


# The Role of State Government Policies and Infrastructure Development in Promoting Sustainable Religious Tourism: A Moderated Analysis of Cultural Diversity

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*Abstract: This study examines the role of state government policies and infrastructure development on the promotion of sustainable religious tourism. This study employed an inferential research design to assess the general and moderating effects of the latent variables of the study. Quantitative methods were used for robust analysis, and 404 participants, including both domestic and international tourists and visitors with diverse religious beliefs, were selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected using a survey questionnaire. The study reveals that state government policy positively impacts promotion of sustainable religious tourism, whereas infrastructure development does not have any significant effect. Furthermore, there is a notable positive relationship between cultural diversity and promotion of sustainable religious tourism. In addition, cultural diversity moderates the relationship between state government policies and sustainable religious tourism. However, no such moderating effect is found in the relationship between infrastructure development and sustainable religious tourism. However, this paper has not incorporated other factors which have significance influence on the promotion of sustainable religious tourism; policymaker can implement the findings of this paper to formulate the policy related to the promotion of sustainable religious tourism.*

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**Keywords:** State government policies, infrastructure development, religious tourism, cultural diversity

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism sector is influenced by so many factors such as government policy, infrastructure, culture, climate and technology etc. Among these factors government policy and infrastructure development plays vital role for promotion of tourism. Likewise, tourism industry contributes significantly in the economy of any country. In Nepalese context also this sector contributes significantly in the economy by offering employment opportunities and generating revenue (Shrestha & Shrestha, 2020; Bhandari, 2019). Nepal can leverage its natural beauty and cultural richness to attract tourists, leading to benefits like foreign exchange earnings, employment, infrastructure development, and improved living standards (Subedi, 2015). To maximize these advantages, Nepal should focus on infrastructure, sustainable practices, conservation, equitable benefit distribution, and community involvement (Khatiwada et al., 2018). Furthermore, religious tourism can diversify Nepalese economy and enhance cultural preservation due to its spiritual and cultural appeal (Pandey & Shrestha, 2017). By emphasizing unique spiritual experiences and international collaboration, Nepal can become an attractive religious tourism destination through effective government policies, social-cultural linkage, and infrastructure development (Gaitanos, 2023; Khanal, 2016).

Research on Nepal's tourism sector faces gaps in understanding the interplay of government policies, infrastructure development, and cultural preservation, hindering effective strategies. Policy implementation challenges and the adoption of sustainable practices remain underexplored. Moreover, the impact of tourism on cultural heritage and the potential of religious tourism are overlooked. Addressing these gaps is crucial for informing policies and investments to promote sustainable tourism and maximize socio-economic benefits in Nepal. Therefore, the factors affecting this sector should be identified for formulation of sound policy for promotion of sustainable tourism. Thus, this paper aims to identify the role of state government policies and infrastructure development in promoting sustainable religious tourism. This paper also aims to analyze the moderating effect of cultural diversity for promoting sustainable religious tourism. For this purpose, this paper employs surveys of both domestic and foreign visitors, conducting a comparative analysis.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Religious tourism involves visiting places of religious significance for spiritual and recreational purposes (Shinde, 2022). It follows a structure of motivation, journey, and destinations similar to pilgrimage (Turner & Turner, 2011). This specialized tourism segment holds cultural, social, and economic importance, providing opportunities for intercultural understanding and personal growth (Kim et al., 2020). Visitors engage with places of worship, temples, shrines, churches, cathedrals, rituals, festivals, and events for physical and metaphysical experiences (Shackley, 2006). Religious pluralism signifies the coexistence of diverse beliefs and practices, each equally important to its followers (Shinde & Pinkney, 2013). In pilgrimage travel, the destination represents an external space where the immanent and transcendent combine to create a complex spiritual

journey (Singh, 2011). It's the moment when pilgrims achieve the objective of "seeing and being seen by God" through rituals and ceremonies (Shinde, 2012). This fundamental structure, consisting of motivation, journey, and destination, is widely employed in understanding contemporary pilgrimage travel (Gaitanos, 2023).

