The Impact of Beach Events on Destination Loyalty in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka: Examining the Mediating Role of Social Media Coverage

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A B S T R A C T

This study investigates the impact of beach events on destination loyalty in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka, with a focus on the mediating role of social media coverage. Beach events, such as music festivals, cultural celebrations, and sports tournaments, have become significant drivers of tourism, offering unique experiences that foster emotional connections with the destination. However, the relationship between beach events and destination loyalty is complex, often influenced by external factors such as social media. Using a quantitative research design, data were collected from 384 tourists who attended beach events in the Southern Province. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to analyze the relationships between beach events, social media coverage, and destination loyalty. The findings reveal that beach events have a direct positive effect on destination loyalty (H1: $\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$) and social media coverage (H2: $\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.001$). Social media coverage also positively influences destination loyalty (H3: $\beta = 0.40$, $p = 0.02$). Furthermore, social media coverage mediates the relationship between beach events and destination loyalty (H4: $\beta = 0.196$, $p = 0.001$). These results highlight the critical role of social media in amplifying the impact of beach events on tourists' loyalty. The study provides valuable insights for destination managers and policymakers, emphasizing the importance of leveraging social media to enhance destination loyalty and ensure the sustainable growth of Sri Lanka's tourism sector.

Keywords: *Beach events, destination loyalty, social media coverage, Southern Province, Sri Lanka, tourism*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Sri Lanka, renowned for its pristine beaches, lush landscapes, and rich cultural heritage, has long been a magnet for tourists worldwide. The country's tourism sector is heavily reliant on its coastal attractions, with the Southern Province, in particular, emerging as a hotspot for beach tourism. Home to iconic destinations such as Mirissa, Unawatuna, and Tangalle, the Southern Province attracts millions of tourists annually, drawn by its golden sands, turquoise waters, and vibrant local culture (Sivasubramaniam & WDC, 2021). However, while attracting tourists for a single visit is an achievement, the long-term sustainability of the tourism industry hinges on fostering destination loyalty. Destination loyalty refers to tourists' willingness to revisit a destination and recommend it to others, which is crucial for ensuring repeat visits, increased spending, and positive word-of-mouth promotion (Oppermann, 2000). In the context of Sri Lanka, understanding the factors that influence destination loyalty is essential for stakeholders to develop strategies that encourage tourists to return year after year, thereby boosting the local economy and ensuring the sector's resilience (Tharaka & Munasinghe, 2022).

One of the key strategies employed to enhance destination loyalty in the Southern Province is the organization of beach events. These events, ranging from music festivals and sports tournaments to cultural celebrations, have become a significant draw for both domestic and international tourists. Beach events not only provide entertainment but also create unique and memorable experiences that can leave a lasting impression on visitors (Getz, 2008). For instance, the Galle Literary Festival and the Mirissa Beach Party have gained international recognition, attracting thousands of tourists and generating significant economic benefits for the region (Perera, 2020). By offering a blend of entertainment, cultural immersion, and natural beauty, these events have the potential to foster emotional connections with the destination, thereby encouraging repeat visits and positive recommendations (Yoon et al., 2010).

However, the relationship between beach events and destination loyalty is not straightforward. While the events themselves can create positive experiences, their impact on loyalty may be influenced by external factors, such as social media coverage. In recent years, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for shaping tourists' perceptions and behaviors. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter allow tourists to share their experiences in real-time, creating a virtual space where the appeal of beach events can be amplified and disseminated to a global audience (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

For example, a tourist attending the Mirissa Beach Party might post photos and videos on social media, showcasing the event's vibrancy and the destination's beauty. These posts can influence potential tourists who were not present at the event, encouraging them to add the destination to their travel bucket list (Lee et al., 2024). Thus, social media coverage may act as a mediator, bridging the gap between beach events and destination loyalty by shaping tourists' perceptions and decisions.

