



ANALYSIS OF THE POTENTIALS FOR PROMOTING SRI LANKA AS A WELLNESS TOURISM DESTINATION

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Abstract

The last few years have seen a growing realization of health and wellness as more travelers seek to find the balance between the physical, mental and emotional well-being of everyday life while incorporating the elements of health, prevention, self-actualization, experiences and attitudes. Hence, the wellness desire is now recognizing as one of the splendid motives to travel and growing concept in many countries. Therefore, it has been researched from diverse perspectives in worldwide and identified wellness tourism as a growing tourism market as well as an ideal niche market for countries seeking tourism opportunities for economic growth. Sri Lanka is a country which has blessed with its unique Ayurveda treatments, yoga traditions, distinctive cuisine, hospitable community, abundant flora and fauna, heritage and culture with existential authenticity which need to explore the capability of Sri Lanka as a wellness tourism destination. In this research, researcher recognized the potential for promoting Sri Lanka as a wellness tourism destination by investigating the wellness tourists' expectations and destination capability as the success of any tourist destination fundamentally rely upon how well they have identified the expectations of tourists' and how conscientiously tourists' expectations are met by the destination through maximum utilization of its capabilities. This study was based on the results derived through the data collection done via interviews from fifty wellness tourists and fifteen operators representing demand and supply side respectively in order to achieve research objectives. Collected data were analyzed by developing transcripts to summarize data for each individual interview and finalize the gathered data. Findings of this research will contribute to authorized bodies in the industry for policy making, strategy development as well as this research will pave paths to future research areas.

Keywords: Destination capability, Tourists' expectations, Wellness Tourism



1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Sri Lanka has been widely recognized as one of South Asia's largest and fastest-growing tourism destination and demonstrated impressive tourist arrivals in terms of international tourism receipts. However, Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority further exposed that the country has not yet acquired the benefits from the full potential of this industry which indicates the underutilize and untapped potentials in this growing market. In current scenario, new tourism concepts are far beyond from the traditional concepts while tourists' preferences have moved from mass tourism to niche tourism and as a consequence of that majority of the countries in the globe are currently paying much more attention on tapping the new niche tourism segments.

Nowadays, more tourists travel to new destinations where they can maintain well-being and include the pursuit of physical, mental, spiritual or environmental wellness. Although wellness tourism is fairly a new niche market in the global travel industry, Sri Lanka Tourism also recognized that this growing global travel trend, with 78% of affluent travellers seeking to include some elements of wellness in their travels, has tremendous potential. With that reason, it is said the "Wellness as a new paradigm for Sri Lankan Tourism". Hence, it is proved that Wellness Tourism is one of the ways that is considered to be rather different in promoting as the destination.

Sri Lanka is a country which nourishes with all the key ingredients needed to make it an ideal wellness hotspot along with abundant access to traditional Ayurveda sciences, its array of breathtaking and serene wellness retreat spots. As the same way, Sri Lanka is blessed with amazing human resources such as professional yoga instructors, therapists, warm and hospitable people to develop the wellness tourism. Especially, being a tropical Asian destination, the Sri Lankan Tourism product is positioned perfectly to curate authentic wellness experiences with the ability to differentiate our offering from regional rivals. Knowledge has turned out to be one of the basic main thrusts for the industry and knowledge has been considered as solid asset like other resources and wealth knowledge on wellness tourism trigger information so as to enhance and support to obtain competitive advantages over the opponents in this industry (Kaldeen, 2019). Hence, Sri Lanka has to acquire their prospects and reap the optimum advantages to become a leading global wellness destination.

The Sri Lanka Export Development Board in collaboration with the Sri Lanka Wellness Tourism Association has been exploring the potential of wellness tourism with local stakeholders and further stating that steps should be taken to establish wellness tourism since it is an easy market to promote massively in Sri Lanka. But, the level of promotion being undertaken to attract wellness tourists to Sri Lanka is currently quite limited when compared with Kerala, Bali and Thailand, although Sri Lanka has several wellness destinations. As wellness tourism is not ample researched topic in Sri Lankan context, the researcher attempted to fill this knowledge gap by examining the potentials to promote wellness tourism in Sri Lanka while highlighting the Sri Lankan contextual gap and the industrial gap relating to the sub sector; wellness tourism industry of Sri Lanka.



2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Tourism destinations were built around distinctive natural features such as mineral healing springs, beach and mountain resorts, and religious locations hundreds of years ago. Although there is currently a lack of agreement in the literature about the definition of wellness tourism, most researchers agree that wellness tourism, together with medical tourism, falls under the category of health tourism (Joppe, 2010; Smith, & Puczko, 2009; Mueller, & Kaufmann, 2001).

