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# Factors Influencing Destination Loyalty: A Sustainability Lens

## Abstract

By adopting the lens of push and pull theory, this study examines the impact of a destination's cultural, environmental, and socio-economic image on destination loyalty, with a focus on the mediating roles of place attachment and tourist motivation. Through a self-administered questionnaire, data was collected from 217 tourists visiting northern areas of Pakistan. Results of partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) revealed that "cultural, environmental, and socio-economic image positively impact place attachment. Furthermore, place attachment and tourist motivation in sequence significantly mediate the influence of cultural, environmental, and socio-economic image on destination loyalty. This study makes a substantial contribution to the emerging literature on sustainability and its role in promoting destination loyalty. The study further provides guidelines for policymakers to adopt destination-specific strategies to boost tourism.

*Keywords:* sustainable tourism, tourist motivation, destination image, place attachment, destination loyalty

## 1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, tourism has emerged as a significant driver of economic and social progress, promoting sustainable growth by alleviating poverty, creating employment opportunities, and supporting small businesses (Destek & Aydın, 2022; Liu et al., 2022). The United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, comprising 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), underscores the crucial role of tourism in addressing global economic, social, and environmental challenges. In alignment with this agenda, 2017 was designated as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development to raise awareness of tourism's significant contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Recognizing tourism's potential as a sustainable economic indicator, numerous countries and organizations have initiated programs to promote local tourism industries (Trupp & Dolezal, 2020). According to the WTTC report (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2022), the travel and tourism industry is projected to contribute 11.4% to the global economy's GDP growth and create an additional 119 million jobs by 2034, underscoring its importance for sustainable development. Sustainable development involves the balanced growth of cultural, social, economic, and

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environmental aspects, which are essential for meeting the needs of present and future generations (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987).

The World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2012) defines sustainable tourism as addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities, considering its current and future implications. This definition highlights three key sustainability components: economic, environmental, and socio-cultural factors. For tourist destinations, the success of sustainability relies on the interplay of these pillars, with the UNEP and UNWTO advocating for practices that address these dimensions. Despite its significance, research on the relationship between destination sustainability and success remains limited, especially in developing countries (Santos et al., 2022).

Tourism has become a key economic driver, leading to intense competition among nations to develop and promote their destinations (Tecil et al., 2020). The success and sustainability of these destinations rely on fostering tourist loyalty, which is defined as the intention to revisit and recommend the destination (Patwardhan et al., 2020). Destination image, encompassing tourists' opinions and views (Crompton, 1979), is a crucial predictor of loyalty behavior (Tasci et al., 2022). While previous research has highlighted natural, historical, and cultural attractions and infrastructure (Wu, 2016), as well as the affective and cognitive components of the image (Huete-Alcocer & López-Ruiz, 2020), in developing loyalty behaviors among tourists, studies on sustainability dimensions are limited. Despite evidence linking destination image and loyalty (Li et al., 2021), the role of sustainable tourism in loyalty remains underexplored (Lee & Xue, 2020). Previous research on destination loyalty has yielded inconsistent findings, leaving uncertainty about the key factors and strategies that drive tourist loyalty. For instance, some studies have found that satisfaction is a key element of destination loyalty (Papadopoulou et al., 2023).

In contrast, others have identified the roles of factors such as perceived value (Mursid, 2023) or trust (Abubakar, 2016) in fostering loyalty. Similarly, Martins et al. (2023) highlighted that satisfaction alone does not drive attachment, stressing the need to examine other factors that shape intentions to revisit or recommend. The inconsistencies in previous studies highlighted the need for further exploration of factors influencing destination loyalty (Heuvel et al., 2022). Therefore, this study aims to understand the linkage between destination image, place attachment, tourist motivation, and destination loyalty from a sustainable tourism perspective.

Sustainable tourism is based on the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental pillars of sustainable development (Hall, 2011; Zhang et al., 2022); however, this phenomenon has remained underexplored, especially in the context of developing countries (Hussain et al., 2024). The northern areas of Pakistan boast stunning landscapes and cultural richness (Baig et al., 2024), yet limited research hinders the development of strategies to balance local tourism growth with resource preservation. Tourism drives economic growth in developing countries (Tabash et al., 2023); therefore, linking sustainability with long-term success is crucial to ensuring a positive impact on local communities and providing meaningful tourist experiences, particularly in Pakistan's northern regions. Bridging this gap can help craft policies tailored to the region's specific needs, promoting sustainable tourism that benefits both destinations and local communities.

