

# Enhancing Destination Loyalty Through Tourist Perception, Destination Image, and Mediation of Tourist Satisfaction: A Case Study in Ataúro Municipality

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## ABSTRACT

The research objectives aim to explore tourist perceptions, including the destination's image as a determining factor in fostering satisfaction in the chosen tourist destination. Ultimately, the positive values identified contribute to ensuring present and continued loyalty in the Ataúro Municipality. This study adopts a quantitative methodology, focusing on quantitative research in a location that emphasizes exploration and understanding the individual or group's desire to visit a tourist destination. The quantitative research method primarily aims to discover and comprehend the experiences, perspectives, and thoughts of tourists. The study utilizes an incidental method with 384 respondents who visited Ataúro Island, distributing questionnaires constructed from high-level variables, encompassing tourist perceptions, destination image, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty. Smart-PLS 3.0 is employed to analyze the data. The research results demonstrate that tourist perceptions significantly influence destination loyalty when reinforced by tourist satisfaction. Additionally, the destination image influences tourist satisfaction but does not directly impact destination loyalty. Nevertheless, empirical studies suggest that tourist perceptions, destination image, and satisfaction have a direct influence on destination loyalty in other contexts. In conclusion, this research establishes that tourist perceptions and destination image significantly and positively influence destination loyalty on Ataúro Island when supported by tourist satisfaction. Consequently, this study strongly implies the need for stakeholders to make informed decisions to enhance the development of tourist destinations on Ataúro Island, ensuring the sustainability of tourism development.

**Keywords:** *Perception, Destination image, Tourist satisfaction, and Destination loyalty.*

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, Tourism emerges as a crucial sector for fostering the development of many nations, including Timor-Leste, presenting substantial potential for economic growth and increased revenue. Successful tourism development serves as a primary attraction for both domestic and international tourists, creating positive impacts on the local economy. In this context, it is imperative for tourist destinations to thoroughly understand the factors influencing tourist loyalty to ensure sustained and increased visitation in the future (Chiu, Zeng, and Cheng, 2016).

One crucial factor in securing tourist loyalty in a tourist destination is tourist perception. Tourist perception encompasses various aspects, including perceptions of natural beauty, culture, religion, safety, facilities, transportation, tourist products, service quality, and the value offered by the destination. A positive perception of a destination increases tourist interest, encouraging repeat visits and positive recommendations to other tourists, thus influencing loyalty to the destination (Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022; Yin et al., 2024). However, it's important to note that tourist perception alone does not guarantee destination loyalty due to other contributing factors, including the destination's own image.

In addition to tourist perception, the destination image also plays a crucial role in influencing tourist loyalty. The destination image results from what tourists perceive about the destination. When tourists have a strong positive impression of

a destination, there is a higher likelihood that they will choose that destination and influence others to do the same. Therefore, understanding the relationship between tourist perception and destination image is essential for fostering tourist loyalty (Artuger and Cetinsoz, 2017; Avram, 2019; Debbagh and Azouaoui, 2021; Iordanova, 2017; Keni et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, tourist satisfaction stands out as a central element in maintaining tourist loyalty to a destination. Tourist satisfaction is an emotional assessment resulting from the comparison between expected and perceived values during the travel experience. It provides a comprehensive evaluation of various aspects such as tourism attractions, tourist products, transportation, accommodation, service quality, and more. When tourists feel satisfied, they are likely to have the intention to revisit and share positive information about the destination with other tourists (Artuđer, Cevdet, and İbrahim, 2013; Rajesh, 2016; Rojas-de-Gracia & Alarcón-Urbistondo, 2020). However, it is crucial to note that tourist satisfaction alone does not guarantee destination loyalty if tourists engage in only a single visit.

This research focuses on the tourist destination of Ataúro Island in Timor-Leste. Despite the island's vast natural and cultural potential, reinforcing a positive image and maintaining tourist loyalty require attention. Previous studies have explored the relationship between these factors in the tourism literature. From these studies, it is evident that tourist satisfaction plays a significant role in mediating the relationship between tourist

perception and destination image for destination loyalty. Nevertheless, there is an opportunity for further research to explore these relationships specifically in the context of Ataúro Island in Timor-Leste (Wahyudin et al., 2019). Therefore, this research aims to deepen the understanding of tourist perception and destination image for tourist loyalty generated through tourist satisfaction, contributing to the improved development of tourism in Ataúro Island. Also, whether there is the impact of tourists' perception and destination image on tourists' satisfaction and the mediation effect of tourist satisfaction between tourist perception and destination image on destination loyalty. The remaining of this study is describing about literature review, the method of research, result, discussion and conclusions and implications of the study.

## 2. Theoretical Background, Hypotheses Development and Hypothesized Model

### 2.1. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

#### 2.1.1. Destination Loyalty

Destination loyalty emerges as a critical aspect in destination markets, aiming not only to attract new visitors but also to retain existing ones (Chiu et al., 2016). It is associated with repeat purchase and recommendation to friends and family (Travassos and Rita, 2008). A well-known definition of brand loyalty is provided by Setiawan (2018), describing it as "a continuous commitment to repurchase or recommend preferred products or services in the future, thereby generating consistent repetition despite situational influences and marketing efforts that may induce alternative purchasing behaviors." In marketing literature, customer loyalty is measured in three ways: behavioral approach, attitudinal approach, and composite approach. Physical stability refers to the frequency of repeated purchase of the same brand, while loyalty refers to the intention to purchase. The composite approach is an integration of the behavioral and attitudinal approaches (L. Wang and Li, 2023) (Huang, Weiler, and Assaker, 2015) (del Bosque and San Martín, 2008). In a specific study, they use the term loyalty, meaning that loyalty occurs when an individual visit a specific location and wishes to return or recommend to others (Viet, 2019).

Customer loyalty has been a major area of business research for over a decade, and many studies reflect on processes to strengthen customer loyalty for various products, including tourist destinations, which refer to customer experience, value, service quality or performance, product superiority, personal attention, trust and synergy, customer involvement, price, risk, brand, habit, and brand usage history (Gallarza and Saura, 2006); (Çoban, 2012); (Stensland et al, 2021). Newman and Werbel (1973) define "customer loyalty as a person who buys a brand, considering it up to the moment and without having information related to the brand." Exposure (2015) defines in terms of behavior, such as the frequency of purchase or relative volume of a buyer for a specific brand. (Çoban, 2012) defines loyalty as the "intention of consumers or current behavior to regularly buy a specific product or service."

Rajesh's (2016) definition addresses loyalty as showing two non-identical aspects of loyalty to behavior and substantive concept: "a continuous commitment to repurchase or recommend preferred products or services in the future, thereby generating consistent repetition despite situational influences and marketing efforts that may induce alternative purchasing behaviors. Loyalty at the highest level, where it has "ultimate loyalty," is like consumers who want to buy a product or service again, there is nothing else, and will continue this mission against everything and everyone and cost anything.

