



EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF MEDICAL CANNABIS AND TOURISM: A CASE STUDY IN SRI LANKA

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Medical cannabis, Tourism, Sri Lanka, Alternative healthcare, Wellness tourism, Economic impact, Cultural sensitivity, Community engagement, Regulatory frameworks, Public health, Sustainable development, Qualitative research, Quantitative research, and Interdisciplinary collaboration.

ABSTRACT

This study delves into the dynamic interplay between medical cannabis and tourism in the context of Sri Lanka, a nation seeking to navigate the evolving landscape of alternative healthcare experiences and wellness tourism. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research encompasses both quantitative surveys targeting tourists and qualitative interviews with local stakeholders. Findings reveal positive attitudes among tourists toward the integration of medical cannabis into their travel experiences, indicating a potential for economic growth, job creation, and diversification of tourism offerings. Cultural sensitivity and community engagement emerge as critical factors, emphasizing the need for the respectful incorporation of local perspectives. The establishment of clear and supportive regulatory frameworks is recommended, alongside ongoing public health education initiatives. The study concludes with a call for collaborative efforts, encouraging interdisciplinary approaches and adaptive strategies to ensure the responsible and sustainable development of medical cannabis tourism in Sri Lanka.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the global landscape surrounding medical cannabis has undergone a transformative shift, prompting nations to reassess their attitudes and policies towards the plant's medicinal properties. Simultaneously, the tourism industry has seen a surge in interest from individuals seeking alternative and holistic healthcare experiences. This convergence of medical cannabis and tourism has spurred a burgeoning field of inquiry, one that delves into the nuanced interplay between health, wellness, and travel. Against this backdrop, our study undertakes a comprehensive examination of the intersection of medical cannabis and tourism, with a specific focus on the unique context of Sri Lanka.

As an island nation with a rich cultural heritage and a growing reputation for its traditional medicinal practices, Sri Lanka provides a compelling backdrop for investigating the dynamic relationship between medical cannabis and tourism. The exploration of this intersection not only contributes to the scholarly discourse on the evolving landscape of healthcare tourism but also offers insights into the socio-cultural, economic, and legal dimensions shaping the integration of medical cannabis into the travel experience.

This article aims to illuminate the complex interdependencies between medical cannabis and tourism in Sri Lanka, offering a case study that transcends geographical boundaries and speaks to broader global trends. By delving into the multifaceted considerations surrounding the utilization of medical cannabis within a tourism framework, we hope to foster a deeper

understanding of the potential impacts on public health, local economies, and policy frameworks. Through this exploration, we aim to contribute valuable knowledge that can inform policymakers, healthcare practitioners, and stakeholders in both the medical and tourism sectors.

1.1 Research Questions

- i. How does the integration of medical cannabis into the tourism industry impact the local economy in Sri Lanka, with a specific focus on job creation, revenue generation, and the development of related industries?
- ii. What legal and regulatory frameworks govern the use of medical cannabis in Sri Lanka, and how do these regulations influence the accessibility and attractiveness of the country as a destination for cannabis-based tourism?
- iii. What are the prevailing attitudes and perceptions of medical cannabis among tourists visiting Sri Lanka, and how do these attitudes influence their decision to incorporate cannabis-related experiences into their travel itinerary?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The burgeoning interest in the intersection of medical cannabis and tourism has sparked a growing body of literature that reflects the evolving dynamics of healthcare-related travel. This review delves into existing research and scholarly discussions to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping the integration of medical cannabis into the tourism industry, with a particular focus on the unique case of Sri Lanka.

2.1 Factors shaping the integration of medical cannabis

– Global Trends in Medical Cannabis Tourism

The global landscape of medical cannabis tourism has witnessed a paradigm shift as more countries embrace the therapeutic potential of cannabis. Jones and Walmsley (2021) and Kumar et al. (2019) emphasize the emergence of wellness tourism, with individuals seeking alternative healthcare experiences beyond conventional medical treatments. Factors such as the increased acceptance of cannabis for medicinal use, changing societal attitudes, and a desire for holistic wellness contribute to the growing trend of incorporating medical cannabis into travel experiences (Kumar et al., 2022). This evolving global context sets the stage for understanding the motivations and preferences of tourists engaging in cannabis-related activities.

