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## MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERING WELLNESS TOURISM IN THE POST COVID -19 PANDEMIC ERA IN SRI LANKA

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### **Abstract**

The tourism industry in Sri Lanka capitalizes the significance of the wellness industry by offering travel experience about wellness and health care products to tourists. The main objective of this study is to investigate marketing related challenges faced by the wellness tourism industry in Sri Lanka in the post COVID – 19 era. Wellness product, which is an activities oriented service delivery process, including medical healings, elders’ care taking, traditional food, recovery activities and sports, and health maintenance and promotion. These have unique features and by using different groups customers can be targeted. An inductive approach has been employed to investigate marketing related challenges that are useful in understanding the social phenomena of the world through their own experiences. Interpretive research philosophy has been employed to examine how participants experience the world based on their views. Twenty seven participants, from various segments of wellness service providers and those who are legally engaged in wellness tourism, in the data collection process, have been chosen by using snowball sampling techniques. Data were analyzed by using discourse analysis methods. This study identified the following four major challenges faced by wellness operators: downfall the demands for wellness tourism products, high competition and lack of diversified wellness tourism activities, limited marketing activities and lack of service infrastructure development. In addition, this study recommended the following four key strategies and remedies to overcome those constraints: involving market



extension and expansion, increasing diversified wellness tourism activities, promoting service infrastructure and encouraging application of IT in service delivery processes.

**Keywords:** Marketing strategy; wellness tourism; market extension and expansion; diversified wellness tourism activities; COVID – 19.

## 1. Introduction

Over the last three decades a considerable amount of focus turned up on marketing strategy by academics and professionals (Greenley, 1989; Cespedes et al., 1996), and it is very interesting that both the academics and practitioners emphasised that the marketing strategy plays a major role in the accomplishment of the goal of organizations (Kumar et al., 2012). The term strategy, which was derived from Greek as the emergence of term marketing (Macdonald et al., 2016), was current among the military in the mid part of the nineteen century (Greenley, 1989). The evidence is in the book “the Art of War” written by Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu (1963) who indicated that there is no doubt, military force played a key role in victory against their enemies. But above it, wisdom was very significant in harvesting victory. Strategy was a comprehensive concept, a rudimentary plan of action to meet prescribed goals. In practice, the words strategy and tactics have been interchangeably used. However, both strategy and tactics are not the same. In fact, tactics is a way of operationalization of strategy (Baker, 2014). Strategy is a direction and scope of an organization over long – term: which achieves advantage for the organization through its configuration of resources within a challenging environment, to meet the needs of markets and to fulfil stakeholder’s expectations (Johnson et al., 2008).

Marketing strategy is very necessary to carry out marketing functions properly (Combe, 1999). After the COVID – 19 pandemic, worldwide marketing strategy is receiving more attention among tourism developers. Undoubtedly, throughout the world, tourism industry is one of the emerging industries with the continuous contribution to socio – economic development. However, due to the COVID - 19 pandemic, the industry has totally collapsed. It is not a first disturbance for this industry which has passed through various vulnerable stages.

The necessity and significance of wellness tourism has been well realized. Numerous examples from within the literature indicated the rapid growth of wellness tourism and its contribution to socio- cultural development (Hall, 2011; Smith et al., 2008). Smith et al, (2017) indicated that wellness products are one of the major components of tourism products and tour packs. The wellness industry in Sri Lanka is closely associated with Sri Lankan indigenous medicine, and it has a very primordial historical background. Tourism industry,



historically, in Sri Lanka has been disturbed by many endogenous and exogenous shocks. In a short while, the industry would come back to normal. But the present health crisis has a wide range of impact on wellness tourism industry due to travel bans and regional and national lockdown (Andreu et al., 2021; Majeed et al., 2020). The main objective of this study is to investigate marketing related challenges faced by wellness tourism industry in Sri Lanka in the post COVID – 19 era.

## 2. Understanding Marketing Strategy

Many writers including Slater et al., (2010), Thorpe et al., (2007), Quinn et al., (2016) in marketing literature, have described that marketing strategy facilitates achievement of organizational goals and objectives by carrying out the long- term activities. Similarly, Winer et al., (2014) see it as a designed scheme of action to meet goals and objectives. The recent work of Sheth (2021. p.4) has indicated the connection between marketing strategy and managerial marketing as “managerial marketing began to evolve into marketing strategy”.

