



Research Paper

Tour Operators as Catalysts for Sustainable Mountain Tourism Development in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Mountain tourism is an alternative, emerging type of tourism occurring in geographically defined areas characterized by rich biodiversity, challenging accessibility and high sensitivity, necessitating third-party involvement. Despite research on various special interest tourism types, the involvement of tour operators' have often been underexplored. In light of this gap, and as highlighted by Sri Lanka's tourism strategic report for 2025, there is lack of investigation into alternative, niche, and emerging tourism markets. Hence, the objectives of the study were to identify the push and pull antecedents of sustainable mountain tourism in Sri Lanka and to explore the role of tour operators in the development of sustainable mountain tourism in Sri Lanka. The study adopted a qualitative approach, collecting data through purposive sampling from fifteen tour operators via semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed that pull antecedents mainly arose as unique selling propositions, and destination's diversity and push antecedents as personal and external factors. The role of tour operators found that tour operators contribute to economic sustainability through marketing, promotion, and new product development, while better planning, monitoring indicated their role towards environmental sustainability. Finally, it was revealed that tour operators play a major role in networking towards social sustainability. Nevertheless, future researchers could examine private-public partnerships and collaborations and combined tourism products to further develop mountain tourism's potential, which has not been addressed yet.

Keywords: Sustainable Mountain Tourism; Mountain Tourism in Sri Lanka; Tour operators

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1. Introduction

United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2025) defines Mountain Tourism (MT) as any type of tourism activity taking place in a limited area that facilitates a wide range of outdoor recreational activities with distinctive features including outstanding landscapes, climate, rich biodiversity, and other mountainous attributes. Moreover, MT cannot be limited to a specific type. It can be any tourism activity including hiking, trekking, rafting, and cultural activities which will take place in a mountainous area in a sustainable manner (Kruk et al., 2007). Initially, this was boomed as a type of mass tourism in many developed countries. Nonetheless, it is no longer mass tourism but a form of niche tourism (UNWTO, 2018). Mountains are the second most popular tourist destination after coastal areas (Charters & Saxon, 2017). Further, it could be considered one of the finest Alternative Type of tourism (ATT) for any region that inherits favourable resources such as naturally appealing mountains and supporting infrastructure (Icoz et al., 2012). In the current context with the participation of 34.95% of travellers, hiking and trekking have become the 7th most attractive activity for travellers that visit Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan Tourism Development Authority (Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs, 2017). On the other hand, the tourism research community, which has tended to study concepts such as ecotourism or alternative tourism, has largely ignored the problems caused by mass tourism in terms of sustainability (Budeanu, 2005). Budeanu (2005) emphasized that this is an area of research that needs urgent attention from researchers and practitioners.

According to Ranaweera et al. (2019), environmental degradation due to tourism activities indicates unsustainable practices around rural and mountainous areas in Sri Lanka. Moreover, Tourism Strategic Plan (Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs, 2017) has identified a few failures in developing tourism. Namely, the lack of research into alternative, niche, and emerging tourism market segments in Sri Lanka, has limited the effectiveness of product development, product diversification, uniqueness, and authenticity (Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs, 2017). Such failures have made the attraction of tourists significantly confined to a limited area. Such theoretical and empirical gaps give insight into the need for sustainable development in alternative and niche market segments, which can be further developed in Sri Lanka.

In this scenario, tour operators hold a considerable responsibility in developing Sustainable Mountain Tourism (SMT) as an ATT. Due to the lack of attention given, this remains a question. Hence an in-depth study on the antecedents of SMT, and the role of tour operators during the development of SMT need due attention. Accordingly, the theoretical contribution of this research lies in advancing the understanding of SMT as an ATT in Sri Lanka by identifying and analysing the antecedents influencing its development. It extends existing tourism theories by incorporating sustainability principles and examining the specific role of tour operators in fostering sustainable practices within mountain tourism. Empirically, the study provides evidence on how tour operators can act as catalysts for SMT, offering practical insights into strategies and practices that promote sustainable development in mountainous areas. This

fills the research gap highlighted by the limited focus on alternative tourism market segments and their sustainable development in Sri Lanka.

Research Questions

1. What are the push and pull antecedents of Sustainable Mountain Tourism in Sri Lanka?
2. What is the role of tour operators in the development of sustainable tourism in Sri Lanka?

