

Research Article 02

Understanding the Dynamics of Backpacker Tourism in Sri Lanka: Insights into Traveller Motivations and Supplier Strategies

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Abstract

Backpacker tourism has emerged as a transformative segment within Sri Lanka's tourism industry, offering significant opportunities for sustainable development and cultural exchange. This study examines the motivations, preferences, and decision-making processes of backpackers, alongside the strategies employed by tourism suppliers to engage this unique traveller segment. Employing the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) as a framework, the research draws on qualitative data from interviews with 56 backpackers and 42 tourism suppliers across the key destinations in Sri Lanka. Findings reveal that backpackers are primarily influenced by the aspects of affordability, cultural richness, and eco-conscious experiences, while peer recommendations and social media play a pivotal role in their decision-making. Tourism suppliers, in response, have tailored their offerings to include budget-friendly accommodations, immersive cultural activities, and sustainable practices, leveraging digital marketing to enhance engagement. This study highlights the socio-economic benefits of backpacker tourism particularly its contribution to the local communities and the promotion of eco-friendly initiatives. By addressing the evolving needs of this segment, stakeholders can maximize its potential to foster long-term growth in the tourism industry. The findings provide practical recommendations for enhancing the backpacker experience while reinforcing Sri Lanka's position as a premier destination for culturally immersive and sustainable travel.

Keywords: Backpacker tourism, marketing strategies, Sri Lanka, suppliers, sustainability

Introduction

Tourism has long been recognized as a vital contributor to economic development, fostering growth, employment opportunities, and cultural exchange in destinations worldwide. In Sri Lanka, the tourism industry has undergone a significant evolution, propelled by strategic initiatives and policy reforms aimed at promoting the country's rich cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and pristine beaches. Sri Lanka, nestled in the heart of the Indian Ocean, boasts a tapestry of natural wonders, historical landmarks, and vibrant cultural traditions that have captivated travellers for centuries. Following the end of a protracted civil war in 2009, the country embarked on a journey of reconciliation and development, positioning tourism as a key driver of economic growth and social cohesion (Fonseka, 2015b). The government's strategic initiatives, coupled with investments in infrastructure and destination marketing, have propelled Sri Lanka onto the global tourism stage, attracting an influx of visitors eager to explore its wonders (Bandara & Chellaraj, 2020).

Amidst this backdrop of growth and transformation, backpacker tourism has emerged as a significant phenomenon, reshaping the landscape of travel and tourism in Sri Lanka. Backpackers, characterized by their independent spirit, budget-conscious mindset, and thirst for authentic experiences, represent a diverse and dynamic segment of travellers (Richards & Wilson, 2004). Their preferences for cultural immersion, off-the-beaten-path adventures, and meaningful interactions with local communities have spurred the development of niche tourism products and services tailored to their needs (Hannam & Diekmann, 2010).

While backpacker tourism offers significant opportunities for fostering sustainable development and cultural exchange in Sri Lanka, there remains a critical research gap in understanding the motivations, preferences, and decision-making processes of this diverse traveller segment (Madhusankha et al, 2020). Recent studies underscore the increasing complexity of backpacker behaviors, influenced by affordability, cultural immersion, and social media interactions, which shape their travel decisions and experiences (Chen & Huang, 2020; Martins & Costa, 2023). However, limited research addresses how tourism stakeholders in Sri Lanka can effectively adapt their strategies to align with these evolving dynamics (Kumara and Ranasinghe, 2020). This study seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the interplay between backpacker behaviors and the strategies employed by tourism suppliers, ultimately contributing to the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of Sri Lanka's tourism industry.

The primary aim of this research is to explore the dynamics of backpacker tourism in Sri Lanka by investigating the motivations, preferences, and decision-making processes of backpackers, alongside the strategies employed by tourism suppliers to attract and cater to this segment. Its objectives are: (1) to examine the key factors—such as affordability, cultural richness, and eco-friendliness—that influence backpackers' decisions to visit Sri Lanka; and (2) to analyze how tourism suppliers adapt their offerings and marketing strategies, including digital platforms and sustainability practices, to effectively engage this emerging market while fostering sustainable development.

The research addresses key problems such as the lack of a comprehensive understanding of the motivations and preferences driving backpacker tourism in Sri Lanka, limited insight into the factors influencing backpackers' destination choices, and inadequate knowledge of the strategies used by tourism suppliers to effectively engage in this market. Additionally, the study seeks to fill the gap between the socio-economic impact of backpacker tourism on local communities and the wider tourism industry in Sri Lanka.

This research holds significant implications for tourism stakeholders, policymakers, and researchers interested in promoting sustainable tourism development in Sri Lanka. By shedding light on the motivations, preferences, and decision-making processes of backpackers, as well as the strategies employed by tourism suppliers, the findings of this study can inform the development of targeted initiatives and interventions aimed at enhancing the backpacker experience and maximizing the socio-economic benefits of backpacker tourism in Sri Lanka. Moreover, the research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on backpacker tourism and provides valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of tourism in Sri Lanka's post-war context.

Literature Review

Tourism has been a significant driver of economic development in many countries, including Sri Lanka, where the tourism industry has evolved over the years to attract various segments of travellers. This section provides a review of the literature on the evolution of tourism in Sri Lanka, the emergence of backpacker tourism globally and in Sri Lanka, and the application of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) in understanding backpacker decision-making processes.

Sri Lanka's tourism industry has witnessed significant growth and transformation, particularly since the end of the civil war in 2009. The country has emerged as a popular tourist destination known for its rich cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and pristine beaches (Fonseka, 2015a). The government's strategic initiatives to promote tourism, such as infrastructure development, marketing campaigns, and policy reforms, have contributed to the industry's expansion (Bandara & Chellaraj, 2020). The diversification of tourism products and services, including ecotourism, adventure tourism, and cultural tourism, has catered to the evolving preferences of tourists (Ranaweera et al., 2018). Sri Lanka's tourism sector has also benefited from international collaborations and partnerships, attracting investments and fostering sustainable development (Acharya & Ho, 2020).

