



Determinants of inbound travellers' motivation to select Sri Lanka as a preferred holiday destination: Perspective of Russian travellers

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Abstract

This study explored the determinants of inbound traveller motivations to select Sri Lanka as a destination of choice for holidays. It specifically looked at the Russian travellers, since the influx of Russian travellers visiting Sri Lanka has significantly increased over the last six months, as per the arrival statistical reports published by Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA). This study attempted to understand what motivates Russian travellers to choose a holiday destination in general and Sri Lanka in particular by using the push and pull factors in the theory of motivation, to explore what they think of Sri Lanka as a holiday destination and to identify the ideal product mix to target them. A qualitative study was conducted with 18 in-depth interviews with Russian nationals who had taken a foreign holiday within the last three years. The purposive sampling technique was used to choose the relevant participants for the study. The interviews were conducted between February 20, 2022, to March 3, 2022. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The NVivo software was used for thematic analysis. This study identified numerous push and pull motivation factors affecting outbound visits of Russian travellers in general and Sri Lanka in particular.

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INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry comprises a collection of stakeholders who come together to deliver a memorable experience to visitors. According to World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2008), tourism is a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon that entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. The importance placed on tourism is paramount due to its socio-economic benefits. While this importance is continuing to grow, understanding what motivates people to travel significantly and positively benefits destination marketers. Studying tourist motivation helps to understand why people travel, choose a specific destination and engage in certain activities while on holiday (Robinson, 2012). In this study, the researchers explored what motivates Russian travellers to choose Sri Lanka as a preferred destination and the products we can offer them to encourage them to choose Sri Lanka as a preferred holiday destination.

While many tourists visit Sri Lanka, the recent statistics revealed that the Russian Federation, India, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and Germany are the top five international tourist generating markets for January 2022. An analysis of Russian arrivals reveals that it has almost exceeded the pre-pandemic arrivals experienced in January 2019 (SLTDA, 2022). Russians visiting Sri Lanka accounted for 18,044 (15.8 percent) of the total 113,670 holidaymakers who visited Sri Lanka in 2022 up to February 11, while Ukrainians accounted for 9,883 (8.7 percent) of the total visitors in the same period (Hamza, 2022). Most Russians travel to foreign countries during the winter period; from November to April, to escape the extreme cold and enjoy the sun. Turkey and Egypt are among the most visited destinations for Russians. It has been reported that, in the first 8 months of 2017, after the opening of charter flights to Turkey, the country was visited by more than 3.3 million Russians (Alexander, 2018). Thus, Russia is a highly lucrative market globally

and for Sri Lanka specifically.

Many researchers have closely studied traveller's motivations. Researchers also accentuate that the knowledge of people's travel motivations and their association with destination selection plays a critical role in predicting future travel patterns (Shawn, 2002). Researchers have shown interest in identifying travel motivations related to specific tourism niches (Nawarathna, 2017; Pesonen, 2011), touristic attractions, and countries (Caber & Albayrak, 2016; Medhekar et al., 2019; Zhang & Peng, 2014). While travel motivations have been studied using numerous motivational theories, Cengizci and Karasakal (2020) have conducted a study incorporating push and pull theory to investigate key determinants of Russian travellers visiting Turkey. The findings of this study have contributed to understanding the Russian market for Turkey through a quantitative approach. While there seems to be a lack of studies exploring the push and pull factors of motivation qualitatively, we highlight the importance of a study with a qualitative perspective to obtain rich and meaningful insights. Such an understanding would enhance destination tourism managers, local government authorities, and other stakeholders to develop customized strategies for tourist patronage, maximizing available resources, and improving marketing efforts (Mohaidin, 2017). Specifically, the findings shed insights into identifying effective marketing communications and campaigns to motivate more visitors and their expectations are met to ensure satisfaction during their stay in Sri Lanka. Broadly, tourists are naturally heterogeneous and travel for various motives; thus, they require efforts to recognize and attract the right visitors to ensure the sustainability of the tourism industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism researchers have long recognized the importance of studying travel motivations. Understanding tourist motivations helps to create better

products and services, enhance satisfaction with tourism experiences and provide an understanding of tourist decision-making processes (Crompton, 1997). Travel motivation has also been studied categorizing into four groups: (1) physical motivators, including those related to physical rest, participation in sports, need for recreation at a beach, and those motivations directly connected with a person's bodily health; (2) cultural motivators concerning the desire to gain knowledge about other countries in terms of cultural activities; (3) interpersonal motivators, including a desire to meet new people, visit friends or relatives, get away from the routine conventions of life or to make new friendships; and (4) status and prestige motivators, related to self-esteem and personal development (Goeldner, 1984).

Travel motivation has been explored using numerous theories. Many tourism researchers have based their theoretical background on Maslow's five-stage hierarchy of needs theory (1954). While Maslow's theory provides a systematic approach to motivational structure, it emphasises the needs that appear in a hierarchical order of increasing motivational importance: physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization. Some researchers argued for a different needs system that may fit tourists more appropriately instead of employing a five-stage classification stemming from Maslow's Hierarchy. Pearce (1988) also suggested that there exists a motivational career in travel, with more experienced travellers emphasizing higher needs than less experienced travellers with a travel career ladder (TCL) (Pearce, 1988). Throughout history, one of the most dominant other theories within the scope of travel influence and motivation has been the push and pull theory of Dann (1977). According to push and pull theory, multiple factors motivate tourists and/or travellers to visit particular places or destinations, but these factors can be categorised as either push or pull motivations (Dann, 1977). Accordingly, the two key factors that influence intentions to select a tourism destination are namely, the motivating or pull stimulus factors and psychological or personal

factors. Motivating or push factors are those precise elements that drive tourists to actualize their needs such as the destination image, services, and entertaining facilities (Uysal, 1993).