The recent work of Sheth has clearly pointed out that managerial marketing began to evolve into marketing strategy. This explanation throws light on the connection between the marketing strategy and managerial marketing. The major task of managerial marketing, at the strategic level, is to discern and integrate the target customers with the company’s product and services to reach marketing objectives in the long – term. Managerial marketing pays more attention to competitors and their activities than to customer and community. Marketing strategy, according to Wind et al., (1983), concentrates on gaining enormous advantage for a long period by utilizing consumer and competitive advantage. As defined by Kotler et al., (2016), marketing strategy is a sublime design game for reaching goals. Some previous writing highlighted that marketing strategy, which is sometimes known as business strategy (Johnson et al., 2008), has been contemplated as part of business strategy which mostly deals with the marketing aspects like market analysis, competitor analysis and market research. This is because these types of marketing information are very necessary to accomplish the vision and mission of business entities (Wind et al., 1983). But the fact is that the scope of marketing strategy compared with business strategy is limited. That means, it heavily concentrates on meeting the objectives of marketers through satisfying those engaged in the marketing process. Ohmae (1982) believed strategy has been characterized by three major elements customer, competitors and corporation. Policy makers and practitioners should have a clear picture of the customers’ profile, competitors’ capacity and movements and company’s ability it can be ensured through SWOT analysis. In this study marketing strategy is formally understood as a blueprint which explains how achieve and when to achieve goals with different levels of collaboration between divergent stakeholders who could be an individual, group of people or entity having legal responsibility to take part in the process of accomplishing the goals. The tourism and hospitality industry makes a substantial



contribution to regional development and socio-cultural development throughout the world (Sharpley et al., 2014; Sofield et al., 2011; Choi et al., 2005).

Many private and public organizations, and governments, therefore, are using various strategies like market development and production development to empower the industry. In the case of tourism, a destination is a product, its development is unique. It may change from destination to destination. As noted by Butler (2009) and Volgger et al., (2021), in the competitive business environment, many tourism destinations face various challenges to position themselves in the market with limited resources. Hence Wickens et al., (2015) argue that various marketing strategies have been used by destination developers to overcome these challenges.

In the evolution of marketing, the trend of marketing activities transformed into customer oriented than sales oriented. Further it can be observed that when designing marketing strategies or marketing activities, currently, customers' preferences and needs are prioritized (Shaw, 2012). As noted by Greenley (1989) Kumar et al., (2012), marketing mix, market expansion, product diversification, basic infrastructure development, and application of advanced technology play key roles in the destination development. In organizations, vision and mission statements and objectives of organizations highlight a clear way to sustain the market with the growth of the market share, revenue and profit through satisfying the customers (Cook, 1985; Fifield, 2012; Mandal & Joshi, 2017).

In such cases, two very interesting routes have been used. First, strengthening the existing market nationally and internationally and reinforcing the supply chain of currently existing products (there are no any new arrivals). Second, entering a new market and introducing new products (Cook, 1985; Fifield, 2012; Mandal & Joshi, 2017). In many tourism strategy plans, the elements of marketing mix like product, price, place, promotion, physical evidence, people, and process are included as a major strategic approach to reach the goals of the destination. Moreover, Horng, et al., (2012) stressed that brand equity plays a very predominant role in creating brand image and brand loyalty. Meanwhile, Liu and Chou (2016) argue that brand equity in tourism literature has been used as a key role to the monetary and non- monetary benefits. Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2012) brand equity has strong association with financial gains. Furthermore, it can be used to convey the message about tourism destinations. Batra, Ahuvia and Bagozzi (2012) point out that brand equity has a positive impact on brand loyalty, brand awareness, and customers' perception about products and services. Oliver (2010) believed that repeat travelers to destinations is a very significant sustainable destination development. As indicated by Mittal and Kamakura (2001) if the satisfaction level of tourists and post purchases behaviour are positive, revisits of travelers to destinations would increase.