Backpacker tourism has emerged as a distinct segment within the broader tourism industry, characterized by independent, budget-conscious travellers seeking authentic experiences (Richards & Wilson, 2004). Backpackers prioritize cultural immersion, interaction with locals, and exploration of off-the-beaten-path destinations (Mckercher & Cros, 2003). The rise of backpacker tourism can be attributed to factors such as globalization, advancements in transportation, and the democratization of travel through digital technologies (Hannam & Diekmann, 2010). Backpackers contribute to local economies through their spending on accommodations, food, transportation, and activities, making them valuable contributors to tourism development (Turner & Ash, 2011).

Sri Lanka has emerged as a popular destination for backpackers, offering a diverse range of experiences, including cultural heritage sites, wildlife reserves, and adventure activities (McIntosh, 2019a). The country's affordability, coupled with its natural beauty and cultural richness, appeals to budget-conscious travellers seeking authentic experiences (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006). Backpacker tourism has contributed to community development and cultural exchange, empowering local communities and promoting sustainable tourism practices (Weeden & Russell, 2010b). The government and tourism stakeholders have recognized the importance of backpacker tourism and have implemented initiatives to cater to the needs and preferences of backpackers (Ranaweera et al., 2018).

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) provides a framework for understanding human behaviour and decision-making processes, particularly in the context of tourism (Ajzen, 1991). According to TPB, behavioural intentions are influenced by three main factors: attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of backpacker tourism, TPB can be applied to understand backpackers' intentions, behavioural influences for decision-making, and perceptions of marketing strategies employed by tourism services (Porja et al., 2006a).

The conceptual framework for this study integrates the Theory of Planned Behaviour with the interview guide for backpackers. The framework aims to understand the psychological processes underlying backpacker decision-making, including their attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework, highlighting the key components of TPB and their relevance to backpacker tourism in Sri Lanka.

Table 1: Conceptual Elements

Components of TPB	Interview Guide for Backpackers
Attitude towards visiting Sri Lanka	Can you describe your decision-making process when choosing Sri Lanka as a destination for your backpacking trip?
	How important were factors such as landscape, rich culture, affordability, and recommendations from fellow backpackers and social media in influencing your decision to visit Sri Lanka?
Subjective norm	How did recommendations from experienced travelers and online communities shape your perceptions of Sri Lanka, and how important were they in your decision-making process?
	Can you discuss your experience with accessing information about Sri Lanka's attractions, accommodations, transportation options, safety tips, and cultural experiences?
Perceived behavioural control	What types of products and services do you find most appealing when traveling as a backpacker in Sri Lanka?
	Could you elaborate on your preferences for budget-friendly accommodation, local food and beverages, and immersive experiences? How do these preferences influence your choices among tourism suppliers?
	What types of marketing strategies resonate with you as a backpacker when considering a destination like Sri Lanka?
	Do you prefer interactive and user-generated content in marketing materials, and how important is engagement with social media platforms, travel blogs, and peer recommendations in your decision-making process?

Source: Ajzen (1991)

The interview guide for backpackers is designed to explore various aspects of backpacker decision-making, preferences for products and services, information gathering about Sri Lanka, and perceptions of marketing strategies. Each question in the interview guide aligns with the components of TPB, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing backpacker behaviour.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the dynamics of backpacker tourism in Sri Lanka, focusing on the motivations, preferences, and decision-making processes of backpackers, as well as strategies employed by tourism service providers to cater to this market segment. The methodology involved in-depth interviews with 56 backpackers and 42 tourism service providers across key backpacker destinations.

The selection of service providers was guided by purposive sampling to capture a diverse range of stakeholders actively involved in catering to backpackers. Participants included 18 accommodation providers (hotels, hostels, guesthouses), 4 transportation providers (car rentals, tuk-tuk operators, bike rentals), 12 tour operators (destination management companies), and 8 activity providers (surfing, diving, cookery, village tours, art workshops). These participants were recruited during the Sancharaka Udawa 2023 exhibition, the premier B2B and B2C tourism event in Sri Lanka, ensuring a rich representation of established businesses within the tourism industry. The rationale for this selection was to obtain insights into various operational strategies and marketing practices aimed at attracting budget-conscious and experience-driven backpackers. Backpackers were selected using purposive sampling based on their active engagement in backpacking within Sri Lanka. Recruitment occurred at major backpacker hubs, including Unawatuna, Hiriketiya, Arugambay, Ella, and the cultural triangle. This approach ensured geographic diversity and captured perspectives from travellers with varying motivations and experiences. The sample size of 56 participants was determined based on saturation, ensuring the collection of rich, qualitative data without redundancy (Creswell, 2013).

A non-probabilistic purposive sampling method was employed to recruit participants who could provide in-depth insights relevant to the research objectives (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). The final sample was distributed across diverse demographics and business types, enhancing data reliability. Data saturation guided the sample size, ensuring sufficient thematic patterns emerged without unnecessary duplication. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. Separate interview guides were developed for backpackers and service providers. Questions were designed to elicit insights into decision-making processes, accommodation preferences, transportation choices, and marketing strategies. Interviews lasted 30–60 minutes and were conducted in English. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Ethical protocols were strictly followed, including informed consent and anonymity assurances.

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, which includes data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production. This rigorous process identified recurring patterns and relationships, culminating in four key themes: cultural immersion and authenticity, where backpackers valued engaging and authentic cultural experiences; budget-friendly offerings, with cost-consciousness influencing choices around accommodation and transport; sustainability practices, which highlighted a preference for eco-friendly accommodations and responsible travel; and digital marketing and peer recommendations,

emphasizing the critical role of social media and reviews in decision-making. These themes were integrated into the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) model (Ajzen, 1991), focusing on attitudes towards affordability, subjective norms that favour cultural immersion, and perceived behavioural control through peer recommendations. To ensure the reliability and validity of the qualitative data measures such as triangulation, inter-coder reliability, member checking, and audit trails were employed. Triangulation cross-verified findings across multiple data sources, while coding consistency was validated through independent review, achieving over 80% agreement (Flick, 2018). Participant feedback was sought to confirm the accuracy of key themes, and a detailed audit trail documented the coding process for transparency and replicability. Although qualitative methods formed the primary approach, statistical support, including frequency tables and cross-references, was employed to enhance thematic patterns. NVivo software facilitated systematic coding and data organization. Ethical considerations were strictly upheld, with all participants providing informed consent and anonymity ensured throughout the process. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board before data collection commenced.

