

# TOUR OPERATORS' ROLE IN PRODUCT DIVERSIFICATION FOR ENHANCING VISITOR SATISFACTION: A CASE STUDY OF HIRIWADUNNA VILLAGE TOUR, DAMBULLA, SRI LANKA

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## Abstract

The tour operator's role in modern world is challengeable due to various factors including technological influences, changes in tourist behavior and novel trends of the industry. In this regard the product diversification appears as a must to be practiced by the tour operators in order to offer a satisfied tour experience and to compete with the rival competitors. This study focuses on tour operators in Hiriwadunna, Habarana, North Central Province, Sri Lanka who promote the village tour as a tour package. The study addresses the question whether tour operators offer diversified tourism product to deliver enhanced visitor experience? Primary objective of the study is to examine the role of the tour operators and their strategies in product diversification in tourism industry.. Study is based on both qualitative and quantitate methods where interviews and surveys were used as data collecting techniques. 50 foreign tourists were given structured questionnaire to measure their satisfaction level. Product diversification strategies were determined by the discussions and structured interviews conducted with 04 tour operators at the destination. The findings indicate that even though the tour operators have implemented many product diversification strategies in village tour operations, the visitors are not satisfied with many aspects which should be concentrated by the tour operators in the area to match with the visitors' expectations.

**Keywords:** Product Diversification, Tour Operators, Tourism, Visitor Experience, Visitor Satisfaction

## 1. Introduction

Rapid competitive nature among the tourist service providers empower themselves for innovations, diversified products, or product extensions. Once a similar product is being offered for a decade of period, the tourist will not be interested to consume or experience the existing product, there they expect an authentic product with uniqueness and diversity.

Habarana located in Anuradhapura District, North Central Province in Sri Lanka is one of the major tourist destinations in the island. The area is a central point connecting the major tourist destinations such as Anuradhapura ancient city, Polonnaruwa ancient city, Sacred Temple of Tooth Relic- Kandy, Cave

Temple of Dambulla, and Sigiriya Rock Fortress which all are reputed UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

According to the Annual Statistical Reports issued by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), Habarana - Dambulla – Sigiriya is a resort region under the main category of Ancient Cities. Table 1 indicates the continuous growth of the tourist arrivals to the particular region by during past 6 years.

Table 1: Tourist Guest Nights in Habarana - Dambulla – Sigiriya tourist destination

Year	Foreign Nights in Hotels *	Guest Tourist	Local Nights Tourist	Guest in Hotels *	Monthly Occupancy Rates in Tourist Hotels	No. of Units	No. of Rooms
2011	284,533		108,265		73.1	13	848
2012	60,710		74,707		68.7	15	343
2013	114,423		72,328		70.0	8	401
2014	n.a.		n.a.		n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
2015	515,326		130,339		74.3	21	1115
2016	646,553		156,809		73.92	24	1403

\*Classified/Unclassified/ Boutique Hotels n.a. : data not available

Sources: SLTDA Annual Statistical Reports, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016)

According to the statistics the region is highly attracted by both domestic and foreign tourists as a major destination in the island. Number of domestic tourists' guest nights and foreign tourists; guest nights at the tourist hotels denote that the attraction of the visitors is significant and they have spent thousands of overnight stays at the destination. If a tourists selects a destination for overnight staying certainly he would visit the nearby attraction or would engage in tourist activities. Under this beneficial condition of tourist arrivals to Sigiriya-Habarana-Dambulla area, there is a huge potential for the tour operators to be targeted and positioned their tourism product 'Hiriwadunna Village Tour' in the potential visitors. It requires a product diversification in tour packages that is expected by the tourists beyond the UNESCO World Heritage Sites which are connected by the area. Not depending only on the conventional tour itinerary, the tour operators in Dambulla area have identified various potentials to promote minor attractions,

lesser known attractions and also new excursions in order to make diversify the tourist product within the periphery. Visit to Sigiriya Rock Fortress, Piduranagla Temple, Dambulla Cave Temple, Rose Quarts Mountain Range at Jathika Namal Uyana, engage in elephant back safaris at Habarana, jeep safaris at Minneriya National Park, and village tour in Hiriwadunna are some of the mostly attracted excursions and recreational activities offered by the travel agencies, tour operating companies at the destination. It is the responsibility of the tour operators to diversify the tourism product to target different market segments of the tourism market. It is not only the heritage and nature, but also the authentic culture is behind Habarana-Sigiriya-Dambulla region which can be highlighted effectively to attract more tourists to the destination.

