. A tourism official reported that

Overcrowded customs and poor infrastructure facilities reduce tourists' willingness to visit (P4, Tourism Official).

Furthermore, Kazakhstan struggles with its good image; a tour agent noted that

Many tourists are still hesitant to travel to Kazakhstan, as the country lacks popularity for novel experiences (P5, Tour Agent).

From a research perspective,

... international tourism growth depends not only on infrastructure but also on administrative efficiency and service quality at border crossings (P9, University Professor).

The potential of visa-free travel is undermined by unacceptable conditions at border crossings, including overcrowding and a lack of basic facilities.

3.3.2.8 Socio-cultural and environmental problems. Residents expressed concerns about the long-term effects of tourism on their community and the environment.

Tourism brings visitors, but I worry that too much focus on infrastructure might harm our local culture and traditions (P3, School Teacher).

Sometimes I see litter and traffic problems around tourist areas; if this keeps increasing, it could damage our environment (P10, Housewife).

Our streets and markets are changing for tourists, and not always for the better; I hope our community does not lose its attractiveness (P6, Shopkeeper).

These statements highlight a deep-seated concern that rapid, narrowly focused development could ultimately erode the very cultural and natural resources that make Turkistan attractive.

4. Study 2: quantitative study

Building on the qualitative findings from Study 1, Study 2 employs a quantitative approach to validate and generalize the key themes identified. It aims to empirically examine the relationships between tourism infrastructure, residents' perceptions of impacts, quality of life, design of city image, and their support for tourism development. This mixed-methods integration strengthens the theoretical grounding of the research in Social Exchange Theory and Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model.

4.1 Literature review

4.1.1 *Urban infrastructure and tourism development.* Mega-infrastructure projects play a crucial role in shaping a city's identity and defining its external image. Along with delivering socio-economic benefits (Ali *et al.*, 2021; Kanwal *et al.*, 2020; Mamirkulova *et al.*, 2025), infrastructure acts as a primary driver in shaping a destination's attractiveness and symbolic value. Large-scale projects under initiatives like the Belt and Road, such as architecturally significant airports, railways, and cultural buildings, serve to improve connectivity and actively construct a new urban image designed to signal modernity and global relevance (Hussain, 2023).

However, from a spatial justice perspective, the creation of such infrastructure is not value-neutral. Soja (2010) and Fainstein (2010) argue that urban space reflects power relations and that large-scale development often unevenly redistributes benefits among social groups. Thus, infrastructure-based tourism development can create economic value at the urban scale while simultaneously reproducing spatial inequalities at the community level. The built environment becomes a mechanism through which certain groups gain access to opportunities, visibility, and mobility, while others face exclusion.

In Turkistan, this dynamic is clearly at play. Storytelling interviews reveal that residents recognize the role of new infrastructure in enhancing the city's reputation and visual appeal. They acknowledge that projects like new transport hubs and cultural facilities are designed to attract visitors and project an image of progress, which they associate with future opportunity.

However, consistent with SET, this initial support is conditional and complex. The data reveals a critical gap between the projected city image and the lived community experience.

Despite tourism officials and entrepreneurs championing the economic gains and modern facade, many residents report that the benefits of this new image are unevenly distributed. Concerns about rising living costs and limited access to the new, symbolic infrastructure highlight a tension. The city is being successfully marketed externally, but the internal community does not always feel it is the primary beneficiary of this new urban identity (Daye *et al.*, 2020). This divergence suggests that the long-term success of the city's new image depends not only on its architectural appeal to tourists but also on its functional and equitable integration into residents' daily lives.

4.1.2 Urban tourism, infrastructure buildings, and city image. Urban tourism infrastructure, encompassing new roads, trains, airports, museums, and cultural complexes, functions as a powerful tool for place-making and the deliberate construction of a new city image. Research demonstrates that such development is not merely functional; it reshapes external perceptions, transforming a destination's identity to attract investment and visitors (Della Corte *et al.*, 2010; Masson and Petiot, 2009). This is exemplified by Dubai's strategic transformation, where massive infrastructure investment reconfigured its global image from a small coastal settlement into a symbolic "global city" of tourism and modernity (Bagaeen, 2007).

