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EMOTIONAL IDENTIFICATION WITH A DESTINATION BRAND: A NEUROMARKETING INVESTIGATION OF KAZAKHSTAN'S VISUAL CONTENT

Abstract

The article investigates the phenomenon of emotional identification with a tourism destination brand, using Kazakhstan's visual content as a case study. The main objective is to analyze participants' emotional connection to the destination brand through neuromarketing methods, emphasizing the need to move beyond traditional subjective evaluations toward objective measurements of unconscious consumer responses. The research is grounded in an interdisciplinary methodological approach that combines theoretical analysis with an empirical neuromarketing experiment. Fifteen participants took part in the study and were shown an image-building promotional video aimed at presenting the tourism potential of the destination. During the viewing process, their emotional reactions were recorded in real time using Face Reading software supported by specialized hardware tools, which made it possible to capture both conscious and subconscious emotional responses to visual stimuli. The spectral analysis made it possible to identify the multidimensional nature of brand perception, illustrating how various visual elements generate different emotional reactions among viewers. The scientific and practical value of this research is connected with a deeper understanding of emotional identification in marketing communication processes and with improving destination branding strategies. The findings confirm that the use of visual codes with opposite emotional valence contributes to the creation of a more dynamic, memorable, and emotionally attractive brand image. The practical value includes improving the communicative power of advertising content, guiding the development of marketing campaigns, and promoting Kazakhstan's tourism services internationally. By integrating neuromarketing insights with visual content analysis, the study provides actionable recommendations for creating emotionally compelling materials that strengthen brand loyalty and enhance the overall tourist experience.

Keywords: advertising, neuromarketing, identification, emotional appeal, consumers, visual content, destination branding.

Introduction

In the context of the modern global competition for tourists, traditional approaches to regional promotion are increasingly being replaced by complex strategies aimed at constructing a distinctive

and attractive image of a destination. The success of contemporary tourism marketing depends not only on the quality of services provided but also on the depth of the emotional connection established with potential consumers through visual content. According to the concept of the “tourist gaze” proposed by J. Urry, the consumption of a destination begins not upon arrival but at the stage of perceiving visual representations in advertising, making visual content a key factor influencing the tourist decision-making process [1].

From this perspective, emotional branding acquires particular theoretical significance, as it enables the formation of a stable emotional relationship between the brand and the consumer through the activation of emotions, values, and personal identity (Gobé, 2001) [2]. Unlike traditional approaches focused on functional characteristics, emotional branding emphasizes the creation of meaningful and memorable experiences involving engagement, pleasure, inspiration, and surprise. Given the intangible nature of tourism products, the emotional component becomes a critical determinant of destination attractiveness (Kotler et al., 1993) [3].

At the same time, the rapid development of digital technologies has significantly transformed branding communications, making visual content a central element of meaning construction in the digital environment. Social media platforms promote a visually oriented model of information consumption, where images and videos act as primary emotional stimuli. Research indicates that visual information is processed considerably faster than textual data and has a stronger impact on emotional engagement and long-term memory formation (Lindstrom, 2008) [4]. The integration of emotional branding and visual content forms a new conceptual framework for destination marketing in the digital space, where the effectiveness of promotion depends on the ability to generate authentic emotional experiences. In this context, user-generated content plays a crucial role, as it is perceived as more trustworthy and enhances emotional attachment to the destination brand (Anholt, 2007) [5]. The relevance of this study is determined by the need to objectify the perception of Kazakhstan’s national tourism brand. Traditional methods of evaluating advertising effectiveness, such as surveys and focus groups, are often limited by subjectivity and the influence of social desirability bias, while up to 95% of consumer reactions occur at a subconscious level, which makes the application of neuromarketing tools particularly significant [6].