Hiriwadunna Village Tour is a diversified tourism product which offer unique community based experience for the tourists compared to other natural and cultural attractions at the periphery. The Village Tour is an excellent combination of culture, nature, tradition, community and their simple but traditional way of living. Hence, the travel agencies have the possibility to add the Hiriwadunna Village Tour in their companies' tour packages, it would be an unexpected experience for the visitors.

Tour operators immensely make efforts to maximize the visitor experience while preserving the authentic quality of the activities and excursions of the Village Tour. Thus, it is significant to study the role of the tour operators in offering Village Tour at Hiriwadunna and to evaluate the visitors' perception regarding their satisfaction level, so that the destination can be promoted with effective manner in future.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

The UNESCO World Heritage sites, Sigiriya Rock Fortress and Cave Temple of Dambulla almost attracted by the tourists since decades and decades. Those heritage sites are included in every tour package as a site must visit. Beyond the tangible heritage aspect, the tourists are willing to experience new tourism products. Thereby, the tour operators have diversified their tourism products in their tour packages. In this effort, the tour operators are encountering with various challenges and issues as well. There is a huge potential for the tour operators in Habarana area, to offer Hiriwadunna Village Tour as a dynamically diversified product with abundant natural, cultural and community based resources.

Thereby, there should be decent combination of selecting human resources, physical and natural attributes when tourism products are developed. It is relevant to identify the tourists' perception on their visitor satisfaction, hence the maximum benefits can be reaped while enhancing the benefits for the community at the periphery.

Despite the significance of product diversification, there is limited research conducted in this context the selected region. Thus, this study analyzes the role of the tour operators in product diversification and enhancing visitor experience which contribute altogether to build-up the destination image of Habarana area as a popular but diversified tourist destination is Sri Lanka.

### 3. Objectives of the Study

**The Primary objective** of the study is to examine the role of the tour operators and their strategies in product diversification in Hiriwadunna Village Tour in Habarana. In the meantime the study further elaborates the specific objectives such as

- i. To examine the visitors' level of satisfaction on safety & security during the village tour Hiriwadunna
- ii. To assess the visitors' level of satisfaction on guidance and information provided by the tour operator in Hiriwadunna Village Tour
- iii. To evaluate the visitors' level of satisfaction on easy access during the Hiriwadunna Village Tour
- iv. To find out the visitors' satisfaction level on authentic tour experience during the Hiriwadunna Village Tour
- v. To assess the visitors' satisfaction level on entertainment aspect during the Hiriwadunna Village Tour
- vi. Village Tour in Dambulla and recommend the suggestions to reduce the visitors' satisfaction gap

## 4. Literature Review

### 4.1 Role of tour operator

Atilgan et al. (2003) defines tour operator as "the principal service provider who is responsible for delivering and/or contracting and monitoring the promised service mix, including all arrangements such as flights,

transportation, accommodation, excursions, guidance etc. throughout the service delivering period”

The role of the tour operator is much prominent in various aspects such as destination promotion, visitor satisfaction, sustainable tourism and tourism product development. Many researchers have emphasized the position of the tour operators as a key stakeholder in the industry. Arica and Çorbacı (2017) has determined the role of the tour operators’ as guiding stakeholder in sustainability process, router and administrator positions in the industry. There, he discusses the limitations and shortcomings of the financial concerns and policy implementations of the tourism industry.

In modern world the tourist’s expectations are designed and modified by many of push /internal factors and pull / external factors such as technology, social media, novel trends and individual characteristics. Contemporary tourist always seek unique experience that worth for what they expend. It is really challenging for the service providers in the tourism industry to cater on the personalized and unconventional demand of the tourists. Today tourists are not interested anymore in purchasing a standardized product/service: in order to meet the new needs of the demand, the tourist destinations must give top priority to the achievement of tourist satisfaction (Corte et al, 2015). Thus there is a huge responsibility on the tour operators to diversify the tourism product in order to promote the destination and to offer a delighted travel experience for the visitors.