The architectural quality of infrastructure buildings is particularly significant, as landmark structures communicate progress, cultural ambition, and a sense of future orientation. However, critical urban theory highlights that these iconic forms are frequently commodified, serving tourism consumption more than local use (Fainstein, 2010). In this process, urban form becomes a marketable product, and the city image is shaped primarily for external audiences rather than internal stakeholders.

From the perspective of the Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC), residents and tourists alike interpret this modernized built environment as a signal of an appealing and advanced destination. In Turkistan, this process of image-crafting is actively underway. The development of new transport links and iconic tourist facilities is explicitly intended to enhance the city's reputation, attract a global visitor base, and encourage repeat tourism. However, this study reveals a critical concern in the local perception of this new image. While residents acknowledge the benefits of an enhanced city building image, they also note a disparity in its consumption. They observed that the new urban image and the infrastructure underpinning it often cater more directly to international tourists than to the daily needs of the local community (Ganji *et al.*, 2021; Styliadis and Quintero, 2022; Tosun *et al.*, 2021). This finding aligns with spatial justice theory, which emphasizes that equitable urban development requires not only esthetic and economic success, but also fair access, usability, and social inclusion. Thus, while Turkistan's architectural strategy appears effective in constructing an external tourism brand, its alignment with residents' lived experience remains incomplete and contested.

4.1.3 Quality of life. QOL is related to individuals' happiness with life and emotional state of satisfaction or pleasure with their life experiences (Mamirkulova and Menhas, 2026). In other words, it is an individual's evaluation, feelings, or view of their own lifestyle. Individuals' QOL will be measured in this study using subjective/formative markers such as life satisfaction. This way was suitable, as recommended by Woo *et al.* (2015) and Kim *et al.* (2013). Various domains of life together represent the quality of life construct (Han *et al.*, 2023), and many frameworks have been established to assess subjective well-being (Kim *et al.*, 2013). The current study focused on domains such as material, emotional, health/safety, and community well-being. Moreover, these four life spheres are divided into two large portions. The first group, the material life sphere, includes current income, the cost of living, and prices for daily necessities. The second group is non-material life spheres, comprising emotional, spiritual, community, safety, and health and well-being.

4.1.4 Willingness to support tourism development. Residents' willingness to support tourism development is a critical measure of their behavioral intentions and attitudes towards tourism projects. A study by Gursoy *et al.* (2017) also stated that support of an individual is "an

individual attitude that is favorable or unfavorable, positively or negatively oriented toward the event.” The importance of resident support is widely acknowledged, as the success of sustainable tourism relies on the hospitality of the host community (Gautam and Bhalla, 2024). Positive local attitudes have a direct influence on tourist satisfaction, loyalty, and revisit intentions, thereby promoting a destination’s future prosperity (Alegre and Cladera, 2009; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2017). Social Exchange Theory (SET) is the dominant framework for understanding this dynamic (Han *et al.*, 2023; Kanwal *et al.*, 2020; Qin *et al.*, 2021). Social tourism theory (SET) suggests that residents evaluate tourism based on perceived benefits and costs; when benefits exceed costs, support increases. However, recent research suggests that these evaluations are also influenced by perceived fairness and the spatial distribution of benefits (Soja, 2010). Local communities may tolerate some of the disadvantages associated with tourism if the benefits are perceived to be distributed fairly, but support weakens when development exacerbates social or spatial inequalities (Andereck *et al.*, 2005; Gursoy *et al.*, 2002; Styliadis and Terzidou, 2014). Thus, integrating SET with spatial justice theory provides a more comprehensive explanation of residents’ support for tourism. It emphasizes that willingness to support tourism based on economic values and spatial assessment of who benefits, who loses, and whose daily lives are prioritized in the process of urban transformation (Fainstein, 2010).

5. Materials and methods

5.1 Measures

This study employed a self-administered, structured questionnaire to evaluate all study variables, with minor modifications tailored to the context of Turkistan. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Urban tourism infrastructure and buildings scale comprised 14 items (Abbas *et al.*, 2025; Mamirkulova *et al.*, 2020). The tourism development impacts scale comprised 12 items across economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions (Andereck and Nyaupane, 2010). The city image scale included nine items (Nazneen *et al.*, 2021; Styliadis and Quintero, 2022). The quality of life scale comprised 10 items divided into material and non-material life domains (Kim *et al.*, 2013; Woo *et al.*, 2015). Finally, the scale of residents’ willingness to support further tourism had five items adapted from prior studies (Qin *et al.*, 2021).

