



Sri Lanka's Readiness to Embrace LGBT Tourism: Hindering Factors

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Abstract

This paper examines the factors that hinder Sri Lanka's readiness to embrace Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) tourism. With global tourism trends increasingly emphasizing inclusivity and diversity, destinations worldwide are adapting to cater to the specific needs of LGBT travelers. However, in Sri Lanka—a country celebrated for its rich cultural heritage and breathtaking landscapes—several barriers impede the development of a welcoming environment for LGBT tourists. This qualitative study utilized a snowball sampling technique to select a sample of eight early adulthood (20-40 years) LGBT individuals from the local community. While these participants are not specifically tourists, their experiences as LGBT members in the country provide valuable insights into the societal challenges that also affect LGBT tourism. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), a flexible qualitative method that identifies patterns of meaning within data. The findings highlight six key factors that hinder Sri Lanka's readiness to embrace LGBT tourism: (1) the arduousness of openly expressing one's sexual orientation, (2) poor reception of LGBT travelers outside urban areas like Colombo and the West Coast, (3) discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation, (4) a lack of societal awareness regarding gender diversity and inclusivity, (5) limited social networking opportunities for LGBT individuals, and (6) the absence of governmental support and legal protections. These factors suggest that Sri Lanka, despite its potential as a tourist destination, is not yet fully prepared to accommodate the needs of LGBT travelers.

Keywords: *Hindering Factors, LGBT, Sri Lanka, Tourism*


Received: 17th April 2024

Accepted: 11th September

Published: 18th December 2024

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DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.4038/wjm.v15i1.7624>

pp: 152-169

ISSN: 2012-6182

Wayamba Journal of Management
Department of Business Management
Wayamba University of Sri Lanka

Journal Home Page:
<https://fbsf.wyb.ac.lk/wayamba-journal-of-management/>

Introduction

The research background of study on Sri Lanka's readiness to embrace LGBT¹ tourism is grounded in the evolving landscape of global tourism trends, emphasizing inclusivity and recognizing diverse traveler needs. The paradigm shift towards inclusivity in the global tourism sector has become increasingly apparent in recent years. Notably, the LGBT tourism market has emerged as a significant mini segment, prompting destinations worldwide to adapt and cater to the specific requirements of LGBT travelers. Against this backdrop, Sri Lanka, with its rich cultural heritage and scenic landscapes, is positioning itself as a tourist destination. However, research identifies in the literature—specifically, the lack of comprehensive research assessing Sri Lanka's readiness to embrace LGBT tourism.

Tourist engagement of LGBT individuals is a less researched area although there is a recent slight growth in focus on that area. However, the absence of welcoming background for LGBT individuals was recognized as one of the dominant issues (Oakleaf, 2018) related to leisure and tourist engagement of LGBT individuals. Discriminatory attitudes present in various leisure and tourist spaces is identified as a fact which suppressed this welcoming background (Liechty, 2018). Moreover, Mechanisms such as homophobia, transphobia, cishnormativity, and lack of access to gender-affirming care may be barriers to LGBT youth leisure and travel participation (Gottfredsen & Linander, 2023). The global recognition of the economic significance of the LGBT travel market serves as a backdrop to the research problem. As more

destinations strive to become LGBT-friendly, understanding Sri Lanka's preparedness becomes not just an academic pursuit but a practical necessity for aligning with the changing dynamics of the international travel market. The absence of a nuanced understanding of Sri Lanka's stance on LGBT inclusivity in the tourism sector presents a serious problem that research aims to address.

Problem Statement

In recent years, the LGBT tourism market has gained prominence as a niche yet significant segment (Guaracino & Salvato, 2017). Sri Lanka, with its rich cultural heritage and scenic landscapes, is increasingly positioning itself as a tourist destination (Fernando, Bandara, & Smith, 2015). Yet, there exists a gap in comprehensive research assessing the country's readiness to embrace LGBT tourism. Readiness" for embracing LGBT tourism can be broken down into three key components: **Welcoming:** This involves societal attitudes towards the LGBT community. Are local communities and tourism operators open to accepting LGBT travelers without discrimination or bias? **Facilitation:** This includes the development of tourism infrastructure that caters to the needs of LGBT individuals, such as inclusive accommodations, LGBT-friendly spaces, and services that respect gender identities. **Providing for Needs and Wants:** This involves understanding the specific preferences and requirements of LGBT travelers, such

¹ LGBT is an initialism that stands for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender"

as safety, privacy, and community acceptance, and creating an environment that addresses these needs.

