

Beyond the low-expectation trap: overcoming socio-perceptual barriers to spatial justice in Kazakhstan's hospitality sector

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to identify strategic pathways for overcoming regional disparities in Kazakhstan's hospitality sector by revealing the interplay between perceptual inequality, the expectation paradox, and the low-expectation trap as socio-perceptual barriers to spatial justice.

Design/methodology/approach – The regions were classified based on administrative status, tourism capacity and network connectivity. The dataset consists of 1,619 user reviews collected from TripAdvisor and Google. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis.

Findings – Even the smallest service deficiencies are harshly criticized due to high price and brand expectations in core destinations, while in peripheral regions, structural shortcomings are normalized and met with more tolerance due to limited alternatives and lower expectation levels. This is low expectation trap in peripheral destinations. Hospitality mask the perceptual barriers and evaluated as a social rewards by tourists. Regional inequality is reproduced not only through physical investments but also through geographically entrenched expectation regimes and perceptual barriers.

Research limitations/implications – This study demonstrates that overcoming regional inequality requires not only physical investment but also policies targeting the low-expectation trap and the professional institutionalization of social rewards. A primary limitation is that the reliance on digitally collected data may not fully capture the experiences of tourist profiles who do not utilize online platforms.

Practical implications – Disrupting the Low-Expectation Trap: Policymakers should establish baseline technical and digital standards in peripheral regions to raise the local expectation floor and prevent the normalization of poor service. Professionalizing Social Rewards: Informal hospitality in peripheral areas should be institutionalized through targeted training, transforming sincerity into a sustainable competitive advantage that complements structural upgrades. Ensuring core excellence: metropolitan centers like Almaty and Astana must prioritize technical reliability and transparent price-quality ratios to meet the high-comparison standards of urban tourists. Spatial justice in planning: national tourism strategies should integrate physical investment with spatially differentiated evaluation metrics to ensure equitable access to quality standards across all regions.

Social implications – The social implications of this study highlight how the service quality gap between core and peripheral regions is sustained through a process of perceptual normalization. The “low-expectation trap” in



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peripheral areas leads to the internalization of structural inequalities, effectively legitimizing spatial injustice. As social rewards – such as staff sincerity – mask technical deficiencies, they inadvertently weaken the demand for higher standards among both locals and tourists. Consequently, improving the quality of life in the periphery requires not only digital and physical infrastructure but also inclusive policies designed to elevate social awareness and raise collective expectation thresholds.

Originality/value – This study extends the regional development literature by introducing the concepts of perceptual inequality and the low-expectation trap. By synthesizing social exchange theory with core-periphery theory, it argues that the “low-expectation trap” – driven by structural inadequacies in peripheral regions – functions as an invisible barrier that hinders regional development.

Keywords Regional development, Perceived service quality, The core-periphery theory,

The social exchange theory, The expectation paradox, Spatial justice, The Kazakhstan hospitality sector

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Regional development is fundamentally concerned with the spatial reproduction of inequalities. While core regions concentrate capital, skilled labor, institutional capacity, infrastructure, and connectivity, peripheral regions often remain structurally marginalized (Liu *et al.*, 2025). Although classical approaches assume that development spreads from the core to the periphery, recent studies suggest that development in peripheral regions often takes the form of reproduced inequalities rather than diffusion effects (Friedmann, 1966; Hrynchyshyn and Bas-Yurchyshyn, 2021; Israel and Salinger, 2025; Pardy and Rodríguez-Pose, 2025). For this reason, regional development should be examined not only through material indicators, but also through perceptual and experiential dimensions.

The literature on service quality has predominantly focused on business performance, customer satisfaction, and service delivery processes. Yet perceived service quality is a contextual, subjective, and multi-layered construct that extends beyond objective service indicators (Brady and Cronin, 2001). The same service element may be interpreted differently across spatial contexts. A limited service element may be considered unacceptable in a core destination, while a similar deficiency may be tolerated or normalized in a peripheral destination due to lower expectations, fewer alternatives, and weaker service standards. At this point, the concept of perceptual inequality provides a useful explanatory framework for understanding how service evaluations are shaped by spatially differentiated expectation regimes.

