



UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH DAY PROCEEDINGS 2026



**Department of Public Administration
Faculty of Management Studies & Commerce
University of Sri Jayewardenepura
Gangodawila, Nugegoda
Sri Lanka**



Undergraduate Research Day 2026

Proceedings

Department of Public Administration

Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce

University of Sri Jayewardenepura

Gangodawila, Nugegoda

Sri Lanka

16th February 2026

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Official Website of the Department: <https://mgt.sjp.ac.lk/pub/>

Proceedings of the Undergraduate Research Day 2026

ISSN 3084-8040

Edited by Editorial Board

Department of Public Administration

Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce

University of Sri Jayewardenepura

Cover Page Designed by: Ms. E.A.G. Ekanayake

No. of Pages: 129

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Published by the Department of Public Administration

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Message from the Vice Chancellor



It is with great pleasure that I extend my warmest greetings to all participants of the Undergraduate Research Day (URD), conducted as part of the 22nd International Conference on Business Management (ICBM) 2026, hosted by the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Sri Jayewardenepura. The URD is a meaningful platform that celebrates undergraduate scholarship and encourages young researchers to engage in inquiry, evidence-based reasoning, and academic communication skills that are essential for the future of our nation and the global community.

Aligned with the ICBM 2026 theme, “Inclusive and Responsible Management for a Circular Economy and Digital Future,” the URD reflects the importance of building research capacity from the early stages of higher education. Undergraduate research not only strengthens critical thinking and problem-solving but also nurtures responsible citizenship by encouraging students to examine real-world issues with curiosity, integrity, and social awareness.

The University of Sri Jayewardenepura remains committed to supporting academic excellence and creating opportunities for students to develop as confident, ethical, and competent knowledge creators. I am pleased to note that the URD brings together diverse research topics and innovative perspectives from our undergraduates, and I trust that the experience will motivate them to pursue further research, professional growth, and meaningful contributions to society.

I convey my sincere appreciation to the organizing committee, departmental coordinators, supervisors, reviewers, and all staff members for their dedication to making the URD a success. I also congratulate all student presenters featured in this proceedings volume and wish them every success in their academic and professional journeys.

Senior Professor Pathmalal M. Manage

Vice Chancellor

University of Sri Jayewardenepura

Message from the Dean



across multiple fields of business and management.

On behalf of the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce (FMSC), University of Sri Jayewardenepura, I warmly welcome you to the Undergraduate Research Day (URD) held in conjunction with ICBM 2026. The URD is a proud academic initiative of the faculty that showcases the creativity, discipline, and commitment of our undergraduates as they present research conducted

This year's overarching conference theme, "Inclusive and Responsible Management for a Circular Economy and Digital Future," provides an important context for undergraduate scholarship. Many of the challenges we face today-environmental pressures, social inequalities, governance concerns, and rapid technological change-require thoughtful analysis and evidence-based solutions. The URD encourages our students to contribute to these conversations early in their academic journeys, strengthening not only their research competence but also their sense of responsibility to society.

At FMSC, we place strong emphasis on cultivating a research culture that extends beyond postgraduate study. Through research supervision, methodological training, and academic platforms such as URD, we strive to empower students to develop analytical thinking, academic writing, and professional presentation skills that will benefit them in both academia and industry.

I extend my sincere gratitude to the URD organizing team, departmental coordinators, supervisors, and evaluators for their support in ensuring the quality and success of this event. I also congratulate all student researchers whose work is presented in this proceedings volume, and I wish you a rewarding and inspiring URD experience.

Professor Dushan Jayawickrama

Dean, Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce

University of Sri Jayewardenepura

Message from the Head of the Department



I take immense pleasure in writing this message in this scholarly endeavour of Undergraduate Research Day-2026 (URD), which is co-organized by the Department of Public Administration and the International Conference on Business Management. Research and publication are a cornerstone of academic excellence offering significant benefits to both the academic community and the broader society. The URD is a unique platform set for the undergraduates to disseminate their findings and to have intellectual dialogue to further enlighten their research journey. This year, ten research papers developed based on the theses are presented under two different tracks, namely, Public Administration, Education, Social Policy, Entrepreneurship, Tourism, and Sustainable Development. Therefore, at the inception, I would like to congratulate all the presenters who have successfully completed their theses and willingly come forward to share their findings with us.

On behalf of the Department, I extend my sincere appreciation to the Vice Chancellor of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and the Dean of the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce and Co-Chairs of the ICBM-2026. Also, the keynote speaker, Senior Professor Rangika Halwathura, inspired undergraduates by sharing his experience. I profoundly acknowledge and appreciate the valuable contribution given by all the academic members of other departments and the faculty as reviewers, panelists, and participants for their dedication and contributions in numerous ways. Further, this would not have been a reality without the enormous support and courage extended by all the academic members, non-academic staff, ICBM executive committee members, and the students of the Department of Public Administration.

Your commitment ensures the success and impact of this academic gathering.

Wishing you all an intellectually stimulating academic experience throughout the day!

