

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Investigating Perceptions of Sri Lanka's Tourism Image via Travel Blog Narratives: A Netnographic Examination

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Abstract: Research consistently shows that destinations with positive images attract more travellers in a competitive tourism industry. Having faced several obstacles such as the Easter attack, COVID-19, and the ongoing economic crisis, Sri Lanka is now reviving itself as a key tourist destination and needs a comprehensive assessment of its destination marketing efforts. A detailed image analysis is crucial, as this area remains underexplored in literature. This study analysed international leisure purpose tourists' post-visit image perceptions of Sri Lanka, using 85 in-depth travel blog entries. The three-dimensional framework suggested by Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993) provided the theoretical lens for the study. The research successfully identified strong and favourable images associated with both the functional and psychological attributes of Sri Lanka. The overarching holistic impressions of the country were predominantly linked to its captivating scenic beauty, lush green landscapes, diverse yet compact offerings, tranquil atmosphere, and tropical character. The findings indicated that unique images of Sri Lanka held a relatively less prominent position in the minds of travellers when compared to other image dimensions. Some inconsistencies between post-visit perceptions and the images promoted by official tourism materials and channels were found. Based on the findings, three key recommendations are: (a) Improve Sri Lanka's tourism offerings by addressing safety concerns and product innovation, (b) Revise marketing campaigns to reflect the true brand essence, and (c) Align destination marketing with product development for a cohesive brand experience.

Keywords: destination, destination image, netnography, Sri Lanka, travel blogs.

INTRODUCTION

Effective tourist destination marketing relies heavily on managing destination image, as it profoundly influences potential travellers' choices and future intentions (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Research consistently shows that destinations with positive images are more likely to attract potential travellers (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Hence, gaining insight into tourists' perception of a destination and their intentions as key stakeholders provides destinations and entrepreneurs with additional avenues to improve the image of tourist destinations (Dunne & Hanrahan, 2017). This need has become even more urgent in the post-pandemic period, as COVID-19 has significantly impacted the global tourism industry, prompting a re-evaluation of destination management strategies (Gowreesunkar et al., 2021). Empirical evidence indicates the media coverage of COVID-19 has negatively affected image perceptions and travel intentions towards certain destinations (Yang et al., 2022). Thus, managing the destination image has gained new relevance as destinations take crucial actions to recover and reposition themselves in a competitive and changing market.

Despite a 30-year civil war hindering its development, Sri Lanka's tourism sector experienced substantial growth after its end in 2009, as per the Central Bank of Sri Lanka

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(2021: p.158). However, setbacks occurred due to the 2019 Easter attack and the global COVID-19 outbreak. World Bank's Strategic Plan for Sri Lanka Tourism 2022-2025 (The World Bank, 2022: p.5) highlights that even before these incidents the sector failed to realise its full potential for an extended period. While recent tourism plans prioritise a focused, competitive, sustainable, and inclusive approach, past destination marketing lacked a long-term perspective. Frequent changes in messages and taglines from 2009 to 2023, such as "Land like no other," "Small Miracle," "The Wonder of Asia," and "So Sri Lanka," exemplify this inconsistency.

Tourist arrival figures over the past decade also reveal that Sri Lanka's global tourism position lags behind more competitive destinations. In South Asia, India leads with about 6% of international tourist arrivals, while Sri Lanka attracts only 1% (World Tourism Organization, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). The UNWTO anticipates continued industry growth, with global tourist arrivals projected to rise 3.3% annually from 2010 to 2030, reaching 1.8 billion by 2030, benefiting all regions, including smaller and developing countries (World Tourism Organization, 2017: p. 3). To sustain this growth, Sri Lanka must strengthen its travel and tourism industry to compete globally.

The Strategic Plan for Sri Lanka Tourism 2022-2025 (The World Bank, 2022: p.6) identifies the need for a more resilient tourism industry, requiring comprehensive positioning, branding, and marketing efforts. Examining the images held by tourists about the country is crucial for this endeavour. Although there have been a few image studies related to Sri Lanka, they have examined images of the country in narrow perspectives excluding elements such as holistic and unique images (Petrus Mudoy, 2020; Udurawana & Wanninayake, 2021). This limited existing knowledge signifies the importance of a more comprehensive investigation to inform future destination marketing efforts.

Today, an increasing number of consumers share their feelings, experiences, and stories online (Niininen et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2021). Travellers share their experiences via email, blogs, and interest group communities, with blogs emerging as a popular option (Volo, 2010). Travel blogs provide a wealth of unobtrusive, researcher-uncontaminated data in the tourism context and are considered highly useful for tourism research (Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2023; Li & Wang, 2011; Pan et al., 2007; Volo, 2010). Consequently, 'netnography' (Kozinets, 1998) which uses online stories reported on online communities, is gaining popularity as a qualitative research method. Travel blogs, offering unbiased and unprompted responses from

travellers, present new opportunities for credible and accurate destination image studies. The purpose of this study was to comprehensively examine perceptions of Sri Lanka's image as a tourist destination by applying the three-component framework proposed by Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993) along with travel blogs as a rich, informative data source. The research questions addressed by the study were (a) What functional and psychological images are most strongly associated with Sri Lanka from the perspective of leisure travellers? (b) What holistic images of Sri Lanka are prominent in the minds of leisure travellers? (c) What unique images do leisure travellers hold about Sri Lanka?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism destination image

A destination image represents an individual's mental construct, incorporating their knowledge, emotions, and overall perceptions of a particular destination, while destination branding involves selecting a consistent mix of elements to identify and differentiate destinations through positive image-building efforts (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Kim et al., 2019). The image of a tourist destination is closely intertwined with the image of the country, the nation, and the place. Consequently, a destination brand image serves as a mental representation that consistently conjures up the unique history, heritage, and culture of a specific destination (Hankinson, 2004).

From a tourist's perspective, choosing a tourist destination is a complex decision influenced by numerous independent factors (Huertas-Garcia et al., 2014). It is widely acknowledged that "destination image" plays a pivotal role and significantly impacts tourists' decisions, satisfaction levels, and behavioural intentions (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991, 1993; Lee & Xue, 2020; Prayag & Ryan, 2012). In the realm of tourism marketing, tourists' perceptions of destination images hold paramount importance (Tasci & Gartner, 2007) making destination image evaluation a focal point of social science literature (Jalilvand et al., 2011; Li & Wang, 2011; Sekhniashvili, 2021).