The object of the study is the visual content representing Kazakhstan as a tourism destination, while the subject of the study is the process of emotional identification with the destination brand formed through visual stimuli. The aim of the study is to conduct a neuromarketing analysis of visual content related to Kazakhstan and to identify patterns of emotional brand identification. To achieve this aim, the following tasks are set: to analyze the emotional content of visual materials representing Kazakhstan; to assess the degree of emotional response to video content using Face Reading technology; and to identify key visual triggers influencing emotional perception of the destination. The research methodology is based on neuromarketing tools, including Face Reading technology, as well as methods of content analysis and comparative analysis. The research hypothesis assumes that visual content reflecting cultural codes, including nomadic aesthetics, landscape diversity, and elements of national identity, generates stronger emotional engagement and contributes to deeper brand identification. The scientific novelty of the study lies in the application of spectral analysis to evaluate unconscious emotional responses to key visual stimuli of Kazakhstan’s tourism branding. The practical significance of the research consists in the possibility of applying the obtained results to improve marketing communication strategies and enhance the international positioning of Kazakhstan as an attractive tourism destination.

Materials and methods

The purpose of this study is to assess the effectiveness of visual tourism content in shaping the perception of Kazakhstan as a tourist destination through the application of neuromarketing techniques. The methodological framework of this study is built on the integration of both theoretical and empirical approaches, which ensures the reliability, validity, and scientific soundness of the obtained results.

At the theoretical stage, a systematic review of monographs, peer-reviewed scientific articles, and analytical reports was conducted. The purpose of this stage was to form a conceptual basis for understanding the role of neuromarketing in tourism and to identify the main factors affecting

consumers' emotional responses to visual content. The research applies general scientific methods such as analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, as well as comparative and logical analysis. These methods made it possible to structure existing academic knowledge and provide a consistent interpretation of the research problem.

The empirical part of the study is based on a neuromarketing experiment using Face Reading technology. The main research material was an official promotional video demonstrating the tourism potential of Kazakhstan. This video was selected because it represents the key visual and emotional components typically used in destination marketing, including natural landscapes, cultural symbols, national identity elements, and emotionally expressive storytelling techniques aimed at shaping tourists' perceptions.

The sample included 15 participants. The choice of this sample size is explained by the specific characteristics of neuromarketing research, where the priority is given to biometric accuracy rather than large-scale statistical representativeness. Methodological recommendations show that a group of 12–15 participants is sufficient to identify stable patterns of unconscious perception and emotional response. Previous studies also confirm that such a sample size provides reliable and consistent measurements of emotional reactions in neuromarketing experiments.

Data collection was conducted through Automated Facial Expression Analysis (AFEA), implemented using the Face Reading hardware and software system. This technology provides non-contact, real-time monitoring of 46 facial landmarks, allowing for highly accurate detection of micro-expressions and subtle emotional changes. The method makes it possible to continuously observe participants' emotional states and record simultaneous reactions during exposure to visual stimuli.

The experimental procedure involved showing participants the selected video content under controlled and standardized conditions in order to reduce the influence of external factors. During the viewing process, emotional responses were recorded in real time, after which spectral analysis of the emotional data was performed. This approach allows not only the measurement of emotional intensity, but also the analysis of the temporal dynamics of emotional reactions throughout the viewing process.

For data interpretation, both quantitative and qualitative methods were applied. The recorded emotional responses were combined into composite indicators reflecting the overall level of emotional engagement and patterns of perception. Statistical analysis helped identify stable trends in subconscious reactions, while qualitative interpretation provided a deeper understanding of how specific visual elements influenced emotional perception and destination image formation.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the results, methodological triangulation was applied by combining multiple analytical approaches. The use of objective biometric data reduces the risk of subjective bias commonly associated with traditional self-report methods. At the same time, certain limitations should be acknowledged, including the relatively small sample size and the reliance on a single type of visual stimulus.

Overall, the chosen methodology provides a robust and scientifically grounded approach to evaluating the effectiveness of tourism promotional materials and their role in shaping the destination image of Kazakhstan.

Results and discussion

The theoretical foundations of destination image research were established in the seminal works of Gunn (1972) and Echtner and Ritchie (1991), who conceptualized destination image as a combination of individual beliefs, ideas, and impressions associated with a particular place [8, 9]. This multidimensional construct includes both cognitive and affective components, which jointly shape tourists' perceptions and behavioral intentions.