A particular lifestyle, with respect to self-responsibility and individual choice, can be reflected in the health and well-being enhancement of the individual tourist in the context of wellness tourism. According to the authors of "Wellness and Tourism: Mind, Body, Spirit, Place," wellness tourism may be classified into six categories depending on visitor motives as well as product purpose and benefits. Medical, health, sport/fitness, adventure, wellbeing, and transformation. (Bushell, & Sheldon, 2009). Several concepts, such as wellbeing, quality of life, happiness, holistic practice and spiritual beliefs relate to the concept of wellness (Smith & Puczko, 2008). In the contemporary context, wellness tourism comprises a broad range of tourist motivations and benefits of the product. According to researchers (Smith & Puczko, 2008), the concept of wellness contains elements of lifestyle, physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing, and one's relationship to oneself, others, and the environment.

Wellness is a relatively new trend in tourism that is growing at an impressive rate. People are increasingly traveling to destinations that offer wellness facilities all over the world. Health tourism, often known as wellness tourism, is a rapidly increasing sector in which individuals travel to obtain health-related effects (Garcia-Altaes 2005). Products in this market are developed to address the health-related demands of tourists so that they can recover and improve their quality of life. Based on the emerging market appealing to a wellness state, different countries have introduced and promoted this concept in various ways in the past few years. In recent years, the hospitality industry has evolved new strategies and initiatives that include a physical and psychological health label, particularly among upscale hotels. The focus of such service innovation has been on promoting individuals' overall well-being state. Further, according to previous researchers (Smith & Kelly, 2006), wellness research and practice should be oriented towards identifying causes of wellness rather than causes of illness.

Tourism service providers, especially the luxury hotels were quick to cash upon these facts and created a palette of wellness services such as spa and health treatments, occupational health therapy, beauty treatments, sports facilities, spiritual activities, massages, and rehabilitation programs etc. (Koncul, 2012). However, studies on wellness tourism should not only focus on motivations but also about constraints of wellness tourists.

3. Research methodology

A mixed approach was used for this study including both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Since, this is a new area of investigation and lack of recorded data about tourists who visit Sri Lanka for wellness tourism purposes, convenient sampling method was used. The population of this research was based on both demand and supply side of wellness tourism. From demand

side, fifty tourists who visit Sri Lanka with the intention of experiencing wellness tourism and fifteen suppliers of wellness tourism including Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) were taken into the account as the sample of this study. Semi structured questionnaires were administered to collect the data from the tourists and interviews were utilized to collect the data from supply side of wellness tourism. Descriptive analysis was adopted to analyze the wellness tourist’s behavior and expectations while the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to investigate the most influencing destination capability for promoting Wellness Tourism. Ultimately, SWOT analysis and summarized data from transcripts were used to identify the potentials to promote Sri Lanka as a wellness tourism hub.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

a) Wellness tourists’ expectations and behavior

Exploring tourists’ expectations and behavior is critically important for tourism providers to understand tourists’ demand during their travel at a particular destination. Especially, understanding the reasons of why visitors participate in wellness tourism and their behavioral intention to visit a destination is now becoming a timely requirement as wellness tourism is a niche area of travel which transcends across different target audiences such as Gen Z, Gen X, the Millennials and baby boomers. Therefore, this section was developed based on the knowledge gathered through questionnaires filled by fifty tourists. Finding wellness tourists was not an easy task as there is no identifiable pattern of visit throughout the year and lack of recorded data available with regards to wellness tourists. However, Wellness tourists’ expectations and behavior can be analyzed as follows.

