

# INNOVATION SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY



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**ISSUE 4**

 Acceptance of papers **April, 2026**



**Acceptance of papers**

Published monthly



**Topics**

economics, technology, social sciences

**ISSN 3060-5229**



Digital Object Identifier



Visit the website [t.me/scopus\\_IST2100](https://t.me/scopus_IST2100)

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UNDER THE NUMBER C-5669633 BY THE  
AGENCY FOR INFORMATION AND MASS  
COMMUNICATIONS (AOKA) OF THE  
REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN, EFFECTIVE  
FROM OCTOBER 9, 2024.

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# THE CONCEPT OF REGIONAL IMAGE AND ITS ECONOMIC CONTENT (THE CASE OF THE KHOREZM REGION)

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the concept of regional image and its economic content using the case of the Khorezm region. The study considers regional image as an important factor affecting investment attractiveness, export potential, tourism development, and the economic competitiveness of a territory. Based on theoretical approaches, the economic, social, and cultural components of regional image are systematized. Using statistical indicators of the Khorezm region, the article examines the region's economic potential, foreign trade activity, investment dynamics, and service sector development. The findings show that the historical and cultural heritage of the region, together with its growing economic indicators, contributes to the formation of a positive regional image.

**Key words:** regional image, place branding, economic content, Khorezm region, investment attractiveness, export potential, tourism, regional economy, cultural heritage, competitiveness.

## INTRODUCTION

Scientific research in the field of regional economics has increasingly identified the issue of regional image as a distinct theoretical and methodological direction in recent years. The intensification of globalization processes, the expansion of capital and labor mobility, and the growing competition for international investment have led regions to achieve competitive advantages not only through their material resources but also through positive perceptions and a well-established image. In this context, regional image has become an important factor supporting economic development and has attracted considerable academic attention [1], [2].

When explaining the economic content of regional image, particular importance is attached to its role in attracting investment flows, the formation of territorial brands, the relationship between image and economic indicators, as well as its influence on foreign trade and tourism revenues. Research in this area not only enriches theoretical knowledge but also provides a practical foundation for developing effective regional economic policies [3], [4].

Xorazm viloyati represents an important empirical case for studying regional image due to its rich historical and cultural heritage, favorable geographical location, and stable economic development indicators. As a successor to the ancient Khorezm civilization, the region possesses strong cultural potential, which contributes to its international recognition. At the same time, the consistent growth of economic indicators between 2010 and 2025, particularly the increase in industrial output to 34,276.1 billion soums, demonstrates a significant strengthening of the region's economic potential [5].

The main purpose of this article is to provide a theoretical explanation of the concept of regional image and its economic content, as well as to analyze its main structural elements using the case of Xorazm viloyati based on empirical data. In achieving this objective, scientific approaches related to regional image were systematized, its structural components were examined in an interconnected manner, and the factors shaping the region's image were evaluated based on economic indicators [6], [7].

The results of the study showed that a positive regional image is being formed in Xorazm viloyati on the basis of its economic and cultural potential. This approach has important practical significance for improving regional economic policy, increasing investment attractiveness, and effectively guiding local development strategies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundations of regional image are closely associated with the scientific approaches developed by Philip Kotler and his co-authors. In the book *Marketing Places*, Philip Kotler, Donald Haider, and Irving Rein established the concept of effectively positioning a territory as a product. According to this approach, geographic areas create specific value for tourists, investors, and local residents while also forming a stable and positive image in their minds [1]. This perspective allows regional image to be interpreted as a strategically manageable asset.

The concept of “Competitive Identity,” introduced by Simon Anholt, initiated a new academic direction in explaining territorial and national competitiveness. His “hexagon” model demonstrates the interconnection between exports, governance quality, culture, investment and migration climate, tourism, and human factors [2]. This model reveals the complex nature of territorial image and later became one of the major foundations of place branding theory.

Mihalīs Kavaratzis provided a deeper interpretation of city branding, explaining it as a broader concept than traditional marketing approaches. According to him, territorial image is shaped not only by physical infrastructure but also by social emotions, experiences, and perceptions associated with a place [3]. The three-layer model developed by Mihalīs Kavaratzis and Gregory Ashworth — primary (practical actions), secondary (official communication), and tertiary (social diffusion) — expands the opportunities for systematic management of territorial brands [9].

In the studies of Sebastian Zenker, the multidimensional nature of regional branding is scientifically explained. According to him, different stakeholder groups — residents, tourists, and investors — perceive a territory in different ways, making regional image a richer and more complex phenomenon [4]. In the works of Sebastian Zenker, Erik Braun, and Mihalīs Kavaratzis, local residents are viewed as active participants in shaping regional brands, with particular emphasis placed on the importance of internal social factors [13].