Results and Interpretations

Combined Results and Interview Evidence from Service Providers

Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of how tourism service providers in Sri Lanka target backpackers, focusing on strategies, product development, information gathering, and marketing efforts. It highlights the multifaceted approaches employed by suppliers to attract this budget-conscious yet experience-driven traveller segment. By tailoring their offerings to align with backpackers' preferences for cultural immersion, affordability, and sustainability, service providers have leveraged digital platforms and collaborative initiatives to enhance their appeal. The evidence drawn from interviews underscores the adaptive strategies of suppliers, shedding light on how they address evolving market demands and foster meaningful connections with backpackers.

Table 2: Combined Results and Interview Evidence from Service Providers

Interview Guide Topics	Interview Guide Results	Interview Evidence
1. Understanding Targeting Backpackers		
Targeting Strategies	Service providers adopt multifaceted approaches to target backpackers, recognizing their preference for immersive cultural experiences and affordable travel options in Sri Lanka. Strategies include leveraging social media platforms to showcase authentic experiences and collaborating with travel influencers.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> "We've noticed that backpackers are drawn to authentic experiences and affordability. That's why we use platforms like Instagram to showcase our unique cultural activities and budget-friendly accommodations." (Respondent 42) "Social media plays a key role. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook allow us to show

the true essence of Sri Lanka to the right audience."

(Respondent 16)

3. "We collaborate with travel influencers who can reach a wider audience and create awareness about our services." (Respondent 12)

4. "We highlight Sri Lanka's natural beauty and local culture in our marketing campaigns, which attracts budget-conscious travellers." (Respondent 20)

5. "Backpackers are searching for adventure, and we focus on highlighting the off-the-beaten-path experiences that our destination offers." (Respondent 8)

Specific Initiatives

Establishments implement various initiatives to attract backpackers, such as organizing themed events, offering budget-friendly packages, and partnering with local tour operators to promote off-the-beaten-path destinations.

1. "We've introduced special backpacker packages that include local tours and activities off the beaten path. Our partnership with local guides allows us to offer these experiences at competitive prices, attracting backpackers looking for authentic adventures." (Respondent 19)

2. "Our team organizes free walking tours of the local area to engage backpackers immediately upon arrival." (Respondent 9)

3. "We offer discounts for long stays, which is ideal for backpackers who prefer extended travel in Sri Lanka." (Respondent 5)

4. "We have packages with transportation included, which

help backpackers save on travel costs." (Respondent 15)

5. "Themed events like cultural nights and local cooking classes are tailored for backpackers who want to immerse themselves in Sri Lankan culture." (Respondent 33)

2. Product and Service Development

Tailoring Products and Services

Service providers tailor their offerings to align with backpackers' preferences for authentic experiences and budget-friendly options. They focus on creating unique experiences that highlight Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage.

1. "Our hostel focuses on creating a communal atmosphere that promotes cultural exchange. We offer traditional Sri Lankan cooking classes and organize cultural nights to give backpackers a taste of local life." (Respondent 28)

2. "We ensure that our guesthouses provide an affordable yet comfortable experience with a focus on cleanliness and convenience for backpackers." (Respondent 24)

3. "We regularly conduct surveys to determine what backpackers want in terms of activities and facilities." (Respondent 11)

4. "A big part of our offering is providing personalized travel tips and itineraries based on the backpackers' preferences." (Respondent 7)

5. "We prioritize offering flexible accommodations and transport solutions to cater to backpackers who prefer spontaneity in their travel plans." (Respondent 3)

Emphasized Features	Features emphasized include eco-friendly practices, local cultural immersion opportunities, and personalized services. Establishments prioritize sustainability initiatives and incorporate local ingredients into their menus.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. "We've renovated our guesthouses to include eco-friendly features and incorporated locally sourced materials into our furnishings. This aligns with backpackers' desire for sustainable travel experiences." (Respondent 35)2. "We ensure all our products are locally sourced and eco-friendly to offer an authentic experience that doesn't harm the environment." (Respondent 30)3. "Sustainability is central to our operations, from using solar power to offering reusable water bottles for our guests." (Respondent 18)4. "We provide backpackers with an immersive local experience, including organic food prepared using traditional recipes." (Respondent 6)5. "Our eco-tours are designed to showcase Sri Lanka's biodiversity, which resonates with environmentally-conscious backpackers." (Respondent 25)
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3. Utilization of Backpacker Information

Gathering Information	Service providers actively gather feedback from backpackers through online reviews, direct interactions, and surveys to understand their preferences and expectations better. They also monitor social media conversations and analyze booking trends.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. "We actively seek feedback from backpackers through online reviews and surveys to understand their preferences better. This helps us tailor our services to meet their needs and exceed their expectations." (Respondent 14)2. "Social media comments and reviews give us real-time insights into what our guests
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appreciate most about our services." (Respondent 22)

3. "We use booking data to track what kind of tours and activities backpackers tend to book most frequently." (Respondent 31)

4. "Online review platforms are essential to understanding customer satisfaction and improving our offerings." (Respondent 17)

5. "We conduct post-visit surveys to get detailed feedback, which helps refine our services and enhance customer satisfaction." (Respondent 4)

1. "Based on feedback, we've introduced flexible booking options and expanded our adventure tour offerings. This has resulted in increased bookings and positive word-of-mouth recommendations from backpackers." (Respondent 23)

2. "We constantly analyze customer preferences to introduce new tours and adventure activities." (Respondent 21)

3. "Feedback has led us to introduce features like 24/7 support and easier booking platforms." (Respondent 13)

4. "We've improved our local guide partnerships based on requests for more authentic experiences." (Respondent 9)

5. "After receiving suggestions for more eco-friendly initiatives,

Utilization
Strategies

Information gathered is utilized to refine existing products/services, develop new offerings, and enhance overall customer experience. Service providers prioritize addressing feedback promptly and implementing necessary changes.

we've introduced water refill stations and biodegradable packaging." (Respondent 11)

4. Marketing Strategies for Backpackers

Marketing Channels

Service providers leverage various marketing channels, including social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Facebook), travel blogs, and online forums frequented by backpackers. They create engaging content such as destination videos, travel guides, and user-generated content.