According to (Uysal, 2008), the push factors, are the reasons why people want to get away from their regular place of residence. Pull factors are reasons for visiting the destinations. These factors have been generally characterized as relating to two separate decisions made at two separate points in time. One focuses on whether to go and the other on where to go (Klenosky, 2002). The following example can be used to understand this further: A person wants to get away from the mundane routine of life. This is a factor that will push the individual towards thinking of taking a vacation. This individual now chooses to visit Bali because of its beaches and he thinks the people are friendly. The beaches and the people are factors that draw this tourist to Bali and are therefore pull motivations (Robinson, 2012). Push factors are viewed as relating to the needs and wants of the traveller, such as the desire for escape, rest and relaxation, adventure, prestige, health and fitness, and social interaction., On the other hand, pull factors have been characterized in terms of the features, attractions, or attributes of the destination itself, such as sunshine, beaches, sports facilities, and cheap airfares (Klenosky, 2002), which may differ among people.

Despite much research focusing on tourists' motivations to travel, more studies are still needed to explore the various theoretical foundations that form the basis of researchers' understanding of travel patterns (Anish, 2018). Even though researchers have looked at the push and pull motivations of tourists visiting Sri Lanka in general (Gnanapala, 2011), there appears to be a gap in literature containing market-specific information on traveller motivations to select a specific destination such as Sri Lanka. While the motivations and travel patterns could vary drastically based on geographic location, cultures, and values of different source markets, for example, travellers from the Middle East,

China, and Europe, Russians may have distinctly different motivations.

Furthermore, these motivations may change among travellers based on the different traveller typologies as identified by Dalen, such as Modern materialists, Modern idealists, Traditional idealists, and Traditional materialists (Dalen, 1989). Studying traveller motivations helps researchers to understand behaviours, attitudes, values, motivations, perceptions, expectations, preferences, and choices from pre-purchases to post purchases. This emphasizes the necessity for empirical and scientific understanding of the determinants of traveller motivations for crucial markets. Due to the significance of the Russian market to Sri Lanka and the possibility for it to grow further in contributing to the country's foreign revenue earnings and due to the gap in the literature with market-specific understanding and knowledge, this study intends to add to the knowledge pool and industry's growth through its empirical and scientific findings because effective tourism marketing would be impossible without an understanding of consumers' motivation (Fodness, 1994).

Russia plays a significant part in the world tourism stage according to reports. In 2012, Russians spent 43 billion US dollars on abroad holidays. Accordingly, Russia got among the top 5 countries with the highest expenditure of their citizens for holidays and travel abroad. Russia held 5th place between the years 2013 and 2014 after excluding all CIS countries, where Russians travel mostly for work and to visit their relatives (RMAA Travel Marketing Agency, 2021). In September 2020, Russia became a leader in the number of tourists in the Maldives for the first time, while in December 2020, 70% more tourists came to the Maldives than in December 2019. In January 2021, Russia became a leader in the number of tourists in the Maldives again. According to the Maldives Ministry of Tourism, the tourist flow from Russia increased by 67.4% (as compared to January 2019) (RMAA Travel Marketing Agency, 2021).

This indicates that Russian tourists have a high tendency to prefer sun and sea destinations such as the Maldives. Sri Lanka can be looked at by positioning itself as a destination with sun and sea along with a variety of other experiences. Russia has consecutively been among the top 10 tourist generating countries to Sri Lanka, but the volume of tourists arriving in Sri Lanka in comparison to the potential of the Russian market is relatively low at “2.8% share in 2018” (SLTDA, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative and employs phenomenological as the research strategy since it focusses on exploring a phenomenon (Dewasiri et al., 2018). As one of the researchers is living in Russia during the period of this study, and being able to live and interact with the people of the country, has prompted the selection of this strategy and it intends to understand the determinants which motivate Russian travellers to choose Sri Lanka as a preferred holiday destination. Open coding was used for analysing and interpreting the data. The participants included Russian citizens who had taken a holiday outside the Russian Federation not earlier than 2019. Since most Russian people don't speak English, it was ensured that the selected participants were also able to communicate in English. Some of the participants of the study had already visited Sri Lanka for a holiday and some were visiting Sri Lanka this year. To find these participants, first, a public message was shared with a google form where people could register as a participant. This form was also shared via social media networks such as VK, WhatsApp, and Telegram, asking people to fill in a registration form based on which audience was qualified to serve the purpose of the study. The main attributes to disqualify were; incapability of speaking English for the interview purpose and not having visited a foreign country within the last 3 years.

A key point to be considered was the outbreak of the Russia Ukraine

war. The war has affected the research because some participants were not in a mindset to sit for an interview of this nature as some had relatives in Ukraine and were emotionally not prepared., This required using snowball sampling in some instances to ensure the researcher had enough participants to interview until a data saturation point was reached.

The study employed 18 Russians from different cities such as Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Nizhny Novgorod with a total of 7 male and 11 female participants who voluntarily took part in the research interviews. Interviews were conducted in 2 formats: via Zoom as a recorded conference call or an audio recorded face-to-face interview based on the participant's preference and convenience. Each interview was carried out for approximately 20 – 30 mins. To abide by the expected ethical standards all participants first registered and confirmed their consent to take part in the study while agreeing to allocate a stipulated time for the interview. It was confirmed with participants that all their personal information will be kept strictly confidential and even their names will not be shared in the research report. The interviews were conducted in English using a semi-structured interview guide to help the researcher navigate the conversation within the framework of the study with minimal deviations from the purpose of the study.