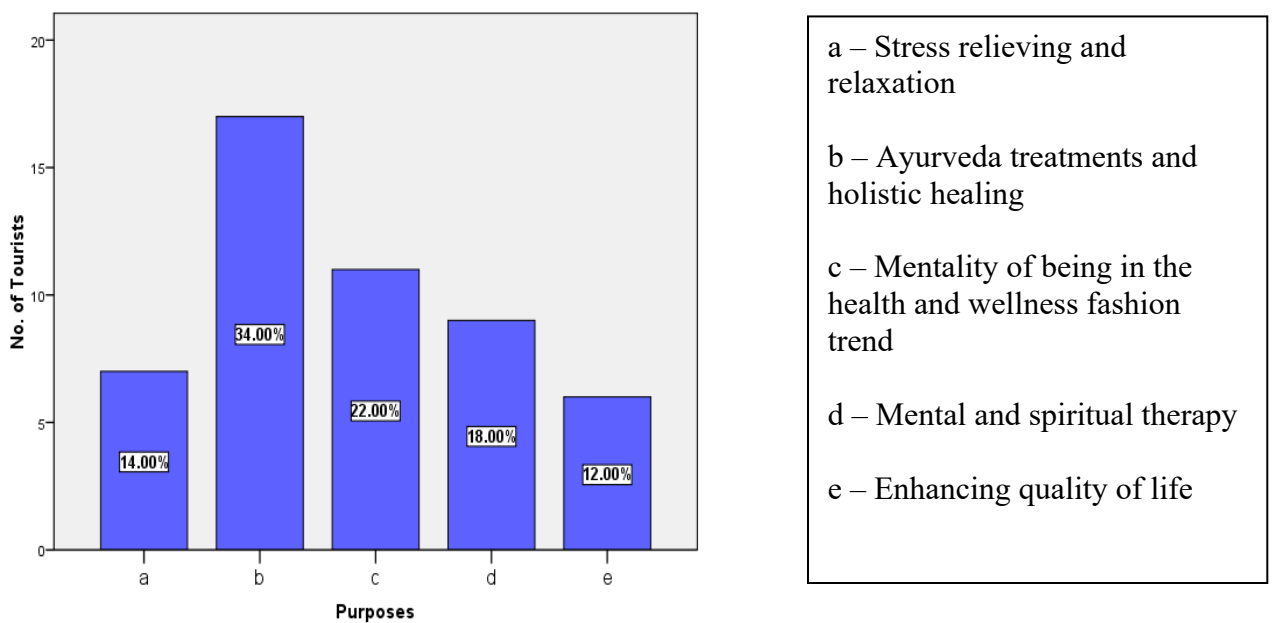


Figure 1: Wellness tourists’ purpose of visiting Sri Lanka

Source: Field Survey

Figure 1 reported that majority of the tourists out of total respondents who came to Sri Lanka for wellness tourism with the purpose of experiencing Ayurveda Treatments and Holistic Healing and their percentage was 34%. About 22% of respondents came with the mentality of being in the health and wellness fashion trend and of being seen as nice and fit. Out of total tourists, 18% were come for the purpose of mental and spiritual therapy while 14% of wellness tourists came for the purpose of stress relief and detoxing to get away from their busy and stressful lifestyles in their countries. Rest of the 12% of respondents came with the intention of enhancing their quality of life.

