

Analyzing International Students' Perceptions of National Brands Through a Qualitative Approach: The Case of Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This study explores the language association of international students during their adaptation to a new environment and its impact on intercultural communication. It addresses the difficulties, language and cultural barriers, social adaptation problems, and both positive and negative influence of association on language learning. The purpose of the study is to determine international students' concerns with Kazakhstani national brands during their studies in Kazakhstan. To achieve this, a survey was conducted, followed by a thematic analysis of 43 international students' responses. The findings of the study reveal that defining international students' associations with national brands eases stereotypical connections in language learning, overcomes language barriers, and enhances intercultural communication.

Keywords: Associative research, international students, language learning, national brand

Introduction

Integration processes in society foster diverse language dialogues among individuals. Research on the adaptation of international students to a new environment (Gu et al., 2010) and academic performance (Murray, 2010) are particularly common. Despite these two unresolved complex issues, efforts have been made to mitigate their consequences. One of these approaches involves the challenge of teaching students the language while considering the national and cultural characteristics of language speakers.

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In this context, it is entirely normal for tourists or students to seek information on language, culture, history, and traditions before visiting any country. The primary challenge for international students lies in language learning. For instance, in English-speaking universities, international students often encounter challenges with academic English. Linguistic, cultural, and social adaptation issues can hinder a student's academic success (Singh & Jack, 2022). Besides the typical academic and personal stressors experienced by all university students, international students also encounter challenges related to adapting to a new culture.

While many international students graduate without significant issues, others encounter various problems such as difficulties in social integration, daily tasks, homesickness, conflicts between their cultural background and their new surroundings, academic challenges, anxiety, depression, physical symptoms, and obstacles in adapting to the new cultural norms (Rahman & Rollock, 2004; Swagler & Ellis, 2003; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Ying, 2005). This complex web of issues highlights the need to research effective approaches for understanding international students' perceptions of national brands. Examining these viewpoints provides insight into the delicate interplay of language, culture, and adaptation processes.

While previous research has illuminated challenges faced by international students, this study employs a qualitative method to reveal their intricate views on national brands, providing a fresh perspective that supplements the larger discourse on adaptation and academic achievement.

Kazakhstani universities primarily offer education in three languages: Kazakh, English, and Russian. The local population predominantly speaks Kazakh, with major cities having developed a blend of Russian language, a legacy from the Soviet era. However, in recent years, there has been an effort to promote the Kazakh language as the state language. Teaching the Kazakh language has been incorporated into the curriculum as a mandatory subject for first-year university students.

At language proficiency levels A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2, standard topics serve as lexical resources, encompassing the fundamental vocabulary that learners can apply in their daily routines. The authors of the study engage in diverse studies that incorporate Kazakhstani national brands into language teaching. Initially, the components of Kazakhstani national brands were delineated (Ibraimova et al., 2023). A distance learning methodology was formulated, integrating the utilization of national brands, and video lessons were produced (link). Kazakhstani national brands attract language learners as they exemplify the intrinsic national

nature of the language. According to the research team, international students should establish connections with these national brands to facilitate their cultural and social adaptation while learning the language.

The motive behind this is to improve intercultural communication, as having an understanding of the culture associated with the target language (Byram, 2021) improves linguistic competence at all proficiency levels. The language gap narrows when we establish a connection to the country's culture, shift perspectives, and actively engage in learning the language, as noted by Dlaska (2000). Rosan K. Gertner conducted a study on students' perceptions of a specific country's brand image during overseas travel and concluded that those students in the tourism field can acquire knowledge about that country (Gertner, 2010). This research will examine studies pertaining to the concept of association and will identify the associations of international students in the medical field with Kazakhstani national brands. The goal is to determine the extent to which international students studying in Kazakhstan have with Kazakhstani national brands. It is crucial to emphasize that the national brands are considered within a linguistic-cultural context, not a marketing one.

Literature review

Exploring Perceptions and Intercultural Communication Through Cultural Associations and Language Learning

Language learning is inextricably linked to cultural associations, changing individuals' perceptions and interactions with the world from the perspective of native speakers (Pilipenko, 2018). These connections represent a country's knowledge, beliefs, traditions, and conventions, imprinting thought patterns onto the language (Pilipenko, 2018). The merging of language and culture becomes a vital element in effective communication, where knowledge extends beyond grammar to encompass spiritual and cultural contexts. The interplay between language, culture, and ideas underscores the communicative necessity, as well as the physiological and national-cultural aspects of language learning. In this case, a representative of another culture must not only comprehend the grammatical structure of the studied language but also its spiritual and cultural context. This fundamental consideration includes communicative necessity, along with

the physiological and psychological traits of individuals and the national-cultural characteristics of language speakers.

