

Influence of Cultural Tourism on Destination Loyalty Mediation of Cultural Distance with Reference to Foreign Tourists

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Abstract

Cultural tourism has emerged as a vital component of the global tourism sector, characterized by visitors seeking immersive experiences in destinations' tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Additionally, cultural distance, the cultural variation between tourists' homes and host countries, has been identified as a significant matter that reshapes visitor behaviour, motivation, and satisfaction levels. Recent studies have clearly identified the empirical and practical gaps related to cultural tourism and cultural distance, highlighting the different segments of tourism as a business scope and the impact on tourist loyalty behaviour. Sri Lanka demonstrates a destination where cultural tourism has become a cornerstone of the national economy. The economic impact of tourism in Sri Lanka is substantial, as evidenced by its national-level statistics covering its contribution to the economy, regional competitiveness, country branding strategies, and issues related to immediate stakeholders. Having said that, this study employed a deductive approach to conceptualize the variable connection, and a quantitative research strategy was applied to examine how cultural tourism impacts the destination loyalty behaviour of foreign tourists, while also investigating the mediating role of cultural distance. Accordingly, data were collected through a survey administered to 230 foreign tourists visiting various cultural attractions in Sri Lanka, resulting in 164 valid responses. The survey measured three

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primary constructs: cultural tourism, cultural distance, and destination loyalty. The collected data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25, utilizing descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and mediation analysis. The findings revealed a strong positive relationship between cultural tourism and destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.770$), indicating that high-quality cultural tourism significantly enhances tourists' loyalty to Sri Lanka. Additionally, cultural tourism was found to have a significant but weaker positive influence on cultural distance ($\beta = 0.225$). Cultural distance also positively affected destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.251$), suggesting that perceived cultural differences can enhance the uniqueness and authenticity of the tourist experience, thereby fostering loyalty. This study confirms all four hypotheses: cultural tourism, cultural distance, and destination loyalty. The paper presents managerial implications with reference to tourism sector strategies and the roles of its stakeholders.

Keywords: *Cultural Tourism, Destination Loyalty, Cultural Distance, Sri Lanka, Tourist Behavior*

1. Introduction

Cultural tourism has emerged as a significant segment of the global tourism industry, attracting millions of visitors annually to experience the heritage, traditions, and ways of life of diverse cultures worldwide. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UN Tourism, 2024) defines cultural tourism as "a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination" (UN Tourism, 2024). Destination loyalty relates to a tourist's inclination to revisit a place and recommend it to others (Chen & Gursoy, 2001). Tourists are more inclined to make return trips, spend money and spread word of mouth about the destination (Oppermann, 2000). One factor that could impact the link between cultural

tourism and destination loyalty is variance. Sri Lanka, often referred to as the "Pearl of the Indian Ocean ", is famous for its history that dates back over 2500 years. Its strategic location along trade routes has resulted in a blend of Arab and European influences that have shaped a diverse cultural landscape, attracting visitors from around the world. The importance of tourism in Sri Lanka cannot be underestimated (Anandasayanan et al., 2020).

Cultural tourism influences tourist satisfaction, the perception of destinations, and visitor loyalty. Past studies have consistently demonstrated that enjoyable cultural experiences play a crucial role in enhancing tourist satisfaction and increasing the likelihood of repeat visits. Chen & Rahman, (2018) revealed that the quality of heritage tourism experiences significantly affects how visitors perceive value, satisfaction levels and their future intentions. Similarly, another study by Rudmi et al., (2016) found a connection between experiences and feelings of attachment to a place as well as overall satisfaction with it. Loyalty towards a destination has also been extensively studied in the field of tourism research. In the tourism context, destination loyalty is commonly measured through intentions to revisit and recommend the destination to others. Suhartanto et al. (2018) define cultural distance as the degree to which the culture of the home country differs from that of the host country. Studies have shown that cultural distance can affect tourist motivation, satisfaction, and behaviour (Chiang et al., 2015). However, research findings on the effects of distance have varied. Some research indicates that when there are variations, a place may become more attractive as people seek unique experiences (Wang & Leou, 2015).

Additionally, previous studies have often treated cultural tourism as a homogeneous construct, without considering the diverse types of cultural experiences (heritage sites, living culture, festivals) that may have differential effects on tourist perceptions and behaviours. A deeper

examination of various cultural tourism is needed to provide actionable insights for destination managers.