Despite the growing popularity of beach events and the increasing influence of social media, there is limited research on how these factors interact to influence destination loyalty, particularly in the context of developing countries like Sri Lanka. While studies have explored the role of events and social media in tourism separately, few have examined their combined impact on destination loyalty (Gursoy et al., 2004; Mariani et al., 2016). This gap in the literature highlights the need for a comprehensive study that investigates the relationship between beach events, social media coverage, and destination loyalty in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka. By addressing this gap, the study aims to provide valuable insights for destination managers and the destination's beauty. These posts can influence potential tourists who were not present at the event, encouraging them to add the destination to their travel bucket list (Lee et al., 2024). Thus, social media coverage may act as a mediator, bridging the gap between beach events and destination loyalty by shaping tourists' perceptions and decisions.

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2 Research Problems

The Southern Province of Sri Lanka has become a hub for beach tourism, with events playing a pivotal role in attracting tourists and enhancing their experiences. Beach events, such as music festivals, cultural celebrations, and sports tournaments, offer a unique blend of entertainment and cultural immersion, creating memorable experiences that can foster emotional connections with the destination (Getz, 2008). These connections, in turn, can influence tourists' decisions to revisit the destination or recommend it to others, thereby contributing to destination loyalty (Yoon et al., 2010). However, the impact of beach events on destination loyalty is not always direct. In many cases, the influence of these events is mediated by external factors, such as social media coverage.

In recent years, social media has transformed the way tourists perceive and engage with destinations. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter have become essential tools for sharing travel experiences, influencing travel decisions, and building destination loyalty (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). For instance, tourists attending beach events in the Southern Province often share photos, videos, and reviews on social media, creating a virtual space where the appeal of these events is amplified and disseminated to a global audience (Lee et al., 2024). Even tourists who did not attend the event may be influenced by these posts, as they provide a glimpse into the destination's offerings and create a sense of FOMO (fear of missing out). This phenomenon highlights the potential of social media to act as a mediator, shaping tourists' perceptions and decisions in ways that extend beyond the immediate impact of the event itself.

However, the relationship between beach events, social media coverage, and destination loyalty is complex and multifaceted. While positive social media coverage can enhance a destination's appeal and encourage repeat visits, negative posts or controversies can have the opposite effect, damaging the destination's reputation and deterring potential tourists (Sparks et al., 2016). Moreover, the effectiveness of social media as a mediator depends on various factors, such as the quality and authenticity of the content, the destination's ability to respond to feedback, and the level of engagement with the audience (Hays et al., 2013). These complexities underscore the need for a deeper understanding of how beach events and social media coverage interact to influence destination loyalty in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka.

2.1 Objectives

1)   To investigate the relationship between Beach Events and Destination Loyalty among tourists attending beach events in Sri Lanka's Southern Province.

2)   To examine how Social Media Coverage mediates the relationship between Beach Events and Destination Loyalty for tourists attending beach events in Sri Lanka's Southern Province.

3. Literature Review

2.1 Beach Events as a Catalyst for Tourism Growth

Beach events, such as music festivals, sports tournaments, and cultural celebrations, have become significant drivers of tourism in coastal regions. These events attract both domestic and international tourists, contributing to the economic and social development of the host destination (Getz, 2008). In the Southern Province of Sri Lanka, beach events like the Galle Literary Festival and the Mirissa Beach Party have gained popularity, drawing thousands of

visitors annually (Perera, 2020). Research indicates that such events enhance the destination's image, create memorable experiences, and foster emotional connections with visitors (Yoon et al., 2010). These factors are critical in building destination loyalty, as tourists are more likely to revisit or recommend destinations that offer unique and engaging experiences (Oppermann, 2000). However, the sustainability of these events and their long-term impact on destination loyalty remain understudied, particularly in developing regions like Sri Lanka (Gursoy et al., 2004).

3.2 Destination Loyalty: Conceptual Framework and Determinants

Destination loyalty is a multifaceted construct that encompasses tourists' intentions to revisit a destination and recommend it to others (Oppermann, 2000). It is influenced by various factors, including satisfaction, perceived value, and emotional attachment (Chen & Tsai, 2007). In the context of beach events, loyalty is often driven by the quality of the event, the overall experience, and the destination's infrastructure (Yoon et al., 2010). For instance, tourists who attend the Galle Literary Festival may develop loyalty to the Southern Province due to the event's cultural significance and the region's scenic beauty (Perera, 2020). However, loyalty is not solely dependent on the event itself but also on the destination's ability to meet tourists' expectations in terms of accommodation, transportation, and hospitality services (Gursoy et al., 2004). Understanding these determinants is crucial for destination managers aiming to leverage beach events for long-term tourism growth.