In the context of increasing global competition for tourists' attention, contemporary scholars emphasize the growing importance of the affective dimension of destination image. Pike (2008) highlights that emotional responses play a decisive role in forming brand loyalty, often outweighing purely cognitive evaluations. This perspective is further supported by Urry's (1990) theory of the "tourist gaze," according to which the consumption of a destination begins with visual representations, serving as a trigger for interest and subsequent travel behavior [10, 11].

In the case of Kazakhstan, the complexity of destination image formation is particularly pronounced. As noted by Smykova (2021), the visual positioning of Kazakhstan is formed through a distinctive combination of nomadic cultural heritage and contemporary urban development [11]. This contrast creates both strong opportunities and certain challenges for destination branding, as it requires a careful balance in marketing communication to present a clear, attractive, and consistent image of the country.

The limitations of traditional research methods in identifying genuine consumer reactions have contributed to the growing use of neuromarketing approaches. According to studies by Zurawicki (2010) and Dooley (2012), nearly 95% of consumer decision-making processes take place at the subconscious level and cannot be fully captured through conventional self-report methods such as questionnaires or interviews [12, 13]. This emphasizes the importance of applying more objective tools capable of measuring implicit emotional responses.

One of the most effective approaches is the use of Face Reading technology, which allows automated analysis of facial micro-expressions. This method provides an objective and non-invasive way to evaluate emotional reactions while minimizing the influence of social desirability bias. Research conducted by Li et al. (2016) and Scott et al. (2017) confirms that biometric indicators such as emotional valence and arousal serve as more accurate predictors of behavioral intentions, including the intention to visit a destination, compared to traditional research methods like surveys and focus groups [14, 15].

Within this framework, the application of neuromarketing techniques to the analysis of Kazakhstan's tourism promotional content enables the identification of authentic patterns of emotional perception. The use of dynamic analysis further enhances the research by allowing for the real-time decoding of subconscious reactions to visual stimuli. Emotional responses were measured using Face Reading technology, providing high-resolution data on the intensity and temporal dynamics of emotional engagement.

Thus, the integration of neuromarketing tools into destination image research offers a deeper understanding of how visual content influences perception and supports the development of more effective marketing strategies.

The results of the measurement are presented in figure 1.

