

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

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Cultural tourism has emerged as a vital component of the global tourism sector, characterised by visitors seeking immersive experiences in destinations' tangible and intangible cultural heritage. It refers that cultural tourism's educational and experiential aspects, encompassing various attractions from historical monuments to living traditions whilst studies reveal that tourism is intrinsically linked to destination loyalty, where tourists tend to revisit locations and engage in positive word-of-mouth promotion. The economic impact of tourism in Sri Lanka is substantial, but still, it finds managerial challenges to optimize the market opportunities. Recent studies have highlighted the empirical gaps remaining in the tourism industry particularly about cultural tourism and destination loyalty whilst cultural distance has been pointed out as a mediating mechanism. Addressing to the research gaps, this study followed a positivism approach, and a deductive method was applied to conduct quantitative research.

Primary data was collected through a survey administered to 200 foreign tourists visiting various cultural attractions in Sri Lanka, resulting in 164 valid responses. The survey measured three primary constructs: cultural tourism experiences, cultural distance, and destination loyalty. Cultural tourism was assessed based on authenticity, cultural learning, and participation in local activities. Cultural distance was measured by evaluating perceived social norms, language barriers, and lifestyle differences between tourists' home countries and Sri Lanka. Destination loyalty was evaluated through intentions to revisit and recommend Sri Lanka as a travel destination.

The collected data was analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25, utilising descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and mediation analysis. The findings revealed a strong positive relationship between cultural tourism experiences and destination loyalty ( $\beta = 0.770$ ), indicating

that high-quality cultural experiences significantly enhance tourists' loyalty to Sri Lanka. Additionally, cultural tourism experiences were 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. Furthermore, cultural distance was identified as a partial mediator in the relationship between cultural tourism and destination loyalty. This implies that while cultural tourism directly influences destination loyalty, cultural distance enhances this relationship by adding depth to the cultural experiences. This study confirms all four hypotheses: cultural tourism, cultural distance, and destination loyalty.

Several methodological limitations were there in the study since the sample excludes domestic visitors, and the focus was strictly on foreign tourists, which questions the application and scope of the findings derived. Although it was a sufficient sample size for statistical analysis, a larger sample size might make the study more generalisable. Findings are not directly transferable to other different cultural tourism destinations as the geographic specificity of Sri Lanka is a limitation. Additionally, reliance on English as the principal investigation language creates a risk for selection inclination and comprehension issues, which may forestall valuable perceptions from non-English talking sightseers. Together, these limitations highlight suggestions for future research to study cultural tourism using longitudinal designs, introduce a multilingual approach, and increase the scope of research to other territories to increase the robustness and generalizability of findings in the cultural tourism research field.

This research has significant implications for practitioners and academics. The findings underscore the immediate need to develop and promote authentic cultural experiences to retain and attract tourists within the tourism industry in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka should highlight its unique cultural characteristics, especially when targeting tourists from culturally unfamiliar backgrounds. Training programs for tourism service providers should also focus on cultural sensitivity to bridge the cultural gap and enhance the visitor experience. These practical implications will engage and interest the tourism industry in Sri Lanka and beyond.

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