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Enhancing Tourist Loyalty Through Service Quality and Digital Communication: The Mediating Role of Destination Image at Matahari Lobuk Beach

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Abstract*. This study examines the direct and indirect effects of service quality and digital communication on tourist loyalty through the mediating role of destination image at Matahari Lobuk Beach, a village-managed (BUMDes) marine tourism destination in Sumenep Regency, Madura. A quantitative causal-explanatory design was applied using Partial Least Squares - Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Data from 154 tourists, selected through purposive sampling, were collected using a structured questionnaire and analyzed with SmartPLS 4 through one-tailed bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. All seven hypothesized relationships were supported. Service quality and digital communication positively influenced destination image and tourist loyalty, destination image positively influenced tourist loyalty, and destination image partially mediated the effects of both predictors on loyalty. Service quality exerted the strongest influence, whereas digital communication and its mediated pathway were comparatively modest, the latter reaching only marginal significance. The cross-sectional, single-destination design and the conceptual overlap between service quality and destination image call for cautious generalization. Managers should prioritize improvements in physical infrastructure and sanitation alongside interactive digital marketing strategies. This study addresses the limited integrated research on BUMDes-based rural marine destinations by demonstrating the partial mediating role of destination image.*

Keywords*: Destination Image; Digital Communication; Rural Tourism; Service Quality; Tourist Loyalty.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector plays a strategic role in driving regional economic growth, diversifying revenue sources, and empowering local communities through the optimization of tourism villages (Andriani & Jannah, 2024; Riyadi, Sufa, Djoko Baruno, & Chrisyantyawati, 2024). In Sumenep Regency, Madura, sustainable tourism development continues to be promoted through the strengthening of collaborative governance based on Pentahelix synergy to create self-reliant and competitive destinations (Sholeh & Rillia, 2025). In the modern destination management paradigm, management success is no longer measured solely by visitor volume in the initial phase but rather by a destination's ability to build and maintain long-term tourist loyalty (Reitenberger, Pick, & Marx, 2026).

Tourist loyalty, as reflected in the intention to return and the willingness to positively recommend a destination, is the cornerstone of sustainable local economic revenue (Giri, Chakrabarty, Lim, Mangla, & Hollebeek, 2026; Reitenberger et al., 2026). Shifting tourist preferences in the modern tourism industry also require alignment between on-site service quality and extensive digital communication efforts (Sustacha, Baños-Pino, & Del Valle, 2024), so the success of destination management depends heavily on the ability of managers to

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integrate on-site service quality with engaging digital communication strategies (Anggraeni & Rahmat Priyanto, 2026; Santos & Vasconcelos, 2025).

One of the up-and-coming village-based marine tourism destinations attracting attention in Sumenep Regency is Matahari Beach, located on the southern coast of Lobuk Village, Bluto Subdistrict. Officially opened in late 2022 and jointly managed by the Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) and the Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis), this destination offers a unique sunset panorama as well as a 150-meter-long wooden bridge jutting out into the sea, and has generated monthly revenue for the BUMDes of approximately Rp15,000,000 to support the village's economic self-reliance (Sholeh & Rillia, 2025). Despite its strong natural appeal, Lobuk Matahari Beach currently faces practical challenges related to declining visitor retention rates and sustainability, characterized by high tourist density, limited basic sanitation facilities (restrooms), and poor road accessibility to the tourist site (Chen, Sotiriadis, & Shen, 2023; Lukoseviciute, Henriques, Pereira, & Panagopoulos, 2024).

These issues related to the quality of physical services are exacerbated by the fact that managers' digital communication efforts have not been optimally utilized; posts on official Instagram and TikTok accounts remain conventional and one-way, lacking visual storytelling or two-way interaction with the audience, as reflected in low engagement metrics—namely, minimal likes, comments, and shares (Armutcu, Tan, Amponsah, Parida, & Ramkissoon, 2023; Deb, Hossain, Shuvo, & Mallik, 2026; Lee et al., 2026). This situation indicates that current promotional strategies have not yet been effective as persuasive communication tools to sustain interest and encourage repeat visits by tourists (Lacárcel, Huete, & Zerva, 2024; Mansoor, Alibrahim, Khan, & Ali, 2026).