Religious tourism in Nepal encompasses a wide range of experiences, including visits to historical landmarks, participation in religious ceremonies, and pilgrimages (Acharya, 2021). Nepal's rich religious diversity reflects its multicultural society, where Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and other faiths coexist harmoniously (Rai & Gurung, 2020). This sector presents various challenges and opportunities, with a particular emphasis on pilgrimage sites, cultural heritage, spirituality, ecotourism, and adventure (Thapa & Sharma, 2019). Key considerations include infrastructure development, accessibility, conservation efforts, cultural sensitivity, safety and security measures, and effective marketing strategies (Maharjan & Gurung, 2018). The growth of religious tourism has the potential to significantly contribute to Nepal's economy, promote cultural preservation, and foster sustainable development (Pandey & Shrestha, 2017). Therefore, religious sites and destinations stand as evidence of the multifaceted nature of human spirituality, serving as sanctuaries for worship, contemplation, and cross-cultural interaction. These places carry profound historical, artistic, and cultural significance, extending an open invitation to individuals from diverse backgrounds to embark on a journey of exploration, appreciation, and respect for the intricate mosaic of religious beliefs and traditions that shape our world (Khanal & Timilsina, 2018). There are lots of theoretical and empirical studies have been found in the context of religious tourism worldwide and least of them were analyzed the moderating impact of cultural diversity between state government policies and infrastructure on promotion of sustainable religious tourism.

#### *State Government Policies (SGP) and Sustainable Religious Tourism (SRT)*

State government policies play a crucial role in shaping and promoting sustainable religious tourism within their jurisdictions (Smith & Johnson, 2022). Religious tourism, which involves travel to sacred or significant religious sites and events, constitutes a significant aspect of global tourism and can have profound cultural, economic, and environmental impacts. State governments can actively promote religious tourism through marketing campaigns, festivals, and events (Jones et al., 2023). Additionally, state governments may encourage the development of community-based tourism initiatives and programs that provide job opportunities for residents (Anderson & Brown, 2021; Li & Wang, 2013). To ensure its sustainability, state governments must enact thoughtful policies that balance the preservation of religious cultures, religious heritage, the economic benefits of tourism, and the protection of the natural environment (Lee et al., 2023). As per the results of previous studies, state government policies significantly influence the promotion of sustainable religious tourism. Thus, to examine the impact of SGP on SRT, this paper has developed the hypothesis as follows:

H<sub>1</sub>: SGP have a significant positive impact on the promotion of SRT.

*Infrastructure Development (IFD) and Promotion of Sustainable Religious Tourism (SRT)*

Infrastructure development plays a crucial role in shaping the landscape of religious tourism and ensuring its long-term sustainability (Garcia & Perez, 2022). Religious tourism is a complex industry, encompassing the exploration of sacred sites, pilgrimage destinations, and participation in religious festivals (Johnson et al., 2023). These activities carry substantial cultural, economic, and environmental consequences for both the destination and the host community. Achieving sustainable religious tourism necessitates meticulous planning and substantial investment in infrastructure to harmonize the requirements of tourists, the conservation of sacred spaces, and the welfare of local communities (Bieger & Wittmer, 2006). Infrastructure development and sustainable religious tourism are intertwined (Dwyer & Kim, 2003). The impact of infrastructure development on sustainable religious tourism depends on careful planning, adherence to sustainability principles, and active involvement of local communities and religious authorities (Chen & Wang, 2021; Song & Witt, 2000). Thus, to examine the impact of IFD on SRT, this study has developed the hypothesis as follows:

H<sub>2</sub>: IFD has a significant positive impact on the promotion of SRT.

