

## **THE SEREN TAUN EXPERIENCE: A CATALYST FOR SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL TOURISM AND VISITOR LOYALTY INTENTION IN WEST JAVA**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the impact of engaging in the Seren Taun ritual at the Ciletuh-Palabuhanratu UNESCO Global Geopark (CPUGGp) on tourist loyalty, with an emphasis on Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTEs) within three indigenous communities: Ciptagelar, Sinaresmi, and Ciptamulya. This study investigates how MTEs influence tourist loyalty by exploring destination image, visitor engagement, and cultural interaction. A quantitative method was utilized involving 200 participants who attended Seren Taun, with data collected through Google Forms. The application of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) through the PLS technique, utilizing SmartPLS 4.0, facilitated the assessment of reliability, validity, and correlation analysis. The results demonstrate that MTEs play a crucial role in improving destination image and fostering cultural interaction, yet they do not markedly boost visitor engagement. The influence of MTEs on loyalty intention is significant, underscoring the importance of enhancing destination image and cultural engagement to promote the growth of cultural tourism in Geoparks. The research highlights the significance of cultural interaction and MTEs in fostering tourist loyalty. Rituals such as Seren Taun enhance visitors' ties to the local culture and encourage sustainable tourism, positively impacting local economies.

**Keywords:** Destination Image; Visitor Engagement; Cultural Contact; Memorable Tourism Experience; Loyalty Intention.

**JEL Classification:** G11, D14, M31

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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, renowned for its geological richness and cultural diversity, has emerged as a prominent global tourist destination (Muslim et al., 2022). Geoparks, which integrate environmental conservation, local community empowerment, and sustainable tourism development, are recognized as significant geo-tourism destinations (Herrera-Franco et al., 2021). One notable example is the Ciletuh-Palabuhanratu UNESCO Global Geopark (CPUGGp) in West Java, which combines stunning geological formations with cultural attractions that captivate visitors (Darmawan et al., 2021; Rifqi & Pramukanto, 2021). The Seren Taun ritual, a post-harvest ceremony by the Sundanese community expressing gratitude for agricultural yields, enhances CPUGGp's unique appeal by offering tourists an immersive experience that highlights the synergy between natural and cultural heritage (Hidayah et al., 2022; Rosana et al., 2019). While CPUGGp exemplifies the integration of natural and cultural assets, the potential of such synergies to foster visitor loyalty remains insufficiently explored, highlighting the need for deeper investigation in this area.

Extensive research underscores the importance of Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTEs) in shaping visitor perceptions and loyalty. MTEs are influenced by factors such as destination image, visitor engagement, and cultural contact (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Moon & Han, 2019). For example, Chen and Rahman (2018) emphasize that cultural engagement and interaction significantly enhance the formation of MTEs. Similarly, studies by Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021) and Kim (2018) reveal that a positive destination image and meaningful cultural contact can foster loyalty intentions by creating emotionally resonant experiences. However, existing studies often address these factors individually, without examining their combined effects in integrated settings like Geoparks.

Additionally, the interplay between cultural and geological elements in shaping visitor loyalty remains underexplored, presenting a critical gap in the literature that this study aims to address.

Despite the growing interest in cultural tourism, there is limited understanding of how Geoparks can leverage cultural elements, such as traditional rituals, to enrich visitor experiences and foster loyalty. For instance, while studies acknowledge the role of visitor engagement in shaping MTEs (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Taheri et al., 2014), inconsistencies remain regarding its direct influence (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). Additionally, most research overlooks the unique interplay between geological heritage and cultural traditions within Geoparks (Ansori et al., 2021; Darmawan et al., 2021), creating a need for further investigation. This study fills this gap by systematically analyzing the mediating role of MTEs in linking cultural and geological elements to visitor loyalty. The focus on Geoparks, particularly the Seren Taun ritual, offers a unique lens to explore these dynamics.

This study offers a novel perspective by integrating cultural tourism and geological heritage within the CPUGGp framework. The Seren Taun ritual serves as a focal point for examining how cultural interactions enhance MTEs and loyalty. By emphasizing the role of local communities in preserving and promoting cultural traditions, this research highlights the untapped potential of cultural assets in Geopark tourism (Hidayah et al., 2022; Prabowo & Nurbaeti, 2023). The proposed model combines factors such as destination image, cultural interaction, and visitor engagement, addressing inconsistencies in prior research while offering actionable insights for sustainable tourism development. This approach not only underscores the significance of cultural rituals in fostering loyalty but also advances strategies for leveraging cultural and

geological heritage as integral components of Geopark tourism.

The CPUGGp was selected due to its rich geological features and vibrant cultural traditions (Hidayah, 2022; Rosana et al., 2019). Its indigenous villages—Ciptagelar, Sinaresmi, and Ciptamulya—offer tourists the opportunity to engage directly with local communities and participate in the Seren Taun ritual, an annual celebration marking gratitude and the agricultural cycle (Adisaputri & Widiastuti, 2015; Budi Rachman, 2017). This harmonious blend of natural and cultural attractions provides an ideal empirical setting for testing the proposed research framework. By situating the study within CPUGGp, the research investigates how the integration of cultural rituals with Geopark attractions enhances emotional and cultural connections, ultimately fostering visitor loyalty..

This research contributes to tourism literature by elucidating the interrelationship between MTEs, cultural contact, and tourist loyalty within Geoparks. It extends previous findings by demonstrating how the integration of cultural rituals and geological heritage can enhance visitor experiences and foster sustainable tourism (Darmawan et al., 2021; Jia et al., 2023). Additionally, it bridges a critical gap by offering a holistic perspective on how Geoparks can serve as platforms for both natural conservation and cultural preservation, aligning with global trends in sustainable tourism (Gordon, 2018; Santoso et al., 2020). The findings are expected to provide practical recommendations for stakeholders to better integrate cultural and geological elements, strengthening Geoparks as destinations that support both cultural preservation and economic development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Tourism Marketing

Tourism marketing is a strategic process that involves planning, pricing, promoting, and distributing tourism pro-

ducts and services to meet the needs of tourists and achieve the goals of tourism organizations (Riege & Perry, 2000). By understanding tourist behavior, market trends, and the competitive landscape, tourism marketing aims to attract visitors, enhance their experiences, and build brand loyalty (Haywood, 1990). The foundation of tourism marketing management lies in delivering value through collaborative efforts, where creating memorable experiences for tourists is key (Calantone et al., 1989). A continuous process of planning, implementation, and evaluation supports this by aligning activities with tourist expectations and destination goals (Morrison, 2013). Effective tourism marketing requires designing tailored products, setting appropriate pricing, and providing relevant information to improve satisfaction and efficiency, ensuring positive exchanges between service providers and tourists. Positive experiences drive destination loyalty, which is crucial for long-term success, as loyal visitors are more likely to return and recommend the destination to others (Oppermann, 2000; Talaei Malmiri et al., 2021). Tourism marketing also involves using market research, targeted campaigns, and collaboration with stakeholders to enhance destination appeal, drive repeat visits, and strengthen competitive positioning, ultimately contributing to sustainable industry growth (Kumar et al., 2022; Sotiriadis, 2020).