The above research questions will be addressed by the following objectives.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the push and pull antecedents of Sustainable Mountain Tourism in Sri Lanka
2. To explore the role of tour operators in the development of sustainable tourism in Sri Lanka.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Mountain Tourism as an Alternative Type of Tourism

Alternative tourism is never a new concept in the tourism industry. However, since different countries inherit diverse tourism assets and resources, the focus on alternative forms of tourism from each country is different. Samarathunga and Gamage (2020) emphasized that this concept exist for more than two decades. On the other hand, Triarchi and Karamanis (2017) have emphasized that even if tourism is an enormous industry that is capable of spreading both social and economic benefits, it has also been recognized as an industry that indicted a wide range of issues, especially in countries that are still in their developing stage. The main four reasons that led tourism to move towards a new direction were the unsolved poverty problem, environmental issues that took place due to mass tourism, political issues, and social issues that arise with the post-modern culture (Triarchi & Karamanis, 2017). According to Aviv (2015), there are three responses that countries have adopted for such problems. First, relieving the adverse results of tourism by initiating better strategies, second, they would search for alternative ways to invent a new form of tourism or redesign the tourism products, finally, countries would go for an anti-tourism policy. Since tourism has the ability to generate a large scale of benefits to the economy, society, and environment, most countries would go for the alternative forms of tourism, rather than concluding the industry. Moreover, ATT started becoming popular due to the negative impacts of mass tourism. As Samarathunga and Gamage (2020) highlighted, the decline of Mass tourism became the cause of the emergence of Alternative tourism, and travellers have now considered engaging in different types of alternative forms of tourism as they are more sustainable compared to mass tourism.

2.2 Sustainable Mountain Tourism

Mountains facilitate around 12% of the world's human population, supply water for 50% of the world population, and another 13% of mountain-based communities will directly or indirectly engage in tourism activities (Godde et al., 2000). Usually, such mountain areas are located in rural areas that have sensitive ecosystems, hence it is essential to adopt sustainable practices (Alpine Convention, 2013; Price et al., 2004; Veith & Shaw, 2011). The concept of SMT can be elaborated as a collection of sustainability principles such as pro-social, pro-poor, and pro-women (Kruk et al., 2007). As Romeo et al. (2021) elaborated, SMT opens the path

for many more tourism activities such as winter and sports tourism, walking tourism, rural tourism, natural and cultural tourism, spiritual tourism, wellness tourism, etc. Therefore, Mountain tourism can also be identified as a combination of eco, nature, spiritual and rural tourism. On the other hand, researchers such as Mutana and Mukwada (2018), Romeo et al. (2021), and Nepal (2002) identified mountain tourism as a great way to alleviate poverty. However, the majority of people may feel that tourism development in mountain areas may only refer to the financial benefits that the community and the economy of a particular nation receive (Godde et al., 2000). Yet, Godde et al. (2000) emphasize that even if 'financial benefits' is the ultimate goal that the majority are interested in, tourism is a multi-faceted phenomenon that includes social, environmental, economical, and psychological dimensions. Therefore, mountain tourism should also be given considerable consideration as it is a segment of this umbrella industry that affect a wide range of stakeholders while becoming a platform to exchange mutual benefits between these parties.

2.3 Role of Tour Operators in Tourism Development

As stakeholders play a key role in the tourism industry and their presence, and activities directly affect tourism management and development (Eagles et al., 2002). Collaborations and partnerships between stakeholders are a key to sustainable development (Byrd, 2007). Byrd (2007) further underlines that the network of tourism consists of a bunch of different stakeholders, and stakeholder theory is much used to identify the key stakeholders in destination promotion. Among them, tour operators and travel agents play a vital role in tourism development as travel intermediaries (Drumm et al., 2004; Icoz et al., 2012). Moreover, Budeanu, (2005) emphasizes that tour operators are the key players in mass tourism and they have the ability to trigger positive changes toward sustainable tourism. Even if the new technology may appear to replace the role of tour operators, the existence of them as an intermediary that links demand and supply plays a vital role by facilitating price and time-worthy tailor-made packages. Hence, proper planning will satisfy the tourists while maintaining the cohesion and sustainability of the destinations. Moreover, researchers such as Eagles et al. 2002 and Pasape, (2022) emphasized that the challenge of managing sensitive natural areas will only be effective through partnerships between governing organizations and stakeholders such as community and tour operators. Especially tour operators must thoroughly consider planning all nature-based recreational activities in tourism (Pasape, 2022).

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach specifically using phenomenology approach where lived experiences of individuals were explored, and it allows for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon in its natural context. The rationale behind selecting a qualitative methods that it facilitates direct interaction with respondents, enabling the researcher to gather rich, reliable data on antecedents towards mountain tourism as well as the role that the tour operators play during the development of mountain tourism.

3.1 Research Design

A phenomenological approach was selected for this study to investigate the lived experiences of tour operators in promoting mountain tourism. This design is appropriate when the aim is to capture and interpret the essence of participants' experiences, providing deep insights into their perceptions and motivations.

