Determinants of Tourists' Cultural Destination Loyalty in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

World tourists have increasing concerns about cultural and spiritual tourism. The tourism industry in Sri Lanka is booming after the COVID pandemic and the severe economic crisis (2020-2022) by promoting Sri Lankan cultural heritage, beautiful beaches, diverse nature, wildlife, and thrilling eco-tourism. Although cultural heritage is the primary promotional tool for Sri Lanka's tourism, the number of tourist attractions, retention in cultural areas, and tourists' return visits to these areas are not meeting the expectations of the Sri Lanka tourism promotion authorities. Therefore, this study identifies destination image and tourist satisfaction as the main determinants of tourists' destination loyalty based on the literature and explores these determinants' positive and significant effect on tourists' cultural destination loyalty in Sri Lanka through a conveniently selected tourist sample. The findings of the study provide recommendations for tourism stakeholders in Sri Lanka based on these results.

Keywords: Destination Loyalty, Destination Image, Cultural Destination Loyalty, Tourism

INTRODUCTION

At the rebuilding Sri Lanka, the government has kept more weight on Tourism industry, to attract and retain more tourists within Sri Lanka. Therefore, Sri Lanka Tourism Promotional Beauro (SLTPB) facilitated cultural heritage to promote Sri Lanka as an elegant destination to the world. As a results tourists' attraction to the cultural places is gradually increasing (SLTDA 2024).
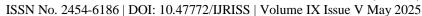
After the year 2018/2019, in the year 2024, the tourism industry reported more than two million tourists to Sri Lanka. As the majority of tourists have selected sandy beaches with pleasure adventures, only around 48% of visitors have selected to visit cultural places such as Sigiriya, Polonnaruwa, Kandy, Anuradhapura, Dambulla, Monaragala, and Matale. However, the most significant thing is, 40% of total tourism revenue in the year 2024 has been generated by the cultural places in Sri Lanka (SLTDA 2024). Another thing is, Udurawana (2019) has expressed that from the tourists who visited Sri Lanka 99% has neglected to visit the Museums in Sri Lanka. Therefore, at the development of tourism in Sri Lanka, it is compulsory to consider cultural destinations, cultural tourism, tourist attractions, and tourists' revisit intentions towards cultural destinations.

The present government has declared that Sri Lanka is planning to attract 2.5 million tourists by the end of 2025/2026. To achieve this target, destination management authorities need to foster tourist loyalty to encourage revisits. Therefore, this study aims to identify whether tourist satisfaction and destination image are key indicators of cultural destination loyalty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The tourists' satisfaction has been identified by Moutinho (1987) as the post-purchase construct, regarding how consumers evaluate the service or product after experiencing it. Though there are more common dimensions to measure tourists' satisfaction, Mill and Morrison (2002) identified tourists' relaxation, safety at the destination, love in relationships, achievement in destination experience, thrill, and authenticity with the destination's own nature as the main dimensions of tourist satisfaction.

The tourists' loyalty is attached to managing consumer relationships, where loyalty helps to retain customers (AS Dick & K Basu 1994). Chen, J. S., & Gursoy, D. (2001) have defined tourist destination loyalty as the level of tourists' perceptions of a destination as a recommendable place. Udurawana Y (2019), and Sangpikul, A. (2018), have discussed about tourists loyalty and explored several dimensions such as staying more times, repurchase /revisit, extent positive word-of-mouth, recommend the place to others, long term relationship with, spent more, and use places valued places of destination loyalty. Therefore, to encourage tourists revisit, tourists' satisfaction and destination image were significant factors in previous tourists' loyalty studies.

This effect of tourists satisfaction and destination image was highlighted by Dick and Basu, (1994), they have mentioned that tourists' loyalty is significantly and positively influenced by both situation and image variables. Further, tourists' destination image has been discussed by Crompton in 1979, where the researcher mentioned destination image as the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a tourist holds of a destination. Tasci and Gartner (2007) discussed the formation of an image as "a construction of a mental representation of a destination based on information cues delivered by the image formation agents". Destination image is so important to loyalty that is, Aliman et al (2016), presented many researchers agreements (Chen & Hsu, 2000; Court & Lupton, 1997; Schroeder, 1996; Ross, 1993) to prove that destination image was significantly effects on tourist behavior such as destination choice, decision making, and satisfaction. Therefore, it is obvious that satisfaction and image are the key factors in the literature to explain tourists' loyalty.

