

FACTORS AFFECTING TOURISM TO SRI LANKA IN THE FACE OF ECONOMIC DISPARITIES.

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ABSTRACT

This study delves deep into the captivating allure of Sri Lanka, a country that attracts travelers from all corners of the world. It aims to uncover the mysterious forces and various factors that turn this island nation into a bustling tourist destination. Through a thorough examination, this research reveals the cultural, natural, historical, and experiential aspects that combine to captivate international attention, transforming Sri Lanka into an irresistible hub for global explorers. Discover the fascinating blend of this tropical paradise as we unveil the secrets behind its enduring appeal. The study utilized a qualitative approach, specifically employing thematic analysis. Primary data was gathered through in-depth interviews with international tourists, experts, and local communities. The research resulted in practical recommendations for stakeholders, providing a nuanced understanding of the psychological and cultural elements that contribute to Sri Lanka's charm in the global tourism arena.

Keywords: *Ayurvedic Medicine, Cuisines, Culture, Economic Disparity, Sri Lanka, Thematic Analysis, Tourist Destination, Wildlife*

1. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka, a mesmerizing island nation nestled in the heart of the Indian Ocean, has long been hailed for its rich cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and warm hospitality. In recent years, the country has gained significant recognition as a burgeoning tourist destination, drawing travelers from all corners of the globe. The allure of Sri Lanka lies not only in its pristine beaches, lush tea plantations, and ancient archaeological sites but also in the unique opportunity it offers to explore the coexistence of tradition and modernity. However, beneath this surface of natural beauty and cultural richness, Sri Lanka grapples with economic disparities that pose challenges to its overall growth and development. This intriguing juxtaposition between the factors attracting tourists and the economic disparities within the nation forms the focal point of the exploration. This study delves deep into the multifaceted factors that contribute to Sri Lanka's appeal as a tourist destination while navigating the intricate landscape of economic disparities, shedding light on how tourism can potentially bridge these gaps and foster sustainable development.

This study serves as a bridge, connecting the factors that make Sri Lanka a desirable tourist destination with the pressing need to address economic inequalities. By examining the specific aspects that draw tourists to the country and understanding their potential impact on local economies, this research aims to uncover opportunities for economic empowerment and sustainable development. Through a detailed analysis of these factors, this study contributes to informed policymaking and strategic initiatives, paving the way for a more equitable and prosperous future for Sri Lanka.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sri Lankan Cuisines and Foreign Destination Decision

The culinary tradition of Sri Lanka is a vibrant and diverse reflection of the country's rich history, culture, and geography. In the era of globalization and increased international travel, researchers and practitioners have shown growing interest in understanding how food preferences impact travelers' choices when selecting a foreign destination. Sri Lankan cuisine, known for its aromatic spices, exotic flavors, and varied textures, features iconic dishes like rice and curry, hoppers, kottu, and a variety of spicy sambols. Stone et al. (2017) have extensively explored the historical and cultural significance of these dishes, emphasizing their role as cultural ambassadors enticing tourists to explore Sri Lanka. Research in tourism psychology indicates that culinary experiences significantly influence travelers' perceptions and memories of a destination, enhancing overall satisfaction and leading to positive word-of-mouth recommendations. Recent studies (e.g., ANDREW, 2023; Laksiri, 2019; Rozais, 2023) have highlighted the growing trend of food becoming a pivotal factor in destination decision-making. Factors such as authenticity, uniqueness, and diversity of local cuisine have emerged as major influencers, amplified by social media platforms showcasing exotic food offerings in foreign countries. As travelers weigh various aspects like cultural attractions, natural beauty, affordability, and safety when choosing a destination, the appeal of a country's culinary offerings has become increasingly significant in shaping travelers' preferences and experiences.