The primary focus of this study is to explore how cultural tourism affects destination loyalty in Sri Lanka, specifically examining the role of cultural differences. While there is existing research on tourism and destination loyalty, there is still a gap in understanding how these factors come together for tourists visiting places like Sri Lanka. Additionally, the challenges faced by Sri Lanka's tourism sector emphasise the importance of attracting high-valued tourists via cultural tourists, whilst examining the strategic importance of infrastructure, interpretation quality and sustainable tourism practices. This understanding is crucial for developing effective strategies to enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of Sri Lanka's cultural tourism offerings.

Furthermore, there are four secondary objectives, helping to answer the above main research objective. It aims to explore how engaging in cultural elements influences tourists' loyalty, encouraging repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth. Additionally, it seeks to understand how cultural tourism affects the perceived cultural distance, the differences tourists feel between their own culture and that of the destination. Since cultural distance can either hinder or enhance tourists' satisfaction, examining its impact on destination loyalty is crucial. Furthermore, this research investigates whether cultural distance acts as a mediator, explaining how cultural tourism ultimately influences loyalty.

Therefore, the main research purpose of this study has been developed to address these identified gaps via investigating how cultural tourism influences destination loyalty through cultural distance with reference to foreign tourists in the Sri Lankan context.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

In Sri Lanka, cultural tourism plays a role in the country's tourist offerings. The nation's rich artistic legacy, which includes eight UNESCO World Heritage Sites, forms a base for developing tourism. From cities like Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa to revered milestones such as Kandy's Temple of the Tooth Relic, Sri Lanka boasts a range of cultural attractions that attract both local and international visitors. Cultural tourism in Sri Lanka extends beyond visiting sites to encompass aspects of local culture, including traditional arts, festivals, food traditions, and practices such as Ayurveda. These elements create an experience for tourists at different levels (Ranasinghe et al., 2020).

The Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (2023) has prioritised enhancing repeat visits and positive recommendations in its tourism agenda. However, building destination loyalty in Sri Lanka faces challenges due to various crises, including the civil war, natural disasters, and recent events like the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic (Priyangika, 2022). These events have highlighted the weaknesses in the tourism industry and underscored the importance of enhancing destination commitment. As Sri Lanka gradually enters the tourism industry, it faces competitors from neighbouring countries. Such a competitive environment calls for identifying factors that affect perceived tourist loyalty towards Sri Lanka. Some prior research has been done on destination loyalty in Sri Lanka. Ranasinghe (2020) explored the link between destination image, tourist satisfaction and loyalty intention in the context of Sri Lankan tourism. Wu (2016) provides a foundational perspective on the intersection of experiential marketing and tourism loyalty, particularly within the niche of heritage sites.

The concept of cultural distance was initially defined by Hofstede (1980) through four dimensions. The other two dimensions are power distance, individualism, collectivism, masculinity, femininity and uncertainty avoidance. Hofstede (2001) expanded this framework to include two additional dimensions. On Hofstede's cultural dimensions, it has a low score for masculinity-femininity and a high score for individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation and indulgence-restraint. These dimensions can be used to analyse and identify cultural variations between two different countries.

Understanding the impact of differences on tourism experiences and outcomes relies heavily on measuring distance. Hofstede's Cultural Distance Index: This index, which is based on Hofstede's dimensions, quantifies the overall variations between countries across different cultural aspects. It is commonly utilised in tourism studies for its extensive coverage of countries (Ng et al. 2007).

2.2. Conceptual Framework

A comprehensive review of existing literature on destination loyalty, cultural tourism, and cultural distance developed a conceptual framework for this study. Figure 3.1 diagrams the proposed relationships between the key variables of this study.

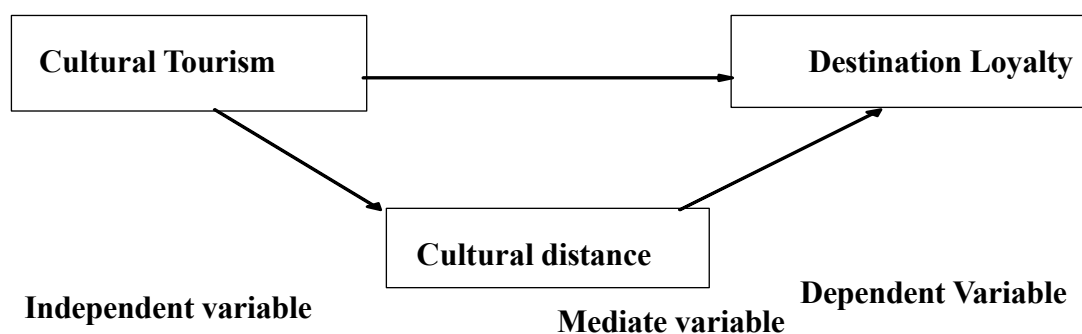


Figure 1: *Conceptual Framework*

Source: Author Constructed (2024)

Cultural tourism has a direct impact on the destination loyalty framework. It also finds that cultural distance, a factor mediating the impact of cultural tourism on destination loyalty, is an intervening variable. The conceptualisation of cultural tourism thus permits an examination of the direct effect of cultural tourism on loyalty and its indirect impact through cultural distance. The framework's grounding in established theories, including Social Exchange Theory (Emerson, 2003) and Cultural Distance Theory (Hofstede, 1980), enables an understanding of the relationships among tourists, destinations, and cultural differences.

