



Destination Image, Cultural Intelligence, and Tourist Loyalty: Insights From a Tunisian Ecotourism Destination

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Article History:

Received: 22-02-2026
Revision: 17-04-2026
Accepted: 01-05-2026
Publication: 22-05-2026

Cite this article as:

Kohli, M., Skhiri, S., Sobaih, A. E., & Abu Elnasr, A. E. (2026). Destination Image, Cultural Intelligence and Tourist Loyalty: Insights from a Tunisian Ecotourism Destination. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 26(2), 66-81.
doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v26i2.1452

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Abstract: This research aims to investigate the structural mechanisms underlying tourist loyalty in emerging ecotourism destinations. Using the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework, it examines how cognitive and affective dimensions of destination image influence loyalty intentions, while exploring the mediating role of cultural intelligence. A quantitative design was deployed, based on a survey of 720 ecotourists in Tunisia, with Structural Equation Modeling used to test the hypothetical relationships. The empirical analysis confirms that while both image dimensions promote loyalty, cognitive image appears to be an important predictor of cultural intelligence. Results demonstrate that cultural intelligence serves as a significant partial mediator, linking knowledge-based perceptions of the local context to loyalty intentions. Contrary to approaches prioritizing pure emotion, this study reveals that ecotourism loyalty is strongly dependent on cultural learning processes. For Destination Marketing Organizations, these findings suggest placing greater emphasis on cognitive positioning within existing destination marketing strategies. Strategies must invest in strengthening the cognitive image through rich educational content (traditions, ecology, local norms) and active learning experiences that foster cultural adaptation. Developing visitors' cultural intelligence thus constitutes a lever for competitive differentiation and sustainable loyalty. This research offers a threefold contribution to tourism marketing literature. First, it extends destination image theory by validating cultural intelligence as a psychological mediator that clarifies the perception-behavior relationship. Second, it repositions cultural intelligence as a dynamic, situational capability shaped by tourist experience. Finally, it fills an empirical gap by validating the SOR framework in a North African context, providing contextual legitimacy for sustainable tourism theories in emerging destinations.

Keywords: Cultural Intelligence In Tourism, Destination Image, Tourist Loyalty, Ecotourism In Tunisia, Cognitive Destination Image, Affective Destination Image, Sustainable Tourism Marketing

1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the largest economic and sociocultural industries globally, playing an important role in employment generation, economic development, and intercultural interaction. In addition to its economic significance, tourism facilitates cross-cultural communication and understanding, making it a critical field of study for both scholars and policymakers (Nguyen et al., 2020). With increasing competitive pressure and diversification within the tourism industry, understanding tourists' perceptions, experiences, and behavioral intentions has become fundamental to ensuring the sustainable development of destinations. Ecotourism is one of the most distinctive forms of tourism, emphasizing environmental protection, community involvement, and meaningful cultural interaction (Rather et al., 2021). Unlike traditional mass tourism, ecotourism experiences are deeply embedded in local cultural and social contexts and, therefore, require close contact between visitors and host communities, as well as adaptation to culturally unfamiliar environments (Su et al., 2025). As a result, the effectiveness of ecotourism destinations depends not only on attracting visitors but also on fostering long-term attachment to the destination, as reflected in tourists' willingness to revisit and recommend it to others (Amir et al., 2025; Mai et al., 2019).

A substantial body of tourism literature identifies destination image as a key antecedent of tourist behavior. Destination image is commonly understood as a multidimensional construct that includes cognitive aspects, such as beliefs and factual knowledge about destination attributes, and affective aspects, which reflect emotional reactions toward the destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999, pp. 152–153; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). Substantial evidence supports the view that cognitive and affective dimensions of destination image significantly influence tourists' behavioral intentions, including loyalty-related outcomes such as revisit and recommendation intentions (Stylidis et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2024). Despite this extensive literature, most previous studies have primarily focused on the direct relationship between destination image and loyalty (e.g., Stylidis et al., 2017; Woosnam et al., 2020; Sobaih et al., 2024; Garay, 2019). Consequently, less attention has been given to the internal psychological mechanisms by which the destination image is transformed into loyalty-related intentions. Although scholars have called for deeper investigation into the “black box” between destination perception and behavioral intention (e.g., Chen & Tsai, 2007; Prayag, 2009), the explanatory processes underlying

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this relationship remain insufficiently developed. Zakaria et al. (2024) recently examined cultural intelligence (CQ) as a mediator in a tourism context; however, empirical research on CQ as a mediating mechanism between destination image and loyalty remains limited, particularly in ecotourism settings and non-Western destination contexts.

Furthermore, the differential effects of cognitive versus affective destination image on tourists' intercultural capability development have received limited attention in the existing literature. This is an important gap because ecotourism destinations are not only emotionally consumed but also experienced through learning, interpretation, cultural contact, and environmental awareness. To address this gap, the current study draws upon the concept of cultural intelligence (CQ), which refers to an individual's capability to function effectively in culturally diverse settings (Earley & Ang, 2003). Indeed, CQ plays a central role in cultural adjustment, meaningful interaction, and positive experiences when traveling in tourism environments characterized by high levels of host–guest interaction (Ang et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2025). Although CQ has been examined in tourism research as an antecedent of satisfaction or as a moderator of behavioral outcomes (Frias-Jamilena et al., 2018; Li et al., 2024), its mediating role in the destination image–loyalty relationship remains underexplored, particularly in an African ecotourism setting. Therefore, this study conceptualizes CQ as a dynamic organismic state that can be activated and shaped by tourists' destination perceptions, rather than as a purely static individual trait.

In this regard, the present study addresses three interrelated gaps in the literature. First, it addresses the theoretical gap regarding the psychological mechanism by which destination image influences loyalty by positioning CQ as a mediating construct. Second, it addresses the comparative gap by examining whether cognitive destination image has a stronger effect on CQ than affective destination image. Third, it responds to the contextual gap by testing the proposed model in Tunisian ecotourism destinations, thereby extending destination image and loyalty research to an African tourism context that remains relatively underrepresented in the literature. Therefore, this study is guided by the following central research question: How does cultural intelligence mediate the relationship between cognitive and affective destination image and tourists' loyalty intentions in Tunisian ecotourism destinations?

This study offers three contributions to the existing literature. First, using the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), it positions destination image as the stimulus, CQ as the internal organismic state, and destination loyalty as the response. Unlike prior research that treats CQ mainly as a fixed trait or moderator (Frias-Jamilena et al., 2018), this study conceptualizes CQ as a dynamic mediating mechanism activated by destination perceptions and subsequently associated with loyalty intentions. Second, while previous studies have treated cognitive and affective image as parallel antecedents of behavioral outcomes (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999), this study empirically examines whether cognitive image exerts a stronger influence on CQ than affective image, given that CQ is fundamentally linked to knowledge, learning, interpretation, and adaptive capability. Third, this research applies and validates the S-O-R framework with CQ as a mediator in an African ecotourism context, a region that has received limited attention in the tourism literature (Kusumah, 2023; Zheng & Rahman, 2025).

Accordingly, this research aims to: (1) examine the effects of cognitive and affective destination image on tourists' revisit and recommendation intentions; (2) analyze the mediating role of CQ in these relationships; and (3) compare the relative influence of cognitive and affective destination image on tourists' cultural intelligence. By empirically testing the proposed model in the context of Tunisian ecotourism destinations, this research contributes to tourism marketing literature by integrating CQ into destination image theory and by extending applications of the S-O-R model. From a managerial perspective, the findings may provide important insights for Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) on how to develop culturally intelligent tourist experiences, strengthen long-term loyalty, and support sustainable ecotourism growth.

2. Literature review

This section presents the theoretical background supporting the five core constructs of the proposed model. It begins by differentiating ecotourism from conventional mass tourism, followed by an application of the (S-O-R) paradigm within the ecotourism context. CQ is then defined, and its multidimensional structure is delineated. The section concludes with an analysis of destination image formation and tourist loyalty in ecotourism settings, leading to the conceptual model and developing research hypotheses.