Several scholars suggest that managing and tracking destination image perceptions is more crucial for attracting tourists in a post-pandemic context (Gowreesunkar et al., 2022; Han et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2022). Inconducive conditions caused by the pandemic and the subsequent travel restrictions directly impact travel decisions and tourism flow (Williamson et al., 2022). How to recover the damages made by media related to the pandemic is one of the major challenges faced by destinations, and the significance of communications by both destination

marketing organisations and tourist-generated content is well acknowledged in the literature (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022). Particularly, the greater significance of user-generated content in the formation of destination images has been validated in previous research (Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2023; Gurung & Goswami, 2017).

Scholars generally agree that destination image is a multifaceted, relativistic, and constructed concept (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Destination image typically comprises two interrelated types: rational (cognitive) and emotional (affective) elements (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). Cognitive evaluations are based on an individual's knowledge and beliefs about a destination's objective attributes, while affective appraisals pertain to an individual's emotional feelings towards that destination (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Tessitore et al., 2014). Some destination aspects, such as 'natural environment,' 'cultural heritage,' 'tourist infrastructure,' or 'atmosphere,' underlie the cognitive structure of destination image (San Martín & Del Bosque, 2008) while the affective image encompasses the emotional impressions or feelings an individual associates with a destination, such as excitement and joy (Tessitore et al., 2014). The amalgamation of these two components shapes an overall image in travellers' minds, associated with either a positive or negative evaluation of a destination (Beerli & Martín, 2004). Hence, to capture these images comprehensively, it is essential to examine their multifaceted elements rather than focusing solely on their attributes.

Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993) suggest a three-dimensional continuum, i.e., attribute-holistic, functional-psychological, and common-unique, to fully capture image perceptions towards a destination. Destination images on the attribute-holistic continuum comprise perceptions of individual features (attributes) as well as overall perceptions (holistic) of a destination. The functional-psychological continuum identifies elements of the image that are directly observable or measurable (functional) and non-observable or non-measurable (psychological). The common-unique continuum differentiates between shared (common) and distinctive (unique) characteristics of a destination's image. Holistic and unique images play a crucial role in shaping how a destination is perceived and categorised (as stereotype-based impressions) and in distinguishing its unique attractions and atmosphere in the minds of target markets (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993).

Image formation process

Prior research has demonstrated that the information sources tourists encounter significantly influence their

perceptions and destination choices before they visit a place (Phau et al., 2010; Um & Crompton, 1990). Such information sources known as image formation agents include prior knowledge, experiences, commercial and non-commercial information sources, as well as content generated by fellow travellers in today's media landscape (Wang et al., 2021).

Gartner (1994) categorised eight image formation agents, including overt-induced I and II (traditional advertising and tour operators), covert-induced I and II (spokespersons and promotional articles), autonomous (independent documentaries and news), unsolicited organic (personal recommendations), solicited organic (requested word-of-mouth), and organic (information from actual visits). Tasci and Gartner (2007) grouped these agents into supply-side, independent, and demand-side categories. Gunn (1988) further elaborated on the role of these information sources in destination image formation at different stages. The initial 'organic image' relies on non-commercial data from the general media, education, and personal networks, influencing the destination image significantly. Subsequently, the 'induced image,' based on commercial sources like advertising and travel guides, modifies the organic image. Destinations exert substantial control over these induced images (Gunn, 1988). Finally, travellers' first-hand experiences during visits reshape their perceptions, creating the 'modified-induced image,' 'perceived image,' or 'post-visit image' (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Gunn, 1988). This modified-induced image, rooted in actual experiences, tends to be more realistic and complex and strongly influences revisit intentions (Lee, 2009).

Internet and eWOM in tourism

In the tourism context, tourists rely heavily on Word-of-Mouth (WOM) recommendations for risk reduction, especially for 'experienced-based' products like destinations (Bei et al., 2004). Thus, tourists often base their decisions on destinations to visit, activities to undertake, and products to consume on WOM (Cheng et al., 2006). With the rise of information and communication technology, tourists increasingly use online travel information, with the internet becoming their preferred medium for collaboration and information sharing (Kim et al., 2015; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Zillinger, 2020). Today, virtual interactions are common, and electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) plays a pivotal role in information sharing (Jalilvand et al., 2011; Litvin et al., 2008). Consumer-generated content media like blogs, online forums, travel review sites, and social networking sites are widely used for eWOM communication (Litvin et al., 2008). The impact of social media and user-generated content on customer decision-making and its

augmented importance during the post-pandemic period is well-documented in the literature (Ha et al., 2023; Jalilvand et al., 2012; Pop et al., 2022).

Among online communication platforms, blogs have gained popularity among tourists for sharing their experiences and stories (Li & Wang, 2011; Niininen et al., 2007; Volo, 2010; Wang et al., 2021). Wenger (2008) defines blogs as web pages organised into diary-like categories, while Pühringer and Taylor (2008) describe travel blogs as forums related to travel. Blogs facilitate ‘many-to-many’ communication among consumers and are asynchronous in terms of interactivity, distinguishing them from other online media (Li & Wang, 2011). People create and maintain blogs for various reasons, including documenting their lives, expressing opinions, sharing experiences, and building social connections (Li & Wang, 2011; Volo, 2010). Like other bloggers, tourists post their experiences, reviews, and opinions about destinations and tourism products on travel blog sites, and reading such travel blogs provides insights into various aspects of destinations, aiding in the formation of pre-visit images in tourists’ minds (Li & Wang, 2011).

Due to their unprompted and researcher-unbiased nature, blogs provide valuable data for research (Volo, 2010; Wang et al., 2021). They offer authentic accounts of tourism experiences, feelings, and reactions, making them a credible and unobtrusive data source (Li & Wang, 2011; Pan et al., 2007; Volo, 2010). Since travel bloggers share every aspect of their experiences, stories, and recommendations, they offer rich data for understanding tourists’ perceptions (Li & Wang, 2011). Consequently, there is a growing body of research examining how user-generated travel blogs reflect destination images (Li &

Wang, 2011; Qi & Chen, 2019; Schmallegger & Carson, 2009; Volo, 2010; Wang et al., 2021). While numerous travel blogs about Sri Lanka exist, studies analysing the image perceptions of Sri Lanka as a tourist destination within these blogs are lacking. Image studies leveraging this rich data source could offer valuable and credible insights to strengthen Sri Lanka’s tourism marketing and branding efforts.