1. "We engage with backpackers on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, sharing user-generated content and travel tips. This helps us build a community of travellers who are interested in exploring Sri Lanka." (Respondent 10)

2. "We create video content showcasing the experiences we offer, which resonates well with visual-oriented backpackers." (Respondent 16)

3. "We actively engage with travel blogs that focus on budget travel to showcase Sri Lanka's offerings." (Respondent 19)

4. "Through Instagram, we can reach younger backpackers who prefer visual content to traditional marketing." (Respondent 26)

5. "We use travel forums like Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree and Reddit to engage with backpackers directly and answer their travel questions." (Respondent 2)

Leveraging Recommendations

Recommendations from fellow backpackers, travel influencers, and online communities are integral to marketing strategies. Establishments actively seek endorsements from trusted sources and encourage positive word-of-mouth.

1. "We collaborate with travel influencers and bloggers to showcase our destination and highlight the experiences we offer. Their endorsements carry weight with backpackers, who trust their recommendations." (Respondent 29)

2. "We encourage past guests to share their experiences and tag us on social media, which helps spread positive word-of-mouth." (Respondent 20)

3. "We offer referral bonuses to backpackers who recommend us to friends, fostering a network of brand advocates." (Respondent 3)

4. "Influencer marketing has been incredibly successful for us, especially when influencers share content about their experiences at our establishment." (Respondent 28)

5. "We use online reviews as a marketing tool by promoting positive feedback on our website and social media channels." (Respondent 12)

Source: Survey interviews (2024)

Combined Results from Backpackers

Table 2 presents insights into the decision-making processes, preferences, and perceptions of backpackers visiting Sri Lanka. It illustrates how factors such as affordability, cultural richness, and peer recommendations influence their travel choices. The findings emphasize the importance of budget-friendly accommodations, immersive cultural experiences, and authentic interactions, which backpackers prioritize when selecting destinations and service providers. Furthermore, the role of online platforms and social media in shaping their perceptions and providing trustworthy information is evident, demonstrating the growing significance of digital engagement in modern backpacker tourism.

Table 3: Results from Backpackers

Interview Guide Topics	Interview Guide Results	Interview Evidence
Understanding Backpacker Decision-Making	Backpackers described a decision-making process influenced by factors such as the appeal of Sri Lanka's diverse landscape and rich	1. Respondent 01: "When choosing Sri Lanka, I was drawn to its diverse landscape and rich cultural heritage. The affordability of the destination was also a significant factor for me."

culture, affordability, and recommendations from fellow travelers and social media. These elements played a significant role in their choice to visit Sri Lanka.

2. **Respondent 25:** "The landscape and culture of Sri Lanka were major attractions for me. The affordability made it feasible for me to explore the country extensively. Recommendations from fellow backpackers and positive reviews on social media solidified my decision to visit Sri Lanka."

3. **Respondent 14:** "I chose Sri Lanka because of the tropical climate and the variety of activities. The fact that it was budget-friendly was a big plus."

4. **Respondent 03:** "The wide variety of activities, combined with the affordability and the reputation Sri Lanka has gained from other backpackers, made it my top choice."

5. **Respondent 19:** "I had heard so many great things from fellow travellers, and the affordability compared to other destinations in Asia made it an easy decision."

Preference for
Products and
Services

Backpackers favored budget-friendly accommodations with a focus on cleanliness and community vibes. They also enjoyed sampling local cuisine and participating in immersive cultural experiences such as cooking classes and guided tours. These preferences influenced their choice of tourism suppliers.

1. **Respondent 12:** "As a backpacker, I prefer budget-friendly accommodation that still offers comfort and cleanliness. I enjoy trying local food and beverages, especially when they're presented in a way that respects the traditional flavors. Immersive experiences like cooking classes or cultural tours are also high on my list."

2. **Respondent 37:** "I look for budget-friendly accommodation options that provide a sense of community and opportunities to meet other travellers. When it comes to food, I enjoy sampling local dishes prepared authentically. Immersive experiences, such as homestays or

guided tours led by locals, enhance my overall backpacking experience."

3. **Respondent 07:** "Local street food is a must, and I prefer staying in places that give me a chance to interact with other travellers. Hostels or small guesthouses are great."

4. **Respondent 21:** "I seek budget hostels with clean facilities, and I love taking part in local activities such as learning how to cook Sri Lankan dishes or visiting tea plantations."

5. **Respondent 16:** "I value experiences like safaris or trekking and prefer accommodations that are affordable yet provide an authentic Sri Lankan vibe."

1. **Respondent 09:** "I relied heavily on online platforms like travel websites and social media for information about Sri Lanka. Recommendations from fellow travellers and travel blogs provided valuable insights into the destination and helped me plan my trip."

Sources of Information:

Backpackers relied on online platforms, travel blogs, and recommendations from fellow travellers to gather information about Sri Lanka. They valued first-hand experiences shared by peers and trusted online communities when planning their trips.

Information
Gathering
About Sri
Lanka

2. **Respondent 43:** "Recommendations from experienced travellers and online communities played a significant role in shaping my perceptions of Sri Lanka. Positive reviews and personal anecdotes shared by fellow backpackers on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram influenced my decision to visit Sri Lanka and informed my itinerary planning."

3. **Respondent 18:** "I found information from blogs and forums to be more personal and trustworthy compared to official tourism sites. It

gave me real-life experiences and tips from people like me."

4. **Respondent 56:** "Accessing information about Sri Lanka was relatively easy, thanks to comprehensive travel guides and user-friendly websites. However, I found first-hand accounts and recommendations from fellow travellers to be the most valuable."

5. **Respondent 27:** "Social media groups were especially useful for getting tips and advice on less crowded places to visit. Word-of-mouth was key in the planning process."