This study addresses the gap between structural reality and subjective experience by examining Kazakhstan’s hospitality sector through the combined lens of Core-Periphery Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and spatial justice. Kazakhstan provides a particularly relevant empirical context because of its large territorial scale, Soviet planning legacy, historically centralized administrative structure, and uneven regional infrastructure. These features have produced visible differences between metropolitan centers and peripheral settlements. Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent represent core destinations where investment, connectivity, hotel capacity, institutional resources, and symbolic expectations are concentrated. Peripheral destinations, by contrast, are often characterized by weaker infrastructure, limited accommodation alternatives, lower service diversity, and more restricted institutional support (Abdulla, 2021; Orymbassar *et al.*, 2025).

These contextual features are directly related to the analytical logic of Core-Periphery Theory. Spatial inequality in Kazakhstan is reproduced not only through the unequal distribution of infrastructure, investment, and accessibility, but also through the ways in which hospitality services are evaluated across different regional contexts. This also relates to Social Exchange Theory, since tourists evaluate hospitality experiences through the perceived balance between costs and rewards. In core destinations, higher prices, stronger brand images, and wider market alternatives raise the comparison level. In peripheral destinations, limited alternatives and lower expectations reduce the comparison level and make structural deficiencies more acceptable. From the perspective of spatial justice, this difference is important because unequal service conditions are not only materially produced, but also perceptually normalized through spatially differentiated expectation regimes.

As an analytical concept, perceived service inequality moves beyond micro-level customer satisfaction and situates service experience within the broader framework of regional inequalities (Oliver, 1980; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). In this context, the expectation paradox explains why objectively weaker service conditions in peripheral regions do not always produce lower satisfaction, while more developed service settings in core regions may generate harsher criticism. The low-expectation trap further clarifies how structural deficiencies in peripheral destinations become normalized when users evaluate service conditions through lower comparison levels. Therefore, the study rethinks the relationship between a destination's position in the core-periphery hierarchy and the tourist's cost-reward balance within a spatial framework.

Against this background, the main research question of the study is formulated as follows: How can regional disparities in Kazakhstan's hospitality sector be overcome through the lens of perceptual inequality, the expectation paradox, and the low-expectation trap? Addressing this question contributes to the literature on service quality, regional development, spatial justice, and destination management by demonstrating that service evaluations are shaped not only by what is offered, but also by how these services are interpreted within spatially differentiated expectation regimes.

Theoretical framework

The spatial and social dimensions of inequality: core-periphery theory

The Core-Periphery Theory explains how economic development, capital accumulation, knowledge circulation, and institutional capacity become spatially concentrated. This suggests that spatial inequalities are reproduced not only through the distribution of resources but also through the ways these resources are interpreted and experienced (Massey, 1994; Harvey, 2010). More recent studies suggest that inequalities may be reproduced rather than reduced (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Pike *et al.*, 2016). This pattern is especially visible in tourism, where infrastructure, accessibility, promotion, and service concentration matter greatly. Core regions usually benefit from stronger networks, higher service standards, and more intensive flows of investment, while peripheral regions tend to face greater fragility in terms of accessibility, physical infrastructure, and service diversity (Ioannides and Petridou, 2016). Tourism can drive local economic and social development, but sustainable growth requires inclusive development models (Moreno de la Santa, 2020).

Perceived service quality and the lens of perceptual inequality

Service quality in hospitality is a subjective and multi-layered construct shaped by user expectations and spatial contexts rather than technical criteria alone (Grönroos, 1984; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990). Within this broad field, perceived service quality refers to the subjective evaluation that emerges from the relationship between pre-service expectations and actual service performance. The same accommodation service may be evaluated differently in different spatial and social contexts. A technically limited service may be interpreted more positively in peripheral destinations where expectations are relatively low, while a similar service may be judged more critically in core destinations where high standards are expected (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Johns and Howard, 1998; Kandampully *et al.*, 2018). This indicates that perceived service quality is shaped not only by business performance but also by the spatial context in which the service is experienced and by the expectation regime associated with that context.

The concept of perceptual inequality helps explain why similar conditions are interpreted differently across social and spatial contexts (Crang and Thrift, 2000; Massey, 2005). Perceived service inequality refers to the uneven evaluation of tourism services across core and peripheral destinations, even when service deficiencies or strengths may be similar in objective terms. In this sense, perceived service inequality is treated here as the service-specific manifestation of

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perceptual inequality. The concept helps clarify how regional inequalities become visible not only through infrastructure and investment gaps but also through the differentiated interpretation of service quality by users (Edensor, 2001; Hjalager, 2010).