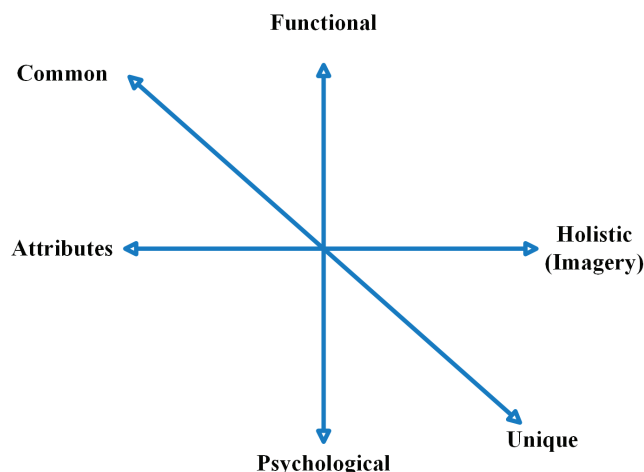
STUDY METHOD

This research utilised an interpretive netnography approach to explore leisure-oriented tourists’ perceived image perception of Sri Lanka. Netnography is an effective interpretive research method that enables researchers to investigate the consumer behaviour of cultures and communities present on the internet (Kozinets, 1998). It is more relevant and useful in understanding human behaviours and perceptions in an environment of digital transformation (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018; Rokka, 2010). In the field of tourism, travel blogs provide new opportunities for researchers to undertake netnography studies on tourist experiences because they are unbiased and unprompted responses from travellers (Chandralal et al., 2015; Li & Wang, 2011).

This study utilised travel blog narratives about Sri Lanka from travel bloggers as data sources, applying the three-dimensional framework proposed by Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993) as its theoretical foundation. Accordingly, image perceptions were examined across three dimensions: (a) functional-psychological, (b) attributes-holistic, and (c) common-unique. Figure 1 illustrates these three components of destination image perception.

Figure 1

Components of Destination Image



Note. Adapted from Echtner and Ritchie (1991: P. 6)

To identify relevant data, online searches were executed on Google, a globally recognised and trusted search engine (Brin & Page, 1998). This search aimed to locate travel blogs, given their potential to provide in-depth narratives about travel experiences. An initial review of prominent travel blog sites on Google highlighted Travelblog.org as a primary platform for detailed accounts of travel experiences in Sri Lanka. Specific search terms—'Sri Lanka,' 'Sri Lanka Tourism,' and 'Sri Lanka experience'—were employed to identify pertinent blog narratives. This search, conducted in June 2022, yielded 1,590 blog entries posted up to the end of 2018. The selection was constrained to posts from before 2019 to mitigate the influence of the 2019 Easter attacks and the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic. It was reasoned that narratives postdating these events might skew perceptions negatively. Consequently, to ensure an unbiased assessment of Sri Lanka under typical conditions, the analysis was confined to data up to end of 2018.

Commercially oriented blog entries were excluded from the dataset. From the remaining pool, the research team purposefully selected 100 blog narratives, anticipating that data saturation would be achieved before reaching this number. Selection criteria comprised: (a) Relevance, focusing on Sri Lanka as a tourist destination, and (b) Richness, requiring sufficient description of Sri Lanka, including places visited, activities undertaken, and reasons for reporting the experience.

In the research process, three of the research team independently identified 150 potential blog entries based on the established criteria. Out of these entries, 100 narratives were retained for the study, chosen by at least two research team members. Previous netnography studies investigating destination images and tourist experiences have typically relied on sample sizes ranging from 40 to 120 (Law & Cheung, 2010; Pan et al., 2007; Volo, 2010; Li & Wang, 2011). The aim of this sample strategy was not representativeness but to achieve an in-depth analysis of the data (Ismail et al., 2010). Data saturation was observed around the 80th blog post, prompting the termination of the analysis after the 85th post.

Selected blog entries were converted to PDF files and imported into MAXQDA 10 software for analysis. The study adopted Echtner and Ritchie's (1991, 1993) three-dimensional framework and employed content analysis. This method allows for a subjective interpretation of textual data, systematically coding and identifying themes and patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis is widely used in tourism and destination image

research to analyse textual and pictorial materials from various sources, including the internet, providing rich insights for image analysis (Jenkins, 1999; Stepchenkova et al., 2009). Blog contents were analysed to determine how Sri Lanka is perceived in terms of three dimensions: functional-psychological, attributional-holistic, and unique-common images. Initial codes were categorised and then assigned to different image types. Text segments, ranging from sentences to paragraphs, served as the unit of analysis. Two researchers independently coded the blog contents while identifying codes and classifying them under different image types. The researchers collaborated to reconcile differences in coding and image types until a consensus was reached. Although travel blog narratives are publicly available, the names of the bloggers whose posts were analysed were omitted in the presentation of findings to uphold ethical standards in the study.

RESULTS

The following sections present images derived from the content analysis of travel blog narratives, aligned with the three-dimensional framework by Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993). First, the analysis of functional and psychological attributes is presented, addressing the study's initial aim. This is followed by an analysis of functional and psychological holistic images, fulfilling the study's second objective. Finally, unique images are discussed.

Images of Sri Lanka on functional attributes

To address the first question of the study, images of Sri Lanka on functional attributes were analysed. This image category encompasses observable and quantifiable destination characteristics. Hence, the study identified the specific traits of Sri Lanka that bloggers became acquainted with during their visits. These traits, often recurring in their entries, highlight their significant influence on shaping perceptions of Sri Lanka. Table 1 showcases the frequently referenced functional attributes in the blog narratives.

World iconic Buddhist attractions

The findings reveal that Sri Lanka's image is strongly associated with prominent Buddhist landmarks across the country, rich wildlife experiences despite its compact size, breathtaking natural landscapes, and a variety of heritage sites, including UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The most frequently mentioned Buddhist attractions (805 text segments) included the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Dambulla Cave Temple, Sri Maha Bodhi, and Ruvanveliseya Stupa in Anuradhapura, as well as the Gangarama Temple in Colombo. Additionally,

Table 1
Frequently Reported Functional Attributes

Functional attributes	Number of text segments
World iconic Buddhist attractions	805
Wildlife attractions	695
Scenic views/Natural attractions	688
Heritage sites	603
Beautiful beaches	287
Scenic train journeys	250
Experiential cities	202

various other notable Buddhist locations and ruins in the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa districts were highlighted by the bloggers. For instance, one blogger emphasised the significance of their visit to the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy: “Day 8 was a highlight for me, with us first visiting the temple of tooth which is said to house the world-famous tooth relic [of Lord Buddha]... the temple itself is a stunning place to visit ...” (B-5).

Wildlife attractions

Numerous bloggers have shared their positive impressions of Sri Lanka’s diverse wildlife experiences (695 text segments), which can be explored in various national parks and sanctuaries. Witnessing elephants and leopards in their natural habitats stands out as the most remarkable aspect of their encounters. Some bloggers have drawn parallels between the national parks and safari experiences in Sri Lanka and renowned experiences in countries like South Africa:

With herds of elephants, wild buffalo, sambar deer and leopards, Uda Walawe National Park is the Sri Lankan national park that best rivals the Savannah Reserves of Africa. In fact, for elephant watching, Uda Walawe often surpasses many of the most famous East African national parks (B-76).