The following definition is adopted by Konečnik et al. (2014) with the objective of maintaining a relationship with a specific service provider and buying it in the category of a specific service provider. Loyalty is innovative without clearly considering efficiency, service quality, social value, relaxation, stereotype, money perception, risk perception, time and effort spent, and perceived value (Chenini and Touaiti, 2018). A clear image of natural resources, cognitive image of service quality, cognitive fun image, and knowledge image influence the level of tourist loyalty. Attributes such as comfortable facilities, safety and infrastructure, cultural and natural attractions, environment, and various accessibilities affect tourist loyalty. Tourist stability depends on tourism satisfaction (e.g., attractions, accommodation, accessibility, equipment, and activities) and reaches expectations. The destination image (e.g., attractions, accommodations, accessibility, activities, local community, and commerce) are the components that leave tourist loyalty (Prayag, 2009). Basic services, attractions, and accessibility affect tourist loyalty, including destination image, personal involvement, joint involvement, and overall influence on the components (Avram, 2019).

Empirical studies report that customer loyalty occurs because there is a level of satisfaction achieved according to their expectations. In the context of tourism, loyalty to a destination results from a memorable travel experience, visible in the destination image, as well as in cost and value perceptions. Tourists have a significant tendency to revisit and provide positive information about visited tourist destinations, including recommendations to other tourists as a destination for tourist trips (Mahadzirah Mohamad, Ab Ghani, and Muhamad Nasir 2019; Rajesh 2016; Yoon and Uysal 2005).

#### 2.1.2. Tourists' Perception

Tourists' perceptions of a tourist destination encompass various aspects related to natural beauty, culture, religion, safety, facilities, transportation, tourist products, service quality, and the value offered by the destination. A positive perception of a destination tends to increase tourists' interest in revisiting and, furthermore, leads to positive recommendations to other tourists, thereby influencing tourist loyalty to that destination (Chiu, Zeng, Cheng 2016; and Yin et al., 2024).

In other empirical studies, it is asserted that tourist destinations receive positive impressions primarily based on the experiences encountered by tourists. However, this positive perception does not necessarily guarantee long-term commitment to the tourist destination (Çoban, 2012; Dong & Qu, 2023; Gim, 2018).

Furthermore, this hypothesis suggests that the positive perception of tourists regarding various aspects such as natural beauty, culture, religion, safety, facilities, transportation, tourist products, service quality, and value offered by Ataúro Island will increase tourists' interest in revisiting the location. Furthermore, this positive perception will also involve positive recommendations to other tourists, thereby influencing the loyalty of tourists to Ataúro Island.

This hypothesis is based on previous empirical studies, such as those conducted by Chiu, Zeng, and Cheng (2016), which indicate that a positive perception of the tourist destination is associated with increased interest and loyalty of tourists. However, it is essential to acknowledge that other studies, such as those conducted by Çoban (2012) and Gim (2018), caution that a positive perception does not necessarily guarantee consistent loyalty to the tourist destination. The study conducted on Ataúro Island confirms the results of previous research, suggesting that the positive perception of the destination has a positive influence on tourist loyalty. Therefore, this hypothesis (H1) is formulated based on these observations and results from related studies. Thus, the hypothesis (H1): Tourist perception has a positive influence on loyalty to Ataúro Island.

Furthermore, tourist perception significantly influences tourist satisfaction in Ataúro Island. This hypothesis asserts that the perceptions held by tourists have a statistically significant impact on their satisfaction levels, drawing support from the research conducted by Çoban (2012). According to Çoban, when tourists express positive comments or thoughts about what they experience, it indicates a high level of contentment with the consumed tourism products. This, in turn, suggests that meeting or exceeding tourists' expectations tends to result in higher satisfaction.

The study conducted on Ataúro Island aligns with these findings, providing evidence that tourist perceptions significantly influence tourist satisfaction. Therefore, this hypothesis (H3) is formulated based on the supportive empirical research and the specific context of Ataúro Island.

### 2.1.3. Destination Image

Image is defined as "a person's feelings about something they know" (Debbagh and Azouaoui, 2021). Furthermore, image is defined as "belief, impression, ideas, and perception of an individual regarding a tourist destination" (Crompton, 1979). Destination image is described as the "expression of knowledge, impressions, prejudices, imagination, and emotional thoughts of an individual in a specific place" (Artuger and Cetinsoz, 2017). In addition, destination image is defined as the "general perception of a destination shaped through information processing from various sources through individual or collective ideas or perceptions of a destination by people" (Iordanova, 2017). This image is also understood as an integrated, consensualized, and personalized understanding of what people believe (Keni et al., 2019). Destination image is defined as perception or impression of a destination that individuals relate to the anticipated benefits or consumption value (Debbagh and Azouaoui, 2021). Sentiments, beliefs, ideas, expectations, and

feelings accumulated over time by an individual or group form part of destination image (Zins, 2010). Destination image is considered as an interactive system of thoughts, opinions, feelings, visualization, and intentions towards a destination (Tasci et al., 2007).

To evaluate destination image, it is crucial to understand behaviors. Numerous studies indicate that a critical factor in the selection of a tourist destination is its image (Pujiastuti et al., 2017; Surya et al., 2018). Destination image comprises two components: cognitive image and affective image. Cognitive image reflects information or beliefs an individual has to determine a destination, while affective image relates to an individual's emotions or feelings about a destination (C. Y. Wang and Hsu, 2010) (Agapito et al., 2013). Various methods are employed in studies to assess tourist destinations. Destination image is a vital factor for tourists in making decisions to participate in tourism activities in a given destination. There is a prevalent trend for people to choose tourist destinations with positive impressions (Artuger and Cetinsoz, 2017). Furthermore, a positive destination image can affect the recreational experience in the future tourist location, satisfaction, and the future behaviors of individuals (Avram, 2019; Setiawan, 2018). Empirical studies also report that determinants for a positive destination image include a positive perception of destination image through various tourist attractions, modes of transportation, good accommodation types, environmental conditions, safety, shopping centers, and a variety of entertainment activities (Rajesh, 2016; Surya et al., 2018; Tasci et al., 2007).

Moreover, this hypothesis posits that the destination image, as tested in empirical studies, does not significantly contribute to the loyalty of tourists to Ataúro Island. The rationale behind this hypothesis is that while a positive destination image may shape tourists' expectations and perceptions, it might not necessarily translate into increased loyalty if not reinforced by a strengthening of overall satisfaction.

This perspective is supported by various empirical studies, including Vinh et al. (2023), Moreira and Iao (2014), and Setiawan (2018), which suggest that destination image alone may not be a strong determinant of tourist loyalty when not effectively aligned with overall satisfaction factors such as product quality, service, and meeting or exceeding expectations.

The study conducted on Ataúro Island appears to affirm this notion by indicating that the destination image might not significantly impact tourist loyalty. Therefore, this hypothesis (H2) is formulated based on the findings from these studies and the specific context of Ataúro Island. Thus, Hypothesis (H2): Destination Image does not have a significant positive influence on Loyalty to Ataúro Island.