All interviews were recorded using the Zoom software including the face-to-face interview audio recordings which were recorded via the Zoom software. All meetings were recorded with an auto-transcription of the conversation with closed captions. These interviews were automatically transcribed with closed captions. Later, the transcriptions were checked for corrections as some words, when pronounced with a Russian accent, were detected by the software differently. With the support of the audios, the transcriptions were fine-tuned. Following that, open coding was used to carry out the analysis phase. Finally, this data was fed into the NVivo 12 software to be coded appropriately to identify emerging themes. This is important in qualitative research because the

themes will not emerge by themselves, so the researcher must get involved and play an analytical role in conducting an efficient and effective thematic analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Russian Traveller

The majority of the participants in this study were females. Most of the participants mentioned that they visit a foreign country for holidays more than once a year. It was also noteworthy that they mostly travelled with their families while the majority of them considered the budget or standard type of holidays (budget holidays defines the unclassified hotels or hotels with lower than 3-star classifications while standard type holidays meant a 3-star or 4-star categorized hotels. Luxury holidays were 5-star or luxury boutique accommodations (Table 1).

Table 1: Participant profiles

Gender		Foreign Vacations/Year			Travel Party			Travel Type		
Male	Female	<1	once	1:	Solo	Friends	Family	Budget	Standard	Luxury
7	11	2	5	11	3	5	10	6	7	5

It was quite significant to note that many Russians choose to visit foreign countries multiple times a year especially during the Summer and Winter holidays, usually for a week or more, indicating the potential of this market for Sri Lanka. One participant said:

Yeah, usually I travel twice a year, outside of my country and I have a four-week vacation at work, and I usually break, it into two parts. So, I take two weeks, usually during New Year's Eve and Christmas holidays, and the second part usually during the May holidays. So, I do trips for two to three weeks long. In winter and spring, usually, it's more or less

like that (Aron).

Some participants also mentioned that the frequency could exceed two trips outside the country, especially

I work online so I can travel anytime. Before the war and COVID lockdown, I used to travel a few times a year to CUBA, the Dominican Republic, Serbia, France, Italy, Austria – 3 or 4 times a year (Emma).

Other participants also highlighted their frequent travel:

Usually, every time when we want to go on a holiday, we do it outside of Russia so maybe in a year - it's two or three times (Yerin).

Yes, I do travel outside. My vacation is always outside of Russia. But because of the COVIDI hardly could travel last two years, but generally, I travel two or three times in the year (Alan).

Considering travel planning, most participants mentioned that they prefer to plan their travel by themselves rather than buying a package tour from a travel agent or tour operator. For example, one participant commented:

We plan by ourselves, we don't use agents just use only aggregators like Airbnb, Agoda, Booking.com or some other and we buy plane tickets online or via sky scanner (Yerin).

Another participant added it was like a 'little adventure' to plan:

I like to plan everything by myself. For me, it is the beginning of the whole story. Going through the internet, getting to know the country more deeply. Trying to talk to some locals – For me, it is already like the beginning of the adventure (Emma).

While one other participant mentioned that some special arrangements can be made with agents, but usually, she plans everything independently:

When I want to study, sometimes I address it to special agencies, which organize exchange programs for students, but usually I plan and prepare everything myself., So. I use different websites like AirBnb,

Avito, what else, booking.com, and so on. I think it's cheaper. Yeah, it helps to save some money because there are no middlemen which charge you, and yes I can choose by myself whatever I want, I have more options to choose from (Ivana).

While Russians were found to be frequent travellers, it is also noteworthy that generally, Russian tourist preferred standardized package tours offered by travel agents. Some participants explained this as:

Most Russians prefer traveling groups. There are some solo Russian travellers, but because Russians don't speak good English, it's difficult for them to communicate when they visit a foreign country. That's why group tourism is still a big business in Russia (Viktoria).

When I think for typical Russian tourists, or mass tourists, it is crucial for it to be all-inclusive like he or she shouldn't care about anything. So - air tickets, hotels with meals, transfers, and maybe some excursions offered to them with a Russian-speaking guide. Maybe some activities like to show that they're not vegetable tourists. So, That's like a typical package, I suppose, yeah... to publish their pictures on Instagram, just to show how, how cool they are right now (Nick).

I think that they're all looking for all-inclusive - hotels, which offer all-inclusive packages. Not that they want to browse the city or meet people or do some research. They just want to be near the beach and just want to swim in the Ocean. This is typical in my surrounding or my colleagues (Yulia).

Majority of the participants stated that their travel partners are either family or friends, which indicates that many plan their holidays by themselves and travel in small groups of 2 or more people.

Participants explained this as:

Um, I usually travel with my mother. And sometimes we take her friend

and her friend's daughter. So, we have like a small group. This is usually about the summer holidays. And then I travel with my partner, and I travel with my friend, which is usual in Russia. But, we haven't visited foreign countries with her if we are talking about different destinations. I travel with my mother and my partner(boyfriend) (Alisa).

When I was young, I've done a lot of travelling to different countries mostly with my family and sometimes with my friends. And when I grew older, I, of course, go with my wife and kids. We wanted to go somewhere with our friends but it didn't happen since everyone has their plans and it's not easy to meet everyone together (Igor).

Okay, usually when I travel - it's my extended family, so it's my husband, my daughter my mom, well my daughter's grandma and sometimes it's my brother. So, it's kind of extended family (Yulia).

