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# Intercultural Communication, Aesthetic Experience, and the Power of Culture: A Multivariable Study in Tourism Cultural Festivals

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**Abstract**

This study explores the impact of cultural tourism festivals on soft diplomacy outcomes, examining how aesthetic appeal, intercultural communication effectiveness, perceived cultural authenticity, and cultural engagement influence the destination image and behavioral intentions of international tourists. Using a structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) approach, data were collected from 401 international visitors attending cultural festivals in Indonesia. The results indicate that aesthetic appeal significantly enhances cultural engagement, positively influencing the effectiveness of intercultural communication and perceived cultural authenticity, which are key drivers of perceived value. Meanwhile, destination image serves as a mediator in shaping the effects of soft diplomacy. The findings underscore the importance of cultural tourism as a non-coercive tool of diplomacy, demonstrating that well-designed cultural festivals can improve a country's international image, foster goodwill, and influence future tourist behaviors. This study contributes to the integration of destination branding, intercultural communication, and soft power theories, offering a novel framework for understanding the role of cultural tourism in international relations. Implications for cultural event organizers and policymakers are discussed, highlighting strategies to enhance cultural engagement and leverage soft diplomacy for nation branding.

**Keywords:** Cultural tourism; soft diplomacy; destination image; intercultural communication; behavioral intention

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## Introduction

Tourism has become a powerful platform for fostering intercultural understanding and enhancing the country's soft power in global mobility and cultural interconnectedness. In developing nations, cultural tourism is increasingly leveraged as an economic driver and a diplomatic strategy for influencing international perceptions and promoting cultural identity (Beljanski & Bukvić, 2020; Gröschl, 2020). Festivals, including traditional performances, heritage festivals, and creative exhibitions, are no longer regarded as mere attractions; they function as integrative cultural spaces where immersive experiences generate emotional resonance, dialogue, and informal diplomacy. In these settings, the roles of intercultural sensitivity, cultural hybridity, and creative engagement are essential in shaping visitor perceptions and fostering mutual respect across cultural boundaries (Kipng'etich, 2024; Li & Adnan, 2023). Although significant scholarly attention has been devoted to key tourism constructs such as authenticity, aesthetic value, tourist satisfaction, and destination image, few studies have examined how these elements operate collectively within the cultural festival framework as tools of soft diplomacy (Morozova, 2023). Research tends to explore intercultural communication or emotional experience in isolation, leaving a gap in understanding how these constructs interact to influence visitor engagement, perceived value, and behavioral intention toward the host culture (Hagqvist et al., 2020; Yuwita, 2023). This requires integrated conceptual frameworks that capture the dynamic relationships between these variables within the tourism setting. Theoretically, this study is anchored in three intersecting domains: Soft Power Theory (Nye, 2008), which emphasizes the persuasive appeal of cultural expression in diplomacy; Intercultural Communication Theory (Gudykunst, 2003; Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1983), which provides insight into how meaning is constructed and interpreted across cultural contexts; and destination branding theory, which explains how cultural experiences contribute to the formation of a nation's image and appeal. These perspectives support a multi-dimensional understanding of cultural festivals as experiential and symbolic arenas where visitor psychology, national identity, and international perception coalesce. Recent literature has increasingly acknowledged the role of cultural diplomacy in shaping global perceptions, especially in the context of non-Western and developing countries. While cultural performances can generate admiration and elevate the destination's image, they do not always lead to sustained cultural engagement or support for national narratives unless deeper emotional and intercultural connections are established (Al Sayegh et al., 2023; Sun, 2024). The lack of integrative, empirically grounded models for assessing these outcomes limits academic understanding and practical implementation. There remains a pressing need to examine how immersive experiences—such as perceived authenticity, intercultural sensitivity, and aesthetic appreciation—translate into long-term behavioral intentions and positive national perception (Ertem-Eray, 2023). In response to this gap, the present study proposes a novel framework that links micro-level

visitor experiences to macro-level outcomes in cultural diplomacy. By integrating variables such as perceived authenticity, aesthetic appeal, intercultural sensitivity, and perceived value while identifying the mediating roles of cultural engagement and destination image, this research offers a comprehensive model for understanding how cultural festivals influence international audiences. The proposed framework contributes to advancing the theoretical and empirical discourse on cultural tourism, soft power, and visitor behavior, particularly in the strategic positioning of cultural festivals within the tourism and public diplomacy agendas of developing countries.