Scenic views/Natural attractions

Numerous text segments emphasised the captivating natural beauty of Sri Lanka (688 text segments), leaving a strong and positive impression on travellers. Some content showcased the island’s lush greenery, with descriptions often portraying it as a beautiful paradise. “My first impression of the island was how beautifully lush and green it was, the island was swathed in palm trees and other flora” (B-12). Many of these descriptions highlighted the beauty of Sri Lanka’s hill country, including cities like Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, and Ella. Bloggers were charmed by the abundant green

landscapes, tea plantations, dense forests, and diverse flora and fauna in these regions.

Heritage sites

Bloggers frequently highlighted their visits to Sri Lanka’s heritage and historically significant sites (603 text segments), providing vivid and positive descriptions of these attractions, many of which have stood for centuries in Sri Lankan history. Key attractions that featured prominently in their narratives included Lion Rock, the Dambulla Cave Temple, the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Galle Dutch Fort, and other significant heritage sites located in the Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Kurunegala districts. Some bloggers expressed their astonishment in a number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites on such a small island, as one states; “Few places on this planet have as many UNESCO World Heritage Sites (8) packed into such a small area” (B-66).

Colonial heritage also holds a significant place in the imagery of Sri Lanka, especially among visitors from European countries. Notable colonial heritage sites are found in Colombo, Nuwara Eliya, Negombo, and Galle, where well-preserved remnants offer visitors a glimpse into the past. The British influence, still evident in Nuwara Eliya, has been frequently observed by bloggers, earning it the nickname “Little England”. As one blogger described it, “We had a glimpse into the colonial past at Nuwara Eliya, also known as “Little England”. The area is full of English-style cottages which centre around the imposing former Planters’ Club ...” (B-65).

Beautiful beaches

Bloggers also spoke favourably about the unspoiled beaches (287 text segments) lining the island’s coastline, and several bloggers asserted that Sri Lanka is an ideal destination for beach-related activities like diving, snorkelling, surfing, and whale watching. One blogger reported: ‘This [Arugam bay beach] is the “surfers’

paradise” in Sri Lanka, the beach here is full of fit guys and girls who really know how to surf!’ (B-14).

Scenic train journeys

Several bloggers have also recognised the train journeys (250 text segments) to the hilly regions as among the world’s most breathtaking, featuring stunning natural beauty and landscapes. As one blogger claimed, “The train ride in Central Sri Lanka must be one of the most beautiful train rides in the world...” (B-64).

Experiential cities

The blog narratives also revealed that travellers’ perceptions of Sri Lanka are often closely tied to several key cities in the country (202 text segments), including Kandy, Galle, Nuwara Eliya, Ella, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Dambulla, and Mirissa. These cities are significant stops on many tourists’ itineraries, each earning admiration for different reasons. Kandy, Ella, and Nuwara Eliya are lauded for their scenic beauty and heritage, Galle for its colonial heritage, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa for their historical and cultural significance, and Mirissa for their attractions related to surfing and whale watching.

Images of Sri Lanka on psychological attributes

After analysing the functional attributes, the study then examined the psychological attributes of Sri Lanka to address the remaining part of the first research question. Psychological attributes refer to individual aspects of a destination that are less tangible or challenging to quantify, as outlined by Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993). Table 2 provides a breakdown of the number of text segments found under various psychological attributes associated with Sri Lanka.

Authentic local experiences

The data reveals that the most strongly associated psychological attributes of Sri Lanka are ‘authentic local

experiences’ and ‘friendly and hospitable residents’. Bloggers frequently highlighted the opportunities for tourists to immerse themselves in authentic Sri Lankan life (605 text segments). These experiences included visiting local villages and markets, interacting with residents, exploring their daily routines and cultural practices, and enjoying delicious Sri Lankan cuisine during their journeys. For example, one blogger shared their experience, “Today, we have eaten with our hands, out of a banana leaf, with locals and it felt good. It’s an amazing country and we’re really happy to be here!” (B-32). Such narratives portray how Sri Lanka continues to offer rich and genuine local experiences for travellers.

Friendly and hospitable residents

The friendliness and hospitable nature of the residents emerged as a recurring theme in many blog posts (601 text segments), portraying it as an inherent quality of the people of Sri Lanka. A majority of the posts analysed for this study featured at least one positive interaction with the locals. Bloggers consistently reported on the warmth and helpfulness shown by the people, especially by hotel owners, service personnel, guides, and taxi drivers. For instance: “... the people would have to be the happiest and friendliest we have ever encountered, and they are exceptional hosts” (B-59). Some bloggers went a step further, asserting that Sri Lanka excels in these aspects compared to other developing countries, especially neighbouring destinations:

One of the first things that hits you in Sri Lanka and which stays with you until the day you leave is the people. Never have we been anywhere in the world where the locals have been so consistently welcoming, polite and kind ... (B-17).

Bloggers consistently praised the residents for their constant smiles, happy faces, and cheerful demeanour throughout their tours. As one blogger reported, “People are warm and welcoming. They seem happy

Table 2

Frequently Reported Psychological Attributes

Theme	Number of text segments
Authentic local experiences	605
Friendly and hospitable residents	601
Rich culture, heritage, and history	382
Delicious local cuisines	353
Experience quality at accommodation places	330
Opportunities for adventure	181
Affordable accommodation, transportation and food	122
General safety	90

and oblivious to many things we seem to worry about” (B-27). Another one reported, “I loved how friendly everyone was - people waved, smiled, and shyly greeted me” (B-15).

Rich culture, heritage, and history

Numerous blog narratives further portrayed Sri Lanka as a destination teeming with cultural, historical, and heritage riches, with this component appearing in 382 text segments across the analysed blog posts. According to these contents, vibrant, diverse, inclusive, and respectful nature of local cultures deeply inspired tourists, making it a must-experience facet of Sri Lanka. Bloggers also commended the cultural diversity they encountered on the island, as one mentioned, “The island is home to many cultures, languages, and ethnicities which include Christians, Moors, Burghers, Malays, Chinese, the aboriginal Vedda and the Tamils” (B-05). Bloggers frequently reported the religious diversity and harmony among the four major religions in Sri Lanka, “...I really admire the religious diversity of Sri Lanka... not that many people around, but what a diversity!” (B-19), ‘Particularly noteworthy is the religious tolerance, certainly a fundamental property inherent especially in Buddhism’ (B-42).

For many bloggers, a key highlight was the Buddhist culture and its associated places and practices, which played a vital role in the tourist experience in Sri Lanka. Bloggers frequently mentioned historically and culturally significant cities such as Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Dambulla, and Kandy in their posts. Additionally, some bloggers observed and appreciated the absence of visible prostitution in Sri Lanka compared to other popular tourist destinations: “One nice difference with Sri Lanka, though, was the lack of visual prostitution, which is so prevalent in [names of two East-Asian destinations]” (B-15).

