"Mediating role of authenticity in the relationship between destination image and destination loyalty"

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MEDIATING ROLE OF AUTHENTICITY IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DESTINATION IMAGE AND DESTINATION LOYALTY

Abstract

Destination loyalty has become a topic that needs attention in tourism research, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic because it affects the number of visitors to tourist sites. This study aims to test the effect of destination image on destination loyalty through destination authenticity. The respondents in this study were visitors to the Ecotourism Mount Leuser National Park in Indonesia. The questionnaires were distributed to 301 respondents using purposive sampling. The data were processed using SEM-PLS methods. The results show that destination image influences destination authenticity (p-value <0.05). Next, destination authenticity affects destination loyalty (p-value <0.05) and destination image influences destination loyalty (p-value < 0.05). Finally, destination image through destination authenticity influences destination loyalty (p-value < 0.05). The findings of this study can be beneficial to the respective governmental bodies that seeks to improve destination authenticity and destination image to enhance destination loyalty of visitors and promote revisit intentions toward the Ecotourism Mount Leuser National Park in Indonesia. This study can be used as a reference for tourist destination managers to increase destination loyalty by maintaining and managing the tourist destination area properly. The government acts as a policymaker and is responsible for preserving the environmental impact of tourism, such as pollution, other environmental hazards, and land use issues stemming from poor planning, regulation, and engineering of the site, attractions, and facilities.

Keywords	destination image model, destination authenticity, destination loyalty, sustainable tourism, ecotourism
JEL Classification	M31, M38, Z32

INTRODUCTION

Tourist destination loyalty can be seen in the tourist intention to revisit tourist destinations. One of the considerations for tourists to revisit tourist places is destination authenticity and the destination image (Kanwel et al., 2019; Marso & Gunawan, 2018). Therefore, managers of tourist attractions must maintain the authenticity of the destination and the image of the tourist place.

Tourism sector has a substantial contribution to the Indonesian economy. Therefore, the tourism industry must be managed properly and correctly. This will have an impact on tourist loyalty to make a return to visit. In Indonesia, tourism has contributed 4.09% to GDP over the past decade. The tourism sector's highest contribution to GDP was achieved in 2019; it was 4.8%. This condition was positively correlated to the number of foreign tourists that visited the country in 2019. Its contribution in 2020 was still 4.1%, although only 4.02 million foreign tourists visited Indonesia (BPS, 2021).

Destination image and destination authenticity are factors that can increase customer loyalty. If tourists have a positive perception of the destination image, then in the future, tourists will revisit it. It means that a good image of a tourism destination will give positive outcomes to visitors in the form of tourist loyalty. A positive destination image as has an impact on customer destination loyalty. Kanwel et al. (2019) showed that destination image improved customer loyalty. These data provide evidence of inconsistencies in the results between destination image and customer loyalty. Marso and Gunawan (2018) also found that destination image can increase loyalty. Although previous studies had different contexts, the results obtained show that the results could be different even if they used the same variables. Therefore, this study is vital to test and make a conceptual model for resolving the existing research problem, which is the inconsistencies of previous results, and proves that destination image influences destination loyalty of customers.

In addition to destination image, destination authenticity is one of the factors that can influence customer loyalty. Tourists are not only looking for experiences through modern and high-quality tourist attractions but also looking for authentic and pristine experiences. The high level of destination authenticity can create a positive emotion for visitors, and the visitors will revisit the tourist destination. Destination authenticity derived from congruence theory is developed as a condition to reach destination loyalty. The self-congruence theory explains why people can adapt or change their preferences when faced with a different situation or environment (Valek & Williams, 2018). Tourists may change their destination after visiting the Mount Leuser National Park in Indonesia; however, with high compatibility with the authenticity of natural attractions, tourists may visit again and create destination loyalty. Only a high self-congruence can help tourists maintain and improve themselves positively (Lages et al., 2018). A high self-congruence toward the authenticity of a tourist destination will create a positive attitude toward a tourist object and eventually produce visitor loyalty (dos Santos, 2014). Therefore, this study examines the destination image's effect on destination authenticity and loyalty. This study also aims to analyze the mediating role of destination authenticity in the relationship between destination image and destination loyalty.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

The sustainability of the tourism industry depends on the number of visitors. Therefore, increasing tourist loyalty to visiting tourist sites is very important. Destination loyalty in the tourism sector indicates that the tourist makes return visits to a tourist place. Initially, the brand serves to identify or differentiate a product, and then the brand develops in services, organizations, sports, arts, ideas, people as well as places, all of which develop with destination brand to communicate its meaning and identity (Loureiro & de Araujo, 2015). The two key indicators of customer destination loyalty are the intention to visit again and the recommendation of the place. Tourism is a place to interact, and tourists are involved with the local culture and create a purposive value through their experience at the destination (Campón-Cerro et al., 2017). The level of involvement can be influenced by the level of knowledge and the frequency of consumption.