Apart from brand equity, some other factors including the accessibility, quality, charges and safety of accommodation are key determinant factors in influencing selecting hotels. Some Sri Lankan studies highlighted that the hotel industry is characterized by the following challenges: a lack of trained and skilled employees, and high tax burdens. McVey and King (1999, p. 65) listed that in the South Pacific region, the following main external factors determine the capacity and willingness of investors to increase their investment activities: lack of infrastructure away from main centres of population; political instability, and land ownership structure. In literature, many researchers articulated that product differentiation is one of major strategies to attract the customers. Product differentiation is the strategy in which one firm promotes the features of its product over competitors' brands offered to the same market (Spence, 1976; Salazar-Ordóñez et al., 2018). In Europe many tourist destinations, according Hjalager (1996, p.104), have extended their products to meet substantial market competition, which leads to an increase in tourist arrivals and adds to the visitors' enjoyment of the experience. Further, his study held that creative and innovative thinking should be incorporated in marketing strategies. Do Valle et al., (2011, p.245) pointed out that diversification of the tourism product is a significant strategy that can be used to increase the competitive capacity of the tourist destinations and is a tactic that can reduce the unfavorable effects of the off – seasons. Tourist destinations, therefore, should have a well – considered product expansion scheme. In a previous study, Robinsion et al., (2008) observed that in Sri Lanka, international tourists search out new tourist experiences to occupy their time.

### **3. Research Methodology**

In this study, a qualitative method is used to address the research question: “What are the marketing related challenges faced by the wellness tourism industry in the post COVID – 19 Sri Lanka? Addressing this question is more complex because the answers are related to the understanding of the researcher about real experience of various stakeholders who are legally engaged in the wellness industry. A qualitative research approach is useful in understanding the social phenomena of the world, and can generate a comprehensive description of processes, mechanisms or settings (Padovan, et al., 2002; Seale, 1999). Moreover, using this method, the perspectives and experiences of participants can be characterized in great depth. This study focuses, in particular, identifying ongoing challenges faced by the wellness industry and formulating a strategy to overcome those challenges. Hence it was better to use the inductive approach which can open the source to generate new ideas. Interpretivism philosophy was employed to diagnose grass root issues in the wellness industry faced by stakeholders and their roles in the development in the wellness industry of Sri Lanka.



The early work done by Saunders et al. (2012, p.137) underlined that interpretivism philosophy enables the social science researcher to recognize variations between humans and their roles in society as social actors. In study the triangulation data collection technique was hosted. That means, a multi – data collection method like semi – structured e- interview and document analysis was employed to gather information to address the research question. The purpose for using triangulation data collection technique was that, one data collection tool whether semi – structured interview or document analysis is not sufficient to collect data to address the research question. Merriam (2002) and Remler et al., (2010) articulate that multi – data collection techniques can provide valuable information that can be gained from any source data collection method. In this study, information from annual reports, policies, master plan and strategy was systematically derived through document analysis. In fact, as noted by Bowen (2009), document analysis is a supplementary technique as it is connected to other qualitative techniques during the data collection process.

In the data collection process, participants identified through snowball sampling techniques were sent an invitation to participate in an interview. Totally the twenty seven (27) people interviewed were 12 wellness operators, 03 spa operators, 02 Sri Lankan based international spa operators, 03 Ayurveda treatment centres, representatives from Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) – 01, Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB) – 01, Sri Lanka Wellness Tourism Association (SLWTA) – 01, travel operators – 02, Hoteliers – 02 and representatives of local government – 01. At the Initial stage of data collection, a few participants were selected. Then respondents suggested other relevant experts. Some other potential people were identified as samples of this study. Data was collected through two phases. The first and second phases of data were collected during the period February to April – 2021 and May to July 2021 respectively. The main objective of using this approach in this study is to obtain a plenty of relevant information from the right person and in a place convenient for participants. Interview questions mainly designed to understand challenges faced by the wellness tourism operators in Sri Lanka after the COVID – 19 pandemic. The average duration of an interview was from 30 minutes to 45 minutes. Data was analysed by using discourse analysis method which offers clear theoretical and methodological background for exploring social phenomena (Phillips et al., 2008).