3.3 The Role of Social Media in Shaping Tourist Perceptions

Social media has revolutionized the way tourists perceive and engage with destinations. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter serve as powerful tools for sharing experiences, influencing travel decisions, and building destination loyalty (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In the context of beach events, social media coverage amplifies the event's reach, creating a virtual community of attendees and potential visitors (Mariani et al., 2016). For example, live updates, photos, and videos from the Mirissa Beach Party often go viral, attracting global attention and encouraging future visits (Perera, 2020). Social media also enables real-time interaction between tourists and destination marketers, fostering a sense of connection and engagement (Hays et al., 2013). However, the impact of social media coverage on destination loyalty is not always positive, as negative reviews or controversies can harm a destination's reputation (Sparks et al., 2016). Therefore, understanding the mediating role of social media in the relationship between beach events and destination loyalty is essential for effective destination management.

3.4 The Mediating Role of Social Media Coverage in Destination Loyalty

Social media coverage acts as a mediator between beach events and destination loyalty by influencing tourists' perceptions and behaviors. According to the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, external stimuli (e.g., beach events) affect individuals' internal states (e.g., emotions and attitudes), which in turn influence their responses (e.g., loyalty) (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In this context, social media serves as a stimulus that enhances the visibility and appeal of beach events, shaping tourists' attitudes and intentions (Mariani et al., 2016). For instance, positive social media posts about the Galle Literary Festival can evoke feelings of excitement and curiosity, motivating tourists to visit the Southern Province (Perera, 2020). Additionally, social media facilitates post-event engagement, allowing tourists to relive their experiences and share them with others, thereby reinforcing destination loyalty (Hays et al., 2013). However, the effectiveness of social media as a mediator depends on the quality and authenticity of the content, as well as the destination's ability to respond to feedback and address concerns (Sparks et al., 2016).

3.5 Challenges and Opportunities in Leveraging Beach Events for Destination Loyalty

While beach events offer significant opportunities for enhancing destination loyalty, they also present several challenges. One major challenge is the potential for overcrowding and environmental degradation, which can negatively impact tourists' experiences and perceptions (Gursoy et al., 2004). For example, the popularity of the Mirissa Beach Party has led to concerns about waste management and the preservation of marine ecosystems (Perera, 2020). Another challenge is the reliance on social media, which can be a double-edged sword. While positive coverage can boost a destination's image, negative posts or viral controversies can have lasting repercussions (Sparks et al., 2016). To address these challenges, destination managers must adopt sustainable event management practices and develop strategies for effective social media engagement (Getz, 2008). This includes monitoring online conversations, addressing negative feedback promptly, and creating authentic content that resonates with tourists (Hays et al., 2013). By doing so, destinations in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka can maximize the benefits of beach events while minimizing their drawbacks, ultimately fostering long-term loyalty among tourists.