### Loyalty Intention

Numerous studies have identified loyalty as the most critical concept in tourism marketing (Suhartanto et al., 2020). This is due to the fact that traveler loyalty is perceived as a metric of a tourist destination's sustainability and achievement (Papadimitriou et al., 2018; Sharma & Kumar Nayak, 2019). In the context of tourism, loyalty is the intention of a tourist to return to a destination that they have previously visited, as well as the intention of referring the destination to family,

colleagues, and relatives (Sangpikul, 2018). The intensity of the desire to return, the intensity of recommending, and the intensity of conveying favorable information about a destination are the three dimensions that are used to measure loyalty intensity (Coudounaris & Sthapit, 2017; K. H. Kim & Park, 2017; Suhartanto et al., 2020). According to Abbasi et al. (2021), the likelihood of a traveler returning to a specific destination is contingent upon the inclination of the tourist to conduct a search or purchase a tour package (Stylos et al., 2016). Conversely, the tourist's assessment of the destination's appropriateness for referral to others is correlated with the intensity of the recommendation (Maghrifani et al., 2022). The final dimension utilized is the extent to which travelers who have visited destinations provide informal advice and interpersonal communication to other individuals on numerous occasions (Schlesinger et al., 2020).

### **Destination Image**

The destination image is the personal impression of a traveler regarding a specific destination (J. Li & Cao, 2022), which influences the behavior of visitors (Chi & Qu, 2008). The destination image is also the outcome of a mix of assumptions, verdicts, comprehension, and effects that a tourist has regarding a specific tourist attraction (Chu et al., 2022). Positive and negative images will be formed in the traveler's psyche as a result of their interaction with the destination's various aspects and attributes (Moon & Han, 2019). Destination images can be quantified in three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and conative (Michael et al., 2018). However, some studies suggest that they can only be quantified in two dimensions: cognitive and affective (Hidayah, 2022). This discrepancy is the result of the fact that certain studies suggest that the conative dimension is less accurate than the cognitive and affective dimensions in assessing the impression of

a tourist attraction (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). The conative dimension is the tendency to conduct toward an object (Chaulagain et al., 2019; J. H. Kim, 2018), and the study will be discussing the explanation of the intensity of loyalty. Cognitive image is the perception of a location's features or qualities by travelers, which includes surroundings, public services, attractions for travelers, and other infrastructure. In contrast, emotive images are related to the way in which visitors perceive a location, which is influenced by their personal attitudes and values (Z. Wang et al., 2023).

### **Visitor Engagement**

Engagement may be conceptualized as the dynamic interplay between travelers and the various attractions they encounter during their travel experiences (Su et al., 2020). Furthermore, visitor engagement can be understood as the level of a tourist's active participation, interaction, and immersion in a destination's offerings, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Zhou & Yu, 2022). The involvement of touristic causes a particular mental condition due to the active role of the tourist and the contribution of the organizer or manager of a vacation spot in involving tourists in all or part of the tourism activities carried out (Huang & Choi, 2019).

Engagement can be divided into four distinct dimensions: attachment, commitment, dedication, and emotional connection (Jebbouri et al., 2022). Cultural tourism involvement can manifest through emotional attachment, commitment to preserving and conserving cultural heritage, dedication to following cultural activities organized, and the emotional connection between tourists with cultural tourist destinations that inspire deep feelings and experiences. Tourist involvement can be observed through direct interaction with tourist attractions, such as active communication, bonding with the local population, and actively participating

in all activities encountered during the visit (Huang & Choi, 2019). The high enthusiasm of tourists during their visits will affect how much they are involved in tourist activities (Rasoolimanesh, Khoo-Lattimore, et al., 2021). The greater the form of involvement carried out by tourists, the greater the level of experience that tourists will feel (Nghiem-Phú & Bagul, 2020).

### **Cultural Contact**

Cultural contacts are the activities of tourists visiting and interacting with local communities living in cultural tourist destinations (Chen & Rahman, 2018). Cultural contact involves customs, behaviors, ceremonies, and traditions, as well as cultural manifestations and arrangements of a group's use of natural and economic resources (Nguyen Viet et al., 2020). Through engagement with local cultures and the indigenous populace, tourists are anticipated to acquire enhanced knowledge and a more profound comprehension of the culture that permeates their everyday existence. (Chen & Rahman, 2018). The concept of tourism that advances cultural contacts is aimed at tourists interested in the hands-on experience of different cultures and traditions, seeking to gain a deeper experience (Gnoth & Zins, 2013; Seyfi et al., 2020). Enchanting and exciting cultural destinations become significant attraction for tourists traveling from far distances (Zeng, 2017). As a result, such visitors will feel happy and happy as they experience new experiences at the destination and gain a higher level of excitement (Nguyen Viet et al., 2020).

### **Memorable Tourism Experience (MTEs)**

The fundamental aspect of the tourist industry lies in the notion of experience (Kartika et al., 2022). A memorable tourism experience reflects the psychological and social reactions of tourists to the performance of a destination, perceived

through their engagement with activities, events, and occurrences at the location (Albayrak & Caber, 2016). J. H. Kim (2018) and Wei et al. (2019) define it as a vividly remembered and cherished travel event that functions as an autobiographical memory, involving emotional and affective aspects. Such an experience transcends the ordinary, leaving a lasting positive impression on travelers (Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018). These moments become cherished stories that fuel a desire to return or explore further (Suhartanto et al., 2020). Various factors, such as the warmth of local people, the quality of service, or unexpected moments of delight, can spark a memorable tourism experience, creating a truly personal and unforgettable journey (Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018).

Building on this foundation, culture emerges as a vital driver of the travel experience, enriching the journey by adding depth and meaning to the interactions and activities tourists engage in (Xu et al., 2022). Tourism products and services' features aim to form a memorable and unique travel experience (Wulandari et al., 2023). A loyal attitude towards a destination is formed through the practical experience experienced by tourists after visiting a particular tourist destination (Moon & Han, 2018; Sharma & Kumar Nayak, 2019). Compelling experiences in travel are travel events that continue to be remembered and remembered after they occur and are included in the category of good memories and memories for the traveler (J. H. Kim, 2018). MTEs measurements refer to the seven dimensions that shape the experience: emotional feelings, novelty, local culture, refreshment, meaningfulness, involvement, and knowledge (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Hosseini et al., 2023).