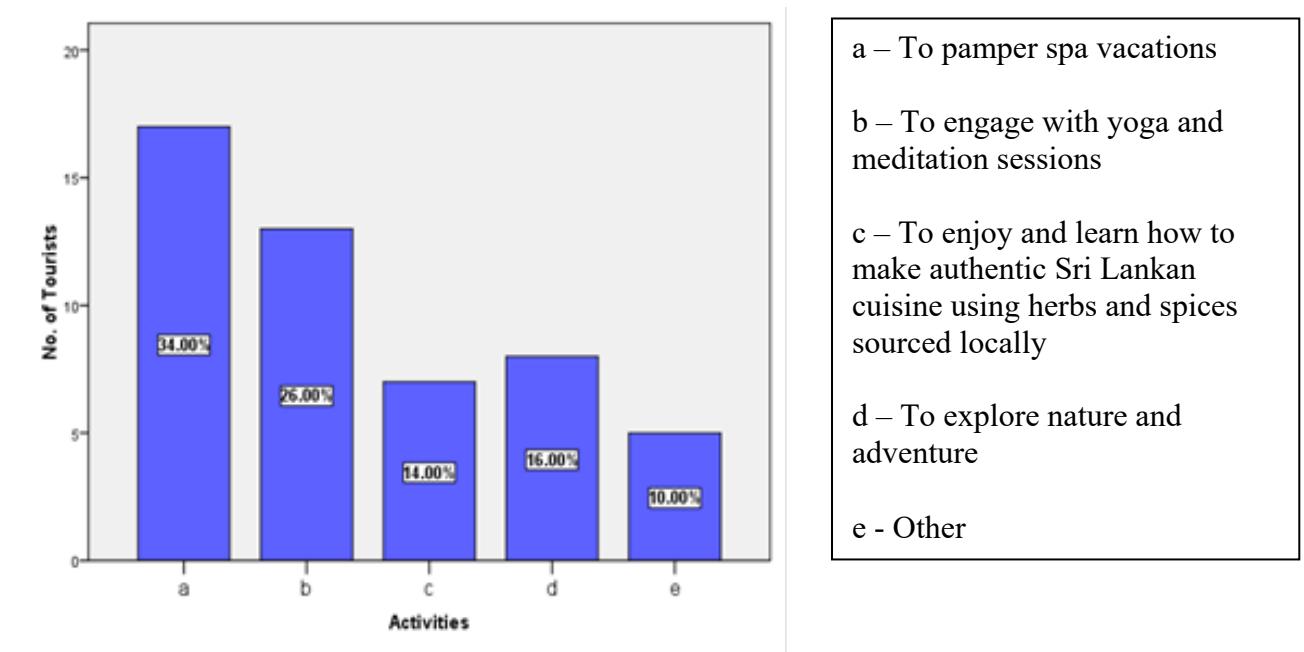


Figure 2: Wellness activities engaged by the tourists in Sri Lanka
Source: Field Survey

Wellness tourism is now considered largely experiential and it is evident that the meaning of wellness has evolved beyond yoga retreats and spa treatments. Hence, respondents were asked which types of activities they experienced as wellness tourists in Sri Lanka as wellness now is anything that brings balance to ones being. However, pampering spa vacations was clearly the most reported activity with 34% of respondents and engaging with yoga and meditation sessions was the second highest reported activity along with 26%. To explore nature and adventure, to enjoy and learn how to make authentic Sri Lankan cuisine using herbs and spices sourced locally, and for other activities such as fitness massage, exercise and having organic foods prepared in Ayurveda manner reported 16%, 14% and 10% respectively.

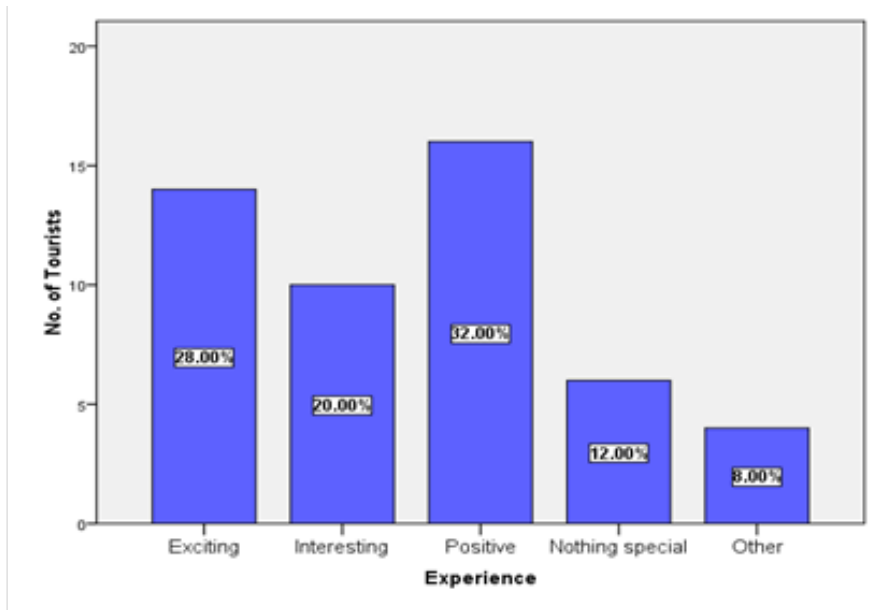


Figure 3: Type of experience

Source: Field Survey

When asked from respondents if they could describe how it felt to visit or experience Sri Lanka as wellness tourists, the majority of respondents indicated that it was a positive experience and their percentage was 32%. About 28% of tourists expressed more than positive feelings to the extent of being excited. 20% of tourists felt it was an interesting experience while 12% of respondents indicated that nothing special. Rest of 8% was belonged to the category of other and some responses included in other indicated that they felt disappointed because it had not met their expectations.

b) Destination capability to promote wellness tourism

A principal component factor analysis was carried out to group the destination attributes with common characteristics with the intention of identifying the underlying destination capabilities possessed by Sri Lanka in order to promote itself as a leading wellness tourism hub. Reliability analysis (Cronbach’s alpha) was calculated to test the reliability and consistency of each factor and a cut-off point of 0.4 was used to include items in interpretation of a table 1.