Destinations worldwide compete for tourist attention, recognizing the economic benefits of tourism. However, retaining tourist loyalty is challenging (Wang et al., 2020). Although researchers have advocated the role of individual factors in shaping tourist loyalty towards the destination (Raggiotto & Scarpi, 2021), the complex relationships between destination image, place attachment, tourist motivation, and loyalty remain underexplored (Liu et al., 2023; Lv et al., 2020; Zou et al., 2022). Destination image shapes tourists' perceptions, influencing their attachment to the place, and this attachment can drive tourist motivation, impacting their decision to visit or return (Rodrigues et al., 2024). However, these factors interact in complex ways, making it difficult to create strategies that effectively address all aspects and foster long-term loyalty. Further, motivation, which is crucial for determining loyalty, drives engagement in tourism activities (Crompton, 1979). While

studies have explored this relationship, further research is needed to fully understand its dynamics (Lv et al., 2020). Tourist motivation, driven by cultural nuances in Asian destinations, also plays a crucial role in determining loyalty (Liu et al., 2023); understanding how motivation influences loyalty is essential for fostering long-term destination success from a sustainable tourism perspective (Lee & Xue, 2020). Therefore, this study examines the sequential influence of place attachment and tourist motivation on the relationship between cultural, socio-economic, and environmental image and destination loyalty. In Pakistan, with its significant tourism potential, understanding these dynamics can guide sustainable tourism initiatives (Khan et al., 2022). The findings will also aid policymakers, tourism authorities, and scholars in promoting sustainable tourism.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses development

The push-pull motivation framework was initially proposed by Dann (1977), and it is a widely used theoretical lens in tourism research (Yim et al., 2021). It underscores that tourists are motivated by a combination of internal desires, referred to as push factors, and external attractions, referred to as pull factors (Crompton, 1979), which shape their destination selection (Dean & Suhartanto, 2019). Push factors, which include the desire for relaxation, adventure, escape from routine, or the need for social advancement, are internal factors that force tourists to seek out new experiences (Crompton, 1979). On the other hand, pull factors are the external features of a destination, which include its cultural attractions, natural beauty, climate, and socio-economic conditions (Crompton, 1979; Liro, 2021), that appeal to tourists. For example, a strong cultural aspect may stimulate interest and a desire for personal learning (push factor).

In contrast, a destination's cultural heritage and traditions offer opportunities for cultural involvement (pull factors) (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Similarly, a destination's strong environmental aspects, encompassing the need for relaxation or adventure (push factors), can be met by a destination's serene environment and outdoor activities (pull factors) (Crompton, 1979). Socio-economic factors, such as affordability and safety (push factors), also play a role, with a destination's infrastructure and services contributing to a positive socio-economic image (pull factors) (Uysal et al., 2009). Overall, the push and pull factors contribute to the attachment to a place. For example, a tourist seeking relaxation (push factor) may find it in the relaxing environment of a destination (pull factor), fostering place attachment (Kastenholz et al., 2020; Maumbe & Arbogast, 2015). This attachment can further reinforce tourist motivation, which is regarded as an emotional bond with a place, strengthening the desire to return and thereby enhancing destination loyalty. Loyalty has emerged as a key predictor of the success of tourism businesses (Suhartanto et al., 2020). Loyal tourists are more likely to promote and revisit a destination (Hu & Xu, 2023), prompting researchers to study tourist-centric destination loyalty. This underscores the importance of incorporating both push and pull motivations in tourism studies better to understand tourist behavior and design effective promotional strategies (Soldatenko et al., 2023).

### 2.1. Cultural image and place attachment

Earlier research has highlighted that increased tourism may have both positive and negative effects on a destination's culture. For instance, tourism can benefit a destination by preserving cultural and historical sites (Hobfoll, 2001). Protecting a destination's cultural image is crucial for maintaining the community's identity and values, as well as its capacity to attract and retain tourists (Nasser, 2003). Moreover, the practical preservation of cultural activities and assets is crucial for the sustainability of destinations (Artal-Tur et al., 2018). According to Ramkissoon and Uysal (2011), in tourism research, the destination's culture and place attachment has a close linkage. The cultural image encompasses perceptions of a destination's customs, traditions, and way of life, which play a significant role in shaping tourists' expectations and experiences (Ramkissoon, 2015). Scholars argue that culture inspires tourists and influences their attachment to a place (Blešić et al., 2022).

Furthermore, positive cultural features, such as festivals and scenic attractions, enhance the destination's image. Likewise, place attachment, an emotional connection to a place, is influenced by various factors, including the physical and social environment, personal experiences, and cultural significance (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Research further suggests that a destination's cultural image can influence the development of place attachment among tourists (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011). A positive cultural image fosters emotional connections with a place, contributing to sustainable development through the preservation of cultural values and heritage (Mondal & Samaddar, 2021). Research has further stressed that a destination's cultural image influences tourists' expectations and experiences (Kusumah, 2024). For example, visitors to northern areas of Pakistan, known for its rich cultural heritage, may find their trips more fulfilling by engaging with the local culture. Therefore, the following is proposed:

*H1: Cultural image has a positive impact on place attachment.*

## 2.2. Environmental image and place attachment

Environmental image, termed as one's subjective perception of the physical environment of a place (Solís-Radilla et al., 2019), is a significant predictor of place attachment. The aesthetic appeal, safety, and functionality are considered key aspects of the environmental image (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010; Sangpikul, 2017). Moreover, environmental factors such as the travel environment, ambience, and natural attractions have also been a key focus of research on destination image (Chen & Phou, 2013). A well-preserved natural environment that offers unique recreational opportunities to tourists is an asset for a destination (Azzopardi & Nash, 2016). According to Lewicka (2011), positive perceptions of the physical environment, influenced by cultural background and personal experiences, enhance attachment to a place.