### **Hypothesis Development**

The image of the destination that the traveler has formed over the course of previous visits may have an impact on their experience (Lu et al., 2022; Moon & Han,



2019; Stylos et al., 2017). The subjective perception of the destination will be influenced by the interactions, memories, and emotions that visitors encounter during their visits (Stylos et al., 2017; Sukaris et al., 2020). In turn, this subjective perception influences their expectations and behaviors during consecutive excursions (Dong & Qu, 2022). For example, a destination's favorable image can be enhanced by positive memories of hospitable locals, delectable cuisine, and breathtaking landscapes (Jebbouri et al., 2022). In contrast, a negative image can be the result of negative experiences, such as encounters with subpar service or disappointing attractions (Yang et al., 2022). As a result, it is imperative for tourism stakeholders to comprehend the ways in which previous experiences influence the formation of destination images in order to effectively manage visitor expectations and nurture positive perceptions that promote sustainable tourism development (Ban et al., 2021). The notion that the image of a destination can influence MTEs is substantiated by the research conducted by J. H. Kim (2018) and H. Zhang et al. (2018).

**Hypothesis 1: Destination image positively and significantly influences MTEs.**

The correlation of tourist intention loyalty and destination image has garnered increasing attention in tourism research (D. Wang et al., 2022). The image of a destination has a significantly impacted on MTEs, which in turn shape the intention of vacationers to make another trip and their participation in electronic recommendations, as demonstrated by research conducted by J. H. Kim (2018) and H. Zhang et al. (2018). Both of these components are essential to Intention Loyalty (H. Zhang et al., 2018). Tourists frequently share their trip impression via electronic recommendation, which is significantly influenced by their views of the destination. A positive destination

image increases the likelihood of repeat visits and encourages other potential tourists, thereby enhancing eWOM (Rasoolimanesh, Seyfi, et al., 2021). For instance, when a destination is constructively considered by consumers based on its hospitality, cultural richness, or quality of services—they are more likely to engage in promoting the destination through their recommendations (Jebbouri et al., 2022). This creates a feedback loop where positive eWOM further strengthens the destination's reputation and fosters loyalty among visitors (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). The cognitive dimension of a destination's image, encompassing tourists' beliefs, perceptions, and knowledge, has been identified as a critical factor in shaping their travel decisions (Zakiah et al. 2023). This component is formed through various sources, including promotional materials, online reviews, and word-of-mouth recommendations (Jebbouri et al., 2022). A strong, positive cognitive image can not only influence initial decisions to visit but also drive loyalty through repeat visits and active participation in eWOM (Zhou & Yu, 2022). Ultimately, the power of a positive destination image lies in its ability to shape tourists' perceptions, create lasting memories, and foster a sense of connection to the destination (Yerizal & Abror, 2019). This connection leads to an increased likelihood of returning and advocating for the destination, underscoring the importance of managing destination image effectively to cultivate tourists' intention loyalty (Jebbouri et al., 2022).

**Hypothesis 2: Destination image positively and significantly influences tourists' intention loyalty.**

In recent years, visitor engagement has been the subject of considerable interest as a critical component of the tourism industry, as it is a significant factor in the creation of positive vacation experiences (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019; Zhou & Yu,

2022). It extends beyond passive consumption of attractions to foster active participation and interaction with a destination's offerings, ultimately creating more meaningful and memorable experiences for tourists (Lao et al., 2023). Engagement is shaped by tourists' level of knowledge, cultural understanding, and motivation to visit cultural destinations (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Taheri et al., 2014; Tang & Xu, 2023). Visitor engagement can take various forms, ranging from participating in local cultural activities, such as traditional art workshops or culinary experiences, to interacting with residents and engaging with digital platforms designed to enhance the visitor journey (Liberato et al., 2018). These active engagements help tourists build emotional connections and gain personalized experiences, which are often integral to creating MTEs (Chen & Rahman, 2018). Furthermore, by fostering a sense of connection, personalization, and active involvement, visitor engagement not only increases satisfaction but also enhances the emotional and cognitive dimensions of MTEs. For instance, tourists who participate in cultural activities or meaningful exchanges with locals are more likely to form positive memories and associations with the destination, contributing to their overall experience (Taheri et al., 2014).

**Hypothesis 3:** Visitor engagement positively and significantly influences MTEs.

Tourists who visit cultural tourist areas often exhibit high levels of engagement through meaningful interactions with communities that preserve unique cultures and traditions (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Xu et al., 2022). This engagement is shaped by their level of knowledge, cultural understanding, and motivation to immerse themselves in the cultural aspects of the destination (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Taheri et al., 2014; Tang & Xu, 2023). For instance, tourists engaging with cultural

destinations often participate in traditional ceremonies, learn about local customs, or engage in direct communication with local residents. These interactions not only enhance their cultural understanding but also create opportunities for deeper cultural contact, fostering meaningful exchanges and mutual appreciation (Chen & Rahman, 2018). Therefore, visitor engagement plays a critical role in facilitating cultural contact, as it encourages tourists to actively interact with the cultural and social fabric of the destination.

**Hypothesis 4:** Visitor engagement positively and significantly influences cultural contact.

Cultural contacts significantly shape the preferences of tourists interested in cultural travel, often seeking emotional or spiritual experiences that contribute to MTEs (Seyfi et al., 2020). These interactions provide opportunities for tourists to immerse themselves in new cultures, introducing elements of novelty and innovation that enrich their overall travel experience (H. Zhang, 2022). Key components of cultural contact include engaging with local wisdom, traditions, customs, art, cultural performances, and culinary practices (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013; L. Zhang et al., 2022). For instance, participating in traditional ceremonies or enjoying authentic local cuisine allows tourists to step outside their comfort zones, fostering deeper emotional connections and creating lasting memories that transcend superficial sightseeing (McKercher, 2020). Active participation in cultural exchanges also enhances tourists' understanding and appreciation of a destination's heritage. This sense of connection and belonging not only enriches their emotional and cognitive dimensions of MTEs but also encourages positive word-of-mouth recommendations and repeat visits (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Lan et al., 2021). Thus, cultural contact plays a pivotal role in shaping experiences

that are not only memorable but also meaningful.

**Hypothesis 5:** Cultural contact positively and significantly influences MTEs.

The correlation between visitor engagement and MTEs is significantly influenced by cultural contact, which functions as a complete mediator (Chen & Rahman, 2018). While visitor engagement establishes the initial foundation for active participation and interaction with a destination, it is the meaningful cultural contact that bridges this engagement to create lasting and impactful memories (Hosseini et al., 2023). Visitor engagement alone may not directly result in MTEs without the enriching dimension of cultural contact. This is because cultural contact reflects the depth of tourists' interactions with local cultures, which transforms engagement into vivid and memorable experiences (Chen & Rahman, 2018). For instance, authentic cultural encounters such as participating in local festivals, rituals, or savoring unique culinary traditions—leave a lasting impression on travelers (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013; Cornelisse, 2018). By fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation for the cultural richness of a destination, cultural contact elevates the tourist experience from passive engagement to an emotionally and cognitively enriching journey. This mediating role highlights that cultural contact is not merely an outcome of engagement but a necessary bridge that enables visitor engagement to fully translate into MTEs (Stone et al., 2022).