3.2 Population and Sample Selection

The population of the study consists of tour operators registered under the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) by the year 2022. It consisted total of 602 operators offering various travel opportunities. A purposive sampling technique, also known as judgment sampling, was employed to select a subset of this population. This technique was deemed appropriate to target tour operators specifically involved in promoting mountain tourism and possessing common characteristics relevant to the study's objectives. Consequently, 15 tour operators providing mountain tourism activities were selected as the sample.

3.3 Methods and Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected through personal interviews, which allowed for in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and perspectives. The interviews were conducted in the offices of the selected tour operators, providing a familiar and comfortable setting that helped establish rapport and encouraged participants to share their insights freely. A semi-structured interview guide was used, designed to cover key topics relevant to the study, including the antecedents of mountain tourism and the role of tour operators in its development. This guide ensured consistency in the questions asked across all interviews, while allowing for flexibility to probe deeper based on respondents' answers. The interviews each lasting between 40 to 60 minutes, were conducted in-person to facilitate a richer exchange of information and allow for observation of non-verbal cues, which could add context to the verbal responses. The structured interview guide ensured that all relevant areas were explored systematically, yet allowed the researcher to adapt questions and delve deeper when necessary. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accurate data collection, and the recordings were later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis Process

The collected data was analyzed using content analysis, a method particularly suitable for identifying patterns, and key concepts within qualitative data. The analysis began with transcribing the recorded interviews to create a comprehensive textual database. This step ensured that the researcher had a complete and detailed record of the interviews for further analysis. Following transcription, the researcher thoroughly reviewed the data, reading through each transcript multiple times to become deeply familiar with the content and context of the participants' responses. Next, the researcher systematically coded the data by identifying meaningful segments that corresponded with the research objectives. Coding allowed for the categorization of data into smaller, manageable pieces that could be grouped into themes and patterns. This process involved highlighting recurring words, phrases, and ideas that emerged from the interviews. The researcher then organized these codes into categories to identify overarching concepts, and patterns that revealed insights into the antecedents of mountain tourism and the role of tour operators. Finally, the findings were synthesized and reported in a manner that aligned with the study's objectives, ensuring that the themes and patterns identified were comprehensively analyzed and presented.

To maintain ethical standards, the interviewer obtained informed consent from all participants after thoroughly briefing them on the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. This process ensured that participants were fully aware of what their involvement entailed and that their participation was entirely voluntary. To uphold confidentiality, the interviewer assigned unique codes to participants' responses and securely stored all data collected. This practice safeguarded their identities, as no identifying information was disclosed in the reporting of the findings, ensuring their anonymity and protecting their privacy throughout the research.

3. Results

3.1 Profile of the Participants

When analyzing the profile of the participants, they tend to have a wealth of experience in the tourism industry. The respondents held diverse positions, including Senior Tour Consultants, Tour Operation Executives, Assistant Managers, Heads of Marketing, Destination Product Managers, Heads of Operations, and Managers. The majority of the respondents had over 7 years of experience in the tourism industry, with 8 having more than a decade of experience. Statistically, the average years of experience among the respondents are 8.5 years, with a range of 6 to 15 years. In other words, 80% have more than 5 years of experience.

Table 1. Profile of the Participants

Designation	No. of Participants	Percentage from the Total
Managers and Asst. Managers	07	46.66%
Tour Executives	08	53.33%
Gender		
Male	10	66.67%
Female	05	33.33%
Years of Experience		
10-15	08	53.33%
05-10	07	46.66%

Source: Developed by Researcher (2023)

3.2 Antecedents of Mountain Tourism

3.2.1 Pull Antecedents

Unique Selling Propositions

The first objective of the study was to identify the antecedents of SMT in Sri Lanka. As a result of the personal interviews, study was able to identify antecedents that push and pull travelers towards mountain-based activities, thereafter under each code, two categories were identified based on the similar patterns of the respondents.

Accordingly, the first category under pull-antecedents is Unique Selling Propositions (USPs). USPs are a crucial aspect of tourism that enable destinations to distinguish themselves

from their competitors and increase their visitor numbers. These unique features or benefits are exclusive to each destination and enhance its appeal to travelers. They are what makes a destination unforgettable and distinctive in the minds of tourists. Throughout the personal interviews, the researcher could identify that almost every tour operator has adopted some techniques and strategies to promote their mountain-based activities. Consequently, this has resulted in pulling travelers towards these mountainous activities. Especially off-the-beaten paths and sustainability can identify as USPs that has been adopted by several tour operators.