Associations and Perceptual Networks: Neural Insights

The nature of these associations is determined by age, geographical location, and profession. The associations for the same word may align among individuals from different cultures. In essence, a word is tied to concepts, and these concepts are interconnected with people's life experiences (Kubryakova, 1991). Associations are closely tied to the brain's operation. Word networks comprise neurons situated in the perisylvian regions, responsible for retaining word form information, as well as neurons in other cortical areas crucial for processing perception and actions.

Sensory and action modalities, which offer insight into a word's referent, seem to hold significance. In practice, nearly all specific words, if not all, evoke both visual and action-related associations, although these associations often vary in intensity. For instance, certain words may generate robust visual connections but only weak associations with actions. Hence, there would be a gradual variance in the density of neurons in the visual and action-related areas between a word primarily connected to action and a word primarily associated with visual perception. The suggested distinct configurations of word networks indicate differences in meaning processing across various word categories (Pulvermüller, 2001). Algorithms can capture cultural associations and meanings by analyzing word associations in a multidimensional vector space. The authors utilize this approach to examine the cultural dimensions of social class and its evolution during the twentieth century, emphasizing the relationships between words and class dimensions. They contended that word associations mirror and contribute to the comprehension of social phenomena such as education, affluence, and material trends (Kozłowski et al., 2019).

Associative Learning in Language Acquisition: Enhancing Vocabulary and Fluency

Through associations, individuals can enhance their vocabulary by linking new words with analogous concepts and mental images. When language learners connect new words with their own experiences and knowledge, it can enhance memorization and facilitate easy recall. Associations are employed in language learning at all proficiency levels. For instance, studies

have delved into the role of association in phonetics (Derwing & Munro, 2005), phraseology (Howarth, 1998), and the syntactic level (Schleppegrell, 2001).

In a study by Lu and Jayeon, (2021), various types of associations, including syntagmatic, paradigmatic, phonological, and unrelated, have an impact on reducing response times as vocabulary size grows. This phenomenon arises because individuals with a larger vocabulary consistently respond more quickly than those with a smaller vocabulary. Associations come with both pros and cons, including excessive constriction. Language learners might form associations that hinder the accurate application of the language, which can occasionally stem from their native language. In these instances, it is advisable to consult a teacher and make use of language learning resources (Ellis, 2006).

Associations, Stereotypes, and Intercultural Communication

Associations can give rise to stereotypes and misconceptions. When students associate with a particular cultural group based on limited information or personal experience, it hinders the development of effective intercultural relationships. Stereotypes can result in misunderstandings, prejudices, and discrimination, hindering establishment of meaningful connections with individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Cultural Associations. When studying a second language, individuals also delve into the culture linked to that language. The relationship between linguistic and cultural elements, including customs, traditions, and awareness of cultural peculiarities, assists language learners in improving their intercultural communication skills (Gazioğlu & Güner, 2021; Lehman & Welch, 2020). Associations and intercultural relations are interconnected and can mutually influence each other. Association involves the effort to connect ideas, concepts, or experiences within the mind. In the realm of intercultural communication, associations can influence the shaping of perceptions, attitudes, and comprehension of diverse cultures and perspectives (Andriyani et al., 2019; Johnson & Hinton, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2020; Tétreault et al., 2020; Vu, 2019).

Associations can shape students' perceptions and assumptions about different cultures. These associations may be rooted in media, social interactions, or personal experiences. If students adhere to associations without evidence, it can impede their capacity to engage in relationships that are open to considering cultural nuances. Recognizing and challenging such associations are essential steps toward strengthening intercultural mutual understanding. Milton J. Bennett (2017)

contends that it is inaccurate to assert that associations with the culture of another country are solely positive, as they can also encompass negative connotations. However, it would not be considered ethnocentrism unless it strays from the realm of humanity. Historically, it has even been associated with racism and discrimination. Associations can impact students' cultural sensitivity and adaptability. Through actively fostering positive associations with diverse cultures, students can cultivate open and inclusive thinking (Makwembere, 2021; Moody & Matthews, 2020). This can improve their capacity to communicate effectively, show respect for cultural differences, and adapt to relationships while considering diverse perspectives (Aimukhambet et al., 2023; Yüncü & Akgül, 2023).

Associations have the potential to impact students' capacity to empathize and embrace different perspectives. Through interaction with diverse individuals and cultures, students can expand their horizons and cultivate empathy for a wide range of experiences and worldviews. Such empathetic understanding is crucial for effective intercultural communication, as it empowers students to forge connections and navigate cultural differences with compassion and respect.