**Hypothesis 6:** Cultural contact positively and significantly fully mediate the relationship between visitor engagement on MTEs.

The extent to which travelers vividly and consistently remember details of previous trips to a tourist destination significantly influences their intention loyalty (Huang & Choi, 2019). These

memories, formed both consciously and unconsciously, depend on personal, emotional, and situational judgments of the events experienced by tourists (Hosseini et al., 2023). MTEs directly contribute to tourists' intention loyalty by evoking positive emotions, unique encounters, and fulfilling activities that amplify their desire to revisit the destination (Antón et al., 2017; J. H. Kim, 2018). Positive recollections create a strong emotional connection, transforming the destination from merely a place to a collection of cherished memories that tourists wish to relive and expand upon (Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018). This emotional attachment fosters a higher likelihood of repeat visits, strong recommendations to others, and sustained loyalty. Consequently, MTEs act as a critical determinant of tourists' intention loyalty, ensuring the destination remains a preferred choice for future travel.

**Hypothesis 7:** MTEs positively and significantly influence tourists' intention loyalty.

MTEs fully mediate the relationship between destination image and tourists' intention loyalty by acting as a transformative bridge (J. H. Kim, 2018). While a positive destination image initially attracts tourists and shapes their expectations, it is through the creation of deeply personal and emotionally resonant memories during their visit that intention loyalty is cultivated (Haryeni et al., 2022). MTEs translate a favorable perception of a destination into lasting emotional connections by fostering unique experiences, such as engaging with authentic local culture, participating in activities aligned with tourists' values, and exploring attractions that resonate with their interests (C. H. Lin & Kuo, 2016). These encounters amplify the impact of destination image by embedding it within vivid memories that significantly enhance tourists' likelihood to visit again and advocate the destination to



their fellow travelers (Coelho & Gosling, 2018; Vada et al., 2019). Importantly, the influence of destination image on intention loyalty is not direct; it depends entirely on the presence of MTEs that convert positive impressions into actionable loyalty. This demonstrates the essential role of MTEs in sustaining and strengthening the connection between a destination's appeal and tourists' behavioral intentions.

Hypothesis 8: MTEs fully mediate the relationship between destination image on influence tourists' intention loyalty.

A research model can be formed based on the theory's exposure, previous research, and the hypotheses submitted in Figure 1.

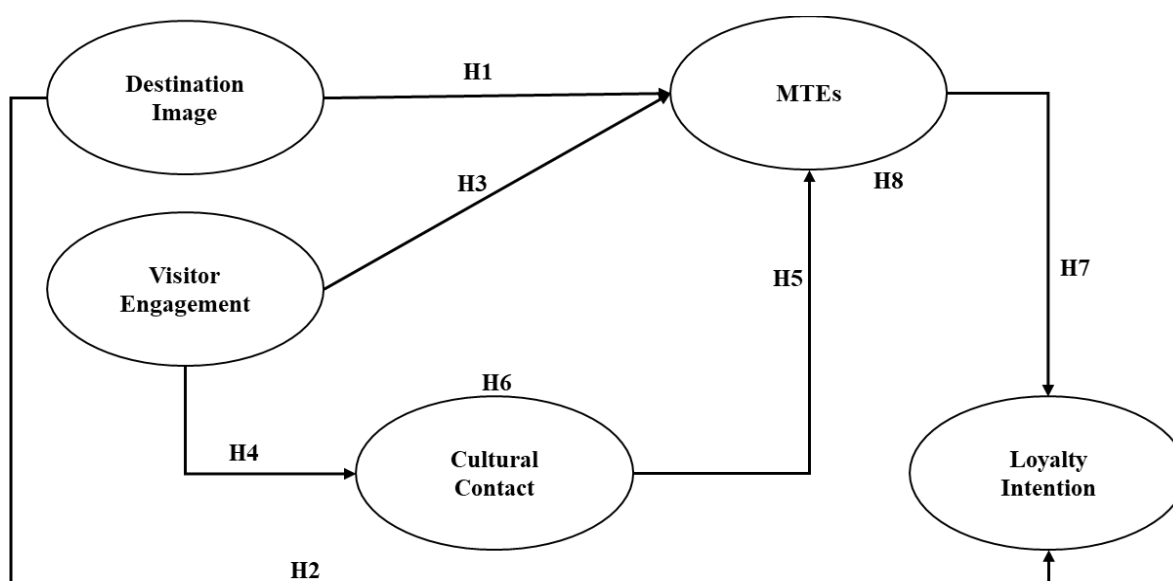
## RESEARCH METHODS

### Population and Sample

This research employed a descriptive quantitative methodology grounded in positivism, focusing on visitors from three indigenous communities within the CPUGGp during the annual Seren Taun event. Following Hair et al. (2014), the required sample size was determined to be multiples of the number of indicators,

which in this case refers to the 40 statements in the questionnaire, leading to the selection of a sample of 200 participants. The sampling frame comprised visitors who had attended at least one Seren Taun ceremony held by the indigenous communities of Ciptagelar, Sinaresmi, or Ciptamulya villages within the CPUGGp. These individuals were chosen as they represent the primary population engaging with both the cultural and natural elements of the destination. To ensure the data's representativeness, inclusion criteria were set to target participants who had actively participated in the Seren Taun events and interacted with the local culture during their visit.

Purposive sampling was used as the sampling approach, since it efficiently selected respondents who fit the study's specific criteria. The inclusion criteria comprised participants who: 1) attended the Seren Taun ceremony in at least one of the indigenous villages of Ciptagelar, Sinaresmi, or Ciptamulya, 2) engaged with the local community during the event, including participation in cultural or traditional activities, 3) expressed a willingness to attend the Seren Taun ceremony in subsequent years, and 4) endorsed the event to others.



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized Model

Participants were requested to submit a questionnaire affirming their first-person account of the Seren Taun event, which was sent to all attendees. Additionally, to include event participants who could not participate in field data collecting, questionnaires were sent online using Google Forms. This technique allowed a diverse sample while adhering to the research objectives.

### Measurement

The statistical analysis was conducted using SmartPLS version 4.0 application to evaluate the research instrument's reliability and validity. Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, along with average variance extracted (AVE) were implemented during the evaluation procedure to assess the constructs' internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were subject to a reliability criterion of 0.7, while convergent validity was verified by AVE values that exceeded 0.5. This rigorous testing verified that the research instrument provided a valid and dependable measurement of the underlying constructs.