The exploration of Sri Lanka's readiness to establish an LGBT tourism industry necessitates a comprehensive examination of societal attitudes and acceptance towards the LGBT community. Some scholars emphasized the critical role of societal openness and acceptance in fostering a welcoming environment for LGBT travelers (Kosenko, Luurs, & Binder, 2015). In the context of Sri Lanka, a country with diverse societal fabric, understanding the prevailing attitudes is paramount. Studies by Silva and Yapa (2018) have noted that societal acceptance is a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and historical factors in Sri Lanka. As per general observation, conservative views rooted in cultural norms and religious teachings have shaped attitudes towards non-heteronormative identities in Sri Lanka. This seems to be a big challenge for Sri Lanka to embrace LGBT Tourism. In addition to societal acceptance, International scholarship emphasizes the pivotal role that legal environments play in fostering an inclusive and safe space for LGBT travelers. One of the studies highlighted that legal protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity contribute significantly to the attractiveness of a destination for LGBT tourism (Stephens, 2023). Within this context, Sri Lanka's legal landscape becomes a focal point for an investigation. Further, the development of a thriving LGBT tourism industry in Sri Lanka necessitates a comprehensive evaluation of the existing tourism infrastructure and services, an essential component of creating an inclusive and welcoming environment. Although

Western countries have shown some sort of acceptance for gender minorities by establishing LGBT-specific bars, community centers, hotels, and cruises that provide recreational spaces for LGBT individuals and their families (Oakleaf, 2018), such platforms are not available in Sri Lanka because of the absence of LGBT friendly environment within the country. However, in Western nations, most indoor leisure have separate individual changing rooms and communal changing areas, thus gender identification is not imposed on the others. This is helpful for LGBT individuals to protect their privacy during their leisure and travel time. Only a few older leisure venues have unisex pool-changing stalls (Manchester City Council, 2010). However, Sri Lankan situation is totally different from those western countries because there are no tourist spaces that specifically address the LGBT requirements. Moreover, market trends and opportunities are critical in determining the feasibility and potential success of establishing an LGBT tourism industry in Sri Lanka. Globally, there is a burgeoning trend towards recognizing and catering to the needs of the LGBT travel market. Some scholars have emphasized the economic significance of this market segmentation, highlighting its growth and potential for destinations willing to embrace inclusivity while actively promoting diversity and providing LGBT travelers with a welcoming environment (Khan, 2013). In Sri Lanka's context, current literature is scarce, signifying a gap in understanding the specific market dynamics and preferences of the LGBT travel segment. Although, problematic situation exists for embracement of LGBT tourism in Sri Lanka is observed at surface level as above, no study is found as a deep address on this issue

according to the best knowledge of the researcher.

The lack of a thorough investigation into Sri Lanka's current stance on LGBT inclusivity in the tourism sector presents a multifaceted problem. This research problem encompasses various dimensions, including the evaluation of existing policies, the inclusivity of tourism infrastructure, societal attitudes towards LGBT travelers, and the overall hospitality landscape. The absence of a sound understanding of these aspects impedes the development of targeted strategies and initiatives aimed at fostering a more inclusive and diverse tourism environment in Sri Lanka. According to the Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (2021), Sri Lanka ranks low in terms of LGBT inclusivity, with many LGBT individuals facing societal rejection. A 2018 study by Silva and Yapa showed that over 70% of Sri Lankans hold conservative views on non-heteronormative identities. These statistics support the need for a thorough exploration of the challenges in promoting LGBT tourism.

The overarching question, "Is Sri Lanka ready to develop as an LGBT friendly tourist destination?" stems from the need to explore and comprehend the diverse dimensions influencing the country's potential in catering to the LGBT travel market. By framing this question, this research sets out to recognize factors hindering Sri Lanka's readiness to embrace LGBT tourism through a proper investigation on societal attitudes, legal frameworks, and tourism infrastructure in Sri Lanka, identifying their pivotal roles in determining the inclusivity and attractiveness of a destination to the LGBT community.

Research Question

The researcher intended to address the following questions through this research study which were formed in response to the problem above to be solved.

RQ1: What factors hinder Sri Lanka's readiness to embrace LGBT tourism?

Research Objective

Accordingly, the following objective can be deduced through the above research issues.

- To explore strategies to overcome the factors hindering Sri Lanka's readiness to accept the LGBT community and create a more inclusive environment.

Methods

Research design usually includes aspects such as study context and sampling, data collection, and analysis techniques to be followed in conducting an investigation (Creswell, 2013). The following sections provide a detailed description of the qualitative research design adopted by the current study.