2.2 Sri Lankan Ayurvedic Medicine and Foreign Destination Decision

Sri Lankan Ayurvedic medicine, an ancient healing system deeply embedded in the country's culture and heritage, has gained global acclaim for its holistic approach to well-being. With the increasing worldwide interest in alternative and holistic therapies, understanding the influence of Sri Lankan Ayurvedic medicine on the travel choices of international visitors has become a significant area of study. This research delves into the historical origins of Ayurveda in Sri Lanka, its distinctive characteristics, and its impact on tourists' decisions when selecting a foreign destination. Rooted in ancient Indian knowledge, Sri Lankan Ayurveda integrates indigenous medicinal plants and healing methods, creating a unique and culturally rich form of traditional medicine that has been practiced in Sri Lanka for centuries. Scholars like Wadippuli Arachchi and Nanayakkara (2022) have highlighted the continuous evolution of Ayurvedic practices in Sri Lanka, demonstrating its integration into the fabric of society. What sets Sri Lankan Ayurvedic medicine apart is its focus on personalized treatments, herbal remedies, and therapeutic techniques tailored to individual requirements, embodying a holistic approach that encompasses physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Researchers like Kamalaseena and Chamodya (2021) have explored the diverse treatments offered, such as herbal massages, dietary therapies, and yoga, showcasing the comprehensive nature of Ayurvedic healing in Sri Lanka. Travelers seeking wellness and rejuvenation experiences increasingly consider Ayurvedic treatments when selecting a foreign destination, as evidenced by studies conducted by Bowers & Cheer (2017). Authenticity and the reputation of Sri Lankan Ayurveda play a crucial role in travelers' decisions, with the perceived effectiveness of Ayurvedic therapies and the tranquil natural settings of Ayurvedic resorts enhancing the destination's appeal. Positive testimonials and online reviews further amplify the influence of Ayurvedic treatments on the choices of international travelers. Sri Lanka has strategically incorporated Ayurvedic tourism into its offerings, promoting specialized resorts and wellness centers. Research by Elabada Arachchi and Kaluarachchi (2019) underscored the economic impact of Ayurvedic tourism on the local economy, highlighting the potential for sustainable development and employment generation. Collaborative efforts between the government, private sector, and healthcare providers have bolstered Sri Lanka's reputation as a hub for authentic Ayurvedic experiences, further solidifying its position in the global arena.

2.3 Sri Lankan Wildlife and Foreign Destination Decision

Sri Lanka, a tropical island nation in South Asia, is renowned for its diverse and captivating wildlife, ranging from majestic elephants and elusive leopards to vibrant bird species and marine life. This review delves into the magnetic appeal of Sri Lankan wildlife and its profound impact on the choices made by international travelers when selecting a destination. Recognizing the importance of wildlife experiences can shed light on strategies for sustainable tourism development and conservation endeavors. Sri Lanka's wildlife is incredibly diverse, spanning various ecosystems such as lush rainforests, dry savannas, coastal areas, and marine environments. Jeremy et al. (2017) have meticulously documented the country's unique and endangered species, emphasizing the presence of endemic wildlife like the Sri Lankan leopard (*Panthera pardus kotiya*) and the Sri Lankan elephant (*Elephas maximus*)

maximus). Studies underscore the imperative need for conservation due to the ecological significance of these species and their contribution to Sri Lanka's natural heritage. Globally, wildlife tourism has gained momentum, with travelers increasingly seeking immersive experiences in natural habitats. Sri Lanka's national parks, including Yala, Wilpattu, and Udawalawe, offer exceptional wildlife encounters, attracting nature enthusiasts, photographers, and researchers. Research indicates that wildlife tourism experiences, such as safaris, birdwatching, and marine excursions, significantly influence tourists' destination choices, providing them with memorable and educational experiences. Moreover, wildlife-focused tourism can serve as a driving force for conservation initiatives. Numerous studies highlight the pivotal role of ecotourism in funding conservation programs, supporting local communities, and raising awareness about the importance of preserving natural habitats (Miththapla, 2022; Jeremy et al., 2018). Collaborative efforts involving government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and the tourism industry are essential in balancing the economic advantages of tourism with the imperative need for wildlife conservation (Oxford Business Group, 2017).