Method

Research Model

The research aimed to comprehend international students' perceptions of Kazakhstan's national brands. It utilized a qualitative approach, employing a questionnaire with open-ended questions for data collection.

Participants

A wide range of international students currently enrolled in academic programs in Kazakhstan was selected to participate in the recruitment process. To ensure simplicity and accessibility in participant selection, a targeted convenience sampling method was employed. The following information provides a comprehensive breakdown of the participant characteristics: Sample Size: The study included 43 international students participated in total. The choice of this sample size was determined by practical considerations and the available resources for data collection and processing. Demographics: 76.7% of individuals identified as male, with 23.3% identifying as female. This gender distribution emphasizes the study's significant male participant majority.

Geographical Diversity: The sample included a substantial representation of international students from diverse cultural backgrounds. A notable portion of participants hailed from India and Turkey, signifying that the study captured a global demographic range.

Academic Pursuits: The exact fields of study and academic disciplines of the participants were not explicitly outlined. The primary focus was on gathering perceptions and associations related to Kazakhstan's national brands, rather than delving into participants' academic specializations. The study seeks to encompass a diverse range of opinions and insights concerning Kazakhstan's national brands by engaging a heterogeneous group of international students, with particular emphasis on those from India and Turkey. Although the gender distribution, age range, and geographic diversity offered a picture of the participants, the research recognized the potential for broader representation and strived to strike a balance between practicality and the study's exploratory objectives.

Data Collection Tools

A questionnaire featuring open-ended questions was employed for the collection of qualitative data. The questions were crafted to prompt participants to share their thoughts on Kazakhstan, its national brand, and familiar Kazakh national dishes. The survey featured open-ended questions, such as "What thoughts associate are associated with the word 'Kazakhstan'?", "What elements do you think with the Kazakh brand?", and "What Kazakh national dishes are you familiar with?"

Data Collection Process

The data collection procedure was meticulously devised to provide an effective, comprehensive, and ethically sound approach to obtain valuable insights from international students. The procedure incorporated the following factors, incorporating cutting-edge technological tools and established research practices:

Online Survey Platform: The survey was efficiently administered using Google Forms, to facilitate data collection process. This digital platform offers participants a user-friendly and readily accessible interface, enabling them to engage in the survey at their convenience, regardless of geographical locations or time zones.

In-Depth Responses to Open-Ended Questions: The survey instrument was carefully developed, featuring open-ended questions that allowed respondents to express themselves in their own words. This method, rooted in qualitative research principles, facilitated a thorough examination of participants' perspectives and produced comprehensive insights into international students' perceptions of Kazakhstan's national brands (Gillham, 2000; Spellman, n.d.). *Language Considerations:* To address potential language barriers, the survey was crafted in English. This strategic approach aimed to accommodate a diverse spectrum of participants while minimizing language-related barriers. Respondents who were more comfortable expressing themselves in English could offer open and complete responses when the survey was presented in English (Welch & Piekkari, 2006).

Voluntary Participation: Ethical considerations played a pivotal role in the data collection process. Participants were properly informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary, emphasizing their autonomy and the freedom to decide whether or not to participate. This method ensured that respondents participated willingly and without any form of compulsion. Participants were thoroughly informed about their freedom to withdraw from the survey at any time, without facing any penalties or inconvenience. The study's dedication to participant well-being underscored its ethical integrity and respect for individual choices.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: Preserving the confidentiality of participants was of utmost importance. Respondents were informed that their identities and responses would remain anonymous and confidential. This protected their anonymity and encouraged candid and open discussion of their ideas.

The data collection process created a favorable environment for international students to express their views on Kazakhstan's national brands. This was achieved by leveraging an online survey platform, employing open-ended questions, promoting language inclusivity, and upholding ethical standards. This method ensured that the insights obtained were both valuable and authentic, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the research objectives.

Data Analysis

The robust and widely recognized qualitative research method of thematic analysis was employed to meticulously scrutinize and unveil the intricate insights hidden within the collected data. This methodological approach enabled the systematic examination of participants'

responses, ultimately unveiling underlying themes and patterns that aid in a complete understanding of the research goals.

Thematic Coding: Thematic analysis employs a rigorous coding process to classify and categorize data segments based on recurring themes, ideas, or patterns. In this study, the researcher effectively conducted the task of analyzing the 43 collected responses, identifying key elements, and organizing them into distinct codes.

Established Framework: The study by Braun and Clarke (2006), whose methodology provides an established framework for organizing and analyzing qualitative data, served as an inspirational source for adopting thematic analysis. Utilizing this framework made the analysis process more rigorous and offered a structured approach, enhancing its dependability.