5.1.1 Operationalization of qualitative themes. The measurement instruments for the quantitative phase, as shown above, were adapted from existing scales but were critically justified and contextualized by thematic findings from qualitative Study 1. Key interview themes guided the selection and wording of items to ensure their relevance to the local context:

Material and non-material quality of life: The stark contrast in resident storylines led to the explicit division of the QOL scale into these two distinct sub-domains (ML1-ML4, NML1-NML6).

Spatial Inequity and Infrastructure Quality: Concerns about neglected residential roads and failing building facades informed the inclusion of specific items in the tourism infrastructure scale (e.g. UTIB3 on living costs, UTIB5 on pollution and debris) and underscored the need for the photographic analysis in Figure 5. It reflects logic based on social exchange principles.

Such an integrative approach ensures that the quantitative study accurately reflects the ground realities identified in the initial phase.

5.2 Data collection and analytical approach

Employing a descriptive quantitative methodology, the study employed an online questionnaire as the primary data collection tool. Respondents are residents of Turkistan. The Turkistan Regional Tourism Department provided the contact information of respondents, ensuring access to residents who are members of the sample and knowledgeable about local tourism development and the New Silk Road infrastructure project. The data were analyzed

using SPSS. The initial analysis involved generating descriptive statistics, with demographic variables summarized using frequencies and percentages. For the assessment of perceived impacts, mean scores and standard deviations were calculated. Subsequently, a Principal Component Factor (PCF) analysis with a varimax rotation was applied to 50 out of the 55 using 5-point Likert-scale survey items. Factor extraction was guided by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure, and only components with eigenvalues exceeding 1.0 were retained. Finally, the internal consistency reliability of the derived factors was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha.

5.3 Sampling and respondents

A total of 700 surveys were distributed to residents representing diverse professional backgrounds: government and non-government organizations, tourism officials, educators, hotel and restaurant staff, business professionals, shopkeepers, civic organizations, and locals involved in traditional activities such as animal husbandry and craft-making. A total of 425 complete questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 60.71%. Among respondents, 55.1% were female, and 44.9% were male, reflecting Kazakhstan's gender ratio of 0.920 (Worldometers, 2019). Age distribution was 24.0% (18–30 years), 29.6% (31–39 years), 26.1% (40–50 years), and 20.2% (51 years and above), consistent with the national population profile. Educational qualifications were high: 75.1% held a university degree or higher (bachelor's, master's, or Ph.D.), and 24.9% had completed school or college-level education.

5.4 Results and discussion

A principal component factor analysis (PCA) was performed on items measuring community perceptions of tourism. The suitability of the data for this analysis was supported by a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of 0.921 and a significant Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($p < 0.0001$) (Türkoğlu *et al.*, 2019) (see Table 3). The scree plot is also visually determine the number of factors to retain (Figure 6). The PCA, run with a 50-iteration limit and excluding cross-loading items with loadings below 0.3, yielded an eight-factor solution explaining 66.004% of the total variance. The reliability of the resulting constructs was assessed as satisfactory to high, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.835 to 0.941. Mean scores for each scale were subsequently calculated for further analysis.

To assess common method variance, Harman's single-factor test was conducted. The results showed that the first factor accounted for 24.334% of the total variance, which is below the 50% threshold (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003), indicating that common method bias is not a concern in this study.

5.4.1 Factor 1: urban tourism infrastructure and buildings. The analysis reveals that residents of Turkistan predominantly perceive the development of tourism infrastructure and buildings as beneficial to the urban environment (Overall mean = 3.68). The highest-rated items signify an appreciation for the new architectural and urban programs that have emerged: increased tourism demand (UTIB12: $M = 4.07$), enhanced services (UTIB13: $M = 3.93$), the creation of modern public spaces and parks (UTIB14: $M = 3.85$), and a resultant boost to trade and commerce (UTIB4: $M = 3.80$).