Nevertheless, in contrast the Hypothesis (H4): Destination Image has a positive influence on Tourist Satisfaction in Ataúro Island. This hypothesis posits that the image of the destination significantly affects the satisfaction levels of tourists in Ataúro Island. Image, in this context, refers to the personal impressions or feelings individuals have about a specific place. It encompasses knowledge, impressions, biases, imagination, and emotional thoughts associated with a particular tourist destination.

The concept of satisfaction reflects an individual's level of contentment after comparing the service received or the outcomes achieved with their expectations (Rajesh, 2016). Several studies emphasize the importance of destination image in the selection of a tourism destination. Destination image is often divided into two components: cognitive image (related to information and belief) and affective image (related to emotions and feelings) (Wang and Hsu, 2010; Agapito et al., 2013).

Research suggests that a positive destination image can influence the recreational experience at a tourism site, satisfaction, and the future behavioral intentions of individuals (Avram, 2019; Setiawan, 2018). Empirical evidence further supports the direct influence of destination image on tourist satisfaction (Jeong & Kim, 2019).

Therefore, hypothesis H4 proposes that the positive destination image in Ataúro Island has a significant impact on tourist satisfaction. The positive perceptions held by tourists about the destination may contribute to their overall satisfaction with the tourism experience in Ataúro Island.

#### 2.1.4. Tourist Satisfaction

Satisfaction is the level of sentiment after comparing performance or perceived results with expectations (Rajesh, 2016; Rojas-de-Gracia & Alarcón-Urbistondo, 2020). Luvsandavaajav et al. (2022) indicate that tourist satisfaction is an expression of attitudes resulting from the comparison between products and service quality perceived by customers in the commerce industry, especially in the tourism service sector. Ngurah et al. (2017) suggest that tourist satisfaction is a critical issue for guiding tourism industry management as it enhances the performance and profits of service providers. Therefore, satisfaction has become an essential concept in tourism theory, commercialization applications, and a fundamental objective for tourism activities. Research by Huang et al. (2015) explores various aspects of satisfaction affected by different influences and theories.

Although empirical studies and theories on satisfaction are limited (Huang et al., 2015), various empirical studies conclude that tourist satisfaction significantly influences tourist loyalty, reflected in repeat visits and recommendations (C. G. Q. Chi and Qu, 2008; López-Guzmán et al., 2018; Soyly and Özdişçiner, 2020; Aunalal et al., 2017). They assert that tourist sentiment has a substantial impact on tourist loyalty. Therefore, a thorough examination and recommendations about tourist destinations are crucial for promoting sustainable tourism development, especially in management and commercialization areas. The study of tourist satisfaction is considered important for sustaining competitive business in the tourism industry as it affects destination selection, product consumption, and services (Kozak, 2002). A profound understanding of satisfaction becomes a principal area of tourism research over the past few decades.

Ngurah et al. (2017) conducted several studies acknowledging the adequacy or inadequacy of sacrifices that tourists recognize through positive experiences and base their evaluation on subjective assessments of results and associated experiences. Evaluations based on

surprise in the acquisition and consumption of products or services are essential. Summarizing psychological studies, it is revealed that when expectations are aligned with consumption expectations, the satisfaction level increases with consumer sentiments before consumption experiences (Ngurah et al., 2017). The response of consumers to consumption assessments after the current performance is compared with past expectations (or other norms for performance) is essential (Tomas et al., 2002). The consumer response to assessments of perception differences between their previous expectations (or other norms for performance) and the current performance of the acquired product is crucial (Yoon and Uysal, 2005).

A decision to make an assessment about a specific selection made through a transaction that resulted from customer comparisons with some standards for specific buying patterns is one of the behaviors when making the selection. Additionally, consumer realization is a decision about a product or service that provides an inadequate level of consumption, including less quantity or compensation. The definitions above are adopted from (Huang et al., 2015). Kozak (2002) defines satisfaction as an individual's feelings of contentment or disappointment resulting from comparing the product's performance with anticipated results and experiences. Crompton (1979) defines customer satisfaction as a purchasing behavior formed through mental comparisons of product and service quality that a customer expects to receive through exchange.

Anggarini (2018) mentions that satisfaction is an emotion of being content with a brand that influences consumption behavior. Tourism activities are complex and temporary experiences. If tourism attributes can meet visitors' needs, they will have a good experience. Satisfaction is considered a valid indicator of the experience at a destination (Lee, 2007). Tourist sentiments are also important for tourism management because of their influence on objective assessments of the school (Chiu et al., 2016; Rajesh, 2016; Setiawan, 2018; Pizam et al., 1978; Pujastuti et al., 2017). A review of those who visit tourist destinations (Lee, 2007) has been conducted.

Customer satisfaction is defined as a response to the consumer regarding the relationship between what the consumer spends and the rewards (benefits) anticipated by the consumer (Thawornwiriyaatrakul and Meeprom, 2020). In the context of tourism, satisfaction is defined as the perception between pre-trip expectations and post-trip performance experiences. This implies that those who are content when compared to the experience before traveling have a positive impact on tourism stability (Mohamad et al., 2019; C. G. Q. Chi and Qu, 2008; Papadopoulou et al., 2023). Positive sentiments are essential for tourist destinations because they influence the chosen destination, product consumption, and the decision to revisit (Yoon and Uysal, 2005). Furthermore, results from Thawornwiriyaatrakul and Meeprom (2020), Mohamad et al. (2019), C. G. Q. Chi and Qu (2008), Yoon and Uysal (2005) demonstrate that sentiment has a positive influence on tourism stability. In empirical studies, it is evident that to measure tourist satisfaction, one must consider the expectations controlled by travel experience that results from entertainment factors, attractions at the destination, and atmospheric conditions, accommodations, food services, transportation services, and

shopping locations (Chenini and Touaiti, 2018; Lu et al., 2020; Ngurah et al., 2017; Rajesh, 2016).

Hypothesis (H5): Tourist Satisfaction significantly influences Destination Loyalty in Ataúro Island. This hypothesis suggests that when tourists experience satisfaction beyond their expectations during their tourism journey to Ataúro Island, there is a substantial tendency to develop loyalty towards the tourism destination (Surya, Rini, and Setiawan, 2018). In a similar vein, when consumption outcomes align with tourists' expectations, signifying their heightened satisfaction, there is a high likelihood of increased loyalty and revisitation to the tourist destination, along with positive word-of-mouth recommendations for new potential visitors (Viet, 2019; Kanwel et al., 2019).

Empirical studies affirm that customer loyalty results from the level of customer satisfaction achieved, aligning with their expectations (Mahadzirah et al., 2019; Rajesh, 2016; Yoon and Uysal, 2005). In the context of tourism, loyalty to a destination emerges from tourists who, after a journey, feel delighted with their travel experiences influenced by destination image, perceived cost, and perceived value. Consequently, these tourists are more inclined to revisit and recommend the destination to others as a preferred travel choice (Mahadzirah et al., 2019; Rajesh, 2016; Yoon and Uysal, 2005).

This study's findings confirm previous research, asserting that tourist loyalty to Ataúro Island results from the tourists' satisfaction levels, aligning with their expectations. Hence, hypothesis **H5** posits that Tourist Satisfaction has a significant influence on Destination Loyalty in Ataúro Island.