Engagement of an Education Expert as the Primary Researcher: A critical facet of this study involved enlisting an education expert as the principal researcher. The researcher's expertise in qualitative data analysis was instrumental in bringing forth a nuanced understanding, ultimately aiding in the extraction of meaningful insights from the collected responses.

Tabular Organization: The education expert systematically organized the coded data into a tabular format, providing a clear and orderly overview of the emerging themes and sub-themes. This visual layout made it easy to identify patterns and relationships within the data.

The Emergence of Categories: As the coding process advanced, distinct categories and sub-topics naturally emerged. These categories encompassed interconnected data segments, reflecting commonalities and shared opinions among the participants. The hierarchical structure of categories and subtopics effectively illustrated the intricacies of the data.

General Topic Formation: Expanding upon the categorized groups, the researcher synthesized the information to establish overarching general topics. As part of this synthesis, the identification of higher-order themes that encapsulated a deeper conceptual understanding of how international students relate to and perceive Kazakhstan's national brands was undertaken.

The researcher navigated the complexity of the qualitative data, condensing it into pertinent insights through a structured approach to thematic analysis. This analytical process unearthed underlying themes, patterns, and connections within participants' responses, guided by an expert's perspective and the methodological framework provided by Braun and Clarke. This comprehensive approach illuminated the diverse ways in which international students engage

with and perceive Kazakhstan's national brands, thus advancing a deeper understanding of the research objectives.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher played a pivotal role in study design, data collection, and implementation of thematic analysis for data analysis. Leveraging their expertise in the field of education, the researcher adeptly categorized and interpreted the responses to yield meaningful insights.

Results

Based on the responses to the question "What thoughts do you have connected with the word 'Kazakhstan'?" as shown Table 1, the following common themes were identified: nature, country, culture, and history. Responses such as "No more idea regarding this, I took it just as a name of a place," "Don't know," "Good," and "Yes" were excluded from the thematic analysis. The information is conveniently presented in Table 1 for better understanding.

Table 1

Thematic Analysis of the Association of Respondents to the Word "Kazakhstan"

№	What thoughts do you have connected with the word "Kazakhstan"?	Preliminary broad topics	Broad topics
1	No more idea regarding this i took it just as a name of place; Don't know; Good (f=3); Yes (f=2)	no association, neutral response (f=8)	-
2	land of the wanderers	Travel (f=1)	Nature (f=11)
3	Nation of apple and horses; It's popular horse and its beauty; Horses; Wild horses	Apple (f=1), horse (f=4)	
4	Natural beauty;	Natural beauty (1)	Country (f=17)
5	It is a blessing to stay there. Its a peaceful place with an awesome climate; Kazakhstan is a beautiful place worth to b seen; beautiful country; beautiful mountains snowfall; beautiful place;	Climate, quiet place (f=1), snow (1 f=), mountains (f=1), beautiful places (f=2)	
6	ITz ppl have got nice carving and I'm so excited to see this and itz ppl; Country with different types of people and different types of food;	People (f=2), food (f=1)	
7	Almaty City;	City (f=1)	
8	A powerful nation; Kazakhstan is a very beautiful country; Republic of Kazakhstan; A beautiful country;	Country (f=4)	
9	Land of Kazakhs;	Territory (f=1)	
10	All inhabitants or citizens of Kazakhstan;	People (f=1)	
11	I think that Kazakhstan is very famous for doctoral study and have good	Knowledge (f=9)	

	environment for international students; Kazakhstan is a very beautiful country they have very good MBBS teaching faculties and colleges; M studying in Kazakhstan and this is best; MBBS; As a MBBS student; Make a better doctor Mbbs; They have very good MBBS teaching faculties and colleges		
12	Kazak language is much similar to our mother tongue (Hindi language) that the main point of enjoying Kazakh language.	Language (f=2)	
13	Brother country, same nation, friends	Friendship	
14	Refugees	Refugees	
15	Beautiful and traditional place	Nature / Traditions	Culture
16	Kazakhs will often forbid you to leave their house unless you have eaten at least some of their bread, even if it is just a small crumb.	Customs and traditions	
17	Culture of Kazakhstan	Culture	
18	1) The United States was a critical player in assisting Kazakhstan to get rid of its strategic nuclear weapons stockpile and dismantle its nuclear weapons infrastructure between 1991 and 1996 through the provision of Nunn-Lugar Comprehensive Threat Reduction (CTR) assistance; Ottoman Empire (2); The name "Kazakh" comes from the ancient Turkic word qaz, "to wander", reflecting the Kazakhs' nomadic culture. ... The Persian suffix -stan means "land" or "place of", so Kazakhstan can be literally translated as "land of the wanderers". The capital is Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana, Aqmola, and Tselinograd), in the north-central part of the country. Kazakhstan, formerly a constituent (union) republic of the U.S.S.R., declared independence on December 16, 1991.	Historical event (f=2)	History

Given that the questionnaire was tailored for students in the medical field, their responses regarding the connection to the term "Kazakhstan" were linked to their profession. This stems from the possibility that students may be less acquainted with information outside their educational institution. Subthemes such as people, country, language, education, territory, and city were combined, with up to 17 respondents providing answers related to the general theme "Country." It's worth noting that the climate in different regions of Kazakhstan exhibits significant variations, including deserts, cooler northern regions, and hotter southern regions.

