

# **Spiritual Tourism, Spiritual Tourists and Religions: the nexus between Authenticity and Commodification**

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# **Spiritual Tourism, Spiritual Tourists and Religions: the nexus between Authenticity and Commodification**

## **Abstract**

Lack of mental stimulation and the materialisation of contemporary living has led to a growing demand for spiritual travel. Considering the abiding principle of spiritual tourism as a type of wellness tourism, similarities between spiritual tourism and the Mandala health model can be observed. This study explores spiritual tourism in Sri Lanka, emphasising its potential as a form of health tourism. Qualitative methods, including interviews with spiritual tourists and spiritual tourism service providers, were employed, underpinned by the Mandala health model. It uncovers that religious motives, cultural and environmental factors, and personal beliefs contribute to spiritual tourism and that Sri Lanka, rich in cultural and natural resources, is poised for spiritual tourism growth. The study emphasises understanding tourists' motives, behaviour, and the supply side, using the Mandala health model. It identifies a nexus between existential authenticity and commodification, posing challenges for sustainable spiritual tourism development in Sri Lanka.

*Keywords:* Existential authenticity, Mandala health model, religious tourism, spiritual tourism, spiritual tourists, commodification

## **Introduction**

Tourism has a prolonged history with spirituality and its association with religions and pilgrimage travels (Apollo et al., 2020). Out of many motives to travel, spirituality has turned out to be of vital importance. Many scholars have identified travelling as a way of finding their true selves (e.g., Ashton, 2018; Tilson, 2005). The demand to fulfil spiritual and mental renewal urges has risen among tourists along with associated services (Ashton, 2018; Cheer et al., 2017). There is a contemporary trend towards spiritual tourism and the focus of much travel has changed. As stated by Ambrož and Ovsenik (2011), many travel to seek the meaning of their modern, free, and independent lives and see traveling as the only way to discover that. A study by Haq and Jackson (2006) described spiritual tourism as a tourism market for countries eager for economic development, yet often with a scarcity of required resources and infrastructure. They consider spiritual tourism to be a solution for less developed countries that cannot offer high-end facilities to tourists but instead can attract a considerable number of tourists by creating platforms for their spiritual needs.

People seek new destinations and places where they can spend their holidays attaining both physical and psychological satisfaction, with spirituality becoming an increasingly important element (Cheer et al., 2017). As a result, demand for the satisfaction of spiritual and mental renewal tourism services has been increasing around the world (Gilli & Ferrari, 2017). There has been an upsurge towards travelling to scenic natural destinations which also contain facilities to renew the mind and spirit. Tourists increasingly want to enhance their personal growth and deepen their

experience through a journey that leads them toward spiritual healing (Choe & O'Regan, 2020). Spiritual tourism has become a significant motive for traveling and a rising concept in many countries. India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Italy are some destinations that practice spiritual tourism along with their cultural, natural, and religious attractions (see Choe et al., 2013; Geary, 2008; Gilli & Ferrari, 2017). Sri Lanka is considered blessed with ample natural and cultural attractions and is also a multi-national and multi-religious country (Dissanayake & Samarathunga, 2020; Jayasinghe & Wimalaratana, 2020; Samarathunga et al., 2020). The "Religious Tourism in Asia and the Pacific" publication highlighted Asia and the Pacific as the world's region with the greatest number of tourists travelling for pilgrimages and religious events (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2011). All these elements underpin a footing for spiritual tourism in Sri Lanka.

Studies related to authenticity and spirituality have attracted a considerable number of scholars in various contexts, including religion, selflessness, and leadership (e.g., Ortiz-Gómez et al., 2020; Christy et al., 2020). All these studies explore the interconnection between adhering to standards and maintaining authenticity when delivering various services. The concept of authenticity, however, has not been extensively applied in the context of spiritual tourism, which is gaining popularity nowadays. Out of two versions of authenticity: objective authenticity and existential authenticity, the present study adopts existential authenticity to inquire about the research problem under investigation. Existential authenticity indicates how well the tourists experience an authentic and true encounter with hosts at the destinations (Steiner & Reisinger 2006; Wearing, McDonald, & Ankor, 2016). Although many tourists visit Eastern destinations in search of true and authentic spiritual experiences, it is hard to recognise what is authentic and what is staged (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2004). This is especially palpable among Western tourists who have never been exposed to Eastern contexts.

Maclean et al. (2004) state that spirituality is growing as people get tired of their materialistic modern living and conclude that many individuals seek spiritual healing. Spiritual tourism can be brought under wellness and health tourism as it can restore one's mental health. The Mandala of Health Model (Hancock & Perkins, 1985) discusses the root causes that influence an individual's health and spiritual tourism can be associated with this vital model based on its similarities. The initial intent of this model was to aid healthcare professionals in understanding the root causes of poor health and devising comprehensive policies and programs for promoting well-being (Bae et al., 2019). Widely adopted by educators, practitioners, and policymakers, the model encompasses biological, psychological, social, political, aesthetic, spiritual, economic, and environmental factors (Bae et al., 2019; Lawson & Kingsley, 2020). Grayling (2011) established two fundamentally contrasting notions that define the concept of spirituality. The first focuses on nature and natural orders whilst the second points to preternatural concepts involving faith and beliefs of divinity. As stated in the Mandala health model, the optimum level that individuals can

reach is the biosphere implying a close relationship with nature which is confirmed by Grayling's (2011) first fundamental notion adopted in the study here.

Although there are ample studies on spiritual tourism, there is a lack of literature on how different destinations offer authentic spiritual tourism products/services and the variations of tourists' behaviour depending on their spiritual needs. In the context of Sri Lanka, spiritual tourism is under-researched with some notable exceptions including Samarathunga (2015), and Jayasinghe and Wimalaratana (2020). Several authors have suggested the importance of conducting spiritual tourism research in different contexts (e.g., Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Haq & Medhekar, 2020; McCartney, 2019; Sharma, 2020). Importantly, an academic debate on authentic spiritual tourism products/services provided in an Eastern context has been missing in research. Therefore, this present study aims to provide in-depth insights into spiritual tourism developments in Sri Lanka through the perspectives of spiritual tourism service providers and the spiritual tourists visiting using the Mandala Health Model. This study enquires about the existential authenticity and commodification of Sri Lankan spiritual tourism products and highlights the motivations and behaviour of spiritual tourists along with the supply side of spiritual tourism.