On the other hand, negative perceptions, like disorder and pollution, weaken this attachment (Biddau et al., 2023). A recent study revealed that urban design, including green spaces, plays a crucial role in creating a positive environmental image and fostering a sense of attachment (Sun et al., 2020). Scholars further assert that destinations often face environmental challenges, yet a well-maintained natural environment can provide a competitive edge (Fong et al., 2017). This shows that environmental quality and access to attractions are pivotal for tourism success. In addition, residents' support for tourism can be influenced by the positive environmental effects in the area (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011), strengthening tourist attachment to the destination. Hence, we propose:

*H2: Environmental image has a positive impact on place attachment.*

## 2.3. Socio-economic image and place attachment

The social and economic dimensions of sustainable tourism development, which include promoting local products, enhancing employment and business opportunities, improving community standards, and developing infrastructure, are often interconnected (Lee & Xue, 2020). Socio-economic factors, such as civic arrangement, approachability, tourism offerings and amenities, and the cost of products and facilities, have a significant impact on tourist behavior (Wu, 2016). Moreover, positive perceptions of safety, infrastructure, and local hospitality can contribute to a more enjoyable experience (Heung & Qu, 2020). Alongside the socio-economic growth of destinations due to tourism activities (Lusby, 2021), adverse effects such as price hikes in goods and services, negative perceptions of cleanliness, safety, overcrowding, or hostility can have a detrimental impact on a tourist's experience (Kusumah, 2024). As a result, the destination's socio-economic image impacts tourist attachment (Jin et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding a city's social and economic reputation is crucial for influencing tourist attachment. These arguments suggest that strong attachments to a destination are more likely to form among visitors who hold favorable opinions about its socio-economic image. Therefore, we propose:

*H3: Socio-economic image has a positive impact on place attachment.*

## 2.4. Place attachment and tourist motivation

Place attachment has been described as the emotional bond a person forms with a location. At the same time, tourist motivation refers to the combination of desires and needs that drive individuals to derive pleasure from a tourist attraction or destination (Crompton, 1979). Research exploring the correlation between place attachment and tourist motivation has found that a strong emotional connection to a destination can enhance motivation to visit and spend time there (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Prayag and Ryan (2012) suggest that positive emotional experiences can lead to greater fulfilment in the tourism experience, thereby increasing the motivation to return to the destination. Moreover, place attachment can encourage repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth recommendations, which have significant implications for the tourism industry (Han et al., 2019). Morgan (2010) highlighted that positive experiences in a place can foster a strong bond with the location, like place attachment, and vice versa. Research has shown that place attachment can influence an individual's attitudes and behaviors (Cheng et al., 2013), impact their tourist experiences (Orth et al., 2012), and contribute to destination loyalty (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Additionally, studies suggest that place attachment can significantly affect a tourist's motivation to revisit a destination (Budruk & Stanis, 2013). According to the arguments, tourists with strong attachments to a destination are more likely to revisit and recommend it.

*H4: Place attachment has a positive impact on tourists' motivation.*

## 2.5. Tourist motivation and destination loyalty

Tourist motivation, which refers to the personal desires and needs of tourists, is a crucial factor in driving loyalty and satisfaction towards a destination (Chang et al., 2014). As already discussed, destination loyalty reflects tourists' intent to revisit and recommend a specific place. In a push-pull framework, factors such as interpersonal relations, novelty, relaxation, and exploration contribute to tourist motivation towards a destination (Lin, 2014). Motivation has also been found to influence activities related to visiting a destination (Chun-Chu & Jen-Shou, 2018). Cohen et al. (2014) argued that, based on certain expectations and attitudes, a visit to a destination is influenced by motivation, which may result in revisiting intention and ultimately lead to loyalty. Carvache-Franco et al. (2022) established a positive link between motivations and loyalty.

Furthermore, Suhartanto et al. (2020) found that tourists' motivation is a key determinant of loyalty. Shakoori and Hosseini (2019) also identified specific dimensions that affect the relationship between motivation and loyalty. Similarly, Rybina and Lee (2021) discovered motivational factors associated with loyalty behaviors.