METHODOLOGY

As denoted by Saunders et al. (2009), this study was an explanatory type study, embraced the deductive research approach, and positivism is the research philosophy. The research methodological choice was a mono-method quantitative approach, the survey strategy was the research strategy, and this research time horizon was cross-sectional. As the population represented by all the tourists who visited Sri Lanka in the year 2024. The representative sample (385 international tourists) was conveniently selected through five major cultural districts (Anuradhapura, Pollonnaruwa, Mathale, Kandy, and Monaragala) in Sri Lanka, and tourists' data were collected through a structured questionnaire. Tourists' satisfaction and cultural destination image are the independent variables, and tourists' cultural destination loyalty is the dependent variable of the study. The tourists' preferences and attitude on destination experiences were measured through a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.
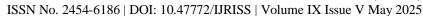
Analysis

In the analysis of the sample, the response rate was 92%. The demographic profile of the sample has shown that more females (53.8%), have visited cultural areas, and the most visitors are in the 30 -39 age group, which was 32% of total visitors to cultural areas. From the religion, the majority (43.1%) was represented by Christianity. Tourists (88.3%) have mentioned that the purpose of their visit to cultural places is 'pleasure'. At further analysis of the demographic information of visitors, 31.7% of tourists mentioned that they have visited Sri Lanka with their friends, others are with family, relatives and solo tourists. However the most important thing was, 46.7% of visitors were re-visitors to cultural areas.

The internal reliability of the variables measured through Cronbach's alpha values, which were higher than 0.7 for all three variables, such as satisfaction, image, and loyalty. All the mean values have been generated for three variables, located between somewhat agree (03) to agree (04) levels in the Likert scales. It meant that tourists have some appreciable attitudes towards cultural experiences in Sri Lanka. In the multiple regression analysis, the research model was significant proving (0.001) less than 0.05 p-value. In the variable effect analysis, tourists' destination loyalty has been significantly and positively affected by the tourists' satisfaction and destination image (R-squared was 0.761), which indicates that 76% of the positive significant effect is given by the two variables.

In many previous studies, Sangpikul A. (2018), Chenini (2017), Chao, D.R. (2015), Chao, Wu and Yen, (2015), Udurawana Y, and Wanninayaka W (2020) have mentioned that though there are more factors to destination loyalty, satisfaction and destination image are the main significant determinants of tourists destination loyalty. Therefore, based on the findings, that argument is still valid for Sri Lankan Cultural

destination loyalty, then the researcher can conclude that though tourists' satisfaction and destination image are the major determinants of tourists' cultural destination loyalty.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Tourism stakeholders such as villagers, district tourism development authorities, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), and other responsible parties need to identify visitors' demographic information when promoting cultural places as loyal destinations. Tourists' gender, age groups, purpose of visit, new visitors & re-visitors, and with whom they visited are valuable demographic factors when arranging cultural places as loyal places to visit.

Beerli A. and Martın J. D. (2004) mentioned nine destination factors (natural resources, natural environment, social environment, culture, history & art, an atmosphere of the place, general infrastructure, tourist infrastructure, tourist leisure & recreation, and political/economic factors) which are compulsory to maintain destination image and satisfaction. All the factors are available in all cultural places in Sri Lanka. Therefore, DMOs and other stakeholders of tourism development must develop their tourist promotional program considering these nine factors to enrich the image and satisfaction.

Further, implementing meditation, pilgrims and spiritual tourism, maintaining quality infrastructures, ensuring visitor security, facilitating for quality food-lodging-financing facilities, allowing for more options to entertain, implementing a nightlife at cultural areas, creating relaxing environment near rivers & water tanks, introducing new solutions such as water- games, tree houses, bird watching, boat riding, and fishing demonstration through many rivers, canals, and big water tanks surrounded to places are the activities DMOs can develop to enrich destination image and tourists' satisfaction for encourage tourists revisit. Finally, Sri Lankan tourism promotion authorities better to consider research findings in the tourism field for their decision-making practices.

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