## **Literature review**

### ***Spiritual tourism, tourists, motives, and behaviour***

The phrase 'Spiritual Tourism' is rare in both literature and everyday life, yet is not a new expression (Norman & Pokorny, 2017). Smith and Puczkó (2008) stated that spiritual tourism can be categorised as a type of holistic tourism defined as tourism activities or treatments which are concerned with balancing the body, mind, and spirit and considered a sub-type of wellness tourism. Health and wellness tourism is always phrased together, with health tourism focusing on providing medical treatments to travellers (Smith & Puczkó, 2008), while wellness tourism concerns overall wellbeing and is an active mechanism of assisting people toward successful living through raising awareness and offering better choices (Bowers & Cheer, 2017). Spirituality holds a pivotal position in the Mandala Health Model, situated at the center of the model. As illustrated in the Mandala Health Model, the inner circle of the human being comprises the body, mind, and spirit (Hancock & Perkins, 1985). A more recent study conducted by Lawson and Kingsley (2020) confirmed the utilisation of the Mandala Health Model across various dimensions, including spirituality.

A well-recognised definition for explaining a spiritual tourist was introduced by Haq and Jackson (2009) as "someone who visits a specific place out of his/her usual environment, with the intention of spiritual meaning and/or growth, without overt religious compulsion, which could be religious, non-religious, sacred or experiential in nature, but within the Divine context, regardless of the main reason for travelling" (p.145). Spiritual tourism can be affiliated with religion or can be non-religious (Choe & O'Regan 2020; Haq & Medhekar 2020). Haq and Jackson (2009) explained that spiritual tourists attempt to move away from their usual environment to reach

prosperity through spiritual achievements. Although tourists may seem alike, individuals aim for different ways of experiencing their holiday (Jacobsen, 1996). Whilst some travel for relaxing getaways or pleasure, others increasingly want to expose themselves to spiritual experiences. What destinations require is to investigate the spiritual needs of tourists and then utilise their resources and competencies to exploit the opportunity. Spiritual tourists differ from other tourists as they seek high-end mental satisfaction. Ambrož and Ovsenik (2011) explained that spirituality has a closer relationship with the destination visited and the quality of services rendered to the spiritual tourist.

The tendency to explore the inner self and spiritual quests has increased the demand for spiritual tourism around the world (Ambrož & Ovsenik, 2011; Choe et al., 2013). Suravichai and Namwong (2020) identified the motivations of spiritual tourists, such as self-improvement and learning new things, and attitudes of spiritual tourists visiting Thailand which are: the attractiveness of the environment, available facilities, accessibility, and ancillary services. When exploring the inner self, association with the host communities and the environment is pivotal (Ambrož & Ovsenik, 2011), which helps to deepen the thinking and increase the awareness of oneself. Self-identity and wellness then are among the top priorities of spiritual tourists. Since spiritual tourism has earned the keen attention of both entrepreneurs and destination marketers, there is a need to research the behaviour and attitudes of spiritual tourists (Haq et al., 2008). In the case of Sri Lanka which aims to expand its existing spiritual tourism experiences (Ministry of Tourism and Christian Religious Affairs, 2017), there is a need to understand the expectations of spiritual tourists.

Despite the various traumatic experiences faced by people during the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a notable increase in the demand for spiritual tourism (see, e.g., Miao et al., 2022; Samarathunga, 2022; Choe & Mahyuni, 2023). Individuals, seeking solace and a sense of renewal, have increasingly turned to spiritual tourism as a means of finding comfort and inner peace. The pandemic-induced stress and uncertainty have propelled a significant number of individuals towards journeys of self-discovery and healing (Jaggernauth, 2023). This heightened interest in spiritual tourism has not gone unnoticed by countries grappling with the economic repercussions of the pandemic. Recognizing the potential for spiritual tourism to contribute to the recovery of the tourism sector, several nations have integrated it into their post-pandemic tourism revival strategies. Sri Lanka, India, and Indonesia, among others, have identified spiritual tourism as a valuable component of their recovery plans (Samarathunga, 2020; Kainthola, Robledo, & Chowdhary, 2022; Choe & Mahyuni, 2023).

### ***Religion and spirituality***

Religion and spirituality are amongst the most common reasons for traveling (Dallen & Olsen, 2006;). Although religious teaching lays the base for spiritual tourism (Choe & O'Regan, 2020;

Heidari et al., 2018), there is no informal way of reaching spiritual quests through religion. Buddhism (Geary, 2008; Gilli & Ferrari, 2017; Sharma, 2020), Hinduism (Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Jesurajan & Prabhu, 2012), and Christianity (Heidari et al., 2018; Tilson, 2005) are the leading religions that welcome spiritual tourists to holy places to serve the spiritual tourists. However, there has been a transformation from formal and known religious practices to a more universal concept where tourists from different religious denominations visit destinations to experience spiritual aspects rather than being observers. Haq and Jackson (2006) cited spirituality as being associated with the environment and the creator irrespective of religious denominations giving it a multi-dimensional aspect. Norman (2004) stated that tourists who engage in religious activities or who experience spiritual aspects can be considered spiritual tourists. However, this does not mean that spiritual tourists are necessarily engaged in religious activities or devote him/herself to a particular religion.

