



## **TRADITIONAL MEDICINE AS A TOURISM PRODUCT: VALUE CREATION TO TRADITIONAL MEDICINE IN SRI LANKA**

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Globally, a number of people travel long distances in search of quality indigenous medical treatments. In Sri Lanka, the indigenous medical system is one of the best tools for promoting the tourism industry. Wellness is a relatively new trend that has registered an impressive growth rate within tourism. Worldwide, many people are traveling to destinations that provide wellness facilities. In Sri Lanka, tourism service providers, especially the hotels were quick to cash in and target these facts to create a palette of wellness services. The belief in the Sri Lankan indigenous medicine system among tourists is evident by the fact that both local and foreign tourists tend to visit indigenous medical treatment centres for the purpose of medical treatments. Hence, the objectives of this study were to identify the demographics of the tourists who are interested in the Sri Lankan traditional medical system, and to examine the opportunities and challenges to promoting Sri Lanka's traditional medical system as a tourism product. Further, the inductive research approach was adapted to conduct the research and the data was collected through 15-semi structured interviews from different stakeholders who are related to the Sri Lankan traditional medical system, such as ayurvedic doctors, and service providers, suppliers, and counsellors. The data was analysed using the qualitative content analysis technique and the purposive sampling method was adapted to conduct the study. The age limit, gender, and nature of living conditions were identified as the categories of the demographics of the tourists whereas the quality of services, resources and strategic locations, demand, and transportation were identified as opportunities. The study reveals a lack of institutional support and a lack of regulatory frameworks as being challenges. In addition, this study provides implications for the future development of Sri Lanka's traditional medical system.

Keywords: Health Tourism, Traditional Medicine, Traditional medical system, Tourism, Sri Lanka

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Sri Lanka is one of the major tourist destinations in the South Asian region. The traditional medical system practiced here is unique to Sri Lanka, and as the legend goes, it has been practiced, cherished, and elegantly guarded for many years from generation to generation. The traditional medical system existing in Sri Lanka today is a combination of mainly the Indian Ayurveda system and ancient Sinhalese Ayurveda system, and it is a kind of indigenous medical system that is unique to the country. Throughout the past decade, Ayurveda tourism has shown fluctuations amid the catastrophic situations that Sri Lanka tourism has undergone. However, the Ayurveda tourism sector has shown positive signs of a gradual growth. Hence, the objectives of this study were to identify the demographics of the tourists who are interested in Sri Lanka's traditional medical system, and to examine the opportunities and challenges to promoting Sri Lanka's traditional medical system as a tourism product. Further, this research will also contribute by identifying the advantages and disadvantages of the industry, which will enable finding solutions to remove the barriers to improving the sector in the future.

### **METHODOLOGY**

An inductive research approach was adapted as the research approach of this study. Accordingly, Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the primary data for this study. The primary data was collected from different stakeholders who are related to the traditional medical system, such as Ayurveda doctors, service providers, suppliers, and counsellors who live in different regions in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka. Further, 15 interviews were conducted using the semi structured interview method as the study reached its saturation point. The purposive sampling method was adopted as the sampling technique of the study. Moreover, as the data analysis technique of the study, content analysis method was adapted using the transcribed data that was retrieved from the interviews.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **The groups of tourists who are attracted to the traditional medical system-related tourism industry**

Through the interviews conducted with the respondents, it was revealed that a significant number of tourists visit indigenous medical centres. Based on these findings, the demographics of the tourists can be categorized into the two following types:

- Domestic tourist demographics
- Foreign tourist demographics

#### **Age limit and gender**

The results indicate that the majority of domestic tourists are young people. In some cases, middle-aged tourists also seek treatments in indigenous medical centres in terms of domestic travellers. Further, male tourists are more likely to receive these treatments than women. A majority of them are over 25 years of age. The respondents pointed out that when it comes to foreign tourists who visit the indigenous medical centres, both men and women are equally involved. Moreover, the age limit of the travellers who visit these traditional medical establishments vary from 18 years to more mature ages. Sometimes, young children also benefit from the treatments offered at these centres. Further, on some occasions, entire family members visit the medical establishments together to gain the benefits of these treatments.



The study revealed the evidence of the intention of revisits by the travellers who have had previous experience at these traditional medical establishments.