*H5: Tourist motivation has a positive impact on destination loyalty.*

## 2.6. Mediating roles of place attachment and tourist motivation

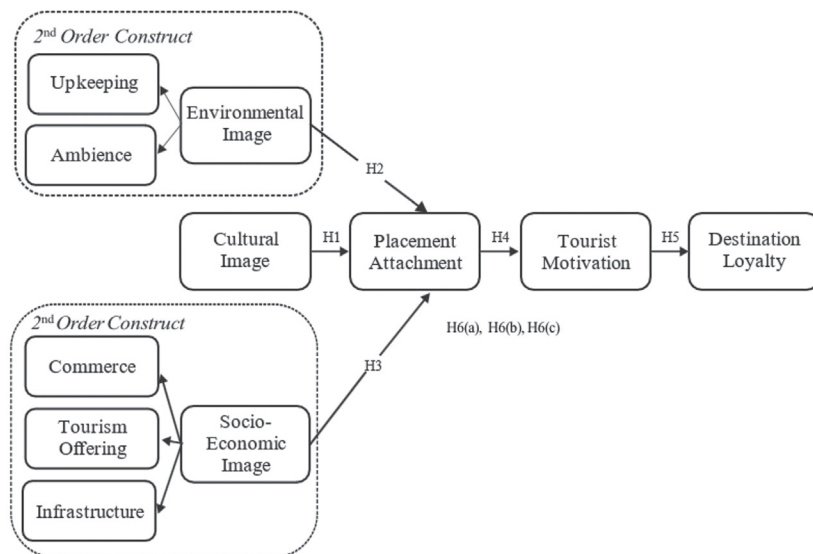
Contemporary research has highlighted destination image, tourist motivation, and place attachment (Li et al., 2021; Raggiotto & Scarpi, 2021) as key indicators of destination loyalty. For example, studies found that place attachment and motivation separately promote destination loyalty (Xu & Zhang, 2016). Moreover, Hosany et al. (2020) highlighted that motivation and place attachment shape visit intentions. Place attachment, an emotional connection to a place, fosters deeper emotional connections (Patwardhan et al., 2020), enhancing travel experiences and the desire to revisit (Wang et al., 2020). Furthermore, tourist motivation—the essential psychological drive for individuals to travel—is explained by the push-pull theory (Suni & Pesonen, 2019), which describes how internal and external factors influence tourists' visiting intentions. Although various studies have examined the relationship between place attachment and tourist motivation concerning other variables, none have tested their sequential impact on destination image and destination loyalty.

*Hypothesis 6(a): Place attachment and tourist motivation mediate the relationship between cultural image and destination loyalty in a sequence.*

*Hypothesis 6(b):* Place attachment and tourist motivation mediate the relationship between environmental image and destination loyalty in a sequence.

*Hypothesis 6(c):* Place attachment and tourist motivation mediate the relationship between socio-economic image and destination loyalty in a sequence.

**Figure 1**  
**Research model**



### 3. Methodology

The northern areas of Pakistan, renowned for their stunning landscapes and rich cultural heritage, offer a diverse range of attractions for tourists. From snow-capped mountains and beautiful lakes to ancient forts and monasteries, the region showcases a blend of Islamic, Buddhist, and pre-Islamic cultural heritage. The warm hospitality and delicious cuisine embedded in the culture of these areas further enhance the tourist experience. The recent development of infrastructure through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has made the region even more accessible and appealing to visitors (Zhao et al., 2022). During summer vacations, the northern areas experience a surge in tourism from families, colleagues, and individuals seeking pleasant weather and a memorable escape from other parts of Pakistan.

Our study employed a deductive research approach using a self-administered questionnaire. Data was collected between June and September 2023 by distributing questionnaires to tourists in waiting areas of various hotels and attractions in northern Pakistan. Given the limited availability of a complete sampling frame for Pakistan's domestic tourism market, convenience sampling was used. The sample size was calculated using Kline's (2015) guidelines, which involve multiplying the number of questionnaire items by 10 (46 x 10 = 460). Ethical considerations and protocols were strictly adhered to throughout the data collection process. The questionnaire included information about the study's objectives, a confidentiality statement, and a voluntary participation agreement. Of the 460 questionnaires distributed, 247 were returned, yielding a response rate of 54.13%. Thirty questionnaires were discarded due to missing information, leaving 217 usable for data analysis.

#### 3.1. Measures

The scales for measurement of variables were adopted from previously well-established studies on the sustainability dimensions of destination image (Lee & Xue, 2020), destination loyalty (Dedeoğlu, 2019), place

attachment (Prayag & Ryan, 2012), and tourist motivation (Suhartanto et al., 2020). The respondents were asked to rate on a five-point Likert scale where “1=strongly disagree” and “5=strongly agree.” The composite reliability values of all the variables were above 0.70, indicating reliability and internal consistency (cultural image=0.94, environmental image=0.94, socio-economic image=0.94, place attachment=0.95, tourist motivation=0.91, and destination loyalty=0.94) (Hair et al., 2019).

### 3.2. Data analysis

In line with the recommendations of Hair et al. (2023), PLS-SEM, using Smart-PLS 4.0.9.5, was employed to analyze the data. Partial least squares (PLS), a variance-based approach, has gained extensive adoption in recent years within the fields of tourism (Cetinsöz et al., 2024). The variance-based approach offers distinct advantages. First, PLS-SEM does not impose distributional assumptions or sample size restrictions (Hair et al., 2019). Second, given the complexity of the research model, which involves sequential mediations with multidimensional variables (i.e., first-order and second-order constructs), PLS-SEM is a more suitable choice for handling such complex models. Third, PLS-SEM provides advanced techniques, including an assessment of the model's predictive power and the calculation of the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio to establish discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2019). Thus, in line with the guidelines of Hair et al. (2019), PLS-SEM was employed to examine both direct and indirect paths, and the results are reported.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Measurement model