Table 3. KMO and Bartlett's test (EFA Result)

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy.		0.921
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	13548.896
	Df.	1,125
	Sig.	0.000

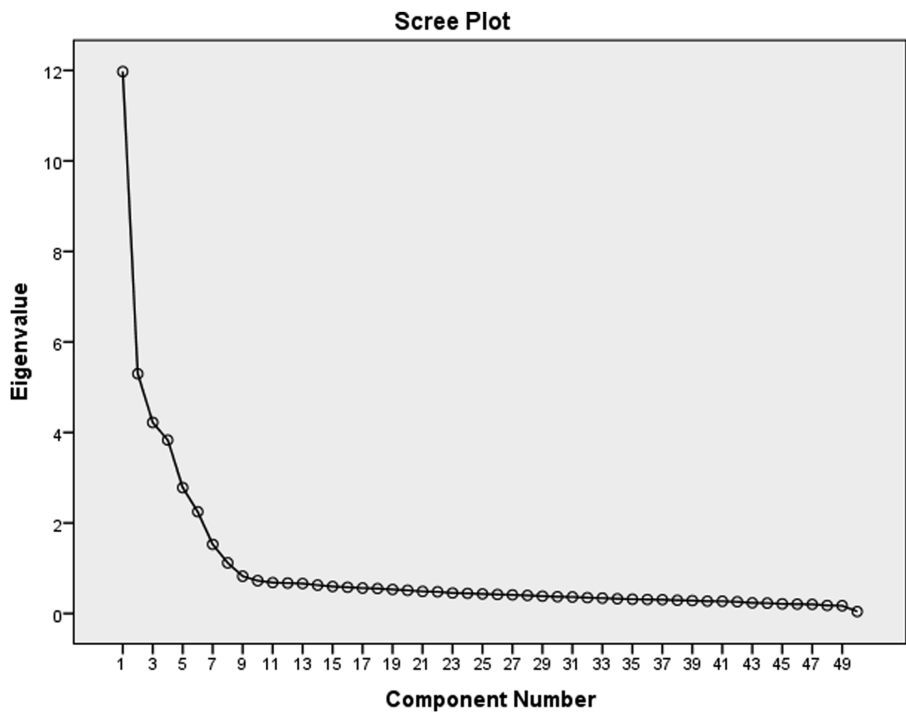


Figure 6. Scree plot results

Furthermore, residents positively associate this development with improvements to the city’s functional infrastructure, acknowledging timesaving transportation systems (UTIB2: $M = 3.79$), the development of educational buildings and facilities (UTIB8: $M = 3.73$), and overall improved public services (UTIB7: $M = 3.88$). This suggests that the investment is perceived as enhancing the city’s spatial utility and connectivity.

However, this rapid urban transformation presents an apparent socio-spatial contradiction. While residents value the new infrastructure, they are acutely aware of its environmental costs, agreeing that construction activity increases debris and noise pollution (UTIB5: $M = 3.65$). More critically, a significant negative perception is the failure of this macro-level urban development to reduce personal living costs (UTIB3: $M = 2.78$). This indicates a disconnect between the built environment’s economic symbolism and its tangible impact on household economics.

Findings similar to those of [Abbas et al. \(2025\)](#), who suggest that heritage-focused infrastructure can enhance sustainability, are observed in Turkistan, where the benefits are currently skewed towards communal and symbolic gains. The call for developing environmental infrastructure by [Mamirkulova et al. \(2025\)](#) is supported. Yet, our data highlights a more pressing need: an architectural and planning strategy that not only enhances roads and parks but also directly addresses the affordability and equitable distribution of economic benefits within the urban fabric.

5.4.2 Factor 2: tourism impacts. Residents observed significant economic benefits from tourism for government or others (Mean = 3.89), particularly acknowledging that non-locals capture a majority of tourism revenue (EI4: $M = 4.07$), alongside recognizing general employment generation (EI1: $M = 3.80$), local business profits (EI2: $M = 3.83$), and government revenue (EI3: $M = 3.90$). This finding aligns with and extends the work of

[Kummitha et al. \(2023\)](#). They observed that even residents participating in tourism enterprises perceived limited economic gains; our study reveals that this sentiment of material dissatisfaction is widespread among the general populace, suggesting the economic benefits of tourism development are failing to permeate the broader community.

Socio-cultural impacts are viewed positively (Mean = 3.74), with residents agreeing that tourism preserves traditions and fosters community pride (SCI2: M = 3.79), improves local services (SCI1: M = 3.72), and promotes cultural exchange (SCI3: M = 3.72). However, they simultaneously recognize its disruptive effect on local culture (SCI4: M = 3.72), indicating a nuanced understanding of tourism's dual socio-cultural role.