The following hypothesis builds on previous studies indicating that tourists form positive or negative opinions about the tourism destination based on their travel experiences, starting from the beginning to the end of their journey. When tourists express positive thoughts about a tourist destination, it signifies that the outcomes align with or exceed their pre-travel expectations. Similarly, negative opinions suggest dissatisfaction, indicating a disparity between what they anticipated and what they experienced. Consequently, the tendency is for those who have positive perceptions and are satisfied to exhibit loyalty to the tourism destination, resulting in a higher likelihood of revisiting in the future (Travassos and Rita, 2008; Chiu et al., 2016; Godovykh and Tasci, 2021; Huwae et al., 2020). This study confirms that positive tourist perceptions lead to tourist satisfaction, subsequently fostering loyalty to the tourist destination they visited in Ataúro Municipality.

Therefore, hypothesis **H6** posits that Tourist Perception and Tourist Satisfaction have a significant positive impact on Destination Loyalty in Ataúro Municipality.

Moreover, this hypothesis, the impact of destination image on satisfaction and subsequently on loyalty has been a prominent research topic in tourism. Studies in the 1970s initiated this line of research by scholars such as John Hunt, Edward Mayo, and Clare Gunn. In the 1990s, Chon identified the influence of destination image on behavior, not just as passengers but also on satisfaction. The positive relationship between environment, infrastructure, quality, value, and the intention to revisit, along with the overall tourism experience

and perception, has been acknowledged (Vinh et al., 2023). Rajesh (2016) developed a theoretical model linking destination development and satisfaction. Travassos and Rita (2008) explored the direct relationship between purchasing behavior, exchange, the intention to revisit, and expenditure.

Moreover, Alcañiz et al. (2005) highlighted the direct influence of residents' behavior on destination image, their experiences, and the intention to engage in future activities. Stensland et al. (2021) established a causal relationship between satisfaction, motivation factors, tourist destination, and also considered the influence on tourism from the perspectives of demographics, tourism services, environment, comfort, and culture. Yoon and Uysal (2005) investigated a significant relationship between tourist involvement, placing together, and satisfaction. Çoban (2012) confirmed the relationship between image, service quality, satisfaction, and loyalty. Gallarza and Saura (2006) studied the casual relationship between value, satisfaction, and loyalty. Valle et al. (2011) demonstrated the relationship between internal consistency and loyalty in the context of Portugal.

In line with these studies, this research confirms that tourist perception and satisfaction significantly influence destination loyalty in Ataúro Municipality. Therefore, hypothesis **H7** posits that Destination Image and Tourist Satisfaction have a significant positive impact on Destination Loyalty in Ataúro Municipality.

## 2.2. Hypothesized Model

The research model constructed by the researcher adopts the framework of the previous studies to measure the impact of tourist perceptions on tourist pressures, destination image, and satisfaction on destination loyalty (Rajesh, 2016). The construction of this research model is divided into four main variables comprising tourist perceptions and destination image as independent variables (x), destination loyalty as a dependent variable (y), and tourist satisfaction as a mediating variable (m).

Destination loyalty is a concept that seeks to explain and understand the factors that influence tourists' loyalty to a specific travel destination. It is related to consumer behavior and loyalty theory but focuses specifically on the context of tourism and travel. Destination loyalty refers to the possibility that tourists will choose and recommend a particular destination for future travels. This occurs because tourists are satisfied with the destination and have developed an emotional connection that goes beyond mere satisfaction, creating a strong attachment to the place (Jiaqi and Sheng-Xian Teo, 2021). When tourists develop loyalty to a place, they are more likely to revisit it and become promoters, actively recommending the destination to others. This loyalty also represents a commitment and preference of tourists for a specific tourist destination. This preference indicates the tendency of individuals to choose and repeatedly visit a destination for others. Establishing loyalty is essential for tourism destinations as it encourages repeat visits, and a positive market can contribute to sustainable economic growth.

Empirical studies affirm that factors influencing destination loyalty include attributes of the destination,

perceived value, emotional connection, service quality, destination image and reputation, social influence, and accessibility and convenience (Çoban, 2012).

The theory related to tourist satisfaction serves as a conceptual framework to understand and analyze the factors that contribute to tourist satisfaction during their travel experiences (del Bosque and San Martín, 2008). Tourist satisfaction refers to the overall evaluation and contentment of tourists with their travel experiences, the destination, and the products and services. It is an important factor in determining the success and competitiveness of tourist destinations and businesses. The concept is used to measure tourist satisfaction based on factors such as Pre-travel factors, On-site factors, and Post-travel factors. Several empirical studies report that satisfaction is influenced by factors like expectations, perceived quality, service quality, destination attributes, value for money, emotional experiences, repeat visitation, and recommendation (Tomas et al., 2002).

Destination image theory is another conceptual framework in tourism and marketing that focuses on the perceptions and mental representations that individuals have about a particular destination. It is based on the idea that individuals form images and impressions of a destination before deciding to visit, and these images significantly influence their travel behavior and decision-making process. Destination image comprises cognitive and affective components, and its construction includes recognition and inclusion. It is influenced by personal factors, marketing and promotion, word-of-mouth, media influence, prior knowledge, and information search. Key elements considered as facets of destination image include perceived image, desired image, projected image, actual image, cognitive and affective components, and image formation (Tang et al., 2022).

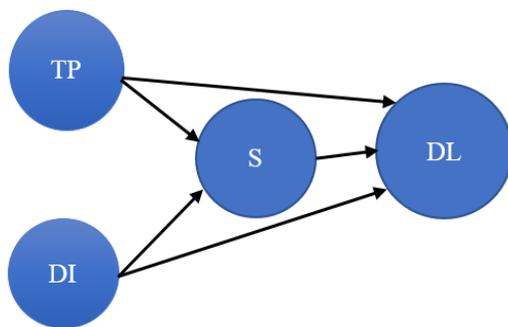


Figure 1. Hypothesized Model (Rajesh, 2016)

Perception theory related to tourists refers to the means by which tourists observe and interpret their travel experiences. It is a theoretical framework that helps to understand how individuals' thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs about a destination or tourist product are formed. Tourist perceptions are subjective opinions, beliefs, and attitudes that individuals have about a destination or tourism experience. These perceptions play a crucial role in shaping the decision-making process of tourists, including the selection of tourist destinations, the evaluation of travel options, and the overall contentment with their travel experiences. The key theories forming the basis for

understanding tourist perceptions include destination image, expectations, perceived quality, cognitive and affective components, information processing, and post-visit perceptions (Rajesh, 2016; Setiawan, 2018).

### 3. Research Methods

The study adopts a quantitative research method, focusing on the exploration and understanding of individual or group intentions to visit tourist destinations. The quantitative research method is effective in uncovering and comprehending experiences, perspectives, and thoughts of individuals or groups (Alshenqeeti, 2014).