## Literature review

### *Perceived cultural authenticity*

Perceived cultural authenticity refers to tourists' subjective judgments about the genuineness and cultural integrity of festivals and performances. Authentic experiences enhance emotional resonance, cultural appreciation, and cognitive engagement (Guerra et al., 2022; Stanovčić et al., 2021). Key traditional elements—such as costumes, music, storytelling, and symbols—anchor this perception, enriching the educational and emotional value of the experience (Mo et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2023). Multisensory cues further deepen immersion, fostering stronger psychological connections with cultural narratives (Guo et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023). Authenticity also builds trust, positioning visitors not only as observers but as active participants in meaningful cultural encounters (Stylidis et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2022). Authentic experiences are closely linked to existential authenticity, leading to personal meaning, satisfaction, and reinforcement of cultural values (Yi et al., 2021; Zhang & Deng, 2022). When grounded in local narratives and community participation, authenticity boosts perceived value and strengthens destination image (Uslu et al., 2023; Zuo et al., 2024). However, over-commercialization may dilute authenticity unless modern adaptations respect cultural integrity (Yong-jun et al., 2021; Yang Zhang & Lee, 2021). In sum, perceived authenticity enhances visitor experiences and drives behavioral intentions such as revisits and recommendations, supporting its role as a key driver of perceived value.

*H1: Perceived Cultural Authenticity positively influences Perceived Value.*

### *Intercultural communication effectiveness*

Intercultural communication effectiveness refers to how well cultural messages are conveyed, understood, and interpreted by diverse audiences. It involves both verbal and non-verbal cues that bridge linguistic and cultural gaps, allowing performances and exhibitions to become emotionally resonant and cognitively accessible (Wei-wei et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022). Effective communication enables cultural expressions to transcend barriers, fostering emotional connection and deeper interpretation processing (Seo et al., 2021). Rich, clear messaging—through metaphors, storytelling, and symbolic acts—stimulates curiosity, admiration, and appreciation of cultural heritage (Genç & Kozak, 2020; Güney, 2021). Technological enhancements like augmented reality can improve communication by adding context and reducing misunderstandings (Kurniati et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2024). Closely related is intercultural sensitivity, or the ability to empathize with cultural differences. Visitors high in sensitivity are more receptive to local customs and engage more respectfully, fostering emotional bonds and enhancing destination perception (Genc & Temizkan, 2023; Guerra et al., 2022). When paired with authenticity, effective communication deepens emotional resonance and attachment to place (Liu et al., 2022; Seo et al., 2021), leading to greater satisfaction and repeat visitation (Chua et al., 2024; Mok, 2022; Shi et al., 2025). Thus, enhancing intercultural communication effectiveness is key to improving perceived value and enriching the cultural tourism experience.

*H2: Intercultural Communication Effectiveness positively influences Perceived Value.*

### *Aesthetic appeal*

Aesthetic appeal enhances visitor engagement in cultural festivals by triggering multisensory and emotional responses. Elements such as costumes, choreography, stage design, and symbolic motifs work together to create immersive environments that evoke curiosity, admiration, and emotional involvement (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2021; Yen, 2022). These expressions foster deeper emotional and cognitive connections with cultural narratives, with fashion and design playing a key role in shaping the atmosphere and storytelling (Yang et al., 2022). Harmonious and coherent performances also enrich cultural interpretation (Şimşek, 2023; Yen, 2022). Beyond immediate sensory impact, aesthetic appeal shapes how experiences are emotionally processed and remembered. Emotions like awe, nostalgia, and joy enhance memorability and deepen long-term engagement (Hains & Hains, 2021; Hwang et al., 2021). Immersive aesthetics can induce a flow state, facilitating stronger cultural appreciation and identity internalization through performance art and symbolism (Genc & Temizkan, 2023). These aesthetic encounters not only promote intercultural understanding but also raise the perceived value of the event (Wei-wei et al., 2021; T. Zhang et al., 2021).