4. Conceptual framework and hypothesis

The Southern Province of Sri Lanka has become a hub for beach tourism, with events playing a pivotal role in attracting tourists and enhancing their experiences. Beach events, such as music festivals, cultural celebrations, and sports tournaments, offer a unique blend of entertainment and cultural immersion, creating memorable experiences that can foster emotional connections with the destination (Getz, 2008). These connections, in turn, can influence tourists' decisions to revisit the destination or recommend it to others, thereby contributing to destination loyalty (Yoon et al., 2010). However, the impact of beach events on destination loyalty is not always direct. In many cases, the influence of these events is mediated by external factors, such as social media coverage.
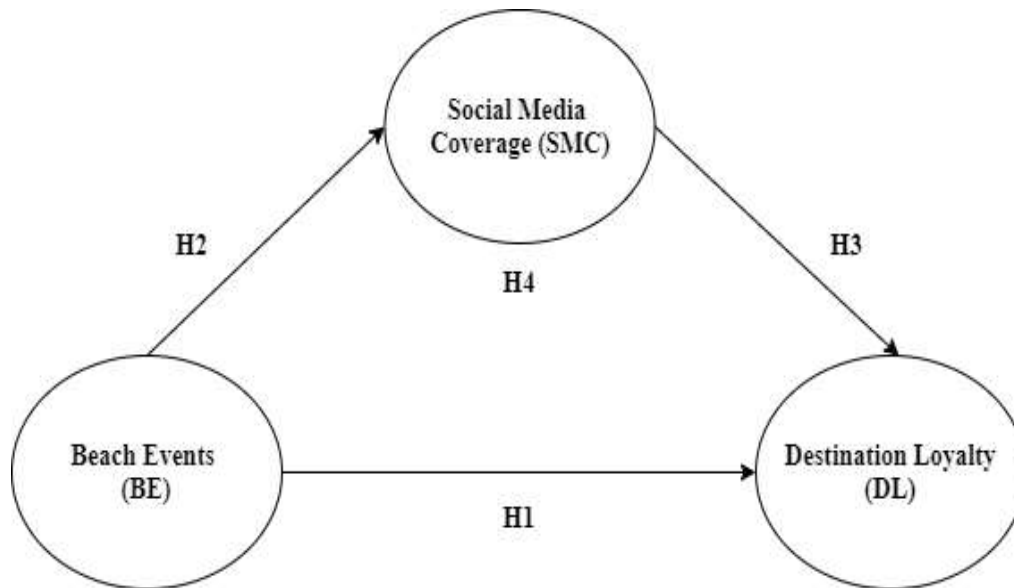
Fig. 1 - Conceptual Framework

4.1 Hypothesis

H1: There is a positive effect of Beach Events on Destination Loyalty

H2: There is a positive effect of Beach Events on Social Media Coverage

H3: There is a positive effect of Social Media Coverage on Destination Loyalty

H4: Social Media Coverage mediate the relationship between Beach Events on Destination Loyalty

5. Methodology

Research Design

Using destination loyalty (DL) as a possible mediating variable, this study uses a quantitative research technique to examine the impact of social media coverage (SMCs) on travellers' inclinations to visit to Sri Lanka for beach activities. Because it enables the collecting and analysis of numerical data to evaluate pre-established assumptions about the correlations between the variables, the quantitative method is especially well-suited to this study (Creswell, 2014).

Population and Sample

Using an online survey tool and the Morgan table sampling approach, 384 visitors who attended beach events in Sri Lanka's Southern Province were selected as a sample. The method of purposeful sampling was used. The sample size was determined using the Krejcie & Morgan (1970) table, which guaranteed sufficient data for a trustworthy statistical analysis and allowed for generalizable findings within the limitations of the chosen sampling strategy (95% confidence level, 5% margin of error).

Sample Technique

To effectively study this specific population, the research used a purposive sampling technique (Tongco, 2007).

Data Collection Method

To set the stage for analysing the outcomes, the first part gathered basic demographic information such age, gender, and educational attainment. The second section of sixty questions using a five-point Likert scale to assess the three primary research variables. Beach Events (BE), Destination Loyalty (DL), and Social Media Coverage (SMC).

Data Analysis Method

First, descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were calculated using IBM SPSS Statistics 25. This provided a comprehensive summary of the key trends for the variables under investigation as well as the characteristics of the sample (George & Mallery, 2018). Second, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was carried out using the SmartPLS 4 programme.

6. Results

Demographic factors of respondents

The study sample consists of 384 individuals that are interested in travelling and frequently use social media. Based on the participant demographics, 35% of the replies were female and 65% of the responses were male. With 45% of respondents in the 16–25 age range and 35% in the 26–35 age group, the age distribution was skewed. In the other age categories, there was a decreasing trend: 15% between 36 and 45, and 5% between 46 and 55. Geographically, the respondents were dispersed fairly equally across Sri Lanka's regions. The largest portion (35%), held by the Southern Province, was closely followed by the Western Province (29%), Central Province (11%), Sabaragamuwa (20%), and Uva Province (5%). In these provinces, the Galle district accounted for the greatest proportion of respondents (24%) and was followed by Gampaha (19%), Colombo (14%), Kegalla (10%), and Badulla (5%). The interviewers' different educational backgrounds were evident in their resumes. The largest group was G.C.E A/L (40%) followed by G.C.E O/L (30%) and then those with a diploma or vocational qualifications (24%). Just 5% of those surveyed had an MBA or MBC degree, and 1% had a Master's. Overall, the demographic characteristics of the responders indicate a diverse sample. Due to this diversity, the study's findings may be applied more widely to a wider range of participants in beach activities, their social media coverage, and the consideration of destination loyalty in the tourist industry.