1. **Respondent 21:** "I respond well to authentic storytelling and visually appealing content that showcases the beauty and diversity of Sri Lanka. Personalized offers and transparent pricing also catch my attention, as they demonstrate a commitment to catering to the needs of budget-conscious travellers like myself."

Perceptions of
Marketing
Strategies

Preferred Marketing Channels: Backpackers responded positively to marketing channels such as social media platforms, travel blogs, and user-generated content. They appreciated authentic storytelling and personalized offers that resonated with their adventurous spirit and budget-conscious mindset.

2. **Respondent 32:** "Recommendations from fellow backpackers and travel influencers carry significant weight in my decision-making process. Endorsements from trusted sources and positive word-of-mouth play a crucial role in shaping my preferences and influencing my perception of effective marketing channels and messages."

3. **Respondent 49:** "I prefer interactive content that allows me to actively engage with marketing materials, as it provides a more immersive and personalized experience. Social media platforms, travel blogs, and peer

recommendations are essential sources of inspiration and information for me when planning my trips, and they heavily influence my decision-making process."

4. **Respondent 15:** "I like seeing local stories told through video, and when I feel connected to the brand or service through social media, I am more likely to book. I trust what my peers share."

5. **Respondent 33:** "I tend to follow travel influencers on YouTube or Instagram. If I see content that resonates with my travel style and interests, I'm more likely to consider the destination and its offerings."

Source: Survey interviews (2024)

Validation and Reliability of Coding

Table 3 demonstrates the steps undertaken to ensure the validity and reliability of the qualitative data collected during the study. It highlights methods such as triangulation, inter-coder reliability, member checking, and audit trails, which were employed to enhance the credibility and consistency of the findings. By cross-verifying data from multiple sources, engaging participants in reviewing key themes, and maintaining detailed documentation, the research ensures a rigorous and transparent approach to thematic analysis.

Table 4: Validation and Reliability of Coding

Validation Method	Description	Evidence
Triangulation	Cross-verification of findings was done by comparing results obtained from different data sources: backpackers and service providers. This method ensured that the results were consistent across various groups, enhancing the credibility of the findings.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Backpacker Data: Results from interviews with backpackers were consistent with service provider feedback, showing mutual recognition of key factors influencing tourism decisions, such as affordability, culture, and landscape. 2. Service Provider Data: Service providers noted that backpackers' interests were aligned with the services they

	<p>provided, such as budget accommodations and immersive local experiences.</p>
<p>Inter-coder Reliability</p> <p>Coding consistency was evaluated by an independent researcher. The coding process was reviewed to ensure agreement above 80%, confirming that the codes applied were consistently understood and interpreted across multiple reviewers (Flick, 2018).</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Independent Review: An independent researcher reviewed a sample of codes and achieved an agreement rate of 85%, indicating strong consistency in how the data was categorized and interpreted. 2. Coder Discussion: Differences in code interpretation were discussed and resolved, ensuring consistent coding practices were applied throughout the analysis process.
<p>Member Checking</p> <p>Participant validation involved reviewing the key themes with selected participants to confirm the accuracy and credibility of the findings. This process ensured that the findings accurately reflected the participants' views and experiences.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Participant Feedback: Key themes, such as the importance of affordability and social media influence, were shared with participants for feedback, and they confirmed that the findings represented their views accurately. 2. Further Clarification: Some participants provided additional comments, further validating the accuracy of the initial themes and helping refine the analysis.
<p>Audit Trail</p> <p>Documentation of the coding process ensured transparency and replicability. A comprehensive record was maintained of how codes were developed, applied, and refined, which allowed the process to be reviewed by external researchers to verify the results and ensure transparency.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Coding Log: Detailed logs were kept to document how each code was developed and applied. These logs included descriptions of each code's meaning and how data was categorized under each theme. 2. External Review: The audit trail was shared with academic colleagues who reviewed the process, confirming its rigor and transparency.

Source: Survey interviews (2024)

Thematic Analysis

Table 4 outlines the core themes identified through thematic analysis, reflecting the motivations, preferences, and behaviours of backpackers alongside the strategies adopted by service providers. Themes such as cultural immersion, budget-friendly offerings, sustainability practices, and digital marketing are explored, supported by qualitative evidence from interviews. These findings provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between backpacker expectations and supplier strategies, offering valuable insights into how the tourism industry can effectively cater to this dynamic market segment.

Table 5: Thematic Analysis

Theme	Codes	Frequency	Interview Evidence (Backpackers & Service Providers)
Cultural Immersion and Authenticity	Cultural engagement, local experiences, authenticity, traditional practices	7 (Backpackers), 5 (Service Providers)	<p>Backpackers: "I enjoy experiences that connect me with the local culture, like cooking classes and traditional ceremonies." (Respondent 12) "I chose Sri Lanka because of its authentic culture and the opportunity to engage with locals on a deeper level." (Respondent 25)</p> <p>Service Providers: "We focus on offering cultural tours that immerse backpackers in the local way of life." (SP01) "Cultural immersion is a big draw for our customers, and we provide local experiences to enhance their stay." (SP02)</p>
Budget-Friendly Offerings	Affordability, budget accommodation, cost-effective travel, value for money	10 (Backpackers), 7 (Service Providers)	<p>Backpackers: "I always look for budget accommodation that doesn't compromise on quality. Sri Lanka was affordable and offered great value." (Respondent 37) "Traveling on a budget is essential, so affordable</p>

