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Tourism in the Context of the Service Marketing Triangle in Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This study explores the applicability of the Service Marketing Triangle (SMT) framework to Uzbekistan's tourism sector. Drawing on qualitative interviews with government representatives, local entrepreneurs, and international tourists, the research identifies three primary themes that are consistently referenced by all stakeholder groups: job creation and development, infrastructure, and safety. The study adopts a deductive research approach grounded in positivist philosophy, utilizing thematic analysis via NVivo 12 software. Findings confirm that SMT is a relevant and effective conceptual tool for evaluating and aligning tourism-related marketing efforts in emerging economies. The research contributes both theoretically and practically by demonstrating how stakeholder alignment across the three vertices of the SMT—government (service provider), tourists (customers), and local entrepreneurs (employees)—can drive holistic tourism development. Recommendations are offered for improving internal, external, and interactive marketing strategies in the tourism domain of Uzbekistan.

Keywords: Tourism development; Service Marketing Triangle; Uzbekistan; stakeholder alignment; qualitative research; infrastructure; job creation; safety.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is an increasingly important domain of socio-economic development globally, and it holds particular significance for emerging economies like Uzbekistan. Historically, tourism has been closely associated with cultural heritage and historical landmarks, but in recent decades, it has evolved into a strategic engine for economic diversification, job creation, and international cooperation [1]. Today, tourism is more than a leisure pursuit—it is an interconnected ecosystem reliant on the quality, coordination, and visibility of services provided to international visitors.

Uzbekistan, rich in Silk Road heritage, has seen a growing number of international tourist arrivals, driven by liberalized visa policies, improved air connectivity, and efforts to promote national branding [2], [3]. Despite increased government attention, tourism in Uzbekistan continues to face systemic issues that hinder its full potential—namely, inconsistent service quality, limited digital tools, underdeveloped infrastructure, and gaps between the efforts of various stakeholders [4], [5].

Against this background, this study explores tourism development in Uzbekistan through the lens of the Service Marketing Triangle (SMT), a framework introduced by Zeithaml and Bitner. SMT theorizes that effective service delivery is a function of the alignment between three entities: the organization (or service provider), the employees (those delivering the service), and the customers (the recipients of the service) [6], [7]. In the tourism context, these correspond to government authorities, local entrepreneurs, and international tourists respectively.

This paper asks: Do these three stakeholders in Uzbekistan's tourism industry share aligned perspectives and priorities regarding the sector's development? Specifically, the study investigates whether these stakeholder groups converge on key issues such as the country's tourism image, the opportunities for local tourism businesses, and the overall tourist experience. Applying the SMT framework in this national context offers a novel perspective to evaluate both marketing effectiveness and sectoral coordination [8].

Literature Review

The Service Marketing Triangle (SMT) is a conceptual model that explains the dynamics between three key actors in service delivery: the company, its employees, and its customers. Originally proposed by Valarie Zeithaml and Mary Jo Bitner, the SMT emphasizes the importance of alignment among internal marketing (between the company and its employees), external marketing (between the company and its customers), and interactive marketing (between employees and customers) [9]. The goal is to ensure that the promises made through marketing communications are fulfilled through employee actions and customer interactions.

In this triangular framework:

- A. External marketing focuses on building expectations through communication with customers.
- B. Internal marketing targets the motivation and training of employees to deliver promised service.
- C. Interactive marketing occurs at the moment of truth when the customer interacts with the service provider.

According to Hsieh, each leg of the triangle must support the others, forming a cohesive system of mutual reinforcement. If one leg fails—for example, if employees are not trained to deliver what external marketing promises—customer satisfaction declines, and the company's reputation suffers. This triangular relationship thus provides a useful lens through which to study service-intensive sectors, including tourism [10], [11].

Yadav and Dabhade applied the SMT model in healthcare and found that congruence across the three components improved service outcomes. Similarly, Jan argued for the SMT's transferability across service industries, including financial services and hospitality. These precedents suggest that SMT can be applied in broader contexts, though there remains a research gap in applying it specifically to national tourism systems—particularly in developing or transitional economies like Uzbekistan [12].

Tourism Marketing, Stakeholder Dynamics, and Uzbekistan's Context

Tourism is inherently a service-driven sector. It involves complex interactions among government authorities (who create policy and infrastructure), businesses (who deliver the experience), and tourists (who consume it). According to Sofronov, successful tourism development requires synergy across these stakeholders. In many countries—including Uzbekistan—fragmentation often exists between strategic vision, operational capacity, and actual visitor experience [13], [14].