Descriptive Analysis for Variables

Data exploration began with a study of the primary trends of the variables that were being examined. Beach Events (BE), Social Media Coverage (SMC), and Destination Loyalty (DL) were found to have average scores that were into the "almost accepts" range, based on the stated criteria ($1 \leq X < 2.5$ - nearly not accepted, $1 \leq X < 3.5$ - Average, and $3.5 \leq X \leq 5$ - Almost accepts). This suggests that respondents' assessments of these concepts were largely positive (Allen and Seaman, 2007). The fact that the outcomes did not meet the "acceptable" level also highlights potential areas for improvement. The standard deviations for the initial variables were within acceptable bounds, indicating a reasonable level of variety in the responses. Understanding the nuances of social media influencers on travel intention for the wellness tourism industry is made easier by this variety of perspectives (Wan et al., 2014). In order to determine if the data were appropriate for further statistical analysis, normality assessments were carried out. The data was largely distributed normally since the initial variables' skewness and kurtosis values were within the allowed range of -2 to +2. (George & Mallery, 1999).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to verify the hypothesised structures of Beach Events (BE), Social Media Coverage (SMC), and Destination Loyalty (DL). This validates the recommended measures and lends credence to the idea of looking into the hypothesised correlations between the variables (Ehido et al., 2022). The degree to which the research's measures properly captured the intended ideas and their connections was evaluated by the CFA. The results showed good convergent validity for all three constructs, indicating that the measures fairly capture the concepts reflected in them.

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity is the extent to which many measures of a concept converge or show strong relationships with one another, suggesting that they are capturing the same underlying idea (Hair, 2009). In this investigation, convergent validity was evaluated using three established measures: average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR), and Cronbach's alpha.

Table 1 - Reliability and Validity.

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (CR)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
BE	**0.85**	**0.87**	**0.65**
SMC	**0.82**	**0.84**	**0.62**
DL	**0.80**	**0.82**	**0.60**

ource: Smart Pls Output

Table 1 displays the results of the convergent validity investigation. As can be seen, all three constructs significantly exceeded the recommended cutoff thresholds for each statistic, demonstrating their convergent validity. Strong internal consistency is suggested by Cronbach's alpha values for all constructions being above the 0.70 limit. The composite reliability (CR) ratings of all constructs above the 0.70 criterion, providing further evidence of precise measurement. According to Hamid et al. (2017) and Siswaningsih et al. (2017), all constructs had average variance extracted (AVE) values more than the 0.5 threshold, suggesting that the constructs accounted for the majority of the variation in the items.

Discriminant Validity

By ensuring that various conceptions are really unique and not just assessing the same underlying notion under different labels, discriminant validity assures that the constructs are indeed separate (Rönkkö & Cho, 2022). This research used the Fornell-Larcker criteria and heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratios, two well-established techniques, to evaluate discriminant validity.

Table 2 - Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	BE	SMC	DL
BE			
SMC	0.48		
DL	0.35	0.43	

Source: Smart Pls Output

Discriminant validity guarantees that alternative conceptions are, in fact, distinct from one another, rather than just evaluating the same underlying idea under different labels (Rönkkö & Cho, 2022). Two well-known methods were utilised in this study to assess discriminant validity: the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio and the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Table 3 Fornell-Larcker criterion

	BE	SMC	DL
BE	0.84		
SMC	0.67	0.80	
DL	0.53	0.45	0.77

Source: Smart Pls Output

Table 3 displays the results of the Fornell-Larcker criterion. The off-diagonal components, which were consistently lower than the diagonal elements, which indicated the AVE for each construct, expressed the squared correlations between the constructs. This shows even more that the three construct variants did not result from overlap with other constructs, but rather from their own indications (Hamid et al., 2017). Overall, the findings show high discriminant validity, showing that the concepts of Beach Events (BE), Social Media Coverage (SMC), and Destination Loyalty (DL) are unique and represent different notions within the study. The HTMT and Fornell-Larcker criteria both support this.