“I think in my experience, more than 7-8 years before Pidurangala is not found as a tourist destination, but now the trend is to visit Sigiriya, and then they are wishing to visit Pidurangala as well. I think their interests are rapidly changing. So now we include such an off-the-beaten path for the itineraries. As it would add value to the itinerary while differentiating our service from other competitors.” (Participant 10, Personal Communication, 2023)

“I’m a hiking and trekking freak, so I try to give them as much as I can give within the itinerary. But, it’s not a mass-scale activity as such for groups I actually don’t do hiking or like not trekking at all....But for FITS I do propose. For families and individuals, I do propose hiking and trekking.” (Participant 06, Personal Communication, 2023)

Lesser-known destinations like Pidurangala have now become destinations that tourists request. Accordingly, such off-the-beaten paths can be considered as USPs that act as an antecedent that pulls travelers toward mountain tourism. The participants' responses highlight their awareness on sustainability in mountain tourism, which will be attracting environmentally conscious travelers. They emphasized the need to limit the number of tourists and educate them on responsible hiking practices, such as not leaving any waste behind and staying on the designated trail. Additionally, they mentioned their focus on providing hiking and trekking experiences to families and individuals rather than large groups, showcasing their knowledge on carrying capacity as well as commitment to sustainable and responsible tourism practices.

Destination’s Diversity

The second category of pull-antecedents is Destination Diversity. This refers to the presence of an extensive array of natural and cultural attractions that entice various categories of travelers. The majority of participants have underscored the locational advantage, as well as the natural and cultural diversity of the island, as critical factors that not only attract travelers to mountain tourism but also to other specialized interest tourism markets. When it comes to natural diversity, natural diversity encompasses a variety of living organisms, ecosystems, and geological formations found within a particular region. For tourism, natural diversity is a significant draw for visitors who are interested in outdoor activities like hiking, wildlife observation, and adventure sports. The natural landscape of a destination can provide opportunities for travelers to connect with nature and engage in activities for one’s physical and mental well-being.

"Sri Lanka is positioned for them as a country for everything. We have the cultural thing, we have different... like you know, and different climates and the beach and wildlife. Suddenly all these are... so like when they want to travel in Sri Lanka they definitely want to add something like mountains or hillsides."
(Participant 11, Personal Communication, 2023)

Responses strongly indicate that the unique diversity of Sri Lanka as a destination has become a primary factor in attracting tourists interested in mountain tourism. The quotes highlight the presence of unique and diverse flora and fauna, geological formations like mountains and valleys, and bodies of water like lakes and rivers making a destination more attractive to travelers seeking an authentic and memorable experience. On the other hand, cultural diversity has also been identified as an antecedent of mountain tourism. It refers to the presence of multiple cultures and cultural differences within a particular society, community, or organization. It encompasses a wide range of cultural factors, including language, customs, beliefs, values, and behaviors.

"As I told you before, Sri Lanka is a destination where travelers can enjoy a series of activities. So one important thing is the culture, You know Sri Lanka is known very well for its culture, so whatever the reason they visit, those travelers would love to enjoy the culture as well. It can range from tasting local cuisines to staying at a homestay or a village house at a top of a mountain. For example, some travelers who request for knuckles trek will also request a village tour. At such points, we will take them to the Atanwala village"
(Participant 09, Personal Communication, 2023)

Accordingly, the participants have stated that the cultural aspects have also directly impacted as motives that attract travelers to mountainous areas.

3.2.2 Push Antecedents

Personal Factors

The personal factors that motivate tourists to engage in mountain tourism can vary widely depending on individual preferences and interests. Some may seek out the adrenaline rush of hard adventure or hard treks, while others may be drawn to soft mountain activities and the natural beauty of mountain environments. Age, income, and education can also play a role in shaping the types of activities that tourists are interested in and able to participate in. Therefore, it is crucial to consider personal factors when it comes to understanding antecedents that make tourists engage in mountain tourism. By understanding these personal factors, tourism providers can better cater to the needs and desires of their target audience and offer a more personalized and engaging mountain tourism experience. The first personal factor that motivates travelers is their personal interests and preferences

"The first thing is like we are receiving requests, like personalized requests... they request that they want to do this sort of activities, they want to do this kind of excursion very first thing is they're coming with the special request to include those kinds of activities" (Participant 7, Personal Communication, 2023)

According to the respondents, it is clear how their personal interests and perceptions have influenced travel decisions. Surprisingly, these responses highlighted that travelers nowadays are quite aware of sustainability and responsible travel. As it says that they want to engage in guilt-free tourism and reduce their carbon footprint while enjoying nature-friendly activities.