#### **4.2 Tourism product diversification**

There are diverse reasons for advocating diversification of tourism to areas such as Kisumu as a strategy for sustainable development. First, is because tourism can act as a catalyst for investment in other sectors thus leading to economic diversification to these areas. Second is that tourism stimulates economic diversification across sectors and therefore economic growth. Third tourism offers strong potential for environmental and cultural linkages by providing an economic incentive to preserve natural and cultural sites, undertake environmental cleanup efforts, and improve local environmental management all which can lead to environmental and social wellbeing which are key pillars for sustainable development. Tourism expenditures can turn over 7 to 11 times in an economy. In addition, pro-poor tourism studies have shown tourism linkages clearly benefiting the poor (World Bank, 2010).

In tourism industry, tourism product can be defined as any tangible product or intangible service or mixture of them which is offered for the tourists to satisfy their travel related requirement. Inskip (1991) and Pearce (1998) defines the tourism products as the combination of attractions, accommodations & catering, sightseeing and entertainment among others. Tourism is therefore a complex activity comprising travel to and around a destination (Briassoulis, 2002).

If the touristic product has the potential to answer the needs of the tourists, the product can be regarded as a success. Thereby, both tour operators and destinations are concentrate on continuous and new tourism products. While these products are preferred to have increased added value and to be applicable all year round from the viewpoint of the tourism actors, it is preferred to create plus value for the customers. (Süreci, 2015)

Smith (1994) has described five elements of a tourism product which are the physical plant, service, hospitality, freedom of choice, and involvement. He further states that the generic production begins with raw inputs, progresses through intermediate inputs and outputs, to final outputs, or the tourist's experience.

Tourism products are available at both tourist generating country and tourist attracting country. Tourist destination is similar to an 'umbrella' under which the diverse sub-sectors of tourism industry appear as the stakeholders with the partnership with each other to facilitate with tourists' travel requirements. Holloway (2002) states that a destination can be a particular resort or town, a region within a country, the whole of a country or even a larger area of the globe. A destination should possesses distinctive attributes of its own so that the tourists get attracted based on the quality of three elements such as attractions, amenities (or facilities) and accessibility (Holloway, 2002)

Rotich (2012) identifies with a case study of Kisumu, that the sustainable tourism development can be achieved through the product diversification where the government and other stakeholders need to develop the amenities/facilities specially, accommodation and improve the accessibility within the region.

According to Kapunda (2003 cited in Malema 2012:55) "diversification is distribution of investment across different economic sectors to improve the

economic spread and minimize overdependence on few sectors”. Carlsen and Butler (2011) explains that diversification of the tourism product base and introducing markets with upmarket destination positioning are contributing to tourism growth of a destination. For product diversification, there should be usage of both types of resources including existing resources which are under strain and previously unexploited resources. Even though, Carlsen and Butler (2011) emphasize the relationship between the new product development and attracting new markets on diversification. Additionally, Farmaki (2012) argues that ‘diversification is associated with advantages of profit maximization through the development of new products that complement cost reduction due to the transfer of assists to other markets and extension of seasonality of offering products that can be enjoyed off season’.

Importance of product diversification is highlighted from the studies by various researchers (Akama 1997; 1999; Ikiara et al. 2006; Manyara and Jones 2007) where challenges affecting on tourism have been identified including unsystematic tourism planning, lack of tourism awareness, insecurity, and bad publicity, stiff competition from other countries, poor road infrastructure and narrow range of tourism products.

### **4.3 Visitor Satisfaction**

In profit oriented business sector, customer satisfaction is the ultimate objective where the satisfied customers are considered as an asset who can be the repeated customers, and finally would be the loyal customers to the business. Product loyalty or brand loyalty is created from the basement of the customer satisfaction. In the tourism and hospitality industry also, the customer is defined in various terms according to the context. A satisfied/delighted tourist/visitor or guest is a precious value for the establishment who always expect the positive impression of the customers. In hotel industry, the customer is the guest, while in travel industry, the customer is referred as either tourist or client. At a particular travel destination the customer in tourism industry is referred as the visitor since he is engaged in excursions or recreational activities.

Tourist/visitor satisfaction or perception regarding the destination choice is determined by various indicators including accommodations, foods, and services. Further there indicators determine the decision to return, too. Many scholars have conducted and testes research on tourist satisfaction and

perception since 1960s from the perspectives of quality management and repurchase intention (Xia et al., 2009). Many researchers have identified that destination image affects the tourist satisfaction (Cooper, Fletcher and Gilbert, 1993; Lee et al, 2002).