There were some less favourable cultural aspects mentioned by a few bloggers, although these were infrequent and had a minor impact on their overall perception of Sri Lanka as a destination. Examples include the unavailability of alcohol on certain festival days and the limited nightlife and entertainment options of the island. For instance, one blogger mentioned, “... Many shops were closed, and no alcohol was sold or served at the Sinhalese and Tamil New Year, which takes place over several days - 12/13/14 April” (B-12). Another blogger reported, “Finally, at 1 am, the bartenders kicked us out so they could close up. Here in Sri Lanka, there is not such a big party culture and bars close quite early” (B-44). However, it’s important to note that these less favourable aspects of Sri Lankan culture were mentioned

relatively rarely, and the overwhelming majority of bloggers highlighted the positive aspects of the country in their posts.

Delicious local cuisines

Bloggers were consistently fascinated by the deliciousness and rich flavours associated with Sri Lankan cuisine, which emerged as a significant element in their perception of Sri Lanka across 353 text segments. Positive remarks on this aspect were prevalent in numerous blog posts: “Since I’ve been in Sri Lanka, I’ve been blown away by how amazing and delicious the food is. It’s fresh, tasty and with a huge variety” (B-15); “The food is always incredible, it seems to me that everyone in Sri Lanka can cook and are exceptional at it, the Sri Lankan flavours are amazing, and I love them!” (B-22). Some bloggers even expressed their determination to replicate the dishes they had enjoyed once they returned home. Among the diverse range of cuisines positively described by bloggers, rice and curry, roti, and ‘kottu roti’ stood out as key highlights.

Experience quality at accommodation places

Bloggers consistently reported positive experiences at hotels and accommodation places throughout their posts (330 text segments). They commended the high quality, excellent facilities, friendly staff, and pleasant physical atmosphere at these establishments. Favourable reports extended beyond just the “five-star” or “four-star” hotels, as bloggers also spoke positively about relatively small guesthouses and homestay options. Some bloggers specifically emphasised the authentic local atmosphere and personal touch offered by these family-type accommodation places: “On the flip side, there are some major positives to Sri Lanka that I hadn’t encountered anywhere else. One was that many of the hostels we stayed in were small, family-run B and B’s” (B-14).

The abundance of positive comments reflects travellers’ overall pleasant experiences at various accommodation places in Sri Lanka. It seems that regardless of their budget, travellers found satisfaction in their chosen hotels, with positive feedback regarding facilities, service quality, physical ambience, and the friendliness of the staff. These factors collectively contributed to shaping favourable perceptions of Sri Lanka.

Opportunities for adventure

Several blog posts, although fewer in number than those highlighting other image perceptions (181 text segments), expressed positive views about

adventure-related experiences available in Sri Lanka. The adventure-related image of the country is often associated with activities such as white-water rafting, snorkelling, surfing, kayaking, safaris, trekking, and hiking. As one blogger excitedly put it, "In 10 days, we played golf, we dived, we rafted, we had a safari, a few days on the beach and one of the most amazing train rides ever....wow!" (B-17). Most of the posts praised Sri Lanka as an excellent destination for surfing. For instance, one blogger described certain Sri Lankan beaches as a "surfer's paradise" (B-22).

The posts, as exemplified above, illustrate how bloggers enjoyed a variety of adventure activities during their trips to Sri Lanka. However, it's worth noting that the posts related to these adventurous experiences have been relatively low in intensity when compared to other psychological attributes. This suggests that while adventure is a notable aspect of Sri Lanka's image perception, it may not be as dominant as other psychological attributes previously discussed.

Affordable accommodation, transportation and food

Some blog narratives also highlighted Sri Lanka as an affordable destination for travellers, particularly in terms of food, transportation, and accommodations. A total of 122 text segments were found, mentioning this image perception. It appears that this perception is more commonly held by budget-conscious travellers, including backpackers. One frequently reported aspect was the availability of delicious yet inexpensive food in Sri Lanka, as exemplified by the following quotes: "We popped into a little restaurant and had a lovely fresh orange and carrot juice for a dollar 5...looking at the menu curry and rice meals very cheap also" (B-26); "...we stop for lunch in one and have all sorts of stuff put in front of us, including small whole fish...quite nice... devilled chicken which is a hot curry, etc. The whole lot for 3 is about \$12" (B-05).

Bloggers also noted the affordability of transportation options in Sri Lanka, while many expressing their satisfaction with the economical yet generally comfortable railway system, especially for long-distance travel. One blogger enthusiastically affirmed this, stating, "I declare that train travel should be mandatory for all foreigners travelling here. It is such a fabulously cheap and fun way to see the country" (B-20). In addition to transportation, some bloggers affirmed that they received good value for their money spent on accommodation. For instance, one blogger described his experience: "The setting was stunning, the room clean and tidy, and a lovely modern bathroom for an affordable price" (B-23). The claims mentioned above suggest that some tourists perceive

major expenses in Sri Lanka, such as food, transportation, and accommodation, as fairly affordable. While the number of text segments dedicated to this perception was relatively fewer, it may hold particular appeal for price-sensitive travellers, including backpackers and budget-conscious tourists.

General safety

In terms of personal safety, there were very few negative incidents reported (08), such as theft of money and belongings during the journey and occasional instances of violent behaviour by residents. However, bloggers generally expressed their admiration for ethnic and religious harmony and the overall peaceful atmosphere in the country. This sense of safety could be influenced by the perception of Sri Lanka as a Buddhist country where violence and misbehaviour are expected to be relatively low. One blogger mentioned, "Sri Lankans today will not be tired of the mutual tolerance and respect and equality of all ethnic groups ..." (B-45). Additionally, bloggers cited the country's relatively high level of education and the presence of numerous universities as contributing factors to the feeling of safety.

Certain bloggers explicitly stated that they felt safe in Sri Lanka, emphasising the country's peace after the end of the civil war. For example, one blogger confidently asserted, "As a tourist, you feel free and completely safe in the country. The people are friendly and polite and try to help where they can" (B-26). Some bloggers made comparisons between Sri Lanka's safety conditions and those of neighbouring destinations, highlighting the relatively better safety situation in Sri Lanka.

Compared to [neighbouring destination], society, at least in the cities, is already well developed, i.e., democratic and tolerant. ...the crime rate is very low, attacks on women - unlike [name of the neighbouring destination] - are very rare and severely punished (B-32).

