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TOURISM-LED ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION: MEASURING THE CONTRIBUTION OF TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT TO REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract

Uzbekistan has positioned tourism as a priority sector for economic diversification, directing substantial public investment into transport infrastructure, hospitality capacity, and destination marketing. Yet whether this investment produces broad-based, regionally distributed economic returns, rather than concentrating benefit in already-developed destinations or leaking out through imported goods and foreign-owned enterprises, remains empirically underexamined. This proposal outlines a mixed-methods doctoral study estimating the regional economic contribution of tourism infrastructure investment in Uzbekistan through input-output and multiplier analysis, combined with an original enterprise survey capturing ownership structure and import dependence, and qualitative interviews with regional investment and tourism authorities. The study aims to produce region-specific multiplier estimates and an evidence-based framework for prioritizing future tourism infrastructure investment toward higher-return, more equitable regional outcomes, contributing an empirically grounded transition-economy case to the tourism economics literature.

Keywords: Tourism economics; regional development; economic multiplier; tourism-led growth; infrastructure investment; Uzbekistan

1. Background and Rationale

Since 2016, Uzbekistan has pursued an ambitious economic reform program aimed at diversifying an economy historically dependent on commodity exports and remittances. Tourism has been identified by the government as one of the priority sectors for this diversification, with targets for growth in visitor arrivals, tourism-related employment, and foreign exchange earnings written into national development strategy. Substantial public investment has followed in transport infrastructure, hospitality capacity, visa liberalization, and destination marketing, particularly around the country's Silk Road heritage cities.

Yet the economic case for tourism-led diversification rests on assumptions that are not automatically guaranteed: that tourism spending generates meaningful multiplier effects within the domestic economy rather than leaking out through imported goods and foreign-owned enterprises; that growth in visitor numbers translates into broad-based regional employment and income rather than concentrating benefit in a small number of already-developed cities; and that infrastructure investment produces returns proportionate to its cost. Whether these conditions hold in Uzbekistan's specific case remains empirically underexamined, despite the scale of public resources committed to the sector.

This proposed research investigates the economic contribution of tourism infrastructure investment to regional development in Uzbekistan, with particular attention to how that contribution is distributed across regions, sectors, and income groups.

2. Statement of the Problem

National-level statistics on tourism's contribution to GDP and employment are published regularly in Uzbekistan, but they offer limited insight into the regional distribution of tourism-generated economic activity, the extent of economic leakage associated with imported inputs and foreign investment in hospitality infrastructure, or the multiplier effects of tourism spending on adjacent sectors

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such as agriculture, transport, and handicrafts. Investment decisions concerning new infrastructure — airports, hotels, road corridors — continue to be made without a robust regional economic evidence base, creating a risk that public resources are allocated toward destinations already benefiting from tourism growth rather than toward regions where the marginal economic impact would be greatest.

The central problem this research addresses is the absence of a regionally disaggregated, empirically grounded understanding of how tourism infrastructure investment translates into economic outcomes across Uzbekistan's diverse regions, and what this implies for the efficient and equitable allocation of future tourism development spending.

3. Research Questions and Objectives

The study is guided by the following overarching research question: What is the economic contribution of tourism infrastructure investment to regional development in Uzbekistan, and how does this contribution vary across regions and economic sectors?

This overarching question is addressed through three subsidiary research questions:

(1) What is the magnitude and regional distribution of income, employment, and tax revenue generated by tourism activity across Uzbekistan's regions?

(2) To what extent does tourism spending create multiplier effects in linked domestic sectors such as agriculture, transport, and traditional crafts, as opposed to leaking out through imported goods and foreign-owned enterprises?

(3) How do differences in infrastructure investment, accessibility, and destination maturity explain variation in the economic returns to tourism across regions?

Correspondingly, the research pursues three objectives: to quantify the regional economic contribution of tourism using input-output and multiplier analysis; to identify the structural factors — including foreign ownership, import dependence, and workforce composition — that determine the extent of economic leakage; and to derive evidence-based recommendations for prioritizing future tourism infrastructure investment toward regions and sectors with the greatest potential economic return.

4. Literature Grounding

The proposed research draws on three established strands of scholarship. The first is the tourism economics literature on income and employment multipliers, which provides the analytical tools — input-output modeling, tourism satellite accounts, and computable general equilibrium approaches — for tracing how tourism spending circulates through an economy. The second is the regional development literature, which examines how infrastructure investment and sectoral specialization shape uneven patterns of growth across subnational regions, and which has documented the risk of tourism development concentrating benefit in already-advantaged locations. The third is the growing body of work on tourism-led growth in transition and emerging economies, which has produced mixed evidence on whether tourism expansion delivers durable diversification benefits or instead reproduces dependence on a narrow, externally oriented sector.

Uzbekistan represents a distinctive case within this third strand: a post-Soviet, rapidly liberalizing economy pursuing tourism-led diversification from a low base, with strong state direction of both infrastructure investment and destination marketing. Existing empirical work on Central Asian tourism economics remains limited relative to the scale of current investment, and regionally disaggregated analysis within Uzbekistan specifically is largely absent from the published literature. This research is positioned to address that gap.

5. Proposed Methodology

The study will adopt a mixed-methods design combining quantitative economic modeling with qualitative stakeholder research. The quantitative strand will construct a regional input-output framework using national accounts data, regional statistical yearbooks, and tourism expenditure survey data, to estimate income and employment multipliers for tourism activity in a purposive sample of regions selected to represent variation in tourism maturity, from established destinations such as Samarkand and Bukhara to emerging destinations in less-visited regions. Secondary data will be

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supplemented by an original survey of tourism-sector enterprises to capture ownership structure, import dependence, and local sourcing practices, which are necessary inputs for estimating economic leakage.

The qualitative strand will involve semi-structured interviews and stakeholder consultations with regional investment authorities, tourism enterprise operators, and national planning officials, to understand the criteria currently used in infrastructure investment decisions and to contextualize the quantitative findings. Findings from both strands will be triangulated to produce region-specific estimates of tourism's economic contribution and a set of investment prioritization recommendations.

6. Significance of the Study

This research is expected to contribute in three ways. Academically, it extends tourism economics scholarship with an empirically grounded, regionally disaggregated case from a rapidly diversifying transition economy, an underrepresented context in the existing literature. Practically, the resulting regional multiplier estimates and investment prioritization framework are intended to support Uzbek national and regional planning authorities in allocating tourism infrastructure spending toward higher-return, more equitable regional outcomes. Nationally, given the scale of public investment already committed to tourism as a diversification strategy, the study offers timely, evidence-based guidance for ensuring that this investment delivers durable and broadly shared economic benefit.

7. Timeline and Feasibility

A three-year doctoral timeline is proposed. Year one would be dedicated to completing the literature review, assembling the regional input-output framework, and securing data access agreements with national and regional statistical authorities. Year two would focus on primary data collection, including the enterprise survey and stakeholder interviews across the selected regions. Year three would be devoted to modeling and analysis, framework development, dissemination through peer-reviewed publication, and dissertation writing. The candidate's existing professional experience producing destination and market content for a national travel booking platform provides practical familiarity with Uzbekistan's tourism enterprise landscape that supports feasibility of the enterprise survey component.

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