The country boasts numerous cities within its borders. Subthemes highlighted by the respondents, including country, city, nature, climate, and snow, suggest that their awareness primarily centers around the Southern region, encompassing the city of Almaty and its surrounding areas. Indeed, the name of the city "Almaty" itself is closely linked to apples and snow-capped mountains. As the largest city in Kazakhstan, with a diverse population representing various nationalities, international students associate this region with a variety of people.

The answers of eight respondents were consolidated under the theme of "Nature." The vast steppes symbolize the nomadic people. Historically, nomads would migrate to grazing lands

during the summer and establish winter camps during the winter, sustaining themselves through animal husbandry. Although times have changed, Kazakhs still associate the steppe with notions of spaciousness and freedom.

The results for the question "What do you think belongs to the Kazakh brand?" are as follows. A substantial number of respondents expressed their lack of knowledge regarding the national brands of the Kazakh people. This is evident from the frequency of the "don't know" response to the question.

Considering international students typically arrive in Kazakhstan via air travel, they mentioned companies such as Air Astana and SCAT as notable brands. In their responses, respondents also highlighted their reliance on Internet and communication services provided by Kazakhtelecom JSC. International students, being aware of Kazakhstan's rich natural resources, included entities like Kazakhmys, KazMunay, as well as commodities such as oil, gas, iron in their responses.

Table 2

Respondents' Associations with Kazakhstani Brand

№	What do you think belongs to the Kazakh brand?	Subtheme	Common topic
1	Woolen clothes	Cloth (4)	Culture
2	Horses and apples		
3	Kazakh have the finest quality of cloth		
4	Woolen cloth and fruits		
5	Levi's	Clothes (3)	Culture
6	Kazakhstan culture brand	Culture (3)	
7	Culture		
8	Cultural dimensions		
9	Kazakhtelecom	Communication (5)	Communication
10		Air (4), and rail traffic (3)	
	Air Astana SCAT airlines Kazakhstan Temir zholy		
11	Kazakhmys	Company (2)	Natural products
12	KazMunayGas		
13	Oil, coal, iron	Nature (3)	
14	Kazakhstan is famous for oil, minerals, and natural gases.		
15	Dominated hydrocarbon industry		Animals and fruits
16	Beef	Animals (2)	

17	Horse		
18	Fruits	Plants (1)	
19	Almaty	City (2)	State
20	Kazakhstan is the world's largest landlocked country, and the ninth-largest country in the world. It has a population of 18.8 million residents and has one of the lowest population densities in the world, at fewer than six people per square kilometer (15 people per sq mi). Since 1997, the capital is Nur-Sultan, formerly known as Astana. It was moved from Almaty, the country's largest city.	Country (3)	
21	Kazakhstan is unique in that its people, the Kazakhs, did not form the majority of the population upon independence in 1991. Currently, the northern part of the country is populated mostly with Ukrainian and Russian majorities while Kazakhs are more prevalent in the south. Kazakhstan is famous for its population of wild horses. It's believed that man first tamed and rode horses here. 6. Coffee is often served very sweet in Kazakhstan - taking 10 spoons of sugar is not unusual. Kazakhstan has a well-articulated culture based on the nomadic pastoral economy of the inhabitants. Islam was introduced to Kazakhstan in the 7th to 12th centuries... Kazakh culture is largely influenced by the Turkic nomadic lifestyle. Kazakh culture seems also to be strongly influenced by the nomadic Scythians.		
22	The tsars effectively ruled over most of the territory belonging to what is now the Republic of Kazakhstan. The Russian Empire introduced		
23	Good	Good (2)	Unrecorded answers
24	Awesome		
25	I don't know any Kazakh brand.	I don't know (8)	
26	Kazakh have finest quality of cloth		
27	I have no idea		
28	As honest I don't know yet any Kazakh brand		
29	I don't have any idea about that ...		
30			
	I don't know about.		
31	Nothing		
32	I have no idea about this at present time		