The measurement model provides factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) to establish reliability, convergent, and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2019). The findings in Table 1 indicate that all factor loadings fall within an acceptable range, specifically 0.68 to 0.89. Table 1 highlights that the values of CR are higher than the minimum threshold of 0.70, confirming reliability (Hair et al., 2019). Table 1 also presents the values of AVE (cultural image = 0.64, environmental image = 0.56, socio-economic image = 0.52, place attachment = 0.70, tourist motivation = 0.72, and destination loyalty = 0.72), which are all higher than 0.50, thereby establishing convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019). Results in Tables 2 and 3 provide the HTMT values for the 1st and 2nd order constructs, respectively, which confirm discriminant validity because all values of HTMT (for both 1st and 2nd order constructs) are below the maximum threshold of 0.85 (Hair et al., 2019).

**Table 1**  
*Factor loadings, reliability and convergent validity*

Constructs	Items	Loadings	CR	AVE
Cultural image	CI1. Northern areas have interesting cultural attractions	0.84	0.94	0.64
	CI2. Have interesting historical attractions	0.83		
	CI3. Have attractive cultural festivals/events	0.83		
	CI4. Have appealing local cuisine	0.72		
	CI5. Have interesting local arts and crafts	0.77		
	CI6. Have quality cultural experiences	0.83		
	CI7. Have unique cultural identity and traditions	0.82		
	CI8. Have good preservation of cultural heritage	0.79		
	CI9. Have abundance of cultural learning opportunities	0.74		
Environmental image	2nd order construct		0.94	0.56
Upkeeping	Upk1. Northern areas have interesting natural attractions	0.74	0.89	0.67
	Upk2. Have clean and tidy environment	0.87		
	Upk3. Have good preservation of natural areas	0.88		
	Upk4. Have good maintenance of buildings	0.77		

**Table 3 (continued)**

Ambience	Amb1. Northern areas have low level of water pollution	0.81	0.93	0.62
	Amb2. Low level of air pollution	0.84		
	Amb3. Low level of noise pollution	0.83		
	Amb4. Pleasant weather and climate	0.76		
	Amb5. Restful and relaxing atmosphere	0.80		
	Amb6. Good recreational/outdoor facilities and activities	0.76		
	Amb7. Low traffic congestion issue	0.76		
	Amb8. Not too crowded with people	0.73		
Socio-economic image	2nd order construct		0.94	0.52
Commerce	Com1. Northern areas have strong local economy	0.81	0.91	0.71
	Com2. Have diverse locally-owned businesses	0.87		
	Com3. Good nightlife and entertainment activities	0.84		
	Com4. Offer good shopping facilities	0.84		
Tourism offering	TO1. Offer reasonable prices of goods and services	0.76	0.90	0.64
	TO2. Northern areas bear good reputation	0.83		
	TO3. Availability of tourism facilities and information	0.86		
	TO4. Offers plenty of tourist attractions	0.72		
	TO5. Provide quality tourism offerings	0.78		
Infrastructure	I1. Have safety in the area	0.72	0.89	0.61
	I2. Locals are friendly and helpful	0.68		
	I3. Easiness to access places/areas	0.88		
	I4. Good public transportation system	0.78		
	I5. Good public infrastructures	0.82		
Place attachment	PA1. Northern areas are very special destination to me	0.86	0.95	0.70
	PA2. I identify strongly with this destination	0.85		
	PA3. Holidaying in northern areas means a lot to me	0.88		
	PA4. I am very attached to this holiday destination	0.87		
	PA5. No other place can provide the same holiday experience as northern areas	0.79		
	PA6. Northern areas are the best place for what I like to do on holidays	0.86		
	PA7. Holidaying here is more important to me than holidaying in other places	0.81		
	PA8. I would not substitute any other destination for the types of things that I did during my holidays in northern areas	0.76		
Tourist motivation	TM1. Northern areas provide me learning new experiences	0.88	0.91	0.72
	TM2. Visiting northern areas refresh my mind from routines	0.88		
	TM3. I accompany my friends / family	0.87		
	TM4. I am attracted by promotion of these areas	0.73		
Destination loyalty	DL1. I tell positive things about northern areas to others	0.89	0.94	0.72
	DL2. I encourage friends and relatives to visit northern areas.	0.87		
	DL3. I recommend northern areas for holiday.	0.88		
	DL4. I like to revisit northern areas in the near future	0.83		
	DL5. I visit northern areas more frequently	0.79		
	DL6. Northern areas are my first choice over other destinations	0.81		

Note. CI=cultural image, UPK=upkeeping, AMB=ambience, TO=tourism offering, I=infrastructure, PA=place attachment, TM=tourist motivation, DL=destination loyalty, CR=composite reliability, AVE=average variance extracted. CR>0.70, AVE>0.50.