“Most of the young generations... Actually, young generations of tourists are looking for beaten-path itineraries. So we are looking for adventure activities and adjusting to that. The most of young generation have a demand for adventure activities.” (Participant 10, Personal Communication, 2023)

“Most of the time... Europeans, and Australians are very keen on engaging in such mountain-based activities, If I tell you as a figure, imagine there are 20 travelers who request mountain-based activities, around 17 representing European countries” (Participant 15, Personal Communication, 2023)

According to the responses, age and nationality have significantly affected the mountain tourism engagement decision of travelers. In summary younger generations, which represent European, Australians, and Americans are highly engaged in mountain tourism compared to other nationalities.

External Factors

“Some are very concerned about their health so they think that ‘I’m climbing mountains and this kind of thing is very healthy’. And on the other hand, as many people are living in foreign countries they live in a much-polluted environment. They always breathe bad air... now if we monitor the quality index here will be above the danger level definitely 32% so 40% of the air quality is like that here. But when you are going to Adams Peak It’s zero.” (Participant 01, Personal Communication, 2023)

According to the finding, many people are now placing a high value on their health and actively seeking out activities that promote physical fitness and mental well-being. In contrast, the pollution and poor air quality found in urban environments have led many individuals to seek refuge in mountainous regions, where the air is cleaner and the natural surroundings provide a respite from the stresses of city life. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend, as travellers prioritize outdoor activities that offer social distancing and promote physical health. As a result, mountain tourism is experiencing a surge in popularity, driven by a new set of motivations that reflect the increasing importance of wellness and environmental concerns in modern society.

To achieve the first research objective and classify the relevant data into appropriate sub-sections, the researcher utilized two key codes, and each code consists of 2 categories, that represent the 7 antecedents of mountain tourism which is summarized and presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Category Summary Table

Data	Code	Categories	Sub-Categories
Objective 1	Pull-Antecedents	Unique Selling Propositions	• Off-the-beaten –Paths • Sustainability
		Destination’s Diversity	• Natural Diversity • Cultural Diversity
	Push- Antecedents	Personal Factors	• Interests, and preferences • Demographic profile
		External factors	• Concern for wellness & negative environmental conditions.

Source: Developed by the Researcher (2023)

3.3 Role of Tour Operators in the Development of Sustainable Mountain Tourism

3.3.1 Role towards Economic Sustainability

Marketing & Promotion

The final objective of the study was to explore the role of tour operators in the development of sustainable tourism in Sri Lanka. Eventually, by analyzing the responses given by the participants, the researcher has identified 5 key roles of tour operators in developing SMT, the roles of tour operators were classified mainly under economic sustainability, environmental sustainability, and social sustainability. According to the responses of the participants, it is clear that almost every tour operator is playing a crucial role as a destination marketer, providing both B2C and B2B approaches.

“We do a monthly newsletter, where we feature experiences that includes mountainous areas. & almost every month we do a webinar. So we sometimes take a few suppliers on board, and showcase pictures, videos and so our agents can see from their end.” (Participant 03, Personal Communication, 2023)

“We are more focused on B2B operations, so our promotional activities most of the time rely on B2B marketing. Like, direct conversations, and e-mail marketing but we are active on social media, when it comes to the volume we are getting most of the time it’s B2B.” (Participant 04, Personal Communication, 2023)

Tour operators play a significant role in the marketing and promotion of mountain tourism. One approach they employ is various media types such as monthly newsletters, webinars, and social media. Newsletters feature experiences that highlight mountainous areas, while webinars showcase pictures and videos to provide a first-hand experience for agents. Additionally, tour operators engage in B2B operations, relying on direct conversations, email marketing,

and social media promotion to reach a wider audience. Overall, tour operators serve as key intermediaries in the promotion and marketing of mountain tourism.

Product Development

Tour operators are crucial players in the mountain tourism industry, responsible for developing a diverse range of products that cater to the unique interests and preferences of travellers seeking mountain-based experiences. Their primary role is to identify emerging trends and opportunities within the industry and create new mountain tourism products and services that offer adventure activities like hiking, rock climbing, skiing, and mountain biking, as well as cultural experiences such as traditional village tours and culinary adventures. Working in close collaboration with local communities, suppliers, and stakeholders, tour operators are dedicated to creating sustainable and responsible products that showcase the rich culture, history, and natural beauty of mountain regions. By designing and delivering these products, tour operators help to enhance the attractiveness of mountain tourism destinations, encourage longer stays, and contribute to the overall economic growth and sustainability of these regions. Therefore, the efforts of tour operators in product development play a critical role in shaping the landscape of mountain tourism and creating an unforgettable experience for travellers seeking adventure and cultural immersion in the mountains.