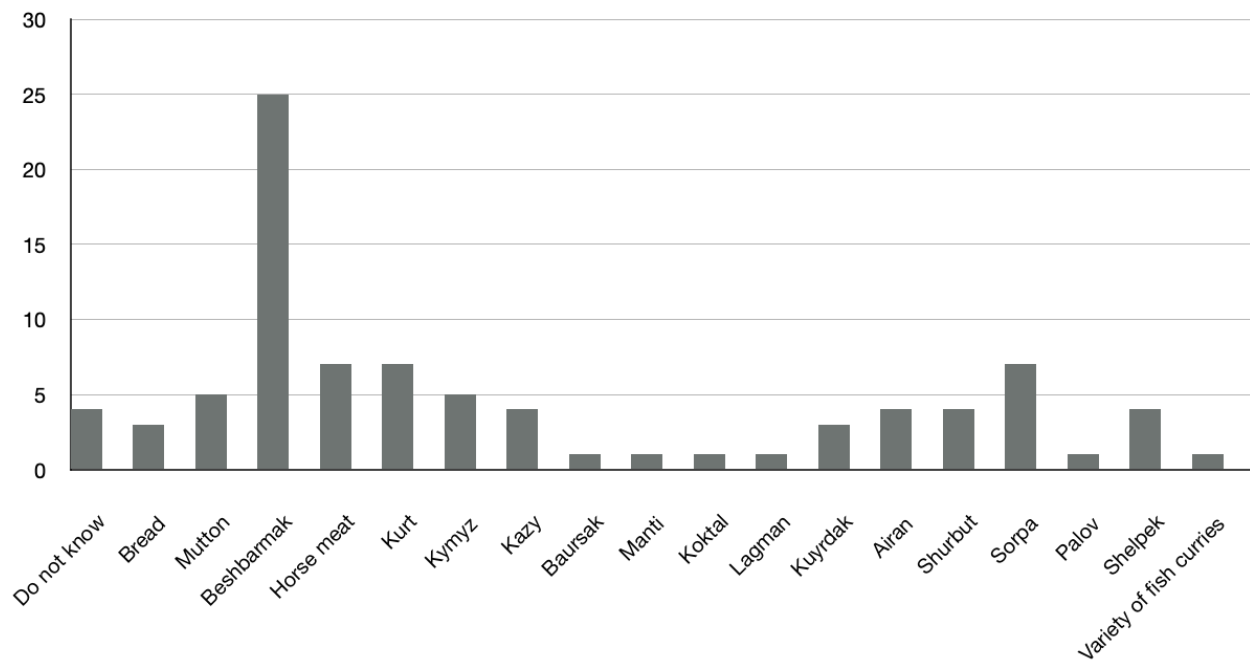
From the response, "Kazakhs will often forbid you to leave their house unless you have eaten at least some of their bread, even if it is just a small crumb," one can observe the profound hospitality of Kazakh culture. When a guest enters their home, they will invariably offer tea and food. If the guest declines, they will persist, encouraging them to "Try some bread." As this response was provided by only one respondent, it suggests that not all international students are familiar with Kazakh national traditions.

The responses to the question "What Kazakh national dishes do you know?" have been categorized as follows: Meat dishes: Beshbarmak - 31, Sorpa - 7, Kuirdak - 3, Lamb - 6, Kazy -

3. Dairy products: Kumys - 5, Ayran - 4, Shubat - 4, Kurt - 6. Flour dishes: Bread - 3, Boursaki - 1, Shelppek - 4.

Figure 1

Views of Respondents on Kazakh National Cuisine



As beshbarmak is frequently prepared as a traditional Kazakh national dish, it is the most frequently mentioned response among the respondents. Among the meat dishes, horse meat (kuyrdak) is also popular, with its nutritional value being acknowledged.

From the responses of international students, it is evident that the word "kurt" stands out among the dairy dishes as a signature Kazakh food, used alongside the word "kazy," as kurt is less prevalent in other countries. Beverages such as kumys and shubat, traditionally consumed by the Kazakh nomads engaged in animal husbandry, are currently being promoted internationally as representative of Kazakhstan's culinary heritage.

The options "Pilaf, the world-famous rice dish, is considered a sign of wealth and prosperity in Kazakhstan. ... Manti... Koktal... Lagman" and "pilaf, and a variety of fish curries" were considered incorrect responses because the listed dishes do not belong to the Kazakh national cuisine.

Responses such as "No," "I knew this because it's my task to right on modern Kazakh," "It's good city," "None," and "Nothing" were excluded from consideration. The associations made in response to the question "What national dish of Kazakhstan do you know?" were reasonably accurate. This is because beshbarmak, kurt, shelvek, and saumal are indeed prominent examples of Kazakh national cuisine.