The network approach proposed by Graham Hankinson emphasizes the important role of cooperation in shaping regional image. According to this view, integrated collaboration among government institutions, business entities, civil society organizations, and mass media enhances the effectiveness of territorial branding [8]. This approach highlights the need to establish a coordinated strategic system in modern regional governance.

In the studies of György Szondi, the importance of strengthening positive identification in the process of regional image formation is emphasized, especially in countries with transition economies [14]. Seppo Rainisto systematized the factors that ensure successful territorial marketing, highlighting the importance of political support, strategic planning, local identity, global connections, and an attractive investment environment [17]. These approaches contribute to the more effective organization of regional development strategies.

In Uzbekistan, the development of territorial image is supported at the level of state policy. In particular, the Presidential Decree PF-60 of January 28, 2022, identified the formation of a competitive regional image and the enhancement of investment attractiveness as priority areas [10]. In addition, the development program of Xorazm viloyati for 2023–2027 identified strengthening the region’s image through the expansion of tourism and export potential as one of its key priorities [11].

Scientific analyses conducted by David Gertner demonstrate the consistent development of research on place marketing and territorial branding [15]. In particular, for regions with strong historical and cultural potential, such as Xorazm viloyati, the study of regional image as an economic category is emerging as a new academic direction.

Mark Boisen, Kees Terlouw, and Ben van Gorp argue that territorial identity is formed selectively, emphasizing the need to highlight the most important and competitive aspects of a region [16]. In the case of Xorazm viloyati, this is reflected in the combination of historical heritage, tourism potential, and economic development. While Magdalena Florek and Gary Insch highlighted the importance of legally protecting territorial brands [18], Nicolas Papadopoulos and Lou Heslop developed modern methodological approaches for evaluating regional capital [8].

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was aimed at revealing the economic content of regional image and was carried out through a combination of theoretical and empirical approaches. First, scientific sources on territorial branding and marketing were analyzed, and the main structural elements of regional image were systematized. In the next stage, the dynamics of economic indicators in Xorazm viloyati for the period 2010–2025 were examined on the basis of statistical data.

Gross regional product, industrial output, export-import activities, investment, and employment indicators were evaluated using comparative and economic-statistical methods. The export structure was grouped into

categories, and its changing trends were identified in detail. In the study, regional image was considered as a multidimensional and dynamic system, while internal and external factors were analyzed in their interrelationship.

The findings made it possible to provide a comprehensive assessment of the region's economic development and to identify the main factors shaping its image.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

When interpreting regional image as an economic category, it is necessary to consider not only local production capacity but also perceptions, trust, and information asymmetry related to the region. Regional image is a multidimensional economic category that emerges in the minds of both internal and external stakeholders and influences the competitiveness of a region, as well as the flow of capital and labor. This definition was developed based on a synthesis of the approaches proposed by Philip Kotler and his co-authors [1], Simon Anholt [2], and Mihalis Kavaratzis [3].

The following Figure 1 presents a conceptual model developed by the author, illustrating the relationships among the main components of regional image.



Figure 1. Main Components of Regional Image (Conceptual Model)<sup>1</sup>

At the center of the model lies the core of regional image, surrounded by six structural components. Economic potential is reflected in quantitative indicators such as gross regional product, industrial output, trade balance, and investment activity. Natural resources, in the case of Xorazm viloyati, include the Amudaryo basin, fertile agricultural land, and recreational potential, which form the basis of its image in tourism and agro-industrial development. Cultural heritage includes UNESCO-listed sites such as Xiva, Kuhna Ark, and Pahlavon Mahmud maqbarasi, which determine the international recognition of the region. Human capital refers to employment levels and the availability of skilled labor. The institutional environment includes business support systems, regulatory quality, and favorable conditions for investors. External relations, including export destinations, the number of partner countries, and tourism flows, shape the external economic image of the region [6], [7], [13].

Regarding the "economic potential" component of regional image, the statistical indicators of Xorazm viloyati for 2010–2025 present a clear picture. Gross regional product per capita increased from 1,826.7

<sup>1</sup> Muallif ishlanmasi

thousand soums in 2010 to 30,713.5 thousand soums in 2025 [5]. In terms of growth rate, this indicator reached 105.9 percent in 2025, reflecting a stable positive trend.

Industrial production is one of the main quantitative indicators of the region's economic image. Its increase from 13,658.1 billion soums in 2021 to 28,438.8 billion soums in 2024, and further to 34,276.1 billion soums in 2025 [5], demonstrates the stable expansion of the industrial sector. Industrial output per capita, which amounted to 37.4 thousand soums in 2000, reached 16,713.5 thousand soums by 2025 [5]. This growth represents an increase of approximately 400 times and creates a strong perception of the fundamental transformation of the region's industrial capacity (Table 1).

