

Research Article 08

Exploring the Critical Sustainable Practices of Community-Based Tourism Entrepreneurs for Enhancing the Destination Competitiveness in Rural Tourism Destinations: A Sri Lankan Perspective

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Abstract

Community-based Tourism (CBT) is recognized as a tool for empowering rural communities to start and manage diverse tourism-related livelihoods, improving their quality of life, and alleviating poverty. Although the majority of CBT businesses are operated on a small-scale level, it is necessary to apply sustainable practices for their success, long-term existence, and enhanced destination competitiveness. In the Sri Lankan context, there is a lack of research based on the visitors' perceptions about the sustainability practices of community-based tourism entrepreneurs (CBTEs), which affects for enhancing the destination competitiveness. This research aims to fill this knowledge gap mainly because it is important for practitioners and policymakers in the tourism industry. The interpretivism research approach and purposive sampling technique were applied in this study, and data were collected from the three selected rural community tourism villages in Sri Lanka. The guests highly appreciated the sustainability practices of CBTEs in the two villages relating to the environmental, social & cultural, and economic dimensions, while less appreciation was received for one of the villages selected for this study. Not having a proper training about sustainability practices and mandatory requirements of running community-based tourism businesses, and a lack of monitoring process seem as reasons behind such a less concern. The majority of the interviewed tourists mentioned that relating to the three aspects of sustainability dimensions, product and service quality; diverse range and novelty of the products and services; well trained and skilled people; cooperativeness as a community and strong leadership; security and safety; and follow the mandatory rules, regulations, and standards effect on enhancing the destination competitiveness in the selected villages. Therefore, much attention needs to be given by practitioners and policymakers on these aspects for enhancing the competitiveness in CBT destinations.

Keywords: Community-based tourism entrepreneurs, destination competitiveness, Sri Lanka, sustainability practices, visitor perception

Introduction

Tourism is recognized as one of the most dynamic, resilient and fastest growing industry in all over the world (UNWTO, 2022; UNWTO/GTERC, 2020). Its value and growth potentials position the sector as a key driver of inclusion the local economic growth. In Sri Lanka, tourism sector has been recognized as one of the key sectors which brings foreign exchange to the country, and creates diverse livelihood opportunities and employments mainly in rural areas where poverty became a critical issue. Moreover, since mid 1990s, community involvement in tourism has become paramount with the trend in enjoying the life by travelling, leisure and adventure activities, as well as shifting the demand for tourism from mass tourism to more environmentally and culturally conscious forms of tourism including: nature-based tourism, ecotourism, community tourism, and sustainable tourism (Ngo & Creutz, 2022). Hence, “Nature, Culture, and People” has become the present day theme in tourism and with these trends, Community Based Tourism (CBT) has become an important and growing sector of the tourism industry in many developing and least-developed countries especially as an alternative form of tourism to reduce the negative impacts of mass tourism, and as a pivotal strategy for poverty alleviation and fostering socioeconomic development (Shelamony & Mohammed, 2020; Sriyani, 2022; Habiba & Lina, 2023; Auksondee & Darawong, 2024). This paradigm shift create more benefits such as diversify tourism offerings which brings surprising experience to visitors, ensure equitable distribution of tourism revenues, fostering inclusive growth and community resilience, mitigation the negative impacts of mass tourism, and creating a strong voice for sustainable development, and in overall enhancing the destination competitiveness (Shelamony & Mohammed, 2020; Auksondee & Darawong, 2024). Such trends imagine a blessing to Sri Lanka, compared with other tourism countries, because Sri Lanka is rich with very attractive and diverse natural and man-made tourism resources, biodiversity, multi-culture, and the unique hospitality nature of the people, especially in rural destinations.

As well, the present government of Sri Lanka is aiming at attracting 3.0 million tourists in 2025 (Daily Mirror-Business News, 23/12/2024), compared to 1.8 million in the first eleven months of 2024 (SLTDA, 2024^b). Camison (2020) pointed out that a huge increase may lead to over-tourism in reputed tourism destinations with negative repercussions on biodiversity, cultural heritage, and local quality of life. Furthermore, presently, green-minded tourists are increasing and when they select products and destinations, they seek the sustainability practices of the tourism entrepreneurs, their greater values and environmental attributes (Camison, 2020). Moreover, several researchers (for example, Suansri, 2003; Dodds et al., 2018; Camison, 2020) argued that to ensure the long-term survival of this sector, it is necessary to incorporate the two key concerns of competitiveness and sustainability with the CBT concept in rural tourism destinations. It was found that many CBT entrepreneurs have failed due to a lack of concern simultaneously on both concepts of sustainability and destination competitiveness (Camison, 2020; Kaluarachchige et al., 2021). Davie et al. (2024) also pointed out that destination competitiveness and community involvement in tourism are interconnected elements within the broader context of sustainable tourism. As the tourists' demand will vary and diversify, the number of tourism destinations continues to rise by differentiating themselves from one another (Campón-Cerroa et al., 2017). Hence, presently, researchers are seeking to understand sustainable strategies for enhancing the destination competitiveness, in particular, building customer loyalty, destination marketing, competitive positioning, and different ways to attract tourists. However, at the community level, especially in rural tourism destinations, the strategies for attracting tourists and increasing their revisit intention are mainly centered on sustainability practices. The tested model developed by

Priyanto et al. (2024) indicates that the application of the CBT concept through sustainable tourism can increase tourist satisfaction, which affects destination attraction. Ridho et al. (2021) stated that the involvement of local communities in sustainable tourism is very important to increase tourist satisfaction. Kim (2014) pointed out that the understanding of destination attributes is important in view of travelers' selection of a particular travel destination after comparing the destination attributes, and these attributes have a meaningful influence on the image formation of the destination. As well, it is ought to identify such important attributes of CBT destinations from the perspective of sustaining the local community and destinations to be competitive.