2.1. Ecotourism

This type of tourism was formalized in the 1980s by Ceballos-Lascurain (2001) as a way of traveling responsibly in natural areas, with the object of studying and reflecting on landscapes, wildlife, plants, and cultural manifestations with the least possible negative effect on the environment. According to Bruyn et al. (2023), ecotourism is a subset of sustainable tourism that focuses on nature-based activities, emphasizing conservation and education. Ecotourism differs from other forms of nature-based tourism in three key aspects. First, ecotourism explicitly emphasizes environmental conservation and education, whereas nature tourism may focus solely on recreation without conservation goals (Ross & Wall, 1999). Second, ecotourism requires active community involvement and benefits local populations, distinguishing it from adventure or wildlife tourism, which may operate independently of local communities (Chan et al., 2021). Third, ecotourism promotes sustainable practices, such as limiting visitor numbers and reducing environmental impact, unlike mass nature tourism, which may prioritize visitor numbers over ecological preservation (Torsney et al., 2025). The small-scale form of this sustainable tourism model aims to conserve natural and cultural resources by incorporating local communities into participatory management (Chan et al., 2021). It also helps conserve biodiversity and promote sustainable economic growth by funding protection initiatives, creating local employment opportunities, and encouraging traditional expertise (Torsney et al., 2025). Ecotourism minimizes its ecological footprint, thereby offering immersive experiences through responsible practices such as adopting renewable energy, limiting visitor numbers, and implementing sustainable waste management systems (Ross and Wall, 1999). It is a multidimensional strategy that incorporates the environmental, social, and psychological aspects and can help raise awareness of ecological problems among travelers by encouraging active participation in conservation initiatives. (Godovykh and Tasci, 2020). These dynamics are important to researchers and managers to coordinate visitor expectations with the sustainability goals of ecotourism projects (Buhalis et al., 2023).

In Tunisia, ecotourism is increasingly seen as a strategic pathway to transition from a mass-tourism model to more sustainable and diversified forms of tourism development. Traditionally concentrated along coastal areas, Tunisia's tourism sector has generated significant economic benefits but also environmental pressures, including resource degradation and spatial concentration of tourist flows (Brzezińska-Wójcik & Widz, 2025). In response, recent research emphasizes the importance of valorizing inland natural ecosystems, such as deserts, mountains, and protected areas, which offer strong potential for ecotourism development (Brzezińska-Wójcik & Widz, 2025). In operational terms, ecotourism in Tunisia is implemented through specific practices including guided nature tours in protected areas (Ichkeul, Bouhedma), desert treks with eco-lodges (Chebika, Tamerza), and hiking with community-led stays (Ain Draham). These activities are organized by certified travel agencies with restricted visitor numbers to minimize environmental impact (Brzezińska-Wójcik & Widz, 2025).

2.2. The Stimulus-Organism-Response Theory

The original (S-O-R) model, as proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), has been widely applied by scholars in the fields of tourism and hospitality and forms the theoretical foundation of the current study. In fact, this paradigm explains how exogenous stimuli influence the internal conditions of individuals and the organism, which in turn induce behavioral responses. Several studies, such as (Kim et al., 2020; Tam et al., 2024; Zhan et al., 2026), extended the S-O-R theory to tourism and artificial intelligence, as well as to virtual reality as a stimulus, and incorporated affective responses such as enjoyment, emotional involvement, and loyalty. In the context of this study, the stimulus represents external factors, such as perceived destination image. The Organism is the internal psychological state of the tourist, represented by their developed CQ, and the response is the destination loyalty (the intention to visit and to recommend a particular destination) to coastal destinations in emerging tourism markets like Tunisia. Similarly, Rather et al. (2021) applied the S-O-R framework to examine how destination branding influences tourist loyalty in ecotourism settings.

2.3. Cultural Intelligence

Cultural intelligence is defined as an individual's ability to interact effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds (Earley & Ang, 2003). It is a type of intelligence specifically adapted to intercultural environments, a complex ability that enables people to perform effectively in culturally diverse settings (Sharma and Makhija, 2024). As Ang et al. (2015) emphasize, CQ entails the capacity to operate successfully across a wide range of intercultural scenarios. Moreover, studies show that individuals with high CQ tend to perceive the world around them in a holistic way, giving them a greater ability to construct and adapt to context compared to those with lower CQ (Ang et al., 2015; Thomas & Inkson, 2008). CQ is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that involves four interrelated dimensions: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral (Earley, 2002; Earley and Ang, 2003). The metacognitive aspect is the ability to consciously acknowledge and process culture. It involves planning, monitoring, and revising cultural knowledge to enable appropriate behavior in intercultural situations (Ang et al., 2015). The cognitive component involves knowledge of the norms, values, practices, and conventions of different cultures. CQ allows people to detect cultural similarities and differences and to make informed decisions in intercultural situations (Earley and Ang, 2003; Ang et al., 2015). The motivational dimension captures the willingness and drive to engage in intercultural interactions. Individuals with higher motivational CQ exhibit a strong intrinsic interest, self-efficacy, and resilience in adapting to new cultural environments (Ang and Van Dyne, 2015; Caprak et al., 2026; Huff et al., 2014). Finally, the behavioral aspect refers to the ability to demonstrate appropriate verbal and nonverbal behavior in cross-cultural situations. This includes adjusting behaviors, gestures, and communication styles to align with diverse cultural demands (Earley and Ang, 2003).

2.4. Destination Image as an Independent Variable

Destination image is a central concept in tourism marketing. Researchers regularly define destination image as a set of affective reactions, perceptions, beliefs, and expectations that a person, potential or actual, assigns to a certain place (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Zhao et al., 2024). Jalilvand et al. (2012) further describe it as "an individual's overall perception or a set of impressions of a specific place. According to Echtner and Ritchie (1991), destination image consists of two primary dimensions (cognitive image and affective image). Accordingly, the cognitive image refers to the objective attributes of a destination, such as infrastructure, availability of tourist attractions, pricing, safety, and service quality. The affective image, in contrast, consists of the affective perceptions associated with a destination, such as pleasure, excitement, and relaxation. It is rather based on more subjective perceptions, especially the emotional responses the destination evokes in people (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991). These two dimensions combine to form a global image of a destination that can significantly influence consumer behavior, particularly their intention to visit a destination (Chon, 1990). In ecotourism contexts specifically, cognitive image has been measured using items related to natural attractions, environmental quality, wildlife diversity, and conservation efforts, while affective image has been captured through emotional responses such as feeling refreshed, connected to nature, and spiritually enriched (Zhang et al., 2024; Sobaih et al., 2024). Studies in ecotourism settings have consistently adapted general destination image scales to include nature-specific attributes and sustainability-related perceptions (Artuger & Cetinsoz, 2017; Zhang et al., 2026).

2.5. Destination Loyalty As Dependent Variable

Destination loyalty has become a crucial part of tourism research (Mirzaalian & Halpenny, 2021; Cong, 2021). Certainly, it is an important factor in identifying destinations' competitive advantages and in developing effective marketing strategies (Elbaz et al., 2023). Hence, understanding how tourists develop destination loyalty and which factors influence its formation is crucial for the success of tourism destination management organizations (Mirzaalian & Halpenny, 2021). Indeed, it is often reflected in tourists' willingness to revisit the destination (Jalilvand et al., 2012) and to recommend it through word of mouth (Lončarić et al., 2020; Cong, 2021; Elbaz et al., 2023). Revisit intention and recommendation intention are widely recognized as the two core dimensions of destination loyalty. Although they often move together, prior ecotourism research has confirmed that they are empirically distinct. A traveler may enthusiastically recommend a destination to others without feeling the need to revisit it themselves. Studies have consistently shown that a two-factor (revisit and recommend) model provides a better fit than a single-factor model, confirming their distinction while acknowledging their shared foundation (Cong, 2021; Mirzaalian & Halpenny, 2021; Elbaz et al., 2023). To conclude, while both cognitive and affective images have been linked to tourist outcomes, prior research has not compared their relative effects on cultural intelligence. As noted by Yang et al. (2022), the understanding

of how different image components interact with culture-related traveler capabilities remains unclear. Whether cognitive image influences CQ more strongly than affective image is an empirical gap that this study addresses.