Furthermore, the level of customer knowledge is proven to affect loyalty and involvement in consumption behavior. There are various tourism models, such as tourism sustainability and responsible tourism (Zulvianti et al., 2022). Destination image is a compilation of people's beliefs and impressions of a destination that originates from processing information from various sources over time (Wang & Zhang, 2019).

The self-congruence theory is a theory that matches the individual self with the brand. Self-congruence influences purchase motivation; hence, consumers are motivated to chase the product as it satisfies their self-esteem and consistency needs (Sirgy, 2018). Based on the self-congruity theory approach, the study uses destination authenticity as a mediating variable in this paper. Self-congruity is defined as a process of matching perception between brand image and individual self-concept. In contrast, destination authenticity is defined as tourists' perception of a destina-

tion that possesses integrity, credibility, continuity, symbolism, and naturalness values. Hence, destination authenticity is hoped to bridge the gap in the research inconsistency problem between brand personality and brand loyalty.

The destination image of tourist attractions has a critical role in visitors deciding whether to visit or not, in other term, destination image will influence tourist loyalty. The destination of tourism place image is defined as a person's beliefs or impressions of a destination that originate from processing information from various sources over time (Tuomi et al., 2019; Hendarto, 2010). Destination image is an important determinant factor in choosing a holiday destination (Isa & Ramli, 2014). The main goal of forming a destination image is to affect tourists' perceptions, which can be defined as a process in which an individual chooses, organizes, and interprets destination stimuli into a meaningful and coherent image (Rajesh, 2013). Destination tourism place image, the representation of knowledge, feelings, and perceptions of parts of the destination, makes up the thoughts, opinions, feelings, visualizations, and intentions toward the destination in the future (Tasci et al., 2020). Consumption activities are strongly tied to self-concept; the more the brand's image suits the customers, the more they will like the product (Chua et al., 2019). This means that if a tourist spot has a positive destination image for visitors, this will have an impact on increasing the number of visitors. Destination image is an essential determinant factor in choosing a holiday destination (Lin et al., 2020). The main goal of forming a destination image is to affect tourists' perceptions (Yuliana et al., 2022). Perception is how an individual chooses, organizes, and interprets destination stimuli into a meaningful and coherent image (Rommy et al., 2018). Therefore, a destination's image is believed to significantly impact tourists' decisions regarding their visit, as tourists with little experience tend to decide based on the destination's image (Rashid et al., 2019).

Destination loyalty relates to how often customers come to visit tourist destinations. Destination loyalty refers to the frequency or the relative desire to revisit the same tourist destination (Christou et al., 2018). Brand loyalty is the inclination to recommend a tourist destination (Japutra et al., 2018).

Customers can be described as loyal if they display consistent purchase behavior or if there is a condition where they are required to purchase at least twice over a specific time interval (Dubois et al., 2021). Destination loyalty is defined as tourists' willingness to revisit a destination consistently (So et al., 2016). Loyalty reflects cognitive, affective, and conative aspects as a prerequisite for a sustainable relationship that can form customer commitment to the destination. Furthermore, loyalty involves actions that subscribe to and support the brand. Loyal attitudes and behaviors toward the brand show true loyalty.

The way people spend their holidays is part of self-actualization (Filimonau & De Coteau, 2020). Self-congruence theory is a psychological process and results where consumers compare their perceptions of brand image and their self-concept (Patwardhan et al., 2020). The self-congruity theory concept states that consumers respond positively to brands that align with their global self-concept (Bosnjak et al., 2011). This theory could help explain and predict consumer behavior and provide a comprehensive understanding of self-concept (Rather et al., 2019). Moreover, many previous studies showed that self-congruity influences customer behavior, specifically in pre-purchase and post-purchase behavior (Joo et al., 2020). In other words, better suitability between brand-user image and consumers' self-concept means consumers are more likely to be satisfied with the brand. Therefore, they will feel confident about the destination, feel committed to returning to the same brand, and promote it to others (Sirgy, 2018).