### ***Spiritual tourism in Sri Lanka***

According to the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA, 2020) the prime motivation of foreign tourists who travel to Sri Lanka is for pleasure. There is a trend towards the promotion of alternative forms of tourism in Sri Lanka through government mediation. The recent “Sri Lanka Tourism Strategic Plan” (TSP) stands as evidence for this claim (Ministry of Tourism and Christian Religious Affairs, 2017). To address the systemic failures identified within the Sri Lankan context, the TSP came up with six themes, one of which was developing spirituality experiences as a transformative tourism project when considering destination development. Although Sri Lanka provides a fertile ground for spiritual tourism development, according to the annual statistical report of the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA, 2020) there was a lower rate of tourists visiting Sri Lanka for religious purposes from 2006 to 2019. The most elevated level of travellers visiting Sri Lanka for religious purposes was 4.8% in 2013. However, the lowest level of tourist visits for religious purposes was 0.00% in 2016 and 2019, highlighting that spiritual tourism in Sri Lanka has not been given due consideration by the authorities (Jayasinghe & Wimalaratana, 2020). In the recent past, Sri Lanka faced three unforeseen disasters, the Easter Sunday attack in 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the economic downfall which has had a detrimental impact on the country’s tourism development (see Karunarathne et al., 2021; Samarathunga, 2022).

### ***Mandala Health Model***

The Mandala Health Model (Figure 1) is a framework developed by Hancock and Perkins (1985) that conceptualizes health within a holistic perspective, drawing inspiration from the mandala, a symbol of wholeness and interconnectedness in Hinduism and Buddhism. In this model, health is depicted as a dynamic balance between physical, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions, with the individual situated at the center of the mandala. The concentric circles surrounding the individual represent various determinants of health, including biological, environmental, cultural, and

socioeconomic factors. The model emphasizes the interconnectedness of these factors and advocates for a multidimensional approach to health promotions and disease prevention. By addressing the complex interplay of influences on health, the Mandala Health Model aims to foster holistic well-being and improve health outcomes for individuals and communities. The ‘Mandala of Health’ is widely used by many officials demonstrating the overall factors affecting an individual’s health. This model points out the importance of considering the root cause of illnesses rather than taking measures for illnesses and explains how cultural, biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors influence a person’s wellbeing.

In the Mandala Health Model, the individual as the major focus of the entire sphere is placed in the centre. An individual human is comprised of body, mind, and spirit. The family provides the most vital buffer between an individual and the outer world (Bae et al., 2019). A child is shaped by how he or she is raised, and the family forms the cornerstone for an individual’s biology, his/her personal behaviour, how an individual reacts to his/her psycho-socioeconomic environment, and how he/she behaves in the physical environment which then explains the four major factors influencing an individual’s and family’s health. Personal behaviour is implicit in dietary habits, preventive measures taken by an individual towards their health, smoking/non-smoking attributes of a person are stressed as being part of a lifestyle, yet influenced by peer pressure, with dignity maintained through socioeconomic status which is referred in the ‘Mandala’ as the psycho-socio economic environment. The remaining two dominant influencers are mentioned as human biology and physical environment which can be defined as human genetics, competence in the immune system and the physical state of the work environment, and adequacy of housing. The Mandala model includes a sick care system that connects mainly to human biological factors and personal behaviours where work attributes are conjoined with the psycho-socioeconomic environment and physical environment. All these factors play their role in the community or in the human-made environment which are affected by cultural beliefs and values. This biosphere contains all the possible factors affecting human health as the Mandala Health Model illustrates. This study pays particular attention to the ‘Personal Behaviour’ and the ‘Physical Environment’ of the Mandala Health Model within the context of spiritual tourism in Sri Lanka.

***Figure 1.*** Mandala of Public Health Model

Insert Figure 1 here

Source: Hancock and Perkins (1985), reproduced by Bae et al. (2019)

The validity of any model depends on its ability to be applied in different fields. The Mandala of health model has been successfully applied in different fields, which are not limited to health. It was observed that during recent years scholars from different fields have been using the Mandala owing to the convenience of applying it in different fields. Therefore, the present study applies the mandala health model in the field of spiritual tourism as spiritual well-being is also a part of the mandala health model.

Table 1 summarises key studies that apply the Mandala health model in different fields:

**Table 1: Use of Mandala Health Model in different fields**

#	Field	Main findings	Authors
1	Anthropocene	The incorporation of ecological and cultural factors into health promotion is deemed crucial but is frequently overlooked in socio-ecological frameworks.	Langmaid <i>et al.</i> (2021)
2	Psychology	Factors at the individual level (within the inner sphere of the Mandala) exhibit more pronounced connections with contented domestic lives among individuals in the lower stratum of self-reported family wealth.	Pianarosa & Davison (2021)
3	Population and demographics	Young nursing students should enhance their lifestyle behaviors. This includes improvements in eating habits, physical activity, stress management, personal hygiene, and environmental safety and protection.	Rafique <i>et al.</i> (2023)
4	Social networks and individual health	People's physical health is adversely linked to social contacts, emotional support, and social participation.	Zhong (2022)
5	Urbanism and urban planning	Enhancing people's understanding and appreciation of their living environment should go hand in hand with the development of the built environment.	Sun <i>et al.</i> (2020)
6	Social inequalities in health	Cultural values and beliefs significantly shape how we perceive health.	Bærøe & Bringedal (2022)
7	Linguistics	The evolution of the mandala model can include dimensions such as politics, aesthetics, spirituality, economics, and the environment. Perspectives within these dimensions not only differ in their "strength of conviction" but also change over time.	Lawson & Kingsley (2020)

### ***Existential Authenticity and Commodification***

Although existential authenticity is relatively new to the tourism literature, it has been discussed in other fields including philosophy and psychology (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Irrespective of the type of tourism product enjoyed, tourists seek to experience authenticity (Kim & Jamal, 2007). The authentic bodily feelings including the smells, touch, arousing, hearing, visuals, and tastes encompass the tourist experience (Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Since these services are produced and consumed simultaneously, it is hard to ensure complete authenticity. Thus, spiritual tourism service providers may attempt to commodify the experience in the guise of authenticity. The

commodification of tourism products/services occurs due to many reasons: limited time, busy itineraries, high cost, and influence of the guides (Shepherd, 2002; Cole, 2007). The same authors also identified that although some tourists are comfortable with commodified products, another segment seeks authentic experiences. This has created some controversies among the tourism suppliers themselves. Thus, in most developing tourism destinations, there is an opportunity to experience both authentic and commodified tourism products/services (Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Choe & O’Regan, 2020).