In support of travelling with friends one participant mentioned:

I prefer to travel with friends or my partner. But sometimes, I do it alone. Yet, in most of the situations I go with my friend or my girlfriend (Alan).

It was observed that participants usually seek all-inclusive packages with a Russian-speaking guide. They also mentioned the word “vegetable tourist”, which means that the general Russian tourists are not interested in any activities; they just want to relax in the sun all day long at their hotel. Some participants also expressed that they prefer short excursions to cultural or historic places, mainly to feel that they didn't just stay at the hotel. They also liked a lot of photos that they can share with friends, family, and colleagues to show off their holiday/vacation experience. It was also mentioned that the price/cost is something that most Russian tourists are concerned about. Few participants highlighted that following the recent conflict with Ukraine, people are also quite concerned about the friendliness of the local people towards Russians and the level of general safety in the country:

Well, there are two kinds of Russian tourists. One type likes to become like vegetables, and sleep in the sun on the seashore - not do anything else. But another type likes to visit some more of the country, and I choose the second type as it is more interesting for me (Alfred).

One participant said that all-inclusive options with some cultural or traditional frills are sought out nowadays by Russian travellers, as these are present in highly popular destinations for Russian tourists:

I think that Russian people are a bit lazy, and they want everything to be included for them. So, all-inclusive options go best for Russian people, Hotels with Buffet, and for example, some performances or shows like in Turkey adapted for Russian people - so everything including food, some entertainment programmes are included, and it should not be very expensive. So yes, I think that when Russian people go on a holiday they want everything to be included, hotel, food, entertainment, and a bit of alcohol (Ivana).

Adding to the all-inclusive preference, one participant said they also look for groups as the prices are lower and they can communicate in the Russian language.

Most Russians prefer travelling in groups. There are some solo Russian travellers, but because most Russians don't speak good English, it's difficult for them to communicate. Hence, they prefer being in groups where Russian is spoken - that's why it's still a big business in Russia - group tourism (Viktoria).

Another participant asserted:

I think lots of Russian people prefer organized tours, just because they have some difficulties with speaking English, or since it's difficult for them to find out some information on the internet. For me, it's not a problem. I think my level of English is good enough and I can find any information that I want. Moreover, I can connect with people from

different countries ask some questions find a host and communicate with this host about the price, about the location to learn any information I need, as I can speak English and French. Also, I am capable of organizing my trips by myself. So, I do not need a mediator who will charge me additional money for the services. I can carry out myself (Ivana).

Even though the participants' travel profile was not a main focus of the study, the above statements provide rich insights into how we could approach the Russian market. For instance, based on the statements provided, the usual 'sun and sea' holiday which Sri Lanka has always been the focus of Sri Lankan destination marketers is the best way to attract general Russian tourists. It also adds new insights into what add-ons can be packaged with the standard offers targeting general Russian travellers. While the general Russian travellers prefer beach holidays, there are certain other Russians who seek different types of holidays when they travel abroad. It is important that as a destination, Sri Lanka presents a variety of options that can be experienced by a traveller visiting the Island. Segmentation is considered a key determinant of a successful marketing program. Thus, findings revealed that participants differ drastically in demographic, psychographic, behavior, and behavioral segments and also revealed numerous types of Russian travellers. One participant highlighted:

I think that among Russians there are different people, and the key point here is to make some segmentation in this market. We need to differentiate them according to their age, because for me, for example, it's important to visit as many places as possible, see everything and to be sure that everything will be organized properly. Young people need to gain new experiences, and have cool posts on their Instagram, as you know - fresh emotions as you go there, you return as like a renewed person. And for people who are like my parents, they may choose to lie on the beach and maybe one excursion, visit historical places around

the island, and buy souvenirs or materials or something to take back to Russia (Alisa).

Highlighting of the variety-seeking Russian travellers, another participant mentioned that:

Russians are now also looking for some interesting activities in the countries they choose to visit. They like to be on the beach definitely, but they try to combine it with a surfing retreat, learning to dive, sometimes yoga or Ayurveda which is also popular in Russia. They like to explore nature and see historical places. – Many Russians know they can watch elephants, climb Sigiriya and Adam's peak and the journey of the train through the tea plantations can be interesting combinations for a good Island tour (Ursula).

Participants also mentioned some specific types of interest or hobby-based travel. A couple of them said:

I went to Sri Lanka because I miss surfing! and there are almost no surfing destinations in Russia. In February, it's kind of a season so, yeah, it's a good time for those interested in surfing to go there (Viktoria).

I did it several times with my friends and I like to travel in this way. We did trips, all together in a small group of two or three people, we did cycle trips - before, I used to travel by bicycle in Russia and to other countries. We brought our bikes by ship or by plane, then we assembled it in the country and started to cycle around the country stopping and visiting places of our interest, talking with locals – It's a different way of travelling (Aron).

Another participant, who was more interested in nature and adventure, said:

For example, if I'm going to Finland, I look at what type of food,

special excursions and unique experiences are available. In Finland, you can take some special eco experiences, forest walks or large garden walks passing lakes through Blueberry fields with some birds, little wild animals and places where you can have your picnics and walk through enjoying the nature... I like stuff like that (Emma).

When speaking of future travel plans, most participants held back their actual plans as the most preferred region to visit seems to be Europe; but due to the existing conflict with Ukraine, there are travel bans and a lack of flights. Because of this reason, most of them foresee the possibility of Ex-Soviet Republics or Central Asian, South Asian, or Southeast Asian and even some South American countries as viable options for holidays in the near future. In general, Russians have a deep desire to go abroad to spend their holidays, yet they seek some general level of standards to existing as most of them have been exposed to Europe, Turkey, and Egypt where a high level of infrastructure and service levels are met. While the existing situation has influenced people's plans, the overall desire to travel to a foreign country for holidays exists.