The population of this research is categorized as an undefined population as there is no statistical data available; thus, it is determined using a random sampling method. It means every number of populations can be the sample. Therefore, this study adopted the undefined population formula to calculate the formula. The formula was adopted from Cochran's (1977), cited in Kotrlík & Higgins (2001). The total sample is 384 tourists. The reason why this study applied for the undefined population formula and the sample is 384 as there is no statistical data numbers of tourist visited Atauro Island from the relevant authorities. Thus, it would be fit for the sample of 384 as the formula for calculating the undefined population Lakens (2022).

Data was collected through a questionnaire adopted from previous empirical studies. The questionnaire covers indicators for tourist perception, destination image, satisfaction, and destination loyalty. Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) is used for responses. Distribution of questionnaires was based on the incidental sampling method in the Atauró municipality, targeting individuals who have visited Atauro Island.

The study uses inferential quantitative research to explore respondents' perceptions of the Atauro tourist destination, their influence on tourist satisfaction, and their role as determinants for destination loyalty. The analysis will be conducted using Smart-PLS 3.0 to establish the validity and reliability of the model.

It is to construct a model that represents relationships between outer and inner models based on theoretical and empirical foundations. Also, it is to define exogenous, endogenous, and mediating variables (Hair et al. 2017).

The aim is to define reflective and formative indicators, to assess outer model reliability using Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variable Extracted (AVE), and Alpha Cronbach. Also, it is to test constructs validity using convergent and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2017).

It begins with to evaluate the structural model by assessing the relationship between latent variables. The, it is to assess the quality of the model based on predictive ability, path coefficients (T-value and P-value), and effect size (f<sup>2</sup>). Also, it is to use HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio) for discriminant validity (Hair et al. 2017).

#### 4. Results

The study involves 384 respondents, with the majority tourists are from Timor-Leste (98.6%), followed by Switzerland (0.5%) and a small percentage from Indonesia, Italy, and Australia (0.3% each). Furthermore, the gender distribution among tourists is balanced, with an equal percentage of male and female respondents (50% each). Regardless the age and education distribution among tourists provides insights into the demographic composition of your study participants. Ages 15-25 is a significant proportion of tourists fall within this age group, constituting 66.7% of the respondents. Ages 26-40 is the second-largest age group, representing 30.4% of the respondents.

Moreover, the education level: Master's Degree: 4.9% of the tourists possess a Master's degree. Bachelor's Degree (Lisensiatura): 36.4% have a bachelor's degree. Associate's Degree (Baxarelatu): 12.5% have completed an associate's degree. High School (Secundaria): A significant portion, constituting 39.6% of the respondents. Pre-High School (Pre-Secundaria): 6.3% fall into this category. Primary School (Eskola Primaria): A small percentage, accounting for 0.3% of the respondents.

Therefore, the majority of tourists are relatively young, with a substantial percentage falling within the 15-25 age group. Education levels vary, with a notable presence of tourists holding bachelor's degrees. The distribution across different age groups and education levels reflects the diverse range of tourists visiting Atauró.

This finding reflects those tourists' Occupations or Reasons for Travel. Mostly respondents are students, comprising of 67%. Also, a significant portion, making up 14.1% of the respondents are traveling for business purposes. The remaining tourists' occupations are working with local government: 7.0% and the private Sector: 5.4%.

The demographic information results that student Dominance: The majority of tourists are students, suggesting that Atauró Island attracts a significant student population. Diverse Purpose: While students form the majority, there's diversity in the reasons for travel, including business, government, private sector, and other professional activities.

##### *Results of Construct Reliability Testing*

In this study, the reliability test utilized the parameters of Cronbach's alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR). The results of the reliability test, based on Cronbach's alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR), demonstrate that the values for all construct variables exceed the minimum threshold of Cronbach's alpha (greater than or equal to 0.7) and Composite Reliability (greater than 0.7).

Based on the reliability test using Cronbach's alpha, the parameter values for all construct variables are above the threshold, indicating good reliability. Specifically, the

Cronbach's alpha (CA) values for Destination Image (DI), Destination Loyalty (DL), Tourist Perception (TP), and Tourist Satisfaction (TS) are 0.818, 0.790, 0.753, and 0.815, respectively.

Table 1. Reliability Constructs Result Test

Note	CA	CR	AVE
DI	0.818	0.819	0.525
DL	0.790	0.794	0.614
TP	0.753	0.753	0.505
TS	0.815	0.815	0.522

From the construct reliability test using Composite Reliability (CR), it is evident that all indicators in this study have CR values exceeding 0.7 (Table 1). This indicates that all indicators exhibit good internal consistency and reliability in testing the relationships between the constructs in the inner model.

The results of the construct validity test involve testing both convergent validity and discriminant validity. Convergent validity is assessed using outer loading (OL) or indicator loading with average variance extracted (AVE). Observing the outer loading, the OL values for all indicators exceed 0.7. However, it's worth noting that indicators from Tourist Perception (TP5) and (TP7) include indicators from Destination Image (DI1) with relatively lower outer loading values, indicating a limited contribution to these variables.

The discriminant validity test uses the Fornell-Larcker Criterion (FL) and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT). When using FL, an indicator is considered valid when the square root of the average variance extracted ( $\sqrt{AVE}$ ) is greater than the correlation between that indicator and other indicators ( $\sqrt{AVE}$ ) in the table (Hair et al. 2017). As per the results of the discriminant validity test using FL, all indicators are considered valid according to the standard (Hair et al. 2017).

Table 2. Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	DI	DL	TP	TS
DI	0.724			
DL	0.472	0.783		
TP	0.636	0.503	0.711	
TS	0.672	0.503	0.596	0.722

The discriminant validity test also utilizes the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT), where the HTMT value should be less than 0.85 (Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2015). The results of the test in this study indicate that the HTMT values for all indicators are less than 0.85 (Table 3). Therefore, all indicators are considered valid for use in this research model.