Destination authenticity is tourists' perception of a destination with integrity, credibility, continuity, and symbolic and natural value that reflects their selves. Self-conformity of tourists with the authenticity of a tourist destination is a form of interaction between tourists and tourist destination areas regarding culture, cuisine, atmosphere, and other attributes. Tourist interactions can generate tourist knowledge that leads them to feel respectful in the form of caring or other gestures of appreciation, an aspect of destination loyalty (Song et al., 2013).

Individuals' conformity with a brand helps them build a good reputation within their social group (Chen et al., 2015). Stokburger-Sauer (2011) con-
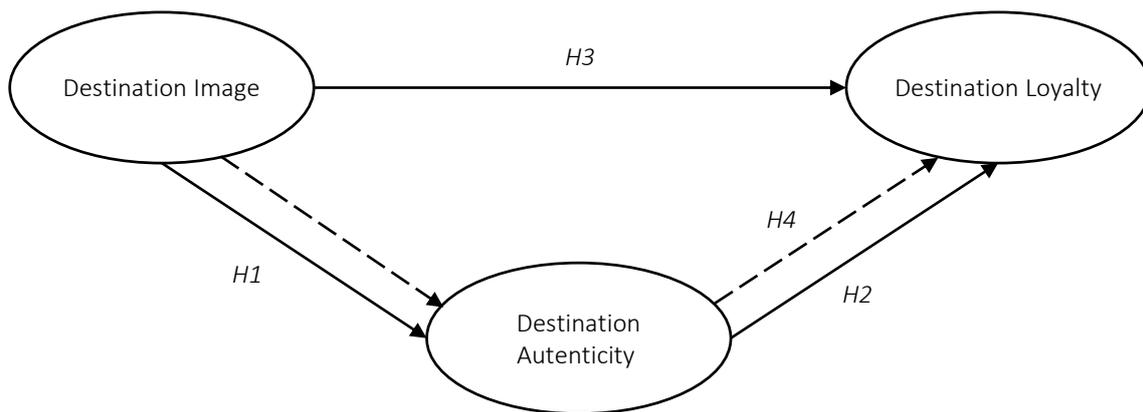
Figure 1. Conceptual framework

firmed that tourists' self-conformity with the authenticity of specific destinations positively influences their loyalty toward the destinations, such as their intention to revisit and advocate it. A person strives to align their actual self and their ideal self through the products they consume (Hultman et al., 2015). The consumer tends to evaluate products or services positively if the products or services have similar characteristics as themselves; thus, they will be willing to pay more for the brand (Deb, 2021).

The tourist destination image is an individual or group's perception of a place (Lozano et al., 2018). The correlation between destination image and destination loyalty is formed because the image can influence tourists to choose and revisit these destinations in the future (Hosany & Prayag, 2013). Image influences visitors in choosing destinations and revisiting destinations in the future. It will provide a better perception of the tourism offered. Substantial conformity between destination attributes and tourists' experiences tends to allow a positive perception of the authenticity of the destination and formulate a strong emotional response to the destination (Fu, 2019). Image can determine travel experiences that encourage tourists to be loyal by recommending the destination, writing a review, and posting a status on social media. Tourists who are socially engaged tend to make informed consumption decisions to revisit. Sustainable tourism leads to a desire to become authentic. The way people spend their holidays is an aspect of self-actualization (Diallo et al., 2015). Destination loyalty is a fundamental concept in marketing strategy.

Regarding the Ecotourism Mount Leuser National Park in Indonesia, based on the pre-survey data of 30 tourists, five tourists (16.67%) chose to visit this tourist spot rather than other tourist destinations, but 25 (83.33%) chose not to have a vacation at the Ecotourism Mount Leuser National Park. Additionally, four (13.33%) would visit Ecotourism Mount Leuser National Park soon; meanwhile, the remaining 26 people (86.67%) would not revisit it soon. Six tourists (20%) would recommend Ecotourism Mount Leuser National Park to others, while the remaining 24 (80%) would not recommend it. Moreover, eight tourists (26.67%) would speak positively about Ecotourism at Mount Leuser National Park, while 22 tourists (73.33%) would not speak positively about it. This condition indicates that destination loyalty is still relatively low. Based on the pre-survey results that revealed most respondents did not choose to have a vacation at Ecotourism Mount Leuser National Park, it must implement a marketing strategy development that can increase customer loyalty and surpass other destinations' customer loyalty. The development of the tourism industry can motivate tourism managers to improve and develop the tourism destination.