Environmental perceptions are mixed (Mean = 3.74). Residents credit tourism with environmental conservation (ENI3: M = 3.87) and disagree with overcrowding (ENI2: M = 3.83), yet acknowledge increased traffic congestion (ENI1: M = 3.65) and pollution (ENI4: M = 3.29). These findings support Social Exchange Theory, demonstrating that residents weigh these multi-dimensional impacts when forming their support for tourism, consistent with previous research ([Kim et al., 2013](#); [Qin et al., 2021](#)).

5.4.3 Factor 3: design of city image. The design of the city image is a critical factor in garnering community support for tourism. It enhances local amenities and fosters resident participation, thereby contributing to sustainable development and community prosperity ([Ramkissoon and Nunkoo, 2011](#)). In emerging destinations like Turkistan, this image is dynamic and evolves significantly with infrastructure development ([Nazneen et al., 2021](#)). The findings indicate that residents of Turkistan perceive their city's image positively (Overall mean = 3.74). As detailed in [Table 4](#), respondents agreed most strongly with statements related to the quality of restaurants and hotels (PI9, M = 3.95) and the availability of nightlife and entertainment (PI7, M = 3.88). They also affirmed the city's variety of tourist attractions (PI3, M = 3.77), pleasant weather (PI4, M = 3.71), and improved tourism infrastructure (PI2, M = 3.70). These results suggest that infrastructural improvements under the tourism initiative are effectively shaping a favorable destination image. These positive perceptions align with [Nazneen et al. \(2021\)](#), who found that residents' perceived destination image can be impacted by hospitality-related infrastructure. This also aligns with [Ramkissoon and Nunkoo \(2011\)](#) and [Nazneen et al. \(2021\)](#), who argue that destination attractiveness combines both infrastructural and socio-cultural attributes. The generally positive appraisal of Turkistan's city image design is a promising indicator for fostering community engagement and long-term support for sustainable tourism.

5.4.4 Factor 4: quality of life. To evaluate residents' quality of life, we followed the model proposed by [Woo et al. \(2015\)](#). Nearly all respondents answered that they disagreed with satisfaction with the material life sphere (total mean of 2.56), with a mean below 3. This sentiment was most acute regarding the high cost of living (ML4: M = 2.42) and the affordability of basic necessities such as food, housing, and clothing (ML3: M = 2.48). Furthermore, satisfaction with personal income (ML1: M = 2.52) and employment security (ML2: M = 2.83) also scored poorly. These findings suggest that the economic benefits from tourism development have not increased individual material benefits, but may have increased financial pressures instead. These findings expand on the study by [Tosun et al. \(2021\)](#), which included a QOL-in-place image study. We also found that tourism creates a poverty gap between people with and without financial resources.

In contrast, perceptions of non-material well-being were markedly positive (Total mean = 3.75). Residents expressed the highest levels of satisfaction with their community's spiritual life (NML4: M = 4.01) and with their leisure time (NML1: M = 3.86). Other social and safety aspects, including social relationships (NML2: M = 3.56), safety and well-being (NML5: M = 3.51), health services (NML3: M = 3.50), and new community opportunities (NML6: M = 3.46), were also viewed favorably, although to a slightly lesser extent. It is a clear opposition situation in which material conditions are a source of strain, while non-material, community-centric aspects of life remain strong, aligning with the findings of [Mamirkulova et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Nazneen et al. \(2019\)](#). These scholars observed that residents often recognize