In tour operating activities, visitor satisfaction is a considerable factor on which the tour operators' future business are depending on. If the visitors are not satisfied with the experience, service, security, reliability and credibility, the negative image will reduce the potential of repeated visitors, positive word of mouth and impression of the visitor. Customer satisfaction has been defined by various intellectuals with number of explanations. According to Solomon (2002) customer satisfaction is determined by "overall feelings, or attitudes, a person has about a product after it has been purchased" (Solomon, 2002): it is often found to be at the heart of firms' marketing activities (Machleit and Mantel, 2001), because it helps them achieving their desired strategic objectives.

The concept of customer satisfaction in the context of tourism and hospitality industry is explored and investigated by Pizam et al (1978), and defined it as the comparison between "a tourist's experience at the destination visited and the expectations about the destination". Tourist's expectations are strengthened by the push and pull factors. As many scholars mentioned in literature, travelers are 'pushed' into making travel decision by internal, psychological forces and 'pulled' by the destination attributes which are the external forces (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977; Uysal and Jurowski, 1994).

O'Neill et al. (2000) states that service quality is a customer issue that is determined by the customers, not by the service providers. Further that study reveals the necessity of understanding customer requirements and adjusting (tailoring) the service to meet the customer requirements. Zemke and Schaaf (1990) point out that 'successful organizations are able to diagnose their customer expectations fully and satisfy them completely, during each and every service encounter'.

Citing WTO (2005), Vveinhardt and Kigaitė (2005) provide the following definition on quality of tourism "the result of a process which implies the satisfaction of all the legitimate product and service needs, requirements and expectations of the consumer, at an acceptable price, in conformity with mutually accepted contractual conditions and the underlying quality



determinants such as safety and security, hygiene, accessibility, transparency, authenticity and harmony of the tourism activity concerned with its human and natural environment”.

## 5. Conceptual Framework of the Study

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study that was developed based on the literature review.

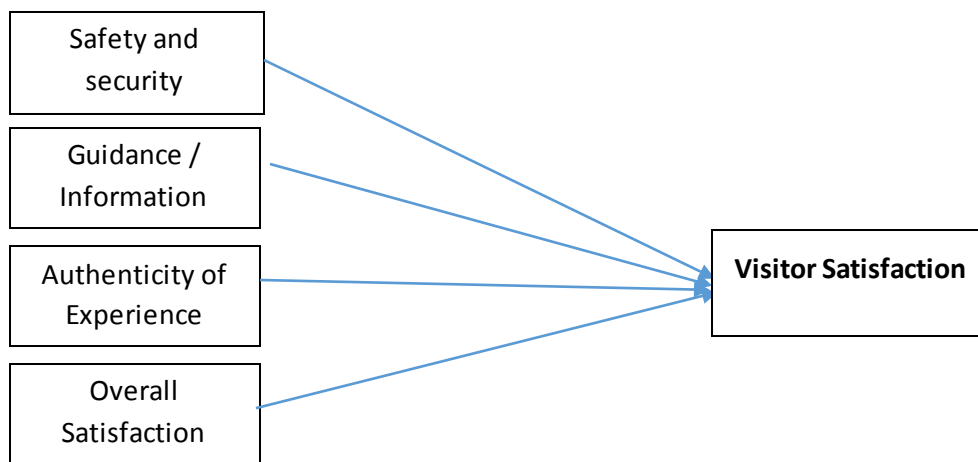


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

## 6. Methodology

The study is basically based on the tour operation on Village Tour at Hiriwadunna village in Habarana. The research is based on both qualitative and quantitative methods where primary data were collected through the techniques of interviews with several parties and surveys were conducted as data collecting techniques. Secondary data were gathered from the websites of the travel agencies who offer Hiriwadunna Village Tour, and the travel blogs, previous researches on visitor satisfaction.

Since the research is an empirical study field observations and experience also were contributed in building up the hypothesis. The survey was conducted in December 2017, through an empirical observation where the villagers, visitors and tour coordinators were interviewed. Village Tour is operated by the villagers who are from Hiriwadunna area itself and coordinators are from the outside. The tour operation is not well established here like the other travel destinations, because the tour operators are directly connected with the travel

agencies who provides the visitors in most of the time. Other than that, the Free Individual Travelers (FIT) might direct connect the tour operators and will have their trek. Due to limited number of tour operating personals at the area, it was only 4 coordinators were interviewed to examine the strategies followed by them to diversify the village tour experience.