## **4. Result and Analyses**

### ***4.1 Downfall the demands for wellness tourism industry.***

The tourism industry in Sri Lanka has experienced many man – made and natural crises. For example, more than three decades of civil war, Tsunami, Easter Sunday attack, and the present pandemic. From these vulnerabilities, the industry gradually recovered with the collaboration of private and public participation by the implementation of various



strategies (Bultjens et al., 2016). The tourism industry, after the trauma of the civil war, in Sri Lanka received more attention from national and international investors, policy makers, practitioners and some leading donor agents because this industry has been seen as one of the key economic drivers not only in Sri Lanka but also globally. Many previous Sri Lanka based studies and government statistics show the significant contribution of tourism in the economic and socio cultural development of the country. Fernando et al. (2013) confirmed that “ there is no doubt that the Sri Lankan tourism sector can play a vital role in the post – war inclusive development strategy in terms of generating much needed foreign exchanges, poverty alleviation via employment generation, accelerating economic growth and uplifting living standards of all Sri Lankans”. In Sri Lanka, the tourism industry, for example, has recruited many people as direct and indirect employees. For instance, in 2018 and 2019, 169,003 and 219,484 people have been recorded as direct and indirect employees respectively (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2020). As of now, larger numbers of employees have temporarily lost their work due to the closure of most tourism – related business including wellness centres, spas, restaurants, hotels and tourist airline service and travel agencies. It led to the damage of livelihoods of many small and medium entrepreneurs. A larger number of interviewees indicated that the wellness industry including spa and leading Ayurvedic treatment centres has been distorted and the consumption level was zero from March 2020 to the end of year 2020. Then the wellness industry, particularly spas, started to rejuvenate by domestic wellness seekers. The industry, however, is continuously meeting a demand shock. In the medical perspective, compared to other South Asian countries, Sri Lanka is successful in controlling the spread of COVID – 19 with a lower death ratio and a higher recovery ratio. It shows the success of healthcare services which will create a positive image to the tourists that Sri Lanka is a safe destination for travel because tourists are typically disinclined to take risks and are very keen to protect themselves from diseases and other unwanted threats. Volo (2008, p. 84) discussed that “more than any other economic activity, the success or failure of a tourism destination depends on its ability to provide a safe and secure environment for visitors, safe from all forms of controllable risks including both natural disasters and human-induced disasters such as disease, political unrest, armed conflict, and terrorism”. Through the lessons learned, it can be ensured that as a tourism destination Sri Lanka has the capability to provide a secure environment for travelers and tourists. Some uncontrollable factors like political instability, terrorism and natural disaster, as pointed earlier, have negative impact on credibility of brand image of Sri Lanka as a wellness tourism destination. Many participants agreed that the COVID – 19 pandemic is a global issue and it has affected all activities of the tourism industry. However, they hope that there is a possibility to promote domestic and regional tourism. Recent statistics also show that in December 2021, 20500 tourists arrived in the country from India.



#### ***4.2 High competition and lack of diversified wellness tourism activities.***

Many countries are engaged in wellness tourism related business activities. For example: Caribbean islands are famous wellness cruises. Kenya, Tanzania and Botswana are specialized in the provision of safari spas to the world. India has the uniqueness to offer meditation, yoga and Ayurveda treatments. Many respondents underlined the high regional competition, particularly, they believe that India is a tiger competitor to the Sri Lankan wellness tourism market. A reality is that Siddha and Ayurveda in Sri Lanka are derived from India. Further in South Asia, health tourism in India continuously booms where both Siddha, Ayurveda, and indigenous medicine are well established and internationally well – known compared with Sri Lanka. In the interview, many leading wellness service providers pointed out that they target international tourists, mostly, those who have a high spending capacity on wellness products. Further it is indicated that various packages with interesting unique and authentic products are used to offer their target group at reasonable prices compared with regional competitors. In fact, the Sri Lankan market faces various levels of competition in the service delivering process. Pre – COVID – 19 era, however, Sri Lanka has a reasonable share in the wellness tourism market. Based on the interviews, it can be figured out that some local people are convinced that disease would be spread by increasing the international tourist traffic in Sri Lanka. The post – COVID – 19 research illustrates that tourists and travelers have been viewed as probable sources for spreading the virus (Romagosa, 2020). It was an interesting think that globally some tourist destinations listed in the past by UNESCO, have suffered from over tourism (Goodwin, 2017; Milano et al., 2019) but currently, tourists and tourism activities are absent in many tourist destinations due to this pandemic.