2.3. Hypotheses Development

2.3.1. H1: Cultural tourism significantly influences destination loyalty with reference to foreign tourists.

This is based on past research that repeatedly shows cultural tourism matters for loyalty. For instance, Nuskiya et al. (2020) discovered that the effect of quality cultural experiences in a destination was a significant driver for the intention to visit, revisit, and recommend a destination. According to Samarathunga and Gamage (2020), Sri Lanka offers a range of attractions, from ancient archaeological sites to vibrant living traditions. Bandusena et al. (2023) explore how Sri Lanka's intangible cultural heritage can contribute to its tourism sector, focusing on crafts, performing arts, and religious celebrations. This study emphasises the significance of safeguarding and promoting treasures as part of a holistic cultural tourism approach. Nevertheless, cultural tourism also encounters obstacles. According to Chandrasiri and Wijesundara (2022), issues such as the commercialisation of culture, degradation of heritage sites, and unequal distribution of tourism benefits among communities pose significant challenges. Their study showed that tourists who had evaluated their cultural experiences as excellent were more likely to be repeat visitors.

2.3.2. H2: Cultural tourism has a significant impact on cultural distance, particularly in relation to foreign tourists.

The hypothesis of this study relies on the idea that tourists' exposure to cultural tourism can lead to perceptions of cultural distance. Immersive cultural experiences may either heighten awareness of cultural differences or, if the nature of the experience is correct, can bridge cultural gaps, wrote Ng et al. (2007). Chen & Rahman (2018) classified tourists based on the importance of cultural experiences in their travel decisions and the depth of experience they seek. By highlighting tourists' motivations and engagement levels, this classification suggests the importance of diverse approaches in developing and marketing cultural tourism products (Liu, 2014).

2.3.3. H3: Cultural distance has a significant influence on destination loyalty of foreign tourists.

Previous studies have explored the relationship between cultural distance and destination loyalty but are mixed. Perceived cultural distance may negatively influence tourists' intention to revisit a destination (Laksiri, 2007). Ng et al. (2007) surveyed the impact of cultural distance on destination choice, behaviour and perceived satisfaction. From their study, they have identified and concluded that cultural strangeness could be a pull factor for tourists or a push factor for other travellers. Dissanayake & Koththagoda (2017) examined the variation of cultural distance during a trip. Their study indicates that perceived cultural similarity increases with familiarity with the culture of tourists' destinations.

2.3.4. H4: Cultural distance mediates the impact of cultural tourism on destination loyalty of foreign tourists.

Chen & Rahman, (2018) discussed how cultural distance affects many aspects of tourists' behaviour, such as choice of a destination and satisfaction with a visit. Based on their findings, they argue that cultural differences can positively impact satisfaction with tourism and the overall quality of the experience. However, they may have a positive or neutral impact if the tourist travels with the right expectations or motivation. In their study on cultural tourism, Taskeen et al. (2022) suggested that visitors from culturally dissimilar countries tend to have significant cultural tourism experiences, and they delve deeper in their quest for cultural interaction. In the context of tourism experiences, Yessimova et al. (2023) identified that larger cultural differences can lead to a higher level of perceived authenticity and uniqueness of the experience, while at the same time posing some difficulties in communication and cultural adjustment. These results highlight the significance of cultural differences as drivers of loyalty results. Huang & Crotts (2019) studied the effect of culture on exchange transactions between tourists and sellers in China. From their research, they realised that where there was a greater inequality in culture, there was a greater appreciation of such interactions; therefore, cultural differences could lead to higher value added to cultural products or even tourism (Liu, 2014).

3. Methodology

3.1 Measures

This study examines three main key variables, Cultural Tourism, Destination Loyalty, and Cultural Distance, along with their respective dimensions, indicators, and sources.