**Table 2**  
Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (1st order constructs)

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Ambiance	-								
2. Commerce	0.52	-							
3. Cultural image	0.57	0.38	-						
4. Destination loyalty	0.52	0.24	0.66	-					
5. Infrastructure	0.63	0.83	0.62	0.48	-				
6. Place attachment	0.61	0.44	0.72	0.82	0.63	-			
7. Tourism offering	0.73	0.79	0.56	0.54	0.82	0.64	-		
8. Tourist motivation	0.53	0.38	0.70	0.81	0.56	0.84	0.62	-	
9. Upkeeping	0.81	0.53	0.67	0.65	0.75	0.61	0.76	0.62	-

Note. Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)<0.85

**Table 3**  
Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (2nd order constructs)

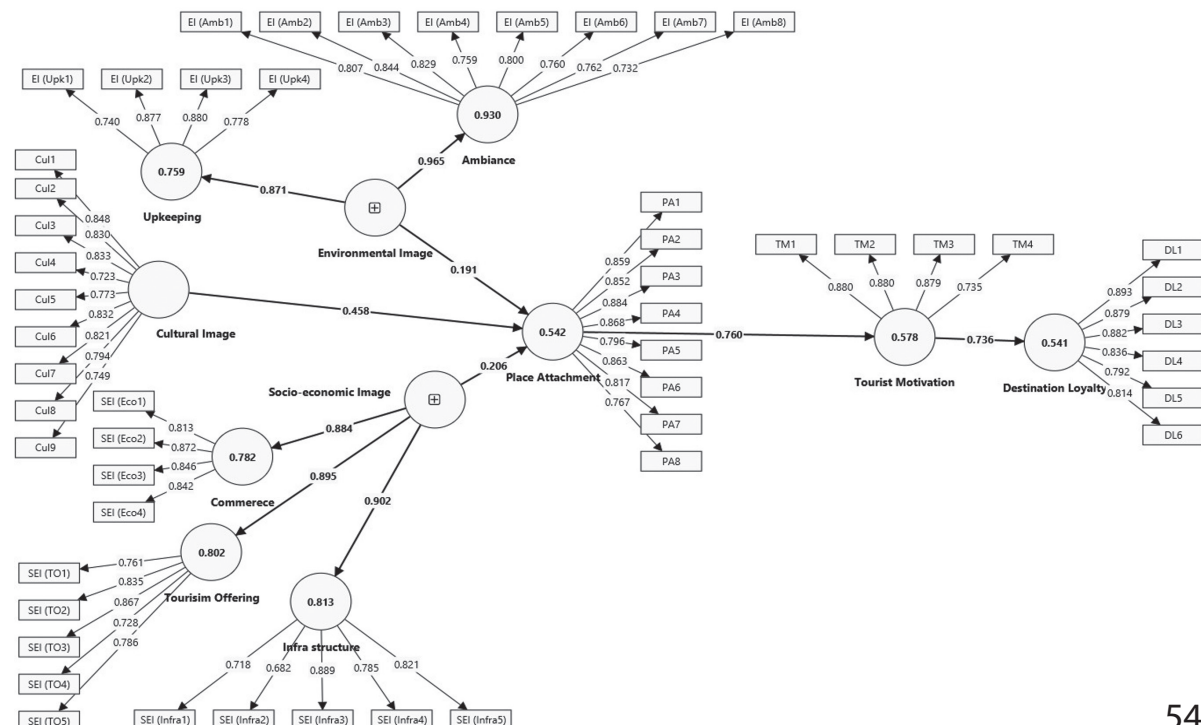
Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Cultural image	-					
2. Destination loyalty	0.66	-				
3. Environmental image	0.63	0.59	-			
4. Place attachment	0.72	0.82	0.64	-		
5. Socio-economic image	0.56	0.46	0.73	0.62	-	
6. Tourist motivation	0.70	0.81	0.59	0.84	0.56	-

Note. Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)<0.85

## 4.2. Structural model

The proposed hypotheses were tested by applying the PLS-SEM bootstrapping method with 5,000 resampling iterations at a 95% confidence interval. The results of R<sup>2</sup> indicate that cultural, environmental, and socio-economic factors account for 54%, 58%, and 54% of the variance in place attachment, tourist motivation, and destination loyalty, respectively. In addition, the results in Table 4 show that place attachment has a significant predictive relevance (Q<sup>2</sup> = 0.51), whereas tourist motivation (Q<sup>2</sup> = 0.41) and destination loyalty (Q<sup>2</sup> = 0.34) have medium predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2019).