This questionnaire table is designed to align with the study's objective of examining the factors that influence tourist loyalty in the context of the annual Seren Taun ritual at the CPUGGp. Specifically, the questionnaire evaluates destination image (Hidayah et al., 2022; Moon & Han, 2019), visitor engagement (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019), cultural contact (Chen & Rahman, 2018), MTEs (J. H. Kim, 2018; Moon &

Han, 2019), and intention loyalty (Coudounaris & Sthapit, 2017; Suhartanto et al., 2020). Each construct is measured to assess its role in shaping the travel experiences and loyalty intentions of visitors, focusing on three indigenous communities: Ciptagelar, Sinaresmi, and Ciptamulya. The questions are crafted to capture how participation in cultural events like the Seren Taun ritual fosters a deeper connection with local culture, enhances MTEs, and ultimately influences visitors' intentions to revisit or recommend the destination (see Table 1).

### Data Analysis

The Partial Least Squares (PLS) methodology was implemented within the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) structure that allowed the data analysis. PLS was selected for its ability to estimate sophisticated models without necessitating large sample sizes and its robustness in managing data that does not adhere to a normal distribution. Following the protocols established by Sarstedt et al. (2021), the analysis process involved constructing measurement and structural models, developing path diagrams, converting these diagrams into equation models, and assessing the research model's fit. The analysis allowed for an in-depth investigation of the relationships between destination image, cultural interaction, visitor involvement, memorable MTEs, and traveler loyalty, culminating in clear conclusions regarding their interdependencies.

**Table 1.** Questionnaire Items for Measuring Destination Image, Visitor Engagement, Cultural Contact, Memorable Tourism Experiences, and Intention Loyalty

Construct	Item Code	Questionnaire Items
Destination Image	DI1	The destination offers adequate facilities for visitors, enhancing the experience of the Seren Taun ritual.
	DI2	I perceive the destination as unique and appealing due to its cultural and natural attractions.
	DI3	The cultural and natural attractions, such as the Seren Taun ritual, enhance the image of the destination.
	DI4	I have a positive overall impression of the Ciletuh-Palabuhanratu Geopark as a cultural tourism destination.

**Table 1.** Continue

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Item Code</b>	<b>Questionnaire Items</b>
<b>Visitor Engagement</b>	VE1	I actively participated in the Seren Taun cultural activities during my visit.
	VE2	I felt emotionally connected to the local culture during the Seren Taun celebration.
	VE3	I was motivated to engage with the local community and traditions during the Seren Taun event.
<b>Cultural Contact</b>	CC1	I interacted with local residents during the Seren Taun celebration.
	CC2	I observed and learned about local traditions and customs related to Seren Taun.
	CC3	I participated in traditional ceremonies or rituals during the Seren Taun event.
	CC4	The visit deepened my understanding of the local culture showcased in Seren Taun.
	CC5	I experienced authentic cultural practices during my stay, particularly during Seren Taun.
	CC6	The local community was welcoming and supportive throughout the Seren Taun event.
	CC7	I explored the historical and cultural heritage of the area during Seren Taun.
	CC8	I observed how local resources are utilized in cultural practices, such as in Seren Taun preparations.
	CC9	The cultural activities during Seren Taun were well-organized and informative
	CC10	I appreciated the diversity of cultural expressions presented in the Seren Taun event
	CC11	The cultural experience during Seren Taun exceeded my expectations
<b>Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTEs)</b>	MTE1	The Seren Taun visit provided a highly emotional and joyful experience.
	MTE2	The destination offered unique and unforgettable moments, especially during Seren Taun.
	MTE3	I was refreshed and re-energized by attending the Seren Taun ritual.
	MTE4	I felt deeply involved in the cultural activities during Seren Taun.
	MTE5	The visit had a meaningful impact on my perspective through the Seren Taun experience.
	MTE6	I gained valuable knowledge about the local culture from participating in Seren Taun.
	MTE7	The overall experience of Seren Taun was highly novel and engaging.
	MTE8	I felt a strong sense of connection to the destination during Seren Taun.
	MTE9	The Seren Taun event included diverse and interesting activities.
	MTE10	The authenticity of the cultural events during Seren Taun was impressive.
	MTE11	I enjoyed participating in local crafts and workshops linked to Seren Taun.
	MTE12	The scenic beauty complemented the cultural experience during Seren Taun.
	MTE13	The event organization of Seren Taun enhanced my satisfaction.
	MTE14	The local cuisine during Seren Taun was a memorable highlight of the visit.
	MTE15	The trip allowed me to discover new traditions through Seren Taun.
	MTE16	I felt welcomed and included by the local community during Seren Taun.
	MTE17	The destination provided both relaxation and adventure through Seren Taun.
	MTE18	I was inspired by the creativity and richness of the culture showcased during Seren Taun.
	MTE19	The Seren Taun festival or event was well-planned and enjoyable.
<b>Intention Loyalty</b>	IL1	I intend to revisit the Ciletuh-Palabuhanratu Geopark in the future.
	IL2	I would recommend attending the Seren Taun ritual to family and friends.
	IL3	I plan to share positive feedback about the Seren Taun ritual and the destination.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Evaluation of Measurement Model Utilizing PLS-SEM

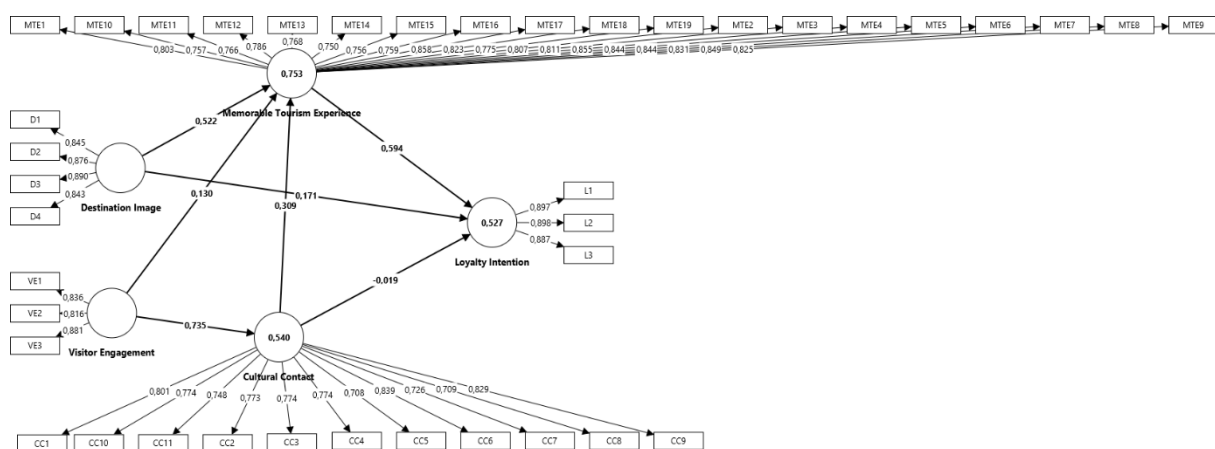
To accurately evaluate the reliability and validity of the convergent reflective constructs in their initial stages, two primary criteria must be met. First, each indicator must have an outer loading value greater than 0.708. Second, the composite reliability (CR), rho\_A coefficient, and average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct must exceed the thresholds of 0.7, 0.7, and 0.5, respectively (Sarstedt et al., 2021). Figure 2 presents the results of the PLS algorithm applied to the measurement model.