The variable Cultural Tourism is divided into two main dimensions: Experience Quality and Cultural Attractions. Under Experience Quality, the indicators include authenticity seeking, cultural learning, and local interaction, as referenced by Nuskiya (2017). These indicators

emphasize the tourists' desire for genuine cultural experiences and meaningful engagement with the local community. The Cultural Attractions dimension focuses on motivation-related indicators, such as heritage interest, participation, culinary expertise, and observation of local life, as identified by Richards (2018). These highlight the various cultural elements that attract tourists and motivate their visits.

The second variable, Destination Loyalty, is categorized into Behavioural Loyalty and Attitudinal Loyalty. Behavioural Loyalty includes indicators such as recommendation intention, positive word-of-mouth, and encouragement to others, as outlined in the work of Hu, Tuou, and Liu (2019). These indicators reflect the actions tourists take to promote a destination. Attitudinal Loyalty, on the other hand, encompasses revisit intention, preference, loyalty feelings, emotional attachment, and commitment, as cited by Zeithaml and Berry (1988). These indicators capture the emotional and psychological bonds tourists develop with a destination, which influence their loyalty beyond mere behavior.

Lastly, the variable Cultural Distance is described through the dimension of Perceived Cultural Difference. This dimension encompasses various indicators, including the overall cultural gap (Ng, Lee, and Soutar, 2007), language barrier (Laksiri, 2007), social norms, religious practices, lifestyle differences, values and beliefs, behavioural understanding, and perceived cultural gap. These indicators collectively measure the perceived differences between the tourists' own culture and that of the destination, which can affect their experience and loyalty. Together, this table provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the relationships between cultural tourism, cultural distance, and destination loyalty. The questionnaire offers that questions are asked, so the responses must be rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 means strongly disagree, and five means strongly agree).

3.2. Research Design

A positivism-oriented research philosophy was employed, which posits that reality is objective and can be observed and measured independently of the researcher (Saunders et al., 2019). The study uses a similar approach to examining these cultural tourism connections through quantitative measures and statistical analysis. The research approach was deductive, beginning with general theories and concepts and ending with unique observations and findings. In this method, researchers formulate hypotheses based on existing, time-tested theories and test them using statistical data. (Saunders et al., 2019). This study is suitable for the deductive approach mainly because it tests well-established theories of cultural tourism in Sri Lanka. The research strategy was the survey method. A survey is the most effective way of collecting standardised, extensive population data (Kothari, 1990). This study selected a quantitative methodological choice; quantitative research tests the hypothesised relations between variables. The study design employed a cross-sectional time horizon, meaning that data were gathered at a single point in time.

3.3. Population and Sample

The target population included all foreign tourists visiting cultural attractions in Sri Lanka during the study period. In 2023, the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA, 2023) reported that approximately 767,913 foreign tourists visited Sri Lanka, with an estimated 60% (460,748 foreign tourists) engaging in cultural tourism (Laksiri, 2007).

The convenience sampling technique was employed to obtain companies from various cultural attractions in Sri Lanka, with a sample size of 200. To account for potential non-responses or invalid questionnaires, the target sample size was set at 150.

Practical methodological decision to use convenience sampling in major cultural attractions, due to the problems of the significant change of transient visitors. Since the research is limited to select locations in Sri Lanka, a sample of 164 represents a diverse enough cross-section of tourists to identify a significant tourist trend without incurring excessive costs and time required for strictly random probability sampling.

The convenience sampling technique was employed to obtain companies from different cultural attractions in Sri Lanka. The country's cultural attractions are divided into five central regions: Ancient Cities (Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa), Hill Country (Kandy, Nuwara Eliya), the southern coast (Galle), the Western Province (Colombo), and the Cultural Triangle (Sigiriya, Dambulla). Within each tourism hub, the researcher collected data. This approach ensured that the sample was representative of the diverse cultural offerings in Sri Lanka.

Primary data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire. This method was chosen for its ability to efficiently gather standardised data from a large sample (Fowler, 2014). The questionnaire was available in English.

4. Data Analysis and Presentation

The demographic profile of the 164 survey respondents is revealed in Table 4 below.