However, it is rarely discovered how the sustainability practices of a CBT destination elicit positive revisit intention and word of mouth effect to create a loyalty formation and destination competitiveness. Moreover, based on a bibliometric study, Camison (2020) and Streimikiene et al. (2020) revealed that prevailing research is placed on sustainability, possibly forgetting competitiveness, and limited knowledge exists about the value of different practices for promoting both sustainable development and greater competitiveness in tourism destinations. These arguments of prior studies show that there is a notable knowledge gap in research that focuses on sustainable practices leading to enhanced destination competitiveness. Also, there is a lack of empirical evidence to support or refute the argument on the relationship between the sustainability practices of a CBT destination and destination competitiveness. Lack of knowledge in these aspects will limit harnessing the full potential of utilization and fostering environmentally responsible and socially inclusive tourism practices in enhancing the competitiveness in rural tourism destinations. Especially in the Sri Lankan context, enhancing the destination competitiveness in rural tourism destinations is very important for attracting more tourists to the country and thereby increasing the foreign exchange earnings. Therefore, the main aim of this study is to identify the critical sustainable practices of the community-based tourism entrepreneurs of the selected tourism destinations in Sri Lanka, and to reveal how the visitors feel about the effect of these sustainable practices on enhancing the destination competitiveness.

Literature Review

Community-Based Tourism

UNWTO (2022) defines Community-Based Tourism as a tourism development model that puts the community at the center of tourism planning, development, and management. Community-Based Tourism is also defined as the tourism activities conducted by the local community in a rural area and aims to generate benefits for local communities in the developing world by allowing tourists to visit these communities to receive an exciting experience and learn (Anuar & Sood, 2017). Vo (2024) introduced CBT as an approach of tourism development in which the community actively participates as a host of tourism products in addition to being a beneficiary. This CBT concept encompasses a wide range of elements, including: local culture, local accommodation, local community, local entertainment, local food, local superstructure, natural environment, and local products (Han et al., 2019; Kiatkawsin & Han, 2017).

APEC CBT Manual (2010) mentioned that CBT is generally small-scale and involves interactions between the visitor and host community, particularly suited to rural and regional areas. Handbook on Community Based Tourism (2009) and WTO (2009) mentioned the aims of CBT as to maximize the benefits for the local community and limit the negative impacts of

tourism on the community and their environmental resources. The CBT concept is based on the principles of community empowerment and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which seek to eliminate poverty, improve urban development, diversify the local economy, preserve culture, conserve the environment, provide educational opportunities, and promote sustainable development (Huruta et al., 2024).

Sustainability in Tourism

WTO (2019) defined sustainable tourism as the “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities”. This directs towards the management of all resources in a way that meets the economic, social, and aesthetic requirements while preserving cultural integrity, critical ecological processes, biodiversity, and life support systems. Sustainable tourism encompasses ecological or ecosystem sustainability, community participation, equal opportunity, and prosperity as a whole. Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA, 2024^a) considers sustainability as a key driver to preserve and conserve the island’s outstanding natural and cultural heritage to safeguard the destination for our people and our visitors for now and for the future. As per these definitions, sustainability in tourism is based on a three-dimensional framework of environmental, social & cultural, and economic (Blancas et al., 2011). Huruta et al. (2024) and Priyanto et al. (2024) discussed the sustainability in tourism by emphasizing the Triple Bottom Line theory (TBL) of Planet, People, and Prosperity (3Ps). The People element emphasizes the tourists’ wishes, the Planet emphasizes the care and maintenance of tourist attractions, and the prosperity concerns the economic values of a tourist attraction.

Destination Competitiveness

Vo (2024) defines a tourism destination as a physical space that has tourism products, which include attractions, tourism resources and supporting infrastructure, where visitors can travel to and experience at least one night. OECD (2013, p.14) defines Tourism destination competitiveness as the “ability of the place to optimize its attractiveness for residents and non-residents, to deliver quality, innovative, and attractive (e.g. providing good value for money) tourism services to consumers, and to gain market shares on the domestic and global market places, while ensuring that the available resources supporting tourism are used efficiently and in a sustainable way”. UNWTO Glossary of Tourism Terms defined the competitiveness of a tourism destination as “the ability of the destination to use its natural, cultural, human, man-made and capital resources efficiently to develop and deliver quality, innovative, ethical and attractive tourism products and services in order to achieve a sustainable growth within its overall vision and strategic goals, increase the added value of the tourism sector, improve and diversify its market components and optimize its attractiveness and benefits both for visitors and the local community in a sustainable perspective”. These definitions emphasize the interrelationship between the sustainability practices and destination competitiveness.

Impact of Sustainability Practices of CBT on Destination Competitiveness

The sustainability concept has been recognized as a mandatory concept which incorporated into the CBT definition in many studies (Anisah, 2022; Dodds et al., 2018; Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2017). Elbarmelgy et al. (2019) argued that the CBT approach serves as the primary entrance point for growing a creative local economy, improving the community’s welfare, quality of life, and living conditions, which leads to sustainable tourism, meanwhile

improving local tourism quality in rural destinations that is essential for enhancing destination attraction. Vo (2020) pointed out that as more and more tourists travel responsibly, the sustainability of a tourist destination significantly impacts their destination choice and community-based attractive features are believed to create long-lasting attractiveness toward tourists, especially sustainable tourists.

Dai et al. (2019) expressed that the communities must invest in building strong brands with the purpose of obtaining a competitive profile in the market and generating marketing objectives to face the current commercial and competitive challenges. Gnanapala (2015) expressed that the potential behaviour of the tourist depends on how he/she perceives the quality and value of the product and tourists value the destination products in different manner and expect diverse benefits through their holidays. Huruta et al. (2024) and Priyanto et al. (2024) argued that for enhancing the tourists' revisit intention, it is a must to ensure the sustainable tourism by providing the tourists with a meaningful experience and CBT has good potentials to fulfill this requirement. Al Amin et al. (2024) pointed out that CBT directly helps to increase the chance of sustainability in the future with the improved economy and environment of a destination, as well as cultural exchange and the ownership of the residents.