This empirical gap is accompanied by a theoretical gap, as most research on service quality, marketing digitization, and destination branding remains concentrated on urban areas, the hospitality sector, or large-scale commercial destinations, while integrated research on rural marine tourism destinations based on BUMDes, particularly those involving the mediating role of destination image, remains very limited (Andriani & Jannah, 2024; Mohammed, Zhou, Mohammed, & AL-Barakanic, 2026). It is this empirical gap in the governance of Lobuk Matahari Beach and the theoretical gap regarding the mediating role of destination image that underpin the urgency and uniqueness of this study (Reitenberger et al., 2026). Based on the discussion above, this study aims to analyze the influence of service quality and digital communication on tourist loyalty—both directly and indirectly through the mediation of destination image—at the Lobuk Matahari Beach tourist attraction.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and develops the research hypotheses; Section 3 describes the research methodology; Section 4 presents the results and discussion; and Section 5 concludes the study with its limitations and directions for future research.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Service Quality

Service quality is the result of tourists' evaluative comparison between their expectations and the actual service performance they experience, which encompasses the dimensions of reliability of physical facilities, cleanliness, safety, and management responsiveness, as outlined in the SERVQUAL framework (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). In the context of rural tourism, service quality is more specifically reflected through the TourServQual and Servicescape dimensions, which emphasize the physical condition of facilities, the cleanliness of sanitation facilities, the performance of public facilities, and personal interactions between staff and visitors (Andriani, Jannah, & Adnan, 2025; Chen et al., 2023). Various studies on rural tourism destinations indicate that the quality of physical services significantly contributes to the formation of tourists' overall perceptions of these destinations (Lukoseviciute et al., 2024).

Digital Communication

Digital communication refers to the use of social media and other online channels to convey information, encourage interaction, and communicate a destination's identity to both potential and past visitors (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). The effectiveness of digital communication is determined by the quality and completeness of information, the appeal of visual narratives, the level of interactivity, and perceptions of peer reviews or electronic word-of-mouth promotions (Han, Mingying, & Peng, 2025; Tang & Tsai, 2024). Several studies confirm that interactive digital communication strategies based on visual narratives can reinforce travelers' perceptions of a destination's uniqueness and appeal (Armutcu et al., 2023).

Destination Image

Destination image reflects tourists' cognitive representations and affective impressions of a destination, which are shaped by their overall experiences, the information they receive, and their interactions with the destination's physical and social environments (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). The cognitive dimension is reflected in tourists' rational assessments of a destination's physical attributes; the affective dimension is reflected in the feelings or emotional

impressions that arise; and the overall image is the result of these two dimensions (Chi & Giao, 2024; Kotsi, Johnston, & Pike, 2023).

Tourist Loyalty

Tourist loyalty is a tourist's commitment to revisit a destination and recommend it to others, as reflected in the intention to revisit, visit priority, word-of-mouth recommendations, advocacy, digital sharing of experiences, lack of interest in alternative destinations, and tolerance for admission fees (Reitenberger et al., 2026; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). A number of studies indicate that tourist loyalty is not only shaped by satisfaction with direct experiences but is also significantly influenced by the destination's image, as cognitively and affectively perceived by tourists (Andriani & Jannah, 2024; Polo-Peña, Peco-Torres, Frías-Jamilena, & Coves-Martínez, 2025).

Conceptual Model and Hypothesis Development

The combination of service quality and digital communication as predictor variables, destination image as a mediator variable, and tourist loyalty as the dependent variable forms a comprehensive framework for marine tourism management. Direct experiences with physical facilities and services form the cognitive basis of destination image (Andriani & Jannah, 2024; Kieanwatana & Vongvit, 2024), while exposure to digital information and narratives helps shape tourists' expectations and initial impressions (Lee et al., 2026; Polo-Peña et al., 2025). Based on this theoretical framework, the research hypotheses are formulated as follows:

H1. Service quality has a positive and significant effect on destination image.

H2. Digital communication has a positive and significant effect on destination image.

H3. Destination image has a positive and significant effect on tourist loyalty.

H4. Service quality has a positive and significant effect on tourist loyalty.

H5. Digital communication has a positive and significant effect on tourist loyalty.

H6. Destination image acts as a mediating variable in the effect of service quality on tourist loyalty.