Discussion

The data analysis findings revealed numerous similar themes among the participants, based on their responses to the question "What thoughts do you have connected with the word 'Kazakhstan'?" Thematic coding was employed in the research to uncover recurring patterns, leading to the identification of themes such as nature, country, culture, and history. Responses with minimal or no relevance, neutrality, or substantive content were excluded from the thematic analysis. Table 1 shows how these findings were methodically organized to enhance comprehensibility. Moreover, the study delved into participants' associations with the Kazakhstani brand. Subthemes, including culture, communication, nature, and history emerged through thematic analysis, offering a comprehensive understanding of how respondents perceived the Kazakh brand.

The information depicted various aspects of Kazakhstan's identity, including cultural features, communication services, natural resources, and historical events. Table 2 effectively summarizes the respondents' relationships, providing a clear picture of their viewpoints. Additionally, the study highlighted the importance of the medical field's impact on participants' responses to the question regarding their associations with Kazakhstan.

This could be attributed to the respondents' potential limited exposure to information beyond their educational realm. Subthemes like people, country, language, education, territory, and city were notably amalgamated into the overarching theme of "Country."

Thematic analysis unveiled notable regional knowledge, with a focus on the southern region, particularly Almaty, renowned for its apples and picturesque landscapes. Thematic analysis categorized responses regarding Kazakh national dishes into specific groups, such as meat dishes, dairy products, and flour-based foods. The prevalence of "beshbarmak," "kuirdak" (horse meat), "kurt," and traditional beverages such as "kumys" and "shubat" demonstrated participants' familiarity with these characteristic elements of Kazakh cuisine. To maintain accuracy, responses

that did not align with authentic Kazakh cuisine were excluded. Through the identification of associations related to the national brand, the potential extent of engagement of international students studying the Kazakh language in intercultural interactions with the local population has been determined.

In the process of admitting and acclimating international students to a new environment, language acquisition and familiarity with the unique traits of the host nation, including national brands, play a vital role in facilitating intercultural communication. Especially within the context of learning the Kazakh language, cultural and national characteristics provide opportunities to explore the use of specific phrases, idioms, and other linguistic phenomena with figurative meanings. To effectively establish associations while adapting to a new environment, the guidance of a teacher is crucial. It was inferred from the responses of the survey participants that the association with "Kazakhstan" was shaped during their Kazakh language lessons. This is likely because the language curriculum may include topics such as Almaty city, beshbarmak, kurt, and saumal.

Given that a significant portion of the Indian community are primarily vegetarians who do not consume mare's milk, this may potentially result in a negative association for them. However, it is important to note that interviews focusing this aspect were not conducted. Despite the potential for negative associations stemming from cultural differences, it is clear that these associations persist in memory. Based on the research findings, respondents' associations were primarily shaped by their personal experiences, leading them to recognize objects as brands that they had personally encountered. The students' interactions with the local population are limited, and their knowledge is confined to what they have acquired through their Kazakh language lessons.

Given that this survey was conducted in a post-pandemic context, it can be inferred that the students may not have had the opportunity to fully acquaint themselves with the traditions of the local population.

Kazakh national brands are associated with cultural values, exemplified by dombyra, shapan, boursak, and others (Ibraimova et al., 2023). Analyzing the respondents' answers, two distinct conclusions can be drawn:

- 1) Associations with national brands stem from individual interpretations made by the respondents regarding their everyday experiences, behaviors, and opinions about the educational institution and the city.

2) Associations are shaped through individual explorations by the respondents and the knowledge they directly acquire during their Kazakh language lessons. Exploring the meaning of words and concepts across various cultures is generally relevant at all levels of linguistic proficiency. Engaging in exercises that entail changing perspectives or assuming different roles is essential for acquiring a language in a culturally integrated manner.

Language learning presents a unique opportunity unlike any other subject, allowing individuals to transcend their own identities and delve into alternative ones. Embracing unfamiliar roles, the inherent detachment in international languages can provide a sense of liberation (Dlaska, 2000). If verbal associations are indicative of knowledge and material well-being (Kozlowski et al., 2019), then based on the respondents' answers, it can be observed that, in most cases, they associate the word "Kazakhstan" with the medical university where they study. The efficacy of integrating language learning with the study of culture has been previously established. Fang Gao aptly describes this relationship by stating, "Culture is like an iceberg in that only a small part of it is visible, and the larger invisible part can cause chaos." Therefore, attempting to encompass all information related to culture and a nation can pose challenges for language learners. However, by incorporating national brands as examples in language learning, the learner's focus becomes more precise and targeted.

The responses gathered from participants offer valuable insights into the cultural aspects of Kazakhstan they know. These aspects can be effectively utilized in language teaching to promote cross-cultural understanding and language acquisition. Here, we delve into the prominent cultural themes identified and explore their possibilities for integration into language education.