Michniak & Więckowski (2021-cited by Priyanto et al., 2024) discussed the equilibrium of three dimensions of TBL and they expressed that environmental, economic, and sociocultural characteristics of tourist destinations have a significant effect on the destination competitiveness. According to Michniak and Więckowski, the TBL theory states that the concept of sustainable tourism is a continuous process that must maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction by ensuring a meaningful experience for tourists. Priyanto et al. (2024) mentioned that this relationship is clearly raised by the fundamental goal of CBT, which focuses on maintaining the equilibrium and harmony between the living environment, diverse resources, and tourist satisfaction through local initiatives. These expressions reveal that there is a strong relationship between sustainability, destination competitiveness, and community involvement in tourism. Without proper involvement by the community in tourism, it is difficult to attain sustainability and destination competitiveness (Streimikiene et al., 2020). Handbook on Community Based Tourism (2009) emphasized that it is mandatory to follow the CBT principals by the CBT entrepreneurs and that violation of such sustainability practices affects on hiding the destination competitiveness. Gnanapala & Karunathilaka (2016) emphasized that the community involvement and their knowledge, attitudes, and awareness about tourism are vital to have a sustainable tourism development.

USAID - IPOP (2023, p 14) has emphasized the importance of embracing sustainability in tourism. It emphasized that according to a survey by Booking.com, 73% of travellers are more likely to choose an accommodation that is carrying out sustainable practices and hence, investing in sustainability will align a business with traveller demand. It further reported that 81% of travellers want to stay in sustainable accommodations. Moreover, it mentioned that sustainability helps boost the business's image as an environmentally aware and socially conscious business that gives back to local communities.

Social exchange theory is used as a grand theory to explain the relationship between the concept of CBT, sustainable tourism, and tourist satisfaction (Priyanto et al., 2024; Huruta et al., 2024). The interactions between visitors and the local community provide opportunities for mutually beneficial exchanges between the two groups at the same time, and this exchange process enhances the sustainability and destination attraction. Davie et al. (2024) pointed out that in light of the growing demand for outdoor experiences and culture, the CBT, as an

alternative form of tourism, plays a pivotal role in destination management, contributing to a destination's overall sustainability including economic prosperity, environmental and cultural preservation, hence, significance of implementing the best practices in destination marketing is more noticeable ever before. Camison (2020) and Davie et al. (2024) argued that though nature-based tourism, destination competitiveness, and community-based involvement in tourism are interconnected elements within the broader context of sustainable tourism, there is a notable knowledge gap, empirical gap, and contextual gap in the research agenda regarding the impact of sustainability practices of CBT entrepreneurs for ensuring customer loyalty and destination competitiveness in rural tourism areas and this will limit to harness the full potentials of utilization and fostering environmentally responsible and socially inclusive tourism practices.

Criteria for Measuring Sustainability in Tourism and Destination Competitiveness

For enhancing the competitiveness in rural tourism destinations, sustainability is decisive element. Table 1 shows the three dimensions of environmental, sociocultural, and economic which have been used by most of the prior researchers in measuring the sustainability in tourism and several other researchers used the similar aspects of Planet, People, and Prosperity.

Table 1: Criteria for Measuring Sustainability of CBT in Rural Destinations

Key Dimensions	Sub Dimensions	Reference
Environmental, Sociocultural, & Economic	Sharing tourism activities among the community; Gaining a reasonable income while satisfying the guests; Preserving local cultures and traditions; Protecting the natural resources and wildlife; and applying circular economy practices	Hafsa, 2020; Sriyani, 2022; Ngo & Creutz, 2022)
Environmental, Sociocultural, & Economic	Ability to increase income and lower poverty rates; Preserve the local communities' traditional cultural heritage; Protect natural resources; and enhance biodiversity	Krittayaruangroj et al., (2023)
Environmental, Sociocultural, & Economic	local culture, local community, local accommodation, local entertainment, local food, local superstructure, and natural environment	Hiruta et al. (2024); Hassan (2022); Han et al. (2019)
Environmental, Sociocultural, & Economic	Five aspects: Sustainable economic growth; Social inclusiveness, employment, and poverty reduction; Resource efficiency, environmental protection, and climate; Cultural values, diversity; and Mutual understanding, peace, and security	UN Tourism (2017)
Environmental, Sociocultural, & Economic	Local economic development through diversification of employment and work as financially viable; respects and encourages equitable participation of local community; ensures ecologically sustainable and minimizes impact on the environment; conserves and	CBT Manual (2010)

	promotes cultural heritage and welfare; educates visitors about culture and nature; demonstrates good management practices; and ensures a quality and safe experience for all	
Economic value, sociocultural, environmental, and destination management	43 indicators were structured under these four categories	European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) -(cited by Font et al., 2023)
Triple Bottom Line: Planet, People, and Prosperity	People - the tourists' wishes; Planet - care and maintenance of tourist attractions; and Prosperity - economic values of a tourist attraction	Priyanto et al. (2024)

Source: Author compiled (2024)

Though most of the prior studies discussed the dimensions of measuring sustainability, little concern was given to destination competitiveness. Murphy et al. (2000) argued that though the natural attractions are primary elements to pull visitors to the destination, this will not be sufficient without appropriate and unique satisfying activities to create an authentic experience for tourists during their visitation. Dupeyras & MacCallum (2013) identified several indicators for measuring tourism competitiveness based on a survey of OECD countries. These indicators focus on four aspects: measuring the tourism performance and impacts; monitoring the ability of a destination to deliver quality and competitive tourism services; monitoring the attractiveness of a destination; and describing policy responses and economic opportunities. The OECD report (2013) used 8 indicators and several sub-dimensions under each indicator in measuring the destination competitiveness (See Table 2).

Table 2: Indicators for Assessing Destination Competitiveness

Key Indicators	Sub Dimensions
Product development	Product differentiation, innovation, investments, provide unique experiences, added value for tourism, develop high-value segments, marketplace perspective (tourism operators and small businesses)
Quality of tourism services	Improve quality, welcome of visitors, quality of life, social equity and cohesion, services to consumers
Price competitiveness	Prices, value for money
Accessibility/connectivity	Infrastructure development, geostrategic position of the destination, proximity
Branding of the destination	Promotion and marketing, identity, image, awareness of the destination, market diversification
Natural and cultural resources	Sustainability, gastronomy, climate, biodiversity
Human resources development	Skills, education and training, tourism training centres
Governance of tourism	Government support and tourism as a priority, Regulations, a whole of government approach, a tourism strategy, safety and security, public/private partnerships, vertical cooperation, statistics and data, multilateral cooperation, institutions,

Source: OECD report (2013, P.16)