H7. Destination image acts as a mediating variable in the effect of digital communication on tourist loyalty.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design, Population, and Sample

This study employs a quantitative approach with a causal-explanatory design to examine the relationships among variables and the mediating role of destination image in the tourist loyalty model. The study was conducted at the Matahari Beach tourist attraction, located in

Tarogan Hamlet, Lobuk Village, Bluto Subdistrict, Sumenep Regency, East Java, with data collected in 2026. The research model involves four variables: Service Quality (X1) and Digital Communication (X2) as independent variables, Destination Image (Z) as the mediating variable, and Tourist Loyalty (Y) as the dependent variable.

The population in this study consisted of all visitors or tourists who had ever visited the Matahari Lobuk Beach tourist attraction. The sample was selected using purposive sampling, with the criteria for respondents being tourists who had visited at least once and were at least 17 years old. The minimum sample size for this study was determined using the inverse square root method recommended by (Hair et al., 2021). Considering an expected minimum path coefficient of 0.20 at a 5% significance level, the minimum sample size was calculated to be 154 respondents. After data screening and the removal of incomplete or invalid responses, this study retained a final sample of exactly 154 respondents, which met the minimum threshold required to provide sufficient statistical power for the PLS-SEM analysis.

Data Collection

The data collection procedure was carried out in several systematic stages. The initial stage began with obtaining permission and conducting a preliminary survey at the Matahari Lobuk Beach tourist site in early 2026. Next, a draft of the online questionnaire was distributed to visitors via a digital link shared on social media and directly to visitors at the tourist site. Data collection took place over a specific period until a final valid sample of 154 respondents was obtained. The collected data was then filtered, verified for completeness, and processed for analysis in the next stage.

Measures, Variables, and Analytical Procedure

Primary data collection was conducted using a structured digital questionnaire (online questionnaire). All items in the questionnaire were developed based on theoretical indicators from the existing literature to measure four research variables: Service Quality, Digital Communication, Destination Image, and Tourist Loyalty. The Service Quality variable was measured using indicators that include the reliability of physical facilities, cleanliness, safety, and management responsiveness (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Digital Communication was measured based on the quality of information, the appeal of visual narratives, and the level of social media interactivity (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). Destination Image is measured through tourists' cognitive and affective dimensions (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999), while Tourist Loyalty is measured through the intention to revisit and positive recommendations to others (Zeithaml et al., 1996). All questionnaire items were measured using a Likert scale, and

prior to widespread use, the instrument underwent validity and reliability testing to ensure data accuracy.

Data analysis in this study employed an inferential statistical approach based on Partial Least Squares - Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 4 software. Model evaluation was conducted in two main stages: evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) to test the convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability of the instruments; and evaluation of the structural model (inner model) to test the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and hypothesis testing. Hypothesis testing for direct effects and mediating effects was performed using a one-tailed bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples at a 5% significance level ($t \geq 1.645$).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

Data collection was conducted over a two-to-four-week period at Matahari Lobuk Beach, a village-managed (BUMDes) coastal tourism destination in Sumenep Regency, Madura. After data screening, a final valid sample of 154 respondents was retained, matching the minimum sample size required for the Partial Least Squares - Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis. Data were analyzed using SmartPLS 4, and hypothesis testing was conducted using a one-tailed bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples, consistent with the directional (positive) formulation of all seven hypotheses.

Respondent Characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 154 respondents, including gender, age, occupation, and domicile.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics (N = 154).

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	82	53.2
	Male	72	46.8
Age	≤ 20 years	31	20.1
	21-30 years	66	42.9
	31-40 years	31	20.1
	41-50 years	19	12.3
	> 50 years	7	4.5
Occupation	Student	54	35.1
	Private employee	38	24.7
	Self-employed/entrepreneur	26	16.9
	Civil servant/Military/Police	18	11.7
	Housewife	7	4.5
	Other[a]	9	5.8
	Unemployed	2	1.3
Domicile	Sumenep	63	40.9
	Bangkalan	43	27.9

	Sampang	22	14.3
	Pamekasan	21	13.6
	Outside Madura	5	3.2

[a] Includes village head, trader, heavy-labor worker, state-owned enterprise employee, pawnshop employee, health worker, coach, and teacher, each represented by a single respondent.

Source(s): Primary data processed using SmartPLS 4 (2026).