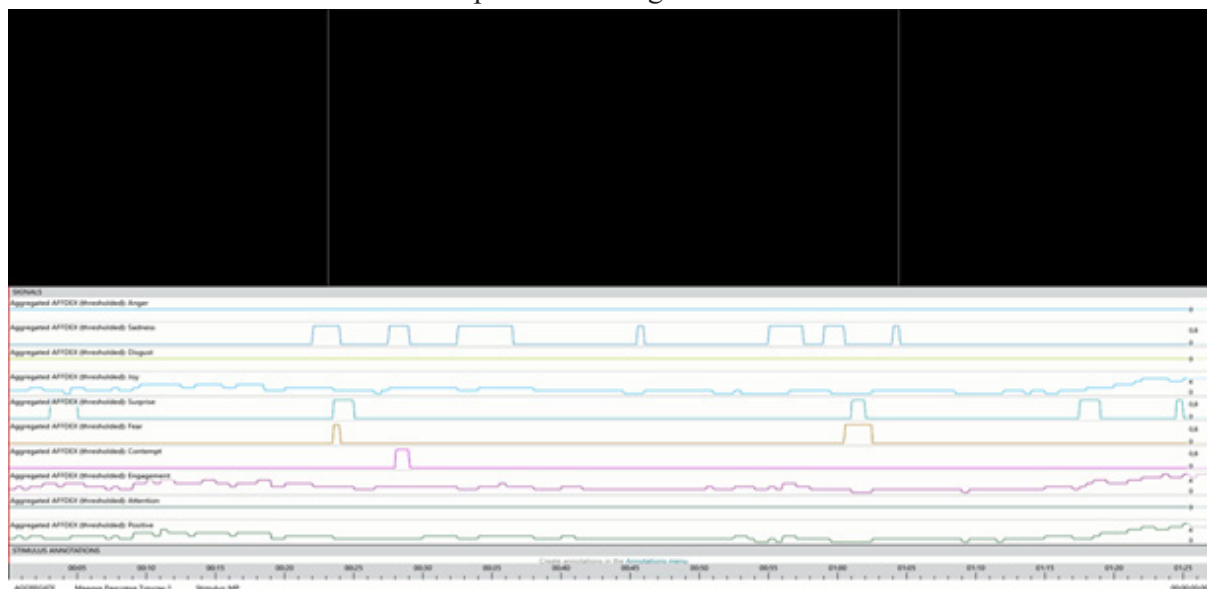


Figure 1 – Emotional responses elicited during the viewing of a tourism image video

Note: Compiled by authors.

Figure 1 illustrates the emotional responses most prominently evoked in consumers throughout the viewing process.

To assess the emotional response construct, results were computed as a percentage. Results are illustrated in figure 2.

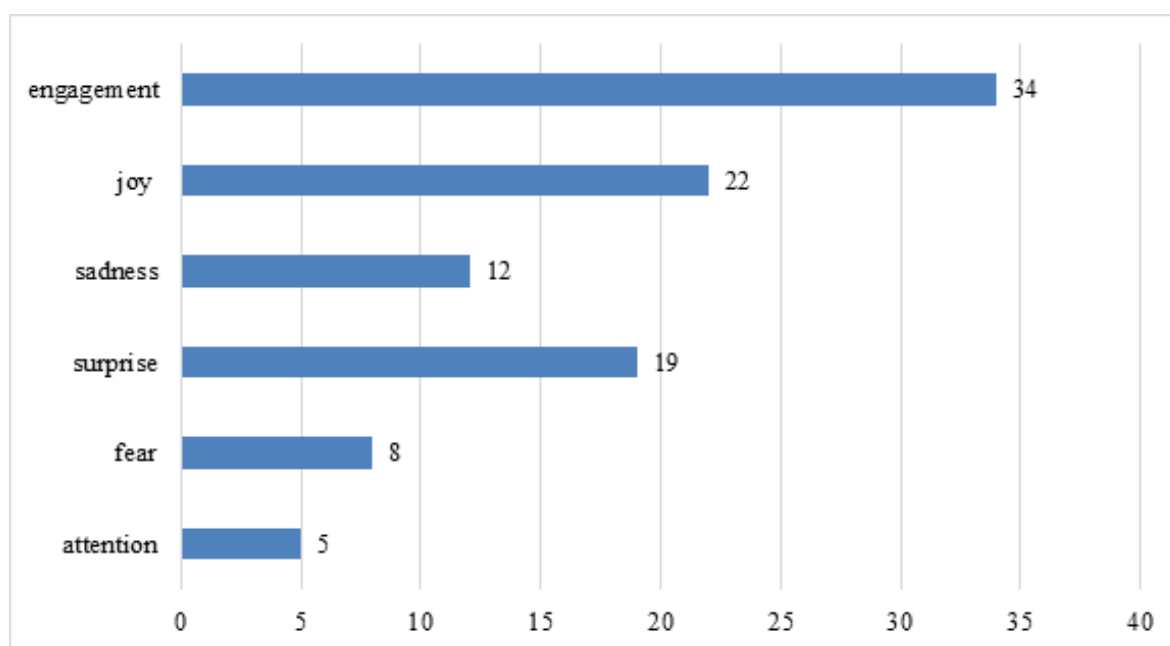


Figure 2 – Structural analysis of the emotional appeal in tourism image advertising, percentage %

Note: Compiled by authors based on Face reading data.

Analyzing the integrated emotional profile of the Kazakhstan promotional video, as presented in figure 2, it is possible to observe a high level of communicative effectiveness. A significant level of engagement (34%) indicates a high level of neurophysiological activation, which is characteristic of the video's ability to hold the audience's attention.