The SET and the expectation paradox

The SET provides theoretical approaches explaining how individuals evaluate social relations and experiences in terms of rewards and costs (Homans, 1958). Central to this balance is the comparison level, which is significantly higher in core destinations due to higher prices and brand expectations (Sabatelli and Shehan, 1993). In core destinations, higher prices, more alternatives, and stronger brand expectations raise the comparison level, which means that even minor deficiencies may produce dissatisfaction (Albert *et al.*, 2024). In peripheral destinations, by contrast, more limited alternatives and lower expectations may make objectively weaker service conditions appear acceptable or even satisfactory (Salvatore *et al.*, 2018). This asymmetry leads to the expectation paradox. Thus, SET bridges the structural logic of regional inequality with the experiential logic of the low-expectation trap.

Kazakhstan as an empirical context

Kazakhstan offers a suitable empirical context for examining how structural regional inequalities are translated into differentiated service expectations. The country's territorial scale, Soviet planning legacy, centralized administrative history, and uneven infrastructure development have created a clear distinction between metropolitan centers and peripheral settlements. This distinction is especially visible in tourism and hospitality, where accommodation capacity, accessibility, institutional resources, and service diversity are unevenly distributed across regions (Abdulla, 2021; Pomfret, 2020; Orymbassar *et al.*, 2025).

Within the logic of Core-Periphery Theory, Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent function as core destinations because they concentrate transport connectivity, hotel supply, tourism demand, investment, and symbolic visibility. Peripheral destinations, by contrast, are more likely to operate under weaker infrastructure, limited market alternatives, and lower institutional support. These structural differences shape not only the material conditions of hospitality provision, but also the expectation regimes through which tourists interpret service quality.

This context is closely linked to Social Exchange Theory. In core destinations, higher prices, stronger brand associations, and wider service alternatives increase tourists' comparison levels. As a result, even minor service failures may be interpreted as unacceptable. In peripheral destinations, lower prices, fewer alternatives, and prior awareness of infrastructural limitations reduce comparison levels. This may lead tourists to tolerate technical deficiencies and evaluate limited services more positively than expected. Kazakhstan therefore provides a strong empirical basis for analyzing the expectation paradox and the low-expectation trap within a spatial justice framework.

Materials and methods

This study was designed within a qualitative research framework to examine how perceived service quality differs across core and peripheral regional contexts. The study adopts a critical realist perspective, which is useful for examining how observable evaluations are shaped by deeper structural conditions and contextual mechanisms (Navarrete and Fryer, 2024). Within this perspective, interpretive qualitative analysis is combined with a classification-based analytical framework. The study is cross-sectional in scope, and the data were collected between 15 November and 15 December 2025.

Data collection process

The dataset was constructed from online user reviews of accommodation establishments in Kazakhstan. Publicly accessible reviews posted on TripAdvisor and Google were used as the

primary data source. Online reviews were preferred because they constitute naturally occurring data, reflect real service experiences, and provide direct access to users' subjective evaluations. Previous studies have shown that such data offer a rich and useful basis for understanding consumer behavior and service experience in tourism and hospitality contexts (Racherla and Friske, 2012; Hussain *et al.*, 2022; Baier *et al.*, 2025).

The final dataset comprises 1,619 online reviews collected from TripAdvisor ($n = 465$) and Google ($n = 1,154$). The TripAdvisor data, extracted via WebHarvy, include reviews from 3 to 5-star hotels and cover both core and peripheral destinations. The Google dataset covers 533 hotels across 37 settlements and provides a broader spatial representation of Kazakhstan's hospitality sector. Together, these two sources enabled the study to combine tourism-oriented review narratives with a wider distribution of accommodation evaluations across different regional contexts.

The use of two review platforms was intended to increase the diversity and contextual depth of the dataset. TripAdvisor and Google differ in terms of user profile, review volume, and platform logic. TripAdvisor reviews are generally more tourism-oriented and tend to include more detailed travel evaluations. Google reviews are broader, more locally embedded, and provide access to a larger number of accommodation establishments across different settlements. For this reason, the two datasets were not treated as identical sources, but as complementary forms of user-generated content.