Measurement Model (Outer Model) Evaluation

Convergent validity was assessed through outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Convergent Validity.

Construct	Indicators	Outer Loading Range	AVE
Service Quality (SQ)	SQ1-SQ6	0.672-0.807	0.580
Digital Communication (DC)	DC1-DC5	0.742-0.817	0.604
Destination Image (DI)	DI1-DI4	0.744-0.797	0.587
Tourist Loyalty (TL)	TL1-TL7	0.680-0.822	0.570

Note. All AVE values exceed the 0.50 threshold.

Source(s): Primary data processed using SmartPLS 4 (2026).

All outer loadings fell within the range of 0.672-0.822, and AVE values for all four constructs ranged from 0.570 to 0.604, each exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.50. Table 3 presents the results of the reliability and discriminant validity assessment.

Table 3. Reliability and Discriminant Validity.

Construct	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability	√AVE	Highest HTMT[a]
Service Quality (SQ)	0.854	0.892	0.762	0.981
Digital Communication (DC)	0.835	0.884	0.777	0.819
Destination Image (DI)	0.765	0.851	0.766	0.981
Tourist Loyalty (TL)	0.874	0.903	0.755	0.895

[a] Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) with the most strongly correlated construct; the value between Service Quality and Destination Image (0.981) exceeds the conservative 0.90 threshold, while all other inter-construct HTMT values remained below 0.90.

Source(s): Primary data processed using SmartPLS 4 (2026).

Cronbach's alpha (0.765-0.874) and composite reliability (0.851-0.903) values for all constructs exceeded the 0.70 threshold. The Fornell-Larcker criterion was not satisfied for Service Quality and Destination Image: the inter-construct correlation (0.795) exceeded the square root of AVE for both Service Quality (0.762) and Destination Image (0.766). No other construct pair violated the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Structural Model (Inner Model) Evaluation

Table 4. Coefficient of Determination, Effect Size, and Collinearity.

Endogenous Variable / Path	R^2	Adj. R^2	f^2	VIF
Destination Image (DI)	0.658	0.653	-	-
Tourist Loyalty (TL)	0.650	0.643	-	-
SQ -> DI	-	-	0.670	1.832
DC -> DI	-	-	0.076	1.832
SQ -> TL	-	-	0.146	3.060
DC -> TL	-	-	0.077	1.970
DI -> TL	-	-	0.069	2.922

Note. SRMR = 0.071. All VIF values are below the conservative threshold of 3.3, indicating no collinearity issue.

Source(s): Primary data processed using SmartPLS 4 (2026).

The R^2 values for Destination Image (0.658) and Tourist Loyalty (0.650) were both in the moderate-to-substantial range. Service Quality produced the largest effect size on Destination Image (f^2 = 0.670, a large effect), while its effect on Tourist Loyalty (f^2 = 0.146) approached, but remained just below, the conventional medium-effect threshold of 0.15. Digital Communication produced small effect sizes on both Destination Image (f^2 = 0.076) and Tourist Loyalty (f^2 = 0.077), and Destination Image produced a small effect size on Tourist Loyalty (f^2 = 0.069).

Hypothesis Testing

Seven hypotheses were tested using one-tailed bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. A hypothesis was supported when the t-statistic was equal to or greater than the one-tailed critical value of 1.645 at the 5% significance level. Hypotheses 1 through 5 concerned the direct effects among Service Quality, Digital Communication, Destination Image, and Tourist Loyalty; Hypotheses 6 and 7 concerned the indirect (mediating) effects of Destination Image.

H1 predicted that Service Quality positively influences Destination Image. H2 predicted that Digital Communication positively influences Destination Image. H3 predicted that Destination Image positively influences Tourist Loyalty. H4 predicted that Service Quality positively influences Tourist Loyalty. H5 predicted that Digital Communication positively influences Tourist Loyalty. Table 5 presents the path coefficients and significance results for H1-H5.

Table 5. Direct Effects (One-Tailed Bootstrapping).

Hypothesis	Path	β	t	p	Decision
H1	SQ -> DI	0.648	11.816	< .001	Supported
H2	DC -> DI	0.218	3.218	< .001	Supported
H3	DI -> TL	0.265	2.586	= .005	Supported
H4	SQ -> TL	0.395	4.518	< .001	Supported
H5	DC -> TL	0.231	2.735	= .003	Supported

Note. Critical value for one-tailed test at $\alpha = .05$ is $t \geq 1.645$.