– Economic Impacts of Cannabis Tourism

The economic implications of integrating medical cannabis into tourism are multifaceted. Pratt (2015) highlight the potential for job creation, particularly in sectors related to the cultivation, processing, and distribution of medical cannabis. Additionally, the tourism industry stands to benefit from increased revenue through the establishment of cannabis-friendly accommodations, tours, and events. Fernández-Palacios et al. (2023) expand on this, emphasizing the development of ancillary industries such as cannabis education, wellness services, and retail. These economic considerations underscore the importance of evaluating the potential for sustainable economic growth and diversification within the context of cannabis tourism in Sri Lanka.

– Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

The legal and regulatory environment significantly shapes the feasibility and attractiveness of a destination for cannabis tourism. Toironovna et al. (2020) and Gözgör et al. (2019) emphasize the need for clear and supportive regulations to create a conducive environment for the industry's growth. Striking a balance between ensuring public safety, preventing abuse, and promoting responsible consumption is crucial. Understanding the global variations in regulatory approaches provides valuable insights for Sri Lanka as it navigates the development of its legal framework for medical cannabis tourism.

– Tourist Attitudes and Experiences

Tourists' attitudes towards medical cannabis and their experiences in destinations where cannabis is integrated into the tourism industry are pivotal for understanding the demand and impact of such offerings. Hadinejad et al. (2019) and Szromek et al. (2021) delve into the motivations behind tourists' choices, exploring factors such as the desire for alternative therapeutic experiences, relaxation, and novelty. The literature suggests that a positive and enriching cannabis tourism experience can contribute to overall satisfaction and potentially influence repeat visits (De La Fuente Robles et al., 2020). Sri Lanka's exploration of this intersection can benefit from understanding these nuanced preferences and tailoring offerings to meet the diverse needs of tourists.

– Socio-Cultural Considerations:

The integration of medical cannabis into tourism is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon and must be approached with careful consideration of socio-cultural factors. Cifuentes-Ibarra et al. (2023) and Groß et al. (2023) highlight the importance of understanding the local cultural context and community perspectives. Factors such as cultural acceptance, religious beliefs, and historical attitudes towards cannabis play a crucial role in shaping the success and sustainability of cannabis tourism initiatives (Coles et al., 2013). Sri Lanka's unique cultural heritage and traditional medicinal practices make it imperative to evaluate how these factors may influence the reception of medical cannabis within the local community and among tourists.

In conclusion, these factors collectively contribute to the complex and evolving landscape of medical cannabis tourism. As Sri Lanka navigates its exploration of this intersection, a holistic understanding of these global trends, economic considerations, legal frameworks, tourist attitudes, and socio-cultural factors will be instrumental in formulating policies and practices that align with the country's unique context and aspirations.

2.2. Concept Indicator Model

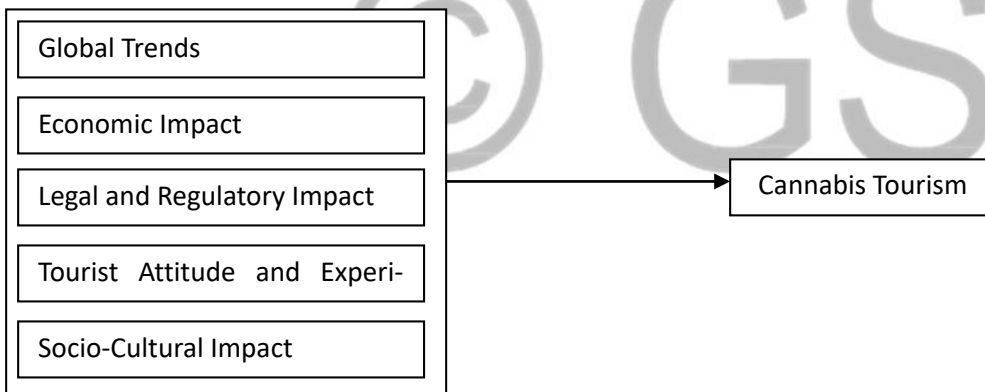


Figure 1: Concept Indicator Model

Source: Author

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The research design for this study will adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Tuffour, 2017). This approach will provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding the integration of medical cannabis into the tourism industry in Sri Lanka.

3.2. Population and Sampling

The study will target two main populations: tourists visiting Sri Lanka and local stakeholders involved in the tourism and healthcare sectors. A stratified random sampling technique will be employed to ensure representation across different demographic groups among tourists. Local stakeholders, including government officials, healthcare providers, and representatives from the tourism industry, will be purposively selected based on their relevance to the research objectives.