The TripAdvisor dataset was limited to five reviews per city for 3 to 5-star hotels in order to ensure comparability across destinations and to avoid the overrepresentation of highly reviewed metropolitan hotels. This sampling decision was not based on statistical representativeness, but on analytical balance and thematic comparability. Google reviews were used to broaden the spatial coverage of the study and to include a larger number of hotels from both core and peripheral regions. The difference between the TripAdvisor dataset and the Google dataset reflects platform-specific availability, review density, and spatial coverage. Rather than representing a methodological inconsistency, this difference strengthens the study by combining more tourism-specific evaluations with a wider spatial distribution of everyday service experiences.

The core-periphery classification

In order to enable comparative analysis, settlements in Kazakhstan were first classified as core or peripheral. For this purpose, a dataset was created for each settlement based on population size, administrative status, tourism capacity, and airport connectivity. Administrative status was defined through categories such as financial capital, national capital, regional capital, city of regional importance, and administrative district. Tourism capacity was represented by the number of hotels, while connectivity was assessed through airport status. The airport variable was classified as international airport, national airport, or no airport. At the end of the classification, Astana, Almaty and Shymkent were described as core.

In the classification process, the selection of variables was informed by regional development literature emphasizing demographic concentration, institutional capacity, tourism-related development, and territorial accessibility (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Mayer and Habersetzer, 2019; Stoffelen and Vanneste, 2017; European Commission, 2022). For the purposes of this study, researcher-defined weights were assigned to the variables: population 35%, tourism capacity 30%, airport connectivity 20%, and administrative importance 15%. Based on the resulting composite scores, the settlements were grouped into core and peripheral categories. This classification enabled the comparison of user evaluations across structurally differentiated regional contexts.

The data analysis

The study employed thematic analysis to examine how users interpreted service quality across core and peripheral destinations. The analysis focused not only on direct statements about service delivery, but also on evaluative expressions that reflected expectations, tolerance levels, comparison standards, and perceived costs and rewards. This approach made it possible

to connect user evaluations with the theoretical concepts of perceived service inequality, the expectation paradox, and the low-expectation trap.

The thematic analysis followed the three-stage structure proposed by Kriukow (2021). In the first stage, all reviews were examined line by line, and meaningful statements related to service experience were coded into initial codes. These codes included technical service deficiencies, staff behavior, price-quality evaluations, comparison with alternatives, destination-based expectations, and tolerance of infrastructural limitations. In the second stage, similar codes were grouped into broader analytical categories. In the third stage, these categories were organized under higher-order themes linked to perceived service quality in core and peripheral contexts.

To increase the reliability and transparency of the coding process, five researchers independently examined the review data. The resulting codes were compared across coders, and codes with an agreement rate above seventy percent were retained for further analysis. Disagreements were discussed collectively until a shared interpretation was reached. The final thematic structure was then linked to illustrative excerpts from user reviews in order to strengthen interpretive credibility and analytical transparency.

The analysis was not limited to identifying positive or negative service evaluations. Instead, the coding process examined how similar service conditions were interpreted differently according to destination type, price level, available alternatives, and perceived infrastructural constraints. This procedure enabled the study to move beyond descriptive review analysis and to explain how spatially differentiated expectation regimes shape hospitality evaluations in Kazakhstan.

Limitations

The dataset is limited to reviews available on TripAdvisor and Google, which means that the experiences of visitors who do not use digital platforms are not represented. User reviews reflect subjective evaluations and therefore do not allow a direct one-to-one comparison between perceptions and objective service conditions. Although the core-periphery classification is based on structural indicators, alternative weighting strategies could produce somewhat different groupings. These limitations do not invalidate the analysis, but they should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings.

Findings

The findings show that perceived service quality in Kazakhstan's hospitality sector is shaped not only by technical performance, but also by spatially differentiated expectation regimes. Core and peripheral destinations generate different comparison levels, tolerance thresholds, and cost-reward interpretations. Four main themes emerged from the analysis: divergent expectation levels and the low-expectation trap, comparison levels and the social exchange balance, perceived service inequality in spatial context, and the compensatory role of social rewards.