## Methodology

Epistemologically, this study was conducted through a constructivist frame where the individual seeks to construct their meanings through experiences of interactions with others and society (Neuman, 2014). It utilised an interpretivist paradigm to gain a deeper understanding of the tourists’ spiritual experiences and the perspectives of the spiritual tourism service providers. To identify places that practice spiritual tourism for data collection eight keyword searches were conducted on TripAdvisor.com. The keywords included “spiritual”, “religion”, “Buddhist Temples”, “Hindu Kovils”, “Churches”, “Mosques”, “Meditation”, and “Monastery”. TripAdvisor.com was used to identify 20 places since it is one of the most trusted travel advisory websites in the world (TripAdvisor.com, 2018). Keyword search is a valid technique in data collection in religious tourism research (Tomljenović & Dukić, 2018). Additionally, the researchers visited five institutions and companies to interview the tour operators and tourism officers who actively engaged in spiritual tourism development and promotion in Sri Lanka.

The study adopted both semi-structured interviews and observations to collect data at the spiritual tourism places. The semi-structured interview method allowed the researchers to explore the valid references that support this study’s objectives. Many scholars including King and Horrocks (2010) and Qu and Dumay (2011) recommend the interview method in the social sciences since it allows more room for knowledge generation without being restricted to pre-defined sets of questions. Table 1 indicates the number of religious places visited, and the number of interviews conducted. Accordingly, 22 interviews were conducted with spiritual tourism service providers who included Buddhist monks, Hindu *Kurukkals*, Muslim *Mawlawis*, and other authoritative figures at the selected sites. Questions posed were related to the spiritual tourism services providers, facilities available for spiritual services, types of spiritual tourists visiting, spiritual tourists’ behaviour, religious and cultural motives, and marketing and promotion. The interviews ranged from 20 to 30 minutes. The data collection took place from January to March 2020.

Table 1: Interview schedule with spiritual tourism service providers

#	Category	No. of places visited	No. of interviews conducted	Synonyms
1	Buddhist Temples, monasteries, and meditation centres	9	6	AUT 01 – AUT 06
2	Hindu Kovils	4	4	AUT 07 – AUT 10

3	Catholic and Christian Churches	4	4	AUT 11 – AUT 14
4	Mosques	3	3	AUT 15 – AUT 17
5	Tour Operators and Tourism Officers	5	5	AUT 18 – AUT 22

When conducting qualitative research, Marshall and Rossman (2006) warned of the possibility of data being biased. Thus, the researchers adopted data triangulation (Easterby-Smith et al., 1991) in this study by interviewing spiritual tourism service providers, officers, and foreign tourists. Many of the tourists were reluctant to give an interview since they visited Sri Lanka for their spiritual needs and did not like extra hassles. However, with the support of the spiritual tourism service providers, 17 interviews were conducted with foreign tourists (see Table 2). Questions related to the motives for selecting Sri Lanka as a spiritual tourism destination, facilities available, international spiritual tourism contexts, intention of re-visiting, cultural and natural environment to rejuvenate spirituality, own beliefs and faith, and religious observances were asked. The interviews ranged from 15 to 45 minutes. Convenience sampling was used in both cases. Synonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the respondents.

Table 02: Demographic profile of the respondents (spiritual tourists)

<b>Synonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Country of residence</b>
TOUR 1	71	Male	No	Masters	Russia
TOUR 2	48	Female	No	Degree	Germany
TOUR 3	53	Male	Buddhist	Degree	Germany
TOUR 4	39	Female	No	Degree	Germany
TOUR 5	36	Male	Buddhist	Degree	Japan
TOUR 6	37	Male	Buddhist	Diploma	Thailand
TOUR 7	26	Male	Buddhist	Diploma	Thailand
TOUR 8	38	Male	No	Degree	Israel
TOUR 9	68	Male	Hindu	Degree	India
TOUR 10	64	Male	Hindu	Masters	India
TOUR 11	56	Male	Roman Catholic	Degree	England
TOUR 12	67	Male	Buddhist	Degree	Germany
TOUR 13	67	Male	Hindu	Degree	India
TOUR 14	46	Male	No	Degree	Norway
TOUR 15	49	Female	No	Degree	Russia
TOUR 16	73	Male	No	Degree	Australia
TOUR 17	69	Female	Roman Catholic	Masters	Australia

Additionally, observations allowed the researchers to visually monitor the behaviour of spiritual tourists in Sri Lanka and the facilities provided by the spiritual tourism service providers. The non-participatory observation allowed the researchers to observe the religious and spiritual-related practices and performances at each of the selected places without disturbing the performers and the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The observational data helped the researchers to validate the claims made by both spiritual tourism service providers and tourists. With prior

permission from the spiritual tourism service providers, field notes were made, and photographs were taken that were used to deconstruct the personal behaviour of spiritual tourists and the associated physical environment. Ethical procedures were followed as per the advice of the Faculty Research and Publication Committee. However, this study is not without limitations. One of the primary constraints is the unavailability of specific data regarding the arrival of spiritual tourists to Sri Lanka. Instead, the study relies on previously published information that can provide some context.

Since this is a qualitative inquiry, the researchers paid much attention to the transparency of the research methods employed. The initial interviews were audio recorded and the recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim by research assistants under the direct supervision of the principal researcher. Accordingly, 39 transcriptions were produced. The other researcher engaged with the data immersion to identify whether there were any issues in the transcribing process (Green et al., 2007). Then, the transcriptions were content analysed using the NVivo (12) software (beta version). According to Stepchenkova et al., 2009 content analysis is a qualitative data analysis that empowers the researchers to make replicable and valid inferences from the data. It further enables researchers to contribute to knowledge by providing new perspectives by carefully examining the content appearing in the data (Yin, 2009).