**Figure 2**  
Structural model



### 4.3. Hypotheses testing

Hypothesis 1 proposes that cultural image has a positive effect on place attachment. Results in Table 4 show that the artistic image plays a significant and positive role in promoting place attachment ( $\beta = 0.46$ ;  $p < .05$ ), confirming Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 posits that an environmental image has a positive effect on place attachment. Results confirmed the positive association between environmental image and place attachment ( $\beta = 0.19$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), supporting hypothesis 2. Similarly, Hypothesis 3 proposes that socio-economic image has a positive impact on place attachment. Findings confirmed that socio-economic factors play a positive and significant role in boosting place attachment ( $\beta = 0.21$ ;  $p < .05$ ), confirming Hypothesis 3. Furthermore, Hypothesis 4 posits that place attachment has a positive effect on tourist motivation. Results in Table 4 show that place attachment has a significant impact on tourist motivation ( $\beta = 0.76$ ;  $p < .05$ ), supporting Hypothesis 4. Moreover, Hypothesis 5 suggests that tourist motivation has a positive effect on destination loyalty. Findings confirmed that tourist motivation has a significant and positive impact on destination loyalty ( $\beta = 0.74$ ;  $p < .05$ ); thus, Hypothesis 5 is accepted. The mediation hypotheses were confirmed by using the assumptions of Hayes (2010), which explain that mediation is significant if the confidence interval does not include zero between the lower-level confidence interval (LLCI) and the upper-level confidence interval (ULCI). Hypothesis 6(a) proposes that place attachment and tourist motivation mediate the relationship between cultural image and destination loyalty sequentially. The findings of an indirect effect show that place attachment and tourist motivation play a mediating role in transferring the effect of cultural image on destination loyalty ( $\beta = 0.26$ ;  $p < .05$ ; LLCI = 0.14, ULCI = 0.38), confirming Hypothesis 6(a). Hypothesis 6(b) posits that place attachment and tourist motivation mediate the relationship between environmental image and destination loyalty sequentially. Results in Table 4 confirmed that place attachment and tourist motivation serve as mediating mechanisms between environmental image and destination loyalty ( $\beta = 0.11$ ;  $p < .05$ ; LLCI = 0.03, ULCI = 0.20), thus accepting Hypothesis 6(b). Finally, hypothesis 6(c) proposes that place attachment and tourist motivation sequentially mediate the relationship between socio-economic image and destination loyalty. Table 4 shows that place attachment and tourist motivation significantly mediate the impact of socio-economic image on destination loyalty ( $\beta = 0.12$ ;  $p < .05$ ; LLCI = 0.03, ULCI = 0.20) in sequence; hence, hypothesis 6(c) is accepted.

**Table 4**  
*Path analysis and hypotheses testing*

Relationships	B	t-values	LLCI	ULCI	Decision
<i>Direct effects</i>					
H1: CI → PA	0.46***	5.34	0.29	0.62	Accepted
H2: EI → PA	0.19**	2.43	0.04	0.35	Accepted
H3: SEI → PA	0.21**	2.69	0.06	0.36	Accepted
H4: PA → TM	0.76***	19.61	0.67	0.82	Accepted
H5: TM → DL	0.74***	20.48	0.67	0.80	Accepted
<i>Indirect effects</i>					
H6(a): CI → PA → TM → DL	0.26***	4.27	0.14	0.38	Accepted
H6(b): EI → PA → TM → DL	0.11*	2.36	0.03	0.20	Accepted
H6(c): SEI → PA → TM → DL	0.12**	2.75	0.03	0.20	Accepted

Note. CI=cultural image, PA=place attachment, TM=tourist motivation, SEI=socio-economic image, DL=destination loyalty, EI=environmental image, LLCI=lower-level confidence interval, ULCI=upper-level confidence interval. Bootstrap confidence intervals were constructed using 5,000 resamples,  $R^2$  = Determination coefficients;  $Q^2$ = Predictive relevance of endogenous.

$R^2$  Place Attachment = 0.54;  $Q^2$  Place Attachment = 0.51

$R^2$  Tourist Motivation = 0.58;  $Q^2$  Tourist Motivation = 0.41

$R^2$  Destination Loyalty = 0.54;  $Q^2$  Destination Loyalty = 0.34

$R^2$  considered weak (>0.25), moderate (>0.50), and substantial (>0.75).

$Q^2$  considered small (>0), medium (>0.25), and large (>0.50) predictive relevance.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The study examines the impact of cultural, socio-economic, and environmental image on destination loyalty through a serial mediation mechanism of place attachment and tourist motivation. Sustainability is crucial for expanding the tourist industry. Considering the importance of tourist destinations in sustainable tourism development (Pulido-Fernández et al., 2015), the study assessed the impact of a destination's sustainable dimensions on predicting tourist loyalty. Aligning with prior research (Gursoy et al., 2014), the findings confirmed the significant impact of cultural, environmental, and socio-economic image on place attachment. Although all three factors of the designation image (i.e., cultural, environmental, and socio-economic) have a direct effect on place attachment, the latter is more influenced by the cultural image ( $\beta = 0.46$ ) than by the environmental ( $\beta = 0.19$ ) and socio-economic images ( $\beta = 0.21$ ).

Furthermore, placement attachment substantially contributes to travel motivation ( $\beta = 0.76$ ), which in turn amplifies destination loyalty ( $\beta = 0.74$ ). This shows that cultural, environmental, and socio-economic image produce place attachment in the first place, and place attachment will, in turn, lead to tourist motivation and destination loyalty. Hence, the findings of our study highlight the importance of underlying mechanisms in explaining the effect of destination image on loyalty.