#### ***4.3 Limited marketing activities.***

Throughout the interviews, it can be perceived that wellness products are more customized. That means, wellness products with special characteristics, according to customers' requirements, being tailored. An interview with a wellness resort operator in down south of Sri Lanka pointed out that due to uncontrolled environment changes like economic and political instability, and some natural disturbances, business operators have to bear financial burden. So they become as money mongers. As a result, the maximization of economies of scale in the service distribution process is more prioritized than prospective industrial development in an ethical way. Worldwide many countries and destinations provide various varieties of services to attract the new customer and prospective customers themselves. Some wellness centres and spas are unregistered where unqualified employees who are working, engage in unethical business activities like satisfying the erotic needs of customers (offering sexually exciting exploits) to maximize monetary benefits. These types of unethical business create a wrong perspective and negative image among genuine wellness seekers. Interviews and document analysis confirmed that operators have no



clear awareness regarding wellness product diversification and differentiation, because they believe that these approaches have a negative impact on originality of products. In fact, the major issue is that, not only in developing countries, tourism policy makers and strategy planners design many products and industries for attracting international tourists or those who have a higher spending capacity, than developing particular industries. The impact of this kind of narrow view in policies presently can be seen due to the zero level or lack of flow in international tourists. Recognizing the value of the domestic wellness tourism market and catering it could contribute to the realization of the ultimate goal of long - term viability of the wellness tourism industry. Domestic market development, however, has received less attention from policy makers and practitioners. The main reason for it being that, foreign exchange cannot be earned through the domestic market. But some Sri Lankan based researches emphasized the significance of domestic tourism development in Sri Lanka. For example, Buultjens et al. (2016) believed that domestic tourism development makes a substantial contribution to promote intercultural understanding and socio – cultural connection. Further his study revealed that in the post war context, this domestic tourism has been used as a tool to build peace and social harmony among minority and majority communities in Sri Lanka.

#### ***4.4 Lack of Infrastructure Development.***

Interviewees confirmed that in Sri Lanka some wellness including hotels and resorts have well – equipped spaces to deliver services. That, however, is not up to international standards. Wellness seekers expect high quality services in well-established peaceful destinations than luxury buildings erected in urban areas. But in Sri Lanka wellness centres and spas are located in crowded cities or urban areas in limited land space in the midst of multi storeyed buildings. Natural lighting and ventilation are very poor. Many interviewees mentioned that generally wellness seekers expect clean and fresh ventilation. So to some extent wellness suppliers are facing some issues to meet the expectations of customers. It is a major issue. Some wellness resorts have their own herbal gardens but most of them do not have sufficient service infrastructure, particularly, lack of accessibility, lack of availability of high quality local foods, and trained professionals. In fact, the infrastructure of service providers is an important aspect in high quality service delivery processes. Interviews indicated that a lack of parking facilities and traditional wellness service providing approaches handled. Further, even presently they also have limited varieties of wellness services to meet the customers' expectations. Interviews highlighted the necessity for the diversification of the wellness tourism product. Within tourism literature, many researchers have discussed this important aspect of the competitive and complex wellness tourism market. For example, Hjalager (1996, p. 104) says that in Europe many tourist destinations have extended their product to meet substantial market competition, which leads to an increase in tourist arrivals and adds to the visitors' enjoyment of the experience. His study also reveals that innovative strategies should be implemented to enhance the tourism product.

The European Union provides funding to tourism operators involved in some selected businesses: for example, tennis courts, open farm facilities, swimming pools and retail outlets.

### 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Throughout the world, tourism industry, particularly wellness tourism, has collapsed. Many governments pay more attention to rebuild the industry. According to the findings of this study, it can be perceived that the pre – COVID -19 pandemic era, the wellness tourism industry made a substantial contribution in economic and socio cultural development. Currently this industry meets various issues and challenges. In this study, four major challenges and issues: decline in the demand for wellness tourism industry, high competition and lack of diversified wellness tourism activities, limited marketing activities, and lack of infrastructure development have been identified. In order to overcome these, policy makers, practitioners and the government concentrate on developing rebuilding strategies. The revitalization for wellness tourism is not a simple task but perhaps, by implementing appropriate marketing strategies in an effective way, empowering the industry is possible. Based on findings, four major marketing strategies (please see figure 01): market extension and market expansion, diversified wellness tourism activities, improving service infrastructure, promoting application of information technology in wellness tourism have been recommended.