2.6. Research Model And Hypotheses Development

Through a review of the literature, destination loyalty has attracted increasing interest among tourism researchers in recent decades, where particular attention has been paid to identifying its antecedents, likewise tourist satisfaction, emotional experiences, destination trust, and so on (Cong, 2021; Jeong & Kim, 2020; Elbaz et al., 2023). Despite the growing recognition of the importance of the perceived destination image in shaping tourist behavior, a considerable gap remains in the current literature regarding its impact on tourists' cultural intelligence and destination loyalty. In particular, special attention should be paid to the mediating role of cultural intelligence in the nexus between destination image and long-term behavioral consequences, including destination loyalty. These mechanisms are crucial to studying how destination branding practices can develop culturally competent and loyal tourist groups.

2.6.1. Cognitive and Affective Destination Image

The article by Baloglu and McCleary (1999) was among the first to highlight the importance of perceptual attributes in tourists' destination evaluation, noting that affective and cognitive elements are closely connected yet independent. The affective destination image concerns the emotional reactions of affection and attachment that people experience toward a place, and the cognitive destination image concerns the knowledge, beliefs, and perceptual judgments people have about the properties of that place. Interestingly, affective judgments depend on prior cognitive judgments, a cascade effect in which cognitive judgments (knowledge and beliefs) guide affective judgments (emotions and attachment) (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). Later empirical studies have confirmed the sequential correlation between cognition and affect. Having positive and accurate cognitive appraisals about a destination is known to increase emotional affinity and attachment (Agapito et al., 2013; Wang and Hsu, 2010). Empirical research has shown a strong and positive correlation between cognitive and affective elements of destination image (Woosnam et al., 2020; Garay, 2019; Zheng & Rahman, 2025). Likewise, Kusumah (2023) confirms that affective responses in sustainable and post-pandemic traveling are strongly influenced by knowledge-based assessments. While this relationship is well established in other kinds of tourism, examining it in ecotourism contexts is important, as ecotourism destinations rely more heavily on cognitive attributes (e.g., biodiversity, conservation) that may shape affective responses differently (Zhang et al., 2024). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. *Cognitive destination image positively affects the affective destination image.*

2.6.2. Destination image and destination loyalty

Destination image is a concept that has been studied extensively in recent tourism and marketing research (Zheng & Rahman, 2025) because it is a crucial factor in explaining tourist behavior, particularly in destination decision-making. Numerous studies have explored how the different dimensions of destination image influence consumer behavior. Building on psychological foundations, the cognitive and affective components are often used to predict the conative image, that is, the behavioral dimension of destination image (Zajonc & Markus, 1982). Consequently, perceived destination image, comprising both cognitive and affective elements, collectively drives tourists' behavioral intentions (Woosnam et al., 2020). For example, Yang et al. (2022) and Kohli and Nefzi (2025) demonstrate that integrating cognitive and affective images yields a global perception of the destination, which, in turn, shapes tourists' revisit intentions. Theoretically, both cognitive and affective image dimensions are expected to influence loyalty, but through potentially different pathways. Cognitive image provides factual information that helps tourists form realistic expectations and make informed decisions, thereby reducing uncertainty and increasing the likelihood of repeat visitation (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Affective image, by contrast, generates emotional attachment and positive feelings that can directly motivate tourists to return without extensive cognitive processing (Stylos et al., 2016).

Empirical data on the effects of destination image always show that it has a strong impact on tourists' willingness to revisit a destination (Kusumah, 2023; Wei et al., 2024). Both the cognitive and affective components of destination image have been found to strongly influence various facets of behavioral intention, including revisit intentions (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Han et al., 2024). Tourists who have positive experiences, a sense of self-congruence, or globally positive attitudes towards a destination have a greater intention to revisit (Stylos et al., 2016). Various studies also support the idea that a favorable destination image is a highly significant factor in increasing revisit intention (Wei et al., 2024). Moreover, attributes such as attractiveness, accommodation, and cultural interaction directly and positively influence revisit behavior (Nguyen et al., 2020).

A favorable perception of a destination also encourages tourists to share their experiences and recommend it to others, core indicators of destination loyalty. From a theoretical perspective, recommendation intention may be particularly sensitive to affective image, as positive emotions are more readily shared with others than factual information (Chung & Chen, 2018). However, cognitive image also contributes by providing the substantive content that tourists use to describe and justify their recommendations (Prayag et al., 2017). Numerous studies have established a positive link between a favorable destination image and tourists' intentions to recommend the destination (e.g., Agapito et al., 2013; Bigné et al., 2001) and to engage in positive word-of-mouth (Chung & Chen, 2018; Prayag et al., 2017). In addition, Chen and Law (2016) found that in an online setting, the valence of positive messages, such as recommendations, depends on the perceived quality of the destination and service features. Visitor loyalty is a multi-dimensional concept, and the motivation to recommend is considered one of its most explicit aspects. Hence, there is little doubt that a positive image of a tourist destination motivates visitors to recommend it to others. Recommendation intention has been positively correlated with overall destination image (Yang et al., 2025), affective (Lee et al., 2005), and cognitive aspects (McDowall and Ma, 2010). Stylos et al. (2016) found that cognitive and affective images are not direct predictors of revisit intention, and Sobaih et al. (2024) identified that the cognitive image plays a significant role in predicting revisit and recommendation intentions, whereas the affective image affects recommendation behavior. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a. *Ecotourism cognitive destination image has a positive effect on tourists' intention to revisit.*

H3a. *Ecotourism cognitive destination image has a positive effect on tourists' intention to recommend.*

H2b. *Ecotourism affective destination image has a positive effect on tourists' intention to revisit.*

H3b. *Ecotourism affective destination image has a positive effect on tourists' intention to recommend.*

2.6.3. The Mediating Effect of Tourists' Cultural Intelligence

In line with the (S-O-R) model, the current research conceptualizes destination image as an external stimulus, CQ as an internal psychological process, and destination loyalty as a behavioral response. The perceptions of tourists towards a destination in ecotourism contexts, where visitor experiences are framed within culturally unique and community-based settings, are predicted to trigger internal adaptation processes that, in turn, influence behavioral intentions. Given that CQ is a multidimensional construct comprising metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral dimensions (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ang et al., 2015), it is important to explain how each dimension of destination image contributes differently to the development of CQ. The informational substrate on which CQ was developed is the cognitive dimension of the ecotourism destination image, which encompasses tourists' awareness of environmental aspects, cultural heritage, local traditions, and sustainable practices. Cognitive image provides factual knowledge that directly supports three CQ dimensions: cognitive CQ (cultural knowledge), metacognitive CQ (planning and monitoring), and behavioral CQ (appropriate actions) (Ang et al., 2015; Thomas & Inkson, 2008). According to recent studies in tourism, enriched cognitive perceptions of destinations can deepen understanding of host contexts and promote learning-based and adaptive responses in intercultural contact. Empirical studies in the tourism setting indicate that knowledge-based beliefs are significantly related to both cultural flexibility and engagement, thus supporting the idea that the cognitive image is a relevant antecedent of cultural intelligence (Zakaria et al., 2024). Besides purely cognitive assessments, the affective facet of the destination image, which summarises tourists' emotional reactions, including pleasure, excitement, and emotional attachment, also plays a significant role in shaping inner psychological states. In contrast to cognitive image, affective image primarily influences the motivational dimension of CQ, which involves willingness and self-efficacy to engage in intercultural interactions (Ang et al., 2015; Huff et al., 2014). Recent empirical tourism literature shows that affective image has a powerful impact on perceived emotional value and experience of visitors, thus inviting tourists to dive deeper into the destination experience (Chi & Giao, 2024; Goeltom and Hurriyati, 2024). This affective engagement has been empirically associated with greater openness, interest, and willingness to interact with local communities, which, on a theoretical level, would correspond to the motivational and behavioral aspects of cultural intelligence. Therefore, the cognitive image is expected to exert a stronger overall influence on CQ than the affective image, as it addresses three of the four CQ dimensions, whereas the affective image addresses only one (Wei et al., 2024; Rather et al., 2021).