Technically, tourists do not select Hiriwadunna village tour as a major attraction or destination, even though it is a best option as an en-route excursion after or before visit at Sigiriya Rock Fortress or Minneriya National Park. The population of the visitors to the area depends on tourist arrivals to Sigiriya-Dambulla region. Therefore, the sample of the visitors was selected as 50 foreign tourists since the domestic tourists are not much interested of the tour operations such as rural tourism activities, they were not targeted during the survey. Foreign tourists were selected based on convenient sampling technique, since all the tourists were not interested to engage in survey due to physical inconveniences during the tour.

Researcher used a self-administrative structured questionnaire given for the visitors was consisted of 25 questions. The questionnaire consisted of 3 parts including demographic characteristics (06 questions), evaluation criteria of visitor satisfaction level such as Safety & security, Guidance & Information, Authenticity of experience and overall satisfaction on experience. Thus each criteria was consisted of 04 questions which were based on five point Likert Scale, to analyze the level of satisfaction.

At the end of the questionnaire 03 open ended questions were added to investigate the personal perception or criticism on the experience, to assess whether they wish to recommend the tour to others and to identify their revisit to Hiriwadunna for village tour experience.

## **7. Findings**

### **7.1.Role of the tour operators in product diversification**

Dambulla destination in Sri Lanka is centralized location which attracts thousands of foreign and domestic tourists annually due to abundance of cultural and natural resources within the peripherals. Habarana, Sigiriya and Dambulla areas is one of the regions in the Resort Region of Ancient cities as identified by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. The particular areas have recorded 646,553 of foreign guest nights in Tourist Hotels

(classified/unclassified/boutiques hotels) in 2016. (SLTDA Annual Report, 2016)

Hiriwadunna is a famous destination for rural / village tourism, located 20 km away from Dambulla. The visitors are given a country side experience which is remarkable and authentic experience especially for the foreigners. Village tourism product is diversified by the tour operators in various aspects covering 3-4 hours at the village vicinity. The journey begins with a 30 minutes bullock cart ride which is handled by a villager. During the ride the guide explains the significances of the village and its rural community. Specially, for the foreigners this is a unique experience, but some contradictory ideas were shared by the visitors about this activity since animal torturing is highlighted here. At the end of the bullock card ride, it begins with a short trek which leads to a man-made reservoir named Hiriwadunna *Wewa*; full of blue water with rich diversified aquatic eco system. Catamaran ride starts here where the visitors are invited by the tour operators for sightseeing of the surroundings and to have the snapshots of the breathtaking sceneries. Meanwhile the visitors can experience the day today living style of the villagers who engage in fishery, bathing, cultivations and other daily chores. The guide makes some opportunities for the visitors to have short conversations with the villagers creating an interpreting atmosphere.

Then, the visitors are given the opportunity to visit the *chena* cultivation or rural vegetable cultivation which is cultivated by the villagers as their living hood. The guide explains the crops, and if the visitors are willing to taste some fresh edible crops, the guide makes it possible too. The tree hut or *pela* which is constructed on the top of a tree for the purpose of farmers' staying at night to protect the cultivation from the wild elephants' hazards. If the visitors like, it is a rare opportunity for them to climb up the tree hut a have a wonderful glance of the rural vicinity. Visitors can enjoy the taste of king coconut offered by the villager penetrating the sign of rural Sri Lankan hospitality.

In the afternoon, the group can enjoy a delicious authentic Sri Lankan lunch prepared by a rural house wife, while sitting on a *pila*: a flat form of a rural Sri Lankan house. The cuisines are prepared of pure Sri Lankan ingredients, vegetables and grains and been offered with Lotus leaf. Further the village woman make cooking demonstrations on how to prepare traditional meal, how to use traditional kitchen utensils and equipment or the farmer would demonstrate how to make a roof out of coconut leaves. The entire village

excursion is mingled with authenticity and simplicity which is a result of the strategies practiced by the tour operators.