*H3: Aesthetic Appeal positively influences Cultural Engagement.*

### *Cultural engagement*

Cultural engagement refers to the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral involvement visitors experience during cultural tourism festivals, often expressed through immersion, reflection, and curiosity (Traversa, 2024; Xiao-li et al., 2020). This engagement is fueled by the synergy of authenticity and aesthetic appeal—authentic content fosters personal connection, while aesthetic

richness sustains emotional attention (Kluis & Land-Zandstra, 2023). Visitors who connect meaningfully with cultural narratives tend to form lasting impressions, report higher satisfaction, and promote the host culture through word-of-mouth or revisits (Massari et al., 2022). Interactions with authentic elements, such as original artifacts, heighten enthusiasm and learning compared to replicas (Ceylan, 2024; Sun, 2023). Immersive technologies like AR/VR also enhance access and emotional resonance, amplifying engagement (Malmisalo-Lensu, 2021; Ning & Chang, 2021). Perceived authenticity strengthens emotional involvement, satisfaction, and existential authenticity—a sense of real connection that supports identity formation and reflective learning deeply (Baker et al., 2020; Genç & Genc, 2022; Ravichandran & Nam, 2024; Uslu et al., 2023). Deep engagement leads to advocacy, conservation support, and higher perceived value, as visitors gain emotional and educational enrichment. Aesthetic immersion, storytelling, and culinary experiences enhance understanding of local identity and values (Haller et al., 2020; Hiamey et al., 2020).

*H4: Cultural Engagement positively influences Perceived Value.*

***Perceived value***

In cultural tourism, perceived value reflects a visitor's overall assessment of the experience as worth emotionally, educationally, and socially relative to their investment of time, money, and attention (Rezaei et al., 2023; Sahabuddin et al., 2021). This value is shaped by authenticity, aesthetic appeal, communication, and engagement. Authentic experiences with storytelling and immersive traditions enhance emotional satisfaction and attachment (Mo et al., 2024). Aesthetic richness, especially multisensory elements, deepens enjoyment and memorability (Guo et al., 2021; Tu et al., 2022). Clear and meaningful communication from guides and performers also strengthens value perception by facilitating understanding of cultural narratives. Visitor engagement is equally vital emotional and behavioral involvement during festivals leads to more satisfying, personally significant experiences (Badal, 2022; Bundzíková & Jánošová, 2021). Engaged tourists are more likely to revisit, recommend, and support cultural preservation. Moreover, perceived value is a strong predictor of destination image, acting as a bridge between cultural experience and behavioral outcomes (Zhang & Niyomsilp, 2020). High perceived value fosters positive impressions, long-term loyalty, and word-of-mouth advocacy (Abror et al., 2021; Yuqing Zhang & Lee, 2022).

*H5: Perceived Value positively influences Destination Image.*

***Intercultural sensitivity***

Intercultural sensitivity is a key competency in cultural tourism, reflecting a visitor's openness, empathy, and adaptability when encountering cultural differences. Tourists with high sensitivity are more capable of appreciating diversity, interpreting cultural performances empathetically, and forming nuanced understandings of host societies (Kuluşaklı, 2023). This awareness enhances communication, deepens engagement, and leads to more favorable evaluations of destinations (Miguel, 2024; Yepes et al., 2024). Intercultural sensitivity fosters meaningful connections with local communities and is strongly linked to traits like empathy, tolerance, and openness, often developed through frequent cross-cultural interactions (Güner et al., 2021; Toptsi & Hajeer, 2023). Visitors with broader intercultural exposure tend to achieve better communication outcomes and report higher satisfaction with host cultures (Wongsuban et al., 2024). Beyond personality traits, intercultural sensitivity is cultivated through education and experience. Programs like Erasmus or global online learning initiatives build intercultural competence by promoting cross-cultural collaboration and awareness (Chan et al., 2021; Niitsu et al., 2022). In tourism, this translates into inclusive, respectful behavior and a stronger emotional connection to local culture (Magsanay et al., 2024). Promoting intercultural sensitivity also helps reduce ethnocentrism, foster peacebuilding through exchange, and shape the destination's image as open and welcoming (Charoensilp, 2024; Oyenuga & Akwen, 2025).