Bassols & Bonilla (2022) developed the C-CBT model for measuring the destination competitiveness in CBT territories by using Heath's (2002) tourism competitiveness model, which is based on the structure of a building. This model includes five levels, namely: foundation level, columns, bricks & cements, waterproofing, and roof. At the foundation level, three factors were used to analyze the competitiveness: i) associativity; ii) principles, values, and joint vision; iii) local empowerment in the CBT process (community leadership). Associative work has been at the core of the development process, focusing on the capabilities, desires and expectations of individuals and families. This associative culture has generated various benefits for the community, such as collective learning, the application of certain national mandatory norms, negotiating collective insurance policies, access to social security, etc. At the column level, three factors, namely: tourist attractions, aggregated value & services, and destination access infrastructure, were used in measuring destination competitiveness. At the bricks & cements level, they applied two factors of tourist satisfaction, and the number of tourist arrivals at the destination. The fourth level, waterproofing, included the overall waterproofing, and the fifth stage (roof) includes happiness, no tolerance to corruption, peace & security, education & health for human development. In overall, Bassols & Bonilla (2022) tried to ensure that having a clear and accepted leadership system by all members of the community; factors (such as local attractions, the access infrastructure, tourist facilities and the available capacities) responsible for making tourists satisfied; produce added value by providing outstanding experiences to visitors by the community; and rising numbers of visitors arrive at the destination.

The majority of the dimensions that were used by Bassols & Bonilla (2022) are similar to the dimensions presented in the OECD report (2013). Also, among the 8 indicators used in OECD report (2013), most of the sub dimensions (like product differentiation, innovation, investments, provide unique experiences, added value for tourism, develop high value segments, quality, welcome of visitors, quality of life, social equity and cohesion, services to consumers, image, sustainability, skills development, and education & training) are similar to the sustainability in CBT which were discussed in the research literature.

Quality was identified as one of the key drivers of tourism competitiveness by many studies (WTO, 2009; Campón-Cerroa & et al., 2017). The Glossary of Tourism Terms of UNWTO defined the Quality of a tourism destination *“as a result of a process which implies the satisfaction of all tourism product and service needs, requirements and expectations of the consumer at an acceptable price, in conformity with mutually accepted contractual conditions and the implicit underlying factors such as safety and security, hygiene, accessibility, communication, infrastructure and public amenities and services. It also involves aspects of ethics, transparency and respect towards the human, natural and cultural environment.* This quality definition covers many aspects that were included in measuring the destination competitiveness by the OECD report (2013) as well as at the column level and bricks & cements level as presented by Bassols & Bonilla (2022). When it takes a closer look at the criteria that were discussed in research literature for measuring the sustainability practices and the destination competitiveness relating to CBT, there is an indistinguishable nature among those. Therefore, identifying the sustainability practices that are perceived as highly valuable for ensuring destination competitiveness in the Sri Lankan context is crucial.

Research Methodology

Based on the interpretivism research paradigm, a qualitative research design was applied in this study since it is important to consider the respondents' psychological attitudes, opinions, and information to explore the sustainable practices used by CBT entrepreneurs in enhancing the destination competitiveness in selected tourism destinations of Sri Lanka. Destination attractiveness was identified from the demand approach and supply approach (Formica & Uysal, 2006 - cited by Vo, 2020), and from demand approach, attractiveness is defined as "reflection of the feelings, beliefs and opinions" that a potential tourist has about the perceived ability of a destination to satisfy his/her needs during the vacation (Hu & Ritchie, 1993- cited by Vo, 2020). Therefore, visitor perception was considered useful in assessing the sustainable practices and the destination competitiveness in this study.

Sample and Data Collection

Three popular CBT villages, Panama, Mirissa, and Heeloya, were selected as this study's research sites, respectively, from the Eastern, Southern, and Central provinces in Sri Lanka. These three CBT villages were selected based on their unique tourism approaches, focusing on community involvement, eco-tourism approaches, nature & biodiversity, and cultural experience. Thus, tourists may have diverse CBT experiences through these three villages. For example, wildlife experience in Panama, Coastal traditions in Mirissa, and trekking & agriculture in Heeloya. Since this is qualitative research, the purposive sampling method was selected for data collection to include the individuals with a high level of concentration and experience regarding the phenomenon of interest. Participants are deliberately selected based on their ability to provide relevant and in-depth information related to the research questions and their CBT experience. The sample size was determined as sufficient when data saturation occurred and no new themes emerged. Accordingly, 5 inbound tourists from each of the selected CBT villages who visited and received the services were selected as the sample. Data were collected by using several methods, including semi-structured face-to-face interviews, direct observations, and comment books maintained by the CBT entrepreneurs. Ethical concerns and confidentiality were the most important issues to address in communicating with tourists. For this, prior consent was obtained to arrange the interviews and observations at their premises, and to record the discussions as well. Also, it was assured that the researchers would protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and the information. Without disrupting the entertainment activities of the selected inbound tourists, several time slots, about 20 to 30 minutes on the same day, have to be arranged to interview them. Though the interviewed guests were from different countries, including Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, Canada, and France, all were able to manage the English language at the interviews. Their cooperation during the discussion was also appreciated. Interviews were concluded when the responses became repetitive, and there was no new information or new themes identified. Hence, data saturation was reached. The expressions of all the respondents were recorded, transcribed, and coded for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied in this study because it is the most popular method of analysis used in qualitative studies. The basic purpose of the thematic analysis method is to identify recurring patterns and themes across a larger data set and provide a broader understanding of the data by grouping similar experiences (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, the thematic analysis method was considered a suitable method in revealing the respondents' views on critical

sustainable practices of CBT entrepreneurs that affect the competitiveness in rural tourism destinations. The recorded data was entered into an MS Excel spreadsheet. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed, and transcripts were methodically coded. After familiarizing with the data, initial codes were generated to identify initial themes. Then, define and name the themes after reviewing the initial themes through a rigorous analysis as specified by Braun and Clarke (2006). After coding the data, the coded segments are sorted based on their similarities and connections. This process allows for identifying allied codes to themes within the data. It allows for the identification of recurring views and opinions of the respondents upon the key themes that were recognized based on the sustainable practices of the CBTEs. The classified codes and categories were further analyzed to reveal broader themes. Afterwards, the relationship between different themes and categories was explored. This involves constructing a narrative that integrates the emerging themes, patterns, and insights into a coherent and meaningful explanation of the sustainability practices of CBTEs that affect destination competitiveness.