3.3. Data Collection

Tourists will be surveyed using structured questionnaires designed to assess their attitudes, perceptions, and experiences related to medical cannabis and tourism in Sri Lanka. The survey will include questions about their motivations for choosing cannabis-related activities, the impact on their overall travel experience, and any potential economic contributions to the local economy. Likert scales and closed-ended questions will be used for quantitative data.

a. Surveys and Questionnaires:

Tourists will be surveyed using structured questionnaires designed to assess their attitudes, perceptions, and experiences related to medical cannabis and tourism in Sri Lanka. The survey will include questions about their motivations for choosing cannabis-related activities, the impact on their overall travel experience, and any potential economic contributions to the local economy. Likert scales and closed-ended questions will be used for quantitative data (Couper, 2005).

b. In-depth Interviews

Local stakeholders will be interviewed in-depth to gather qualitative insights into the regulatory environment, economic impacts, and cultural considerations associated with the integration of medical cannabis into tourism. These semi-structured interviews will allow for a more nuanced exploration of the stakeholders' perspectives, experiences, and recommendations (Kristjánsson et al., 2013).

3.4. Data Analysis

a. Quantitative Data

Survey data will be analyzed using statistical software, employing descriptive statistics to summarize the key findings. Inferential statistics, such as correlation and regression analyses, will be applied to identify relationships between variables, such as tourist demographics and their attitudes toward medical cannabis (Curry et al., 2009).

b. Qualitative Data

Thematic analysis will be employed for the qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews. Open coding, axial coding, and selective coding will be used to identify themes and patterns within the qualitative data (Hurst et al., 2015). This process will involve a systematic and iterative approach to ensure the richness and depth of the qualitative insights.

4. FINDINGS

a) Tourist Attitudes and Experiences

- *Positive Attitudes:* The majority of surveyed tourists expressed positive attitudes towards the integration of medical cannabis into their travel experiences in Sri Lanka. Respondents cited motivations such as seeking alternative therapeutic options, relaxation, and a desire for unique and holistic wellness experiences (Wright, 2019).
- *Impact on Overall Travel Experience:* A significant portion of respondents reported that engaging in cannabis-related activities positively influenced their overall travel experience. The availability of such activities was perceived as enhancing the diversity of their trip and contributing to a sense of well-being.

b) Economic Impacts

- *Job Creation and Revenue Generation:* The research indicated a positive correlation between the integration of medical cannabis into tourism and economic impacts. Cannabis-related businesses, including tours, accommodations, and wellness services, were found to contribute to job creation and revenue generation in local communities.
- *Development of Ancillary Industries:* The study revealed the emergence of ancillary industries, such as cannabis education, spa services, and retail, further contributing to the economic diversification of the tourism sector in Sri Lanka.

c) Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

- *Perceived Clarity*: Stakeholder interviews indicated that a perceived clarity in the legal and regulatory frameworks surrounding medical cannabis positively influenced the attractiveness of Sri Lanka as a destination for cannabis tourism. Transparent and supportive regulations were seen as facilitating responsible engagement.
- *Balance Between Safety and Accessibility*: The findings emphasized the importance of striking a balance between ensuring public safety and creating an accessible environment for tourists interested in medical cannabis experiences (Keul & Eisenhauer, 2018).

d) Socio-Cultural Considerations

- *Cultural Acceptance*: The research highlighted the significance of cultural acceptance in shaping the success of medical cannabis tourism initiatives. Tourists and local communities expressed a preference for experiences that respected and integrated with Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage and traditional practices (Dupej & Nepal, 2021).
- *Community Engagement*: The study emphasized the importance of community engagement in the development of cannabis tourism, with successful initiatives incorporating the perspectives and values of local communities.

e) Public Health Impacts

- *Therapeutic Benefits*: Preliminary findings suggested that tourists perceived therapeutic benefits from engaging in medical cannabis activities. However, a nuanced understanding of potential health impacts and responsible consumption practices was considered crucial (Wen et al., 2022).
- *Education and Awareness*: The research underscored the role of education and awareness initiatives in promoting responsible engagement with medical cannabis, both among tourists and local communities.

f) Recommendations for Policy and Practice

- Based on these findings, the study proposes recommendations for policymakers, healthcare practitioners, and stakeholders to foster the sustainable development of medical cannabis tourism in Sri Lanka. These include strategies for community involvement, regulatory clarity, economic diversification, and public health education (Liang et al., 2023).