Table 2: Demographic Analysis

	Category	Count	Percentage
Gender	Male	108	65.9%
	Female	56	34.1%
Age	18-25	63	38.4%
	26-35	32	19.5%
	36-45	30	18.3%

	46-55	24	14.6%
	56+	15	9.1%
Education	High School or less	65	39.6%
	Bachelor's degree	72	43.9%
	Master's degree	22	13.4%
	Doctorate	1	0.6%
	Other	4	2.4%
First Visit	Yes	104	63.4%
	No	60	36.6%
Length of Stay	Less than 1 week	26	15.9%
	1-2 weeks	107	65.2%
	2-4 weeks	30	18.3%
	More than 4 weeks	1	0.6%
Purpose	Leisure	153	93.3%
	Business	3	1.8%
	Visiting friends/relatives	3	1.8%
	Other	5	3.0%
Country	Russia	83	50.6%
	Austria	25	20.6%
	UK	21	12.8%
	India	18	11.0%
	Others (<10% each)	-	-

Source: Survey data, (2024)

The demographic profile of the 164 survey respondents reveals a predominantly male sample. (65.9%) with the largest age group being 18-25 years (38.4%), followed by the 26-35 years age group (19.5%). Educational attainment indicates that 43.9% hold bachelor's degrees, while

39.6% have a high school education or less. Most participants (63.4%) were first-time visitors staying 1-2 weeks (65.2%), primarily for leisure purposes (93.3%). The sample demonstrates strong international representation, with Russian tourists comprising the largest group (50.6%), followed by Austrian (20.6%), UK (12.8%), and Indian visitors (11.0%), indicating diverse cultural backgrounds that enhance the study's cross-cultural validity for examining cultural tourism and destination loyalty relationships.

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive statistics provide an overview of the central tendencies and dispersions of the main variables.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Variables

	CT	DL	CD
Mean	4.2393	4.2736	3.6791
Median	4.1250	4.3750	3.7500
Mode	4.13	4.38	4.00
Std. Deviation	.50636	.50866	.53144
Variance	.256	.259	.282
Minimum	3.13	3.13	2.25
Maximum	5.00	5.00	5.00

Source: *Survey data, (2024)*

The analysis of cultural tourism (CT), destination loyalty (DL), and cultural distance (CD) revealed insightful patterns among foreign tourists in Sri Lanka. High mean scores for CT

(4.2393) and DL (4.2736) on a 5-point scale indicated generally positive cultural tourism and strong destination loyalty. The slightly lower mean for CD (3.6791) suggested a moderate perceived cultural distance between tourists' home cultures and Sri Lankan culture. Median values (CT: 4.1250, DL: 4.3750, CD: 3.7500) closely align with the means, indicating a symmetrical distribution of responses, which is further supported by similar mode values. The relatively small standard deviations (approximately 0.5) for all variables demonstrated a high consistency in respondents' perceptions and experiences, with responses clustered closely around the mean. The range of reactions spanned from around 3 to 5 for all variables, utilising the full scale and providing comprehensive data spread for analysis.

4.2. Reliability, Validity, Assumptions

The reliability and validity analysis presented demonstrates a robust methodological foundation for the research study examining the relationships between Cultural Tourism (CT), Destination Loyalty (DL), and Cultural Distance (CD)¹. The reliability assessment, using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, reveals exceptional internal consistency across all constructs, with CT achieving a coefficient of 0.910, DL reaching 0.914, and CD obtaining a coefficient of 0.711. These values substantially exceed the conventional threshold of 0.7, with the CT and DL constructs demonstrating particularly excellent reliability above 0.9, while CD shows good reliability. This high internal consistency indicates that the measurement scales are reliable and that the items within each construct effectively measure the same underlying concept.

The validity analysis comprehensively establishes the measurement quality through multiple validation approaches. Construct validity is confirmed through Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values exceeding 0.6 for all constructs (CT: 0.844, DL: 0.862, CD: 0.697) and significant Bartlett's Tests ($p < 0.001$), indicating data suitability for factor analysis. Convergent validity

is strongly supported, with Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values of 0.8875 for CT, 0.8938 for DL, and 0.7260 for CD, all surpassing the 0.5 threshold. The factor loadings generally demonstrate strong item-construct relationships; however, some items in the CD scale exhibit weaker loadings that may warrant further investigation. Discriminant validity is well-established, as evidenced by the square root of AVE for each construct exceeding its correlations with other constructs, confirming that each construct measures distinct phenomena.

The preliminary statistical assumptions analysis validates the appropriateness of the analytical approach for subsequent hypothesis testing¹. Normality is confirmed through skewness and kurtosis values within the acceptable ± 2 range, with P-P plots showing points clustered along the diagonal line. Linearity assessment reveals a strong relationship between CT and DL ($R = 0.770$), indicating that cultural tourism is substantially associated with destination loyalty, while the weaker CD-DL relationship ($R = 0.262$) suggests cultural distance has a more modest influence. Multicollinearity concerns are effectively addressed with tolerance values above 0.1 and VIF values below 10, ensuring reliable estimation of individual variable effects. The homoscedasticity assumption is satisfied through residual plot inspection showing no systematic patterns, confirming constant variance across predicted values and supporting the validity of regression analysis procedures.