The significant level of joy (22%) contributes to the positive valence of the destination brand, which is directly related to the formation of trust and the intention to visit. A significant level of surprise (19%) indicates the presence of unconventional marketing stimuli within the video, which significantly contributes to memorability.

The level of negatively valenced emotions, such as sadness (12%) and fear (8%), cannot be considered negative. In the context of the video's content, where scenes with majestic landscapes and mountains are presented, it is necessary to consider the presence of awe, which significantly contributes to the dramatic depth of the experience, thereby promoting emotional brand identification, unlike other options characterized by positive valence but without memorability. The overall level of active emotions, which is characterized by engagement, joy, and surprise, is 75%, thereby ensuring the effectiveness of differentiation within the competitive environment.

The degree of emotional responses was measured using the cumulative activation coefficient of facial muscles, where a value above 0.5 Hz signifies a state of heightened emotional involvement in relation to the visual stimulus [16].

In relation to the analysis on the tourism promotional video in Kazakhstan, it was found that the intensity of emotional appeal was strongest in relation to the following emotions: positivity, happiness, engagement, surprise, contempt, fear, and sadness (figure 3).

Unlike declarative methods like surveys, Face Reading technology measures two critical aspects of the consumer experience:

1. Emotional valence: A vector that defines the nature of the relationship with the brand, from negative/distant to positive/attractive.
2. Emotional activation: The level of engagement and concentration, which measures the intensity of neural encoding of the image in memory.

Tourism marketing success is not driven by what consumers say but by objective measures of their psycho-emotional condition. The Face Reading technology in this research measured two main aspects of emotions: valence/emotional tone and intensity/emotional intensity. Another important

feature is the frequency of emotions expressed and experienced, measured by the number of sharp peaks in emotions (see figure 4).

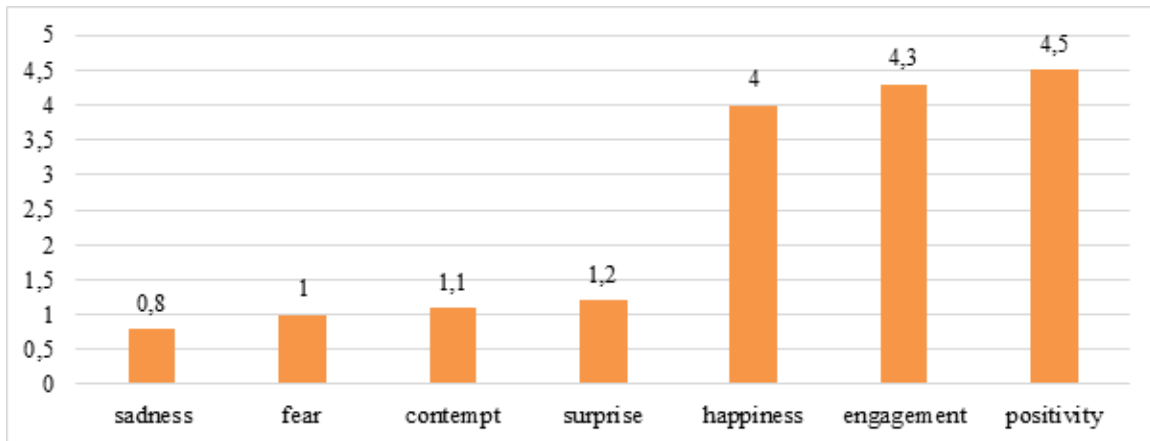


Figure 3 – Intensity of the emotional response when consumers view advertisements, in hertz

Note: Compiled by authors based on Face reading data.