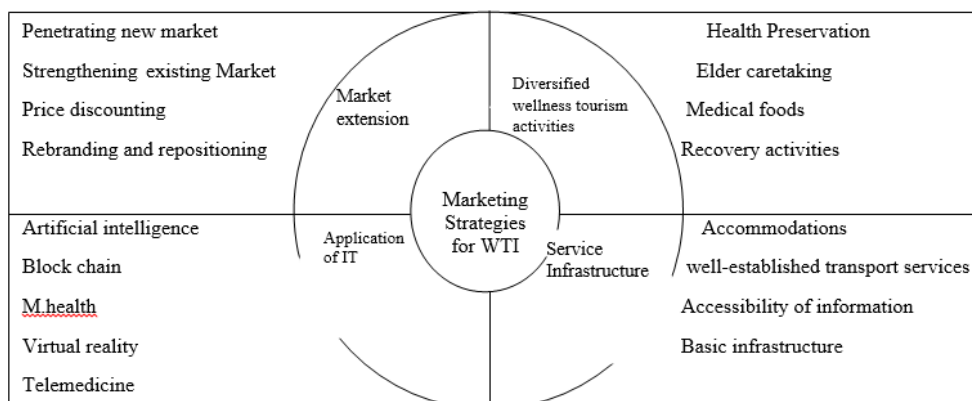


Figure 1: Marketing Strategy for wellness tourism

### **5.1 Market Extension and Market Expansion**

Sri Lanka has an opportunity to empower as well – established and well – known tourism destinations in the world. Because as pointed out earlier, Sri Lanka has unique gorgeous natural and cultural heritage resources. But to empower wellness tourism industry in the post COVID – 19 pandemic era the following action should be carried out: Regional tourism marketing should be strengthened. It is possible because over the last two decades, the Sri Lankan tourist market has been dominated by Asian countries, particularly China, Japan and India. Further during the present COVID – 19 era, in order to sustain and strengthening regional marketing, some marketing strategies including promotional strategy like tradeshow and exhibitions should be carried out with private and public collaboration. For example, In fact, the Jetwing hotel had a branch in Japan to expose Sri Lankan wellness products to Japanese. Due to the COVID – 19, it is temporarily shut down. Strengthening the existing international market and penetrating the new market: Western Europe supplied, and continues to supply, a huge number of tourists to the contemporary Sri Lankan tourism market. In fact, in the pre – COVID – 19 era also, many researches highlighted that in the western world, due to the technological development and hustle and bustle of city life, people are in high stress and with burden. In the “New Normal” situation, not only Europeans but also all regional people are mentally and physically affected by the COVID – 19 pandemic. These people, therefore, would look for the healings for their problems. Evidence for it, Austria based researchers Pieh and his colleagues articulated that as well as the lockdown, seems to have a major impact on mental health. Second, young adults (< 35 years), women, people without work as well as those with low income are significantly more burdened, physical activity has a positive association with mental health” (Pieh, et al., 2020, p.5). Reeves and Sivesan (2017) indicated that internationally Sri Lanka has been considered as a momentous tourist destination compared with other South Asian countries. Because it offers high quality services for tourists at a low price. The price discount is appreciable because offering an affordable price, Sri Lanka could be continuously placed high by tourists in their choice list.

As mentioned in the result and analyses section, presently, there are many countries involved in wellness tourism with various wellness products. For example, India is a well-known destination for meditation, yoga and Ayurveda treatment. Kenya, Tanzania and Botswana are specialized in safari spas. In the post – COVID – 19 pandemic era, while Sri Lanka as a wellness tourism destination re-enters the world market, it faces many challenges. So product differentiation should be considered as a major strategic tool to capture the new market and retain it in the existing market. Product differentiation is a process of creativity and innovative approach that can assist to distinguish a nature of the product from another product (Salazar-Ordóñez et al., 2018). In fact, it continuously plays a very significant role in gaining competitive advantage. In the case of wellness tourism in Sri Lanka, the product differentiation strategy is applicable in the following forms of provision of services: tourist