Therefore, this study examines the destination image's effect on destination authenticity and loyalty. This study also aims to analyze the mediating role of destination authenticity in the relationship between destination image and destination loyalty.

Based on the previous studies and conceptual framework (Figure 1), the study develops such hypotheses:

H1: *Destination image has a significant impact on destination authenticity.*

H2: *Destination authenticity has a significant impact on destination loyalty.*

H3: *Destination image has a significant impact on destination loyalty.*

H4: *Destination image through destination authenticity has a significant impact on destination loyalty.*

2. METHOD

This analysis was conducted with a quantitative method approach. The population comprises tourists who have visited the Mount Leuser National Park. The variables in this study consist of destination image, destination authenticity, and destination loyalty. Sampling is the individuals from a larger population selected specifically to represent the population as a whole (Abdillah & Hartono, 2015). This study uses a non-probability purposive sampling technique because the identity of the respondents for making the sample framework cannot be obtained in detail. Purposive sampling is a sample collection with specific criteria, such as experts (Milman et al., 2020). As the number population cannot be confirmed (Chen & Rahman, 2018), the number of samples at least needs to be 5-10 times the indicator variable. This results in 301 samples obtained by multiplying the indicator by 7 (4×7 = 301). Thus, the samples for this study were 301 tourists who have ever visited the Mount Leuser National Park.

This study uses structural equation modeling (SEM) with partial least squares (PLS) to analyze the data as the statistic model is quite complicated and is aimed to explore knowledge. The benefit of using PLS is that it creates minimal demand on the data distribution and works on nominal, ordinal, and interval variables. Additionally, it can detect the differences between various groups and is best suited to predict a set of dependent variables and one large set of independent variables (Hair et al., 2019).

3. RESULTS

Table 1 shows that of all the respondents, 170 (56%) are male and 131 (44%) are female. Based on age, 50 (16.6%) respondents are over the age of 45, 89 (29.6%) are between 17 and 25 years old, and 98 (32.6%) are between 26 and 35 (largest proportion). Furthermore, 63 (20.9%) respondents are between 36-45 years old, and 1 (0.3%) respondent is between 37 and 45. Individuals aged 26 to 35 are a part of the generation who enjoy visiting natural tourist sites the most. Based on their most recent education, 130 (43.2%) respondents have a Bachelor's Degree, 83 (27.6%) have a high school diploma, 75 (24.9%) have a postgraduate degree and 13 (4.3%) have a diploma degree. Based on income, 93 (30.9%) respondents earn more than 6 million, 123 (40.9%) earn between 1.2 and 6 million, 46 (15.3%) earn between 500 thousand and 1.2 million, and 39 (13.0%) earn between 350 and 500 thousand.

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents

Characteristics	Options	Respondents	
		N	%
Gender	Male	170	56
	Female	131	44
Age (years)	> 45	50	16.6
	17-25	89	29.6
	26-35	98	32.6
	36-45	63	20.9
	37-45	1	0.3
Education	Diploma Degree	13	4.3
	Postgraduate's Degree	75	24.9
	Bachelor's Degree	130	43.2
	High School Degree	83	27.6
Income	> IDR 6,000,000	93	30.9
	> IDR 1,200,000 up to 6,000,000	123	40.9
	> IDR 500,000 up to 1,200,000	46	15.3
	IDR 350,000 up to 500,000	39	13.0

The first evaluation is assessing the loading factor. This evaluation aims to know the link between the indicators and the latent variables. The value of the loading factor must have a value (λ) of > 0.7. The model was recalculated if the loading value is (λ) < 0.7, and if the value of the loading factor is (λ) 0.7, then the indicator of the variable is considered valid. Indicators with high loading factors strongly contribute to explaining the latent variables. If the loading factor value for the variance inflation factor