H4a: *Ecotourism cognitive destination image positively influences tourists' cultural intelligence.*

A cognitive destination image provides organized and reliable data that support visitors' cultural understanding and adaptability, thereby fostering cultural intelligence in culturally intense environments, as shown by Zakaria et al. (2024).

H5a: *Ecotourism affective destination image positively influences tourists' cultural intelligence.*

The empirical literature on tourism indicates that an affective image enables greater emotional engagement and motivational involvement of tourists in destinations. Emotional value gained through destination experiences fosters deeper cultural exploration and exchange, thereby creating a psychological environment conducive to the emergence of cultural intelligence (Chi & Giao, 2024; Goeltom & Hurriyati, 2024).

H4b: *Tourists' cultural intelligence positively influences intention to revisit.*

Cultural intelligence facilitates positive interpersonal interactions and cultural accommodation, thereby improving experiential comfort and relationship quality in travel environments. Empirical studies on tourism show that these adaptive competencies are associated with stronger behavior intentions, specifically, revisit intentions (Zakaria et al., 2024).

H5b: *Tourists' cultural intelligence positively influences intention to recommend.*

Tourists with greater cultural intelligence have a greater capacity to perceive and experience culturally encoded experiences, which increases the likelihood of sharing positive experiences and recommending their destinations to others (Stanovčić et al., 2021). When applied within the framework of the suggested model, cultural intelligence is expected to serve as a mediating organismic process, transforming perceptions of the destination image into behavioral reactions related to loyalty. According to the S-O-R framework, external stimuli do not directly produce behavioral responses without an internal processing mechanism (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Here, the destination image (stimulus) must first activate CQ (organism), which then shapes loyalty (response). Without CQ, a positive image may produce only superficial liking rather than behavioral commitment (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Prayag, 2009). Once activated by an image, CQ enables tourists to adapt effectively, reduce uncertainty, and enhance satisfaction. These internal states translate into intentions to revisit and recommend. Thus, CQ is conceptualized as the intervening mechanism that converts external perceptions into loyalty dispositions, rather than merely a parallel outcome of a positive experience (Zakaria et al., 2024; Frías-Jamilena et al., 2018). Furthermore, both direct and indirect paths are hypothesized simultaneously because ecotourism loyalty may be formed through two complementary mechanisms. On one hand, a favorable destination image may directly generate emotional attachment, trust, and satisfaction, leading to revisit and recommendation intentions without requiring deeper cultural processing (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Prayag, 2009). On the other hand, a positive destination image, particularly its cognitive dimension, may enhance tourists' cultural intelligence, which in turn facilitates loyalty through better cultural adaptation and reduced uncertainty in intercultural encounters (Zakaria et al., 2024; Frías-Jamilena et al., 2018). Therefore, partial mediation is theoretically expected rather than full mediation, as both pathways are conceptually distinct and equally plausible in ecotourism settings. Excluding the direct paths would risk oversimplifying the psychological process underlying tourist loyalty.

H6a: *Tourists' cultural intelligence mediates the relationship between ecotourism cognitive destination image and intention to revisit.*

In ecotourism settings, cognitive destination image helps in increasing tourists' cultural knowledge, which helps their adaptive interactions coupled with revisit intentions (Zakaria et al., 2024).

H7a: Tourists' cultural intelligence mediates the relationship between ecotourism affective destination image and intention to revisit.

Empirical evidence indicates that affective destination image can generate emotional value and motivational involvement, which should, in turn, drive tourists to seek culturally significant experiences (Chi & Gao, 2024). These affectively motivated processes can facilitate the cultivation of cultural intelligence, which serves as a feasible mediating mechanism between affective image and revisit intention.

H6b: Tourists' cultural intelligence mediates the relationship between ecotourism cognitive destination image and intention to recommend.

By enhancing cultural awareness and adaptability, CQ can be used to translate cognitively developed destination perceptions into recommendation behavior among tourists, thereby strengthening the mediating role presented in the conceptual framework (Zakaria et al., 2024).

H7b: Tourists' cultural intelligence mediates the relationship between ecotourism affective destination image and intention to recommend.

Recent studies in tourism indicate that destination experiences that lead to emotional engagement enhance cultural engagement and the depth of experience, which are attributed to increased word-of-mouth diffusion (Stanovčić et al., 2021; Goeltom & Hurriyati, 2024). As such, cultural intelligence serves as a mediating construct that links affective destination image to recommending propensity by influencing tourists' motivational involvement and cultural adjustment. This mediation is expected to be partial, as an affective image may also directly influence recommendation intention through emotional attachment without requiring CQ.

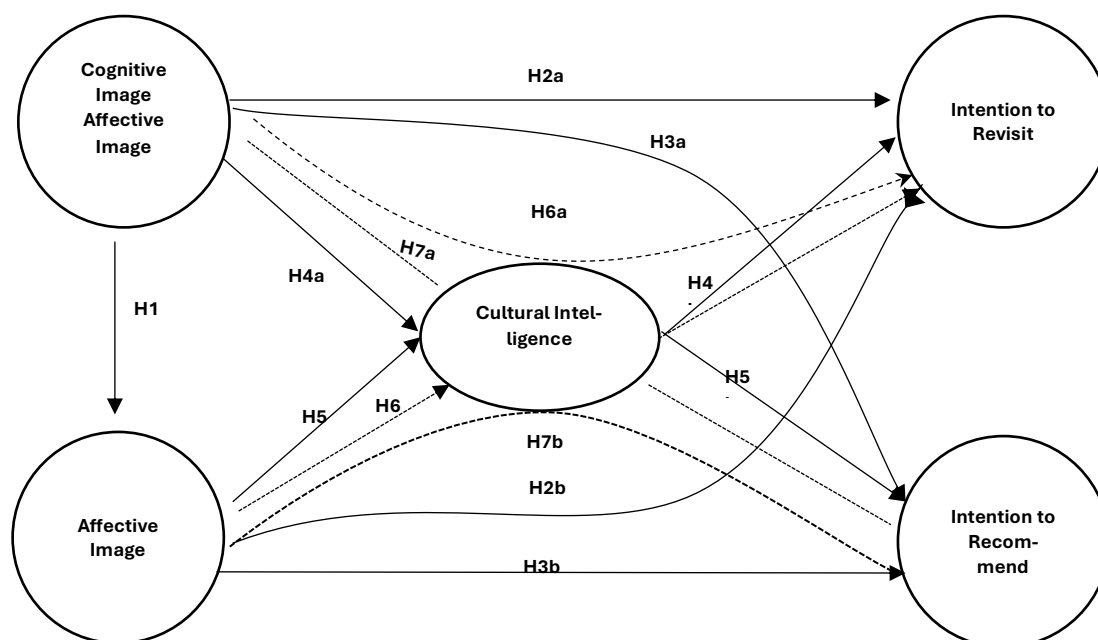


Figure 1: The Conceptual Research Model.