*Cultural Diversity (CD) and Promotion of Sustainable Religious Tourism (SRT)*

Cultural diversity and sustainable religious tourism are closely linked, promoting global understanding, economic growth, and heritage preservation (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). Religious tourism, rooted in history, attracts visitors to sacred sites for spiritual enrichment and cultural exploration (Girard & Luzon, 2018). Cultural diversity enriches this tourism by enhancing experiences, fostering dialogue, preserving heritage, driving economic growth, and encouraging cultural exchange. Responsibly harnessed, it can drive positive change, benefiting tourists, host communities, and our diverse world cultures (Zaheer, Mubariz & Alvi, 2020). Cultural diversity enhances the tourism experience by offering a plethora of perspectives, traditions, practices, cultural identities, coexistence opportunities, cultural exchange programs, cultural sensitivity, awareness, and facilitating intercultural communication (Fernandez & Villarino, 2012). Despite the fact that, in this study, the researcher formulated alternative hypotheses to assess the influence of infrastructure development on sustainable religious tourism, including:

H<sub>3</sub>: CD has a significant positive impact on the promotion of SRT.

*Cultural Diversity (CD) as a Moderator*

Cultural diversity stands as a cornerstone of human society, interweaving customs, beliefs, and rituals across generations (Zhang, 2021). Beyond enriching our collective experience, it plays a pivotal role in shaping governmental strategies, especially in nurturing sustainable religious tourism (Song et al., 2017). Governments worldwide recognize the importance of cultural diversity in shaping sustainable religious tourism policies and infrastructure (Chen & Wu, 2019). It balances economic growth with heritage preservation, promoting inclusivity and cross-cultural understanding (Shmushko, 2023; Shinde, 2015). Moreover, cultural diversity is pivotal in shaping infrastructure

development for sustainable religious tourism and it guides the creation of tourism-friendly infrastructure while preserving cultural identity (Rodriguez & Kim, 2020; Liu & Li, 2018). Besides that, cultural diversity profoundly influences both infrastructure and sustainable religious tourism (Anderson & Brown, 2021). This study explores its effects on both state government policies and infrastructure development within sustainable religious tourism. Thus, alternative hypotheses were formulated to investigate how cultural diversity interplays across multiple dimensions. These are:

H<sub>4</sub>: CD moderates the relationship between SGP and the promotion of SRT.

H<sub>5</sub>: CD moderates the relationship between IFD and the promotion of SRT.

### *Conceptual Framework*

Numerous theoretical and empirical studies have been conducted in the field of religious tourism on a global scale. However, only a limited number of these studies have examined the moderating effect of cultural diversity on the promotion of sustainable religious tourism in relation to policies and infrastructure. The latent variables of the study were identified and modified with reference to previous studies conducted by Devkota et al. (2023), Kim et al. (2020), Thapa & Sharma (2019), Maharjan & Gurung (2018), Li & Wang (2013) and Shinde (2012). The conceptual framework of the study is expressed as:

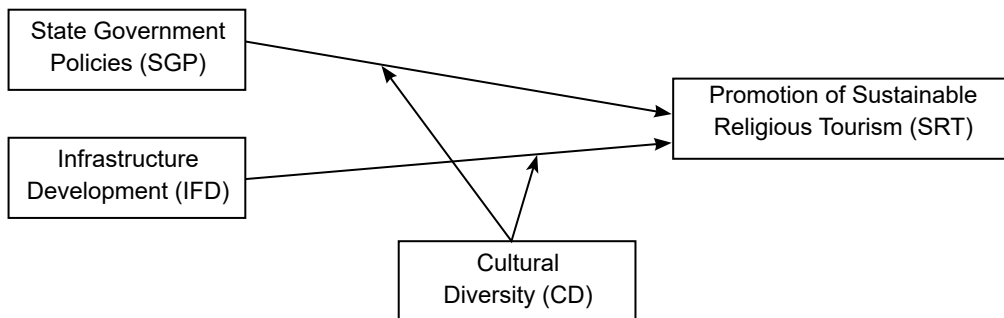


Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework of the Study*

The above figure presents the conceptual framework of the study. This framework outlines the key components, relationships, and variables that are being examined in the research. It serves as a visual representation of the theoretical underpinnings and guiding principles of the study, providing a structured overview of how different factors like state government, infrastructure development and cultural diversity influences to the promotion of sustainable religious tourism in the context of Karnali Province of Nepal.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

This section explains the research methodology used in this paper. It covers the description of the study area, research design and methods, sampling technique and sample size, validity and reliability of data and methods of data presentation and analysis.