Reliability and Validity of Data

Ensuring the trustworthiness of the data establishes the validity and reliability in qualitative research (Seale 1999). The criteria for trustworthiness for evaluating interpretive research proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) include: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) conformability. The study used the following strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of data.

- Prior explanation of the research purpose was explained to the participants, and informed consent from the participants was obtained to build trust and capture rich data on CBT practices and destination competitiveness. These data were presented in narrative form to capture the rich data and insights on the themes generated.
- Field observation was done in a natural setting.
- Researchers maintained a more objective stance during data collection, analysis, and interpretation to minimize personal bias regarding the phenomena. The interview transcript was produced using an audio recording.
- Data were collected from multiple methods, such as interviews, participant observation, and comment books maintained by the CBT entrepreneurs to cross-verify the findings and ensure triangulation.
- Researchers maintained records on each step of the research process, which ensures transparency and allows others to replicate the study and assess the dependability of the findings.
- Both researchers individually and together analyzed data to recognize the diverse views and also received feedback from two peers to validate interpretations and minimize personal biases.
- Used quotes to support themes generated on CBT practices and destination competitiveness.

Results and Interpretations

Brief Description for the Selected Community Tourism Destinations:

Panama is situated on the East coast in the Ampara district of Eastern Province in Sri Lanka. Panama village is a gateway to the breathtaking Kumana National Park and to several surfing points like Arugam Bay, Peanut Farm, Okanda, etc.. Having a vibrant community that belongs to several ethnic groups (Sinhala, Tamil, Muslims) provides a multicultural experience, and diverse livelihoods revolve around farming, Chena cultivation, paddy cultivation, and fishing. In Panama, there is a strong CBT society named Panama Community-Based Tourism Society (Ltd). Its activities often focus on experiences like visiting local villages, bird watching and safari tour to Kumana national park, guided nature walks led by local guides, surfing and surf training by local people, participating in traditional crafts demonstrations, learning about indigenous cultures, traditional fishing activities, farm-to-table cooking classes, and homestay experience.

Heeloya Tourism Village is located in the Dumbara valley in Kandy district of Sri Lanka's Central Province. In Heeloya, CBT activities primarily focus on immersive experiences in traditional Sri Lankan village life, nature walks through tea estates and paddy fields, hands-on participation in paddy farming, spice harvesting, cooking local foods, homestay experience with local families, traditional craft workshops, and learning about local customs and festivals.

Mirissa is a small beach town on Sri Lankan south coast, located in the Matara District of Southern Province. In the Mirissa area, CBT activities primarily focus on experiences directly engaging with local people and their livelihoods. Those include whale & Dolphin watching tours operated by local fishermen, traditional fishing demonstrations, visits to small-scale coconut farms, homestays with local people, home-cooked meals with local families, handicraft workshops, and guided nature walks through nearby wetlands or paddy fields, and surfing and surf training at the nearby Weligama area.

Basic Profile of the Selected Respondents:

For this study, a total of 15 inbound tourists from 3 CBT destinations were interviewed, and Table 3 shows their basic profile and the coding of respondents as per the destination. Respondents of this research were in age between 36 to 60 years. 7 of them were male and 8 were female. The period of stay at a particular destination was high in Panama, and it was 6 weeks on average, and next, Mirissa, and it was 4 weeks on average. This is due to the availability of diverse water-based and land-based adventure activities that are arranged by the community in these two areas. The least number of periods of stay was reported in Heeloya, and it was 2 weeks on average.

Table 3: Basic Profile of the Respondents

Respondent Code*	Age (Years)	Gender	Country of Origin	Destination	Period of Stay (Weeks)
MR1	45	Male	Russia	Mirissa	6
MR2	47	Female	UK	Mirissa	4
MR3	52	Male	US	Mirissa	4
MR4	43	Female	Canada	Mirissa	3
MR5	40	Female	Australia	Mirissa	3
PR1	41	Male	Russia	Panama	6
PR2	45	Male	France	Panama	6
PR3	51	Male	Germany	Panama	8
PR4	37	Female	UK	Panama	6
PR5	36	Female	Australia	Panama	4
HR1	54	Male	Russia	Heeloya	2
HR2	56	Female	Russia	Heeloya	2
HR3	60	Male	UK	Heeloya	3
HR4	43	Female	Australia	Heeloya	2
HR5	41	Female	US	Heeloya	1

* MR - Mirissa Respondent; PR - Panama Respondent; HR - Heeloya Respondent

Visitor Perceptions on Sustainability Practices of CBT Entrepreneurs that Critically Affect Destination Competitiveness

The main aim of this study is to identify the critical sustainable practices of the community-based tourism entrepreneurs of the selected tourism destinations in Sri Lanka, and to reveal how the visitors feel about the impact of these sustainable practices on enhancing the destination competitiveness. As elaborated in the methodology section, after systematically identifying and coding the expressions and experiences of the respondents, those were grouped into the meaningful segments under three broader themes that cover the three key areas of sustainability practices, namely ‘environmental’, sociocultural’, and ‘economic’. Table 4 summarizes these expressions and experiences. Next, the researchers critically observed how they explained the impact of these sustainability practices on enhancing the destination competitiveness in these villages.

Table 4. Visitor Perceptions on Sustainability Practices of CBT Entrepreneurs and the Destination Competitiveness

Sustainability Dimension	Perceptions and Experiences on Sustainability Practices of CBT Entrepreneurs
Environmental Protection	PR1: “Panama community-based tourism society is a very strong one and it is capable of directing the society towards adopting sustainable practices for environmental protection like garbage disposal, more use of eco-friendly materials, organic and local foods and meals, and

protecting wildlife and natural resources. Also, prioritizing environmental sustainability by avoiding harmful chemicals and promoting natural and traditional methods can be seen. These practices highly affect on marketing this destination over the other destinations”.

PR2: “The community people dedicate to protecting the natural scenery and beauty for the future. Even displaying several name boards for environmentally sensitive areas and boards for follow-up rules by spending the society funds are remarkable feature of strong community collaboration”.

PR3: “I felt that the community tour guides always promote sustainable practices and conservation efforts at the safari and village tours. They do not damage the ecosystem when organizing safari and lagoon tours. Homestay owners also emphasize eco-friendly practices in preparing meals, disposing of garbage, use of eco-friendly materials to minimize polythene and plastic”.