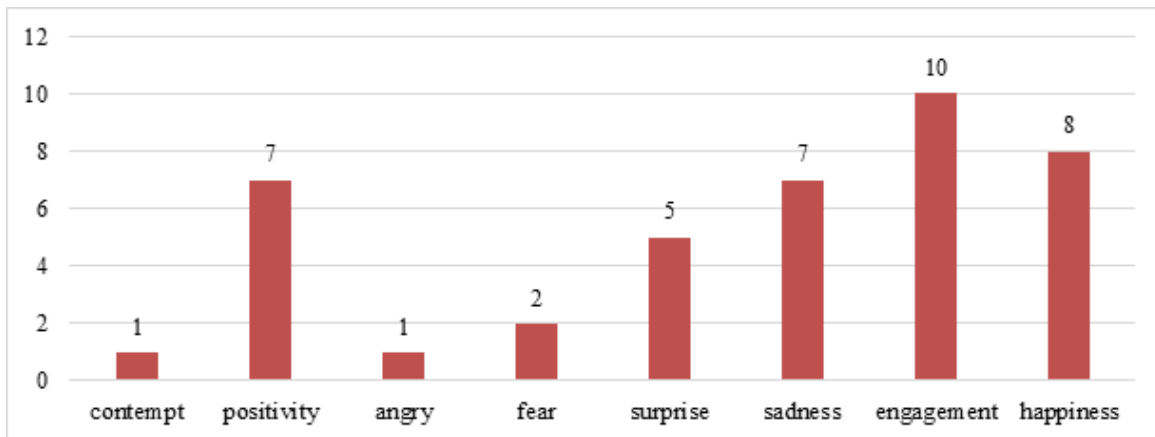


Figure 4 – Analysis of the frequency of emotional responses whilst watching a video about tourism in Kazakhstan

Note: Compiled by authors based on Face reading data.

Spectral analysis allowed for a frame-by-frame analysis of consumers' emotional responses as they watched the video, allowing for the identification of points of cognitive dissonance and points of high attentional activation in relation to changes in framing and auditory patterns.

Table 1 presents a spectral analysis of consumers' emotional responses to a video advertisement for tourism in Kazakhstan.

Table 1 – Spectral analysis of a tourism video

Time	Key trigger	Dominant valence	Strength and nature of the response
3 c	Introduction	Positive / Neutral	High: The synergy of surprise and engagement
11 c	Nature	Highly positive	Increased engagement through the emotion of joy
21–27 c	Mountains and desert	Negative	Specific response: sadness and fear transforming into deep interest
75 c	Final (character)	Positive	A surge of surprise that ensures brand recall

Note: Compiled by authors based on analysis.

The results of the analysis of Kazakhstan's tourism promotional video corpus indicate that the structure of affective responses is multifaceted, with complex interactions between valence-opposed emotional states playing a critical role in audience perception. Visual stimuli with positive emotional valence, especially scenes showing natural landscapes such as mountains, lakes, and wide panoramic views, are closely connected with stronger attraction to the destination. These images usually generate feelings of joy, curiosity, and emotional involvement, which increase the overall appeal of the place and can positively influence behavioral intentions, such as the desire to visit the destination or recommend it to others.

The emotion of joy plays an important role in this process, as it helps reduce cognitive resistance during decision-making. When viewers experience positive emotions, they tend to form favorable impressions more quickly and with less rational hesitation, making the destination appear more attractive and memorable.

Conversely, negative valence stimuli were observed in specific scenes, notably those depicting expansive mountain ranges, desert environments, or visually stark landscapes. These visual stimuli triggered emotions such as sadness, fear, and tension, which, although traditionally considered negative, showed a strong level of emotional activation. Such reactions indicate deeper cognitive involvement, since emotionally intense scenes attract more attention and help viewers remember the content more clearly. This increases the overall effectiveness of promotional materials, proving that not only positive emotions but also emotionally powerful negative reactions can strengthen destination marketing outcomes through different psychological mechanisms.

The emotion of surprise was identified as one of the strongest drivers of audience engagement. Unexpected visual elements, such as the brief appearance of a character or scene that differs from the usual visual pattern for example, the appearance of an African-American boy within the context of Kazakh landscapes created noticeable peaks in emotional arousal. This effect of novelty significantly increased attention and involvement, showing that unusual or unexpected content can make promotional videos more memorable and strengthen the perception of uniqueness.