Push and pull motivation to travel

Having obtained an understanding of the travel behaviour of Russian travellers, the researchers explored the push/pull factors determining their travel in general. The majority of participants mentioned that the urge for new experiences, environment, and culture, was the main reason to take a foreign holiday followed by the need to relax and refresh from work-related stress. Some participants also mentioned a change in climate or better weather as a popular reason for choosing a foreign destination for a Holiday.

One of the participants said:

When I feel bored and want to change my surrounding. It is good to travel and feel all these differences in different places., It makes me feel refreshed! New people, new place, new smells, new tastes, new

food – basically many different new experiences (Emma).

Another participant, highlighted the desire to relax and refresh or rejuvenate being the key motivation pushing them to travel:

Holidays are to help me relax from stress to change the place where you live, where you walk, where you sleep, and to be a bit away from thoughts of work and stress, and it also helps develop myself, my mind, it also helps to meet new people. To know about new things in the world (Natasha).

One participant stated their key motivation to travel to a foreign country for holiday was climate or better weather:

It depends on the season, that's how we decide where we go When we go for a holiday in summer usually, you know, in Summer maybe we travell to Europe, or some other Nordic or Baltic countries. On the other hand, when we go on a holidayin winter, we choose warm countries like Thailand, or India, or some other in Middle East, South America, a beach with a good sea or an ocean,or something similar (Yerin).

Among the pull factors motivating them to visit a country, the convenience to enter the country, cost, beaches, unique activities or experiences, safety for tourists, culture, nature, history, and food were prominent.

One of the respondents commented:

Okay. The first thing, which is attractive for me, is, of course, the convenience and cost of traveling because I always have a specific budget for travelling and first, I want to understand which country is possible and then what I can do in this country –It is like a beach holiday or sightseeing or what I can see in this country and after – What service I can get in this country – All-inclusive or Fullboard or

some special promotions. Then, what attracts me is the history of the country. For example, recently, I visited Turkey - I was in Istanbul. Historically this place was Constantinople and Byzantine empires, it means that, I can see a lot of interesting historic, buildings, for example. Then I like to understand the local people's culture and lifestyle in this country (Alan).

Another respondent shared quite similar points on motivation when asked what motivates or attracts you to visit a foreign country for a holiday:

Well, I would like to see some cultural places, you know, to see to be able to touch buildings or something you know - to see it with my eyes. Also, what is interesting for me is the food. I really like these gastronomical parts of travelling when you eat and drink something new. This is very interesting and important for me (Donna).

Another respondent, who considered beach as a major factor in motivating the desire to choose a destination, said:

I like to travel to somewhere where there is a Sea. That's why I'm interested in where the hotel is located, I prefer the first line hotels. Some interesting cultural places and if it's nearby the hotel, it's more attractive for me, than maybe some ancient ruins or historic places (Elisa).

Push and pull motivations to visit Sri Lanka

When exploring the push and pull factors specific to Sri Lanka, participant's awareness, perceptions, and experiences of Sri Lanka were identified. We consider this as an important learning opportunity for Sri Lanka not only to market to the Russian travellers but to explore what inbound travellers think of Sri Lanka in general.

The findings revealed a lack of promotion conducted on Sri Lanka tourism. According to the participants, other popular countries like Turkey, Egypt,

Thailand, and India in South Asia are all heavy advertisers in Russia. Most participants said, they knew very few things about Sri Lanka but mentioned that they have seen pictures of Sri Lanka on social media.

One of the participants said:

“Actually, I didn't know much. I know the name of the country. I just have some idea where it is located, but no, I have never seen anything, any advertisement, nothing. Because it's not the most usual country for a holiday, it's quite adventurous and it's a bit far-reaching for us to actually visit this country.” (Yulia).

Some other participants said:

“I see on travel agencies ads, they almost always mention Thailand and such countries, but I have never seen any ads about Sri Lanka. There is no mention about it, and if it will be, it will be better.” (Gina)

“I think that most promoted countries to go are Egypt, Turkey, Seychelles islands, Dominican Republic, Tunisia, Cuba. These are typical countries for Russians to travel to. They have many advertisements and social media activity” (Kate).

One participant said that currently people who visit countries like Sri Lanka, have many groups on different social platforms. Those participants mentioned the following:

“No ads, yet, I have seen offers from Sri Lanka, maybe in some special chats in Telegram or groups in Facebook or on WhatsApp. So, social media is like a more social network.” (Nick)

Since there seems to be a general lack of information about Sri Lanka, awareness campaigns which would be outdoor marketing or events where people can receive some initial exposure to the destination can be seen as an immediate. A participant said:

“Well as for me. I know that I don't know much about Sri Lanka. So,

the first thing that I think is that to have some representation, somewhere in, ..., mass media or something. And also, more [promotion].” (Donna)

Findings indicate that awareness of the different types of holidays will help motivate Russian travellers who are motivated by varying pull factors. The campaigns need to be conducted during late summer or early autumn when people have returned to their homes. Generally, during summer, many Russians have a habit of living in their village summer houses. So, to make sure the right audiences receive the message, the timing of the campaign will be crucial.

Some of the participants also mentioned that Russian travel influencers on social media usually help reach wide audiences. Therefore, it also might be useful to identify social media travel influencers with different interest backgrounds similar to the tour product themes designed. Then, some promotional campaigns in collaboration with them and Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau can be arranged to reach more Russians, and motivate more of them to visit Sri Lanka during their next holiday.