Research by Wariboko highlights that tourists today make decisions not only based on attractions but also on the perceived quality and safety of services such as accommodation, transport, digital access, and multilingual support [15], [16]. Abir and Khan add that modern tourists increasingly value authenticity, ease of access, and personalized experiences—factors which can be influenced by both private providers and national policies. These developments raise important questions about how marketing promises align with actual service delivery in tourism contexts.

In Uzbekistan, recent policy efforts have focused on simplifying visa procedures, expanding international air routes, and restoring historical cities like Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva. However, tourists still face challenges in language accessibility, fragmented online information, underdeveloped infrastructure, and service inconsistencies. While local entrepreneurs report bureaucratic obstacles and limited support from government authorities.

This makes the Service Marketing Triangle especially relevant. In the context of Uzbekistan's tourism sector:

- A. The government serves as the "company," setting strategic direction and providing core infrastructure.
- B. Local entrepreneurs and service workers represent the "employees," delivering hospitality and on-the-ground services.
- C. Tourists act as "customers," whose satisfaction and return depend on the experience alignment, Figure 1.

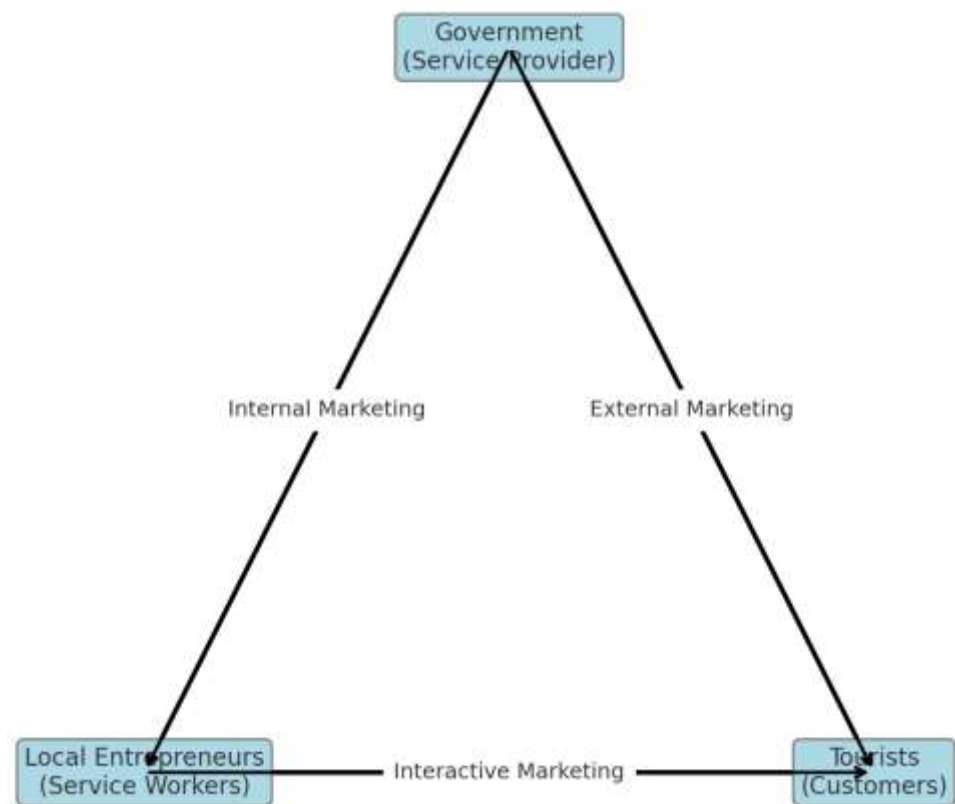


Figure 1. Visual Description.

A triangular diagram showing:

1. Top vertex: "Government"
2. Bottom left: "Local Entrepreneurs (Service Providers)"
3. Bottom right: "Tourists (Customers)"

Arrows indicating:

- A. External marketing (Gov → Tourists): destination branding, promotional campaigns
- B. Internal marketing (Gov → Entrepreneurs): support, policies, training
- C. Interactive marketing (Entrepreneurs ↔ Tourists): service encounters, experiences

This literature foundation justifies the application of SMT to the Uzbek tourism sector and sets the stage for the methodological design of the current study [17].