2.4 Sri Lankan Culture and Foreign Destination Decision

Sri Lanka's cultural heritage is deeply rooted in a history spanning more than 2,500 years, shaped by influences from Indian, Arab, European, and Southeast Asian cultures, resulting in a distinct and unique identity. Ranasinghe and Li (2017) have meticulously traced the historical evolution of Sri Lankan culture, highlighting its resilience against the forces of colonialism and globalization. Enduring traditions such as dance, art, music, and rituals, as emphasized by Munasinghe et al. (2020), continue to enthrall both locals and visitors. The cultural tapestry of Sri Lanka is richly adorned with vibrant festivals celebrated by diverse ethnic and religious groups. Udurawana (2020) has explored the cultural significance of events like Sinhala and Tamil New Year, Vesak, and Esala Perahera, showcasing the nation's cultural diversity and unity. These festivals offer immersive experiences, enabling tourists to engage with locals and partake in age-old traditions, enhancing their overall travel experience (Rauf, 2014).

The renowned warmth and friendliness of the Sri Lankan people have been widely acknowledged by travelers. Several studies (Dilshad, 2023; Perera et al., 2012; Ghali, 1976) have emphasized the pivotal role of hospitality in shaping tourists' perceptions and satisfaction levels. Genuine smiles, welcoming gestures, and authentic interactions with locals create a sense of belonging and cultural immersion for visitors, significantly influencing their decision to choose Sri Lanka as their destination. The preservation and promotion of Sri Lankan culture are vital for the sustainable growth of the tourism industry. Researchers have explored the challenges and opportunities in cultural preservation, emphasizing the importance of community engagement, cultural education, and responsible tourism practices. Collaborative initiatives involving the government, local communities, and the private sector are instrumental in safeguarding Sri Lanka's cultural heritage while ensuring a positive and respectful experience for tourists (Ahmed, 1986).

2.5 Sri Lankan Economic Disparities and Foreign Destination Decision

The economic disparities within Sri Lanka have become a focal point of interest for researchers and travelers alike when making decisions about foreign destinations. Sri Lanka, a nation with a burgeoning tourism industry, showcases a paradoxical landscape of economic inequality amid its natural beauty and cultural richness (Jolliffe & Aslam, 2009). Travelers are increasingly aware of the economic disparities within the countries they visit, prompting a shift in their decision-making process. Research in the field of tourism psychology suggests that tourists consider not only the scenic attractions and cultural experiences a destination offers but also the socio-economic conditions of the local population (International Labor Organization, 2021). Economic disparities can impact tourists' perceptions, influencing their choice of destinations that prioritize ethical and responsible tourism practices. Moreover, understanding these disparities is crucial for policymakers and stakeholders in Sri Lanka's tourism industry. By addressing economic inequalities, fostering community development, and promoting sustainable tourism initiatives, Sri Lanka can enhance its appeal as a foreign destination, offering not just natural and cultural wonders but also a responsible and ethical travel experience for conscientious travelers.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Population and Sample

The study encompasses a broad spectrum of individuals, including international tourists, travel experts, cultural scholars, tour operators, and local communities throughout Sri Lanka. To ensure a diverse and comprehensive perspective, the study's sample, carefully selected using a purposive sampling technique, includes various participants. This deliberate approach involves recruiting international tourists from different nationalities and travel preferences, allowing for a varied representation. Furthermore, insights from travel experts and tour operators provide industry-specific knowledge, while cultural scholars and historians contribute expertise to Sri Lanka's rich heritage. The viewpoints of local communities residing in different regions are also incorporated, offering valuable insights into the societal implications of tourism. With a diverse and representative sample of 150 respondents, the study aims to thoroughly investigate the factors contributing to Sri Lanka's appeal as a global tourist destination, capturing a wide range of perspectives for a nuanced understanding.