The figure illustrates the factor loadings for each indicator in the measurement model. Based on the PLS-SEM analysis, all indicators demonstrate factor loadings exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.7, indicating that each indicator significantly reflects its corresponding construct. Therefore, all indicators are deemed valid for measuring the study's variables, which include destination image, visitor engagement, cultural contact, memorable tourism experiences (MTEs), and loyalty intention. These findings confirm that each indicator is relevant and effectively measures its corresponding variable. This validation establishes the reliability and accuracy of

the measurement model for subsequent structural analysis.

Table 2 complements Figure 2 by providing a detailed summary of the reliability and validity metrics for each construct. Specifically, the table presents the composite reliability (CR), rho\_A coefficients, and average variance extracted (AVE) values. These results confirm acceptable levels of reliability and convergent validity for all first-order reflective constructs. The detailed metrics in Table 2 further validate the robustness of the measurement model, ensuring its reliability for structural analysis.

To enhance the accuracy of discriminatory validity testing in the initial stages, two advanced tests were carried out using the Fornell-Larcker Criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio (Sarstedt et al., 2021). To ensure the discriminant validity of the Fornell-Larcker criteria, the square root value of the AVE of each structure should be greater than the correlation with other structures (Hair et al., 2014). Furthermore, the HTMT value of each structure should be less than 0.9 (Ali et al., 2018). Table 3 and Table 4 demonstrate acceptable discriminatory validity for all reflective structures in the early stages, using the Fornell-Larcker criteria and the HTMT method.



**Figure 2.** Results of PLS Algorithm Measurement Model

**Table 2.**Assessment of Reflective Measurement Models

Construct		Items	Loadings	CR	rho_A	AVE
<b>Destination Image (D)</b>	<b>Image</b>	D1	0.845	0.922	0.887	0.746
		D2	0.876			
		D3	0.890			
		D4	0.843			
<b>Visitor Engagement (VE)</b>	<b>Engagement</b>	VE1	0.836	0.882	0.798	0.714
		VE2	0.816			
		VE3	0.881			
<b>Cultural Contact (CC)</b>	<b>Contact</b>	CC1	0.800	0.941	0.934	0.593
		CC2	0.773			
		CC3	0.774			
		CC4	0.776			
		CC5	0.709			
		CC6	0.840			
		CC7	0.727			
		CC8	0.707			
		CC9	0.828			
		CC10	0.773			
		CC11	0.749			
<b>MTE</b>		MTE1	0.803	0.972	0.970	0.647
		MTE2	0.807			
		MTE3	0.811			
		MTE4	0.855			
		MTE5	0.844			
		MTE6	0.844			
		MTE7	0.831			
		MTE8	0.849			
		MTE9	0.825			
		MTE10	0.757			
		MTE11	0.766			
		MTE12	0.786			
		MTE13	0.768			
		MTE14	0.750			
		MTE15	0.756			
		MTE16	0.759			
		MTE17	0.858			
		MTE18	0.823			
		MTE19	0.775			
<b>Intention Loyalty</b>	<b>Loyalty</b>	L1	0.370	0.923	0.876	0.799
		L2	0.355			
		L3	0.394			

**Table 3.** Discriminant Validity Assessed Through The Htmt Ratio

	Cultural Contact	Destination Image	Intention Loyalty	MTEs	Visitor Engagement
<b>Cultural Contact</b>					
<b>Destination Image</b>	0.720				
<b>Intention Loyalty</b>	0.590	0.729			
<b>MTEs</b>	0.784	0.881	0.777		
<b>Visitor Engagement</b>	0.843	0.830	0.656	0.818	



**Table 4.** Discriminant Validity Assessed Through Fornel-Larcker Criterioan

	Cultural Contact	Destination Image	Intention Loyalty	MTEs	Visitor Engagement
Cultural Contact	0.770				
Destination Image	0.662	0.864			
Intention Loyalty	0.539	0.644	0.894		
MTEs	0.751	0.818	0.719	0.804	
Visitor Engagement	0.735	0.697	0.549	0.721	0.845

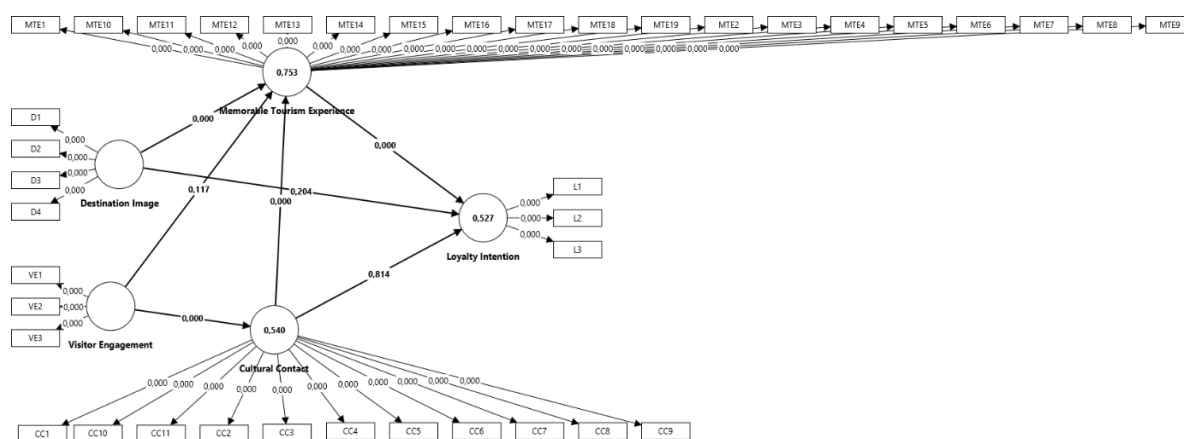
### Evaluation of the Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

After confirming the validity and reliability of the constructs in this study, the next step involves evaluating the connections between them within the structural model. This evaluation determines whether the relationships among the constructs align with the proposed hypotheses and assesses the predictive capability of the model. Figure 3 illustrates the results of the bootstrapping method applied to test the significance of both direct and indirect effects. Additionally, the impact size ( $f^2$ ) was used to measure the magnitude of these effects, following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2014).