When questioning participants on what mainly attracts or motivates them to choose a country like Sri Lanka for a holiday - many people state beaches, nature and culture are the main factors that attract them to visit. Some participants also mentioned Tea. Though Sri Lanka generally offers a whole variety of different benefits which fall within the spectrum of general pull motivations mentioned by the respondents, they don't seem to associate such factors as motivations to choose Sri Lanka.

One participant stated:

“Countries like Sri Lanka, so it is like, you know, these other countries are a way to receive new experiences. I think they are very different. I just want to see how people are living, and the new culture which are the most important for me. I really love to travel. That's why any new country for me is wonderful.” (Alisa)

According to one participant, what motivates them to visit Sri Lanka is:

“The ocean, but still, it was very nice for me that there are some mountains and a lot of greenery. I think it's beautiful, and is the journey on the train through the island and tea plantations. I think there are not so many countries where you can receive such an experience where you also have the ocean, and beach and something in mountains, and some plantations. It's very diverse. That's what's attracting me!”. (Alisa)

Another participant said:

“I think the nature, incredible views, beautiful beaches, mountains, and the people are quite hospitable in Sri Lanka. That's what attracts me to this country.” (Ivana)

Though Sri Lanka has strong religious, cultural, and historic attractions, it seems that many had very little information or awareness about the country. Some even mentioned that they feel it as a negative factor that Sri Lanka doesn't have a vibrant culture of its own.

“About Sri Lanka, there is a weak point, that there is no great history and culture that I am aware of. So sorry, maybe there is, but I never knew about it. I know that I do know India has a deep culture. So, if Sri Lanka also has something similar then it would be preferable to go there ...” (Sam).

“Unfortunately, haven't been very curious about this because I think it's way too far for me. A long fly. But this country, I think, I would like to take my kids to. Exploring a new country is a priority for me and also the nature” (Kate).

Some participants have a very basic understanding and knowledge of the country. Many people relate it to be something like India but a little different. The general perceptions were mostly positive and encouraging, but some people who have visited the country also mentioned some negative aspects which need to be studied from a constructive point of view, as these concerns must be improved to project a more positive and attractive image in motivating more Russian travellers/tourists to visit Sri Lanka.

During the interviews, some participants said:

Okay, um, I think for me it's like a paradise on Earth with beaches, the sea, some mountains. The mountains, at some distance. It's quiet and calm, some you know like some place of abundance.” (Ivana).

“I feel something warm and sunny and green. Also, I think the roads and the building are a little old and dirty, I guess. A lot of people, a lot of cars and bikes. Oh, and Elephants as well and the Tea Plantations (Gina).

Some participants also closely associate Sri Lanka with tea and tea plantations, as mentioned in the statements below:

Ohh, Tea plantations, Ocean, Waves, Elephants, Turtles... Hmm the sandy beaches. Maybe and maybe sunrise on the peak Adam. These are some of the images I associate with Sri Lanka” (Alisa).

“Yes. Sri Lanka. It's a synonym of good tea in Russia and Russians love the tea! It's a national tradition in Russia – many cups of Tea – Every day (Yerin).

Some others who knew less about Sri Lanka associated it to be more like India. One participant added:

I see it a lot like India somehow, also, because it's located close to India, and pictures or photos I have seen from Sri Lanka and pictures from India are quite similar for me. Of course, Sri Lanka has nice beaches, maybe like in Goa in India. Second, there are the mountains.

I remember photos of mountains in Sri Lanka. I think, I remember an old railroad in Sri Lanka, I have also seen the pictures (Aron).

Another participant mentioned that he perceives Sri Lanka as a very exotic country. He asserted:

I think it is an exotic country, exotic but it includes interesting things that I have never seen before. For example, in my mind, it's something like Turkey, but more exotic. I think there is a lot of green scenery. A lot of women wear white and colourful clothes, hmm I don't know; it looks very hot and humid. Yeah, and I think I also imagine a lot of colorful exotic foods (Igor).

As mentioned in another study, despite its relatively small size, Sri Lanka possesses a high level of biodiversity due to its wide range of topographic and climatic variations. Sri Lanka is known as one of the 25 biodiversity hotspots in the world, as identified by Conservation International. The country has abundant birdlife with 251 species resident and no less than 21 endemics on the island (Mathews, 2000).

However, while many participants had many good things to say when discussing their perceptions, some people who had experienced the country also mentioned the following statements, one participant said:

It's like, it's the same inconvenience as in the Philippines, same in Indonesia, same in Sri Lanka. It's like the government - they don't care much for people. So, you must walk by the road. There are no pedestrian walks, you don't have a place to walk. I'm sorry - I will say this - I don't mean this as any kind of offense but, like, It's a rather poor country. So, the people are poor but still cheerful and smiling (Viktoria).

This indicates that, though travellers enjoy the positives, there are some expectations of higher standards and better infrastructure to be in place. These developments will contribute to more favourable perceptions, which will

motivate more Russians to choose Sri Lanka as their preferred holiday destination.

Figure 1 depicts a word cloud generated based on the most frequent word associations that participants shared during the interviews.