Figure 1: A structural equation model with rectangles representing constructs: Cognitive Image (exogenous), Affective Image (endogenous), Cultural Intelligence (mediator, second-order with four dimensions), Intention to Revisit (endogenous), Intention to Recommend (endogenous). Arrows show: H1 from Cognitive to Affective; H2a, H3a from Cognitive to Revisit and Recommend; H2b, H3b from Affective to Revisit and Recommend; H4a, H5a from Cognitive and Affective to Cultural Intelligence; H4b, H5b from Cultural Intelligence to Revisit and Recommend; and mediation paths H6a, H7a, H6b, H7b (indirect).]*

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

To achieve the objectives of this study, a quantitative research design was adopted. The study employed a convenience sample of 720 tourists who had visited ecotourism destinations in Tunisia. Given the intercultural nature of the research context and the diversity of tourists visiting Tunisia, the questionnaire was administered in three languages: English, French, and Arabic. The original English version was translated into French and Arabic using a back-translation procedure conducted by two independent bilingual translators, following Brislin's (1970) guidelines. This process helped ensure semantic equivalence and reduce potential translation bias across the three versions of the questionnaire.

Data were collected between June and September 2025. Before completing the questionnaire, all participants were informed of the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no incentives were offered. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection. Respondents were approached at five selected ecotourism locations in Tunisia: Ichkeul National Park, Bouhedma National Park, the mountain oases of Chebika and Tamerza, and the forested areas of Ain Draham. These sites were selected because they represent important ecotourism destinations in Tunisia, combining natural attractions, cultural heritage, biodiversity, and community-based tourism experiences. Data were collected using an on-site intercept approach, whereby researchers

distributed questionnaires at the exit points of these sites. This strategy was used to ensure that respondents had already completed their ecotourism experience and were therefore able to evaluate the destination based on direct experience rather than expectation alone.

To ensure the relevance of the sample, tourists were identified as “ecotourists” based on two criteria: (a) participation in at least one nature-based activity, such as hiking, birdwatching, desert excursions, visits to protected areas, or community-based experiences; and (b) staying in accommodations or participating in tours associated with ecotourism-oriented or certified operators. In addition to direct on-site data collection, collaboration with partner travel agencies facilitated access to tourists engaged in ecotourism activities, including hiking, desert excursions, birdwatching, and rural community-based experiences. Approximately 750 questionnaires were distributed. After excluding incomplete or invalid responses, 720 questionnaires were retained for statistical analysis, resulting in a usable response rate of 96%. The final sample included both first-time and repeat visitors, which allowed the study to capture a broader range of tourist experiences and loyalty intentions. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents, including gender, age, nationality, educational level, visitation status, and average length of stay.

Table 1: Sample Demographics

Profile	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	352	49.0%
	Female	368	51.0%
Age	<20 years	90	12.5%
	20-30 years	127	17.6%
	31-40 years	107	14.9%
	41-50 years	90	12.5%
	51-60 years	149	20.7%
	>61 years	157	21.8%
Nationality	German	110	15.3%
	Algerian	320	44.4%
	British	90	12.5%
	French	88	12.2%
	Tunisian	62	8.6%
	Other	50	7.0%
Educational Level	Primary school	35	4.9%
	High/secondary school	194	27.0%
	Professional/diploma	201	27.9%
	University degree	198	27.5%
	Postgraduate degree	92	12.8%
Visitation Status	First-time visitor	305	42.4%
	Repeat visitor	415	57.6%
Average Length of Stay	1-3 days	128	17.8%
	4-7 days	342	47.5%
	8-14 days	186	25.8%
	>14 days	64	8.9%

Source: by the author

3.2. Measure And Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire assessed eight first-order constructs: cognitive image, affective image, metacognitive cultural intelligence, cognitive cultural intelligence, motivational cultural intelligence, behavioral cultural intelligence, intention to revisit, and intention to recommend. These constructs were organized into three broader theoretical components: destination image, cultural intelligence, and destination loyalty. Specifically, destination image consisted of cognitive and affective components; cultural intelligence was conceptualized as a second-order construct comprising four dimensions; and destination loyalty was measured through revisit and recommendation intentions.

All measurement items were adapted from empirically validated scales used in previous studies. This approach was adopted to ensure content validity and to maintain consistency with established constructs in tourism and intercultural research. Consistent with the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework guiding this study, destination image, represented by cognitive and affective image, was treated as the independent variable or stimulus. Cultural intelligence was treated as the mediating variable or organismic state, while destination loyalty, represented by intention to revisit and intention to recommend, was treated as the dependent variable or response. Destination image was measured using scales adapted from Artuger and Cetinsoz (2017), Sobaih et al. (2024), and Zhang et al. (2026). The cognitive image scale consisted of 15 items measuring five dimensions: natural resources, cultural heritage, infrastructure and facilities, safety and security, and price and value. Example items included “rich wildlife and biodiversity,” “authentic local traditions and customs,” “quality of accommodation and transportation,” “safe environment for tourists,” and “reasonable cost of services.” The affective image scale comprised four items measuring tourists’ emotional responses toward the destination, including feelings of relaxation, excitement, pleasure, and emotional attachment.

Cultural intelligence was modeled as a second-order reflective construct comprising four first-order dimensions: meta-cognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ang et al., 2015). A 12-item adapted scale from Ang et al. (2015) and Van Dyne et al. (2010) was used. Although the original cultural intelligence scale comprises 20 items, with five items for each dimension, this study retained three items per dimension, following previous tourism studies (Frias-Jamilena et al., 2018; Zakaria et al., 2024). Accordingly, each CQ dimension was represented equally in the measurement model, thereby preserving the theoretical balance of the original CQ framework while reducing respondent burden. This structure also ensured that the higher-order construct consistently reflected all four dimensions of cultural intelligence. The four CQ dimensions were presented separately in the measurement model to assess reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity at the dimensional level. However, for structural equation modeling and hypothesis testing, CQ was treated as a single higher-order construct, consistent with the study's theoretical framework.

Destination loyalty was measured as a bidimensional construct using a scale adapted from Cong (2021). It included three items measuring intention to revisit and three items measuring intention to recommend. These two dimensions were treated separately because tourists may recommend a destination to others even when they do not personally intend to revisit it. Therefore, distinguishing between revisit intention and recommendation intention provides a more precise understanding of loyalty behavior in ecotourism contexts. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). No reverse-coded items were included; all items were positively worded to reduce confusion among respondents, particularly given the multilingual nature of the questionnaire. Demographic information, including gender, age, nationality, educational level, visitation status, and average length of stay, was collected at the end of the questionnaire.

3.3. Data Analysis Method

The data were analyzed using SPSS 23 and AMOS 23. The analysis followed several stages. First, the dataset was screened for incomplete responses, missing values, and invalid questionnaires. After this process, 720 usable responses were retained for analysis. Descriptive statistics were then used to summarize the demographic profile of the respondents. Second, a preliminary clarity check was conducted using a pre-test sample of 42 respondents. This stage was intended to assess the clarity, wording, and comprehensibility of the questionnaire items rather than to test the final measurement model. Feedback from the pre-test helped refine the questionnaire before the main data collection phase. Third, exploratory factor analysis was conducted to examine the underlying factor structure of the measurement items and to assess whether the items loaded appropriately on their intended constructs. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin values, Bartlett's test of sphericity, factor loadings, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients were used to evaluate sampling adequacy, factorability, and internal consistency. Items with weak loadings or problematic cross-loadings were removed where necessary. Fourth, confirmatory factor analysis was performed using AMOS 23 to validate the measurement model. This stage assessed the reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the constructs. Composite reliability, average variance extracted, maximum shared variance, and average shared variance were examined to ensure that the constructs met accepted validity standards. In addition, model fit was evaluated using multiple goodness-of-fit indices, including CMIN/DF, CFI, TLL, GFI, AGFI, and RMSEA. Finally, structural equation modeling was used to test the hypothesized relationships among cognitive image, affective image, cultural intelligence, intention to revisit, and intention to recommend. The mediating role of cultural intelligence was examined using bootstrapping procedures with bias-corrected confidence intervals. This approach was appropriate because it allowed the study to estimate both direct and indirect effects and to determine whether cultural intelligence significantly mediated the relationship between destination image and tourist loyalty. Although both exploratory and confirmatory analyses were conducted within the same overall sample, the use of validated scales, the pre-test procedure, and the subsequent CFA provided support for the adequacy of the measurement model. Nevertheless, this methodological choice is acknowledged as a limitation, and future studies may strengthen validation by using separate subsamples for EFA and CFA or by replicating the model with an independent sample.