PR4: Cycling tour and a bull Cart tour to visit organic farms and chena cultivation allow us to learn about traditional farming practices and enjoy with real natural taste of fruit juice. This tour shows us how they are concerned on the protection of the environment and culture”.

PR2: “The community team that organizes safari tours and boat trips is well trained, well experienced and has the license for it”. The tour is organized without harming animal behaviours or indigenous flora and fauna”.

PR5: “Panama Lagoon tour and Crocodile watching tour with an experienced guide provided us very good learning experience about biodiversity in Sri Lanka. The knowledge having with the crewmen, high concern on safety by having with life jackets, first aids and so on, and high concern on biodiversity without harming bird nests, animal caves, diverse flora and fauna were at the highly appreciable level and such practices of the community team create a positive word of mouth about the destination and their services”.

PR3: “The community offers novel and unique experiences like relax and dine in the open-air cafe surrounded by nature, enjoy fresh farm-to-table meals made with organic ingredients produced from the farm to enhance our revisit intention”.

HR2: Slow travel experience was arranged as an Eco-tour with home-made organic meals to enjoy the serene and picturesque landscape of the Central Highlands surrounding Heeloya, and step-down paddy cultivation. This is a pure eco-friendly experience that can be proposed to potential visitors to select.

HR3: The Eco-tour, which was integrated with a rural cuisine experience, provides us with the knowledge of biodiversity in the area and actions taken for protecting these scarce resources”.

HR4: “The community people who organize land-based and water-based adventure activities like hiking, boating, and so on, concern highly on environmental protection while also stimulating us to follow up the sustainability practices”.

HR3: While receiving an amazing experience through adventure tours, we learn a lot about diverse nature-based resources like frog types, snakes, birds and their cages, and flora & fauna. The community guides are well educated about this diverse resource and where these are located. Passing this knowledge from one generation to another is helpful for ensuring the sustainability also”.

HR5: “Their homestays are very neat and clean. The surroundings of the homestay is very attractive. The garden is full of diverse flower plants and fruits. It provides us with a feeling of exact rural village life”.

H4: “Trekking is a nice experience at Heeloya. This half-day tour is arranged by the community people to bring us while hiking through verdant forests and hills, a beautiful scenery of paddy lands to show the step cultivation method. High concern on the environment protection, educate us about the bio-diversity and cultural diversity, as well as providing first-aid services, a well-trained guide, and diverse meal types inherited from Kandy culture, leads to create good word-of-mouth about their overall package”.

MR1: The amazing experience is the whale & Dolphin watching tour, which is arranged by local fishermen. However, they are not much concerned about the safety and the protection of marine resources”.

MR3: “Presently, cleanliness of the destination, hazard-free environment, like free from dengue threat, a proper garbage disposal system, zero use of plastic and polythene are the serious concerns features by even budget tourists. However, improper garbage management practices in the inner side of this village will damage the image as a tourism destination”.

MR4: Most of the community people in this village work on short-term profit motive rather protecting the environment and enhancing the destination image”.

MR5: Though the local guides use high-speed boats for the Whale & dolphin watching tours to satisfy the tourists, the use of high-speed boats can negatively impact the marine environment through noise pollution, habitat destruction, and potentially cause injuries or death. So, I advise them to focus on protecting the sustainability of marine resources”.

Sociocultural
Aspect

HR1: *“Community tour guides arrange visits to nearby heritage places and handicraft workshops to share the local culture. Also, the villagers arrange several cultural events and festivals like Thaipongal day with Tamil people and New Year celebration to share their cultural values and customs bound with the local culture”.*

HR2: *Demonstrations of craft work inherited by the Kandy culture of Sri Lanka are a unique experience that cannot be experienced anywhere for the guests. Also, traditional ways of welcoming by presenting betel leaves to the guests with a cheerful Ayubowan is a remarkable experience that I got”.*

HR3: *“Women's participation in CBT activities is at an appreciable level, specially at homestays, craft work, and farming activities”.*

PR1: *A community team has arranged a heritage tour to visit the religious places of Buddhists and Hindus. This provides us with a clear understanding about the beliefs and values of multi-ethnic people”.*

PR2: *“We receive multicultural learning by visiting Murugan Kovil, Buddhist temples like Muhudu Maha Vihara and the community tour guide explains well the importance of these places and the history”.*

HR3: *Homestays provide us a breathtaking experience of family lifestyle, local foods, and cuisines inherited to Kandy culture. I highly appreciate the hospitality of the homestay people.*

PR3: *“Staying 4 nights at a homestay let us to receive a very good understanding about the family culture of rural poor families, how strong their social network in arranging a ‘Paduru Party at one night’, diverse types of local foods like Kurakkan Roti, Thalapa with lake fish curry, sweet potato cutlets, belimal drink with kithul jaggery. It is a marvelous menu that differs from every night that we stay.*

PR2: *“I am very happy with the cooking experience that I got with a local family. I learned how to prepare milk rice, coconut sambol, Manioc, and lake fish curry”.*

PR4: *Women participation in tourism activities is very high in this village. They are very active and together with the husband manage properly the homestay and farming activities.*

PR5: *“Amazing gastronomic experience is given at their cookery classes about their food culture, including history, traditions, agricultural practices, diversity of the meals of the day, its nutritional values, cooking techniques, and so on”.*

HR2: *"Homestays are very safe and secure, like staying at our own home, even treated by using indigenous medicines for my headache and leg pain. This shows their hospitality nature bound with family culture".*

HR5: *A community group of the village arranged a cookery class and food festival to demonstrate their gastronomic experience, including plucking from the farm, diversity of dishes, cooking techniques, cooking and dieting differences among the ethnic groups, and their specific meals at festivals like Thai Pongal. Such experiences are very interesting and cause more tourists to be attracted to the destination.*

HR4: *All the community tourism activities at Heeloya village provide an authentic insight into the local culture and environment. We received the 10-day service package and it covers varied experiences including Agri experience, Kithul experience, Spice experience, Chena farm experience, Banana products and craft work experience, Slow travel experience, and cultural experiences shared with Tamil and Sinhala communities. Among several visits to Sri Lanka, this was the amazing experience that I got".*