3.2 Data and Sources of Data

The study collects primary data through in-depth interviews conducted with international tourists from diverse backgrounds, travel experts, and local communities, providing a firsthand insight into their experiences and viewpoints. Structured questionnaires were utilized as a framework during interviews to gather qualitative data. These primary sources are complemented by a wealth of secondary data obtained from tourism reports, government publications, scholarly articles, and online databases. This diverse array of data, both qualitative and quantitative, serves as the foundation of the research, allowing for a thorough exploration of the cultural, historical, and experiential aspects that contribute to Sri Lanka's appeal as a global destination. By combining primary interviews with a wide range of secondary sources, the research is rooted in real-world experiences and also benefits from expert analyses and academic perspectives, ensuring a well-rounded and comprehensive study.

3.3 Propositions and Concept Indicator Model

The research study titled "Unveiling Sri Lanka's Allure: A Magnetic Pull for Global Wanderers" relies on key concepts and theories from the fields of tourism studies, cultural anthropology, and psychology. One fundamental theoretical perspective guiding this study is the Tourist Gaze theory, introduced by John Urry, which examines how tourists perceive and engage with the cultural and natural attractions of a destination (Bao et al., 2021). Additionally, the Cultural Diffusion theory is applied to understand how cultural elements from Sri Lanka spread to international tourists, influencing their experiences and perceptions (Coşkun, 2021). The study also incorporates the Destination Image theory, exploring how the portrayal of Sri Lanka in media and promotional materials shapes tourists' expectations and decision-making processes (Madden et al., 2016). Furthermore, the Push-Pull theory is used to examine the motivations guiding tourists to visit Sri Lanka (pull factors) and the factors in their home countries that influence their travel choices (push factors) (Said & Maryono, 2018). By integrating these theories, the study establishes a comprehensive framework to analyze the complex forces that contribute to Sri Lanka's appeal. This approach sheds light on the intricate interplay between cultural, psychological, and promotional factors that attract global wanderers to this captivating destination.

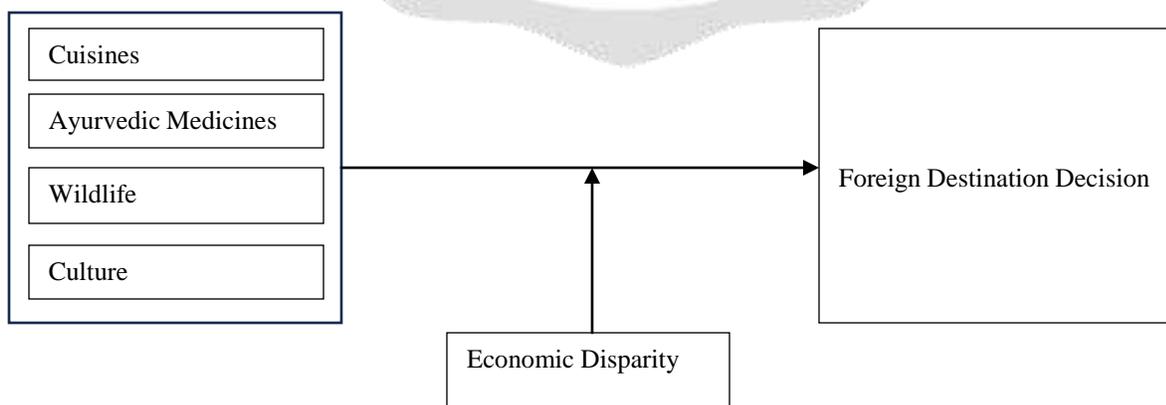


Figure 1: Concept Indicator Model

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1. Culinary Experiences and Tourist Destination Choice:

The research findings confirm the substantial impact of Sri Lankan cuisine on the destination choices of international tourists. Participants expressed high levels of contentment with the diverse and aromatic flavors found in Sri Lankan dishes like rice and curry, hoppers, and spicy sambols. The authenticity and distinctiveness of these culinary experiences emerged as crucial factors, with tourists appreciating the chance to explore local tastes. Positive culinary experiences not only heightened overall satisfaction but also served as strong incentives for recommending Sri Lanka to others. Social media platforms played a vital role in increasing the visibility of Sri Lankan food, attracting culinary enthusiasts and food tourists. These results align with prior research, underscoring the growing trend of food becoming a central factor in destination decision-making (Andrew, 2023; Laksiri, 2019; Rozais, 2023).