4.3. Results of Hypothesis Tests

To test the proposed hypotheses, a quantitative analysis was conducted utilising regression-based models. All statistical analyses, including mediation analysis, were performed using SPSS version 25. This analytical framework provided crucial insights into the relationships between cultural tourism, cultural distance, and destination loyalty among foreign tourists in

Sri Lanka. This part examines each hypothesis and the corresponding regression results in detail.

H1: Cultural tourism has a significant influence on destination loyalty with reference to foreign tourists.

The model summary for H1. The R-value of 0.770 indicates a strong positive correlation between cultural tourism (CT) and destination loyalty (DL). The R Square value of 0.593 suggests that cultural tourism can explain 59.3% of the variance in destination loyalty. This is a substantial proportion, indicating that cultural tourism plays a significant role in shaping tourists' loyalty to Sri Lanka as a destination.

The ANOVA results for H1. The F-statistic of 235.768 with a significance level of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$) indicates that the regression model is statistically significant. This means that cultural tourism significantly predicts destination loyalty, supporting the hypothesis.

Table 4: Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	.964	.215		4.488	.000
	DL	.766	.050	.770	15.355	.000
a. Dependent Variable: CT						

Source: Survey data (2024)

Table 4.20 shows the coefficients for H1. The unstandardised coefficient (B) for DL is 0.766, with a significance level of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). This positive coefficient indicates that for every one-unit increase in cultural tourism, destination loyalty increases by 0.766 units. The high t-value (15.355) further confirms the strong relationship between these variables.

These results support H1, suggesting that positive cultural tourism in Sri Lanka significantly enhances tourists' loyalty to the destination. This aligns with previous research by Chen and Rahman (2018), who emphasised the importance of quality cultural tourism in driving tourist satisfaction and loyalty intentions.

H2: Cultural tourism has a significant influence on cultural distance with reference to foreign tourists.

the model summary for H2. The R value of 0.215 indicates a weak positive correlation between cultural tourism (CT) and cultural distance (CD). The R Square value of 0.046 suggests that only 4.6% of the variance in cultural distance can be explained by cultural tourism. This low percentage indicates that while there is an impact, cultural tourism has a limited influence on perceived cultural distance.

The ANOVA results for H2. The F-statistic of 7.838 with a significance level of 0.006 ($p < 0.05$) indicates that the regression model is statistically significant, albeit with a weaker relationship compared to H1.

Table 5: Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	2.723	.344		7.921	.000
	CT	.225	.081	.215	2.800	.006
a. Dependent Variable: CD						

Source: Survey data (2024)

Table 5 shows the coefficients for H2. The unstandardized coefficient (B) for CT is 0.225, with a significant level of 0.006 ($p < 0.05$). This positive coefficient indicates that for every one unit

increase in cultural tourism, perceived cultural distance increases by 0.225 units. The lower t-value (2.800) compared to H1 further confirms the weaker impact of the independent variable.

H3: Cultural distance has a significant influence on destination loyalty with reference to foreign tourists.

The model summary for H3. The R value of 0.262 indicates a weak to moderate positive correlation between cultural distance (CD) and destination loyalty (DL). The R Square value of 0.069 suggests that 6.9% of the variance in destination loyalty can be explained by cultural distance. ANOVA results for H3. The F-statistic of 11.966 with a significance level of 0.001 ($p < 0.05$) indicates that the regression model is statistically significant.

Table 6: Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	3.350	.270		12.420	.000
	CD	.251	.073	.262	3.459	.001
a. Dependent Variable: DL						

Source: Survey data (2024)

Table 6 shows the coefficients for H3. The unstandardized coefficient (B) for CD is 0.251, with a significance level of 0.001 ($p < 0.05$). This positive coefficient indicates that for every one-unit increase in perceived cultural distance, destination loyalty increases by 0.251 units. The t-value of 3.459 confirms the significance of this relationship.

H4: Cultural distance mediates the impact of cultural tourism on destination loyalty among foreign tourists.

Mediation Analysis

Table 7: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.770 ^a	0.593	0.59	0.32562	0.593	235.768	1	162	0
2	.776 ^b	0.603	0.598	0.32266	0.01	3.986	1	161	0.048
a. Predictors: (Constant), CT									
b. Predictors: (Constant), CT, CD									
Dependent Variable: DL									

Source: Survey data (2024)

In the first model, cultural tourism (CT) alone explains 59.3% of the variance in destination loyalty (R-squared = 0.593). When cultural distance (CD) is added as a mediator in the second model, the R Square increases slightly to 0.603, explaining an additional 1% of the variance in destination loyalty.