*H6: Intercultural Sensitivity positively influences Destination Image.*

***Destination image***

Destination image refers to the mental representation tourists form of a place, shaped by both cognitive aspects (e.g., infrastructure, hospitality) and affective responses (e.g., cultural richness, emotional appeal) (Swati, 2020). A favorable image emerges through authentic cultural representation, strong branding, and emotionally engaging experiences (Li & Adnan, 2023; Sanggramasari et al., 2023; Susanto et al., 2022, 2024). In the context of cultural diplomacy, destination image acts as a mediator, linking tourists' on-site experiences to broader perceptions of national identity and soft power. A strong image evokes admiration and curiosity, deepening cultural engagement (Gürsoy et al., 2022). Emotional and cognitive components of destination image shape behavioral responses—positive emotional connections, in particular, encourage revisits, advocacy, and deeper cultural appreciation (He et al., 2022). User-generated content (UGC) plays a pivotal role, as emotionally resonant travel stories often influence others more than factual information (Hagger et al., 2022; Septianto et al., 2020). Strategic cultural storytelling and authentic communication enhance the appeal of the destination and amplify its soft diplomacy impact (Brogni et al., 2023; Seyfi et al., 2021).

*H7: Destination Image has a positive and significant effect on Soft Diplomacy Effect.*

### *Soft diplomacy effect*

The soft diplomacy effect refers to the enhancement of a nation's international image and goodwill through non-coercive, culturally immersive experiences, particularly within tourism (Khairunnisa, 2024; Zhu et al., 2021). Cultural festivals act as strategic platforms for showcasing heritage and shared values, allowing visitors to emotionally connect with the host country and appreciate its political and cultural identity (Kunkunrat, 2024). By engaging with authentic performances and symbolic narratives, tourists become informal ambassadors who carry positive impressions abroad. These interactions foster empathy, mutual understanding, and relational goodwill—key goals of cultural diplomacy (Reyaz & Khan, 2023; Widiyanto & Atiqah, 2023). Research further shows that culturally engaging and emotionally resonant experiences enhance a country's soft power, encouraging revisits, advocacy, and deeper cultural connections (Widiyanto & Atiqah, 2023; Xia, 2024). Soft diplomacy also helps dispel stereotypes and promotes international cooperation, especially when diverse cultural forms (e.g., cuisine, arts, film) are strategically integrated (Kunkunrat, 2024). Thus, cultural tourism not only strengthens national image but also influences future behavior, confirming the hypothesis:

*H8: Soft Diplomacy Effect positively influences Behavioral Intention.*

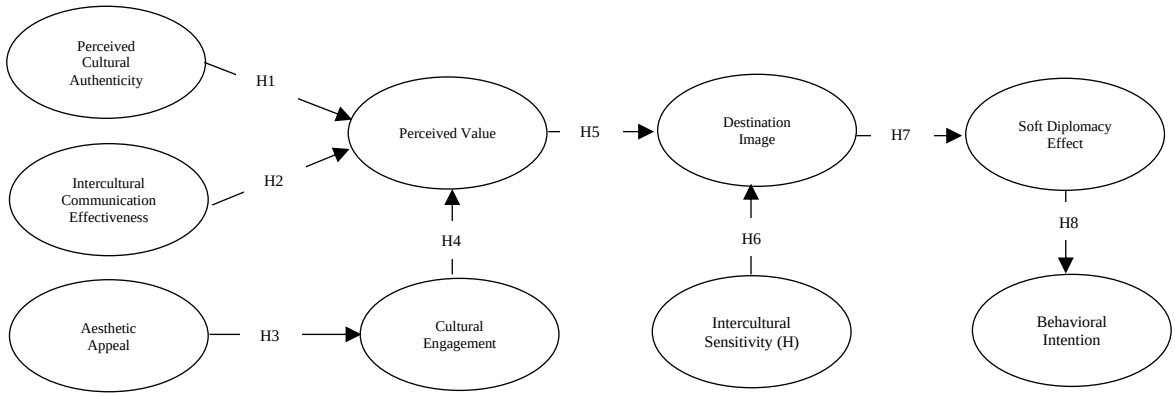


**Figure 1. Proposed models**

## Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative design to examine structural relationships among key constructs in cultural tourism—specifically, the effects of perceived authenticity, aesthetic appeal, intercultural communication effectiveness, intercultural sensitivity, and cultural engagement on perceived value, destination image, and behavioral intention, with soft diplomacy as a mediating variable. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used, suitable for theory-building research involving multiple latent variables and complex paths (Henseler et al., 2009; Sarstedt et al., 2021). Data were gathered using a structured survey distributed both online and offline to international tourists who had direct exposure to Indonesian cultural tourism festivals. Offline surveys were conducted at events such as the Yogyakarta Art Festival, Bali Arts Festival, and cultural heritage sites in Bandung and Ubud. The online version was shared through international travel forums, social media, and email lists targeting those who visited Indonesia within the past year. This hybrid approach aimed to ensure a representative and engaged sample. A total of 401 valid responses were collected, exceeding the sample size requirement for PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2019; Wagner & Grimm, 2023). Participants were screened to confirm attendance at least one cultural festival. The instrument used multi-item reflective scales adapted from prior validated studies, with items rated on a five-point Likert scale. A pre-test with 30 international tourists ensured clarity and cultural relevance. Data analysis followed a two-step procedure: first, assessing the measurement model for reliability, convergent validity (AVE > 0.50), and discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT) (Henseler et al., 2015); and second, evaluating the structural model using SmartPLS 4.0. This included analysis of path coefficients, $R^2$, effect sizes ($f^2$), and predictive relevance ($Q^2$), with significance assessed via bootstrapping (5,000 subsamples).

## Results and discussion

### *Respondent profile*

The study collected 401 valid responses from international tourists who attended cultural tourism festivals in Indonesia within the past year. These included traditional dance events, heritage exhibitions, and ritual ceremonies in Yogyakarta, Bali, and Bandung. The sample reflected a diverse demographic, with 55.1% female, 43.4% male, and 1.5% undisclosed. Most respondents were aged 25–44 (58.4%), followed by 18–24 (21.7%), 45–54 (13.2%), and 55+ (6.7%). Regionally, tourists came primarily from Western Europe (36.9%), North America (21.4%), East and Southeast Asia (18.7%), Oceania (10.2%), and other regions (12.8%). A large majority held at least a bachelor's degree (72.1%), with 24.4% having postgraduate qualifications. Occupationally, 33.9% were professionals, 20.7% students, 17.2% entrepreneurs/creatives, and 12.5% retirees. Cultural tourism was the primary motive for 62.6% of respondents, while 37.4% cited it as a secondary interest. Most (59.1%) attended more than one festival. In terms of stay duration, 42.4% stayed 7–14 days, 30.9% over 15 days, and 26.7% less than

a week. Repeat visitation was high, with 68.3% having visited Indonesia before. Notably, 77.8% would recommend Indonesian cultural festivals, and 70.6% intended to return for future cultural experiences, underscoring the role of cultural tourism in promoting soft diplomacy and national image.

### *Measurement model*

The assessment of the measurement model is a critical step in ensuring that the constructs used in this study are measured with sufficient reliability and validity. This study employs a reflective measurement model, in which indicators are assumed to reflect the latent constructs. In line with recommendations from (Sarstedt et al., 2021), the model evaluation includes the following: 1) indicator reliability via outer loadings, 2) internal consistency reliability via Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR), 3) convergent validity via average variance extracted (AVE), and 4) discriminant validity using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). Each construct in the model was measured using three reflective indicators adapted from prior validated instruments in tourism, cultural diplomacy, and cross-cultural communication research. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The results for indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, CR, and AVE are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Reflective indicators, loadings, reliability, and convergent validity**