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate whether the three key stakeholders in Uzbekistan's tourism sector—government authorities, local entrepreneurs, and tourists—share similar perspectives regarding tourism development. The research adopted a positivist philosophy and a deductive approach, following a systematic structure to test the applicability of the Service Marketing Triangle (SMT) framework in the given context.

Research Philosophy and Approach

The positivist philosophy was chosen for its emphasis on objectivity and factual data, treating responses from participants as reflections of observable social phenomena. As described by Dudovskiy, positivism assumes that reality is stable and can be observed and described from an objective standpoint without interfering with the phenomena being studied.

This philosophical position aligns with the deductive approach employed in the study. The research began with an established theoretical framework (the SMT) and sought to test its relevance in a specific sector (tourism in Uzbekistan). According to Hyde, a deductive approach is especially suitable when the aim is to evaluate existing theories in new contexts, which is precisely the focus of this study.

Research Design

The research followed a descriptive qualitative design to explore stakeholder perspectives and themes surrounding Uzbekistan's tourism sector. The objective was not to manipulate variables but to describe and interpret participants' views using structured instruments and thematic analysis.

A total of 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with three distinct groups:

1. 1 government representative from a national tourism authority
2. 8 local entrepreneurs engaged in the tourism industry (e.g., hoteliers, tour operators, restaurant managers)
3. 7 international tourists visiting Uzbekistan during the data collection period

This triangulation of sources allowed for a comprehensive examination of the SMT's application in the real-world context of tourism development.

Sampling Technique

Given logistical and time constraints, the study employed a random sampling technique to select participants. As noted by Gravetter and Forzano, random sampling enhances generalizability by reducing selection bias. In this case, participants were chosen at random from various locations in Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara, as well as through online outreach via messaging platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram.

The diversity of respondents helped ensure that multiple perspectives within each stakeholder group were represented. This technique allowed the researcher to infer shared themes and patterns across stakeholders, making the findings more robust.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interview guides tailored to each stakeholder group. Questions were designed to explore the three key components of the SMT framework in tourism:

1. Country image and external marketing (Tourist perception)
2. Entrepreneurial opportunities and internal marketing (Business experience)
3. Tourist experience and interactive marketing (Service delivery and feedback)

Examples of questions include:

- A. "How do you evaluate the support provided to local tourism businesses?" (for entrepreneurs)

- B. “What features or services have positively or negatively shaped your travel experience?” (for tourists)
- C. “What is the government’s strategic focus for enhancing tourism?” (for officials)

Most interviews were conducted in person, while a few were completed through online correspondence. Each interview was recorded (with consent), transcribed, and translated where necessary.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data. All transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 12 software, where key concepts were coded into nodes. This process allowed for the identification of repeating themes across the three stakeholder groups.

The NVivo tool’s “Noding” function enabled the researcher to sort unstructured interview data into thematic categories, such as infrastructure, job creation, safety, online visibility, and service quality. These nodes were then quantified in terms of how frequently they appeared in participant responses.

The output of this analysis informed both the results and discussion sections, providing empirical support for whether SMT components are aligned in the Uzbek tourism system.

4. Results and Findings

The central research question guiding this study was whether Uzbekistan’s three tourism stakeholders—government representatives, local entrepreneurs, and international tourists—share aligned perceptions on tourism development when analyzed through the Service Marketing Triangle (SMT). Thematic analysis of the 16 interviews revealed that despite some differences in emphasis, all three groups consistently highlighted **three** major themes:

1. Job creation and development
2. Infrastructure quality and availability
3. Safety and tourist security

Overview of Thematic Frequency

Through NVivo 12, over ten distinct themes were identified, but the most frequently mentioned topics across all groups were job creation, infrastructure, and safety [18], [19]. The frequency of mentions was counted and visualized to highlight the prominence of these categories, see Figure 2.