4. Results

4.1. Results Of Exploratory Factor Analysis

A preliminary clarity check was conducted on an initial sample of 42 respondents to ensure that all items were understood as intended. The primary exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was then performed on the full sample of 720 respondents, as this sample size meets the recommended threshold for factor analysis (Hair et al., 2014, 2019). The empirical results demonstrate satisfactory psychometric properties for all constructs. All Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) statistics were above 0.8, indicating excellent sampling adequacy. Bartlett's test of sphericity yielded significant results ($p < 0.001$) for all constructs, justifying the validity of the subsequent factor analytic processes. Based on factor loadings from the full sample, five items with loadings below 0.5 were removed from the original 37-item scale, yielding 32 reliable items for further analysis. Furthermore, no significant cross-loadings were detected. All retained items loaded cleanly onto their intended dimensions, with primary factor loadings above 0.5 and cross-loadings below 0.3 on other dimensions. Table 2 below presents the final factor structure.

Table 2: Results of the Exploratory Factor Analysis

Dimension	Items Retained	KMO	Variance Explained (%)	Cronbach's Alpha
Cultural Intelligence	12	0.891	68.45	0.912
– Behavioral CQ	3	—	—	0.847
– Motivational CQ	3	—	—	0.889
– Cognitive CQ	3	—	—	0.876
– Metacognitive CQ	3	—	—	0.854
Cognitive Image	10	0.923	72.34	0.945
Affective Image	4	0.832	75.67	0.901
Intention to Revisit	3	0.794	79.23	0.902
Intention to Recommend	3	0.808	81.45	0.921

Source: by the author. Note. CQ = Cultural Intelligence; KMO = Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy. Five items with factor loadings below 0.50 were removed from the original 37-item scale, leaving 32 items for further analysis. The four CQ dimensions were retained with three items each, consistent with the measurement description.

The exploratory factor analysis supported the four-dimensional structure of cultural intelligence. Specifically, three items were retained for each CQ dimension: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral. This item distribution is consistent with the measurement design described in Section 4.2 and supports treating CQ as a second-order construct in the subsequent structural model.

4.2. Common Method Bias

To address the potential for common method bias, two procedures were employed. First, Harman's single-factor test was conducted using exploratory factor analysis. The unrotated factor solution revealed that a single factor accounted for 28.4% of the total variance, which is below the recommended threshold of 50% (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Second, a common latent factor was introduced into the confirmatory factor analysis model. The comparison between the model with and without the common latent factor showed no significant difference in model fit, indicating that common method bias did not substantially affect the results. These tests suggest that common method bias is not a serious concern in this study.

4.2. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess the validity of the measurement model. The analysis was performed on the full sample of 720 respondents. As shown in Table 3, the measurement model demonstrated a marginally acceptable fit. The CFI value of 0.875 and the TLI value of 0.894 were slightly below the commonly recommended threshold of 0.90, while the RMSEA value of 0.066 and the CMIN/DF value of 3.428 were within acceptable limits (Hair et al., 2014; Evrard et al., 2003). In addition, the GFI value of 0.773 and AGFI value of 0.799 were below the preferred threshold, suggesting that the measurement model did not achieve a strong fit across all indices. Nevertheless, because several key indices, particularly RMSEA and CMIN/DF, were within acceptable ranges, and because the CFI and TLI values were close to the recommended cut-off point, the model was considered sufficiently adequate for further analysis. Therefore, the CFA results should be interpreted as providing acceptable but cautious support for the measurement model rather than indicating a strong or excellent model fit. Normality was also examined before estimating the structural model. The skewness values ranged from -1.789 to -0.374 ($<|3|$) across all items. Those for Kurtosis ranged from -0.320 to 1.429 ($<|8|$) for all items. The Mardia's test of multivariate normality was carried out before performing the maximum likelihood estimation ($<|3|$) (Roussel et al., 2002). After checking the skewness and kurtosis values, we can assume that the variables' distributions were symmetric.

Table 3: Indices of the Adjusted Model

X2 referred to as (χ^2/df)	NFI	TLI	CFI	GFI	AGFI	RMSEA	CMIN/DF
574.993 ddl=189	0,876	0,894	0,875	0,773	0,799	0,066	3,428

Source: by the author

4.3. Convergent And Discriminant Measurement Validity

Extensive reliability and validity statistics are presented in Table 4. Composite reliability values ranged from 0.860 to 0.961, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 and, therefore, confirming satisfactory internal consistency across all constructs. Moreover, the average variance extracted values ranged from 0.606 to 0.794, all of which exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.50. Accordingly, the results provide adequate support for convergent validity, indicating that the constructs explained a sufficient proportion of variance in their respective indicators.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, maximum shared variance, and average shared variance (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The results show that most constructs met the required criteria, as their square root of AVE exceeded their correlations with other constructs, and their AVE values were greater than the corresponding MSV and ASV values. However, one exception was observed for Intention to Recommend. Specifically, the AVE value for Intention to Recommend was 0.606, whereas its MSV value was 0.656, indicating that the MSV exceeded the AVE. In addition, the square root of AVE for Intention to Recommend was 0.778, which was lower than its correlations with Affective Image, Motivational CQ, and Intention to Revisit. Therefore, discriminant validity for this construct should be interpreted with caution.

Nevertheless, the overall reliability and convergent validity of the measurement model were acceptable. The relatively high association between Intention to Recommend and related constructs may be theoretically understandable because recommendation intention is closely connected to emotional evaluation, intercultural engagement, and revisit intention in tourism loyalty research. However, to strengthen the validity of the measurement model, additional evidence such as the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio, cross-loading inspection, or further item refinement should be reported. Therefore, the measurement model can be retained for further analysis, but the discriminant validity of Intention to Recommend should be acknowledged as a limitation rather than presented as fully established.

Table 4: Convergent And Discriminative Measurement Validity

Construct	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Behavioral CQ	0.890	0.697	0.596	0.538	0.835							
2. Motivational CQ	0.860	0.661	0.630	0.535	0.718	0.813						
3. Cognitive CQ	0.935	0.794	0.596	0.537	0.772	0.769	0.891					
4. Metacognitive CQ	0.917	0.636	0.578	0.521	0.748	0.664	0.727	0.797				
5. Cognitive Image	0.925	0.742	0.658	0.521	0.701	0.683	0.694	0.672	0.861			
6. Affective Image	0.901	0.732	0.658	0.586	0.763	0.727	0.718	0.736	0.811	0.856		
7. Intention to Recommend	0.961	0.606	0.656	0.592	0.733	0.794	0.736	0.760	0.756	0.810	0.778	

Construct	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
8. Intention to Revisit	0.912	0.718	0.632	0.556	0.697	0.754	0.712	0.741	0.728	0.789	0.795	0.847

Source: by the author. Note. CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; MSV = Maximum Shared Variance; ASV = Average Shared Variance. Diagonal values in bold represent the square root of AVE. CQ = Cultural Intelligence.

4.4. Structural Equation Modeling Results

After confirming the adequacy of the measurement model, the proposed structural model was assessed to examine the hypothesized relationships among destination image, cultural intelligence, and destination loyalty. The structural model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data. Specifically, the CFI (0.906) and TLI (0.921) exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.90, indicating satisfactory incremental fit. Moreover, the RMSEA value of 0.053 and the CMIN/DF value of 2.83 were within acceptable limits, while the SRMR value of 0.044 further supported the adequacy of the residual fit (Hair et al., 2014; Didellon & Valette-Florence, 1995). Therefore, the overall fit indices provided sufficient statistical justification for examining the proposed structural relationships.