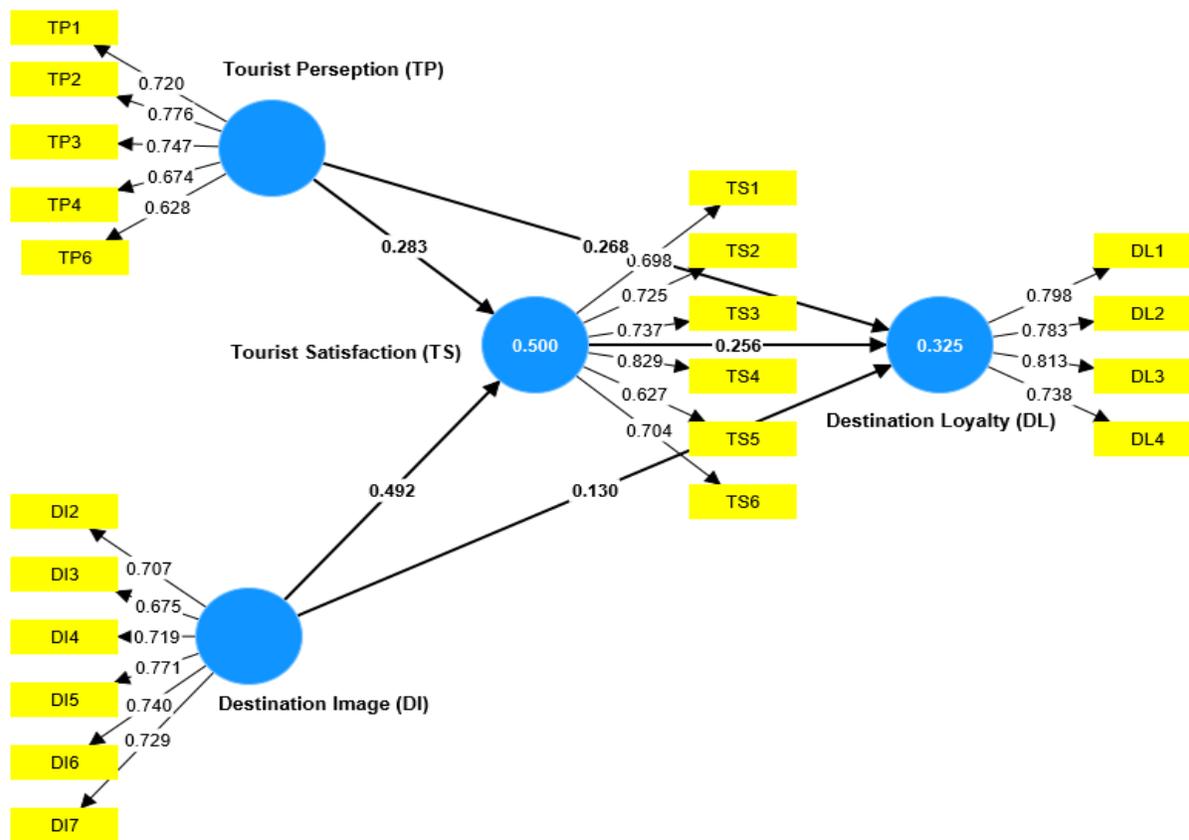


Figure 2. Outer Loading for Convergent Validity Test

The hypothesis test for the direct effect of each research variable is presented below:

H1: Tourist perception has a significant positive impact on destination loyalty in the Municipality of Atauro. The research results indicate that the T-value (3.538) and the P-value (0.000) exceed 1.96 and are less than 0.05, respectively (Table 4). Thus, it shows that tourist perception has a significant positive impact on destination loyalty in the Municipality of Atauro. Therefore, hypothesis (H1) is considered accepted.

H2: Destination image does not have a significant positive impact on destination loyalty in the Municipality of Atauro. Based on the table above, the T-value (1.96) and the P-value (0.071) show that the T-value is less than 1.96, and the P-value exceeds 0.05 (Table 5). Thus, it indicates that destination image does not have a significant positive impact on destination loyalty in the Municipality of Atauro. Therefore, hypothesis (H2) is considered rejected.

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)	
Destination Loyalty (DL) <-> Destination Image (DI)	0.582
Tourist Perception (TP) <-> Destination Image (DI)	0.811
Tourist Perception (TP) <-> Destination Loyalty (DL)	0.644
Tourist Satisfaction (TS) <-> Destination Image (DI)	0.816
Tourist Satisfaction (TS) <-> Destination Loyalty (DL)	0.623
Tourist Satisfaction (TS) <-> Tourist Perception (TP)	0.751

In empirical studies that have tested destination image to generate loyalty to tourist destinations, the majority of those loyal to tourist destinations are so because they feel attracted and satisfied with their experiences, including the perceived value that meets their expectations. Thus, destination image

may not impact tourist destination loyalty if not strengthened by their satisfaction. (Vinh et al., 2023) (Moreira and Iao, 2014) (Setiawan, 2018).

However, in this study, it is suggested that contrary to the general trend, the destination image also becomes a significant

influencing factor for tourist loyalty. This is attributed to the unique natural and historical attractions in the Municipality of Atauro compared to other locations.

H3: Tourist perception has a significant positive impact on tourist satisfaction in the Municipality of Atauro. The results indicate that the T-value (5.894) and the P-value (0.000) exceed 1.96 and are less than 0.05, respectively (Table 4). This signifies that tourist perception has a significant positive impact on tourist satisfaction in the Municipality of Atauro. Therefore, hypothesis (H3) is considered accepted.

H4: Destination image has a significant positive impact on tourist satisfaction in the Municipality of Atauro. Similarly, the results demonstrate that the T-value (11.319) and the P-value (0.000) exceed 1.96 and are less than 0.05, respectively (See Table 4). This indicates that destination image has a significant positive impact on tourist satisfaction in the Municipality of Atauro. Thus, hypothesis (H4) is considered accepted.

H5: Tourist satisfaction has a significant positive impact on destination loyalty in the Municipality of Atauro. The table above reveals that the T-value (4.270) and the P-value (0.000) exceed 1.96 and are less than 0.05, respectively (Table 4). This implies that tourist satisfaction has a significant positive impact on destination loyalty in the Municipality of Atauro. Hence, hypothesis (H5) is considered accepted.

In this study, tourist satisfaction plays a role as a mediating variable to examine the relationships between tourist perception and destination loyalty, as well as between destination image and destination loyalty. The mediation test results were obtained through the bootstrapping technique using PLS (Partial Least Squares) with the indirect effect from path coefficients, as shown in Table V.

The analysis demonstrates that the indirect effect of tourist perception on destination loyalty through tourist satisfaction has

a significant value, as evidenced by the T-value and P-value. Similarly, the indirect effect of destination image on destination loyalty through tourist satisfaction is also significant based on the obtained T-value and P-value.

These results indicate that tourist satisfaction mediates the relationships between tourist perception and destination loyalty, as well as between destination image and destination loyalty in the Municipality of Atauro. Therefore, it can be concluded that tourist satisfaction plays a significant mediating role in influencing destination loyalty through both tourist perception and destination image.

H6: Tourist perception and tourist satisfaction have a significantly positive impact on destination loyalty in the Municipality of Atauro.

The results of the mediation test (specific indirect effect) from tourist perception to destination loyalty through tourist satisfaction demonstrate a significant value, with a T-value of 3.345 and a P-value of 0.000. Considering the T-value surpasses 1.96 and the P-value is less than 0.05 (Table V), it is evident that both tourist perception and tourist satisfaction have a positively significant impact on destination loyalty in the Municipality of Atauro. Thus, hypothesis H6 is accepted.

H7: Destination image and tourist satisfaction have a significantly positive impact on destination loyalty in the Municipality of Atauro.

Similarly, the results of the mediation test (specific indirect effect) from destination image to destination loyalty through tourist satisfaction reveal a significant value, with a T-value of 3.965 and a P-value of 0.000. Given that the T-value exceeds 1.96 and the P-value is below 0.05 (Table 5), it is apparent that both destination image and tourist satisfaction exert a positively significant impact on destination loyalty in the Municipality of Atauro. Therefore, hypothesis H7 is accepted.