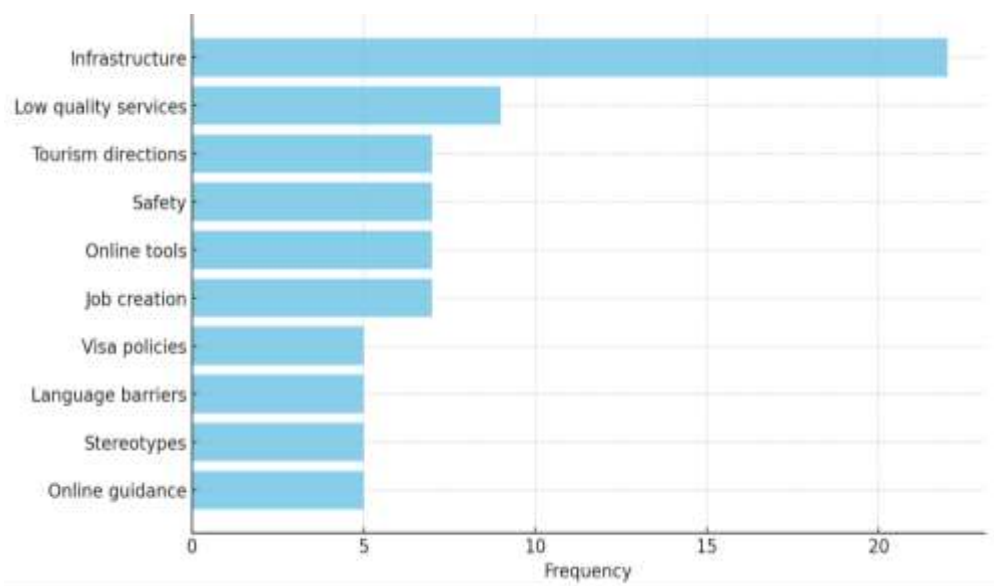


Figure 2. Frequency of Themes Mentioned Across Interviews.

1. Infrastructure – 22 mentions
2. Low quality services – 9 mentions
3. Tourism directions, Safety, Online tools, Job creation – 7 mentions each
4. Visa policies, Language barriers, Stereotypes, Online guidance – 5 or fewer mentions

Stakeholder Themes

Government Representative

The government official highlighted:

- A. Investments in infrastructure (roads, intercity trains, clean public toilets)
 - B. Creation of job opportunities for guides and tourism freelancers
 - C. The need for improved personnel training and higher education in tourism services
- “Relatively recently, guides were included in the list of professions for self-employment... This is a very important step.”
- “Infrastructure is not always ready to handle the influx of tourists, especially in peak seasons.”

Local Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurs emphasized:

1. Difficulties in navigation, language, and payment systems
2. The need for digital tools and foreign-language resources
3. Importance of ease of entry and simplified visa procedures

“There are attractions, but the information online is limited and scattered. Tourists often don’t know where to begin.”

“It’s difficult to travel without a personal car... High-speed train tickets are sold out weeks in advance.”

Entrepreneurs also commented on inconsistent service quality and called for more government support for innovation and investment.

International Tourists

Tourists praised Uzbekistan’s cultural richness but identified:

- A. Infrastructure shortcomings (e.g., ATM access, unreliable taxis, lack of signage)
- B. Lack of English-language information and poor availability of tour apps
- C. High prices and low service quality in some accommodations

“Most tourists expect basic comfort, not just authenticity. Service needs to meet modern expectations.”

“Tourist police were reassuring. It makes a difference when you feel safe in a foreign country.”

Cross-Group Consensus

Despite different language and emphasis, all three groups mentioned:

1. Job opportunities as a key benefit of tourism
2. The importance of infrastructure (transport, utilities, digital platforms)
3. The role of safety in attracting and retaining international visitors

This triangulated finding confirms strong alignment among stakeholders, supporting the SMT model’s applicability to Uzbekistan’s tourism system.

5. Discussion

The application of the Service Marketing Triangle (SMT) to Uzbekistan's tourism industry offers important insights into stakeholder alignment and the dynamics of service delivery in an emerging tourism market. The triangulated findings from this study demonstrate that government authorities, local entrepreneurs, and international tourists all emphasized job creation, infrastructure, and **safety** as central elements of the tourism experience. This alignment suggests that the SMT framework can be effectively extended beyond firm-level service contexts to national-level tourism strategy.

External Marketing: Government to Tourists

External marketing refers to the communication and branding efforts of the service provider (the government) directed toward customers (tourists). In Uzbekistan, stakeholders recognized visible efforts by the government to promote the country's image abroad. These included infrastructure investment, visa liberalization, and the restoration of key cultural heritage sites.

However, tourists noted significant gaps between these promotional efforts and the on-ground experience. For example, while marketing may emphasize Uzbekistan as a seamless and accessible destination, tourists reported challenges with ATMs, signage, and train ticketing systems.

This gap between external promises and actual experience is a common failure point in service systems, indicating the need for better synchronization between marketing claims and operational readiness.