The bootstrapping results, as summarized in Table 5, provide insights into the direct and indirect effects tested in this study. The table show that MTEs gains positive and significant influence from destination image (H1) and cultural contact (H5), where destination image and culture contact are strongly influenced. Visitor engagement has no positive and significant

impact on MTEs (H4). In addition, the study found that visitor engagement had a positive and considerable influence on cultural contact (H3), with visitor engagement having a strong effect on the creation of cultural contact. The results also showed that loyalty intention was not directly influenced by the destination image (H2) but received a positive and significant influence from MTEs (H7), with MTEs considered to have a strong effect.

Mediation is the relationship between visitor engagement, cultural contact, and loyalty intention variables. The full mediation relationship is due if the test is done directly between the visitor engagement and loyalty intention variables; there is an insignificant relationship. However, a significant relationship occurs when an indirect test is carried out between the visitor engagement variable and the loyalty intention variable mediated by the mediator variable. This means that cultural contact variables fully mediate between visitor engagement and loyalty intention.

**Figure 3.** Result Of Bootstrapping Structural Model

Source: data processed by researchers (2024)

**Table 5.** Structural Model Evaluation

Hypothesis		Path Coefficients	P-Value	Effect Size ( $f^2$ )	Supported
<b>H1</b>	Destination Image→MTEs	0.522	0.000	0.514	YES
<b>H2</b>	Destination Image→Loyalty Intention	0.171	0.204	0.020	NO
<b>H3</b>	Visitor Engagement→ Cultural Contact	0.735	0.000	1.177	YES
<b>H4</b>	Visitor Engagement → MTEs	0.130	0.117	0.026	NO
<b>H5</b>	Cultural Contact→MTEs	0.309	0.000	0.161	YES
<b>H6</b>	Visitor Engagement → Cultural Contact→MTEs	0.227	0.000	0.052	YES
<b>H7</b>	MTEs → Loyalty Intention	0.594	0.000	0.237	YES
<b>H8</b>	Destination Image→MTEs → Loyalty Intention	0.310	0.001	0.092	YES
<b>Overall Fit of The Estimated Model</b>			<b>Saturated Model</b>	<b>Estimated Model</b>	
<b>Standardized Root Mean Square Residual</b>			0.061	0.070	
<b>d_ ULS</b>			3.048	3.986	
<b>d_ G</b>			2.425	2.532	
<b>Chi-square</b>			2272.276	2269.147	
<b>Normed Fit Index (NFI)</b>			0.721	0.721	

Full mediation is the relationship between the variable destination image, MTEs, and loyalty intention. The full mediation relationship is due if the test is done directly between the destination image variable and the loyalty intention variable; there is an insignificant relationship. However, a significant relationship occurs when the mediator variable mediates an indirect test between the destination image variable and the loyalty intention variable. Then, the variable MTEs has a role in fully mediating destination image and loyalty intention.

Additionally, Table 5 presents the model estimate results for fit indices, including SRMR and NFI, indicate that the SRMR value stands at 0.070. This value is below the recommended threshold of 0.08, suggesting that the model fit is acceptable. The model introduced in this study shows a strong alignment for further validating and clarifying the development of memorable tourism experiences and their connection to visitor loyalty, particularly within the context of cultural tourism at the Ciletuh-Palabuhanratu UNESCO Global Geopark. Even so, the NFI value of 0.721 remains below the optimal threshold ( $> 0.90$ ), indicating that additional evaluation is

required to enhance the model's overall fit and more closely align it with theoretical expectations.

### Discussion

The Ciletuh-Palabuhanratu UNESCO Global Geopark offers a unique blend of cultural and natural attractions, particularly through the Seren Taun ritual, a significant cultural tradition of the Sundanese people, which is celebrated annually in the indigenous villages of Ciptagelar, Sinaresmi, and Ciptamulya (Rosana et al., 2019). The event became known as an important cultural attraction for tourists and has the potential to attract more visitors, rather than depending only on natural attractions (Mokoena, 2020; Prabowo & Nurbaeti, 2023; Richards, 2018; Santoso et al., 2020), and this study aims to enhance the tourism experience in these villages by promoting Seren Taun as a central cultural attraction to boost tourism in the geopark. The research findings contribute to strengthening the role of cultural tourism within the geopark.

Our study supports H1, indicating that the destination image influences the creation of MTEs. This is consistent with prior research by Moon and Han (2019) and Stylos et al. (2017), which suggests

that a positive destination image can shape tourists' cognitive (perceptions) and affective (emotional) responses, ultimately supporting memorable experiences. The scenic beauty of the CPUGGp, combined with the cultural richness of Seren Taun, creates a unique cognitive perception and an emotional response of awe, reinforcing MTEs. The designation of CPUGGp as a UNESCO Global Geopark indicates its profound natural, biological, and cultural history, offering an unforgettable experience for tourists in trips in person (Arrasyid et al., 2021).

However, the study does not support H2, which posits that destination image influences loyalty intentions. This finding partially contradicts Rasoolimanesh, Seyfi, et al. (2021), who found that while destination image does not directly influence the intention to return, it impacts specific loyalty dimensions, such as the intensity of recommendations. This aligns with Kim's (2018) theoretical perspective, suggesting that destination image alone may not drive repeat visits or recommendations unless accompanied by vivid, meaningful experiences. For example, tourists may remember the cultural richness of CPUGGp but are more likely to return if their experience includes immersive cultural activities, such as participation in the Seren Taun rituals.

The study supports H8, suggesting that the destination image affects the intensity of loyalty through MTEs. This implies that the destination image influences loyalty only when tourists create MTEs during their engagement with the cultural attractions of Seren Taun. The festival's integration of cultural narratives, emotional engagement, and unique activities fosters a strong sense of connection, motivating tourists to revisit and recommend the destination. This aligns with the concept of place attachment, where memorable experiences deepen emotional bonds and drive loyalty (XU Ning-ning et al., 2022).

The study also supports H3, showing that visitor engagement significantly

influences cultural contact. This finding aligns with Chen and Rahman (2018) and Elfiondri et al. (2021), who found that visitor engagement enhances cultural contact. However, the study contradicts H4, which suggests that visitor engagement influences MTEs. In contrast, our findings indicate that engagement alone does not directly influence MTEs, which diverges from previous studies by H. Chen & Rahman (2018) and Rasoolimanesh, Seyfi, et al. (2021). Practically, tourists who engage in activities like traditional dances or agricultural rituals during Seren Taun develop a deeper appreciation for local culture, consistent with social exchange theory, where reciprocal interactions between tourists and locals foster mutual respect and enrich the tourism experience (X. Li et al., 2022).