While many bloggers acknowledged that personal safety in Sri Lanka was generally acceptable, some expressed concerns about safety issues related to travel within the island. These concerns revolved around the poor safety conditions of roads and the reckless driving of public transport services and taxi drivers. Some bloggers changed their initial verdict on Sri Lankan drivers, concluding that many of them were reckless and dangerous. These safety concerns were among the few negative aspects mentioned in the blog narratives. Compared to other aspects, safety perceptions seem to play a relatively minor role in shaping this positive

Table 3
Frequently Reported Functional Holistic Images

Theme	Number of text segments
Island of scenic beauty	335
A lush and green island	324
A tropical and sunny island	308

image. This is further indicated by the lowest number of text segments (i.e., 90) found across the blogs on the safety aspect.

Functional holistic images of Sri Lanka

Holistic images of Sri Lanka were examined to address the second research question of the study. The overall mental imagery constructed from a destination's physical attributes contributes to the formation of functional holistic images in tourists' minds. While some travellers explicitly articulated their holistic perceptions of the country, many descriptions in the narratives focused on individual attractions and experiences, rather than forming a complete holistic picture. However, implicit holistic images could be gleaned from these descriptions. Three such holistic images emerged from the content analysis: 'an island of scenic beauty,' 'a lush and green island,' and 'a tropical and sunny island.' Table 3 provides a detailed breakdown of the number of text segments found under each image category.

An island of scenic beauty

Bloggers consistently portrayed Sri Lanka as a stunningly beautiful island (335 text segments), using an array of descriptive terms to convey their awe at the country's natural beauty. Terms like "picturesque", "paradise", "exquisite", "amazing", "spectacular", "enticed", "unforgettable", "gorgeous", and "magical and beautiful" were frequently employed to capture the mental images formed based on Sri Lanka's scenic allure. Some of the reported sentiments were: "Sri Lanka is a truly beautiful island" (B-28); "...we have been part of a group of 11 on an adventure tour which took in many of the highlights of this beautiful island" (B-17); and "Sri Lanka so far has blown me away with its beauty and its history" (B-20). Several blog posts highlight the significance of diverse flora and fauna, along with pristine beaches, in shaping the holistic perception of Sri Lanka's beauty. For instance, one blogger remarked, "On the way, we saw much of the flora and fauna that made Sri Lanka such a visually stunning country"

(B-20), while another expressed, "My first impression of the beach is just stunning this really is a paradise island". These narratives collectively depict Sri Lanka's strong image as a remarkably beautiful island.

A Lush and green destination

In close alignment with the 'Scenic Beauty' image, bloggers frequently depicted Sri Lanka as a 'green and lush' paradise (324 text segments), emphasising the fertile landscapes that characterise various parts of the country. This lush imagery was vividly expressed in posts like: "Sri Lanka is a lush, green island covered with palm trees, tea plantations, rice paddies, and bamboo" (B-20); "...We went across the emerald island of serendipity" (B-30); "My first impression of the island was how beautifully lush and green it was, the island was swathed in palm trees and other flora" (B-08); "What a gorgeous country, so green and verdant; palm trees all over the place backed by rolling green hills peppered with vibrant green trees" (B-03). As these statements illustrate, bloggers constructed a favourable holistic image rooted in the lush and vibrant greenery that characterises various regions of the country.

A Sunny and tropical island

Bloggers commonly characterised Sri Lanka as a hot and humid country (308 text segments), forming a functional holistic image. However, this holistic image appeared to elicit mixed viewpoints from travellers, with some regarding it as a positive aspect and others as a drawback. Here are some quotes from the narratives that highlight the positive side of this tropical image: "The first thing to get used to is the warmth. For the most part, this is an attractive summer temperature, with cool early mornings and warm evenings..." (B-54); "...and of course, seemingly endless hours of warm sun to gain that perfect tan" (B-01); "The next morning it was sunny!!!! Yes, a brilliant blue sky, everything looked greener, and the lake sparkled. It made us realise what a truly beautiful country Sri Lanka is" (B-22). Some bloggers expressed their delight in the sunny weather,

particularly in coastal areas where they could enjoy the beaches, "...On a beach in paradise where the sunset never fails to amaze, I am sure we can forgive them a little rain" (B-24). However, some bloggers found the tropical weather too challenging to bear, as evidenced by comments such as: "... the saturated humidity, however, is killing me" (B-76); "...to be abnormally hot here with even the locals complaining" (B-31).

While Sri Lanka is often described as tropical, bloggers have recognised its diverse weather conditions, especially the cooler climate in hill country destinations like Nuwara Eliya and Ella. They highlighted the convenience of escaping hot and humid weather conditions within just a few hours of travel, as expressed in comments such as: "Even though it's a small country, it has all seasons going at once across the regions" (B-29); "Looking out the window, I observe a pretty big change in scenery from the heat and humidity of the beach to the height and coolness of the hills" (B-04). This acknowledgement of varying climates within the country adds depth to their holistic perception of Sri Lanka.

Psychological holistic images of Sri Lanka

This aspect pertains to the overall mental impressions travellers hold about Sri Lanka, which is related to the holistic atmosphere or mood of the place. In the blog narratives, two types of holistic images were identified: 'relaxed and peaceful' and 'compact and diverse.' Four hundred twenty-seven (427) text segments were reported about the 'relaxed and peaceful' aspect whereas three hundred eighty-three (383) text segments were found for 'compact and diverse' image perception.

Relaxed and peaceful

Atmosphere in travel is often recognised as a psychological element of image perception (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). In many travel blog entries, Sri Lanka is depicted as a serene, easy-going, and tranquil country. A total of 427 text segments in the narratives conveyed these perceptions, including comments such as: "These past few days have been pleasantly laid-back before embarking on our 12-day island tour tomorrow" (B-17); "...I find the overall experience very relaxing, and I'm delighted with my decision to visit Sri Lanka" (B-22). One blogger even suggested Sri Lanka as an ideal escape from the bustling and chaotic city life: "If you're seeking respite from the hectic pace of big cities, this small country near Southeast India is the perfect getaway. We truly enjoyed our 8-day stay in this beautiful country" (B-15). Some bloggers went so far as to describe Sri Lanka as a paradise or heaven, primarily due to the relaxed and easy-going ambience: "Well it's another day in paradise for me...All very peaceful and not a

car horn to be heard ahhhhhh!" (B-07).

In addition to the praised laidback atmosphere highlighted by travellers, the country's peaceful nature was also a significant component of the image perception of Sri Lanka. Travel bloggers posted favourable comments about various aspects contributing to this sense of peace, including the lower crime rates and levels of violence, religious harmony among the followers of the four major religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Catholicism, and Islam), and the relatively high education level of the residents.