Source(s): Primary data processed using SmartPLS 4 (2026).

All five hypothesized direct effects were statistically supported, with t-statistics ranging from 2.586 (H3) to 11.816 (H1), all exceeding the critical value of 1.645. Service Quality showed the strongest effect among all direct paths, on both Destination Image (H1: $\beta = 0.648$, $t = 11.816$, $p < .001$) and Tourist Loyalty (H4: $\beta = 0.395$, $t = 4.518$, $p < .001$). Digital Communication also produced statistically significant, though smaller, effects on Destination Image (H2: $\beta = 0.218$, $t = 3.218$, $p < .001$) and Tourist Loyalty (H5: $\beta = 0.231$, $t = 2.735$, $p = .003$). Destination Image was significantly associated with Tourist Loyalty, although this path showed the weakest statistical strength among the five direct effects (H3: $\beta = 0.265$, $t = 2.586$, $p = .005$).

H6 predicted that Destination Image mediates the effect of Service Quality on Tourist Loyalty. H7 predicted that Destination Image mediates the effect of Digital Communication on Tourist Loyalty. Table 6 presents the specific indirect effects used to test H6 and H7.

Table 6. Mediating Effects / Specific Indirect Effects (One-Tailed Bootstrapping).

Hypothesis	Path	β	t	p	Decision
H6	SQ -> DI -> TL	0.172	2.546	= .005	Supported
H7	DC -> DI -> TL	0.058	1.965	= .025[a]	Supported

[a] The t-statistic for H7 (1.965) exceeds the critical value of 1.645 by a narrow margin, indicating only marginal statistical support.

Source(s): Primary data processed using SmartPLS 4 (2026).

Both indirect paths were statistically significant. The indirect effect of Service Quality on Tourist Loyalty through Destination Image (H6: $\beta = 0.172$, $t = 2.546$, $p = .005$) was approximately three times larger than the indirect effect of Digital Communication on Tourist Loyalty through Destination Image (H7: $\beta = 0.058$, $t = 1.965$, $p = .025$), and the latter path reached significance only marginally, with a t-statistic close to the 1.645 critical value. Because the direct effects of Service Quality on Tourist Loyalty (H4) and Digital Communication on Tourist Loyalty (H5) also remained significant alongside these indirect effects, the mediation pattern for both paths is consistent with partial mediation. In total, all seven hypotheses (H1-H7) were supported by the data.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that service quality and digital communication play a crucial role in enhancing tourist loyalty at Lobuk Matahari Beach, both directly and through the mediation of destination image. Empirical findings confirm that all research hypotheses are statistically supported, with service quality serving as the dominant antecedent factor shaping visitors' cognitive and affective perceptions of this rural marine tourism destination managed by a

Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes). Meanwhile, although digital communication makes a tangible contribution, its effectiveness—along with its mediated pathway through destination image—still needs to be strengthened through visual narratives and more interactive engagement. The theoretical contribution of this study enriches the evolving literature on tourism management by confirming the role of partial mediation by destination image, while also highlighting a notable conceptual overlap between service quality and destination image that warrants further theoretical attention. Practically, destination managers are advised to prioritize improvements in physical facilities and basic sanitation while optimizing digital communication strategies to ensure the sustainability of competitive local tourism.

Although this study provides valuable insights, there are several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the data collection was cross-sectional and limited to a single destination with a sample of 154 respondents, so generalizing the findings to rural marine tourism destinations with different characteristics must be done with caution. Second, there are indications of conceptual overlap (discriminant validity) between service quality and destination image in small-scale destinations, suggesting the need to refine the measurement instruments in the future. Third, the mediating effect of digital communication on tourist loyalty through destination image (H7) reached only marginal statistical significance, indicating that this pathway should be interpreted and generalized with particular caution. Future research could expand the sample scope by conducting a comparative analysis of several BUMDes-based rural marine tourism destinations across various regions. Additionally, future research could include additional explanatory variables—such as price, accessibility, or electronic word-of-mouth promotion—and refine the measurement instruments, particularly to better distinguish service quality from destination image, to test the robustness of the theoretical model in the context of sustainable tourism.

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