Table 4. Path Coefficient Result Test

Note	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (IO/STDEV)	P Values	Note
Destination Image (DI) -> Destination Loyalty (DL) (H2)	0,130	0,128	0,072	1,805	0,071	Not significant
Destination Image (DI) -> Tourist Satisfaction (TS) (H4)	0,492	0,494	0,043	11,319	0,000	Significant
Tourist Perception (TP) -> Destination Loyalty (DL) (H1)	0,268	0,270	0,076	3,538	0,000	Significant
Tourist Perception (TP) -> Tourist Satisfaction (TS) (H3)	0,283	0,283	0,048	5,894	0,000	Significant
Tourist Satisfaction (TS) -> Destination Loyalty (DL) (H5)	0,256	0,256	0,060	4,270	0,000	Significant

Table 5. Mediation Result Test (Specific Indirect Effect)

Note	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation	T Statistics (IO/STDEV)	P Values	Note
Destination Image (DI) -> Tourist Satisfaction (TS) -> Destination Loyalty (DL) (H7)	0,126	0,126	0,032	3,965	0,000	Significant
Tourist Perception (TP) -> Tourist Satisfaction (TS) -> Destination Loyalty (DL) (H6)	0,072	0,072	0,022	3,345	0,001	Significant

## 5. Discussion

### *Relationship between Tourist Perception and Destination Loyalty*

The results of the research conducted in Atauro Island indicate that tourist perception has a significantly positive impact on destination loyalty. This implies that the majority of tourists has positive thoughts about their experiences during the journey, and committed to being loyal to the visited tourist destination.

This result is consistent with other empirical studies that reaffirm that many tourists who have positive thoughts about a tourist destination and necessarily guarantee long-term loyalty to that destination (Çoban, 2012; Gim, 2018; Yin et al., 2024). Despite having positive perceptions, there is assurance that these tourists will remain committed to the tourist destination (Çoban, 2012; Dong & Qu, 2023; Gim, 2018).

Moreover, another empirical study investigated the relationship between tourist perception of destination relationships and loyalty to a destination in Erbaz Mundu Site in China. The study demonstrated that the perception of tourist relationship has a positive and significant impact on destination loyalty, both directly and indirectly through the mediating effect on overall destination satisfaction and trust (Lestari, Yasri, and Abror, 2019). Another empirical study by Ibrahim et al. (2022) explored the relationship between perceived value, trust in the destination, and loyalty to the destination among tourists in an ecotourism destination in the Municipality of South Cotabato, Philippines. This study found that perceived value and trust in the destination are significantly related to loyalty to the destination among tourists.

### *Relationship between Destination Image and Destination Loyalty*

The research results show that the destination image does not have a significantly positive impact on destination loyalty in Atauro Municipality. The result of this study is in contrast with empirical studies that tested destination image to generate loyalty to tourist destinations, it was found that most tourists become loyal to a tourist destination because they feel satisfied and content with their experiences, including the perceived value of their purchases aligning with their expectations (Vinh et al., 2023; Moreira and Iao, 2014; Setiawan, 2018).

In a meta-analysis of 44 studies, a consistently positive and significant relationship was identified between destination image and destination loyalty. The strength of this relationship is greater for cognitive image (i.e., beliefs and perceptions about destination attributes) compared to affective image (i.e., emotional and sentimental connections with the destination). Thus, the positive and significant relationship is particularly evident among repeat tourists compared to first-time tourists (Mohamad and Ghani, 2014).

However, in this particular study, it is observed that the unique conditions of natural attraction and history in Atauro Municipality has not well served as factors influencing destination loyalty, contrary to the general trend observed in other locations.

### *Relationship between Tourist Perception and Tourist Satisfaction*

The research results indicate that tourist perception has a significantly positive impact on tourist satisfaction in Atauro Municipality. These findings are consistent with previous empirical studies, such as Çoban (2012), who mentioned that when a tourist provides positive comments or thoughts about what they have experienced, it signifies their satisfaction with the consumed tourism product. It can be concluded that when the perceived reality matches the expected reality, there is a tendency to generate high levels of satisfaction.

In another empirical study examining the impact of tourist perception, destination image, and tourist satisfaction on destination loyalty, the results showed that all three variables have a significantly positive impact on destination loyalty. Additionally, tourist perception plays a mediating role between destination image and tourist satisfaction (Rajesh 2016). Other empirical studies (Aliman et al., 2016; Bhuiyan et al., 2021) investigating the relationship between tourist perception and satisfaction in safari tourism in Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Safari Park in Bangladesh and rural tourism in Langkawi, Malaysia, found a positive and significant relationship between tourist perception and satisfaction. The studies also revealed that variables related to tourist perception are crucial, especially concerning the quality of the experience in the safari, the diversity of life, affordable prices, environmental quality, attraction and activity quality, and service and facility quality.

### *Relationship between Destination Image and Tourist Satisfaction*

The research results demonstrate that destination image has a significantly positive impact on tourist satisfaction in Atauro Municipality. The positive impact of destination image on satisfaction is attributed to the creation of satisfaction resulting from the destination's image. Tourists who embark on journeys to tourist destinations with positive thoughts signify their contentment with the visited destination (Surya, Rini, and Setiawan, 2018). Empirical studies, including a meta-analysis of 109 studies on destination image and tourist satisfaction, suggest a strong and positive relationship between destination image and tourist satisfaction. The results suggest that the destination image plays a crucial role in shaping the expectations and experiences of tourists, influencing their satisfaction (Zhang et al., 2014).

An empirical study conducted by Chi and Qu (2008) to investigate the structural relationship between destination image, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty revealed that destination image has a direct positive effect on tourist satisfaction, and tourist satisfaction has a direct positive effect on destination loyalty. The study also found that destination image indirectly affects destination loyalty through tourist satisfaction.

### *Relationship between Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Loyalty*

The research results indicate that tourist satisfaction has a significantly positive impact on destination loyalty in Atauro Municipality. This finding aligns with previous studies, emphasizing that loyalty to a tourist destination arises when tourists are satisfied with the experiences gained during their tourism journey and have a high likelihood of revisiting the destination (Pizam et al., 1978; Surya, Rini, and Setiawan, 2018). When consumers consume according to their expectations and desires, there is a high likelihood that they will be more loyal, intending to revisit the tourist destination and disseminate positive information to others (Rojas-de-Gracia & Alarcón-Urbistondo, 2020; Viet, 2019; Kanwel et al., 2019).

In another empirical study investigating the impact of tourist satisfaction and destination image on destination loyalty, data collected from 400 tourists visiting Malaysia revealed that tourist satisfaction has a significantly positive impact on destination loyalty. However, destination image does not have a direct impact on destination loyalty without the mediating effect of tourist satisfaction (Králíková et al., 2020).