Figure 1: Word Frequency Associations

The themes that emerge from this study further strengthen the following statement: Sri Lanka's diverse landscapes and rich cultural heritage present a wide range of tourism opportunities, ranging from "sun and beach" holidays, wildlife excursions, and cultural tours. Generally, Sri Lanka's tourism resources are relatively under-exploited (Ranasinghe, 2015)

By analysing the themes developed based on push and pull motivations, and travel-related preferences, the report moves on to explore the varying type of travellers and the suitable products that can be offered. Findings provide useful insight into what motivates Russians to travel in general and what can

motivate them to choose Sri Lanka as a preferred holiday destination. Since this study intertwined with the period of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, along with the global response towards the Russian government and its people, most of the responders touched on this as a significant influence on their responses since the sanctions imposed have had massive financial, emigration, and social repercussions on the Russian public. This inevitably is going to affect Russian travellers' motivations and choices. Interestingly, this hasn't limited the spirit of Russian travellers to take vacations outside of Russia. Since the situation with COVID19 had similar effects on many other countries and travellers, they seem to view the current situation and limitations similarly and they are looking for alternative destinations.

However, the Russian Ruble falling against the U.S. Dollar will have a significant effect on the prices that Russian travellers will pay, especially in the segment of price-sensitive travellers who are not looking for anything fancy but just a simple holiday in a foreign country. This reason may prompt many of them to only move around the ex-Soviet republics, which are still supporting Russia and not closing their borders to Russians. However, since a difference from their usual environment is something many people desire when they take a foreign holiday, the neighbouring republics or countries may not fulfill such desires. Furthermore, most participants mentioned that they are looking for warm holidays by the beach and that seems to be the most general expectation among many Russians.

Nevertheless, when it comes to Sri Lanka people also significantly associate it with nature, culture and history, and the cultural and environmental experience. It is also noteworthy that participants had almost no recall of any advertising or promotions regarding Sri Lanka, but many respondents mentioned that they had come across different images on social media. Russians seem to be quite particular about the amount of information and understanding they have regarding a country before they choose to go there,

and a massive vacuum of information exists in the case of Sri Lanka. Though Sri Lanka has an on-arrival and long-stay visa program running for Russian tourists, none of them were aware or informed about such a possibility. This is vital because one of the key triggers that pull Russians to visit a new holiday destination is the ease of entry and emigration. Many have a desire to visit Sri Lanka and agree that they would go if the time and cost of travel would be within their capacity.

Our study identified some new aspects such as a change in environment, hobbies/interests, curiosity, weather, and sunshine as some of the main push motivations to travel to a foreign country and aspects like – ease or convenience of entry, safety, beaches, nature, animals, tea, and mountains as the main pull factors that attract tourists to visit a country. However, it is also noteworthy that our study didn't capture push motivational factors such as prestige or enhancement of human relationships or pull motivational factors such as high-tech image, service quality, and attitude. This may be because countries like Sri Lanka are relatively underdeveloped in comparison to Hong Kong, and the factors motivating visitors vary.

Similarly, when looking at previous literature relating to the topic, we found another study that investigated how push and pull motivational forces influenced two of the most important travel decisions: destination choice and vacation activities pursued at a destination. Through factor analysis, six push factors and seven pull factors were extracted from 17 push items and 22 pull items, respectively. The push factors contained psychological motivations intrinsic to individual tourists such as escape and get away, novelty-seeking, relaxing, bragging about the trip, and family togetherness. The seven pull factors were environmental quality, nature/ecology, ease and value, art and culture, atmosphere and weather, unique and different people, and outdoor activities (Lee, 2002).

When compared with our findings, the above-mentioned study has

relatively similar push motivations, It was interesting to note that bragging about the trip was also a push factor in the study conducted by Lee (2002). Art and outdoor activities were the only differences in terms of pull motivations. In addition to what has been mentioned in this study, this study also identified push factors such as climate, hobbies, and knowledge, along with pull factors such as safety, food, beaches, tea plantations, and elephants. This shows that though there are some similarities between push and pull factors of travellers, there are also notable differences between them. That is why as mentioned by Klenosky (2002), in his study “the key idea underlying the push-pull framework—that travel behaviour is motivated by two sets of factors, one that influences or pushes a person to consider travelling outside his or her everyday environment and another set that attracts or pulls that person to visit a particular destination (or set of destinations)—has been and will long remain an important component of the travel motivation literature” (Klenosky, 2002). However, understanding tourist consumer behavior is not merely of academic interest but doing so would provide knowledge for effective tourism planning and marketing (Choibamroong, 2004).

The figure below shows the combination of push and pull factors that motivate Russian travellers in general and the factors that motivate them to visit a country like Sri Lanka. This will help us understand better what elements we need to communicate more effectively to attract more Russians to visit Sri Lanka.

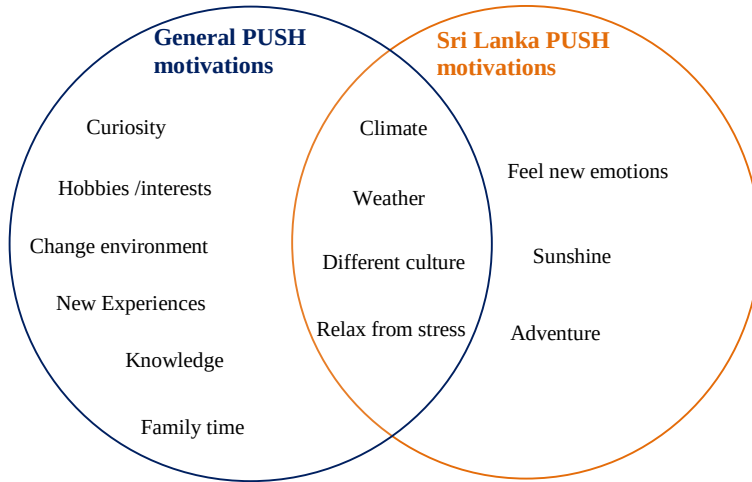


Figure 2: Push motivation factors

Figure 2 and 3 help us to identify which push and pull factors intercept each other based on their general push factors vs Sri Lanka-specific push factors and general pull factors vs the Sri Lanka-specific pull factors. Common push factors would be climate/weather, different cultures, relax from stress. Common pull factors are cost/price, beaches, culture, mountains, and nature.