Study context and sampling

This section explains the nature of the study context and the sampling procedure.

Study context:

This study focused on the Sri Lankan context which is a conventional society where there's no strong economic, legal and social framework to protect the gender minorities and people with non-mainstream sexual orientations. Young/early adulthood-age (20-40 years) LGBT individuals who have being the local tourists in Sri Lanka are identified as the focused community in this qualitative analysis. Previous scholars in the field of social studies

identified an age range between 20-40 years as someone’s early adulthood (Colarusso, 1992). This study focused on the Sri Lankan context, a conventional society lacking strong economic, legal, and social frameworks to protect gender minorities and individuals with non-mainstream sexual orientations. The sample consists of young/early adulthood (20-40 years) LGBT individuals from the local community in Sri Lanka. These individuals were chosen to provide insights into their experiences and the societal challenges they face, particularly regarding acceptance and inclusivity within their own country. Furthermore, academic works in economics have also identified the same age range as early adulthood where individuals can engage in tourist activities with a greater capacity (Rank & Hirschl, 2001). Therefore, this study also considered 20-40 years of age range as the inclusion criteria when selecting potential early adult transgender participants. This community includes individuals in categories namely lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.

Sampling: To select members for the sample, this study has primarily adopted a non-probability sampling technique called snowballing sampling technique/chain-referral sampling which was extensively utilized for qualitative research (Naderifar et al., 2017).

In line with this approach, the researcher has recruited the first two (2) members for the sample through personal network of the researcher. These two members were selected from two separate occupations namely NGO worker and social activist/journalist.

The member from NGO (a Trans man) is recruited through the network with Prana transgender Collective² centralized in the Colombo district, Sri Lanka. Network built with social activist/journalist through social media platforms was used to recruit another member (a Gay man). As the qualitative study progressed, the researcher reached multiple participants who were recommended by the initial participants. In this manner, the researcher has utilized this snowballing sampling technique for the sampling process of this qualitative study as recommended by Rossman and Rallis (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). The technique of snowball sampling is highly useful when there is no pre-calculated list of target populations (Wijayawardhana & Siriwardhane, 2022). This research also used this technique due to the absence of a proper list of young/early adulthood-age LGBT individuals because of the hidden nature of that community in the Sri Lankan context. However, the sample of this study consists of eight (08) participants. Participants were selected in a way to have diversity within the sample (*Table 1*).

Table 1: Participant information

	Pseudonym	Age (Year)	Sexual orientation
1	Samika	24	Lesbian
2	Anuhas	23	Gay
3	Awantha	32	Gay
4	Ananda	40	Bisexual
5	Udeni	37	Transgender (Male to Female (MtF))

²Prana transgender Collective is the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in Sri Lanka established for Female-to-Male

(FtM) Transgender individuals to protect the human right of FtM people.

6	Ramal	32	Transgender (Female to Male (MtF))
7	Nuwan	24	Transgender (Female to Male (MtF))
8	Kaush	29	Gay

Data collection

Data collection for this qualitative study was conducted through a semi-structured interview procedure. Data collection for this qualitative study was conducted through semi-structured online interviews with all participants. This method was selected due to the sensitive nature of the research and the concerns expressed by LGBT individuals regarding privacy and potential exposure in Sri Lankan society. The hidden nature of the LGBT community in Sri Lanka makes face-to-face interviews less feasible, as participants may face social stigma or harassment. To ensure privacy, all interviews were conducted through encrypted online platforms, and participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. Prior to the interviews, informed consent was obtained, with participants reassured that their responses would remain confidential, and any identifying details would be anonymized. While online interviews may limit in-person rapport, they allowed participants to feel more comfortable and secure, leading to more open discussions. However, recognizing the value of physical interactions in sociological research, future studies could explore face-to-face interviews by building trust and using neutral, private locations. Researchers would need to take additional steps to protect participants' anonymity, such as using secure, undisclosed venues and maintaining strict confidentiality protocols.

Interviews have allowed participants to ask questions for further clarification within the conversation. These interviews were conducted in a friendly manner to avoid participants from getting stressed and to create a relaxed ambiance for them to share their life experiences openly. All discussions were conducted in Sinhala language as it is the mother language of Sri Lankans which is more convenient for participants to share their life experiences comfortably in story format.