### *Description of the Study Area*

Karnali Province is one of Nepal's seven federal provinces, established by the new constitution adopted on September 20, 2015. In this Province, religious sites offer a harmonious blend of spiritual tranquility, cultural heritage, and architectural magnificence. They create opportunities for individuals to deepen their faith, forge connections with divine forces, and engage in the rich religious and cultural heritage of the region.

### *Research Design*

The basic purpose of this paper is to assess the influence of state government policies and infrastructure development on promoting sustainable religious tourism, considering the moderating impact of cultural diversity. Thus, this study has followed an inferential research design. Consequently, quantitative research methods were employed to enhance the study's methodological rigor. This research primarily relied on primary data as its principal source of information, collected through the use of a survey questionnaire.

### *Sampling Techniques and Sample Size*

To achieve the objectives of the study, the researcher employed convenience sampling to determine the sample size from various stakeholders within the religious tourism sector in Karnali Province. Sample size calculation for an unknown population was carried out using the formula method:  $n = z^2 \cdot [p \cdot q] / d^2$ , as prescribed by Cochran (1977), where  $n$  represents sample size,  $z$  is the critical value from the standard normal distribution (which is approximately 1.96 at 95 percent confidence level),  $p$  signifies the estimated proportion of the population with the characteristic under study (0.35),  $q$  is the complementary probability ( $1 - 0.35 = 0.65$ ), and  $d$  represents the desired margin of error which is estimated 0.05. Hence, the minimum required sample size was determined to be 349 as per the formula method. However, the study comprised of 404 samples to gather relevant data and address the research gap and providing justification for the research hypotheses.

### *Validity and Reliability of Data*

To achieve the predefined objectives of this study, the researcher designed a questionnaire divided into two parts to collect authentic information from both the target population and the sample. The first part gathered demographic responses, while the second part contained questions related to the study variables. In the second part, a set of five-point Likert questions was developed for four variables, each consisting of 4 items or statements and total 16 items. These questions assessed the level of agreement or disagreement, using a 5-point rating scale, with options as follows: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; and 5 = Strongly Agree. Cronbach's Alpha, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test, Bartlett's test of sphericity (Chi-Square), and associated p-values are used to ensure the validity, reliability, and sample adequacy of the collected data in this study. The study revealed satisfactory levels of Cronbach's Alpha (0.899), KMO (0.879) and Bartlett's test of sphericity Chi-Square (4487.12), and a highly significant p-value (0.000).

### *Methods of Data Presentation and Analysis*

The collected data from the survey questionnaire, which was subsequently coded, entered, processed, and analyzed. The data analysis encompassed both descriptive and inferential statistics, including percentages, frequencies, mean/standard deviation and structural equation modeling (SEM). In this study distinct statistical software were used to analyze the data collected from the structure survey questionnaires.

## **IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the result of data analysis which includes the descriptive statistics, structural equation modeling and hypothesis testing. The results of these analyses are presented and scrutinized with the aid of the tables and figures provided below:

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics of the Latent Variables

Items	Min	Max	Mean	Std.	Skewness	Kurtosis		
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
CD1	1	5	3.62	.879	-.622	.121	.193	.242
CD2	1	5	3.72	.682	-.338	.121	.711	.242
CD3	1	5	3.69	.716	-.364	.121	.288	.242
CD4	1	5	3.69	.747	-.716	.121	1.287	.242
SGP1	2	5	4.04	.573	-.553	.121	2.157	.242
SGP2	1	5	4.02	.637	-.945	.121	2.913	.242
SGP3	2	5	4.01	.610	-.601	.121	1.729	.242
SGP4	1	5	4.00	.655	-.902	.121	2.444	.242
SRT1	1	5	4.18	.687	-.715	.121	1.234	.242
SRT2	1	5	4.04	.707	-.911	.121	1.894	.242
SRT3	1	5	4.01	.548	-.905	.121	4.432	.242
SRT4	1	5	4.01	.708	-.738	.121	1.593	.242
IFD1	1	5	4.05	.529	-.648	.121	4.319	.242
IFD2	1	5	4.03	.613	-.989	.121	3.916	.242
IFD3	1	5	3.99	.572	-.801	.121	3.378	.242
IFD4	1	5	3.99	.568	-.819	.121	3.554	.242

Note: Valid N (List wise) = 404; CD = Cultural Diversity; SGP = State Government Policies; SRT = Promotion of Sustainable Religious Tourism; IFD = Infrastructure Development

### *Descriptive Statistics of Latent Variables*

In this section, researcher conducted a descriptive analysis of the study's variables, assessing their impact on latent variables. The study featured two independent variables: state government policies and infrastructure development, a moderating variable (cultural

diversity), and a dependent variable (sustainable religious tourism). The study also computed the overall mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis for each study variable with multiple items to assess normality. Table 1 shows the result of descriptive statistics. The result shows the mean value of minimum 3.62 to maximum 4.18 with standard deviation less than 1, which indicates the agreement on all the items included in the study with lower variability. Similarly the result shows the value of Skewness less than 2 and value of Kurtosis less than 7, which indicates that the data are normal (Hair et al., 2010 & Bryne, 2013).

### *Exploratory Factor Analysis*

To adhere to the fundamental assumptions and guidelines of structural equation modeling, the researcher conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA). As stated by O'Brien (2007), EFA is instrumental in reducing the number of questionnaire items that do not meet the analysis's requirements. Additionally, EFA aids in grouping items related to cohesive concepts and revealing complex relationships among them. By identifying several essential dimensions, EFA facilitated the examination of the correlation structure among multiple variables (Ghauri et al., 2010). In this study, EFA was employed to pinpoint the key variables required for structural modeling.

Table 2  
Factors Loading, KMO and Cronbatch Alpha

Latent Variables	Items	Factor Loading	KMO	Cronbatch Alpha
State Government Policies (SGP)	SGP3: Regulation of tourism-related activities	.891	.827	.936
	SGP2: Preservation of cultural heritages	.861		
	SGP4: Community involvement and benefits	.858		
	SGP1: Tourist safety and security	.855		
	IFD1: Sanitation and waste management	.863		
Infrastructure Development (IFD)	IFD4: Visitor centers and root map	.827	.829	.887
	IFD3: Convenience of modern amenities	.821		
	IFD2: Transportation accessibility	.703		
	CD2: Cultural identity and coexistence	.894		
Cultural Diversity (CD)	CD3: Cultural exchange programs	.865	.787	.830
	CD4: Cultural sensitivity and awareness	.818		
	CD1: Intercultural communication	.610		
Promotion of Sustainable Religious Tourism (SRT)	SRT2: Superior policies and infrastructure	.876	.748	.807
	SRT1: Tourist education and satisfaction	.855		
	SRT3: Stakeholder collaboration	.654		
	SRT4: Visitor numbers and density	.592		

Note: Total items associated to latent variables = 16



Table 2 presents the result of factor loading, KMO and Cronbach's Alpha. The result shows that the factor loading of all items are more than 0.5, which indicates that all the selected items are suitable for generating the factors. Similarly, the value of KMO is found to be more than 0.6. These values of KMO imply that the sampling is adequate. Finally, the table shows the value of Cronbach's Alpha more than 0.6, which indicates that there is no issue of reliability in the items included in the study. All these values indicate that the data are appropriate for further analysis using SEM.