Table 1: Factor Analysis of destination capabilities in Sri Lanka

Statement	Factor Loading	Eigenvalue	Variance %
Core Wellness Tourism		5.970	42.641
Product offerings by the destination			
Range of Ayurveda treatment and holistic wellness offered in the destination	0.797		
Healthy and nutritious diet	0.738		
Availability and integrity of natural and cultural resources	0.705		



Length of treatment programs	0.640		
Option for the packaged services	0.636		
Factors that influence for accessibility and quality of the service		1.412	10.
Overall existence of transportation and ground infrastructure	0.813		
Availability of spas and wellness retreat spots	0.767		
Specialized instructors and trained staff	0.645		
Destination climate	0.510		
Gastronomy supply	0.458		
Status of destination		1.251	8.
Environment that is conducive and enabling to tourism	0.804		
Safety and security protocol	0.707		
Availability of multiple activities in destination	0.674		
Popularity of the destination	0.646		
Total Variance			61.66

Table 1 depicts that the factor analysis of 14 factors related to destination capabilities resulted in three factor groupings which accounted for 61.66% of variance. Factor groupings of destination attributes were “Core wellness tourism products offered by the destination”, “Factors that influence for accessibility and quality of the service” and “Status of destination”. “Core wellness tourism products offered by the destination” was the most important factors related to destination capabilities in Sri Lanka to be promoted as one of the well-known wellness tourism destination which explained 42.641% of the variance (eigenvalue is 5.970). According to this factor analysis, first component is highly influenced to destination capabilities and it further revealed that most of the wellness tourists who came to Sri Lanka highly value the range of Ayurveda treatments and holistic wellness such as yoga, meditation offered in the destination, healthy and nutritious diet, availability and integrity of natural and cultural resources, length of treatment programs and options for the packaged services. “Status of destination” will not much influence for tourists who came with the wellness desire and this component was explained 10.085% of variance (eigenvalue is 1.412).

c) SWOT analysis for identifying potentials to promote Sri Lanka as a wellness tourism destination

Table 2: SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
Sri Lanka is ideally positioned to welcome the wellness traveler with more biodiversity on land, satisfactory ground and port infrastructure, rich heritage and culture, organic foods and authentic cuisines, relatively clean and favorable	Insufficient and uncoordinated promotion of wellness tourism Inadequate coordination between Ayurveda enterprises and international stakeholders



environmental standards, air quality, the wellness qualities of locals and a multitude of water-based activities.

Private ayurvedic resorts that have already been established in the country such as Siddalepa, Barbarian, Jetwing, Tree of life, Santani and etc. are an asset to the wellness tourism sector.

Sri Lanka’s indigenous Ayurveda industry is one of the most prominent strength.

Good therapists, professional yoga instructors and trained working staff

Lack of standardization and certification in relation to Ayurveda

Lack of variety in types of wellness offerings

Language barrier when interacting with guests

Opportunities

Threats

Sri Lanka is perceived as less busy, less intense, overwhelming, and cleaner than its main competitor destinations

Potential competitors offering wellness tourism with tropical beaches and pristine natural settings.

Sri Lanka is the only Asian destination offering a kitesurf & yoga retreat.

Political instability that may threaten the future of wellness tourism

Strong relation of Ayurveda with Sri Lankan wellness tourism product earns a competitive advantage while differentiating it from other Ayurveda destinations

Risk of commercialization of Sri Lankan traditional medicine or Hela wedakama

Potential new markets for traditional medicine include Gulf /Russian federation countries, Eastern Europe, the far east and Australia.

Due to the Covid 19 outbreak, Sri Lanka has a huge opportunity for wellness tourism with the inborn compassion of its people, its knowledge on traditional medical practices, culture, and religious diversity resources.



5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research study has taken the attempt to identify the potentials for promoting Sri Lanka as a wellness tourism destination. In this study, researcher employed an effort to identify wellness tourists' expectations and behavior as travel purpose for each audience may vary. According to the research findings, it is revealed that wellness tourists travel to Sri Lanka basically with the intention of experiencing Ayurveda treatments and holistic healing. By identifying the expectations that tourists are willing to achieve, service providers may able to shape the offerings and services in order to meet customers' exact requirements. As the same way, it is important to identify destination's capability to cater the requirements of the target customer group in order to promote Sri Lanka as a niche wellness tourism destination.

As the wellness traveler generating at least five times more earnings than the standard tourist, Sri Lanka Tourism needs to strategically work with key stakeholders to perfectly position the destination to curate authentic wellness experiences with the ability to differentiate our offering from regional rivals. Hence, the findings of this research will contribute to the authorized bodies in Sri Lanka Tourism to focus on product and infrastructure development, training and guidance to the SME sector and the larger industry, targeted marketing and promoting investor opportunities along with making relevant policies and developing strategies to officially remark Sri Lanka as a wellness tourism destination.

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