Divergent expectation levels and the low-expectation trap

Service evaluations in core destinations are shaped by higher expectations regarding consistency, variety, professional standards, and brand performance. In these destinations, users do not evaluate accommodation services only in terms of basic adequacy. They also expect a level of service consistent with price, destination status, and hotel category. Even relatively minor shortcomings are therefore interpreted critically. This is reflected in reviews such as "Excellent à la carte breakfast on the first day . . . On the second day, the caviar and juice were in packets" (Almaty), and "The breakfast served wasn't bad . . . we expected at least one local dish" (Astana). These comments show that users in core destinations evaluate service through an elevated expectation structure. When the expected reward is not fully achieved,

dissatisfaction becomes more explicit, as reflected in the statement: “Next time I’ll stay at another hotel with a better price-quality ratio” (Astana).

In peripheral destinations, service evaluations are shaped by a more flexible expectation structure. Users often tolerate deficiencies when prices are lower, alternatives are limited, or infrastructural weaknesses are expected in advance. This pattern is visible in comments such as “The breakfast lacked variety, but what was there was good” (Petropavlovsk), “The hotel is from the Soviet era but is in excellent condition” (Aktobe), and “You can’t expect more for this price” (Atyrau). Similarly, one review states, “The Wi-Fi was very weak. The bathrooms are very old. Considering the reasonable price, we can tolerate this” (Aktau). These examples indicate that deficiencies in peripheral destinations are not always interpreted as service failure. Instead, they are often normalized through lower comparison levels. This mechanism forms the low-expectation trap.

Comparison levels and the social exchange balance

The second theme concerns the comparison level used by tourists when evaluating accommodation services. In line with Social Exchange Theory, users appear to assess hospitality experiences according to the perceived balance between costs and rewards. In core destinations, the comparison level is higher because tourists encounter stronger brand images, higher prices, more alternatives, and greater expectations of professional consistency. This is illustrated by the statement: “I think the hotel isn’t worth the money . . . the standard room is large but very basic” (Astana). Such comments show that dissatisfaction is shaped not only by immediate service experience, but also by the perceived mismatch between price, symbolic value, and expected service level.

In peripheral destinations, the comparison level is more contextual. Users often evaluate accommodation quality relative to local conditions rather than according to an abstract hospitality standard. This is reflected in comments such as “Well, it’s a historic place . . . and it’s affordable, not expensive. I guess that’s all” (Karaganda), “Typical city hotel problem in places like this” (Pavlodar), and “This is probably the best hotel in the city” (Kyzylorda). These statements show that users interpret the service experience through destination-based expectations and available alternatives.

The findings also show that tolerance in peripheral destinations is not unconditional. Criticism becomes stronger when prices are high or when an establishment claims a higher status. This is visible in the review: “One of the most expensive places, and the overall impression is below average for the price you pay” (Konayev). Therefore, comparison levels are shaped by geography, but they are also influenced by price, symbolic status, and perceived market alternatives.

The perceived service inequality in the spatial context

The third theme shows that perceived service inequality emerges through the interaction between service conditions and the spatial status of the destination. In core destinations, users expect standardized excellence in return for higher financial and symbolic costs. When this expected standard is not met, dissatisfaction becomes more visible. Reviews such as “The rooms needed some renovation . . . that really didn’t fit the Rixos brand” (Shymkent), and “There was no brochure about the hotel and its services in the room . . . I wouldn’t choose it again if I came back” (Astana), illustrate how users interpret service deficiencies as a failure to meet the standards associated with core destinations.

In peripheral destinations, similar or greater deficiencies do not always produce the same level of dissatisfaction. Users often enter the service experience with prior awareness of infrastructural limitations and a more modest expectation structure. This is reflected in comments such as “The staff were very kind, but spoke little English” (Karaganda), and “The rooms are clean, but could be better . . . We appreciated it very much” (Aktau). Another reviewer states, “The people at reception don’t speak English perfectly . . . the receptionist was

very kind and tried her best to help me” (Aktobe). These examples indicate that perceived service inequality is not based only on objective service performance. It is also shaped by the spatial interpretation of service conditions.