The inclusion of woolen garments signifies an acknowledgment of Kazakhstan's traditional clothing and textile heritage. This can be leveraged to introduce vocabulary related to clothing and materials. Furthermore, delving into the relevance of woolen clothes in Kazakh culture enables discussions about the historical, climatic, and cultural factors contributing to their prevalence. The reverence for horses and their significance in Kazakhstan's history mirrors the nation's enduring nomadic heritage. This theme can engage language learners in discussions about historical traditions, human-animal relationships, and the nomadic way of life. It also serves as a basis for expanding vocabulary, encompassing terms related to animals, transportation, and daily activities. Participants who exhibit knowledge of Kazakhstan's culture

and its cultural characteristics demonstrate an understanding of the diverse elements that shape the country's identity.

This feature can be employed to teach students about various aspects of Kazakh culture, including traditions, customs, food, and social conventions. It encourages students to explore intercultural communication and cultural similarities between their own culture and that of Kazakhstan. The inclusion of Air Astana, SCAT airlines, and Kazakhstan Temir Zholy (rail traffic) illustrates the members' comprehension of Kazakhstan's transportation system. This facilitates the teaching of terminology related to travel, various modes of transportation, and navigation. Discussions can encompass geographical aspects, tourism, and economic facets of transportation networks. Responses regarding Kazakhmys, KazMunayGas, and Kazakhstan's engagement in the hydrocarbon industry highlight an understanding of the country's important natural resources and industries. This applies to geography, energy production, and environmental factors courses. Natural resources, energy, and extraction processes offer specific vocabulary for language learners to delve into. Kazakhstan's diverse population, history, and unique characteristics offer a platform for teaching about multiculturalism and historical events. Language learners can explore the nation's demographic evolution, its journey to independence, and interactions among diverse ethnic groups. This promotes discussions on tolerance, identity, and the importance of understanding diverse perspectives.

Conclusion

The significance of this research lies in validating the incorporation of national brands in language acquisition. In this context, associations tied to national brands were identified among international students. The findings of this study can be employed in language instruction for international students and in fostering cross-cultural connections.

The national brand is an intrinsic concept of a particular nation, formed in connection with its culture, traditions, and knowledge. It develops over time, influenced by the nation's comprehension and reflections. The integration of national brands into language education not only enhances language learning but also helps in delineating the mental characteristics and image of the indigenous population. In particular, the introduction of Kazakh as a state language commenced with a foundation in national brands, driven by the necessity of developing a contemporary and effective methodology for teaching and mastering Kazakh. To accomplish

this, student associations linked to national brands were identified. By determining whether these associations were positive or negative in nature, an analysis of the effectiveness of national brands in students' language education was conducted. The survey results show that international students possess limited information about the Kazakhstani brands. In other words, we have observed that students who come to Kazakhstan for education may not be highly informed about the country. Hence, we have acknowledged the necessity of not only teaching the language to international citizens but also acquainting them with the culture, traditions, and national brands of this country. The effectiveness is enhanced when language instruction is rooted in national brands. This not only laid the groundwork for establishing a methodology for teaching the Kazakh language through national brands but also underscored the need for systematizing and advancing this approach. Associations, in general, exert a significant influence on students' intercultural communication, molding their perceptions, attitudes, expectations, and understanding of various cultures.

Cultivating conscious and precise associations, challenging stereotypes, and nurturing cultural sensitivity are crucial steps in enabling successful intercultural communication among students. Language learning encompasses not only grammar and vocabulary but also an appreciation of the culture and perspective of native speakers. The sociocultural aspect of linguistics, which encompasses national brands and cultural characteristics, holds a pivotal role in language learning.

When teaching a language, it is essential to consider the culture and national identity of the country. International students may encounter various challenges in intercultural communication as they adapt to a new environment. One of these challenges is the impact of pre-existing associations about this country on language they are learning

Consequently, associations play a crucial role in intercultural communication and language learning. When employed effectively, they facilitate the process of learning a new language and enhance the retention of fresh vocabulary and cultural ideas. Nevertheless, it's crucial to recognize the potential limitations and biases inherent in associations to ensure the accurate use of language and to foster meaningful connections among people from diverse cultures.

Excessive reliance on associations can result in language misuse and impede learning progress. Moreover, associations can perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions, which in turn hinder effective intercultural relationships.

This study could serve as the starting point for future research endeavors. National brands necessitate investigation in the learning process to formulate a tailored language acquisition methodology. Such research will furnish the fundamental information required for mastering Kazakh language skills through the use of national brands.

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Ethical approval

Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Kazakh State Women's Pedagogical University. The procedures in this study comply with the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration.

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