service, quality of services, different packages of services and modified service delivery. If Sri Lanka has a Unique Selling Proposition (USP), it, definitely, will assist to distinguish Sri Lankan wellness products from other countries' products, and to position Sri Lanka itself, as a well-developed wellness tourism destination. Further, the target market for the Sri Lankan wellness products should be re-profiled and re – set with the intensive marketing promotion programme. The digital era, through the usefulness of the digital media can gain more advantages in repositioning and rebranding. In fact, Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority and Sri Lanka Promotion Bureau should take all efforts to promote wellness tourism abroad with the collaboration of the private sector, and the Sri Lankan Embassies abroad. It is possible because according to previous Sri Lankan studies, in the aftermath of the civil war – 2009, the SLTD and its sister organizations internationally launched various propagandas. As a result, the tourism industry gradually boomed. In addition to that, with the private and public collaboration and participation, expectations of tourists should be managed by implementing customer engagement programmes. In fact, customer engagement makes it possible to understand tourists' actual expectations. Actually wellness products are tailored or customized products. Hence, customer engagement in the service delivery process is more important. The Sri Lankan hoteliers and travel agents should work together with STDA and EDB to extend their network with internationally reputed foreign hotels and travel agents to bring wellness seekers to Sri Lanka. Further, the Sri Lankan hoteliers and travel agents should be encouraged to perform as the brand embossers for Sri Lankan authentic wellness products through their international branches.

### ***5.2 Diversified Wellness Tourism Activities***

The diversification of tourism products is a significant strategy that can be used to increase the competitive capacity of the tourist destinations and is a tactic that can reduce the unfavorable effects of the off-seasons (do Valle, Guerreiro et al., 2011, p. 245). Therefore, tourist destinations should have a well-considered product expansion scheme. Interviews with many wellness business operators confirmed that national and international tourists expect diversified wellness products. In a previous study, Robinson et al. (2008) note that in Sri Lanka, international tourists search out new tourist experiences with which to occupy their time. This indicates that tourist-product diversification can increase demand and promote longer in-country vacations.

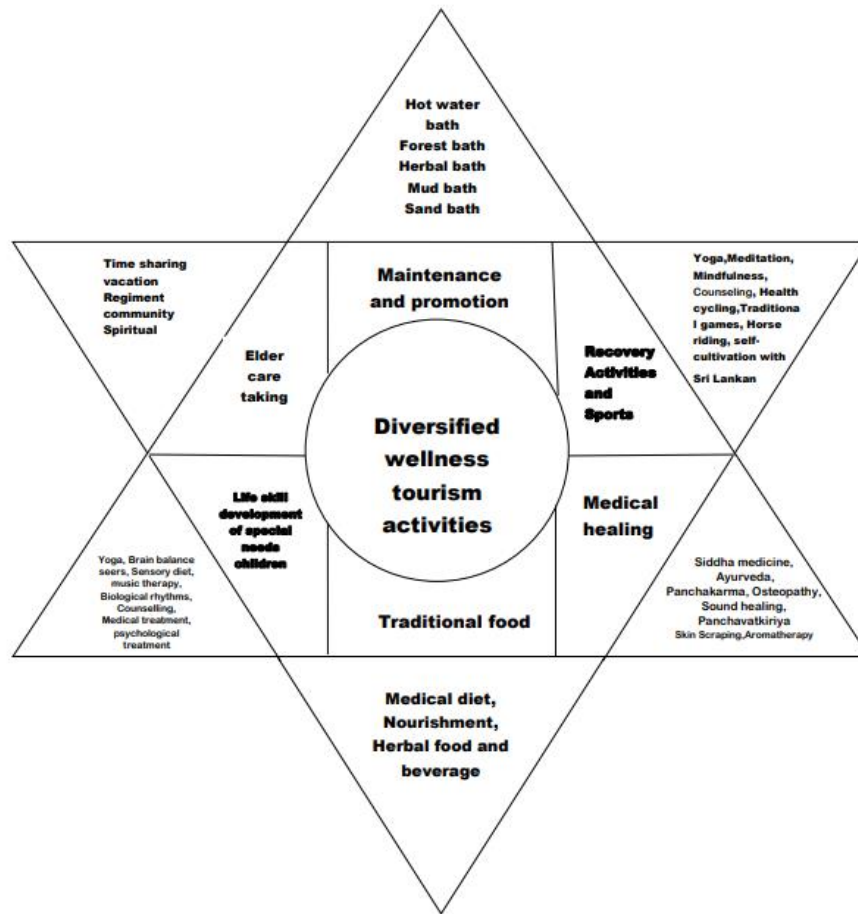


Figure 2: Diversified wellness tourism activities

In Sri Lanka, various wellness tourism activities (see figure -02) can be offered to wellness chasers to meet their expectations. As described in mapping wellness tourism in Sri Lanka, Siddha and Ayurveda are famous traditional medical systems that provide better amelioration, by offering various wellness activities including health preservation, recovery activities, mental healing, medical foods, sports and elder caretaking, for wellness product consumers. Globally many countries pay more attention to offer many different wellness products to the wellness seekers. New Zealand based research done by Becken (2013, p. 515) who has recognized a tourism subsystem or tourist product differentiation to manage the uncertainty that is created by climate changes in the Queenstown-Wanaka region of New Zealand. Further,, research suggests that there are nine tourism subsystems: snow based activities, river based, lake based, air based, land based and indoor attractions. So diversified wellness tourism activities constitute a major strategy to meet high competition.