Table 8: ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	24.998	1	24.998	235.768	.000 ^b
1 Residual	17.176	162	.106		
Total	42.174	163			
2 Regression	25.413	2	12.706	122.049	.000 ^c
2 Residual	16.761	161	.104		
Total	42.174	163			
a. Dependent Variable: DL					
b. Predictors: (Constant), CT					
c. Predictors: (Constant), CT, CD					

Source: Survey data (2024)

The ANOVA results indicate that both models are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that the inclusion of cultural distance as a mediator enhances the model's predictive power, albeit marginally.

Table 9: Coefficients**Coefficients^a**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	.995	.215		4.627	.000
	CT	.773	.050	.770	15.355	.000
2	(Constant)	.730	.251		2.910	.004
	CT	.751	.051	.748	14.705	.000
	CD	.097	.049	.102	1.996	.048

a. Dependent Variable: DL**Source:** *Survey data (2024)*

Table 9 provides the coefficients for the mediation analysis. In Model 2, both CT ($B = 0.751$, $p < 0.05$) and CD ($B = 0.097$, $p < 0.05$) have significant positive effects on destination loyalty. The slight decrease in the coefficient for CT from Model 1 (0.773) to Model 2 (0.751) suggests that cultural distance mediates the impact of cultural tourism on destination loyalty.

Introducing CD as an additional predictor in the second stage significantly enhanced the model's explanatory power. The R-square increased to 0.893, indicating that CT and CD explain 60.3% of the variance in CP. This represents a substantial improvement of 0.10% in explanatory power ($\Delta R^2 = 0.010$). The F-statistic decreased to 122.049 ($p < .000$), confirming the enhanced model's statistical significance. Notably, while CT's effect remained significant ($B = 0.770$, $\beta = 0.773$, $p < .000$), its magnitude decreased with the introduction of CD, which showed a strong positive effect ($B = 0.748$, $\beta = 0.751$, $p < .000$).

Following Baron and Kenny's (1986) approach, the four steps of mediation analysis were conducted,

Table 4. 10: Testing Mediator Effect of CD on the Impact of CT on DL of Employees

Hypothesis	Tested Steps	Coefficient Value	Sig. Value
H4: Cultural Distance mediates the impact of the Cultural Tourism on Destination Loyalty	Step I (Path a) Predictor: CT, Outcome: DL	0.773	0.000
	Step II (Path b) Predictor: CT, Mediator: CD	0.225	0.006
	Step III (Path c) Mediator: CD, Outcome: DL	0.251	0.001
	Step IV (Path a') Predictor: CT, Mediator: CD, and Outcome: DL	0.097	0.048

Source: *Survey data (2024)*

Step I (Path a): CT significantly predicts DL ($B = 0.773$, $p < 0.000$)

Step II (Path b): CT significantly predicts CD ($B = 0.225$, $p = 0.006$)

Step III (Path c): CD significantly predicts DL ($B = 0.251$, $p = 0.001$)

Step IV (Path a'): When both CT and CD are included as predictors, CT's effect on DL remains significant but slightly reduced ($B = 0.097$, $p = 0.048$)

The results indicate that cultural distance partially mediates the relationship between cultural tourism and destination loyalty. The indirect effect of CT on DL through CD is small but significant ($B = 0.097$, $p = 0.048$), suggesting that a portion of the impact of cultural tourism on destination loyalty is explained by cultural distance. This partial mediation implies that while cultural tourism has a substantial direct effect on destination loyalty, it also has an indirect effect through cultural distance. Tourists' perceptions of cultural differences may influence how their cultural tourism translates into loyalty towards the destination.

4.5. Hypothesis Testing

Table 11: Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses	Slope (Coefficient value)	P value (Sig value)	Decision
H1: Cultural tourism has a significant influence on destination loyalty.	0.766	0.000	Supported
H2: Cultural tourism has a significant influence on cultural distance.	0.225	0.006	Supported
H3: Cultural distance has a significant influence on destination loyalty.	0.251	0.001	Supported
H4: Cultural distance mediates the impact of cultural tourism on destination loyalty.	0.097	0.048	Supported

Source: *Survey data, (2024)*

Table 11 presents the results of hypothesis testing for four relationships, confirming the existence of significant positive relationships between cultural tourism and cultural distance, and destination loyalty. Additionally, the data support the mediation effect of cultural distance, which shows that it plays a critical role in explaining the influence cultural tourism has on a traveller's loyalty to a destination.

5. Discussion

The research findings suggest dynamics of cultural tourism, cultural distance, and destination loyalty in Sri Lanka. By conforming to the hypothesis for each objective, significant results are yielded in both the end products (the objectives) and the networks that establish their relationships (the hypotheses).