The compensatory role of social rewards

The fourth theme concerns the compensatory role of social rewards. A clear distinction emerges between technical and social dimensions of service quality. In core destinations, technical infrastructure is treated as a minimum requirement. When technical performance fails, users interpret this as an institutional shortcoming rather than a minor inconvenience. This is reflected in the comment: “It’s really disappointing that the Internet is so slow in a five-star hotel” (Almaty).

In peripheral destinations, social rewards such as staff helpfulness, personal attention, and sincere communication often reduce the negative effect of technical deficiencies. Positive interpersonal interactions may lead to evaluations that exceed expectations despite outdated facilities or infrastructural limitations. Reviews such as “The staff were very friendly, they made us feel at home” (Aktobe), “The girls at reception helped me solve it” (Taraz), and “The hotel owner personally came to help” (Atyrau), show that interpersonal support plays an important role in the overall service experience. Similarly, comments such as “Considering the reasonable price, we can tolerate it” (Aktau) and “The price was reasonable, the staff was very helpful. It exceeded my expectations” (Pavlodar), indicate that social rewards may carry greater evaluative weight in peripheral destinations.

These findings suggest that social rewards have a dual function. On the one hand, they improve the user experience and create positive perceptions of hospitality. On the other hand, they may conceal technical and infrastructural deficiencies when they compensate for weaknesses that should be addressed through institutional service standards. This dual function is central to understanding how the low-expectation trap operates in peripheral hospitality contexts.

Discussion

This study shows that perceived service quality in Kazakhstan’s hospitality sector is shaped not only by technical service performance, but also by regional hierarchies and spatially differentiated expectation regimes. By linking user evaluations to Core-Periphery Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and spatial justice, the study positions service quality as an empirical indicator of regional inequality. [Figure 1](#) summarizes how the main components of Social Exchange Theory differ between core and peripheral destinations.

In core destinations, tourists evaluate service through higher comparison levels. Higher prices, stronger brand expectations, wider accommodation alternatives, and greater symbolic value increase the expected reward level. As shown in [Figure 1](#), this produces a high-expectation regime in which even minor deficiencies in service consistency, breakfast quality, room standards, or digital infrastructure may generate dissatisfaction. This finding supports the service quality literature, which argues that perceived service quality is shaped by the relationship between expected and experienced performance ([Parasuraman et al., 1988](#); [Brady and Cronin, 2001](#); [Salazar et al., 2010](#); [Ingram and Grieve, 2013](#)).

In peripheral destinations, the same mechanism operates differently. Lower prices, fewer alternatives, weaker infrastructure, and prior awareness of local limitations reduce tourists’ comparison levels. As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), this creates a tolerant evaluation frame in which objectively weak service conditions may be perceived as acceptable or reasonable. This explains the expectation paradox. Service deficiencies in peripheral destinations do not always lead to dissatisfaction because tourists evaluate them through the perceived limitations of the destination.

The low-expectation trap emerges from this process. Low expectations reduce dissatisfaction in the short term, but they also normalize technical and infrastructural deficiencies in the long term. When weak Wi-Fi, outdated facilities, limited breakfast variety,

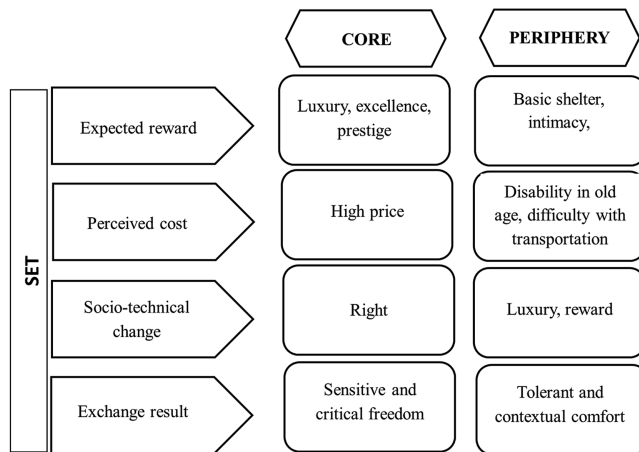


Figure 1. Differentiation of social exchange theory components in core and peripheral destinations. **Source:** Authors' own elaboration

or language barriers are accepted as normal, pressure for improvement becomes weaker. This creates a socio-perceptual barrier to spatial justice.