| Code | Instrument | Loading |
|---|---|---|
| **AE** | **Aesthetic Appeal (Cronbach α=0.835; CR=0.900; AVE=0.751)** | |
| AE1 | The costumes and stage design of the festivals were visually impressive. | 0.831 |
| AE2 | The music, dance, and performance elements were aesthetically captivating. | 0.902 |
| AE3 | The festivals presented a harmonious and culturally rich artistic expression. | 0.865 |
| **BI** | **Behavioral Intention (Cronbach α=0.889; CR=0.931; AVE=0.818)** | |
| BI1 | I intend to revisit Indonesia to attend similar cultural festivals in the future. | 0.909 |
| BI2 | I would recommend this cultural experience to others. | 0.890 |
| BI3 | I am interested in learning more about Indonesian culture after this experience. | 0.914 |
| **CE** | **Cultural Engagement (Cronbach α=0.900; CR=0.938; AVE=0.834)** | |
| CE1 | I felt emotionally connected during the cultural performance. | 0.888 |
| CE2 | I reflected deeply on the cultural meanings during the festivals. | 0.933 |
| CE3 | I was fully immersed in the cultural atmosphere throughout the festivals. | 0.918 |
| **DI** | **Destination Image (Cronbach α=0.886; CR=0.929; AVE=0.814)** | |
| DI1 | The festivals enhanced my perception of Indonesia as a culturally rich country. | 0.879 |
| DI2 | I now view Indonesia more positively after attending the festivals. | 0.920 |
| DI3 | Indonesia appears more attractive as a travel destination due to its rich cultural heritage. | 0.907 |
| **ICE** | **Intercultural Communication Effectiveness (Cronbach α=0.839; CR=0.903; AVE=0.756)** | |
| ICE1 | The festivals effectively conveyed their cultural meaning, even across language barriers. | 0.862 |
| ICE2 | I understood the intended message or story of the performance. | 0.894 |
| ICE3 | Cultural expressions were conveyed in a way that felt accessible to me as a foreign visitor. | 0.852 |
| **IS** | **Intercultural Sensitivity (Cronbach α=0.817; CR=0.892; AVE=0.734)** | |
| IS1 | I enjoyed interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds during the festivals. | 0.845 |
| IS2 | I attempted to comprehend the perspectives and values inherent in the performance. | 0.913 |
| IS3 | I appreciated cultural differences during this tourism experience. | 0.808 |
| **PCA** | **Perceived Cultural Authenticity (Cronbach α=0.814; CR=0.890; AVE=0.729)** | |
| PCA1 | The cultural festivals felt authentic to their roots. | 0.826 |
| PCA2 | The performance reflected genuine aspects of local tradition. | 0.872 |
| PCA3 | The experience felt culturally meaningful and credible. | 0.863 |
| **PV** | **Perceived Value (Cronbach α=0.781; CR=0.871; AVE=0.693)** | |
| PV1 | I received valuable cultural insight through these festivals. | 0.866 |
| PV2 | The experience was worth the time and money I spent. | 0.819 |
| PV3 | Overall, I consider this cultural festival a rewarding experience. | 0.811 |
| **SDE** | **Soft Diplomacy Effect (Cronbach α=0.868; CR=0.919; AVE=0.790)** | |
| SDE1 | This cultural festival helped improve my perception of Indonesia on a global level. | 0.890 |
| SDE2 | I now feel more connected to Indonesia as a country after this experience. | 0.879 |
| SDE3 | Festivals like this foster goodwill and mutual understanding between countries. | 0.898 |

All items demonstrated satisfactory factor loadings (≥ 0.80), and internal consistency reliability was confirmed for each construct with Cronbach's Alpha values above 0.78 and CR values above 0.87. Furthermore, the AVE values for all constructs exceeded the 0.50 threshold, confirming that each construct explains more than 50% of the variance in its indicators, thereby meeting the criterion for convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). To assess discriminant validity, the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) was calculated. HTMT values below 0.85 indicate strong discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015). Table 2 presents the HTMT results for all construct pairs.

**Table 2. Discriminant validity – Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT)**

| Constructs | BI | CE | DI | ICE | IS | PCA | PV | SDE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Aesthetic Appeal | 0.779 | 0.577 | 0.444 | 0.651 | 0.489 | 0.653 | 0.889 | 0.665 |
| Behavioral Intention | — | 0.520 | 0.514 | 0.533 | 0.488 | 0.521 | 0.775 | 0.825 |
| Cultural Engagement | | — | 0.468 | 0.426 | 0.765 | 0.372 | 0.618 | 0.549 |
| Destination Image | | | — | 0.448 | 0.595 | 0.295 | 0.406 | 0.623 |
| Intercultural Communication Effectiveness | | | | — | 0.368 | 0.800 | 0.658 | 0.547 |
| Intercultural Sensitivity | | | | | — | 0.336 | 0.530 | 0.623 |
| Perceived Cultural Authenticity | | | | | | — | 0.703 | 0.461 |
| Perceived Value | | | | | | | — | 0.627 |

All HTMT values fall below the conservative threshold of 0.85, providing strong evidence of discriminant validity among constructs. The highest inter-construct correlation (HTMT = 0.889) was observed between Aesthetic Appeal and Perceived Value, which is theoretically justified given that emotionally compelling and artistically rich performances enhance the perceived benefit of cultural experiences. The measurement model demonstrates strong psychometric properties, confirming that the structural model's constructs are reliable and valid, thus allowing for a confident interpretation of subsequent structural relationships.