As presented in Table 5, all direct hypotheses were statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level, thereby providing empirical support for the conceptual framework. Cognitive destination image was positively associated with affective destination image, suggesting that tourists' knowledge-based evaluations of destination attributes are linked to more favorable emotional perceptions. Furthermore, both cognitive and affective destination image significantly predicted revisit and recommendation intentions. This indicates that tourists' loyalty intentions are associated with both rational evaluations and emotional perceptions of the ecotourism experience.

In addition, both dimensions of destination image were positively related to tourists' cultural intelligence. However, the path coefficient for cognitive image \rightarrow cultural intelligence was larger in magnitude than the path coefficient for affective image \rightarrow cultural intelligence. This pattern suggests that knowledge-based perceptions of local culture, environmental resources, traditions, and destination characteristics may play a more prominent role in tourists' intercultural capability development than emotional evaluations. Nevertheless, because no formal statistical comparison of the two path coefficients was conducted, this difference should be interpreted as a magnitude-based difference rather than as a statistically confirmed difference.

Similarly, cultural intelligence significantly predicted both intention to revisit and intention to recommend, confirming its role as an important psychological mechanism in explaining loyalty intentions. Taken together, these findings support the logic of the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework. Destination image represents the external stimulus, cultural intelligence functions as the internal organismic state, and destination loyalty represents the behavioral response. Thus, cultural intelligence helps explain the association between destination perceptions and loyalty intentions in ecotourism contexts.

Table 5: Hypothesis Testing Results

H	Path	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	p-value	Result
H1	Cognitive Image \rightarrow Affective Image	0.724	0.056	12.929	<0.001	Supported
H2a	Cognitive Image \rightarrow Intention to Revisit	0.432	0.068	6.353	<0.001	Supported
H3a	Cognitive Image \rightarrow Intention to Recommend	0.387	0.071	5.451	<0.001	Supported
H2b	Affective Image \rightarrow Intention to Revisit	0.319	0.062	5.145	<0.001	Supported
H3b	Affective Image \rightarrow Intention to Recommend	0.425	0.065	6.538	<0.001	Supported
H4a	Cognitive Image \rightarrow Cultural Intelligence	0.646	0.051	12.667	<0.001	Supported
H5a	Affective Image \rightarrow Cultural Intelligence	0.283	0.058	4.879	<0.001	Supported
H4b	Cultural Intelligence \rightarrow Intention to Revisit	0.417	0.059	7.068	<0.001	Supported
H5b	Cultural Intelligence \rightarrow Intention to Recommend	0.448	0.061	7.344	<0.001	Supported

Source: by the author

4.5. Mediation Analysis Results

The mediating role of cultural intelligence in the relationship between destination image and destination loyalty was assessed using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. As presented in Table 6, all indirect effects were statistically significant because none of the confidence intervals included zero. Therefore, the findings provide empirical support for all proposed mediation paths: H6a and H6b for the cognitive image–loyalty relationships, and H7a and H7b for the affective image–loyalty relationships. Moreover, since both the direct and indirect paths remained significant, the results indicate partial mediation rather than full mediation. This interpretation is consistent with Zhao et al. (2010), who argue that complementary mediation is present when both direct and indirect effects are significant and operate in the same direction.

More specifically, cultural intelligence partially mediated the relationship between cognitive destination image and revisit intention, with a standardized indirect effect of 0.270. Similarly, it mediated the relationship between cognitive destination image and recommendation intention, with a standardized indirect effect of 0.289. These findings suggest that tourists' knowledge-based perceptions of an ecotourism destination are positively associated with loyalty intentions both directly and indirectly through cultural intelligence. In addition, cultural intelligence partially mediated the relationships between affective destination image and revisit intention (indirect effect: 0.118) and between affective destination image and recommendation intention (indirect effect: 0.127). Accordingly, positive emotional responses toward the destination were also linked to loyalty intentions through cultural intelligence, although the indirect effects were smaller than those observed for cognitive image.

Furthermore, the indirect effects associated with cognitive destination image were larger in magnitude than those associated with affective destination image. However, because no formal statistical comparison of indirect effects was reported, this pattern should be interpreted cautiously as a magnitude-based difference rather than as definitive evidence that the cognitive-image mediation paths are statistically stronger. This pattern is theoretically meaningful because cultural intelligence is closely related to knowledge-based perceptions, such as awareness of local traditions, environmental practices, cultural heritage, and destination attributes. Nevertheless, affective image remains relevant because emotional engagement may be associated with

greater openness to intercultural experiences. Taken together, these findings indicate that cultural intelligence functions as a meaningful psychological mechanism that helps explain the association between destination image and loyalty intentions in ecotourism contexts.

Table 6: Mediation Analysis Results

Mediation Path	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Mediation Type
H6a: Cognitive Image → CQ → Revisit	0.432	0.270	0.702	0.198	0.354	Partial
H6b: Cognitive Image → CQ → Recommend	0.387	0.289	0.676	0.214	0.376	Partial
H7a: Affective Image → CQ → Revisit	0.319	0.118	0.437	0.067	0.183	Partial
H7b: Affective Image → CQ → Recommend	0.425	0.127	0.552	0.071	0.195	Partial

Source: by the author

5. Discussion

This research examined the relationship between destination image and destination loyalty through the mediating role of tourists' cultural intelligence (CQ), with particular attention to ecotourism settings. Overall, the statistical findings provide support for the proposed model and offer relevant theoretical and managerial insights. The results indicate that both cognitive and affective destination image are positively associated with tourists' cultural intelligence and that CQ, in turn, significantly predicts destination loyalty intentions, including revisit and recommendation intentions. This finding is consistent with previous tourism research, which has established that destination image dimensions are closely related to tourist behavior and loyalty-related outcomes (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Styliadis et al., 2017). However, the present study extends this literature by showing that these relationships are partly explained through CQ, thereby offering a more detailed understanding of the psychological mechanism linking destination perceptions to loyalty intentions.

Furthermore, the findings support the mediating role of cultural intelligence in the relationship between destination image and loyalty, which is consistent with the logic of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Within this framework, destination image represents the external stimulus, CQ reflects the internal organismic state, and destination loyalty intentions represent the behavioral response. This result is also consistent with Zakaria et al. (2024), who examined CQ as a mediating construct in tourism outcomes, and with Frías-Jamilena et al. (2018), who demonstrated the relevance of CQ in destination brand equity. Nevertheless, unlike studies that have treated CQ mainly as a moderator, antecedent, or relatively stable individual capability, the current study positions CQ as a mediating mechanism that helps explain the relationship between destination image and loyalty intentions. In doing so, the study extends the application of the S-O-R framework to an African ecotourism context, where cultural interaction, community engagement, and environmental learning are central to the visitor experience.

Moreover, the cognitive image–CQ path was larger in magnitude than the affective image–CQ path. This pattern suggests that knowledge-based perceptions may be particularly relevant to tourists' intercultural capability in ecotourism contexts. However, because the study did not report a formal statistical comparison between these two path coefficients, this finding should be interpreted as a magnitude-based difference rather than as conclusive evidence that cognitive image has a statistically stronger association with CQ than affective image. Even so, the result is theoretically meaningful because CQ is closely related to knowledge acquisition, cultural interpretation, and adaptive awareness (Ang et al., 2015). Accordingly, the findings suggest that tourists' perceptions of cultural heritage, local traditions, environmental practices, and service quality may be closely connected with their ability to understand and adapt to culturally diverse destination environments.