The tour operators encounters with many issues and challenges in tour operation of Hiriwadunna village tour. Though the tour operators have generated several direct and indirect job opportunities and extra income ways for the villagers, even from the villagers there is a protest against the tour operators. Some villagers argue that the presence and involvement of the foreigners is regarded as a threat for the rural, simple life style of the villagers. They highlight that the risk at the young generation who seek minor jobs generated from tour operational activities at the destination and not been motivated for higher studies or traditional cultivation practices. Due to this protest of some villagers in the area, the tour operators are with the issue of appointing villagers for the activities if the tour such as bullock cart riding, catamaran riding and other activities. The tour operators are not been registered with the Sri Lanka Tourism or any tourism body of the country is not monitoring or giving guidelines for these tour operational activities at the area. Thus, the service quality and the security of the tourists might be at a risk due to unavailability of safety guidelines, precautions and quality standards.

The efforts indulge by the tour operators in Hiriwadunna area is admirable due to the product diversification techniques they have utilized offering a diversified authentic travel experience for the foreign tourists. The tourists who visit the Cave Temple of Dambulla, then after proceed to Sigiriya or if not next day they have the excursion at Sigiriya rock fortress. Since Sigiriya and Dambulla are famous destinations, the tourists can enjoy the Hiriwadunna village tour which is positioned less than 15 km from Sigiriya. Sigiriya-Dambulla destination is not only for UNESCO World Heritages, but also for a new aspect of authentic Sri Lankan culture can be explored during this village tour. Thus the tourism product is significantly diversified and most of the travel companies get the advantage of this village tour by including for their tour packages as a 3-5 hour en-route village excursion on the way to Minneriya National Park which is located another 13 km away from the village.

## **7.2. Visitor satisfaction level during the village tour**

Visitors' satisfaction was measured with a sample of 50 foreign tourists soon after they end up the village tour. With the consent of the tour operator, the foreign tourists were informed to complete the given questionnaire which consisted of only 25 questions, allocating only about 20 minutes. With regard to the perception of safety and security criteria of the village tour experience, safety of the catamaran ride, chena tour, bullock cart ride and safety foods were measured. In safety and security criteria, 23 visitors (46%) have mentioned that they are dissatisfied with safety & security of foods provided during the village tour. At the end of the questionnaire, 24% of visitors had commented on the safety and hygienic condition of food preparation was not in a satisfied level so that they reluctant to consume homely prepared foods due to threat of food borne illnesses.

30 (60%) visitors are strongly dissatisfied with the safety of the sanitary facilities offered during the tour so that it would be considerable factor for the tour operators to provide with hygienic and safe sanitary facilities for the visitors. Usually, foreigners are highly concerned on safe foods, safe water and hygienic sanitation which are the basic needs for a healthy life. Thus, there should be a proper mechanism to facilitate the visitors with basic needs in a secured manner so that satisfaction level of the future visitors can be increased. If not, the negative recommendation would be spread through the reviewing channels.

Rather than that, safety on other activities including catamaran ride, bullock cart ride are strongly satisfied levels as 40% and 60% respectively due to the usage of personal protective devices in catamaran ride and allocating minimum number of visitors for a bullock cart at once.

24% of visitors are dissatisfied about information provided about the village and its community. Since the foreigners are unable to have direct communication with the villagers, they highly expect the interpretation and explanations about the village, its people, their way of life, cultural aspects, natural resources and bio diversity. Thereby, the tour operator is expected to be much fluent in either English language or any other preferable foreign language to create favorable communication by mitigating the language barrier. So that 36% of tourists have rated that they are in a natural perception regarding the responds of the tour operators at the moment they expect further clarification while 28% visitors are in their natural perception on information provided on attractions at the peripheral area.

Since the foreigners are strangers to Sri Lankan culture, they are highly interested and keen on investigating each and every scene they catch during the tour. During the tour they might ask number of questions about the floral and faunal species of the surrounding. It is recommended for the tour operators to be rich enough with terminology and knowledge regarding culture, nature and bio diversity in order to enhance the visitor satisfaction on information and guidance.

Authenticity of the experience was measured under four aspects including Engagement with community, Authenticity of activities, Uniqueness/diversity and Interaction with native activities. 24%, 28% and 24% of visitors are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied on engagement with community, Authenticity of activities, and Interaction with native activities respectively. Even though 50% of visitors are satisfied with uniqueness and diversity of the authentic experience, which is inherited by the village. The cultural identity of the area should be promoted in a sustainable manner without commercializing the traditional aspects and opening avenue for demonstrative effect.