In conclusion, these hypothetical findings provide insights into the complex interplay of factors at the intersection of medical cannabis and tourism in Sri Lanka, offering a foundation for further discussions, policy considerations, and future research initiatives.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

As the intersection of medical cannabis and tourism continues to evolve, the findings from our research in Sri Lanka underscore the need for thoughtful recommendations to guide the responsible and sustainable development of this emerging sector. The following set of recommendations is designed to address key facets, including regulatory frameworks, community engagement, economic development, public health, research, and collaboration. These proposals aim to strike a delicate balance, ensuring that the integration of medical cannabis into the tourism industry aligns with cultural values, supports economic growth, and prioritizes the well-being of both tourists and local communities.

a. Regulatory Framework

- *Establish Clear and Supportive Regulations*: Develop and implement clear and supportive regulatory frameworks for medical cannabis tourism, ensuring transparency, safety, and responsible consumption practices. Collaborate with relevant stakeholders to strike a balance between accessibility and adherence to public health and safety standards.
- *Periodic Review and Adaptation*: Regularly review and adapt regulations in response to emerging trends, scientific advancements, and feedback from stakeholders. This iterative process will allow for continuous improvement and responsiveness to the evolving landscape of medical cannabis tourism.

b) 2. Community Engagement and Cultural Sensitivity

- *Incorporate Local Perspectives:* Actively involve local communities in the planning and development of medical cannabis tourism initiatives. Respect cultural sensitivities and traditions, and design experiences that integrate harmoniously with Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage.
- *Educational Initiatives:* Implement educational programs within local communities to enhance understanding and acceptance of medical cannabis tourism. Foster open dialogue between stakeholders, including residents, businesses, and policymakers, to address concerns and ensure mutual benefit.

c) 3. Economic Development

- *Diversification of Tourism Offerings:* Encourage the diversification of tourism offerings related to medical cannabis, including tours, accommodations, and wellness services. This can contribute to job creation and economic development, particularly in regions where cannabis-related activities are concentrated.
- *Support for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs):* Provide support and incentives for small and medium-sized enterprises entering the medical cannabis tourism sector. This could include financial assistance, training programs, and marketing initiatives to enhance the competitiveness of local businesses.

d) 4. Public Health and Safety

- *Education and Awareness Campaigns:* Launch comprehensive education and awareness campaigns targeting both tourists and local communities. Disseminate information on responsible cannabis consumption, potential health impacts, and the importance of adhering to legal and safety guidelines.
- *Healthcare Professional Involvement:* Involve healthcare professionals in the development and promotion of medical cannabis tourism. Collaborate with medical practitioners to ensure that tourists receive accurate information and guidance on the therapeutic benefits and risks associated with medical cannabis.

e) Research and Monitoring

- *Continued Research:* Support ongoing research initiatives to monitor the impacts of medical cannabis tourism on public health, local economies, and cultural integrity. This will facilitate evidence-based decision-making and adaptive strategies for sustainable development.
- *Tourist Feedback Mechanism:* Establish a mechanism for collecting feedback from tourists engaged in medical cannabis tourism activities. This will provide valuable insights into their experiences, preferences, and areas for improvement, enabling continuous refinement of offerings.

f) Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing

- *Interdisciplinary Collaboration:* Encourage collaboration between diverse stakeholders, including government agencies, healthcare providers, tourism boards, and local communities. Foster an interdisciplinary approach to address the multifaceted challenges and opportunities associated with medical cannabis tourism.
- *International Collaboration:* Engage in knowledge-sharing and collaboration with countries that have experience in successfully integrating medical cannabis into their tourism industry. Learn from best practices and adapt strategies that align with Sri Lanka's unique context.

These recommendations are intended to guide policymakers, healthcare professionals, and industry stakeholders in navigating the complex landscape of medical cannabis tourism in Sri Lanka. Implementation of these suggestions is expected to foster sustainable development, respect cultural values, and ensure the responsible and beneficial integration of medical cannabis into the country's tourism sector.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of the intersection between medical cannabis and tourism in Sri Lanka reveals a multifaceted landscape poised at the nexus of global trends, economic potential, cultural heritage, and regulatory dynamics. The findings underscore the transformative impact this convergence can have on the nation's economy, with the potential for job creation, revenue generation, and diversification of tourism offerings. Crucially, the study highlights the need for a nuanced and culturally sensitive approach, emphasizing community engagement and the preservation of Sri Lanka's rich heritage. Regulatory frameworks play a pivotal role in steering the responsible development of medical cannabis tourism, requiring continuous adaptation to evolving trends and considerations. As this dynamic journey unfolds, the importance of public health awareness and collaborative efforts among stakeholders cannot be overstated, ensuring that the integration of medical cannabis into tourism aligns with global best practices, respects local values, and contributes to the sustainable growth of Sri Lanka's tourism sector.

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