The first and third authors, who collected the data, were directly involved in the data collection and analysis. The backgrounds of both authors, who are Buddhist and Christian respectively, and possess ample experience with other religions, empowered the researchers to gain insight into the religious practices of Sri Lanka. Consequently, both researchers followed the six steps of analysis and coding as recommended by Stepchenkova et al. (2009). The interpretation and the discussion were done under the supervision of the second author.

The following steps were undertaken during the content analysis stage:

Step I: Two researchers independently reviewed the transcripts and observational notes

Step II: Compared the initial observations

Step III: Developed a common coding hierarchy

Step IV: Coded the data independently

Step V: Compared the codes

Step VI: Addressed the inconsistencies

The results of the content analysis are discussed in the subsequent section of this study.

## **Findings**

### ***Motivation to select Sri Lanka***

#### *Religious motives*

Most of the spiritual tourists interviewed indicated religious motives to travel to Sri Lanka with the influence of Buddhism in an eastern context emerging. The respondents believe that Sri Lanka is one of the best destinations to learn about and for deep examination of the philosophy of Buddhism. According to a few tourists:

The first thing that comes to my mind when I hear 'Sri Lanka' is Buddhism... I have been visiting Sri Lanka for about 20 years now and I cannot stop coming to Sri Lanka because of Buddha's philosophies. (TOUR 03)

Buddha taught us to give up. So, to practice both Buddhism and spiritual gain, Sri Lanka is the best place to visit. You know why, we see the Buddha's teaching in your people's lives. (TOUR 08)

Two separate religious motives emerged. The first points to educational or learning purposes and applies to both religious and non-religious groups. Many spiritual tourists visited places such as *Siri Vajiragnana Dharmayathanaya* at Maharagama, and *Siri Vajiraramaya* at Bambalapitiya for a profound analysis of Buddhism. The monks at both temples identified the spiritual quests of these different categories and helped the tourists to achieve their purposes. In their own words:

We receive so many tourists, spiritual seekers, and pleasure seekers, foreign, and domestic and they have different purposes. Some come for short visits, and some ask for accommodation for weeks to stay and learn about Buddhism. (AUT 03)

Frequently we receive tourists from different corners of the world who are interested in learning Buddhism. They do it for personal gains or sometimes to complete a module in their degree or education. No matter the purpose, we help them to understand Buddhism. (AUT 05)

As stated by the Chief Incumbent Thero of *Vajiragnana Dharmayathanaya*, apart from Buddhists a significant number of non-Buddhists visit the *Dharmayathanaya* to learn about Buddhism and about learning meditation *Ana-pana-sati* (mindfulness of breathing) when practising spiritual quests.

The tourists visiting us are very much interested in practising *Ana-pana-sati* meditation at least for half an hour. Perhaps it is very popular since there is no deep thinking involved around it. (AUT 04)

Sri Lanka is not only a Buddhist destination but rather a multi-religious destination. Similarly, spiritual seekers do not limit themselves to Buddhist practices and philosophies but extend their desires to other religions as well. Hindu spiritual tourists visiting Sri Lanka can be found at many ancient Hindu temples around the country. Out of them, Ramakrishna Mission at Wellawatta, Shirdi Sai Centre of Sri Lanka, and Seetha Amman Kovil in Nuwara Eliya top the list. Many officers and religious leaders at Hindu temples revealed that Hindu tourists are fond of seeing, learning, and experiencing destinations as narrated in the *Ramayana* tale.

Ramayanaya is one of the main reasons why we receive so many Hindu pilgrims to Sri Lanka. They follow the Ramayanaya trail from India and visit many destinations in Sri Lanka. They always ask us about the association of our Hindu religious places with Ramayanaya (AUT 08)

With some tour operators in India, we have organised special tours for Hindu pilgrims to visit Ramayana destinations here in Sri Lanka and such tours are very popular. We also guide them to perform special pooja at the Kovils (AUT 07)

A few Hindu tourists were also interviewed at *Seetha Amman Kovil* in Nueara Eliya and *Koneswaram* temple in Trincomalee. The respondents unanimously stated that they visited Sri Lanka for religious purposes and that they stayed a few days at Ramayana destinations to attend different types of *poojas* to find ‘inner peace’ at the Hindu temples. For them, the *Ramayana* is not a story but an actual event and presents the teachings of ancient Hindu sages (Vedas) in narrative allegory by interspersing philosophical and devotional elements, as highlighted below:

We are an elderly group of travellers and we do not have many years to go. So, we came to Sri Lanka to worship Lord Hanuma’s temples and Lord Shiva’s temples. We go back to India with much peace in our minds. (TOUR 10)

I have been reading and studying Ramayana for my entire life and finally, I fulfil my last wish by visiting Sri Lanka. I am lucky to see these ancient places with my own eyes because many people do not get such opportunities. (TOUR 13)

It emerges that the key driving force for spiritual tourists visiting Sri Lanka is backed by religious motives. The availability of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, the opportunity to learn Buddhism, meditation, a simple lifestyle, visiting Hindu religious sites that are associated with the *Ramayanaya* trail, and performing Hindu *Pooja*’s contribute to the religious motives.