Hypothesis testing

Following the establishment of the constructs' validity and reliability, hypothesis testing was carried out to investigate potential relationships among Beach Events (BE), Social Media Coverage (SMC), and Destination Loyalty (DL). The structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis was conducted using the PLS-SEM approach in the SmartPLS 4 software (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 4 Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficient	T-Value>2	P-Value	Decision
H1	BE → DL	0.44	4.37	0	Accepted
H2	BE → SMC	0.53	5.30	0	Accepted
H3	SMC → DL	0.40	3.94	0.02	Accepted

Source: Smart Pls Output

Table 4 compiles the results of the hypothesis testing. The researcher carefully considered each hypothesis, using metrics like the path coefficient, T-value, p-value, and final conclusion. Furthermore, the researcher came to the conclusion that each estimated probability value for each hypothesis was significantly lower than the 0.05 significance level (Kennedy-Shaffer, 2019). Consequently, each of the three hypotheses was supported by the data, according to the results of the hypothesis testing.

Mediation analysis

In order to evaluate the potential mediating role of Destination Loyalty in the relationship between Beach Events and Social Media Coverage, a mediation research was conducted using the bootstrapping approach as recommended by Hayes (2017). By using replacement sampling and repeated sampling, this methodology generates an indirect impact distribution that facilitates a more comprehensive assessment of mediation.

Table 5 Specific Indirect Effect

Hypothesis		Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values	Decision
H4	BE → DL → SMC	0.196	0.197	0.056	3.6	0.001	Accepted

Source: Smart Pls Output

Table 5 displays the outcomes of the mediation analysis (H4). Research has shown that social media coverage of beach activities has a significant indirect effect on destination loyalty. These findings suggest that there is compelling evidence for the mediating role of destination loyalty via the correlation between beach events and social media coverage.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the impact of beach events on destination loyalty in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka, with a particular focus on the mediating role of social media coverage. The findings provide valuable insights into how beach events and social media interact to shape tourists' loyalty to a destination, offering practical implications for destination managers, event organizers, and policymakers in the tourism sector. The results confirmed that beach events have a significant direct impact on destination loyalty, as they create memorable experiences that foster emotional connections with the destination. Tourists who attend beach events, such as the Galle Literary Festival or the Mirissa Beach Party, are more likely to revisit the Southern Province and recommend it to others. This aligns with existing literature, which emphasizes the role of unique and engaging experiences in building destination loyalty. The study also found that beach events positively influence social media coverage, as attendees share their experiences on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. This amplifies the reach of the events, creating a virtual space where the destination's appeal is showcased to a global audience. Importantly, social media coverage was found to mediate the relationship between beach events and destination loyalty. Positive social media posts and viral content can enhance the destination's image, even among those who did not attend the event, thereby encouraging future visits. This highlights the dual role of social media as both a promotional tool and a mediator of tourists' perceptions and decisions. However, the study also underscores the challenges associated with social media, such as the potential for negative reviews or controversies to harm a destination's reputation. Destination managers must, therefore, adopt proactive strategies to monitor and manage social media content effectively. The study also identified several challenges in leveraging beach events for destination loyalty, including overcrowding, environmental degradation, and the need for sustainable event management practices. For instance, the popularity of the Mirissa Beach Party has raised concerns about waste management and the preservation of marine ecosystems. Addressing these challenges requires a balanced approach that maximizes the benefits of beach events while minimizing their negative impacts.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on destination loyalty by highlighting the interplay between beach events and social media coverage. The findings demonstrate that beach events are not only a source of entertainment but also a powerful tool for fostering emotional connections with a destination. When combined with effective social media strategies, these events can significantly enhance destination loyalty, driving repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth promotion. For the Southern Province of Sri Lanka, this presents an opportunity to strengthen its position as a leading beach tourism destination. By adopting sustainable event management practices and leveraging social media effectively, destination managers can ensure the long-term growth and resilience of the tourism sector.

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