The average total time duration consumed per interview is 60 minutes. The interviews consisted of three phases. First, 10 minutes were used to create a close and harmonious relationship between the participant and the interviewer to understand each other. Approximately 40 minutes was consumed to drive targeted discussion, and the last 10 minutes were spent on a post-interview conversation. However, data collection took about two (2) months from the beginning of September to end of October 2023. An interview protocol (*Appendix 1*) was finalized by including all the testable fields recognized from extensive literature review.

Data analysis

This study has adopted the Thematic Analysis (TA) which is commonly used as a foundational method for qualitative analysis or as an approach to narrative analysis. This is a method which involves in recognizing the patterns of meaning or themes across a qualitative data set. However, this research used widely cited theoretically flexible approach to TA called Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach which was introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006). It is different from the other approaches to TA in terms of the process of theme development. The researcher chose this

approach because it was employed in previous similar research works focused on transgender community (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020). Especially, labor economic studies related to transgender groups had also followed Reflexive Thematic Analysis because of its flexible nature (Goldberg et al., 2021).

According to the recommendations of Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, three aspects should be considered before beginning the data analysis through the above approach. Those three aspects are, the type of thematic analysis, the way of identifying themes, and the level of identifying themes. Accordingly, the study should first identify the type of TA. In this scenario, the researcher was fully familiarized with the data set because he was the one who conducted all the interviews for data collection. Therefore, out of the two types of thematic analysis explained by Braun and Clarke, this study has chosen the second type which involves providing detailed accounts of various aspects of the research questions/objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Then, the study should determine the way of identifying themes. According to Braun and Clarke, Theoretical Thematic Analysis and Inductive Thematic Analysis are the two ways available to identify potential themes. This study has adopted the Inductive Thematic Analysis to identify themes because it is the way which is driven by data instead of theories (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Finally, it is crucial that the researcher determines the level at which themes are going to be identified. Semantic or explicit level and latent or interpretative level are the two optional levels of identifying themes. With the semantic approach, the analyst does not see anything beyond what the participant says. However, the latent approach

guides the analyst to go beyond the semantic content. It involves in interpretative work when developing themes. Therefore, this study selected latent level as the level of identifying themes.

The stages of reflexive thematic analysis introduced by Braun & Clarke were modified in 2020 and this study employed the modified technique. Table 2 illustrates those phases and description of the process.

Table 2: Steps of Thematic Analysis (TA) and description of the process

Phase	Description of the process
1.Data familiarization and writing familiarization notes	In this phase, researchers have to familiarize themselves with the data through data immersion and active reading. The initial list of ideas should then be generated about what is in the data set and what parts are interesting about them. Further, Transcription of verbal data (verbatim transcription) is necessary to be prepared if the researcher's data collection method is an interview or a similar verbal mode.
2.Systematic Data Coding	A code is a brief phrase. This phase involves the coding process which is used to recognize parts from the data

	<p>set that are interesting to the analyst and related to as answers to the research question. This step should ensure that all relevant actual data extracts are coded and are then merged together within each code. Initial coding needed to be conducted with the use of data sets and data items. Further, research should also decide coding strategy.</p>		<p>build the thematic map. If coherent pattern is there, the researcher could then move to the level two which reviews the validity of individual themes in relation to the data set.</p>
<p>3. Generating initial Themes from coded collated data</p>	<p>Classification of the various codes into potential themes and merging of all relevant coded data within the identified themes are conducted under this phase. Sorting of codes for themes and development of themes are happened under this stage. At the Visualization of themes is required be conducted.</p>	<p>5. Refining, Defining, and naming themes</p>	<p>The phase of ‘defining and refining’, involves recognizing the ‘essence’ of each theme and determining the aspect of the data captured by each theme. An informative name for each theme is also determined under this phase.</p>
<p>4. Developing and Reviewing themes</p>	<p>In this phase, the researcher has to review themes in two levels. Under level one, all the collated extracts for each theme must be read by the researcher in order to identify whether coherent pattern is appearing in coded data extracts. Through that, the researcher can</p>	<p>6. Writing the report</p>	<p>All the themes identified in early phases are presented in written form together with the data extracts and analytic narrative under this step. Contextualizing the qualitative analysis in relation to prevailing literature is also conducted under this final step. Visualization and audit trail parts are also conducted under this stage.</p>

Source: (Braun & Clarke, 2020)

Coding is the basic process of developing themes in raw data by identifying significant instances and encoding it prior to interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998). Firstly, the researcher, we immersed ourselves in the data, reading each transcript several

times and began the coding process by highlighting relevant passages. Our

analytical interest and decisions meant that we particularly attended to the data segments that contained references to these domains.