Table 2. Loading factors, CR, AVE, and CA

Indicator	Loading factor	Composite Reliability	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha
Destination Image		**0.924**	**0.575**	**0.909**
I feel that the environment in Mount Leuser National Park is safe	0.770			
There is unique local art at the tourist destination	0.744			
There are local cuisines at the tourist site	0.734			
I feel that the environment in Mount Leuser National Park is clean	0.744			
The tourist area includes the people that I meet	0.816			
I feel that people in the local communities are friendly	0.792			
Transportation Mode	0.773			
Shopping Area	0.718			
Accessibility	0.729			
Destination Authenticity		**0.945**	**0.743**	**0.931**
I feel that the authenticity of Mount Leuser National Park matches my personality or self-concept	0.849			
The authenticity of Mount Leuser National Park reflects me	0.845			
When somebody praises the authenticity of Mount Leuser National Park, it also feels like a compliment to me	0.863			
I feel a personal connection with the authenticity of Mount Leuser National Park	0.881			
The authenticity of Mount Leuser National Park is in line with how I want others to see me	0.878			
Destination Loyalty		**0.954**	**0.750**	**0.944**
I intend to revisit Mount Leuser National Park in the future	0.854			
I want to visit Mount Leuser National Park soon	0.841			
I will share positive things about Mount Leuser National Park with others	0.811			
I will make Mount Leuser National Park my choice of destination	0.900			
After my vacation, I will recommend Mount Leuser National Park to others	0.922			
I will invite other people to visit Mount Leuser National Park	0.930			
After my vacation, I will give a review of the holiday experience at Mount Leuser National Park	0.794			

(VIF) is less than 5, there is no multicollinearity between the indicators. Furthermore, the AVE values for the variables examined are above the minimum value of 0.5. The results are shown in Table 2.

There are three criteria for assessing convergent validity: (1) all factor loading > 0.60, (2) the composite reliability (CR) must be greater than 0.70, and (3) the average variance extracted (AVE) must be > 0.50. Additionally, all Cronbach's Alpha (CA) values must be greater than 0.70 to show good measurement reliability. The discriminant validity of all constructs is also enough as the square root of AVE of every construct (the diagonal entry of each column) is greater than its correlation with other constructs (Prebensen & Xie, 2017).

Discriminant validity refers to the degree to which certain model constructs differ. Several discriminant validity tests exist, such as Fornell-Larcker Criterion, cross-loading, and hetero-trait-monotrait Ratio (HTMT). This study utilizes HTMT as all HTMT ratios are less than the max-imum limit of 0.93, which proves that HTMT is the superior method in assessing discriminant validity (Su et al., 2020). Therefore, this study uses HTMT analysis to assess discriminant validity, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Discriminant validity

Variable	DAI	DI	DL
Destination Authenticity (DAI)	0.862		
Destination Image (DI)	0.586	0.760	
Destination Loyalty (DL)	0.726	0.532	0.866

Table 4 displays the hypotheses testing. This study finds that destination image positively impacts destination authenticity ($\beta = 0.586$, $p < 0.000$). Destination authenticity significantly influences destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.635$, $p < 0.000$). Destination image and destination loyalty positively correlate ($\beta = 0.160$, $p < 0.001$). Destination authenticity mediates the effect of destination image on destination loyalty. Through destination authenticity, destination image positively influences destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.372$, $p < 0.000$).

Table 4. Direct and mediated influence on the variables

Hypothesis	β	*p*-value	Decision
H1: Destination image has a significant impact on destination authenticity.	0.635	0.000	Accepted
H2: Destination authenticity has a significant impact on destination loyalty.	0.586	0.000	Accepted
H3: Destination image has a significant impact on destination loyalty.	0.160	0.001	Accepted
H4: Destination image through destination authenticity has a significant impact on destination loyalty.	0.372	0.000	Accepted

Note: * and ** signify the rejection of the null hypothesis at 1% and 5% significance.

4. DISCUSSION

This study examines the effect of destination image and authenticity on destination loyalty. This study also explores the mediating role of destination authenticity in forming a relationship between destination image and destination loyalty. Destination loyalty has become an indicator of the success of the development of a tourism destination. One form of tourist loyalty to a destination is to make repeated visits to the same destination. In general, tourists choose the same destination as a form of their commitment to a destination and then increase their intention to visit a tourist destination (Satriawan et al., 2022).

This study finds that destination image has a significant influence on destination authenticity. This means that the greater the destination image of a tourist site, the greater the visitors' destination authenticity. Moreover, this study finds that destination authenticity significantly influences destination loyalty. An individual's conformity with the destination authenticity helps develop the aspired good reputation within their social group. A tourist's conformity with the authenticity of certain destinations positively impacts their loyalty, such as their intention to revisit and advocate it (Fonseca et al., 2021). Individuals strive to align their actual and ideal selves through the products that they consume (Kressmann et al., 2006). Authenticity is the main attribute of heritage tourism that influences the visitor experience at the destination. Authenticity is created from the authenticity of information or stories in an area (Nurfajrina & Aprilia, 2022). The results in this study are also consistent with the theory by Schiffman and Kanuk Leslie (2007), which states that attitudes are learned tendencies, meaning that attitudes related to buying behavior are built as a result of experiences directly related to products, information obtained through other people both verbally and in electronic media and the internet (e-WOM). e-WOM is essential in influencing and building tourist attitudes and behavioral intentions (Doosti et al., 2016).