Table 4. Values of pattern matrix

Variables	Scale items	The factor loading	Mean	Standard deviation
Urban tourism infrastructure and buildings	UTIB1	0.796	3.55	1.404
	UTIB2	0.793	3.79	1.249
	UTIB3	0.498	2.78	1.489
	UTIB4	0.815	3.80	1.236
	UTIB5	0.807	3.65	1.251
	UTIB6	0.730	3.70	1.216
	UTIB7	0.729	3.88	1.209
	UTIB8	0.778	3.73	1.260
	UTIB9	0.738	3.70	1.216
	UTIB10	0.662	3.40	1.476
	UTIB11	0.771	3.74	1.285
	UTIB12	0.829	4.07	1.291
	UTIB13	0.795	3.93	1.283
	UTIB14	0.817	3.85	1.351
<i>Tourism impacts</i>				
Economic impacts	EI1	0.712	3.80	1.178
	EI 2	0.663	3.83	1.097
	EI 3	0.827	3.90	1.156
	EI 4	0.807	4.07	1.205
Socio-cultural impacts	SCI1	0.866	3.72	1.165
	SCI 2	0.824	3.79	1.094
	SCI 3	0.789	3.72	1.130
	SCI 4	0.794	3.72	1.348
Environmental impacts	ENI1	0.728	3.65	1.202
	ENI 2	0.832	3.83	1.102
	ENI 3	0.804	3.87	1.204
	ENI 4	0.746	3.29	1.413
Design of city image	PI1	0.720	3.56	1.337
	PI2	0.718	3.70	1.194
	PI3	0.799	3.77	1.251
	PI4	0.811	3.71	1.182
	PI5	0.805	3.64	1.183
	PI6	0.764	3.70	1.175
	PI7	0.794	3.88	1.405
	PI8	0.851	3.63	1.247
	PI9	0.833	3.95	1.273
<i>Quality of life</i>				
Material life sphere	ML1	0.885	2.52	1.416
	ML2	0.825	2.83	1.380
	ML3	0.924	2.48	1.451
	ML 4	0.937	2.42	1.489
Non-material life sphere	NML1	0.808	3.86	1.345
	NML2	0.803	3.56	1.212
	NML3	0.790	3.50	1.341
	NML 4	0.758	4.01	1.281
	NML 5	0.790	3.51	1.312
	NML 6	0.808	3.46	1.442
Support for tourism development	STD1	0.837	3.90	1.364
	STD2	0.811	3.96	1.185
	STD3	0.863	3.88	1.197
	STD4	0.882	3.78	1.235
	STD5	0.891	3.60	1.253

the broad, infrastructural benefits of mega-projects yet experience uneven and sometimes negative material gains. However, the results differ from those of [Han et al. \(2023\)](#) in South Korea, where both material and non-material well-being have a positive influence on tourism support. Their study reflects a developed economy with a more equitable distribution of benefits. Our results, however, were obtained in Turkistan, a developing region undergoing a significant phase of rapid tourism-driven development. The present findings extend this understanding by demonstrating that in Turkistan, robust non-material well-being can coexist with material dissatisfaction. This indicates that socio-cultural and spiritual fulfillment may act as a buffer. However, it does not negate the critical need to address the economic disparities and rising costs that threaten long-term community support for tourism.

5.4.5 Factor 5: support for tourism development. Residents demonstrated high support for tourism development (Mean = 3.82), particularly endorsing current development levels (STD2: M = 3.96) and strategies to expand hospitality and recreational facilities (STD1: M = 3.90). Strong agreement was also shown for cultural conservation through tourism (STD3: M = 3.88) and willingness to engage in cultural exchanges (STD4: M = 3.78), while destination promotion received slightly lower but still positive support (STD5: M = 3.60). These findings reinforce Social Exchange Theory ([Kanwal et al., 2020](#)) by confirming that residents' support depends on their perceptions of positive outcomes. Our study extends SET theory by proposing the coexistence of high support and material dissatisfaction. Resident support in Turkistan appears to be primarily mediated by strong non-material well-being (community and spiritual life) and a positively evolving city image. These social benefits, with high average scores for factors 3 and 4, currently outweigh significant material dissatisfaction in the overall calculation of residents' exchange. This suggests that support is resilient but potentially fragile; if material conditions further deteriorate or non-material ties are undermined by cultural change, the balance of support could shift. The results align with inclusive tourism planning goals ([Han et al., 2023](#); [Kanwal et al., 2020](#); [Mamirkulova et al., 2020](#); [Nazneen et al., 2019](#); [Wang et al., 2021](#)), suggesting policymakers should balance tourism and infrastructure development with improved material and non-material well-being and preservation of socio-cultural and environmental assets to maintain resident support.

6. Practical implications for developing a sustainable urban tourism development model

Drawing on the sequential mixed-methods findings, we propose a sustainable tourism model for Turkistan that moves beyond a focus on iconic structures to prioritize spatial justice and community well-being. This model integrates environmental, economic, and cultural pillars through participatory governance ([Bai et al., 2024](#)). For Turkistan, this necessitates a development framework that protects its historical heritage and promotes ecotourism, while ensuring procedural and distributive fairness for its residents.