Temporal analysis also showed that emotional intensity changes depending on the sequence and dynamics of visual scenes. Segments that were visually rich and emotionally expressive generated the highest levels of valence and arousal, while static or repetitive scenes led to lower emotional engagement. This confirms that the structure and order of visual content play an important role in maintaining audience attention throughout the entire video.

In general, the findings demonstrate that the most effective promotional content combines positive and negative emotional stimuli together with elements of surprise and novelty. Such a balanced emotional strategy increases both emotional engagement and cognitive processing, making tourism advertising more memorable, persuasive, and emotionally impactful for potential visitors.

Conclusion

The conducted neuromarketing study provided a detailed understanding of how emotional identification with Kazakhstan's destination brand is formed through tourism video advertising. By using Face Reading technology, it became possible to record subtle emotional reactions in real time and evaluate how visual content influences both conscious perception and subconscious emotional responses. This approach offers a higher level of accuracy compared to traditional self-report methods such as surveys or interviews, as it captures genuine emotional reactions rather than only verbalized opinions.

The results show that the emotional structure of destination brand perception is mainly shaped by three key indicators: engagement (34%), joy (22%), and surprise (19%). Together, these emotions account for nearly 75% of the total emotional response, which demonstrates the strong influence of emotionally rich visual content on the formation of Kazakhstan's tourism image in the minds of potential tourists. A high level of engagement reflects not only attention but also deep psychological involvement, which is essential for effective message perception. Joy helps create positive emotional associations, making the destination more attractive and reducing hesitation during decision-making. Surprise, in turn, strengthens attention by breaking expected visual patterns and making the promotional message more memorable and distinctive.

The study also confirms that positively valenced visual stimuli, especially scenes showing natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and dynamic human activities, are strongly connected with higher emotional intensity and more positive attitudes toward the destination. Such content increases emotional closeness to the place and supports positive behavioral intentions, including the desire to visit and preference for the destination. At the same time, negatively valenced elements that evoke emotions such as sadness, tension, or even awe especially in response to large-scale natural scenery also produce strong physiological and cognitive activation. Although these emotions may seem negative, they play an important role in attracting attention and improving memory retention. This proves that positive and negative emotions should not be considered separately, but rather as complementary tools within a single marketing communication strategy.

Another important finding concerns the role of novelty and unexpected visual elements. The inclusion of unusual or contrasting scenes created noticeable peaks in emotional engagement, showing that deviation from standard destination imagery serves as a powerful attention trigger. This supports cognitive theories suggesting that novelty increases perceptual importance and prevents viewers from losing interest, helping to maintain engagement throughout the video.

From a practical perspective, the study highlights the usefulness of spectral analysis of emotional responses frame by frame as an effective tool for improving tourism advertising. By identifying moments of high emotional intensity, marketers can better structure promotional videos and create a balanced emotional flow. The combination of positive and negative emotional states allows for stronger audience involvement: surprise improves memorability and information retention, while joy strengthens positive impressions and emotional loyalty to the destination. This makes promotional content not only informative but also emotionally immersive and persuasive.

In conclusion, the research confirms that neuromarketing technologies, especially Face Reading, are highly effective instruments for analyzing and improving the emotional impact of tourism promotion. The findings contribute to destination marketing theory by proving the central role of emotions in shaping destination image and consumer behavior. In addition, the study offers practical recommendations for strengthening Kazakhstan's international tourism positioning by shifting from mainly rational promotional messages toward more emotionally oriented communication strategies. Future studies may expand the range of visual materials, compare emotional reactions across different cultural groups, and include additional biometric tools to further develop the application of neuromarketing in global tourism marketing.