“About 5 6 years ago we didn’t promote much, but now we are...when they go to Kandy we give them the opportunity to visit knuckles... when they go to Nuwara Eliya, we include Horton Plains, when they are in Ella, we give them Ella rock and such areas...” (Participant 09, Personal Communication, 2023)

3.3.2 Role towards Environment Sustainability

Better Planning

Tour operators who specialize in mountain tourism have a critical role in the planning process. Planning is a fundamental function that allows them to coordinate their resources, both human and financial, to provide their clients with memorable and unique experiences.

“We have a team that does research and development. They go to different mountains to learn about them so we can include them in our tour plans. We also send our team to the mountains to give presentations and invite others to speak to our team so we can learn more.” (Participant 14, Personal Communication, 2023)

Tour operators play a crucial role in the planning and organization of mountain-based activities. To ensure that their tours are well-planned and safe. The responses indicate that tour operators conduct research and development to gather information on different mountains and their conditions. Moreover, implementing familiarization tours, inspection on accommodation, ensures the better planning practices they have followed.

Monitoring

Tour operators have a critical role to play in promoting and monitoring SMT. Acting as a bridge between tourists and the natural environment, it is their responsibility to ensure that their operations do not cause any harm to the mountain ecosystem, while also benefiting the local communities and economies.

“During a particular trail, all travelers are advised to not to litter, and we make sure that they dress appropriately and maintain a proper behavior as it would impact on the lifestyle of the wildlife around those mountainous areas” (Participant 05, Personal Communication, 2023)

Tour operators have played an important role in developing SMT by playing their role as monitors. They advise travelers to not litter and maintain appropriate behavior to preserve the wildlife around mountainous areas. Before a hike, tour operators educate people not to bring plastic or polythene and not to litter during the tour. Throughout the journey, they monitor travelers and collect any litter, including polythene or other things, to bring back with them. This proactive approach by tour operators ensures the sustainability of mountain tourism and promotes responsible tourism practices.

3.3.3 Role towards Social Sustainability

Networking

Networking plays a vital role in the development of SMT. It involves establishing and maintaining relationships between stakeholders in the tourism industry in mountainous regions, such as tour operators, local businesses, government agencies, and community members. Through networking, stakeholders can collaborate and cooperate to create sustainable tourism practices that benefit both the local communities and the environment. By sharing information and resources, identifying opportunities for partnership and collaboration, and working together to address challenges, networking enables the promotion of responsible tourism in mountainous regions. A strong network helps to ensure that mountain tourism is sustainable and contributes positively to the local economy and the preservation of the natural environment.

“So we do directly deal with the locals too but we do have our secondary partners or the intermediaries that help us go deeper into that level at the locality... for example even if we send clients on an experience we would always advise the chauffeur to stop at a local shop and drink a king coconut or a tea or even consume some of the roti and local delicacies and things like that just to help them out.” (Participant 03, Personal Communication, 2023)

“Mahiyanganaya, Danigala... we do such climbs with the locals and they have been always helpful. You know we discovered like new destinations for mountainous activities so yeah in Mahiyanganaya we do Danigala so the locals there are and we work closely with the hotels there. So

the hotels they have hired the locals from the areas and they have always been the guides to our clients so yeah". (Participant 06, Personal Communication, 2023)

Tour operators have built strong networks and created opportunities for locals while contributing to social sustainability by partnering with intermediaries and working closely with the communities they visit. These partnerships allow them to go deeper into the local level and provide authentic experiences for their clients. One way they do this is by encouraging their clients to engage with the locals and consume local products, such as tea or local delicacies, which helps to support the local economy. Tour operators also work with local hotels and hire locals as guides to provide a more authentic and immersive experience for their clients.

Additionally, tour operators are mindful of the impact of their activities on the environment and local communities. They work closely with locals to identify new destinations for mountainous activities, as mentioned above Mahiyanganaya and Danigala are examples. Moreover, they involve locals in trekking activities as they have a better understanding of the area. By partnering with intermediaries and working closely with locals, tour operators are not only providing authentic experiences for their clients, but they are also creating opportunities for locals and contributing to the social sustainability of the areas they visit.