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research process. Every participant gave their informed consent, which included information about the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality procedures. Participants received guarantees that the final research report would anonymize their responses and protect their identities.

Results

The results of the thematic analysis revealed six major themes that highlight the factors hindering Sri Lanka's readiness to promote LGBT tourism. These themes are drawn from participant interviews and provide deep insights into the cultural, social, and institutional challenges that exist. The themes are discussed in the following sections. This chapter reports on the main findings of the current study which answers the research question of the study:

RQ1: What factors hinder Sri Lanka's readiness to promote LGBT tourism?

The results of the Thematic Analysis related to the “factors hindering the Sri Lanka's readiness to promote LGBT tourism” are presented in detail under this section. Extracts from the interviews conducted with the participants made by the researcher provide supporting evidence for the themes emerging from the data. The

major themes are presented as the factors hinder Sri Lanka's readiness to promote LGBT tourism³.

Theme 1: The arduousness of expressing sexual orientation

Expressing one's sexual orientation while engaging in LGBT tourism can bring about unique challenges and considerations. It's important to prioritize traveler's safety and well-being while exploring new destinations and cultures. Due to presence of unwelcoming mindset for Sri Lankans with regard to gender minorities, it is found to be arduous for LGBT tourists to express their sexual orientation openly in visiting public places. Absence of LGBT-friendly travel communities to provide support and guidance for individuals navigating these experiences hinders the Sri Lanka's readiness to embrace LGBT tourism in Sri Lanka. Every traveler's identity and sexual orientation is valid, and they should deserve to feel comfortable and respected wherever they go. However, that conformability to express themselves as a part of LGBT community is a very poor in Sri Lanka because of the absence of readiness of community to accept beyond gender heteronormative concept due to traditionalism. This fact was proven from the expression of one of the participants, Anuhas (a 23-year-old Gay Man). He said:

Especially in a country like Sri Lanka where most of the people are stereotyped on anything, it is very challenging to express my sexual orientation. Forget sexual orientation, even personal opinions, and feelings are humiliated because of this

³When presenting extractions under each theme, fake names are given to

participants by the author to protect their personal identity.

traditionalism (Anuhas, 2024).

After analyzing this comment, it was identified that traditionalism and the stereotyping nature of Sri Lankan people as a community are holding us back when embracing LGBT tourism. Another noticeable point is after expressing their sexual orientation they had to endure various uncomfortable things such as name-calling, and harassment.

Theme 2: Poor reception beyond Colombo and West Coast

LGBT tourists are found to be struggled in certain areas of Sri Lanka, particularly outside of Colombo⁴ and the West Coast. While progress has been made in terms of LGBT rights and acceptance in some urban areas, attitudes and awareness may vary in more rural or conservative regions. Under this circumstance, it's advisable for LGBT tourists to exercise caution and discretion when traveling to these areas and to be mindful of local customs and sensitivities. Connecting with local LGBT organizations or seeking advice from LGBT-friendly travel resources can help navigate potential challenges and ensure a more positive and safe experience.

However, kind of good reception is observed in Colombo and West Coastal areas for LGBT travelers in Sri Lanka. This idea was supported by Awantha (a 32-year-old Gay Man). He said:

I have seen gay couples in star hotels even in areas of Colombo but no one discriminates those (Awantha, Gay Man, 32 Years).

Similar experience was shared by

Samika (a 24-year-old Lesbian woman). She expressed:

Having better LGBT facilities such as medical facilities (hospitals, clinics) accommodation, and fashion has made Colombo the number 1 (Samika, Lesbian Woman, 24 Years).

This statement has further verified that 'Colombo' stands out as the most welcoming Sri Lankan city to the LGBT community because of the presence of LGBT traveler-friendly infra-structure facilities. Furthermore, it was surprising to hear that the west coastal side of Sri Lanka is more welcoming to the LGBT community and central part of Sri Lanka is less welcoming. This finding was supported by Ananda (a 40-year-old Bi-Man)

Hikkaduwa, Bentota, Galle, Matara, Mirissa, Dikwalla⁵ is more welcoming because these cities are focused on tourism. But when you move into Kandy, Badulla⁶ it is not the same (Ananda, Bi-Man, 40 Years).

This finding elaborates that rural areas and central part of Sri Lanka are less ready to promote LGBT tourism. In accordance with this finding, strategies to promote LGBT tourism in Sri Lanka should commence from Colombo and West Coast areas where LGBT community is not understood as abnormal social segment.