Findings reveal that the northern area's cultural image stands out as the most positive among tourists, while its environmental image is the least positive. This suggests that, for sustainability, an area's cultural reputation can outweigh its economic reputation. Known for their diverse cultures, which include traditional festivals such as Shandur Polo and Jashn-e-Nauroz, these areas offer tourists valuable insights into local sports, dance, music, and culinary delights. Moreover, the region's hospitality traditions and regional arts and crafts foster a strong connection between tourists and the local culture, enhancing their overall experience. These findings align with the push-pull theory, which posits that cultural aspects (push factors) are destination-driven motives, distinct from those that originate solely within the tourist (Crompton, 1979; Uysal et al., 2009). The findings also suggest that a destination's environmental features, including its attractions and activities, have a significant influence on tourists' attachment to the place. Furthermore, renowned for their serene and peaceful environments, these areas are ideal for fulfilling tourists' desires for relaxation.

Additionally, they offer recreational activities such as hiking and mountain climbing, enhancing tourists' attachment to the place and their motivation to revisit the area. This aligns with the push and pull framework, which suggests that a destination's environmental features, such as peaceful surroundings and outdoor activities, fulfil tourists' desires for relaxation and adventure (Crompton, 1979). Previous research has demonstrated that the socio-economic factors of a destination play a crucial role in shaping its positive perception (Uysal et al., 2009); however, the socio-economic image was found to have the least impact on attachment to place. This can be attributed to multiple factors, like underdeveloped infrastructure, climate change challenges, limited accessibility, and gender inequality issues. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts between local and national governments to establish the region as a tourism hub while preserving its natural landscape. The launch of the Pakistan-China Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a positive step towards improving the socio-economic conditions of the region and attracting more tourists.

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

The study delves into sustainable tourism by examining how visitors perceive a destination's characteristics and how these perceptions affect attachment, motivation, and, ultimately, loyalty behavior. Using the push and pull theory, the study examines the role of sustainability dimensions in influencing destination image, place attachment, and tourist motivation, which, in turn, impact loyalty. Firstly, the study extends the sustainability literature by exploring destination loyalty and its antecedents (Li et al., 2021; Raggiotto & Scarpi, 2021). Findings further highlight the destination image as a key factor in determining visitors'

loyalty, particularly when an emotional connection is formed. Secondly, it confirms the significance of place attachment and tourist motivation in predicting loyalty, which aligns with previous research (Gursoy et al., 2014; Xu & Zhang, 2016). The study also contributes to the push-pull framework explaining how sustainability dimensions of destination image impact behavioral intentions through attachment and motivation. Thirdly, it establishes that all dimensions of a destination's sustainable image have a positive influence on loyalty through place attachment and tourist motivation. This highlights the crucial role of emotional bonds in fostering loyalty (Woosnam et al., 2018). Fourthly, the study adds to the existing literature on destination loyalty by elucidating the mechanisms through which cultural, environmental, and socio-economic aspects foster attachment and motivation, leading to loyalty. Lastly, the research fills a knowledge gap by focusing on sustainable tourism in developing countries (Liu et al., 2023), thereby enhancing our understanding of destination loyalty dynamics and providing valuable insights for promoting tourism.

## 5.2. Practical implications

The study offers crucial insights into the sustainable development of tourism, offering recommendations for tourism authorities and destination managers. It underscores the paramount importance of prioritizing the sustainability dimension of destination image to bolster visitors' attachment to the location, advocating for concerted efforts towards the preservation and promotion of cultural attractions alongside initiatives aimed at upgrading socio-economic conditions. Additionally, the study highlights the pivotal role of cultural resources and activities in sustaining destinations (Artal-Tur et al., 2018), suggesting that proactive measures such as promoting festivals, local cuisine, and native arts and crafts can be used to appeal to tourists. Moreover, deliberate interventions are required to attract international tourists, including ensuring a secure environment and actively promoting cultural events. The establishment of tourist information centers to mitigate language barriers and enrich tourists' experiences is also recommended. Furthermore, the study highlights the need for destination marketing strategies that showcase unique local offerings and organize cultural events to foster a deep emotional connection with the destination. Complementing these efforts, comprehensive tourism policies that prioritize socio-economic advancement and foster private sector engagement are advocated, alongside investments in tourism infrastructure and services aimed at enhancing the overall visitor experience and satisfaction.

## 5.3. Limitations and future directions

While this study has significant implications for both theory and practice, several limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional design, influenced by data collection challenges in developing countries, may create common-method bias and hinder the establishment of causal relationships. Future research can mitigate this limitation by employing longitudinal data collection methods. Second, the study's focus solely on the Pakistan context may restrict the generalizability of its findings. Incorporating data from multiple destinations, particularly from other developing countries with similar characteristics, may enrich the insights. Third, tourist characteristics and categories may influence these relationships. Future studies may investigate the impact of destination image on destination loyalty, considering tourist characteristics and categories as well. Although the survey examined place attachment and tourist motivation as mediators in the link between cultural, environmental, and socio-economic image and destination loyalty, further research may explore this relationship. Future research may consider additional mediators to broaden the scope of investigation, such as customer engagement, tourist experience, and involvement (Singh et al., 2022). Moreover, while previous research has emphasized place dependence and place identity, dimensions such as "affective attachment and social bonding" have received less attention in the context of destination loyalty (Zou et al., 2022). Integrating these variables into future studies can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the drivers of destination loyalty.

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