Internal Marketing: Government to Entrepreneurs

Internal marketing describes how service providers support their employees—in this case, how the government equips local entrepreneurs with the training, infrastructure, and regulatory environment needed to deliver quality tourism experiences. Entrepreneurs in the study acknowledged improvements in registration systems and tax conditions, but they also reported bureaucratic hurdles, lack of targeted support for small businesses, and minimal innovation support.

Some entrepreneurs expressed frustration with inconsistencies in government policies, outdated payment systems, and the absence of user-friendly platforms for tourists. These concerns suggest that internal marketing efforts are not yet fully optimized, leading to a misalignment between strategic goals and on-the-ground delivery.

This misalignment reflects the “service delivery gap” that arises when employees are not adequately prepared or empowered to fulfill the promises made by external marketing.

Interactive Marketing: Entrepreneurs to Tourists

Interactive marketing occurs at the point of service, where entrepreneurs and tourists interact directly. This is the most visible and emotionally resonant aspect of the triangle because it shapes the tourists' perception of the entire country. Here, the study found that local entrepreneurs and tourists shared a deep understanding of what makes a successful tourism experience: clarity, comfort, language accessibility, and trust.

In particular, both groups emphasized the importance of:

1. Clear online information
2. Transparent pricing
3. Language support (beyond Russian and Uzbek)
4. Consistent service quality

This convergence suggests that the interactive marketing arm of the triangle is the strongest in Uzbekistan's tourism system. Entrepreneurs are keenly aware of tourist expectations, and tourists express satisfaction with local hospitality, though they also highlight infrastructural weaknesses.

Implications for the SMT Framework

The SMT's effectiveness hinges on the degree of alignment among its three corners. This study reveals that:

- A. Interactive marketing (entrepreneurs ↔ tourists) is relatively strong
- B. External marketing (government → tourists) is improving but inconsistent
- C. Internal marketing (government → entrepreneurs) is the weakest link

These findings mirror Zeithaml and Bitner's assertion that breakdowns often occur when internal systems are not equipped to fulfill the promises of external campaigns.

Furthermore, in adapting SMT to a national, public-private partnership model—rather than a single firm—the study expands the framework's application and contributes to theory-building in tourism marketing.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to investigate whether the Service Marketing Triangle (SMT)—a well-established model in service marketing—can be meaningfully applied to the tourism sector in Uzbekistan. Through qualitative analysis of interviews with government representatives, local entrepreneurs, and international tourists, the research confirmed that all three stakeholder groups prioritize three critical dimensions of tourism development: job creation and employment opportunities, infrastructure and accessibility, and safety and security.

The convergence of perspectives across these groups indicates a strong potential for strategic alignment in Uzbekistan's tourism sector. While gaps exist in both internal and external marketing mechanisms—especially in the consistency between promoted image and actual visitor experience—the study finds that the interactive marketing relationship between tourists and local entrepreneurs is robust, suggesting a solid foundation for further development.

Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the academic literature by:

1. Extending the SMT model beyond firm-level applications to national tourism systems.
2. Demonstrating the model's relevance in transitional economies and public-private service contexts.
3. Providing empirical evidence of stakeholder alignment as a measure of service system readiness.

Practical Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following actions are recommended for enhancing Uzbekistan's tourism sector:

1. Strengthen Internal Marketing

- A. Provide targeted training and incentives for local entrepreneurs.
- B. Streamline business registration and access to tourism investment funds.
- C. Develop partnerships between tourism authorities and SMEs to co-design tourism offerings.

2. Improve External Marketing Consistency

- A. Align marketing campaigns with real visitor experiences and available services.

- B. Expand multilingual promotional content, particularly online.
- C. Promote realistic itineraries and transparent pricing on official platforms.

3. Support Interactive Marketing Enhancements

- A. Encourage the development of user-friendly mobile applications for navigation, ticketing, and cultural interpretation.
- B. Foster a culture of hospitality service excellence through public campaigns and certifications.
- C. Expand customer feedback channels that are monitored and acted upon by tourism authorities.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its sample size and geographic concentration in major Uzbek cities. Future research could incorporate longitudinal data, include rural tourism stakeholders, or apply mixed-methods approaches to triangulate quantitative findings.

In addition, comparative studies across Central Asian countries could explore how variations in governance models and tourism maturity influence stakeholder alignment within the SMT framework.

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