### ***5.3 Service Infrastructure***

Basic infrastructure facilities are necessary to attract tourist destinations. In other words, the characteristics of a tourist destination are not only the determinant factors of the success of the tourist destination, the ability to attract and provide for the basic daily requirements of the tourists is essential (Prideaux, 2000). As discussed in the result and analyses, a lack of professional trained employees in the wellness tourism industry is a major issue which can be sorted out. Many Sri Lankan universities including the University of Jaffna and the Eastern University annually produce more than 200 doctors in the field of Siddha and Ayurveda. They should be encouraged and trained to join this wellness tourism industry.

In Sri Lanka, transport, particularly road mode, can be somewhat overwhelming to tourists as well as to investors in the tourism sector. It should be well designed with information technology. As mentioned earlier, in urban areas, many wellness centres have a limited space to accommodate the wellness seekers. This type of wellness treatment centres should be moved to rural areas. Actually, Sri Lanka is blessed with beautiful natural resources. In the digital era, the virtual information supply is very significant to attract tourists. As noted by Devesa, at al., (2010), the availability of information regarding such tourist destinations, street maps and accommodation guides are a significant factor in determining the flow of tourists.

### ***5.4 Application of Information Technology***

Advanced technology has made, and continues to make, a valuable contribution to the wellness industry throughout the world. This can be observed from the development and evolution of application of IT in the healthcare industry (Liang et al., 2017; Tang at al., 2019; Wong at al., 2020). For instance, two decades back, the evolution and revaluation in medicine was purely based on the hardware (Önder at al., 2020; Önder et al., 2018). In other words, most of the development and innovation was in the equipment. In the context of medical research, researchers like Davenport and Kalakota (2019) and Khanna (2018) have emphasized that the future medical profession would belong to artificial intelligence which is something like a computer software system. In the modern sophisticated world, any sector including healthcare tourism could not escape the mounting IT development. In addition to that, the expansion of application of advanced technology in healthcare industry cannot be viewed within a narrow dimension, because as advocated by Wong and Hazley (2020, p. 2), the technology advancement is not only enhancing medical precision and quality but also bringing healthcare services closer and faster to the patients, by revolutionizing the healthcare travelling requirements”. Policy makers and industrialists have to consider the enactment of



new technology like Artificial Intelligence (AI), Block chain, Genomeds and Virtual reality in the industry to gain competitive advantage. Wellness tourism is a complex concept with unique and distinguished attributes and characteristics that can offer value to customers. Wellness marketers ought to figure out what types of product can fulfil their customer expectations and contribute to gain profit for the organization. In fact, wellness business operators must understand customer experience. Customer experience is the cognitive and affective outcome of the customer's exposure to, or interaction with, a company's people, processes, technologies, products, services and other outputs. Generally, the application of IT plays a key role in understanding customer experience. customers can virtually interact with wellness operators by websites, Facebook and other social media, service centres, call and contact centres, events, exhibitions, trade shows, seminars, webinars, direct mail, email, advertising, sales calls and retail stores. These are called touch points which would be useful to increase the customer encounter with business operators.

Finally, this study concludes that Sri Lanka has a great opportunity to develop wellness tourism in the future and also the demand for wellness tourism should be increased in the future due to the impact of the COVID -19 pandemic. Importantly, the evolution of the wellness industry with high standard indigenous medical facilities in Sri Lanka has been perceptible.

## **6. Limitations and directions for future research**

The research is one of the more comprehensive are on wellness tourism in Sri Lanka in a comparative approach but there are limitations. First, globally the tourism industry and wellness industry have been suffering from COVID – 19. However this study is limited to Sri Lanka only. Second, snowball sampling techniques – using e- interviewing potential subjects were employed to select the participant as this sampling technique proved useful in identifying suitable stakeholders. Snowball sampling has a somewhat limited reliability compared with other sampling techniques. Future researchers have to consider these two issues in their research.



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