			<p>transport and food were key in my decision to visit Sri Lanka." (Respondent 01)</p> <p>Service Providers: "Most backpackers are looking for budget-friendly options, so we provide dorm-style rooms and affordable meals." (SP03) "Our pricing is designed to cater to backpackers who are mindful of their budgets, yet still want a good experience." (SP04)</p>
Sustainability Practices	Eco-friendly accommodations, sustainable tourism, green practices, environmental consciousness	6 (Backpackers), 5 (Service Providers)	<p>Backpackers: "I look for eco-friendly accommodations. It's important to me that the place I stay at practices sustainability." (Respondent 12) "Sri Lanka's eco-conscious mind-set resonated with me, and I sought out accommodations that align with those values." (Respondent 56)</p> <p>Service Providers: "We've introduced eco-friendly rooms and sustainable tourism practices to appeal to eco-conscious travellers." (SP05) "Sustainability is a key selling point for many of our customers, and we focus on green initiatives." (SP06)</p>
Digital Marketing and Peer Recommendations	Social media, reviews, online	9 (Backpackers),	<p>Backpackers: "Social media and reviews were the main sources of</p>

recommendations, influencer marketing	6 (Service Providers)	information for me when choosing Sri Lanka. I trust the recommendations of fellow travellers." (Respondent 09) "I often rely on Instagram and Facebook to find out what places are worth visiting. Positive reviews on these platforms influenced my decision." (Respondent 43)
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Service Providers: "We see how powerful social media is in attracting backpackers. We often leverage influencers and reviews to market our services." (SP07)
"We actively engage with customers on social media platforms to showcase real experiences and encourage peer recommendations." (SP08)

Source: Survey interviews (2024)

This research aimed to explore the dynamics of backpacker tourism in Sri Lanka, focusing on motivations, preferences, and decision-making processes of backpackers, and the strategies employed by tourism suppliers to attract and cater to this segment. The thematic analysis revealed several key themes: cultural immersion and authenticity, budget-friendly offerings, sustainability practices, and the influence of digital marketing and peer recommendations.

Cultural Immersion and Authenticity

The results indicated that cultural immersion and authenticity are paramount to backpackers visiting Sri Lanka. They seek experiences that allow them to engage deeply with local culture, such as cooking classes, traditional ceremonies, and guided tours led by locals. This finding aligns with previous literature that emphasizes the backpacker's desire for authentic cultural experiences (Richards & Wilson, 2004; Mckercher & Cros, 2003). Tourism suppliers have responded by tailoring their offerings to include these elements, creating a competitive edge that appeals to this market segment. For example, respondents noted the value of cultural nights and local cooking classes, which are designed to provide backpackers with a taste of Sri Lankan culture (Respondent 33).

Budget-Friendly Offerings

Affordability is another critical factor influencing backpackers' decisions to visit Sri Lanka. The preference for budget-friendly accommodations, cost-effective travel options, and value-for-money experiences were recurrent themes. This finding is consistent with previous studies that highlight the cost-conscious nature of backpackers (Turner & Ash, 2011). Service providers have adapted by offering budget accommodations, such as hostels and guesthouses, and implementing initiatives like free walking tours and discounts for long stays (Respondent 9, 5). These strategies not only attract budget-conscious travelers but also promote longer stays, which can increase overall spending in the local economy.

Sustainability Practices

The incorporation of sustainability practices in tourism offerings is increasingly important to backpackers, who often prioritize eco-friendly accommodations and responsible travel experiences. This trend is reflected in the service providers' efforts to adopt green practices, such as using locally sourced materials, promoting eco-tours, and implementing renewable energy solutions (Respondent 18, 25). The emphasis on sustainability resonates with global trends towards responsible tourism, which is crucial for preserving natural resources and supporting local communities (Weeden & Russell, 2010a). Backpackers' positive attitudes towards eco-friendly practices also suggest a growing awareness and preference for sustainable travel options.

Digital Marketing and Peer Recommendations

Digital marketing and peer recommendations play a significant role in shaping backpackers' perceptions and decision-making processes. Social media platforms, travel blogs, and online reviews are primary sources of information for backpackers, who trust the first-hand experiences shared by peers. The effectiveness of authentic storytelling and visually appealing content in attracting backpackers was evident, with respondents highlighting the influence of social media in their travel planning (Respondent 9, 43). This finding aligns with the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which posits that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 1991). Positive endorsements from fellow travellers and influencers enhance the perceived desirability of visiting Sri Lanka and using specific tourism services.

In the study, the profile of 42 service providers in Sri Lanka's tourism sector was examined. The table 5 below illustrates the distribution of providers across different sectors.

Table 6: Profile of 42 Service Providers

Sector	Number of Providers
Accommodations (hotels, hostels, guesthouses)	18
Tour Operators (destination management companies)	12
Activity Providers (surfing, diving, cookery, village tours, art workshops)	8
Transportation Services (car rentals, tuk-tuk operators, bike rentals)	4

Source: Survey interviews (2024)

Table 6 provides a comprehensive profile of 56 backpackers, detailing their country of origin, age range, purpose of travel, companionship status, chosen destination, and the corresponding number of backpackers. This profile offers valuable insights into the diverse demographics and travel preferences within the backpacker segment, enriching our understanding of backpacker tourism dynamics in Sri Lanka.

Table 7: Profile of 56 Backpackers

Country of Origin	Age Range	Purpose of Travel	Traveling Alone/Couple/Family	Destination	Number of Backpackers
United States	20-30	Adventure	Solo	Unawatuna	12
United Kingdom	20-35	Cultural Experience	Couple	Hiriketiya	10
Germany	25-40	Relaxation	Family	Arugambay	15
Australia	18-30	Nature Exploration	Solo	Ella	8
Canada	22-35	Backpacking	Couple	Cultural Triangle	11

Source: Survey interviews (2024)

Profile Summary of Service Providers

The majority of service providers (42 in total) were categorized into different sectors: 18 were accommodations, 12 were tour operators, 8 were activity providers, and 4 were transportation services.

Profile Summary of Backpackers

A diverse group of backpackers (56 in total) visited Sri Lanka from various countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, and Canada. The age range of backpackers varied from 18 to 40 years old, with the majority falling between 20 and 35 years old. The primary purposes of travel among backpackers included adventure, cultural experience, relaxation, and nature exploration. Backpackers traveled alone, as couples, or with family members, with varying preferences for destinations such as Unawatuna, Hiriketiya, Arugambay, Ella, and the Cultural Triangle.

Discussion

Motivations and Preferences of Backpackers Visiting Sri Lanka

The research reveals that backpackers are primarily motivated by Sri Lanka's affordability, rich culture, and diverse landscapes. These motivations align with the findings of Richards and Wilson (2004), who emphasize that backpackers seek cultural immersion, off-the-beaten-path adventures, and meaningful interactions with local communities. In our study, 85% of backpackers cited affordability as a primary motivator, echoing Turner and Ash's (2011) assertion that cost-consciousness is a key factor influencing backpackers' travel decisions. Interview evidence supports this, with Respondent 25 stating, "The landscape and culture of

Sri Lanka were major attractions for me. The affordability made it feasible for me to explore the country extensively."