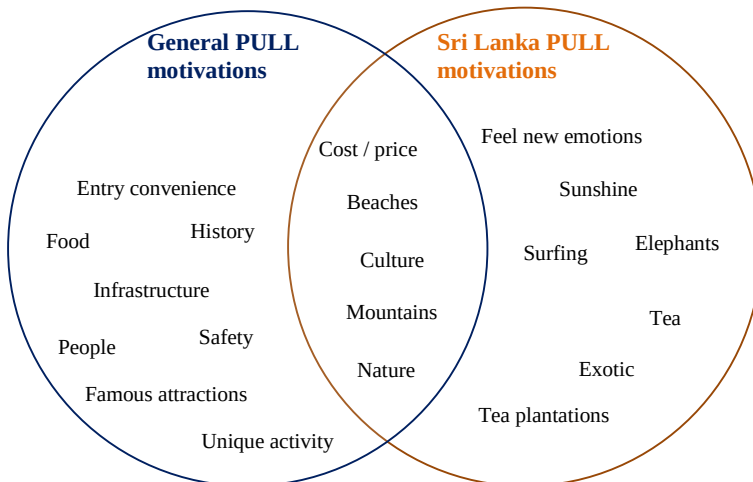


Figure 3: Pull motivation factors

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

At the outset of this study, we noticed that there was a gap in the literature that included insufficient qualitative data about travellers visiting Sri Lanka. During a time of economic struggle and the industry being at a standstill due to COVID19-related challenges, we identified that there was a gap in the literature that needs to be filled, and a benefit for the industry to gain insight into the Russian traveller's motivations and help improve future marketing activities.

Since the scope of trying to cover all travellers visiting Sri Lanka would be a challenge of time, effort, and expense, and because geographic differences generally have an impact on travel-related preferences, the researchers focused on some of the significant markets. Since after COVID19 restrictions were relaxed - Russian tourist arrivals started rapidly increasing, and since Russians have been among the top 10 destinations for tourist arrivals in the past; the researchers chose the Russian market. Also, since one of the researchers was based in Russia during the time of the study, we chose to look at the Russian market and understand the determinants that motivate Russian travellers to select Sri Lanka as a preferred holiday destination.

Since Sri Lankan tour operators have a perception that Russians are just price-sensitive beach tourists, we wanted to explore if there would be other traveller segments that may emerge from this study. We wanted to answer 3 key questions in our quest to understand the determinants that motivate Russian travellers to select Sri Lanka as a preferred holiday destination.

The findings indicate that most participants choose a preferred destination based on convenience, as Russians currently face travel restrictions in many countries due to the conflict with Ukraine. The next factor that motivates them is the climate of the country – a warm climate is something they seek excessively, especially during the colder months in Russia. Good beaches,

beautiful nature, rich culture, and significant history are some other factors that motivate them to choose a country.

We then tried to understand what Russians think about Sri Lanka, or how they perceive it - most participants mentioned that they see it as a place filled with beautiful greenery and nature. They also mentioned that they know it is an island with warm beaches / the sea. Colourful traditions and varieties of food were also mentioned by some. Fewer participants also mentioned that the elephants, the train on the bridge, and the turtles were some images that came to their mind when thinking of Sri Lanka.

Based on these understandings developed through the themes, we finally set out to explore what would be the ideal products we can propose for the Russian market. Based on the traveller profiles, this study presents 4 themes that emerged and were segmented the themes by psychographic variables based on their travel interests or preferences. These products are also offered at 3 different price points - considering the price sensitivity which was evident among some participants who have highlighted that they are quite concerned about pricing and value of the overall offer.

These products when carefully curated will be able to attract more Russian travellers who have varied interests and it will also help show the wide variety Sri Lanka can offer as a destination. In order to attract the right audience, the researchers will run a well-thought-through promotional plan which will combine some innovative traditional marketing methods with some of the state-of-art digital and social media marketing initiatives to reach as many Russian travellers as possible. This will help all industry stakeholders to benefit by attracting more Russian travellers and gaining more business from the Russian market, while Sri Lanka as a destination will increase in preference among Russians

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Since this study was conducted only in the English language this may have some level of bias as many Russians usually don't speak English. This may have limited some of the insights that could be derived from Russian travellers who don't speak English. The study was carried out when the conflict between Russia and Ukraine broke out, in turn, this may have hindered the responses as many participants mentioned changes in travel plans and destinations because of the travel restrictions for Russian passport holders.

This study was conducted focusing on the Russian market. In the recent past inflow of travellers from the middle eastern markets has also been rapidly growing, similarly to European markets and some Asian markets like India and China which also contribute to a large number of tourist arrivals in Sri Lanka. It would be highly lucrative to identify such key strategic markets and learn more about their preferences and motivations to understand how we could attract more travellers from those countries. Moreover, this study has focused on general traveller motivations to choose a destination. More research could explore the specific interest-based travellers such as family travellers, adventure seekers, etc. This will help to gain a deeper understanding of those specific segments of inbound travellers. Future research can also include Russian speakers in their study to understand if any unique new insights are developed. This may give us further insight into how to motivate more Russians to visit Sri Lanka.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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