### *Confirmatory Factor Analysis*

In this study, CFA was used to explore the influence of exogenous variables on endogenous variables, with statistically significant path coefficients indicating convergent validity. CFA evaluated the reliability and validity of latent constructs, such as state government policies, infrastructure development, cultural diversity, and sustainable religious tourism.

Table 3  
Estimated Model Fit Indices of CFA

Indices	P-value	CMIN/DF	RMR	GFI	TLI	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Expected Values	≤ 0.05	2-5	≤ 0.05	>.90	>.90	>.90	<.08	<.08
Obtained Values	.000	2.95	.019	.928	.952	.961	.049	.070

*Note: P-value = Likelihood Ratio, CMIN/DF = Relative X<sup>2</sup>, RMR = Root Mean Squared Residual, GFI = Goodness of Fit Index, TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index, CFI = Comparative Fit Index, SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual, RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation.*

The result of CFA is presented in Table 3. The result depicted in Table 3 shows that the model fit measures, including P-value, CMIN/DF, RMR, GFI, CFI, TLI, SRMR, and RMSEA, all fell within accepted levels. This suggests that the independent and moderating factor model demonstrated a good fit for further investigation in this study. Furthermore, Hu and Bentler's (1998) cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis were employed to confirm model fit indices in this study.

### *Measurement Model*

In this study, the researcher assessed the convergent and discriminant validity to establish the reliability and validity of the latent variables or constructs. Convergent and discriminant validity were evaluated within the diagonal matrix. The criteria used for testing convergent and discriminant validity were AVE > 0.5 and CR > 0.7, with a priority on meeting convergent validity over determining discriminant validity, following established guidelines (Hair et al., 2010).

The results of validity and reliability assessments are presented in Table 4. The results indicate that value of AVE is more than 0.5 and value of CR is more than 0.7, which assure the discriminant validity of the model.

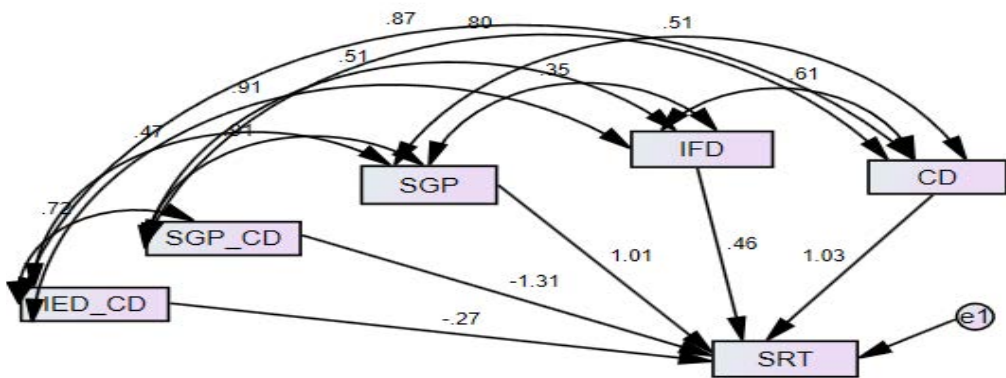
**Table 4**  
**Measurement Model of CFA**

Variables	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	SGP	IFD	CD	SRT
SGP	0.937	0.787	0.308	0.943	0.887			
IFD	0.890	0.669	0.308	0.901	0.555	0.818		
CD	0.868	0.637	0.147	0.922	0.326	0.380	0.798	
SRT	0.833	0.630	0.233	0.879	0.479	0.482	0.384	0.794

Note: AVE = Average Variance Explained; CR = Composite Reliability; ASV = Average Squared Variance; MSV = Maximum Squared Variance; SGP = State Government Policies; IFD = Infrastructure Development; CD = Cultural Diversity; SRT = Promotion of Sustainable Religious Tourism

*Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) or Path Analysis*

SEM is used to test and validate the hypothetical models. Researchers use SEM to assess how well hypothesized relationships among variables match the actual data collected from their study (Hair et al., 1998; Lin & Lee, 2004). It helps to determine whether the hypothesized model fits the data and whether certain relationships are statistically significant (Sit et al., 2009). After creating CFA and verifying model fit indices and reliability and validity tests of statistics, the present researcher draws the SEM model for testing the hypothesis using IBM SPSS Amos 23. The primary objective of conducting SEM is to investigate the direct and moderating effects of state government policies, infrastructure development, and cultural diversity on sustainable religious tourism within the context of Karnali Province. The SEM path analysis can be outlined as:



**Figure 2. SEM Path Structure**

Note: SGP = State Government Policies; IFD = Infrastructure Development; CD = Cultural Diversity; SRT = Sustainable Religious Tourism; SGP\_CD = State Government Policies and Cultural Diversity; IFD\_CD = Infrastructure Development and Cultural Diversity

Figure 2 illustrates the SEM outputs that encompass the relationships between variables, the fit of the constructed models, and the mechanisms driving observed effects among the latent variables. These outputs are pivotal in the process of hypothesis

testing, hypothesis confirmation, and the refinement of research models to align with the predefined objectives of this study.

### *Hypotheses Testing*

In the concluding phase of SEM, the statistical significance of each structural parameter value is examined to confirm the validity of the proposed pathways. Based on the SEM results and path analysis, the predefined alternative hypotheses in this study have been assessed. The evaluation of the impacts of exogenous variables (SGP and IFD) and the moderating variable (CD) on the endogenous variable (SRT) was conducted through five distinct hypotheses. The result of hypothesis testing is presented in Table 5.

Table 5  
Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Remarks
H01: SGP has a positive and significant impact on promoting SRT	.851	.219	3.879	***	Accepted
H02: IFD has a positive and significant impact on promoting SRT	.431	.303	1.422	.155	Rejected
H33: CD has a positive and significant impact on promoting SRT	1.069	.216	4.942	***	Accepted
H4: CD moderates the relationship between SGP and promotion SRT	-.186	.054	-3.45	***	Accepted
H5: CD moderates the relationship between IFD and promotion of SRT	-.040	.077	-.520	.603	Rejected

*Note: (\*\*\*) Denotes p-value significant at the 0.01 level of significance*

Table 5 displays the path coefficients of the latent variables. The results indicate that SGP has a significant positive impact on SRT ( $\beta = 0.851$ , C.R. = 3.879,  $p < 0.001$ ). Similarly, IFD does not have a significant positive impact on SRT ( $\beta = 0.431$ , C.R. = 1.422,  $p > 0.001$ ). The study also found that CD has a significant positive impact on SRT ( $\beta = 1.069$ , C.R. = 4.942,  $p < 0.001$ ). The findings also revealed the moderating effects, where DC moderates the relationship between SGP and SRT ( $\beta = -0.186$ , C.R. = -3.456,  $p < 0.001$ ). Likewise, CD does not moderate the relationship between IFD and SRT ( $\beta = -0.040$ , C.R. = -0.520,  $p > 0.001$ ). The empirical results of this study delineate a discernible and statistically significant positive influence exerted by state government policies and cultural diversity on the sustainability of religious tourism. Furthermore, the analysis reveals an absence of statistically significant positive effects emanating from infrastructural development, as well as the nexus between cultural diversity and infrastructure development, on the sustainability of religious tourism.

The study's findings are consistent with recent research in the field. Smith and Johnson (2022) and Jones et al. (2023) also highlighted the importance of government initiatives in promoting tourism sustainability. However, Anderson and Brown (2021) found mixed results, showing that the impact of SGP varies depending on regional factors.

Lee et al. (2023) emphasized the contextual nature of SGP effectiveness, influenced by collaboration among government agencies, religious institutions, and local communities. This aligns with earlier research highlighting government policies' role in shaping tourism development (Li & Wang, 2013).