#### *Relationship between Tourist Perception, Tourist Satisfaction, and Destination Loyalty*

The research results regarding the relationship between tourist perception and destination loyalty through tourist satisfaction demonstrate that tourist perception and tourist satisfaction have a significantly positive impact on destination loyalty in Atauro Municipality. The findings further reinforce previous empirical studies that suggest tourists express both positive and negative thoughts about the tourist destination they visit. Positive or negative thoughts are shaped by the travel experiences from the beginning to the end. When tourists have positive thoughts about a tourist destination, it signifies that the obtained results or experiences align with their expectations before traveling. Conversely, if they express negative thoughts, it means that they did not experience or feel as expected. To conclude, what tourists think should become a reality (satisfaction). Consequently, feeling content tends to strengthen loyalty to the tourist destination, and there is a higher likelihood of revisiting in the future (Chiu et al., 2016; Godovykh and Tasci, 2021; Huwae et al., 2020; Travassos and Rita, 2008).

Moreover, another empirical study sheds light on the complexity of tourist perception regarding the destination's quality, encompassing various factors, including tourist satisfaction, destination image, and trust in the destination. These factors play integrated roles in promoting destination loyalty. Tourist satisfaction serves as a measure of contentment, representing how tourists feel based on their overall experience at a particular destination. This feeling is influenced by factors such as the quality of tourist attractions, accommodation, and service. Destination image, as the general perception of tourists about a tourist destination, is influenced by factors such as destination reputation, effective marketing, and positive information from word of mouth. Therefore, it can generate loyalty to the destination due to the established trust in the tourist destination. From these studies, it is evident that positive perceptions of tourists arising from global experiences in a

tourist destination can foster strong loyalty to that destination (Chi and Qu, 2008; Hasan et al., 2017; Su et al., 2017).

#### *Relationship between Destination Image, Tourist Satisfaction, and Destination Loyalty*

The research results indicate that destination image has a significantly positive impact on destination loyalty through tourist satisfaction in Atauro Municipality. This finding provides further support to previous researchers who have emphasized that destination image, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty are interconnected concepts in tourism marketing.

Destination image is perceived as the overall perception of a tourist destination, linking to information and positive experiences gained during the tourism journey. Tourist satisfaction, which results from comparing expectations with received value, indicates how tourists will convey positive information about the visited destination to others, including recommending the place to new tourists. These studies suggest that destination image and tourist satisfaction play crucial roles in shaping loyalty and positive word-of-mouth recommendations for a tourist destination (Ibrahim et al., 2022; Králíková, Peruthová, and Ryglová, 2020).

Previous studies also indicate that these influences are essential for those who feel content and are more likely to become loyal to the tourist destination. This explains why there is a tendency to express loyalty to tourism destinations when tourists have positive experiences at the destination, and there is a high likelihood of expressing positivity, increasing the probability of returning to the tourist destination (Chiu et al., 2016; Viana, Saldanha, and Barreto, 2021b; Surya, Rini, and Setiawan, 2018).

## 6. Conclusions and Implications

The conclusion of this research indicates that tourist perception, destination image, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty all have a positive and significant impact in the Municipality of Atauro. The results further enhance our understanding of the relationships among these aspects in the tourism sector.

- a. **Tourist Perception and Destination Loyalty:**  
The results show that tourist perception has a significant positive impact on destination loyalty in the Municipality of Atauro. The positive thoughts about the destination experience leads to tourists' loyalty that influenced by their perceptions.
- b. **Destination Image and Destination Loyalty:**  
The results confirm that destination image does not have a significantly positive impact on destination loyalty in the Municipality of Atauro. Positive thoughts about the tourist destination, including its unique natural conditions and history, have yet strongly influence tourists' loyalty.
- c. **Tourist Perception and Tourist Satisfaction:**  
The results indicate that tourist perception has a significantly positive impact on tourist satisfaction in the

Municipality of Ataúro. A positive perception of the destination contributes to tourists' satisfaction, strengthening their appreciation for the tourist experience.

- d. **Destination Image and Tourist Satisfaction:**  
The results confirm that destination image has a significantly positive impact on tourist satisfaction in the Municipality of Ataúro. A positive destination image increases tourists' satisfaction, reducing the likelihood of disappointment.
- e. **Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Loyalty:**  
The results indicate that tourist satisfaction has a significantly positive impact on destination loyalty in the Municipality of Ataúro. Satisfied tourists are more likely to make decisions to revisit the destination and recommend it to others.
- f. **Tourist Perception and Tourist Satisfaction with Destination Loyalty:**  
The results indicate that tourist perception and tourist satisfaction significantly impact destination loyalty in the Municipality of Ataúro. Positive thoughts and satisfaction contribute to a sense of contentment and loyalty to the tourist destination.
- g. **Destination Image and Tourist Satisfaction with Destination Loyalty:**  
The results indicate that destination image and tourist satisfaction have a significantly positive impact on destination loyalty in the Municipality of Ataúro. A positive combination of destination image and tourist satisfaction reinforces tourist loyalty.

These conclusions reinforce the idea that the tourism sector in the Municipality of Ataúro needs to continue strengthening and promoting a positive image, providing services of high quality, and emphasizing tourist satisfaction to ensure their loyalty and contribute to sustainable development for the local community and the destination as a whole.

#### Theoretical Implications:

- a. Future research should consider the identified aspects to obtain clear and useful data for the sustainable development of tourism in Ataúro Island.
- b. Researchers should explore diverse data collection methods, such as interviews, questionnaires, and documentation, to ensure comprehensive and accurate information.
- c. The observation during the research revealed that many tourists visiting Ataúro Island face challenges in fully enjoying the tourism products due to time constraints. It is recommended to investigate this further to enhance the overall tourist experience.

#### Practical Implications:

- a. The Timor-Leste government, through the Ministry of Tourism and Environment, should collaborate with local authorities on Ataúro Island to address basic facilities such as sanitation, water, and electricity. This collaboration aims to ensure the comfort of tourists during their visits.

- b. Managers and tour operators on Ataúro Island should maintain a high standard of service, provide quality products, and offer maximum assistance to tourists whenever needed in the tourist destination.

#### 7. Limitations and recommendations for future research

Based on the experiences encountered during the research process, the researcher acknowledges that the results of this study are not perfect, and various limitations may impact the expected outcomes. Therefore, these limitations need to be taken into consideration by future researchers:

- a. **Narrow Focus:** The research exclusively concentrates on tourist perceptions and destination image concerning destination loyalty through tourist satisfaction as a mediator. As a result, other relevant variables may not have been identified in this research such as frequency of tourist visiting and tourist products (biodiversity ecosystem in the ocean).
- b. **Response Bias:** Respondents may exhibit bias in their responses, indicating that the information provided by the respondents may not fully reflect their true opinions. This could be due to a lack of understanding or honesty in responding to the survey questions. Therefore, caution is required in interpreting the results.
- c. **Survey Instrument Limitation:** The study relies solely on survey instruments to collect data. This means that the research is limited to the information provided in the survey, and respondents may not have had the opportunity to express their thoughts on specific research problems under real conditions.
- d. **Analysis Unit on Ataúro Island:** The study was conducted only at the entry port of Ataúro and some tourist destinations, potentially excluding a significant portion of tourists visiting the island. This limitation arises from the focus on a specific area, and the results may not represent the entire population of tourists.
- e. **Language Limitation:** The research is written in Tetum, and the translation of certain concepts and theories may alter their original meaning or significance.

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