#### *Cultural and environmental motives of the spiritual tourists*

The researchers also interviewed some young Thai Buddhist monks who are studying Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The monks had been travelling around Sri Lanka in search of many ancient Buddhist temples and to practice religious rituals. Some of the key religious places they visited were the Temple of Tooth and *Delgoda* Temple in Kandy, great stupas in *Anuradhapura*, and the *Nilambe* Buddhist Meditation Centre. The monks believe that Sri Lankan culture is very welcoming for them to travel around and pursue their religious quests:

Although we are foreign Buddhist monks, we did not feel any difference here in Sri Lanka. The people were always welcoming and helpful. They always looked after our needs (TOUR 06)

A German tourist expressed a similar idea about the hospitality of the Sri Lankans, especially in rural settings. Unlike the hosts at popular destinations, the hosts at rural destinations appeared

to be more caring and empathetic towards the tourists who were visiting Sri Lanka in search of enlightenment. According to the German tourist:

First, I stayed at a famous Ayurveda and Yoga centre down south. But, later on, I got to know about this place and decided to come over here. To my surprise, the culture here is very comfortable for me to practice my meditation. The people here are different from the people in the city. (TOUR 04)

According to the respondents' point of view, Sri Lankan culture is considered authentic and greatly influenced by Buddhism. Additionally, factors like multi-culturalism, and freedom of religion persuade the spiritual tourists to select Sri Lanka as a pristine spiritual tourism destination. Many Asian spiritual tourists stated that it was easy to blend in with the culture and people in Sri Lanka and that they would be interested in visiting Sri Lanka more often. Although the infrastructure in peripheral areas was considered challenging at times, the destinations were well preserved given the distinct nature of Sri Lankan culture and heritage.

### ***Behaviour of spiritual tourists***

This study included atheists who visited Sri Lanka in search of spiritual yearnings. Although atheism and spirituality have some unsolved debates, the atheists who were interviewed still display a desire to find inner peace, without committing themselves to religions, philosophies, and deities. In a small lodge in *Roomassala*, the researchers came across a Norwegian tourist (atheist) who made the following comment:

When I look at the sea, when I hear the sound of the waves, when I hear birds sing around me, I feel that I am in the right place. Humans are a part of nature. So, humans should believe that nature... I visit Sri Lanka annually because I feel I am connected to the universe when I am here in this place. (TOUR 14)

It emerged that few organizations were purposely developed to support and facilitate any atheists visiting Sri Lanka. Such organizations recommend places of natural value, religious value, and social and cultural value to atheist tourists, as one tour operator mentioned:

We can never forecast the demand for atheist tourists. Their requirements are highly heterogeneous. For instance, one might be interested in watching stars while another will listen to the birds. So, we have a big database including different destinations, cultures, food, sounds, flora and fauna. These tourists find themselves very comfortable and enjoying their lives with their peculiar needs. (AUT 18)

Any organised religion comprises its own ethics, rituals, and practices. For instance, the Roman Catholic community has its established way of practicing and worshipping but the

researchers encountered a Roman Catholic spiritual tourist who followed the religion according to his own desire and level of understanding. These persons can also be identified as spiritual seekers who attempt to uncover the truth of the universe through their lenses. Other Christian spiritual tourists visited Sri Lanka to engage in missionary services or as students who prefer experiencing different cultures while engaging in their educational activities. According to one traveller:

I am a Roman Catholic, but I decide how I follow my religion. (TOUR)

A Bhikku, an authoritative figure at a leading Buddhist temple, identified this distinct behaviour by the atheist tourists. He had encountered many spiritual tourists who belonged to different religions but made learning Buddhism or other religions a part of their spiritual journey. These types of tourists are extremely knowledgeable in different fields, on cosmogony, and are often well educated. However, they still expect to gain more wisdom and seek wise people to teach them along with superior spiritual practitioners guiding them to achieve their desires. Independency, bright personality, and high self-confidence are some of the personal characteristics of these spiritual tourists as observed by the researchers. Two religious leaders expressed their opinions as follows:

The spiritual tourists do not necessarily belong to one religious group. They are well-educated, and curious individuals who search for inner peace. So, they really do not care where they find that spiritual cleanse. (AUT 05)

These tourists are well-experienced travellers and sometimes they know the history better than us. So, they are here to find the truth of life, in their own way. (AUT 06)

The study identified some homogeneous behaviours and characteristics of spiritual tourists visiting Sri Lanka. These include being atheists or polytheists, not following traditional religious practices or bonds, having love for nature and the universe, and being independent, well-educated, and experienced travellers. These characteristics must be considered if Sri Lanka wants to promote itself as a spiritual tourism destination.

### ***The supply side of spiritual tourism in Sri Lanka***

Though there are no official governmental references for spiritual tourism destinations in Sri Lanka, many travel websites recommend places around the country for different religious rituals including yoga and meditation. The researchers visited many places that practice spiritual tourism in Sri Lanka to gain a good understanding of them. The places visited are in Colombo, *Polgasduwa*, *Maligakanda*, *Mathugama*, *Agalawatta*, Kandy, and Galle and include *Vipassana* meditation centres, temples, *Ayurveda* and *Yoga* centres, churches, and mosques. The majority of these centres are located within city limits and the number of days spent by a tourist in a particular

location varies between two to five days due to many reasons. According to some tourists interviewed in rural areas:

First, we inquired about this place (a famous city temple) before coming to Sri Lanka. However, we found that it was noisy, and the environment did not fit our requirements. (TOUR 17)

Although the city centres are resourceful, I think we can concentrate more on our souls by being in a nice quiet place. (TOUR 16)

It emerged that the tourists get their guidance mainly from other spiritual tourists, by e-word of mouth, and from other spiritual tourism service providers regarding suitable rural locations for further learning and meditation. *Kalugala Aranya Senasanaya* at Agalawatta, *Delgoda* Meditation Centre, *Bowalawatta Aranya*, *Kanduboda* Meditation Centre, *Ovitigala Sri Sunandarama Pirivena* at Matugama and *Galduwa Aranya* at Ambalangoda are some of those locations popular among the spiritual tourists.