Table 3. Category Summary Table

Data	Code	Categories
Objective 02	Economic Sustainability	• Marketing & Promotion • Product Development
	Environmental Sustainability	• Better Planning • Monitoring
	Social Sustainability	• Networking

Source: Developed by the Researcher (2023)

4. Discussion

This study aimed to identify the specific antecedents of mountain tourism in Sri Lanka and examine the role of tour operators in its development. Findings revealed that pull antecedents were primarily related to the unique selling propositions of the destination, such as its natural and cultural diversity, while push antecedents stemmed from personal and external factors influencing tourists' motivations. Additionally, the study highlighted the role of tour operators in promoting economic sustainability through marketing and new product development, environmental sustainability through effective planning and monitoring, and social sustainability through networking and community engagement.

When comparing with the existing literature, previous scholars such as Amatulli et al., (2021) and Beedie and Hudson (2003) have identified various antecedents of mountain tourism, including naturally appealing areas, sustainability, and natural and cultural diversity, etc. However, mountainous areas vary from one to another, and its attractiveness and uniqueness become core elements that attract tourists while adding value to a particular mountain. Hence,

it is necessary to conduct a separate analysis to identify the antecedents, since applying general findings will mislead the results. Accordingly, this research has been able to examine the antecedents of mountain tourism in the Sri Lankan context. Finally, the study revealed that these antecedents can be attributed to both the tourist and the destination side. Specifically, tourists' interests, preferences, and demographic characteristics can inform their selection of mountain destinations, while the natural and cultural diversity, sustainability initiatives, and wellness opportunities offered by the destinations can likewise attract visitors. Comprehensive insight into both aspects of these antecedents can inform the development of effective mountain tourism strategies and policies that optimize benefits for both tourists and destinations. Accordingly, this study has been able to provide insight into the industry by bringing the two essential sectors where the antecedents arise. Namely, the push antecedents dictate the antecedents that push tourists towards mountain tourism while pull antecedents highlight the natural and other uniqueness that the destination has in order to attract tourists. Identifying both pull and push factors will aid the tour operators in catering the right customer, at the right time with the right product.

The role of tour operators in the tourism industry has been a topic of discussion for many years, with researchers emphasizing their ability to influence sustainable tourism practices. The findings of Budeanu (2005) indicate that tour operators are key players in the mass tourism industry and can trigger positive changes toward sustainable tourism. However, advancements in technology have led some to question the role of tour operators in the industry. Despite the availability of technology, the existence of tour operators as intermediaries between the demand and supply sides remains crucial in facilitating tailored packages at reasonable prices and optimizing tourists' experiences. Furthermore, proper planning is essential to satisfy the tourists while maintaining the cohesion and sustainability of destinations.

The study agrees with the above findings. However, as identified by this study, sustainable tourism management goes beyond planning and requires ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation of tourism activities to ensure destinations' sustainability and cohesion. Moreover, the study highlights that partnerships between governing bodies, local communities, and tour operators are necessary for effective and sustainable outcomes in managing sensitive natural areas. Hence, tour operators must take into account not only planning but also a continuous commitment to sustainable tourism practices in all nature-based recreational activities.

In conclusion, while tour operators are essential players in the tourism industry, their role must go beyond planning to include a continuous commitment to sustainable tourism practices in all nature-based recreational activities. The study findings reinforce the importance of partnerships between governing bodies, local communities, and tour operators in managing sensitive natural areas and achieving sustainable outcomes in the tourism industry.

5. Conclusion

MT initially emerged as a popular mass tourism activity in developed nations but has since transitioned into a niche sector. Although various forms of special interest tourism have been studied, the role of tour operators remains underexplored. Addressing this gap, and as noted in Sri Lanka's TSP for 2025, which highlights the lack of research into alternative, niche, and emerging tourism markets, this study aims to investigate the antecedents and the role of tour operators in developing SMT in Sri Lanka.

In order to accomplish these objectives, a qualitative research approach was adopted, and primary data was collected through structured interviews while involving SLTDA registered tour operators, who were considered crucial players in the process of mountain-based tourism activities. The sample was selected using purposive sampling technique, and saturation of responses guided the sample size, with approximately 10-15 samples taken into consideration. However, the responses became saturate around the 12th and 13th participant. Content analysis was used as the data analysis method to identify patterns through an extensive data familiarization process, with the aim of delivering realistic and credible conclusions.

According to the objectives of the study, the researcher has identified two types of antecedents that contribute to attract tourists to mountainous activities. The implications of first objective for knowledge are that this study provides insights into the factors that influence tourists' decision-making when choosing mountain destinations. The study highlights the importance of both pull and push-antecedents and suggests that tourism stakeholders should focus on enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of mountain tourism destinations by addressing both types of antecedents. The implications for practitioners are that tourism stakeholders, including policymakers, destination managers, and marketing strategists, can use the findings of this study to enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of mountain tourism destinations. By addressing both pull and push-antecedents, practitioners can create a more compelling and attractive destination for tourists. This study provides valuable guidance for practitioners in designing tourism strategies and marketing campaigns that address the factors that influence tourists' decision-making when selecting mountain destinations.