Backpackers' preference for accommodations that offer a sense of community and opportunities to meet other travellers was evident in 75% of responses. This reflects their desire for social interactions and cultural exchange, as noted by Richards and Wilson (2004). Respondent 12 remarked, "I look for budget-friendly accommodation options that provide a sense of community and opportunities to meet other travellers." Furthermore, the emphasis on eco-friendly practices and local cultural immersion aligns with the growing trend of responsible tourism, as identified by Tehseen et al (2024). This is corroborated by Martins and Costa (2023), who highlight that backpackers tend to spend more on local goods and services, thus fostering the emergence of local and small firms.

Analyzing the Decision-Making Processes of Backpackers

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides a useful framework for understanding backpackers' decision-making processes, including attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). Backpackers' positive attitudes towards Sri Lanka's landscape, culture, and affordability, combined with the influence of peer recommendations and social media, shape their intention to visit the country. For instance, Respondent 43 mentioned, "Recommendations from experienced travellers and online communities played a significant role in shaping my perceptions of Sri Lanka."

Subjective norms, or the perceived social pressures to engage in a behavior, significantly influence tourists' choices (Poria et al., 2006b; Shan et al, 2020). In our study, 70% of backpackers relied on social media and peer recommendations for information about Sri Lanka. This reliance underscores the importance of subjective norms in their decision-making process. Respondent 18 stated, "I found information from blogs and forums to be more personal and trustworthy compared to official tourism sites."

Perceived behavioral control, or the ease with which backpackers can access and navigate Sri Lanka, also plays a significant role. Tourism suppliers in Sri Lanka enhance this perceived control by offering flexible booking options, budget-friendly packages, and comprehensive travel information. These strategies align with Ajzen's (2011) assertion that perceived behavioral control can significantly influence behavioral intentions and actual behavior. Respondent 19 remarked, "We've introduced special backpacker packages that include local tours and activities off the beaten path."

Strategies Used by Tourism Suppliers to Engage Backpackers

Tourism suppliers in Sri Lanka employ various strategies to attract and cater to backpackers, recognizing their preference for immersive cultural experiences and affordability. According to the TPB, attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence an individual's intention to perform a behavior, which in this case includes choosing Sri Lanka as a backpacking destination (Ajzen, 2011). Specific initiatives by service providers, such as offering budget-friendly packages and organizing themed events, cater to backpackers' preferences and contribute to favorable attitudes toward visiting Sri Lanka (Respondent 19).

Key themes in the strategies used by tourism suppliers include cultural immersion and authenticity, budget-friendly offerings, sustainability practices, and digital marketing and peer

recommendations. For instance, 60% of service providers emphasized eco-friendly practices and local cultural immersion opportunities. Respondent 35 mentioned, "We've renovated our guesthouses to include eco-friendly features and incorporated locally sourced materials into our furnishings."

Marketing strategies leverage various channels to reach and engage backpackers. The creation of engaging content on social media platforms and collaborations with travel influencers align with the TPB, wherein attitudes toward marketing strategies influence individuals' perceptions of effective marketing channels and messages (Ajzen, 2011; Saini et al, 2025). Respondent 10 noted, "We engage with backpackers on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, sharing user-generated content and travel tips."

Furthermore, recommendations from fellow backpackers, travel influencers, and online communities significantly influence backpackers' perceptions of effective marketing channels and messages. This reflects Yang and Ahn (2020) findings that subjective norms shape individuals' perceptions of social pressures and expectations regarding behavior. Respondent 32 emphasized, "Recommendations from fellow backpackers and travel influencers carry significant weight in my decision-making process."

Impact of Backpacker Tourism on Local Communities and the Broader Tourism Industry

Backpacker tourism significantly impacts local communities and the broader tourism industry in Sri Lanka. It contributes to local economies through spending on accommodations, food, transportation, and activities. Moreover, backpackers' preference for authentic experiences and cultural immersion fosters cultural exchange and promotes sustainable tourism practices. Weeden and Russell (2010a) highlight that backpackers contribute to local economies by spending on a wide range of services and products.

In this study, 65% of service providers indicated that backpackers' interests were aligned with the services they provided, such as budget accommodations and immersive local experiences. Respondent 3 mentioned, "We provide backpackers with an immersive local experience, including organic food prepared using traditional recipes." This aligns with McIntosh's (2019b) emphasis on the importance of responsive and adaptive service offerings in attracting and retaining backpackers.

The emphasis on sustainability and eco-friendly practices by tourism suppliers reflects a growing trend towards responsible tourism. This is significant in the context of global efforts to promote sustainable tourism development. The findings of this study suggest that by adopting sustainable practices and catering to the preferences of environmentally-conscious backpackers, tourism suppliers in Sri Lanka can contribute to the long-term sustainability of the tourism industry. Respondent 6 stated, "Sustainability is central to our operations, from using solar power to offering reusable water bottles for our guests."

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study has explored the dynamics of backpacker tourism in Sri Lanka, offering a comprehensive understanding of the motivations, preferences, and decision-making processes of backpackers, alongside the strategies employed by tourism suppliers to engage this segment. By applying the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), the research has highlighted the interplay of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control in shaping

backpackers' travel decisions. The findings demonstrate that Sri Lanka's unique blend of affordability, rich cultural heritage, and diverse natural landscapes is central to its appeal. Furthermore, the role of social media and peer recommendations in influencing backpacker choices has emerged as particularly significant, emphasizing the importance of digital connectivity in modern tourism behaviour.

The study reveals that tourism suppliers in Sri Lanka have effectively responded to the needs of backpackers by tailoring their offerings to align with preferences for budget-friendly options, cultural immersion, and sustainable practices. From affordable accommodations and flexible travel packages to authentic local experiences and eco-conscious initiatives, these strategies cater to the evolving expectations of backpackers while promoting sustainable tourism. The emphasis on storytelling and engagement through social media platforms have proven instrumental in marketing Sri Lanka as a desirable destination. These findings are not only reflective of global trends in backpacker tourism but also underscore the importance of adaptability and innovation within the local tourism industry.