### **Nature of Living Conditions**

The majority of the visitors belonged to the middle class of society in terms of both foreign and domestic visitors. A majority of them are residents of urban and semi-urban areas. It was revealed that the tourists visited these institutions not only for their illnesses but also for leisure and recreational purposes. The respondents pointed out that foreign tourists come from all directions of the world, such as North America (Canada, America, Mexico, United States), Western Europe (France, Germany, and Nederland, England), Eastern Europe (Russia), Asia (China, Japan, India, Maldives, Pakistan, and Nepal), and Australia.

### **Analysis of the Opportunities and Challenges**

#### **Opportunities**

##### **Quality of Services**

This study reveals evidence regarding many medical centres that offer treatments not only for physical and mental ailments but also spiritual amenities as a part of the overall product offered by the traditional medical establishments. They cover a wide range of aspects of mental illness, dermatology, beauty, therapy, etc. Also in these institutions, a large number of qualified indigenous doctors, nurses, paramedics, and specialists are employed. Hence, the overall quality of the services provided by the traditional medicine establishments has reached a standard level, allowing more visitors to get a better experience.

##### **Resources and Strategic Location**

The natural beauty, freshwater, and beautiful beaches are the main attractions sites that play a pivotal role in developing the indigenous medical-related tourism sector creating a unique competitive advantage over other regional competitors. Further, this study shows that the ability to obtain the required medicinal resources within the local neighbourhood area easily and at a low cost is a great advantage. The results reveal that obtaining the supportive labour required for developing the sector has become much easier. Moreover, there is a growing demand for tourists staying in resorts and seeking local medical treatment and advice. Further, there is a possibility of introducing indigenous medical treatments at resorts and other nearby accommodation establishments to promote this enterprise.

##### **Demand**

With aging, non-communicable diseases are more common in the elderly population. As a result, a gradual incentive for demand for traditional medical treatments has been identified. Also, people who are inclined towards western medicines are now experiencing its side effects. As a result, people are once again building confidence in indigenous medicine creating a gradual increasing of the demand for these services.

##### **Development of the transportation system**

The advanced transport systems in the country have generated many opportunities for the traditional medical sector. Results reveal that for both foreign and local tourists, quality road networks and transport systems have enabled them to access more traditional medical establishments. Ease of access to indigenous medical treatment centres has increased by the rapid development of the transportation systems.

#### **Challenges**

##### **Lack of institutional support**



Although the Sri Lankan government has implemented plans for developing tourism related to this sector, actions in this area is yet to be seen. Moreover, this study reveals the lack of price control policy in traditional medical centres. Further, travellers are often more inclined and confident with utilising insurance. However, the lack of a proper relationship between traditional medical providers and insurance companies has become a challenge to the industry. In addition, a clear connection between air operations, transportation, insurance companies, hotel, and medical treatment centres, and the tourism sector has not been identified. Further, the lack of attention to areas outside the main cities is a challenge in developing the indigenous medical tourism sector in areas like Bentota. Moreover, the tourism industry based on indigenous medical services is spread throughout the island and, concurrently, there is some competition between these institutions.

**Lack of Regulatory framework**

Illegal medical centres and unskilled labourers can lead to a loss of trust in indigenous medical services and treatment in the country. In addition, results reveals that illicit financial transactions and the deception of tourists have resulted in decreasing the number of tourist arrivals in these areas.

Table 1. Categories Summary

Objective	Code	Category
To identify the demographics of tourists interested in the Sri Lankan traditional medical system	Demographics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Age limit and gender</li> <li>● Nature of living conditions</li> </ul>
To examine the opportunities and challenges to promoting Sri Lanka’s traditional medical system as a tourism product	Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Quality of services</li> <li>● Resources &amp; strategic location</li> <li>● Demand</li> <li>● Development of the transportation system</li> </ul>
	Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lack of institutional support</li> <li>● Lack of a regulatory framework</li> </ul>

Source: Developed by the Researcher

**CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings of this study reveal that most young male domestic tourists and both male and female foreign tourists who belong to young, middle, and elder age groups from Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and Asia are mainly attracted to try treatments from Sri Lanka’s indigenous medical-related tourism institutes. According to this study, it was found that there are several advantages and disadvantages associated with this trend. To achieve sustainable development in the tourism sector while also supporting Sri Lanka's indigenous medical system, it is crucial for the government and non-governmental organizations to create and implement well synchronized development projects that can capitalize the strengths and opportunities available. Further, this study also identified various critical challenges that need immediate action. Hence, it is crucial to take appropriate measures to manage these difficulties and address this type of vulnerability with the aim of achieving a delightful, sustainable, and productive development in the tourism industry by incorporating Sri Lanka’s indigenous medical sector.



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