Theme 3: Discriminations and harassments based on sexual-orientation

Sexual-orientation based discrimination for LGBT tourists in Sri Lanka is indeed found as a significant issue which hinders Sri Lanka's

⁴ Colombo is the executive and judicial capital and largest city of Sri Lanka by population

⁵ Some areas belonging to west coastal side of Sri Lanka

⁶ Some areas belonging to central side of Sri Lanka

readiness to promote LGBT Tourism. Unfortunately, members of the LGBT community have faced discrimination, prejudice, and even violence based on their sexual orientation while traveling in certain parts of the country. Nuwan (a 24-year-old Trans-Man) shared his experience which revealed this finding. He said:

There was no room for us to entertain ourselves, dress the way we wanted because people were judging us. These kinds of instances made it very harder for me to associate people, when we are traveling, walking in the road, school, office people were looking at us as if we were not from this planet like that we don't belong here. They were watching us top to bottom (Nuwan, Tran-Man, 24 Years).

According to Nuwan's expression, most parts of the community in Sri Lanka perceive LGBT individuals as living beings of a different planet. This makes many including accommodations, dressing, transportation discriminatory for LGBT travelers. It's crucial for LGBT tourists to be aware of these challenges and to take necessary precautions to ensure their safety and well-being during their visit to Sri Lanka.

Harassments faced by LGBT tourists within the country are another issue which discourages the rise in number of LGBT travelers of Sri Lanka. An experience at hotel shared by Udeni, a solo traveler (a 37-year-old Transgender (Male to Female (MtF) person) proved how hard it is for LGBT individuals to travel Sri Lanka safely. She Said:

In one instance 5 boys locked me up in a room and removed my clothes.

Though I refused and struggled to move out, that was in vain. After this incidence I was so embarrassed to face those boys. Similar things have happened to me continuously during the 2 week stay at Nuwara-Eliya⁷ because of transgender appearance (Udeni, Male-to-Female transgender (MtF) person, 37 Years).

LGBT traveler's safety and comfort are paramount, so it's important to prioritize their well-being and seek assistance if needed. Their identity is valid, and they should have a positive and inclusive travel experience. However, presence of unsafe environment for travelers with non-mainstream sexual-orientation is a serious issue which hinders readiness of Sri Lanka to promote LGBT tourism.

Theme 4: Weaker awareness in the larger society regarding the presence of gender diversity and the significance of practicing inclusivity

According to the findings, it is unfortunately true that there is often weaker awareness in larger society in Sri Lanka regarding the presence of the LGBT community and gender diversity. This lack of awareness can lead to misunderstandings and stereotypes against individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Although, it is important for society to educate themselves about the existence and rights of the LGBT community in order to promote inclusivity, currently, it is not at progressive level in Sri Lanka. Udeni (a 37-year-old Transgender (Male to Female (MtF) person) shared her experience on weaker awareness in the local society regarding the presence of the LGBT community and its' impact on LGBT travelers' freedom. She said:

⁷ Nuwara Eliya is a city in the hill country of the Central Province, Sri Lanka

It was very hard for me to belong to a group because we are getting judged based on our sexuality. In a country like Sri Lanka where sexuality is perceived and taught that it should be hidden not to be expressed, I remember it was very challenging for me as a little kid. I had done some short documentary videos on the places where I have visited and uploaded to Facebook. But I had a backward feeling to continue it later because people commented badly to my videos. Some have even blamed my parents in the comment box because of my appearance. Our people are not much educated to accept the presence of LGBT community (Udeni, Male-to-Female transgender (MtF) person, 37 Years).

Accordingly, absence of increasing awareness and fostering dialogue hinders the Sri Lanka's readiness to create a more supportive and respectful environment for LGBT tourists, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Theme 5: Limited social networking opportunities

Having a large scope of social networking opportunities is an essential factor in having broad experiences in travel time. However, this study found that the majority of LGBT participants narrowed their travel time because they often limited their social network scope to only LGBT friends. Nuwan (a 24-year-old Trans-Man) who tends to spend his travel time only with his close circle of LGBT friends expressed how his transgender nature pushed him to own an introverted personality. This limits the ability of those individuals to form wider social connections during travel time. They also feel isolated if they do not have that close circle to enjoy leisure time with. Nuwan said:

Every weekend I travel to Kandy with

my Trans friends in a car owned by one Trans friend. I have seen so many beautiful place that others have not seen there. I like that environment. However, I feel that I have been socially limited because of being a transgender person. Even when I spend leisure, I do not tend to talk with strangers. I am just comfortable with a close circle. That circle is mostly filled with my Trans friends because they are the set of individuals with whom we can leisurely be expressive (Nuwan, Tran-Man, 24 Years).