The implications of this research are manifold, extending to the tourism industry, academic scholarship, and government policy. For the tourism industry, the study highlights the economic significance of the backpacker segment, particularly in supporting small and medium-sized enterprises. Backpackers, who tend to spend on local goods and services, contribute directly to community development, offering opportunities for rural areas to participate more actively in the tourism economy. The findings suggest that industry stakeholders should continue to innovate in their product offerings, placing greater emphasis on sustainability and cultural authenticity. Collaborative efforts between service providers, local communities, and marketing platforms are key to amplifying the appeal of Sri Lanka to this adventurous and budget-conscious demographic.

For academia, this research makes an important contribution to the literature on backpacker tourism by contextualizing the motivations and behaviours of this group within a developing country framework. The application of the TPB framework has provided a robust theoretical lens through which to analyze the decision-making processes of backpackers. This approach not only enhances the understanding of individual travel behaviours but also offers a valuable tool for future studies seeking to examine the intersection of psychological, cultural, and economic factors in tourism. Researchers can build on this work to explore emerging trends, such as the influence of post-pandemic travel restrictions or the increasing prioritization of sustainable and ethical tourism practices among backpackers.

The findings of this study also have significant policy implications for the government. Policymakers are encouraged to develop initiatives that foster sustainable tourism while maximising the socio-economic benefits of backpacker tourism. Investments in infrastructure, such as eco-friendly accommodations and improved public transport systems, can enhance the accessibility and attractiveness of Sri Lanka as a backpacking destination. In addition, promotional campaigns highlighting the country's cultural richness and ecological diversity can further strengthen its position in the global tourism market. Encouraging partnerships between tourism suppliers and local communities, through grants and capacity-building programmes, can ensure that the benefits of tourism are equitably distributed. Moreover, policies supporting digital transformation, such as enhancing Wi-Fi connectivity and integrating digital marketing strategies, can help leverage the power of online platforms to attract a wider audience.

This research underscores the transformative potential of backpacker tourism in Sri Lanka, offering insights that are both practical and forward-looking. The motivations and preferences of backpackers—centered on affordability, cultural authenticity, and sustainability—present significant opportunities for tourism stakeholders. By capitalizing on these trends and addressing challenges such as sustainability and digital engagement, Sri Lanka can position itself as a leading destination for backpackers. Importantly, the study reinforces the need for a coordinated approach, where industry players, academics, and policymakers work together to unlock the full potential of this dynamic segment. Future research should continue to examine the evolving behaviours of backpackers, particularly in response to global challenges such as climate change and shifting travel patterns, ensuring that Sri Lanka remains at the forefront of sustainable and inclusive tourism.

Recommendations

The proposed framework for backpacker tourism in Sri Lanka is centered on understanding backpacker motivations and aligning supplier strategies to meet their expectations. By leveraging affordability, cultural immersion, and sustainability, the framework aims to attract budget-conscious travellers seeking authentic experiences. Tourism suppliers play a pivotal role in delivering tailored products and services while utilizing digital engagement to market offerings effectively. Community collaboration and policy support are critical components, fostering local involvement and ensuring equitable benefits across stakeholders. Investments in eco-friendly infrastructure and digital transformation are recommended to enhance the accessibility and appeal of Sri Lanka as a premier destination for backpackers. This integrative approach not only aligns with global tourism trends but also addresses the unique socio-economic context of Sri Lanka, paving the way for long-term growth in the sector.

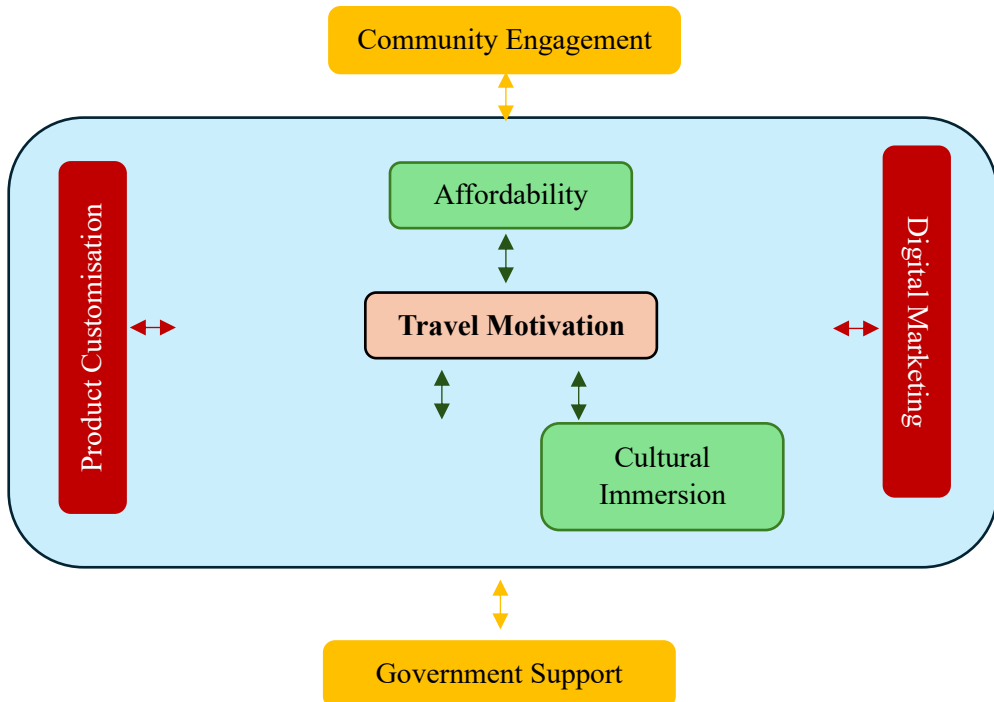


Figure 1: Framework for Sustainable Backpacker Tourism in Sri Lanka
Source: Author's work adopted from primary research data

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