**Table 1. Quantitative Indicators of the Economic Image of Xorazm viloyati (Selected Years) [12]**

Indicator	2010	2015	2020	2025
Gross regional product per capita, thousand soums	1,826.7	5,164.3	13,122.2	30,713.5
Industrial output, billion soums	628.6	2,616.0	9,615.9	34,276.1
Exports, million USD	156.2	111.4	169.6	435.7
Imports, million USD	53.6	100.0	299.7	438.1
Investments, billion soums	416.9	1,531.5	5,391.8	22,621.2
Employment, thousand people	475.8	573.3	567.9	481.5
Share of small business in gross regional product, percent	71.8	74.1	77.4	71.6

Table 1 confirms a stable upward trend across the four main dimensions of the region's economic image: production, foreign trade, capital attraction, and the labor market. In particular, the increase in investment volume from 416.9 billion soums in 2010 to 22,621.2 billion soums in 2025 [12] had a strong positive effect on the region's investment attractiveness. According to the 2024 report of the World Bank, Uzbekistan's investment climate indicators have been improving, while the role of the private sector in the regional economy has been expanding [19].

The external economic dimension of regional image is directly linked to the export structure and the geographical composition of export markets. In the export structure of Xorazm viloyati, textile fibers and waste accounted for 66.0 percent in 2013 [12], while by 2025 this share had declined to 1.4 percent. In contrast, food products and live animals reached 56.2 percent of total exports. This demonstrates that the region's export image has gradually shifted from being a "raw material supplier" to becoming an "exporter of processed food products." This structural transformation serves as an important signal that the region is moving beyond a raw-material-based image [12].

From a geographical perspective, the diversification of the region's export profile is also noteworthy. In 2025, the main export destinations were as follows: Pakistan – 106,360.0 thousand USD, Russia – 97,636.8 thousand USD, Afghanistan – 85,988.4 thousand USD, and Kazakhstan – 31,012.7 thousand USD [12]. The rise of Pakistan to the leading position reflects a new strategic direction in developing the region's image in the South Asian market. Meanwhile, although Kyrgyzstan accounted for 36,910.9 thousand USD in the region's exports in 2019, this figure declined to 3,595.1 thousand USD by 2025, indicating that image and logistics relations in certain markets are being reconsidered [12].

In the import structure of 2025, machinery and transport equipment maintained a 30.1 percent share [12]. This indicates that the region's production sector continues to undergo modernization and contributes to shaping the image of a "technologically modernizing region." Russia remained the main source of imports with 135,505.1 thousand USD, while China ranked second with 127,054.1 thousand USD [12].

The "institutional environment" component of regional image is often measured by the level of development of small business and private entrepreneurship. In Xorazm viloyati, the share of small business in gross regional product ranged between 74 and 78 percent during 2015–2017 [12], while it decreased to 72.0 percent in 2022 and 71.6 percent in 2025. This change is associated with the increasing role of large enterprises in the industrial and construction sectors. In 2025, the construction sector reached 12,692.4 billion soums [12]. At the same time, the service sector achieved 27,110.9 billion soums in 2025, further strengthening the region's image as an economy increasingly oriented toward services.

The employment indicator is another important criterion reflecting the region's human capital image. In 2024, employment in the region amounted to 611.0 thousand people [12], compared to 475.8 thousand people in 2010. The share of employment in the small business and private entrepreneurship sector reached 78.4 percent in 2024 [12], indicating that the labor market is largely shaped by the private economy. According to

the report of the United Nations Development Programme, Uzbekistan's Human Development Index continues to show stable growth, providing a basis for a positive assessment of human capital potential at the regional level [22].

One of the indicators reflecting the internal economic climate of the region is the level of trade activity. In Xorazm viloyati, wholesale trade turnover increased from 270.9 billion soums in 2010 to 10,785.5 billion soums in 2025 [12]. Retail trade turnover increased from 1,005.9 billion soums to 18,715.9 billion soums over the same period [12]. In terms of growth rate, retail trade reached 109.7 percent in 2025 [12].

Among the districts of the region, Urganch had the highest retail trade turnover per capita, reaching 31,050.6 thousand soums in 2025 [12]. Other areas, including Gurlan tumani with 8,635.8 thousand soums and Hazorasp tumani with 8,620.9 thousand soums, formed the second group of indicators [12]. This uneven distribution highlights the unequal allocation of economic activity and trade image within the region, creating the need for a differentiated management approach [16].