### *Structural model*

After validating the measurement model, the next step involved assessing the structural model to evaluate the predictive relationships among the latent constructs. This assessment included evaluating the coefficient of determination ($R^2$), predictive relevance ($Q^2$), and path coefficients for hypothesis testing. The $R^2$ values indicate the proportion of variance in the endogenous variables explained by the exogenous variables in the model. According to (Chin & Newsted, 1998), $R^2$ values of 0.67, 0.33, and 0.19 are considered substantial, moderate, and weak, respectively. As shown in Table 3, the model explains 52.8% of the variance in Behavioral Intention, 47.5% in Perceived Value, 30.0% in Soft Diplomacy Effect, 28.0% in Destination Image, and 25.5% in Cultural Engagement, suggesting moderate to substantial explanatory power across most constructs. The Stone-Geisser $Q^2$ values were calculated using the blindfolding procedure to evaluate predictive relevance. All $Q^2$ values for the endogenous constructs were above zero, indicating that the model has satisfactory predictive relevance (Sarstedt et al., 2021).

**Table 3. $R^2$ and $Q^2$**

| Construct | $R^2$ | $Q^2$ |
|---|---|---|
| Behavioral Intention | 0.527 | 0.426 |
| Cultural Engagement | 0.253 | 0.210 |
| Destination Image | 0.276 | 0.222 |
| Perceived Value | 0.471 | 0.316 |
| Soft Diplomacy Effect | 0.298 | 0.234 |

Based on bootstrapping (5,000 samples), Table 4 and Figure 1 present the results of hypothesis testing. All path coefficients are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), with t-values far exceeding the minimum threshold of 1.96 (for a 95% confidence level), providing support for all proposed hypotheses.

**Table 4. Hypothesis testing results**

| Path | β | t-value | p-value | Supported |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| H1: Perceived Cultural Authenticity → Perceived Value | 0.324 | 5.138 | <0.001 | Yes |
| H2: Intercultural Communication Eff. → Perceived Value | 0.206 | 3.199 | 0.001 | Yes |
| H3: Aesthetic Appeal → Cultural Engagement | 0.505 | 10.615 | <0.001 | Yes |
| H4: Cultural Engagement → Perceived Value | 0.342 | 5.501 | <0.001 | Yes |
| H5: Perceived Value → Destination Image | 0.165 | 3.279 | 0.001 | Yes |
| H6: Intercultural Sensitivity → Destination Image | 0.437 | 8.216 | <0.001 | Yes |
| H7: Destination Image → Soft Diplomacy Effect | 0.547 | 13.476 | <0.001 | Yes |
| H8: Soft Diplomacy Effect → Behavioral Intention | 0.727 | 18.888 | <0.001 | Yes |

All eight hypothesized paths are statistically significant and demonstrate meaningful effect sizes. Notably, the strongest path is observed from the Soft Diplomacy Effect → Behavioral Intention (β = 0.727, t = 18.888), emphasizing the substantial role of soft diplomacy outcomes in shaping international tourists' future behaviors. Similarly, the influence of Destination Image on the Soft Diplomacy Effect (β = 0.547) and Aesthetic Appeal on Cultural Engagement (β = 0.505) underscores the importance of visual-cultural experiences in building long-term affinity and trust toward the host country.