As stated by one authority member at *Siri Vajirarama* Temple, Bambalapitiya, they have prepared themselves to teach people who show an eagerness to learn in-depth about Buddhist philosophy. Some tourists also reveal their personal issues related to their life and work. Accordingly, the religious centres provide customised services to these spiritual tourists. Most Buddhist temples and meditation centres visited housed great libraries with ample books about Buddhist philosophy. Thus, tourists can get the opportunity to read and understand the religious teachings, norms, and practices available within a Buddhist society. Some key books were available in different languages including English, Hindi, German, and French. According to one Buddhist monk:

Sometimes spiritual tourists inquire about the availability of a library even before visiting Sri Lanka. So, we are taking the necessary actions to collect different books that best explain Buddhist philosophy. (AUT 05)

Transportation, accommodation, and food were three other vital components in the spiritual tourism journey most spiritual tourists inquired about. Consequently, the spiritual tourism service providers introduced different packages that covered every need of a spiritual tourist visiting Sri Lanka. According to one tour operator:

The spiritual tourists visit Sri Lanka to relieve themselves from their personal stressors. Therefore, they are not ready to put themselves in trouble in searching for appropriate accommodation, transportation, and food and beverage during their stay in Sri Lanka. (AUT 18)

Two tourism officers expressed a similar idea:

Most tour operators and spiritual tourism service providers are now providing their services as an inclusive package that involves transportation, accommodation, guiding, food and beverages, and even shopping. However, there is still a large number of spiritual tourists who find their own paths and places. (AUT 21)

Hindu spiritual tourists in particular come in big groups, and they travel around Sri Lanka in search of the evidence of the Ramayanaya trail. Therefore, many leading travel agencies are now offering Ramayanaya packages. (AUT 22)

Sri Lanka has ample spiritual tourism attractions that range from natural to cultural attractions. However, the demand for spiritual tourism can greatly vary according to how they are offered. On a positive note, many tour operators are offering spiritual tourism packages, however, proper monitoring is deemed necessary since the spiritual seekers are a sensitive group of tourists. The quality of the vicinity area, quality of the accommodation, availability of food and beverage, e-word of mouth, availability of reference materials, and the quality of the packages offered top the list. Additionally, when offering spiritual tourism services, the service providers need to maintain a harmonious blend between the religions, environment, and elements of the socio-culture.

### ***Existential Authenticity and Commodification***

It is inevitable when providing tourism-related products and services for there to be some commodification. The spiritual tourism products available in Sri Lanka are no exception to the established tourism standards which are globally accepted. Starting from meditation to yoga practices the traditional methods have been commodified to meet the tourist demand. A veteran spiritual tourism service provider mentioned:

The tourists are alien to our culture, practices, food, etc. They will not like the true experience which they find difficult to cope-up. Also, some tourists who visit our centre have a very limited time to experience the entire package we offer. Instead, they want to have a glance at it and move to the next activity. (AUT 05)

In contrast, there have been occasions where tourists fully adapt to the local culture, food, and practices and demand authentic spiritual tourism products. Such tourists do not arrive in Sri Lanka through tour operators, instead, they make their own travel and accommodation arrangements. According to the service providers, such tourists spend a longer duration, sometimes more than three months up to years, at the destination they visit.

I have personally seen tourists convert themselves into Buddhist monks and practice Buddhism, especially at rural meditation centres, and stayed there for many years. They fully adapt to the

local conditions and the host community in return accept these foreigners as spiritual seekers. (AUT 17)

It is hard to teach and practice the authentic spiritual packages for foreign visitors as the authentic practices are deeply woven with Sri Lankan religion and culture. Without knowing the basics that you gain over the decades a tourist finds it hard to experience the realities in life according to the Eastern discourse. (AUT 02)

This demonstrates the complexities that spiritual tourism service providers face when supplying an authentic spiritual tourism product. However, there are a few exceptions where the foreign spiritual tourism seekers fully adapt to the local setting.

## **Discussion**

This study identified Buddhism as the main driving force to attract spiritual tourists to Sri Lanka. The spiritual seekers spoke in favour of the hospitality they received from the Sri Lankan people which is strongly interlinked with the Theravada Buddhism practices deeply rooted in Sri Lanka for centuries (Munasinghe et al., 2017). However, Sri Lanka is also a popular destination among Hindus due to the *Ramayana* destinations located around the country. This verifies the study findings of several scholars (e.g., Battaglia, 2017; Chinthaka & Senarathna, 2012) who identified the *Ramayana* trail destinations as key pulling factors in spiritual tourism. The culture and the environment are further key considerations in spiritual tourism (Choe et al., 2013). Religious observances and culture are two factors that are bonded together. Many tourists who were interested in Buddhism were also keen to learn more about Sri Lankan culture but most tourists visited for religious observances as part of their journey. Many of the tourists had travelled to several Asian Buddhist countries including Thailand, Myanmar, Nepal, and India, and considered Sri Lanka as a potential destination to reach their spiritual quests. Relaxation was the ultimate desire and expectation of many spiritual tourists (Choe et al., 2013) along with concerns regarding their career, stability as well as family life. Although they had numerous personal obligations, the quest for spirituality was not fading away. Therefore, the spiritual tourists were searching for a more harmonious balance in life. This proves the inextricable link between religion and tourism (Collins-Kreiner, 2020) and Buddhism's competitive advantage in attracting spiritual tourists to South Asia (Choe et al., 2013; Geary, 2008; Sharma, 2020).

Figure 2: A group of spiritual tourists discussing Buddhist Philosophy

Insert Figure 2 here

The spiritual tourists did not necessarily belong to one religion, and most were in search of the "Truth" using meditation, yoga, being closer to nature, or by attending different religious practices including *Buddha wandana* (worshipping the Lord Buddha), attending to *Bohi Poojas* (paying respect to the holy Bo tree), and listening to *Pirith* (*Pali* doctrine of Lord Buddha).