PR4: *"Participate in harvesting fresh fruits and vegetables from local farms and gardens. Meanwhile, they asked our preferred menu and picked up vegetables from this farm tour, and then we received a good experience about farm to cook".*

MR1: *"Cookery class experience is very nice. They demonstrated us how to prepare several meals pertaining to Southern Sri Lanka, like Malu Embulthiyal and coconut Samboll with Red Rice. Also, they serve us with Ruhuna Curd and pure Kithul Hunny as the dessert to show us the real taste of southern food". Such unique treatments are capable of creating revisit intention".*

MR2: *A fantastic experience we received was the devil dances organized by the community people. We are also invited to dance by providing the required devil cloths. Our team had real fun from this activity and learn specific cultural values and beliefs of Southern people".*

M3: *A very small-scale organic farm is there. But it is not enough to provide the demand of this particular homestay and utilize it to demonstrate properly the traditional agricultural experience. So, scaling up is required to attract more tourists by promoting the organic farming concept".*

MR4: *"Cooperativeness and friendliness among the community people are lacking. They do not focus on applying standard marketing tactics like attracting guests through a well-designed web page or a page in social media, rather most of the community people bargain with the tourists to stay at their homestays. This will create a bad word of mouth and affect the image of the destination".*

MR5: “Mutual understanding, peace among the community people, and security in the area are lacking in the inner side of this destination, and it creates a bad impression on the destination. However, the town area is much better than the village side”.

MR1: “At homestays, guest rooms are totally separated from the family and there is little concern about the security. Also, rather than a low-cost stay at their homestays, no learning experience is received relating to the family culture”.

Economic
Aspect

PR1: “It is appreciable that the role of the leader of the community association for encourage equal sharing the business opportunities received. They collectively serve us to share the economic benefits among several members of the society”.

PR2: “Diverse tourism activities are available at this village, and the equality can be seen in sharing the tourism activities among the community people”.

PR3: “We understood that by engaging in tourism activities, the community people were able to uplift their economic condition. They are concern highly on children’s education and health. Their houses include with required facilities that can be recommended to use as a homestay. Their family status ensures that engaging in tourism businesses leads to an increase in family income, lowers the poverty rate, and in overall improves their quality of life”.

PR4: “The women in the village play the biggest role in earning a sufficient income to cover their family expenses. They proudly tell us that they spend this income mainly on children’s education and health”.

PR5: “It is appreciable that the team collaboratively offers the tourism activities and shares the benefits among the team. This behaviour aims to enhance their economic condition and harmony among the people”.

HR1: “Tourism plays a vital role in supporting the financial sustainability of peasant households”.

HR2:” All the tourism activities are directly supporting the improvement of the income and quality of life of the local community”.

HR3: “Women in the village are capable of earning a sufficient income through homestays and demonstrating craft work. Most of the women in the village use this income source for managing their family expenses”.

HR4: “I looked that most of the community tourism entrepreneurs work on gaining a reasonable income while satisfying the guests. Also, unfair competition cannot be seen among the community members to attract

guests to their places. The visitor has the chance to select a package of services or activities rather than being forced by the community people”.

MR1: “I didn’t see sharing the available tourism activities equally among the community people and hence a huge competition can be seen in attracting the guest for their business places”.

Source: F2F interviews organized by the authors and comments books maintained by the CBTEs (2024)

As per the visitors’ expressions, Table 5 summarizes the determinants of competitiveness that have been identified through the sustainability practices of the CBTEs.

Table 5. Determinants of Destination Competitiveness Perceived by the Visitors

SN	Determinant
i	Strong community leadership and a greater level of community collaboration
ii	Availability of well-trained, well-disciplined, and skillful service providers in the community
iii	Equal sharing of tourism business opportunities among the community members
iv	Availability of diverse and novel tourism activities
v	Serve with organic and local foods
vi	High quality of food and accommodation
vii	Availability of all-inclusive service packages, even covering the nearby tourism attractions
viii	High level of dedication to protect the natural scenery and beauty of the village
ix	High level of emphasis on waste management and eco-friendly practices
x	High concern on safety and security
xi	Well-arranged the farming, cooking, and entertainment activities to provide a real outdoor experience
xii	Well-organized village life tours and heritage tours to provide a perfect experience of their lifestyle and culture
xiii	Providing an authentic rural family life experience through the homestays
xiv	Availability of events and industry visits to demonstrate the multi-ethnic culture and bound livelihood activities.

Source: Compiled by the authors (2024)

Environmental Concern and Destination Competitiveness

Visitors of this study perceived that communities’ greater concern is on biodiversity and environmental protection in arranging most of the outdoor tourism activities, like wildlife safari, village-life safari, boat trips, and trekking & hiking are very important for attracting more tourists to a particular destination. This finding is consistent with the finding of Davie et al. (2024) relating to the communities’ greater concern about biodiversity and environmental protection for enhancing the destination competitiveness. Cleanliness of the destination, hazard free environment like free from dengue threat, proper garbage disposal system, zero use of plastic and polythene were recognized as the attributes that affect on revisit intention by the visitors. This study also found that work collaboratively by the community

people for disposal of garbage properly, use of eco-friendly material and grow organic fruits and vegetables is recognized by the visitors as highly important for enhancing the uniqueness of a tourism destination. OECD report (2013), Priyanto et al. (2024), Hafsa (2020), and Ngo & Creutz (2022) viewed that such a positive perception definitely affects on enhancing the destination competitiveness. As emphasized by Patwary et al. (2019) and Vo (2020), this study reveals that tourists select a rural destination based on its natural and man-made resources as well as the opportunity to get a real rural life experience. Hence, offering a nature-based and authentic rural life experience is essential to attract more tourists to a destination.

Socio-Cultural Concern and Destination Competitiveness

Visitors interviewed in this study and the comments marked in comment books revealed that organizing wonderful cultural events and festivals like the welcome of guests, Pongal Day, New Year festival, Wesak festival, food festivals, and devil dances, as well as arranging cookery classes and demonstration of craft manufacturing work, affect to create a uniqueness in these destinations. Krittayaruangroj et al. (2023); Hiruta et al. (2024); Vo (2020); and Hassan (2022) also discussed the importance of such cultural events and festivals for enhancing the destination attractiveness. Moreover, the homestays were used to share their family culture and rural lifestyle with the visitors. The visitors of this study are highly satisfied with the chance of having a real experience of different family cultures and cultural values between different ethnic groups, as well as destination-based differences. This finding is in line with Vo (2020), who presented a similar view on how the CBT activities that were organized to demonstrate their cultural values and rural life pattern affect on visitor satisfaction and destination competitiveness.