Investigating the overall satisfaction level of the Village Tour experience, four aspects were evaluated such as Coordination of the tour, Attractions & activities, Hospitality and Value for money. 20% and 22% of visitors are on neutral perception regarding the tour coordination and attractions/activities offered during the tour. This is resulted due to the language barrier occurred during the interpretations and explanation since there is a high expectation of the visitors to be engaged with local community. Time management during the tour is another factor in coordination where the tour itinerary is exceeding the time permit, so that the visitors might get delay for the next excursion to Minneriya national park to witness the large elephant gathering in Sri Lanka. 30% visitors have mentioned they are in a neutral view on value for money, that the reason behind this rate, would be the poor coordination, communication barriers, lack of information of the sightseeing and lack of engagement with local community.

## **8. Conclusion**

Tourism product is a prominent factor which derives the attention of the tourist to the travel destination where a collection of diversified tourism products should be available. If the destination fails to offer the diversified tourism products with determining the requirements, consuming patterns, and

expectations of the tourists, definitely the tourist will change their destination choice.

Tour operators, being one of the prominent service providers in tourism industry in Sri Lanka, pass through a challengeable stage where they have to utilize the available resources including natural, cultural, community and other physical resources while diversifying the tourism product offered by their companies. Simultaneously the tourists are expecting a diversified even though quality and safety are given priority during their tour.

The role of the tour operator in diversifying the Hiriwadunna Village Tour experience is admirable and not having any contribution or guidance from the tourism related authorities, the local tour operator is currently encountering challenges and issues with standards. There is a strong combination and participation of the host community of the area, even though that partnership should be strengthened further, identifying the expectations of the visitors.

To analyze the visitors' expectations, it is highly essential to determine their current satisfaction level regarding the village tour. Basically four criteria including Safety & security, Guidance & Information, Authenticity of Experience and Overall Satisfaction level were measured during the survey. It is identified that the mentioned criterions have positive core-relationship between the visitors' satisfaction level. Even though the tour operators have taken maximum efforts to diversify the tourism product of 'village tour', there are critical aspects to be concerned by the tour operator, and the expected satisfied level is not achieved yet.

## **9. Managerial Implications**

This study analyzes the role of the tour operators in product diversification and the level of visitor satisfaction which contribute altogether to build-up the destination image of Hiriwadunna area as a popular and diversified minor tourist destination in Sri Lanka. Not depending only on the conventional tour itinerary, the tour operators in Sigiriya-Dambulla area have identified various potentials to promote minor attractions, lesser known attractions and also new excursions in order to make diversify the tourist product within the periphery. Tour operators in Hiriwadunna Village Tour have to perform a major role in creating a responsive environment for the tourists to engage in various activities, excursions and experiences. Further, the tour operators immensely

make efforts to maximize the visitor experience while preserving the authentic quality of the activities and excursions.

Even though in perspective of the tourist, there are some aspects to be concentrated by the tour operators to offer a delighted visitor experience. According to the visitors' reviews it can be identified that there is a gap between what they expect and what they really perceive at the destination. Food safety, hygienic sanitary facilities, effective communication with proper language, making responsible opportunities for interaction with host community are some of the aspects that the tour operators should focus on.

There should be a proper mechanism to monitor the tour operational activities at the area, and guidance from the tourism related authorities in private or public sector to promote the Hiriwadunna Village Tour as major destination. Development of a home stay project or ecofriendly accommodation units would be more effective for sustainable tourism development within the area.

The tour operators are unable to expect the re-visits of the tourists who had the first experience, due to visitors' individual perception. Still, the tour operators have not positioned the Hiriwadunna Village Tour as a destination that must visit by a foreign tourist in Sri Lanka. It would be really difficult for the tour operators to generate repeat visitors to the excursion, if the prevailing issues were not addressed accordingly.

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

This study examined the role of the tour operator in Hiriwadunna area in diversifying the tourism product: 'Hiriwadunna Village Tour'. Hiriwadunna area is not only famous for village tourism but also for nature tourism, and therefore future research can be developed on combination of village tourism with nature tourism at particular area. Additionally, the visitors' satisfaction level was determined based on only four criteria and there is potential for future researchers to measure the service quality of the tour operators in Hiriwadunna Village Tour, and to analyze the promotional strategies followed by the tour operators in promoting village tourism in particular area. The research structure can be applied for any form of tour operation in any selected destination in order to identify the product diversification strategies of the tour operators and their implications on visitor satisfaction level.



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