The relatively larger cognitive image–CQ relationship can also be understood through the nature of cultural intelligence itself. CQ is a capability-related construct that involves cognitive processing, metacognitive awareness, motivation, and behavioral adaptation in culturally diverse settings (Earley & Ang, 2003; Ang et al., 2015). Therefore, cognitive destination image, which includes tourists' evaluations of cultural heritage, local traditions, environmental practices, and destination infrastructure, is likely to be closely related to context-based cultural knowledge and intercultural understanding. This interpretation is consistent with Thomas and Inkson (2008), who suggested that CQ is theoretically linked to exposure to and processing of cultural information. Thus, in ecotourism settings, where visitors often encounter unfamiliar cultural practices, conservation activities, and community-based experiences, cognitive destination image may provide the informational foundation through which tourists interpret host practices more effectively.

In addition, the findings are consistent with previous empirical studies suggesting that explicit information, perceived authenticity, and knowledge of local contexts are associated with tourists' understanding and adaptive flexibility (Su et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025). They also align with Rather et al. (2021), who emphasized the importance of cognitive attributes in ecotourism experiences. By contrast, affective destination image is mainly connected with emotional responses such as pleasure, excitement, relaxation, and attachment. Although these emotional responses are important because they may increase openness, motivation, and willingness to engage with the destination, they may not provide the same level of structured cultural knowledge as a cognitive image. Therefore, the smaller affective image–CQ path is theoretically understandable. Emotions may encourage tourists to engage with the destination, but knowledge-based perceptions may be more directly associated with the development of intercultural understanding and adaptive capability.

Nevertheless, affective image should not be considered unimportant. The results show that affective image was significantly associated with CQ and loyalty intentions, indicating that emotional responses remain relevant in ecotourism experiences. Rather than replacing affective image, cognitive image appears to complement it by providing the interpretive and informational basis through which tourists can make sense of cultural and environmental experiences. Therefore, the findings suggest that ecotourism loyalty intentions are not explained by emotional appeal alone, but by the interaction between emotional engagement, destination knowledge, and intercultural capability. In this respect, the study contributes to the literature by

indicating that cognitive image may play a more prominent role in CQ-related loyalty formation within ecotourism contexts, while affective image continues to support tourists' emotional connection and motivational involvement.

5.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three key theoretical contributions to tourism and destination marketing literature. First, the present work expands upon the destination image theory by incorporating cultural intelligence as a mediating psychological variable, thus reframing destination image as an attitudinal antecedent of loyalty, with cultural intelligence mediating loyalty. The current approach recognizes the need to provide comprehensive descriptions of the mental mechanisms by which perception-based inputs are converted into behavior-based outputs (Stylidis et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2024). Second, the research contributes to the existing body of research on cultural intelligence in tourism by empirically demonstrating that CQ is associated with destination perceptions and shows a consistent relationship with loyalty, rather than being a fixed personality attribute. This dynamic perspective is congruent with more recent tourism research that places greater emphasis on learning, adjustment, and transformative experiences of travel (Liu et al., 2025). Third, the study empirically confirms the S-O-R framework in an African ecotourism context, which is under-researched in the literature. The study provides context-specific support to sustainability-conscious tourism theory by showing that the destination image (stimulus) influences loyalty (response) via cultural intelligence (organism) (Rather et al., 2021).

5.2. Managerial Implications

The current findings provide clear, practical implications for DMOs and ecotourism operators in managerial contexts. To start with, DMOs must focus on improving the cognitive image of ecotourism destinations by providing high-quality, reliable, and informative content that is culturally accurate and appropriate. This involves developing stories about local traditions, community values, conservation activities, and expected visitor behavior. These strategies not only enhance the destination image but also proactively develop tourists' cultural intelligence, thereby increasing their likelihood of returning and promoting positive word-of-mouth. Second, managers are supposed to create experiences that promote cultural learning, such as guided community interactions, interpretive programs, and participatory ecotourism. Such programs strengthen the cognitive principles of cultural intelligence and enable affective experiences to enhance visitors' engagement. Third, although affective image plays a secondary role, emotional appeals should not be neglected. Authenticity, respect, and emotional bonding in marketing communications can enhance motivational states and encourage transparency, thereby strengthening cognitive learning mechanisms and ensuring loyalty outcomes. Overall, this paper reveals that image is not the sole determinant of destination loyalty in ecotourism, but the ability of tourists to cognitively process and culturally adjust to the destination. Therefore, the prevalence of the cognitive image underscores the importance of knowledge-based perceptions in culturally intensive tourism. Accordingly, this study contributes to the concept of cultural intelligence by highlighting it as a decisive explanatory variable, thereby providing a clear theoretical understanding and practical recommendations for sustainable destination development.

6. Conclusion

This research examined the mechanisms associated with tourist loyalty intentions in the context of ecotourism in Tunisia, an emerging destination where the promotion of natural and cultural heritage is strategically important. Drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, the study investigated the relationship between destination image and destination loyalty, represented by intention to revisit and intention to recommend, through the mediating role of cultural intelligence. Based on data collected from 720 ecotourists, the empirical findings support the proposed model and provide a more refined understanding of how destination perceptions are associated with loyalty intentions in ecotourism settings. The findings indicate that both cognitive and affective dimensions of destination image are positively related to loyalty intentions, while cultural intelligence helps explain this relationship. More specifically, cultural intelligence functions as an internal organismic state that links tourists' perceptions of the destination with their revisit and recommendation intentions. Thus, rather than viewing ecotourism loyalty as mainly dependent on emotional appeal, the results suggest that loyalty intentions are also closely associated with learning, cultural understanding, and the ability to interpret the local context. In this respect, cultural intelligence should not be understood only as a fixed personal trait but also as a capability connected to tourists' destination experiences, factual knowledge, and intercultural engagement.

From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it extends destination image theory by incorporating cultural intelligence as a psychological mediating mechanism, thereby helping to clarify the "black box" between destination perception and loyalty-related behavioral intentions. Second, it suggests that cultural intelligence may be understood as a situationally relevant construct in tourism contexts, particularly where visitors engage with unfamiliar cultural, social, and environmental settings. Third, by testing the S-O-R framework in a Tunisian ecotourism context, the study contributes to the limited body of empirical research on sustainable tourism and destination loyalty in North African destinations. From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that Destination Marketing Organizations and ecotourism operators should not rely solely on emotional or visual destination appeal. Instead, they should also strengthen the cognitive image of ecotourism destinations by providing accurate, engaging, and culturally meaningful information about local traditions, ecology, conservation practices, and community values. Moreover, active learning experiences, guided interpretation, community interaction, and participatory ecotourism activities may help visitors develop stronger cultural understanding and more meaningful destination experiences. Therefore, enhancing tourists' cultural intelligence can be a useful strategy to support destination differentiation, positive word-of-mouth, and long-term loyalty intentions in sustainable ecotourism contexts.

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite these contributions, the study has limitations due to convenience sampling and seasonal data collection, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Future research would benefit from adopting a longitudinal and probabilistic approach to capture seasonal variations. Furthermore, replicating this model in other geographic contexts (sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Latin America) would allow for testing the cross-cultural validity of the results. Finally, incorporating moderating variables, such as prior experience or personality traits, would further refine understanding of the interactions among image, cultural intelligence, and loyalty. Specifically, future studies could test whether prior travel experience moderates the relationship between cognitive image and CQ, or whether the mediating role of CQ is stronger for first-time visitors than for repeat visitors.

Alternative models should also be examined, such as whether loyalty influences CQ (reverse causation) or whether destination trust mediates the image-loyalty relationship independently of CQ.

Acknowledgment Statement: The authors would like to thank all participants in the survey for their contribution to completing this manuscript.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Authors' contribution statements: Author 1 contributed to the Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, and Writing - Original Draft; Author 2 contributed to Software, Validation, and Data Curation; Author 3 contributed to Validation, Investigation, and Resources; Author 4 contributed to Validation, Data Curation, and Investigation; Author 5 contributed to Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision, and Project Administration.

Funding statements: This work was supported through the Annual Funding track by the Deanship of Scientific Presidency for Graduate Studies and Scientific Research, King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia, grant no. is: KFU261163.

Data availability statement: Data are available upon request from the author.

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Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process: During the copy-editing of this work, we used our entire AI tool. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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