According to this finding, another one of the major challenges that LGBT travelers face in Sri Lanka is the difficulty of extending their social networks beyond the LGBT community. In many cases, LGBT travelers may feel more comfortable interacting with other members of the community, but it is important for them to be able to connect with locals and non-LGBT individuals as well. This seems to be challenging in a society where traditional values and attitudes towards homosexuality may still prevail. This finding also reflects that, it would be less attractive for both local and foreign LGBT travelers to travel in Sri Lanka if it difficult to extend their social networks to non-LGBT community too. This fact too had hindered the readiness of Sri Lanka to embrace LGBT tourism.

Theme 6: Lack of governmental support and supportive legal frameworks

The lack of governmental support and supportive legal frameworks for LGBT tourists in Sri Lanka creates a challenging environment for LGBT travelers. This research found that, although, it is essential for the government to address these issues and work towards creating a more inclusive

and welcoming destination for all visitors, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, such mechanism is not strongly available within the country. Awantha (a 32-year-old Gay Man) expressed the negative effect of having such unsupportive legal framework on LGBT tourism.

Even the government does not know what the human rights that are there for us are. What are the essential things, environment that we need to live. It is very sad to live in an environment like that. When it comes to humanity all of us are equal doesn't matter whether we are male, female or a gay person. In Sri Lanka, same-sex relationships are criminalized under Section 365A of the Penal Code, which carries a penalty of up to ten years in prison. The danger is, this law not only affects local LGBT citizens but also puts LGBT tourists at risk of arrest and prosecution

According to this finding, it is clear that the Sri Lankan government has not taken significant steps to address the issues faced by LGBT tourists, such as providing safe spaces or support services. Further, there is a lack of non-discrimination policies in place to protect LGBT individuals in the tourism industry, leading to exclusion and mistreatment. This loophole could be cited as another strong fact which hinders the Sri Lanka's readiness to embrace LGBT tourism.

Table 3: Summary table of results

Theme 1	The difficulty in openly expressing one's sexual orientation due to societal stereotyping and traditionalism is a significant barrier. LGBT-friendly communities and support systems are essential to provide a safer and more inclusive environment.
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Theme 2	While urban areas like Colombo and West Coast regions are somewhat receptive, rural areas and the central part of Sri Lanka are less welcoming to LGBT travelers. Thus, promotion efforts should focus on these areas first before expanding to rural regions.
Theme 3	Sexual orientation-based discrimination is common, particularly in more conservative areas. Strengthening safety measures, especially in accommodations and public spaces, could help mitigate this issue.
Theme 4	Lack of awareness and understanding of the LGBT community in the general population contributes to social exclusion. Education and awareness campaigns could improve inclusivity and public perception.
Theme 5	LGBT tourists tend to stick within their own communities due to discomfort in expanding their social networks, limiting their experiences. Promoting broader social acceptance is key to fostering inclusivity.
Theme 6	The absence of governmental support and legal protections for LGBT tourists is a critical issue. Legal reform, including the decriminalization of same-sex relationships, is crucial to create a more welcoming environment.

Discussion

Thematic analysis of this qualitative study found six (6) themes as the factors hinder Sri Lanka's readiness to embrace LGBT tourism. The

arduousness of expressing the sexual orientation, Poor reception beyond Colombo and West Coast, Discriminations and harassments

based on sexual-orientation, Weaker awareness in the larger society regarding the presence of gender diversity and the significance of practicing inclusivity, Limited social networking opportunities, Lack of governmental support and supportive legal frameworks can be cited as those five themes. These findings were supported by previous literature too. The arduousness of expressing the sexual orientation was also highlighted as a serious issue observed with regard to gender minorities in the study done by UK authorities and it explained that Sri Lanka's 'Customary norms, religious beliefs and social practices influence on emergence of rejection feeling on LGBT community (Independent Advisory Group on Country Information, UK, 2021). However, some scholars found that Male-to-Female (MtF) transgender individuals are more likely to experience bigger difficulty to express their transgender nature than Female-to-Male (FtM) transgender individuals (Wijayawardhana, Chaminda, & Siriwardhane, 2023). However, the researcher was not able to find any strong literature to support or contrast the second theme related to geography and LGBT tourism. Therefore, poor reception beyond Colombo and West Coast might be a new finding which emerges as another fact hindering the Sri Lanka's readiness to embrace LGBT tourism. The third theme, discriminations and harassments based on sexual-orientation is vastly supported in past literature. Accordingly, LGBT victims of gender-based