Visitor perceptions of this study further revealed that strong community leadership, community participation, and working collaboratively in offering tourism activities; more women's involvement, especially in homestay operations, cookery class arrangements, and craft work demonstration, were able to ensure the social sustainability in rural tourism destinations. A similar view regarding the impact of high levels of community engagement and collaboration, leadership, and more women's participation in tourism activities on ensuring social sustainability as well as destination attractiveness was presented by Priyanto et al., (2024); Streimikiene et al. (2020); Vo (2020); and Patwary et al. (2019). Moreover, Abukhalifeh & Wondirad (2019) also expressed the presence of strong CBT organizations and committed leadership with growing support, cause for concern about sustainability practices by the community. As a community group, providing a unique bundle of products and services is useful in attracting more tourists to these destinations.

Moreover, the visitors of this study perceived that the CBTEs' concerns on safety and security, quality of products and services, availability of diverse and novel products, etc. as very important sustainability practices that affect the destination competitiveness. By arranging diverse tourism activities as a team, the CBTEs can make a destination more special. Such a similar dimensions like product differentiation, innovation, unique experiences, added value for tourism, develop high value segments, quality, welcome of visitors, quality of life, social equity and cohesion, skill development, and education & training were highlighted by the studies of Bassols & Bonilla (2022), Vo (2020) and OECD report (2013) regarding the CBT destination attraction. In defining the tourism destination competitiveness, OECD (2013) and UNWTO Glossary of Tourism Terms included these attributes.

Economic Concern and Destination Competitiveness

The visitors of this study highlighted several sustainability practices relating to the economic dimension such as: equally sharing the benefits of tourism activities among the members of the society, preparing and training them for offering diverse and novel tourism products and services, gaining a reasonable income while satisfying the guests, ensuring the financial sustainability, women play a biggest role for earning a sufficient income to cover their family expenses, and not having an unfair competition among the majority of community members. Similar perspectives were derived from the studies of Hafsa (2020), Sriyani (2022), and Ngo & Creutz, (2022). However, as per the findings of this study, the revisit intention of visitors to CBT destinations is strongly influenced by their perception of environmental, social, and cultural sustainability practices, rather than solely economic factors. One particular interesting result from the data revealed that about 90% of the respondents traveled for the purposes of relaxation. Therefore, for relaxation purposes, they select such a rural destination that possesses calm, neat, and clean environment as well as socially responsible people. However, economic benefits are important for the long-term viability of the CBTEs and their sustainability in the industry. A similar view was presented in UN Tourism (2017) and CBT Manual (2010).

Based on the findings of this study, it can be understood that the community people in rural tourism villages play the biggest role in enhancing the destination competitiveness through proper application of sustainable practices.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This research provides an outlook on visitor perceptions of the sustainability practices of CBTEs and how these practices create destination competitiveness. The comprehensive understanding of the critical sustainable practices of the CBTEs, which lead to enhancing the competitiveness in rural tourism destinations, is useful for the community-based tourism entrepreneurs, business development service providers, and policy makers for the sustainable destination development under the competitive market environment. Visitor perceptions revealed that community-based tourism entrepreneurs in Panama and Heeloya tourism villages are highly concern on all three aspects of sustainability practices and less concern is seen in the Mirissa community tourism village. This is due to the absence of a formal community association and strong community leadership, a lack of proper training about sustainability practices and mandatory requirements of running CBT businesses, and a lack of government support and monitoring process. This study further revealed the determinants of destination competitiveness in these CBT villages and those include: quality of products and services; unique, novel and diverse range of tourism activities, value for money, safety and security, strong community leadership, community collaboration and cooperation, more women involvement, all-in-one service package, follow the mandatory rules, regulations and standards and utilize well trained and skilful human resource. All these determinants are high in Panama and Heeloya community tourism villages compared with the Mirissa tourism village. As concluded at the end of the literature review section, the determinants of destination competitiveness, which are mentioned here, are interconnected with the sustainability practices of the CBTEs. In the study sample, the revisit intention of the majority of the visitors is based on the sustainability practices of the CBTEs relating to the

environmental and socio-cultural rather than the economic perspective. A low level of concern about sharing economic benefits equally among the members of society can be seen mainly in the Mirissa tourism village. This behaviour of the CBTEs implied that though the CBT concept was suggested as a pivotal strategy for poverty alleviation in rural tourism destinations, its implication is vague in several destinations where not having a strong community leadership and collaboration among the community members.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made. For uplifting the destination competitiveness, the CBTEs are essential to follow the sustainability practices relating to environmental and sociocultural aspects. Moreover, ensuring economic sustainability is essential for the long-term survival of the business. Enhancing the desalination competitiveness in CBT villages it requires offering high-quality, diversified, unique, and novel or innovative products and services. These attributes lead to creating positive word-of-mouth about the destination and enhancing the revisit intention. Other rural tourism destinations in Sri Lanka can also consider such determinants of destination competitiveness that emerged through the proper applications of sustainable practices. These attributes cannot be reached without a proper application of the sustainability practices as elaborated above. The role of the business development service providers, Tourism Development Authority, and the policy makers are to provide a proper awareness, and training about the sustainability practices, circularity of resources and materials by applying 3-R or 5-R concept, mandatory requirements, rules and regulations, as well as assisting the CBTEs to identify viable tourism business opportunities and innovative product and service ideas mainly the circular business ideas.

However, this study had several limitations in providing insightful points for future studies. This study was only based on the 3 selected community tourism destinations, and data were collected only through the perceptions of the inbound visitors. For more results, data need to be collected from both visitor and operator perspectives by covering several tourism destinations. Also, generalizing the findings it requires gathering the data from a large sample. Finally, it can be mentioned that community involvement in tourism activities, their sustainable practices, and the destination competitiveness are interconnected elements that require greater concern for ensuring the overall tourism sustainability of a country.

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