Objective 1: Analysing the impact of cultural tourism on destination loyalty

H1 was supported by the study finding a strong positive relationship between cultural tourism and destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.766$, $p < 0.001$). This finding is similar to other research in the area, such as Chen and Rahman (2018), who stressed that quality cultural tourism positively

influences tourist satisfaction and loyalty intention. The results indicate that positive experiences related to cultural tourism in Sri Lanka incredibly lead to tourists' loyalty to the destination by providing authentic and memorable cultural experiences.

Objective 2: Evaluating the impact of cultural tourism on cultural distance

H2 is supported by research, which found a significant, albeit weaker, positive relationship between cultural tourism and cultural distance ($\beta = 0.225$, $p = 0.006$). Such a finding is in harmony with Ng et al.'s (2007) observation that cultures can be more immersive and conscious of their differences. The result shows that the more tourists get involved in the Sri Lankan culture, the more they realise the cultural differences between their home country and Sri Lanka.

Objective 3: Determining the impact of cultural distance on destination loyalty

Supporting H3, this study yields a significant positive relationship between cultural distance and destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.251$, $p = 0.001$). On the other hand, this finding differs from previous studies, such as those by Laksiri (2007), which suggest that cultural distance could negatively affect revisit intentions. Conversely, it aligns better with additional research suggesting that cultural differences can create a feeling of authenticity and uniqueness (Fans et al., 2017) in the experience. This result indicates that the greater perceived cultural distance of Sri Lanka for tourists may strengthen its destination loyalty.

Objective 4: Examining whether cultural distance mediates the impact of cultural tourism on destination loyalty

H4 was confirmed by the mediation analysis in that cultural distance operates as partial mediation between cultural tourism and destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.097$, significant at 0.05). The

finding above is consistent with the argument from Liu et al. (2022) that the relationship between cultural tourism, cultural distance, and destination loyalty is complex. Based on the partial mediation effect, it is inferred that cultural distance exerts a partial indirect effect on destination loyalty mediated by cultural tourism. These findings highlight the significance of cultural tourism in fostering foreign tourists' loyalty to their destination in Sri Lanka.

6. Conclusion

This cultural tourism study on destination loyalty and the impacts of cultural distance on this phenomenon offers important insights into the cultural tourism dynamics in Sri Lanka. The research finds that cultural tourism significantly matters to destination loyalty among foreign tourists in Sri Lanka. Significantly, when it finds that cultural distance, it increases destination loyalty. This finding contradicts several previous assumptions regarding the role of culture in tourism and highlights the distinctiveness of Sri Lanka's cultural offerings. This is supported by the partial mediating effect of cultural distance between cultural tourism and destination loyalty, as tourists' behaviour and perceptions can be complex. These findings indicate that perceived cultural differences are as important for tourists' destination attachment as positive cultural experiences. The implications of these findings for Sri Lanka's tourism industry are apparent. A particular emphasis is placed on preserving and promoting the country's unique cultural heritage as a major drawcard for international tourists and a step towards retaining them. The results also indicated that tourism strategies should not be hesitant to include cultural differences in marketing campaigns but instead promote them as a unique selling point for a destination. By providing empirical evidence on the interplay between cultural tourism and cultural distance in terms of destination loyalty, the study contributes to the overall body of tourism research. It provides a quantitative framework for understanding these relationships, which can be extended and applied to other cultural tourism contexts.

The study was restricted to foreign tourists only, which may limit the generalizability of the findings, as domestic tourists were excluded from the study. Although the sample size was large enough for analysis, increasing it would enhance the generalizability of future studies. However, the research limits itself specifically to the case of Sri Lanka. Similarly, the direct applicability of the findings to other cultural tourism destinations with diverse characteristics would be limited. Using a cross-sectional design, the data were collected at a single point in time, ignoring the possibility of reversed perceptions or behaviour over time or across different seasons. Since the study was conducted in English, many non-English speaking tourists may not participate or misunderstand due to language differences.

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence for the relationships between cultural tourism, cultural distance, and destination loyalty. It extends the application of theories such as the Social Exchange Theory and Cultural Distance Theory in the context of cultural tourism. The research demonstrates the effectiveness of a quantitative approach in examining the complex relationships between cultural tourism, perceived cultural differences, and loyalty intentions. This methodological framework can be adapted for similar studies in other cultural tourism contexts. The finding that cultural distance has a positive influence on destination loyalty challenges some existing assumptions. It opens new avenues for research into the role of cultural differences in tourism experiences.

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