The findings also show that social rewards play a compensatory role in peripheral destinations. Staff kindness, personal attention, and informal hospitality improve the perceived cost-reward balance. However, these social rewards may also conceal structural weaknesses when they replace institutional service standards. Therefore, informal hospitality should be professionalized without allowing it to substitute for technical reliability, digital infrastructure, hygiene standards, and consistent service quality.

Although the empirical focus is Kazakhstan, the concepts of perceived service inequality, expectation paradox, and low-expectation trap may be relevant for other post-Soviet, transition, rural, and emerging tourism destinations. In such contexts, tourism development should be evaluated not only through visitor numbers, hotel capacity, or infrastructure investment, but also through the ways users perceive and normalize unequal service conditions.

Conclusion

This study examined how regional disparities in Kazakhstan's hospitality sector are shaped by perceptual inequality, the expectation paradox, and the low-expectation trap. The findings show that service quality is not evaluated only through technical performance. It is also interpreted through spatially differentiated expectation regimes. The study contributes to the literature by positioning perceived service inequality as a service-specific manifestation of regional inequality. In core destinations, higher prices, brand expectations, and wider alternatives increase tourists' comparison levels and make service deficiencies more visible. In peripheral destinations, lower expectations and limited alternatives reduce dissatisfaction, but they may also normalize weaker service standards. The low-expectation trap is therefore central to understanding hospitality development in peripheral regions. It reduces immediate dissatisfaction, but it may also weaken pressure for improvement. Social rewards such as staff kindness and personal attention improve the service experience, yet they should not replace technical reliability, digital infrastructure, and professional service standards. The study shows that overcoming regional disparities requires more than physical investment. Destination management should also address how service quality is perceived, tolerated, and normalized across different spatial contexts. This approach offers a practical basis for linking hospitality development with spatial justice.

Practical implications

This study offers spatially differentiated strategies for destination managers and policymakers in Kazakhstan. The findings suggest that the same service improvement strategy should not be applied uniformly across core and peripheral destinations. In core destinations such as Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent, priority should be given to technical reliability, service consistency, and price-quality balance. Tourists in these destinations evaluate hospitality services through higher comparison levels. Therefore, hotel managers should monitor room standards, breakfast quality, digital infrastructure, complaint handling, and brand-service consistency more systematically. In peripheral destinations, the main priority should be the gradual raising of the local expectation base. Basic service standards related to hygiene, Wi-Fi quality, room maintenance, language support, and accessibility should be improved. These improvements would help prevent weak service conditions from being normalized as acceptable features of peripheral destinations.

The findings also show that staff kindness and personal attention operate as important social rewards in peripheral destinations. These strengths should be supported through professional hospitality training. Informal friendliness should be transformed into a sustainable service standard, rather than being used as a substitute for technical quality. At the policy level, tourism development should be evaluated not only through hotel numbers, visitor arrivals, or infrastructure investment. Policymakers should also monitor how tourists perceive, tolerate, and normalize service inequalities across regions. This would support a more balanced hospitality development strategy and contribute to spatial justice in Kazakhstan's tourism sector.

Future research directions

Future research should test the concepts of perceived service inequality, the expectation paradox, and the low-expectation trap in different national and destination contexts. Comparative studies in post-Soviet, transition, rural, and emerging tourism destinations would help determine whether the low-expectation trap is specific to Kazakhstan or represents a broader mechanism in peripheral hospitality development. Further studies may combine user-generated reviews with longitudinal surveys, in-depth interviews, and field observations. This would allow researchers to compare online perceptions with direct service experiences and objective service conditions. Future research may also examine how tourist profiles, travel purposes, income levels, and socio-cultural backgrounds shape expectation structures and comparison levels. Policy-oriented studies should evaluate whether hospitality training, minimum service standards, digital infrastructure investments, and regional quality monitoring systems reduce the normalization of weak service conditions in peripheral destinations. Such research would strengthen the link between hospitality management, regional development, and spatial justice.

Author contributions

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Institutional review board statement

Ethical approval was not required for this study as it involves the analysis of publicly available, anonymous online user reviews from TripAdvisor and Google, and no direct interaction with human participants occurred.

Data availability statement

The data supporting the results of this study (user reviews from TripAdvisor and Google) are publicly available on the respective platforms. The compiled dataset used for analysis can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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