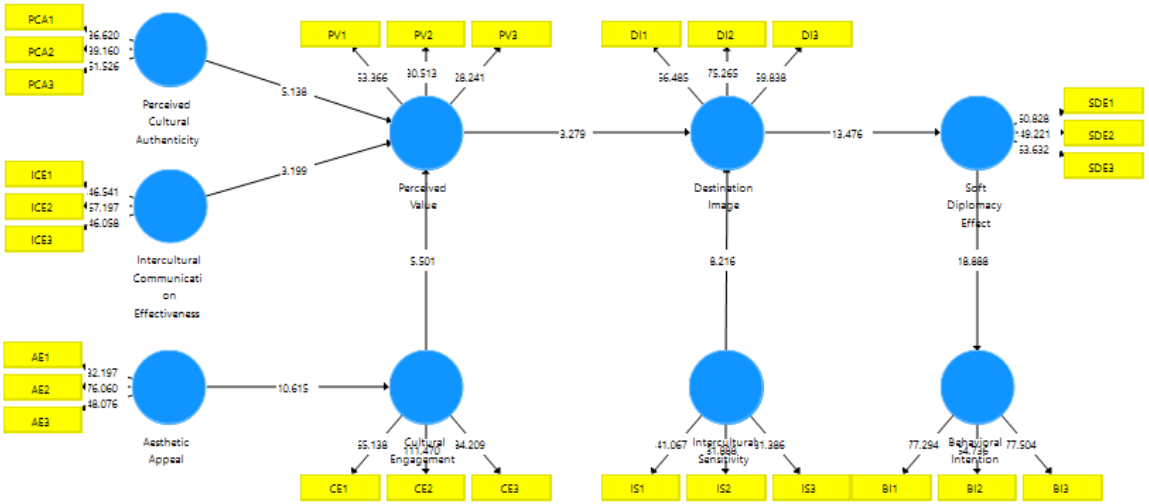


**Figure 2. Final structural model**

### Discussion

The findings confirm that cultural tourism festivals significantly shape international visitors' perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions through pathways involving cultural engagement, perceived value, and destination image. Aesthetic appeal showed a strong influence on cultural engagement (β = 0.505, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the emotional and sensory dimensions of cultural experiences (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2021; Yen, 2022). Cultural engagement also predicted perceived value (β = 0.342), while intercultural communication effectiveness (β = 0.206) and cultural authenticity (β = 0.324) emerged as key antecedents, supporting prior findings on festivals as spaces for value co-creation and informal diplomacy (Kovačić et al., 2023; Morozova, 2023). The model confirmed the mediating role of destination image in soft diplomacy. Both perceived

value (β = 0.165) and intercultural sensitivity (β = 0.437) shaped destination image, which strongly predicted soft diplomacy outcomes (β = 0.547). In turn, soft diplomacy was the most potent predictor of behavioral intention (β = 0.727, p < 0.001), aligning with Nye's soft power theory (2008) and emphasizing tourism's potential as a diplomatic tool. The study contributes by integrating theories of destination branding, soft power, and intercultural communication within a unified empirical framework via PLS-SEM. Unlike previous fragmented studies, it reveals how authenticity, communication, and engagement interact to shape long-term visitor behavior and perceptions of national identity (Braslauskas, 2023; Komorowski et al., 2023). Positioning soft diplomacy as a mediator is a key theoretical advancement for tourism diplomacy research. Practically, the findings urge tourism stakeholders to focus on curating culturally authentic and aesthetically rich experiences, enhancing communication (e.g., multilingual storytelling), and promoting intercultural sensitivity. As soft diplomacy strongly predicts future engagement, cultural tourism offers a strategic, non-coercive avenue for nation branding, especially relevant for emerging or postcolonial nations seeking global visibility through culture.

## Conclusions

This study examined how cultural tourism festivals contribute to soft diplomacy by integrating aesthetic appeal, intercultural sensitivity, communication, authenticity, and destination image into a unified model. Drawing on survey data from 401 international visitors to Indonesian festivals, the model confirmed that perceived value and destination image mediate the influence of cultural engagement on behavioral intention. Notably, soft diplomacy emerged as the strongest predictor of future tourist behavior, validating the role of cultural festivals as practical tools for informal diplomacy and cultural branding. The findings offer empirical support for combining destination branding, intercultural communication, and soft power theories to explain cultural tourism's strategic role in shaping national image. The study's generalizability is limited by its focus on Indonesia; future research should adopt cross-national comparisons to explore soft power dynamics across regions. The cross-sectional design also limits insights into long-term effects—longitudinal or experimental approaches are recommended to track evolving perceptions. While the model captured mediating effects using reflective constructs, future studies could include moderating variables (e.g., nationality, prior exposure) or employ multi-group analysis (MGA) to explore subgroup differences. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias; behavioral data (e.g., return visits, online engagement) could strengthen future models. Finally, refining the soft diplomacy construct with multi-dimensional and institutional metrics may improve its robustness and policy relevance.

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