Sri Lanka seems a very peaceful, progressive, and modern country, certainly compared with [name of a neighbouring destination]. The majority of the population are Buddhists although there are also Hindus, Moslems and Christians mainly Roman Catholic, who live in harmony (B-32).

The detailed descriptions in the blog narratives indicate a positive image perception of the country in terms of its relaxed and peaceful atmosphere.

Compact and diverse

The narratives strongly indicate that "compact and diverse" is a prominent image perception of Sri Lanka held by travellers. Bloggers have both explicitly and implicitly conveyed how a diverse range of experiences is packed into this relatively small island. This aspect was mentioned in 383 text segments across the analysed blog posts. The country's high biodiversity, varied landscapes, cultural diversity, rich history and heritage, abundant wildlife, rainforests, authentic local life, pristine beaches, adventure opportunities, laid-back atmosphere, delicious cuisine, and quick transitions in weather conditions over short distances all left bloggers in awe. Some posts explicitly described the country's compact and diverse nature as: "Compact - There is lots to see in this country, but it is rolled up in a very small space. We could literally get anywhere in the country in three cycling days" (B-71); "Although smaller than Ireland, Sri Lanka is an incredibly diverse country. It actually has everything - mountains, rainforests, idyllic beaches, lively cities, and historic sites" (B-65), "It's hard to beat Sri Lanka for its sheer diversity of experiences - ancient cities, national parks, hiking, festivals, great food, etc." (B-31). One traveller mentioned that they altered their initial plan, which was to relax on the beaches, after realising the immense exploration opportunities the country had to offer:

The first thing you realise about Sri Lanka is that for a small country, there is so much to do...it seemed Sri Lanka, with all its beaches, temples, wildlife, and other such treats, lured us into trying to see as much of this place as possible...we felt

that we would be wasting it sitting on beaches day in, and day out as we had originally planned (B-32).

Some bloggers wanted to extend their stay to explore more and planned to revisit Sri Lanka. They enthusiastically recommended the country to others, emphasising its diverse offerings within easy reach: "...It's a lot of diversity packaged in a very accessible little place. I wish I had had more than 10 days here" (B-14), "Sri Lanka was superb! We didn't know much about it before arriving, but we left wanting to stay longer and explore more!" (B-42). They found Sri Lanka to be a destination suitable for all types of travellers: "...I hope everyone visits Sri Lanka; it is so worth it. A little something for everyone" (B-54).

Unique images of Sri Lanka

The final aspect of the image model proposed by Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993) is the continuum from 'Common to Unique'. This dimension reflects the perception of common and unique aspects of a destination. 'Common' aspects are those that are shared with other destinations, while 'unique' aspects are those that set the destination apart. In the analysis of blog posts, the focus was on identifying unique images or characteristics that bloggers emphasised in their narratives, which was the final aim of the study.

In contrast to the other image dimensions (functional, psychological, and holistic) discussed previously, there were relatively fewer reports (42 text segments) regarding the unique images of Sri Lanka. This suggests a limited perception of the uniqueness in Sri Lanka as a tourist destination. Some blog entries explicitly mentioned the lack of uniqueness in certain attractions and the experience of visiting similar type of attractions during their tours, for example: "Good trip so far but too many temples for me, even though they may be important to Sri Lankan history" (B-80). Similarly, another post mentioned:

I found that at the top of Ella Rock, the first sight I visited that day, a bit disappointing. It was disappointing in much the same way as the Monteverde Cloud Forest in Costa Rica; I've seen a few views in my time, and this one really wasn't anything special (B-24).

These posts suggest that some popular tourist destinations in Sri Lanka, like Ella and the ancient cities, are perceived as comparable to similar places around

the world. It indicates that there might be a challenge in making these destinations unique and distinctive through effective experiential marketing strategies. Despite the limited number of unique images mentioned, some unique places and experiences in Sri Lanka garnered positive attention in blog entries. One such aspect was the spicy but delicious local cuisine, especially the authentic Sri Lankan dishes like 'rice and curry,' 'kottu,' 'hoppers,' and 'roti':

Before going out to Sri Lanka, a Sri Lankan friend of mine had given me a list of unique foods to try and on the list was Kottu Roti, a dish made up of leftover bread, chicken and other things. So that evening I tried the dish and OMG!!! It is absolutely delicious (B-8).

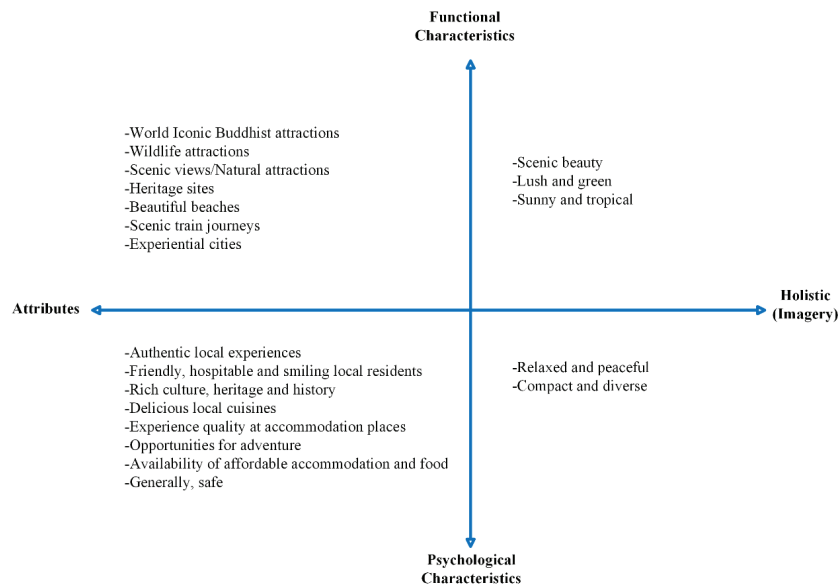
A few blog entries mentioned certain unique attractions, mainly Sigiriya (Lion Rock) and Dambulla Cave Temple in Sri Lanka.

Sigiriya is famous for the Lion Rock which is the eighth wonder of the world. It is very spectacular, a large rock rising from a relatively flat area with the remnants of an ancient palace built on top (B-02).

The caves are ancient, filled with colourful large Buddhas, and frescoes on the walls and ceilings. I had never seen anything like it in my life; imagine being surrounded by 40 life-sized (and larger) Buddhas in a cave. It was so beautiful... (B-29).

Similarly, a few posts mentioned Bo Tree in Anuradhapura, Kandy festival (Perahara), Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Galle city which is located in a Fort built by Holland during the colonial period, and stilt fishermen in the southern part of the country as unique places and experiences. While not explicitly labelled as unique, bloggers acknowledged that the scenic train journeys in Sri Lanka's hill areas, such as Nuwara Eliya and Ella, rank among the best train journeys in the world. To some extent, this distinction can be considered unique to Sri Lanka when compared to neighbouring destinations.