Further, the study supports H6, indicating that cultural contact mediates the relationship between visitor engagement and MTEs. This suggests that visitor engagement influences MTEs only when tourists experience cultural contact, emphasizing the critical role of cultural engagement in shaping memorable experiences. One of the activities tourists can participate in at these indigenous villages, besides witnessing the Seren Taun ritual, includes direct interaction with local communities, even with village leaders (Tang & Xu, 2023). Visitors can also take part in traditional activities such as engaging in agricultural practices or crafting traditional Sundanese art and handicrafts (Kurnia, 2015). These hands-on experiences allow tourists to immerse themselves in the local way of life, fostering a deeper appreciation of Sundanese culture and strengthening their memorable experiences.

Additionally, the study provides evidence for H5, confirming that cultural contact significantly impacts MTEs. It also supports H8, indicating that MTEs positively influence loyalty intentions. The research suggests that tourists' memories

of their experiences—rooted in the authenticity of local culture and the Seren Taun ritual can enhance their loyalty to the destination (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013; Q. Su & Zhang, 2020). Tourists who actively participate in Seren Taun rituals, such as preparing traditional food or observing ceremonies, report a deeper emotional connection to the destination, consistent with cultural immersion theories that emphasize the transformative power of direct interaction with cultural practices (J. Lin et al., 2022).

In terms of theoretical contributions, this research extends tourism marketing theory by demonstrating how integrating cultural rituals like Seren Taun within Geoparks can enhance MTEs and foster visitor loyalty. The study highlights the interplay between destination image, visitor engagement, and cultural contact in shaping tourist experiences. It underscores the importance of incorporating local cultural practices into tourism experiences to enhance visitor engagement, emotional connection, and loyalty. The research contributes valuable insights for tourism marketers seeking to enhance destination appeal through cultural immersion and active visitor participation, bridging gaps in the literature on the role of cultural rituals in tourism.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This research aimed to investigate the influence of destination image, tourist engagement, and cultural interaction on MTEs and loyalty intention, particularly in relation to the Seren Taun ceremony in the indigenous communities of the Ciletuh-Palabuhanratu Geopark. The results indicated that while the destination image favorably impacts MTEs, it does not directly influence visitors' loyalty intentions. MTEs significantly contribute to cultivating loyalty by serving as a mediator between destination image and loyalty intention. Moreover, tourist involvement was determined to considerably affect

cultural interaction, which subsequently favorably improves MTEs, however visitor engagement alone did not directly improve MTEs.

These findings underscore the vital significance of cultural interaction and MTEs in influencing visitor loyalty, particularly in cultural tourism sites such as the Geopark. The execution of rituals such as Seren Taun is essential for augmenting MTEs and fostering a profound connection between visitors and the local culture, hence promoting the long-term viability of the region's tourism. The economic influence of a sustainable cultural tourism model may be significant for local communities, since MTEs promote repeat visits and favorable word-of-mouth endorsements. Consequently, enhancing cultural engagement and refining MTEs via cultural assets, such as Seren Taun, are essential techniques for augmenting visitor loyalty.

Based on the findings, several strategic recommendations can be proposed to enhance the cultural tourism experience and visitor loyalty in the Ciletuh-Palabuhanratu Geopark. Firstly, the destination image should be further strengthened to positively impact Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTEs). Geopark stakeholders can achieve this by promoting the unique integration of cultural and geological attractions through targeted digital marketing campaigns. These campaigns should highlight the rich cultural heritage of the Seren Taun ritual, as well as the breathtaking geological features of the area, utilizing storytelling techniques to evoke emotional engagement and enhance tourists' perceptions of the destination's uniqueness.

Facilitating meaningful cultural interactions is also essential, as cultural contact significantly influences the creation of MTEs. To achieve this, Geopark managers should design participatory programs that actively involve visitors in local cultural activities. For instance, guided workshops on traditional crafts, agricultural practices,

and ceremonial preparations for the Seren Taun ritual can offer tourists a deeper understanding and appreciation of the local culture. These activities align with experiential learning theories, emphasizing the importance of active engagement in creating lasting and impactful memories for visitors.

Furthermore, visitor engagement should be enhanced by introducing cultural mediators or facilitators, such as local guides or community leaders, who can act as intermediaries between tourists and the local community. These mediators can provide context and personal narratives that enrich tourists' interactions, making the engagement more meaningful and impactful. Strengthening MTEs is also crucial to translating destination image and cultural interaction into loyalty intentions. Tourism stakeholders should focus on creating emotionally resonant experiences by integrating storytelling, sensory engagement, and unique ceremonial elements into tourism offerings. For example, enhancing the Seren Taun experience with interactive exhibits or multimedia presentations can amplify its memorability and foster emotional connections between visitors and the destination.

Collaborating with local communities is a critical component of sustaining cultural tourism in the Geopark. Empowering local communities through capacity-building initiatives, revenue-sharing mechanisms, and active participation in tourism planning ensures the preservation of cultural assets such as the Seren Taun ritual. This approach aligns with social exchange theory, fostering mutual benefits and respect between tourists and host communities. Finally, leveraging technology can broaden accessibility to the Seren Taun ritual and other cultural attractions. Virtual tours, augmented reality (AR) applications, and digital archives can be employed to enable tourists to explore CPUGGp remotely, promoting inclusivity and aligning with the growing trend of digital tourism.

These recommendations, grounded in the findings of this study, provide actionable strategies for stakeholders to enhance visitor experiences, foster loyalty, and support the long-term sustainability of cultural tourism in the Ciletuh-Palabuhanratu Geopark. By aligning practical strategies with established theoretical frameworks, such as cognitive-affective-conative models, experiential learning, and place attachment theories, this research contributes both scientific and practical value to sustainable tourism development.

This research examines Geoparks in West Java, particularly the Ciletuh-Palabuhanratu Geopark, including three indigenous villages: Ciptagelar, Sinaresmi, and Ciptamulya. Consequently, the results of this research may not be applicable to other Geoparks or cultural tourist sites in Indonesia. Furthermore, data collection was performed via self-reported questionnaires, which are prone to biases, including social desirability bias. This study emphasizes the yearly Seren Taun ceremony, restricting its focus to a single cultural attraction and excluding other cultural sites within the Geopark region. The used cross-sectional approach offers just a temporal snapshot of visitor experiences, failing to capture the evolution of tourist loyalty behavior over an extended period.

Future study may broaden its reach by include more Geoparks in West Java and Indonesia, allowing comparisons across diverse Geoparks with distinct cultural and geographical settings. Longitudinal studies are crucial for examining how visitor encounters with cultural events, such as Seren Taun, affect their allegiance over time. Moreover, additional study might investigate diverse cultural activities inside Geopark regions to get a more thorough comprehension of the formation of MTEs in the realm of cultural tourism. Qualitative approaches, including in-depth interviews, may be used to explore the emotional and psychological dimensions of visitors'



interaction with local culture and its influence on loyalty.

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