4.2. Ayurvedic Medicine and Tourist Destination Choice:

The research emphasized the significant impact of Sri Lankan Ayurvedic medicine on the travel choices of international tourists. Visitors were attracted to the holistic approach of Ayurvedic treatments, which included personalized therapies, herbal remedies, and therapeutic techniques tailored to individual requirements. The perceived effectiveness of these treatments, combined with the tranquil natural surroundings of Ayurvedic resorts in Sri Lanka, heightened the destination's overall appeal. Authenticity and reputation emerged as pivotal factors influencing tourists' decisions, with positive testimonials and online reviews reinforcing the impact of Ayurvedic treatments. The study also highlighted the economic benefits of Ayurvedic tourism on the local economy, showcasing its potential for sustainable development and job creation. Collaborative efforts between the government, private sector, and healthcare providers played a crucial role in bolstering Sri Lanka's standing as a leading destination for genuine Ayurvedic experiences.

4.3. Wildlife Experiences and Tourist Destination Choice:

The abundant and diverse wildlife in Sri Lanka emerged as a major attraction for international tourists. Participants expressed amazement and enthusiasm upon encountering unique and endangered species like the Sri Lankan leopard and elephant. Wildlife-related activities such as safaris, birdwatching, and marine excursions were identified as both memorable and educational, significantly influencing tourists' choices of destinations. The study emphasized the crucial role of conservation efforts in this context, with wildlife tourism acting as a catalyst for funding conservation programs, supporting local communities, and spreading awareness about the importance of preserving natural habitats. It was stressed that collaborative initiatives involving governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations, and the tourism industry were vital in striking a balance between the economic benefits of tourism and the imperative needs of wildlife conservation.

4.4. Cultural Immersion and Tourist Destination Choice:

The cultural wealth and hospitable atmosphere of Sri Lanka played pivotal roles in influencing tourists' views and choices. Those surveyed greatly valued the country's enduring customs, lively festivals, and opportunities for immersive cultural engagement. The authentic smiles, warm gestures, and interactions with local residents fostered a feeling of connection and cultural immersion, which had a lasting effect on visitors. It was recognized that the preservation and promotion of Sri Lankan culture were vital for ensuring the sustainable development of the tourism sector. Key strategies highlighted for cultural conservation included active involvement with local communities, educational initiatives focusing on culture, and the adoption of responsible tourism practices.

4.5 Sri Lankan Economic Disparities and Foreign Destination Decision

Economic disparities within Sri Lanka significantly influence tourists' perceptions of the destination. Travelers are more inclined to choose destinations that actively address social inequalities, aiming for a positive impact on local communities. Initiatives focused on community development, education, and sustainable employment opportunities were found to enhance the appeal of Sri Lanka for conscientious travelers. Tourists are increasingly looking for destinations that promote responsible tourism practices, ensuring that the economic benefits of tourism are distributed equitably among local communities. The study highlighted the importance of collaborative efforts between the government, private sector, and local communities in fostering responsible tourism. Tourists appreciated destinations that actively engaged with local artisans, supported fair trade practices, and contributed to community-led development projects.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings underscore the interconnectedness of economic disparities and tourist destination decisions. Tourists are increasingly becoming agents of change, seeking destinations that align with their ethical values and contribute positively to the communities they visit. Sri Lanka, with its diverse cultural heritage and natural attractions, can leverage these conscientious travelers as catalysts for social and economic change.

By actively addressing economic disparities and promoting responsible tourism practices, Sri Lanka can not only enhance its attractiveness as a tourist destination but also foster sustainable development. Collaborative efforts involving the government, private sector, and local communities are essential in bridging the economic gaps and ensuring that tourism becomes a force for positive change in the lives of the people of Sri Lanka.

In conclusion, understanding the complex relationship between economic disparities and tourist destination choices provides valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders. By embracing responsible tourism, Sri Lanka can not only preserve its cultural and natural heritage but also create a more inclusive and equitable society, ultimately transforming the nation into a beacon of sustainable tourism in the global arena.

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