Furthermore, this study finds that destination image significantly affects destination loyalty. The results prove that destination image has a direct positive and significant effect on destination loyalty. It means that the better the destination image is attached to tourists, the more the destination loyalty will increase. The results of this study support Sukaris et al. (2020), indicating that destination image has a positive and significant effect on destination loyalty. Kanwel et al. (2019) showed that feelings make the cognitive features in tourism activities, and the accumulated assessment of various features and components of destination image positively and significantly affects visitor loyalty. Therefore, it is necessary to have marketing innovation in packing tourism products in order to increase destination loyalty (Danurdara, 2022). Marketing performance can be improved through environmentally friendly innovations, product completeness, and competitiveness in environmentally friendly products (Fikri et al., 2022). Innovation is significant to achieve the goal (Siregar et al., 2022; Siregar et al., 2021; Siregar et al., 2019b; Siregar et al., 2019a; Siregar et al., 2020; Pranowo et al., 2020).

This study also confirms that destination authenticity mediates the effect of destination image on destination loyalty. Sustainable tourism leads to a desire to become authentic (Diallo et al., 2015). When tourists have positive perceptions or impressions about a destination, they are more likely to choose it (Lee & Kim, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore the effect of destination image and destination authenticity on destination loyalty and uses destination authenticity as a mediating variable. The finding proved that all hypotheses are accepted. Destination image has a significant impact on destination authenticity. Destination authenticity has a significant impact on destination loyalty, and destination image has a significant impact on destination loyalty. The finding also found that destination image affects destination loyalty through destination authenticity. In order to gain loyalty, destinations can utilize various channels to strengthen their destination authenticity and improve and focus their development on innovation and better quality. Destinations are also expected to carry out promotions oriented toward customers' wants and create emotionally engaging advertisements.

This study also contributes by showing that destination image is the most crucial phase in the process of determining a travel destination. Tourists' image after visiting the site will influence their desire to revisit, and this depends on the management's ability to maintain and improve the tourist site following the tourists' needs and perceptions. The government acts as a policymaker and is responsible for preserving the environmental impact of tourism, such as pollution, other environmental hazards, and land use issues stemming from poor planning, regulation, and engineering of the site, attractions, and facilities. Additionally, destinations can create a community for the customers and involve them in preserving the environment. Lastly, tourist destinations can hold loyalty programs and collaborate with various third parties to fulfill the needs and wants of the tourists.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study provides an important contribution to natural tourism studies but still has several limitations. Firstly, many environmental and non-environmental factors are still not included in this study. Therefore, future studies need to identify additional variables, such as environmental orientation and tourists' personal connection with tourist destinations, that can increase loyalty. Environmental factor also needs to be included, considering that sustainable natural tourism is tourism aware of the local community's present and future environmental, social, and cultural impact. Future research is expected to increase the analysis duration as this study was done in the new normal era; therefore, there are several differences compared to the conditions before the pandemic. All respondents in this study are domestic tourists; thus, future studies are expected to include foreign tourists.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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Methodology: Yayuk Yuliana, Endang Sulistya Rini, Sirojuzilam, Syafrizal Helmi Situmorang, Amlys Syahputra Silalahi.
Project administration: Yayuk Yuliana, Endang Sulistya Rini, Sirojuzilam, Syafrizal Helmi Situmorang, Amlys Syahputra Silalahi.
Supervision: Yayuk Yuliana, Endang Sulistya Rini, Sirojuzilam, Syafrizal Helmi Situmorang, Amlys Syahputra Silalahi.
Data processing and analysis: Yayuk Yuliana, Endang Sulistya Rini, Sirojuzilam, Syafrizal Helmi Situmorang, Amlys Syahputra Silalahi.

Validation: Yayuk Yuliana, Endang Sulistya Rini, Sirojuzilam, Syafrizal Helmi Situmorang, Amlys Syahputra Silalahi.

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Writing – review & editing: Yayuk Yuliana, Endang Sulistya Rini, Sirojuzilam, Syafrizal Helmi Situmorang, Amlys Syahputra Silalahi.

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