Price dynamics in local farmers' markets can also be considered a factor influencing the region's economic climate image. In 2025, the average price of beef reached 99,935 soums, while the price of lamb amounted to 109,701 soums [12]. These indicators make it possible to compare average price levels in the region with national averages and serve as important information for assessing the region's image in terms of cost of living.

The analysis above demonstrates that the regional image of Xorazm viloyati consists of several interconnected and mutually reinforcing components. In terms of strategic importance, they can be grouped as follows:

The first group includes the most prominent components. Historical and cultural heritage, such as Xiva, Kuhna Ark, and Ichan Qal'a, represents the most important factor in the international recognition of the region. The presence of UNESCO-listed sites ensures that the region is clearly positioned on the global cultural map. In addition, the increase in the share of agricultural and vegetable exports, which reached 56.2 percent in 2025 [12], strengthens the image of the region as an "agro-industrial region".

The second group includes components that are currently in the development stage. Rapid industrial growth — with a growth rate of 108.4 percent in 2025 [5] — is positioning Xorazm viloyati as a competitive industrial location. The steady increase in investment volume further strengthens the region's image in terms of capital attraction. In this group, not only production capacity but also the quality of the business environment within the region plays an important role [10], [11].

The third group consists of components that still require further improvement. Although the foreign trade balance recorded a deficit of only 2.4 million USD in 2025 [12], which represents a more balanced situation compared to previous years, the relatively high share of machinery and equipment in imports (30.1 percent) indicates the continuing need to strengthen the technological structure of domestic production. In addition, the significant difference between Urganch and the other districts in terms of trade performance reflects the uneven distribution of the regional economic image [12].

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conducted analysis made it possible to gain a deeper understanding of the economic content of regional image and to evaluate it from a practical perspective. The findings demonstrated that regional image is a complex phenomenon closely connected with economic development.

From a theoretical point of view, regional image is formed in close connection with material economic indicators. It is reflected in such important indicators as the dynamics of gross regional product, export structure, investment activity, and employment levels. At the same time, since image is shaped through perceptions, information, and trust, it reflects a broader and more enriched representation of economic processes. This feature further increases the relevance of studying regional image as an economic category that can be effectively managed and developed.

Using the example of Xorazm viloyati, one of the most important advantages of regional image was identified as its rich historical and cultural heritage. This potential plays a significant role in ensuring the region's international recognition and stimulating tourism development. At the same time, there are further opportunities to use this potential more effectively by expanding tourism and international cooperation. The gradual shift in the export structure toward a higher share of processed products also reflects the positive transformation of the region's economic image and demonstrates that the necessary conditions for its further strengthening are being formed.

The stable growth of the industrial, construction, and service sectors in the region confirms the increasing level of economic activity. Differences in the level of economic development between various districts can be viewed as an additional opportunity to further improve regional policy and expand economic opportunities more evenly across territories. Such an approach would contribute to strengthening the internal coherence of the region's image.

The following priority directions are proposed as practical recommendations. First, in order to manage regional image systematically, it is important to establish a special institutional structure dedicated to territorial branding. In Xorazm viloyati, this could be effectively organized in the form of a branding council based on cooperation among regional authorities, business entities, tourism organizations, and academic institutions. Such a structure would play a coordinating role in developing and implementing a long-term image strategy for the region.

Second, it is recommended to introduce a "Khorezm Product" geographical indication system. This would emphasize the uniqueness of products and services produced in the region, improve their competitiveness in international markets, and create an opportunity to link the region's image directly with exports.

Third, it is important to introduce a modern digital system for monitoring regional image. Regularly studying the perceptions of investors, tourists, and foreign partners about the region, as well as analyzing information from social media and mass media, would make it possible to track the dynamics of regional image. When combined with economic statistical data, such a system would contribute to forming a comprehensive assessment of regional development.

The fourth direction is aimed at balancing economic development across different territories. Developing logistics infrastructure, creating new centers of economic activity, and supporting small businesses in all districts would contribute to forming a more integrated and sustainable regional image.

Fifth, within the framework of national development strategies, it is important to develop a clear and financially supported action program aimed at strengthening regional image. Such a program should include the development of tourism infrastructure, export promotion, support for innovation activities, and the expansion of international cooperation.

Xorazm viloyati possesses sufficient potential to further strengthen its regional image on the basis of its rich historical and cultural heritage, stable economic growth, and diversified development directions. A targeted policy implemented through the combination of scientific approaches and practical strategies can play an important role in increasing the region's investment attractiveness and ensuring its sustainable economic development.

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**Proofreader:** Zokir ALIBEKOV  
**Layout and Designer:** Oloviddin Sobir ugli

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## 2026. № 4

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