To put the spatial justice approach presented earlier into practice, urban planning in Turkistan can actively address socio-spatial inequalities through the following equity-oriented strategies:

Architectural and urban design implications: The findings suggest that urban design in Turkistan could benefit from a stronger focus on equity. To this end, we propose strategies that strike a balance between development and community well-being. First, public investment should prioritize social infrastructure, such as high-quality schools, clinics, and public spaces in residential neighborhoods, alongside tourist landmarks, directly addressing the "social cost of image building" ([Najjar et al., 2025](#)). Second, master plans should aim to integrate, rather than segregate, tourist and resident pathways by creating mixed-use districts that serve both communities through local amenities. Third, promoting the adaptive reuse of historic structures for community-led enterprises, such as cultural centers, can ensure local benefits beyond new construction. Finally, implementing low-cost tactical urbanism interventions, such as improved street lighting, pop-up markets, or smart technologies, can provide quick wins and build public trust by demonstrating responsiveness to resident concerns ([Yang and Kim, 2025](#)).

Economic benefits: To sustain local support, tourism must generate tangible material benefits for residents (Türkoglu et al., 2019). Findings indicate that local perceptions undervalue these benefits, while rising living costs and job competition diminish support for them. According to Social Exchange Theory, support depends on perceived benefits outweighing costs (Han et al., 2023). Therefore, government policies should actively increase economic participation and manage costs (Du and Zhang, 2015). This requires prioritizing local job creation, supporting small businesses, regulating housing prices, and ensuring community reinvestment of tourism revenue. Strengthening material well-being is crucial for equitable tourism development in Turkistan.

Building capacity and re-skilling the local workforce: A significant barrier is residents' limited access to education and financial resources. Promoting tourism requires reframing it from low-wage work to a viable career. Infrastructure for Training through establishing vocational training centers focused on hospitality, heritage interpretation, and sustainable tourism management. Co-locate these facilities within community hubs to ensure broad accessibility. Empowering through design by using participatory design workshops to involve residents in the planning of new tourism facilities, fostering a sense of ownership, and ensuring projects align with community needs and skills.

Promoting environmental conservation program: Although environmental issues are currently less important for residents' perceived quality of life in Turkistan, tourism growth may increase ecological pressures. Sustainable tourism requires ongoing conservation efforts (Wu et al., 2025). Residents and tourists also contribute to littering in streams, yards, and highways, highlighting the need for a solid waste management committee and dedicated teams for specific service areas (Mamirkulova et al., 2020). Social media can be used to promote local initiatives, such as tree planting and beautification, and to raise awareness about pollution. Improved infrastructure enhances connectivity and tourist mobility, but higher visitor numbers increase plastic waste, necessitating public education and the installation of more roadside bins.

Culture and heritage sites: Tourism thrives on curiosity about diverse cultures. Domestically, cultural values and heritage foster a sense of pride. While internationally, cultural tourism promotes respect and global understanding. Cultural heritage sites are fragile and require balanced strategies for development and long-term protection to prevent irreversible damage. There is strong potential for culturally focused tourism in Turkistan, though research has not clearly mapped heritage clusters. Recommendations include creating a database of local business owners, leveraging community fair clientele for smaller events, and designing local maker tours featuring Kazakh houses, cuisine, clothing, and handicrafts. These initiatives raise awareness of tourism's role in cultural preservation, employment for disadvantaged groups, and the enhancement of cultural, educational, and recreational opportunities (Shi and Tan, 2025).

Marketing and design city image: A destination's image is central to its success, making it a cornerstone of effective tourism management and marketing. For Kazakhstan to attract international travelers, high-quality print and multimedia promotional materials should showcase the country's distinctive cultural and natural assets. Government agencies and tourism authorities must collaborate with local publishers, media outlets, tour operators, and hotels to maximize outreach. Leveraging modern digital platforms, such as comprehensive tourism company websites, can further extend Kazakhstan's global visibility. Hosting international cultural, sporting, and tourism events will also enhance its reputation as a vibrant and hospitable destination. In line with the New Silk Road infrastructure, tourism strategies should ensure that fair community benefits are derived from tourist spending while encouraging support for local businesses. Practical initiatives, such as bilingual signage (Kazakh/Russian with English translation), can help reinforce Kazakhstan's image as an accessible and culturally rich destination.