Similarly, Hindu religious activities including attending *Poojas*, singing *Bhajan*, listening to *Stotra* (religious poems), and visiting famous *Ramayana* destinations were demanded by spiritual tourists. Additionally, the *Bohra Muslims* venerated Sri Lanka for their annual pilgrimage events. This confirms other study findings that identified religious events and practices as spiritual tourism attractions in a destination (e.g., Geary, 2008; Heidari et al., 2018; Norman & Pokorny, 2017). Promoting spiritual tourism in Sri Lanka has been recommended by several scholars as a crucial component of the country's post-pandemic tourism promotion strategies (Samarathunga, 2020; Sivanandamoorthy, 2021; Karunarathne et al., 2021). Given the abundance of spiritual tourism assets in the country, this strategy can be swiftly implemented to maximize benefits for the nation while concurrently contributing to the local economy.

Figure 3: Spiritual tourists at Nallur Kovil, Jaffna, Sri Lanka

Insert Figure 3 here

When discussing the supply side, all the spiritual tourists spoke positively about their visit to Sri Lanka and stated that this country is well placed for spiritual tourists. However, many spiritual tourists were not contented about transportation and accommodation facilities. Although some rural places provided economical or free accommodation and other facilities, the spiritual tourists tended to seek more home comforts. Meals and accommodation in most places were not up to the tourists' high standards and many spiritual tourists preferred not to stay overnight at the religious places, nor extend their vacation in Sri Lanka. However, in and around the main cities including Colombo, Kandy, Galle, and Nuwara Eliya the accommodation facilities and meals were not considered a problem. Researchers including Sharma (2020), Choe et al. (2013), Choe and O'Regan (2020), and McCartney (2019) agree with the need for providing suitable accommodation and meals to spiritual tourists, while Bowers and Cheer (2017) warn about improved provisions of food and accommodations as signs of the commodification of spiritual tourism. It is worth noting that Buddhist teachings promote simple lifestyles which help the disciples to gain insights without being corrupted by comforts. Yet, in the Sri Lankan context, there are signs of spiritual seekers searching for home comforts and tour operators willing to promote more comfortable accommodation since this adds economic value to the overall spiritual tourism packages being sold.

Spirituality cannot be explored using scientific methods because it involves deep personal and subjective experiences. Spirituality can only be achieved with one's involvement and external stakeholders can only facilitate this by providing the guidance and required facilities. Sri Lanka boasts diverse cultures, languages, and religions resulting from its many ethnic communities and is admired for its ancient culture and scenic nature which were referred to as motives by the spiritual tourists and confirmed by Grayling (2011) and Munasinghe et al. (2017). The subjective nature of human beings introduces variability in the perception and experience of spiritual tourism in Sri Lanka. While the country possesses significant spiritual tourism potential, not all tourists may attain a profound spiritual experience due to individual subjectivity. As highlighted by

scholars (e.g., Smith & Puczko 2008; Brown, 2016), personal beliefs, values, and expectations influence one's spiritual encounter. Even with authentic spiritual tourism resources, tourists may or may not engage in spiritual experiences without a certain level of commodification of the exotic spiritual encounter. Therefore, despite authentic spiritual resources, the transformative impact may vary, necessitating a level of commodification to enhance the appeal and accessibility of the exotic spiritual experience.

While the Mandala Health Model supports health-care practitioners in understanding the underlying causes of illness and designing comprehensive policies and programs to promote health, this study paid attention to the “Personal Behaviour” and “Physical Environment” elements of the Mandala health model. It identified five main components of personal behaviour of spiritual tourists: religious / secular / polytheist, heterogenous, erudite, non-repeaters, and stays of 02 – 05 days. Additionally, the study identified the characteristics of the physical environment preferred by spiritual tourists: peaceful and quiet place, access to knowledge, convenient transportation, and satisfactory accommodation. Figure 4 illustrates the key contributions of this study to the Mandala Health Model.

Figure 4: Personal behaviour and physical environment explained through the Mandala Health Model

Insert Figure 4 here

## **Conclusion**

This study identified spiritual tourism in Sri Lanka as a form of health tourism that can heal the minds and souls of tourists. It applied qualitative methods to reach its objectives by interviewing foreign tourists as well as spiritual tourism providers and adopted the Mandala Health Model to make more significant inferences.

The study revealed that religious motives, cultural and environmental factors, and own beliefs and faith work as contributing factors for spiritual tourism development in Sri Lanka. These factors are not sufficient in themselves but co-exist with other factors. For instance, students who visit Sri Lanka to learn deeply about religion, expect that the environment, culture, and the outside community will assist them. Some spiritual tourists who introduced themselves as non-religious or atheist individuals still desired some religious aspects. However, the three principal factors, i.e., religious motives, cultural and environmental factors, and own beliefs and faith, considered for spiritual tourism development reappear in the Sri Lankan context validating the findings by Kujawa (2017), and Norman and Pokorny (2017).

Being an Asian country with a plethora of tourism resources, spiritual tourism has become an accessible market to promote in Sri Lanka. A peaceful environment, natural resources, Buddhist and Hindu religions, Eastern culture, and ancient Buddhist and Hindu cultural monuments are some key points for Sri Lanka to become an ideal spiritual tourism destination (Jayasinghe & Wimalaratana, 2020). Thus, as a destination, Sri Lanka must acquire their prospects to be able to reap the full benefits of spiritual tourism. This study does not propose to “sell religion” but to better realise the opportunities encompassed with spiritual tourism.

The study contributes to the overall spiritual tourism development of Sri Lanka by highlighting the spiritual tourists’ motives, personal behaviour, and understanding of the supply side of spiritual tourism in the country. Using the Mandala Health Model, explains the influences of personal behaviour and the physical environment on the body, spirit, and mind of the tourist, with deep insights and knowledge sought in a more comfortable and accommodating environment. Religious and cultural motives can be identified as key motives among the spiritual tourists to select Sri Lanka as a spiritual tourism destination. Importantly, the study identified the nexus between existential authenticity and commodification which are greatly influenced by the behaviour of spiritual tourists, tourists’ demand for spiritual tourism products, and tourists’ limitations concerning time, money, and scheduled itineraries. Thus, commodification is sometimes unavoidable according to the perspectives of spiritual tourism stakeholders. This can be identified as a challenge for sustainable spiritual tourism development in Sri Lanka.

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