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ТАҒЫЛЫМДЫ БРЕНДТІҢ ЭМОЦИОНАЛДЫҚ ТАНЫМАСЫ: ҚАЗАҚСТАННЫҢ ВИЗУАЛДЫҚ МАЗМҰНЫНЫҢ НЕЙРОМАРКЕТИНГТІК ЗЕРТТЕУЛЕРІ

Андатпа

Мақала Қазақстанның визуалды мазмұны мысалында туристік дестинация брендімен эмоционалды сәйкестік феноменін зерттейді. Зерттеудің негізгі мақсаты – нейромаркетинг әдістерін пайдаланып қатысушылардың брендімен эмоционалды байланысын талдау, дәстүрлі субъективті бағалаулардан тыс, тұтынушылардың бейсаналық реакцияларын объективті өлшеу қажеттілігін көрсету. Әдістемелік тұрғыдан, зерттеу теориялық талдау мен эмпирикалық нейромаркетинг экспериментін біріктіретін интердисциплинарлық тәсілді қолданады. 15 қатысушыға бейнемазмұн көрсетіліп, олардың эмоционалды реакциялары Face Reading бағдарламалық және аппараттық құралдарымен тіркелді. Спектралдық талдау бренд қабылдауында күрделі құрылымды анықтап, әртүрлі визуалды элементтердің әртүрлі эмоционалды реакциялар туындататынын көрсетті. Ғылыми және практикалық мәні – маркетингтік коммуникацияда эмоционалды сәйкестікті түсіну және дестинациялық бренд стратегияларын жетілдіру. Зерттеу визуалды кодтарды контрастты мәнмен пайдалану арқылы динамикалық және эмоционалды тартымды бренд профилін құру тиімділігін дәлелдейді. Практикалық құндылығы – жарнама мазмұнының коммуникативтік тиімділігін арттыру, маркетингтік науқандарға ұсыныстар жасау және Қазақстанның туристік қызметтерін халықаралық деңгейде насихаттау. Нейромаркетинг деректерін визуалды мазмұнды талдаумен біріктіру эмоционалды тартымды материалдар жасауға, брендке деген адалдықты күшейтуге және жалпы туристік тәжірибені жақсартуға нақты ұсыныстар береді.

Тірек сөздер: жарнама, нейромаркетинг, идентификация, эмоционалдық әсер, тұтынушылар, визуалды мазмұн, бағыт брендингі.

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ЭМОЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ ИДЕНТИФИКАЦИЯ С БРЕНДОМ ДЕСТИНАЦИИ: НЕЙРОМАРКЕТИНГОВОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ВИЗУАЛЬНОГО КОНТЕНТА КАЗАХСТАНА

Аннотация

Статья посвящена исследованию феномена эмоциональной идентификации с туристским брендом дестинации на примере визуального контента Казахстана. Основная цель исследования заключается в анализе эмоциональной связи участников с брендом туристской дестинации с использованием нейромаркетинговых методов, что подчеркивает необходимость перехода от традиционных субъективных оценок к более объективному измерению бессознательных потребительских реакций. Исследование основано на междисциплинарном подходе, который объединяет теоретический анализ и эмпирический нейромаркетинговый эксперимент. В эксперименте приняли участие пятнадцать респондентов, которым был продемонстрирован имиджевый видеоролик, направленный на продвижение туристского потенциала Казахстана. Эмоциональные реакции участников фиксировались с помощью программного обеспечения Face Reading и специализированного оборудования. Проведенный спектральный анализ позволил выявить многослойную структуру восприятия бренда и показать, каким образом различные визуальные элементы вызывают разные эмоциональные реакции у аудитории. Научная и практическая значимость исследования связана с более глубоким пониманием процессов эмоциональной идентификации в маркетинговых коммуникациях и совершенствованием стратегий брендинга дестинаций. Полученные результаты подтверждают, что использование визуальных кодов с противоположной эмоциональной валентностью способствует формированию более динамичного, запоминающегося и эмоционально привлекательного образа бренда. Практическая ценность работы заключается в повышении коммуникативной эффективности рекламного контента, совершенствовании маркетинговых кампаний и продвижении туристских услуг Казахстана на международном рынке. Интеграция нейромаркетинговых инструментов с анализом визуального контента позволяет разрабатывать более эмоционально насыщенные и убедительные рекламные материалы, которые способствуют укреплению лояльности к бренду и улучшению общего туристского опыта.

Ключевые слова: реклама, нейромаркетинг, идентификация, эмоциональное воздействие, потребители, визуальный контент, брендинг туристического направления.

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