Furthermore, developing diverse tour packages and quality hotels across categories (three-, four-, and five-star) that offer good value for money is vital. Improved national and

international transport links are essential for facilitating access to cultural and natural resources. These measures can significantly enhance Kazakhstan's competitiveness in the global tourism market.

Digital visa regimes and customs. Advancing digitalization in visa and customs procedures through a unified online system is crucial to enhancing Kazakhstan's accessibility and fostering a more tourist-friendly image. This should be pursued alongside improved air connectivity and a strategy to diversify tourism offerings, moving beyond a transit perception. Balancing this growth with community well-being and sustainability is critical, as supported by cautiously optimistic local sentiment.

Overall, the proposed concept represents a multi-layered action plan. Given empirical evidence of material dissatisfaction among the local population, the primary focus could be on the distribution of economic benefits and the creation of equitable social infrastructure. These measures address the key issues identified in our study and serve as the basis for long-term initiatives in cultural development, workforce retraining, and environmental protection.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to achieve three core objectives: to analyze the impacts of tourism-driven development on the local community, to evaluate the relationship between built infrastructure and resident well-being, and to propose an equitable planning framework for Turkistan. In answer to our research question, "For whom are these developments being built?" the findings suggest that Turkistan's development has been built primarily for the projection of a global image and tourist consumption. However, the costs are often borne by the local community, which does not receive commensurate benefits. The study is grounded in documents, photos, interviews, and survey results, as well as an assessment of both the strengths and weaknesses of the current tourism system (Mamirkulova and Ding, 2025). The findings conclusively address these aims. Top-down tourism development, supported by mega-infrastructure and iconic architecture, has successfully enhanced Turkistan's external tourism image. Yet, our research demonstrates that its spatial and socio-economic impacts (Objective 1) have been profoundly uneven. The empirical evidence exposes a critical disconnect as it reveals that significant investment in physical infrastructure has failed to translate into tangible improvements in residents' material well-being (Objective 2). Instead, the community faces a high cost of living, low-quality local services, and limited meaningful engagement. This results in a clear socio-spatial divide between the curated tourist experience and the neglected residential conditions.

The main contribution of this study is to apply a mixed-methods approach to spatial justice and to use the findings and evaluation to create an adaptable system for planning and decision-making. This study proposes a model that prioritizes equitable distribution of benefits and advocates for an integrated urban planning strategy that balances economic growth with community well-being.

The proposed framework offers actionable insights for policymakers and urban planners. It emphasizes that architectural and infrastructure development must be explicitly linked to social infrastructure (schools and hospitals) and material living standards. Community engagement must evolve from providing low-wage jobs to ensuring genuine participation and fair distribution of economic gains. Tourism planning and urban design must be unified to create a city that works for both visitors and residents.

Our research expands the academic discourse on heritage-led urban development in post-Soviet Union Silk Road contexts. It highlights the often-overlooked social costs of projects aimed at creating a tourism image. In practice, it provides a replicable framework for other heritage cities seeking to avoid the pitfalls of spatial inequity and build a more resilient, comprehensive tourism economy.

Thus far, the study is also without limitations and opens the door to future research. Our work is limited to a single heritage city in South Kazakhstan. While its findings are illustrative,

they are not universally generalizable. Future research can conduct comparative studies with other regions to identify cross-cultural factors in tourism development. Methodologically, our work used factor analysis; however, scholars could employ PLS-SEM or other causal modeling techniques to test the structural relationships among the identified factors (e.g. Tourism Infrastructure, Quality of Life, and Support for Tourism) and to more precisely define their causal pathways. Further qualitative analysis using systematic coding could also deepen the theoretical understanding of residents' storylines.

Ethical approval

The study was conducted in accordance with established standards for research integrity and ethics. The Research Ethics Committee of Shandong Xiehe University in Jinan examined and approved this study, which involved human subjects (Approval Number: LLSC-KY03-2025028). Every method used in the study complied with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent revisions.

Data availability statement

Data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Informed consent statement

All participants provided informed consent prior to participating in the study.

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