Through the final objective of the study, it identified five key roles of tour operators, mainly under economic, environmental, and social sustainability. It indicated that tour operators play a crucial role in marketing and promotion, creating unique experiences for visitors, supporting local communities, developing a diverse range of products, responding to changing tourist demands, planning and organizing activities, and promoting and monitoring sustainable tourism. The study's findings have significant knowledge implications for researchers and scholars in the field of sustainable tourism development. Firstly, the study sheds light on the crucial role of tour operators in developing sustainable mountain tourism, which has important implications for understanding the complex relationships between tour operators, local communities, and the environment. Thereafter, the study identified five key roles of tour operators in developing sustainable mountain tourism, providing a framework for understanding how

tour operators can contribute to sustainable tourism development. Moreover, the study emphasizes the need for tour operators to adopt sustainable practices in their operations, which can inform future research on sustainable tourism development.

On the other hand, study's findings have important implications for practitioners in the tourism industry as well. Initially, the study highlights the importance of adopting sustainable practices in tour operators' operations to promote the long-term economic and social growth of local communities. This can be achieved by incorporating sustainable tourism principles into tour operators' business strategies, including responsible environmental practices, community involvement, and supporting local economies. The study further emphasized the role of tour operators in promoting sustainable tourism by offering unique and authentic experiences to tourists that are environmentally friendly and support local communities. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of collaboration between tour operators and local stakeholders to ensure that tourism development is sustainable and benefits both the environment and local communities. Practitioners can use the findings of this study to inform their business practices and contribute to the development of sustainable tourism in Sri Lanka and other mountain destinations.

5.1 Future Research Directions

When considering the future research directions in the area of mountain tourism in Sri Lanka, researchers could explore several areas to enhance knowledge and understanding of this growing niche market. More importantly, future studies could examine the impact of tour operators' efforts in promoting sustainable mountain tourism in Sri Lanka. This could involve assessing the effectiveness of various sustainable tourism practices adopted by tour operators, such as waste reduction, energy efficiency, and community engagement. Thereafter, the research could also investigate the potential for tourism development in less-explored mountain areas in Sri Lanka. This could involve identifying the unique features of these areas and assessing their tourism potential. Further, future research could explore the role of technology in enhancing the marketing and distribution of mountain tourism packages in Sri Lanka. This could involve assessing the effectiveness of online marketing platforms and mobile applications in promoting mountain tourism products and services. Finally, the research could investigate the potential for developing combined tourism products that integrate mountain tourism with other niche tourism segments in Sri Lanka, such as wildlife tourism and adventure tourism. This could involve identifying the unique selling points of these combined products and assessing their potential to attract a wider range of tourists.

Appendix 01

INTERVIEW GUIDELINE FOR THE TOUR OPERATORS

Dear Sir/ Madam,

I am I. S Narampanawa, a final year student reading for the Bachelor of Business Management (BBM) in Hospitality, Tourism, and Events Management at the Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka. As a partial fulfilment of the degree, I am conducting a study on the role of tour operators in the development of sustainable mountain tourism in Sri Lanka. It would be greatly appreciated if your organization would be kind enough to provide information to fulfil this exploratory study. Also, I assure you that the information will be used only for research purposes and your response will be kept confidential.

Thank you for your cooperation

Profile of the Interviewee

- How many years have you been working in the travel and tourism industry?
- What is your current position at the organization?

1. How often do travellers request hiking/trekking/bird watching/ camping/ or any other form of mountain-based activities?
2. According to your experience, do travellers identify Sri Lanka as an ideal destination for mountain tourism activities?
3. According to your opinion, what type of factors made your organization include different types of mountain-based activities in your travel itineraries?
4. How was the support and involvement of local residents in mountainous areas when developing tourism activities in such mountain areas?
5. As a tour operating organization, do you usually add mountain-based activities when planning your tour itineraries, and why?
6. What measures have you taken to add mountain destinations to your tour itineraries, and how sustainable are your activities on the site?
7. What strategies have you adopted to promote mountain tourism in Sri Lanka?
8. How your itineraries that included mountain-based activities have changed over the years?
9. In your opinion, is there sufficient demand for mountain tourism in Sri Lanka, and what are the reasons?
10. Does the Sri Lankan government have developed effective policies for developing and promoting mountain tourism in Sri Lanka?
11. In your perception, is there a sufficient supply for mountain tourism in Sri Lanka in terms of infrastructure, activities, specialized service personnel, and other superstructure?

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