The train ride in Central Sri Lanka must be one of the most beautiful train rides in the world. This place is also called the High Hills, and it is the place which put Sri Lanka as the third biggest producer of tea in the world (B-17).

Figure 2*Image Perceptions of Sri Lanka*

A Graphical illustration of image impressions of Sri Lanka

Figure 2 depicts the image impressions resulting from the examination of the 'functional-psychological' and 'attribute-holistic' image dimensions.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research derived insights from 85 detailed blog narratives about image perceptions of Sri Lanka among leisure-purpose tourists. No previous studies have examined the image perception of Sri Lanka in a comprehensive manner capturing all three image elements suggested by Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993). Furthermore, this is the first study that used travel blogs to analyse the destination image of Sri Lanka as a tourist destination.

The findings revealed strong positive images of Sri Lanka in visitors' minds, in terms of both functional and psychological attributes. Key functional elements included widespread Buddhist attractions, rich wildlife experiences, stunning natural beauty, and world-heritage sites. Pristine beaches, scenic train journeys, and experiential cities were also noteworthy. Psychological attributes that stood out were the availability of authentic local experiences, friendly and hospitable locals, rich and diverse cultures, delightful local cuisine, and quality accommodations. These strong attributional images have

contributed to forming strong holistic images of Sri Lanka such as 'a destination of scenic beauty,' 'lush and green,' 'tropical,' 'compact and diverse,' and 'relaxing and peaceful' in tourists' minds. Hence, the results indicate that future destination marketing and branding efforts need to capitalise on these strong image elements.

When comparing the results with the images projected by the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotional Bureau (SLTPB) through official channels, certain strong image elements that were found from this study (e.g. 'authentic local experiences,' 'rich and diverse cultures,' 'friendly, hospitable residents,' and 'best train journeys,') have not been adequately been represented in the promotional materials. Similarly, holistic images are not fully captured in the official promotional materials since more emphasis has been placed on attributional images (Wickramasooriya et al., 2020). Furthermore, certain images projected by SLTPB, such as 'place for trill and wellness,' a blissful country,' and 'full of festivity' were inadequately reflected in bloggers' posts. This suggests that these experiences have yet to become prominent associations with Sri Lanka, thus need to be properly integrated into future brand-building efforts.

Destination branding is closely linked to destination image concepts, and destinations are widely using branding efforts to craft an identity that emphasises the uniqueness of their product (Ekinici, 2003). For Sri Lanka Tourism, identifying the country's points of differences

(PODs) based on strong image components is essential to emphasise its value propositions to various travel segments. This is particularly important, as the findings revealed that Sri Lanka's unique images are the weakest aspect of its overall image. Although the country has much to offer tourists, there is a need to develop new products and to transform the existing offerings into distinctive Sri Lankan experiences. To achieve this, it is important to monitor the image strengths and weaknesses of key competitors in South Asia, such as India and Nepal. For instance, India is frequently associated with positive attributes like natural beauty, rich culture, history, art, diversity, affordability, and cuisine. However, it also faces negative perceptions related to infrastructure, poverty, pollution, and concerns about safety and transparency (Dwivedi, 2009; Kaur et al., 2016; Khan, 2013). To strategically position the unique value proposition in Sri Lanka, the brand essence should be conveyed through more targeted and consistent communication campaigns. This is essential, as current destination marketing efforts often lack coherence, with messages and appeals changing frequently.

The results also indicate areas where Sri Lanka could improve its image as a tourist destination. When compared with other psychological images, the safety of the country did not receive sufficiently favourable impressions, particularly concerning road safety during travel within the island. Enhancing safety measures during tourist journeys is crucial, as safety perception significantly influences destination choices, tourist loyalty, and future intentions, especially in the post-COVID era and when negative perceptions persist (Dale et al., 2021; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Patwardhan et al., 2020). Additionally, the findings suggest that Sri Lanka's tourism authorities should incorporate more adventure, nightlife, and entertainment options into future branding efforts, as these elements were less favourably evaluated in the blog narratives.

The least favourable image found in the blog posts was the unique imagery, emphasising the need for urgent attention from tourism authorities. To enhance its unique image, Sri Lanka needs to develop more innovative tourism products beyond a few existing aspects like local cuisines, scenic train journeys, and specific attractions. Improving conventional tourist places and products, making them more experiential and novel, is vital since travellers usually prefer to visit new destinations or seek new experiences due to their desire for novelty (Petrick, 2002; Pujiastuti, 2020). Thus, Sri Lanka should invest in innovative, truly Sri Lankan products and promote them to the right markets. This requires understanding diverse travel segments, analysing competitive destinations, and

exploring opportunities in emerging tourism types like wellness, community-based, and spiritual tourism.

CONCLUSION

The study examined the image perceptions of Sri Lanka held by leisure travellers, as expressed in their travel blog narratives. While Sri Lanka enjoys a generally favourable image among tourists, there is room for enhancement. Based on the study findings, three key recommendations are proposed: (a) Enhance Sri Lanka's tourism offerings by addressing issues like safety concerns and limited product innovation, (b) Revise destination marketing campaigns to communicate the true brand essence of Sri Lanka, incorporating the strong image perceptions identified in the study, and (c) Integrate destination marketing with product development efforts to create a cohesive brand experience.

Limitations and future research

This study had limitations. Firstly, the travel blogs were not randomly selected from all those that cover the entire country; instead, we gathered them by searching major travel blog sites and employed subjective criteria, as detailed in the methodology. Secondly, we exclusively examined English-language blogs, consequently, our findings don't fully represent the overall destination image but rather reflect tourists who are conversant in English. These limitations may impact the study's findings and generalizability. Nevertheless, given that approximately 71% of WordPress sites are in English, as per general blogging statistics (Hayat, 2025), this language choice is justifiable. Future research could address these limitations and conduct comparative analyses to identify discrepancies. Furthermore, researchers can enhance the study's credibility by collecting data from various sources and employing multiple methods, such as blogs, interviews, and structured surveys, to triangulate the results.

Thirdly, our image analysis considered blog posts published before the Easter attack in 2019 and the COVID-19 outbreak, which implies that the image of tourism of the country may have evolved since then. Subsequent research can conduct comparative studies to assess the evolution of these images, a crucial aspect given that images tend to change over time (Li & Vogelsong, 2006).

Additionally, this study exclusively explored post-visit images of the country. Future research can investigate the images of both pre-visit and post-visit to determine their

alignment or disparities. Such comparative analyses can offer valuable insights into destination marketing efforts, especially concerning induced images.

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