Besides that, the study's unexpected finding that infrastructure development (IFD) does not significantly impact sustainable religious tourism (SRT) challenges conventional beliefs about the universal role of improved infrastructure in tourism (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Song & Witt, 2000). This highlights the need to consider nuanced factors in infrastructure planning within religious tourism destinations. Chen and Wang (2021) support this idea, revealing that the effectiveness of infrastructure development varies with destination type, visitor demographics, and local stakeholder engagement. Therefore, a context-specific approach to infrastructure development is crucial for sustainable growth in SRT (Bieger & Wittmer, 2006). Recent studies, including Garcia and Perez (2022) and Johnson et al. (2023), underline the variability in infrastructure development's impact on SRT, emphasizing the importance of context-specific planning and stakeholder collaboration for sustainable outcomes in religious tourism.

Furthermore, this study's significant path coefficient for cultural diversity (CD) highlights its pivotal role in enhancing sustainable religious tourism (SRT) in Karnali Province. This finding aligns with prior research emphasizing culturally diverse destinations' appeal to tourists seeking authentic experiences (Chen & Wu, 2019). Cultural diversity enriches visitor experiences, fostering cultural exchange and enhancing religious tourism destinations' attractiveness (Rodriguez & Kim, 2020; Liu & Li, 2018; Smith, 2017). Furthermore, this study reveals that CD acts as a significant moderator in the relationship between SGP and SRT, expanding on existing literature. This finding aligns with prior research by Lee et al. (2020) and Wang et al. (2019) highlighting cultural diversity's crucial role in shaping policy effectiveness in various contexts. It emphasizes the need for tailored policy approaches that consider cultural diversity's influence on outcomes within the religious tourism sector (Anderson & Brown, 2021). These findings underscore that while government policies positively impact sustainable religious tourism, their effect may vary in destinations with greater cultural diversity.

On the other hand, the study's findings suggest that CD does not significantly moderate the relationship between IFD and SRT, aligning with prior research. Smith et al. (2017) emphasized the pivotal role of infrastructure in promoting sustainability within religious destinations, while Jones and Patel (2019) found that CD enhances the tourist experience but doesn't significantly impact the infrastructure-sustainability relationship. Kim and Lee (2020) advocated for culturally inclusive infrastructure, but this study reaffirms that infrastructure's role in achieving sustainability remains essential, regardless of cultural diversity. Finally, it is essential to recognize that sustainable religious tourism in Karnali Province can be significantly enhanced when stakeholders are well-informed and actively engaged in state government policy formulation and implementation, infrastructure development, and the promotion of cultural diversity. Notably, stakeholder involvement proves crucial for enhancing sustainable religious tourism in Karnali Province,

emphasizing the practical importance of well-informed and engaged stakeholders in policy formulation and implementation, infrastructure development, and the promotion of cultural diversity.

## V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has been conducted to identify the influence of state government policies, infrastructure development, cultural diversity, on sustainable religious tourism. State government policy emerges as a potent driver of sustainability within religious tourism destinations, reaffirming its pivotal role. Interestingly, the study challenges prevailing assumptions by revealing that infrastructure development does not have a statistically significant impact on promoting sustainable religious tourism. The condition of infrastructure development at Karnali Province not enough for sustainability of religious tourism and there is biggest problem of geographic structure and infrastructural development initiatives in this Province. In contrast, cultural diversity emerges as a strong contributor to sustainable religious tourism and enhancing the visitor experiences. Moreover, this study elucidates the moderating influence of cultural diversity on the relationship between state government policies and sustainability, emphasizing the need for customized approaches in the religious tourism sector. In contrary, this study demonstrates that cultural diversity has no moderating impact on the relationship between infrastructure development and sustainable religious tourism in the context of Karnali Province. The study's findings suggest that policymakers should prioritize cultural diversity and tailor policies to specific cultural contexts to enhance sustainable religious tourism. Tourism industry should adopt a holistic approach, leveraging the region's cultural richness beyond infrastructure development.

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### *Conflict of Interest*

The author declared having no conflict of interest in the research work.

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