discrimination, harassment, violence, and rejection by community are

recognized as the individuals who showed higher rates of suicidal behavior (Virupaksha et al., 2016). This implies how hard it is to bear the pressure of harassments and discriminations against own sexual orientation. "Weaker awareness in the larger society regarding the presence of gender diversity and the significance of practicing inclusivity", the fourth theme was followed-up by a researcher attached to Social Scientists' Association (Peiris, 2021) and that report highlighted absence of mechanism to make people sensitive for dynamic changes in the social world as a key factor which led towards this hindering factor. The fifth theme which emerges as a fact that hinders the Sri Lanka's readiness to embrace LGBT tourism is the 'limitedness of social networking opportunities'. This finding is supported by previous scholarly works which state that lack of a sense of belonging, inability to connect with others, and neglect or deterioration of social relationships as factors which limit the free engagement in leisure time (García-Álvarez, Soler, & Achard-Braga, 2021). Lack of governmental support and supportive legal frameworks is the last theme recognized as a hindering fact related to LGBT tourism in Sri Lanka. This fact was recognized in previous literature too. Sri Lanka, like many colonial countries, has colonial laws adopted during that era of British rule. These laws reflect Victorian morality and have been heavily criticized. Such one law is the law against homosexuality.

Although Sri Lanka was seen much later Progressive legislation on women's rights, the issue of LGBT remains a challenge (EQUAL GROUND, 2013).

Accordingly, traveling as a member of the LGBT community can be a daunting experience, especially in countries like Sri Lanka where acceptance and inclusion are not prevalent. Sri Lanka, a country known for its rich culture and stunning landscapes, may not be the most welcoming destination for LGBT travelers. While there has been progress in recent years towards LGBTQ rights in Sri Lanka, there are still challenges that make it difficult for LGBT travelers to be a tourist in Sri Lanka. Overall, still Sri Lanka's readiness to embrace LGBT tourism is not up to a satisfactory level.

Conclusion

This study was carried with the intention of recognize factors hinder Sri Lanka's readiness to promote LGBT tourism. Study collected primary data through qualitative data collection approach named semi-structured interviews. It has used a snowball sampling technique to select a transgender sample of 8 participants who belong to early adulthood (20-40 Years of age). Qualitative data was analyzed through widely cited theoretically flexible approach to Thematic Analysis called reflexive thematic analysis approach which was put forwarded by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2020).

Sri Lanka, known for its picturesque landscapes and rich cultural heritage,

has been making strides in the tourism industry. However, when it comes to embracing LGBT tourism, the country still faces several hindering factors. The

arduousness of expressing the sexual orientation, Poor reception beyond Colombo and West Coast,

Discriminations and harassments based on sexual-orientation, Weaker awareness in the larger society regarding the presence of gender diversity and the significance of practicing inclusivity, Limited social networking opportunities, Lack of governmental support and supportive legal frameworks were recognized in this study as such major hindrances to LGBT tourism in Sri Lanka. Based on the findings, ensuring that anti-discrimination laws are in place to protect LGBT individuals and enforcing these laws to create a safe environment for LGBT tourists can be cited as an immediate step that should be taken from government side. Developing marketing campaigns specifically targeting LGBT travelers by highlighting LGBT-friendly accommodations and attractions is an action that has to be taken from the end of tourist service suppliers in Sri Lanka. Collaborating with travel agencies to promote Sri Lanka as a LGBT-friendly destination is a responsibility falls on the shoulders of LGBT organizations in the country. The findings reveal several major hindrances to LGBT acceptance in Sri Lanka, such as difficulties in expressing sexual orientation, poor societal reception, discrimination, lack of awareness about gender diversity, limited social networking opportunities, and the absence of government support and legal protections. To foster acceptance of the LGBT community, the government must take immediate steps to implement anti-discrimination laws and ensure enforcement. Social

campaigns, led by LGBT organizations, must focus on educating the public, reducing stigma, and advocating for

equal rights. Accepting the LGBT community is the first crucial step, and only then can Sri Lanka consider positioning itself as an LGBT-friendly destination. Last, but not least, it is a responsibility of media and journalist to raise awareness about the importance of LGBT tourism while encouraging businesses to become LGBT allies and support diversity initiatives.

In conclusion, while Sri Lanka has much to offer as a tourist destination, the country's readiness to embrace LGBT tourism is hindered by legal barriers, social stigma, and cultural norms. Addressing these hindering factors is crucial in creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment for all travelers, regardless of their sexual orientation.

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