Professor L A Pavithra Madhuwanthi

Head

Department of Public Administration

Message from the Co-Chairs, ICBM 2026



We are pleased to present the Proceedings of the Undergraduate Research Day (URD) conducted as part of the 22nd International Conference on Business Management (ICBM) 2026, organized by the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Sri

Jayewardenepura. The URD is designed to provide an encouraging and scholarly platform for undergraduates to share their research, build confidence in academic communication, and experience the standards of academic dissemination and peer review.

Guided by the ICBM 2026 theme, “Inclusive and Responsible Management for a Circular Economy and Digital Future,” the URD recognizes that responsible and inclusive solutions require contributions from all levels of the academic community, including emerging researchers. The student papers featured in this volume reflect a diverse range of topics and approaches, demonstrating the ability of undergraduate research to generate valuable insights relevant to organizations, communities, and the broader economy.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the supervisors, reviewers, evaluators, departmental coordinators, and organizing committee members for their commitment and support. We also commend all student presenters for their effort, curiosity, and professionalism in completing and presenting their research. We trust that the URD experience will inspire our undergraduates to pursue lifelong learning, uphold academic integrity, and continue contributing to knowledge creation in meaningful ways.

We hope this proceeding volume serves as a lasting record of their scholarly achievement and encouragement for future research endeavours.

Dr. Isuru Manawadu, Co-Chair, ICBM 2026

Dr. Sepali Bamunusinghe, Co-Chair, ICBM 2026

International Conference on Business Management (ICBM) 2026

Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Sri Jayewardenepura

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Ensuring Equitable Representation of Management and Public Administration Graduates through the Sri Lanka Administrative Service Examination: Challenges and Opportunities

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Keywords: Administrative recruitment, Competency-based assessment, Equitable representation, Management and Public Administration graduates, Sri Lanka Administrative Service

Introduction

Sri Lanka Administrative Service (SLAS) is the topmost agency of the administrative hierarchy of the Sri Lankan public sector and is the hub of national policy execution, institutional sustainability, and good governance (Ministry of Public Administration). Being the major entry point to senior civil service jobs, the SLAS recruitment and examination system has a profound impact on the professional make-up, competence profile, and legitimacy of administrative leadership. An ambiguity, however, still exists on whether equitable representation should be considered at the examination level or in greater career advancement within the service.

The updated recruitment system proposed by the Government Gazette of 18 June 2021 splits the Grade III SLAS open competitive examination into Comprehension, General Intelligence, and General Knowledge parts. This framework indicates a worldwide trend toward aptitude-based assessment frameworks, which focus on objectivity, comparability, and administrative effectiveness (Public Service Commission; Cingolani, 2023). However, the existence of such generic testing mechanisms has little to no implications on disciplinary diversity and competency recognition in governance related context, but this is not fully developed within the Sri Lankan context. The current sources posit that overreliance on general cognitive evaluation cannot reflect discipline-specific skills needed in the field of public administration, such as policy analysis, strategic management, administrative ethics, organizational behavior, and financial administration of the state (Fernando, 2006; Frederickson, 2010; Jayasundera, 2021). Recent hiring tendencies also give the impression that there is an imbalance of technologically focused graduates in the job market, with graduates in Management and

Public Administration seeming to be relatively under-represented, which creates an issue of fairness and competency fit.

The primary objective of this study is to examine the structural design of the Sri Lanka Administrative Service open competitive examination and to analyze how it influences the representation and competency recognition of Management and Public Administration graduates. The study also seeks to evaluate whether the present assessment framework adequately reflects governance-related competencies required for effective administrative performance.

Accordingly, the research is guided by the following questions:

1. How does the current SLAS examination structure recognize disciplinary and governance-related competencies?
2. To what extent does the examination design influence equitable representation of Management and Public Administration graduates?
3. What structural or assessment improvements can enhance competency alignment while preserving merit-based recruitment?

Literature Review

The recruiting of civil servants is essential to the efficacy of the administration, the legitimacy of the institution, and equitable governance (Schuster et al., 2023). The SLAS, being the top-level administration in Sri Lanka, defines the effects of disciplinary backgrounds on the results of governance. Although the global literature on the recruitment of civil servants is vast, there is a lack of empirical research on the SLAS examination system. The aspects that this review addresses are the recruitment of civil servants, disciplinary representation, and competency recognition to graduates of Management and Public Administration. It is based on four overarching themes, namely: (i) social equity and representative bureaucracy, (ii) competency relevance in public administration, (iii) comparative recruiting practices, and (iv) representation, quality in government, and trust of the populace.

Representative Bureaucracy and Social Equity

The representative Bureaucracy approach indicates that the administrative organizations perform optimally when employees mirror the social diversity, including the disciplinary backgrounds (Frederickson, 2010; Lee, 2021). It is supplemented by Social Equity theory, which focuses on fairness, inclusiveness, and equal opportunity, and cautions that neutral exams can be biased towards some academic disciplines (Frederickson, 2010). Opening these theories to SLAS, it is possible to harbour the implication that policy making, strategic management, ethics, and public finance should be among the governance competencies identified during the recruitment process.

Relevance of Competency in Public Administration

The requirements to perform well in the top-level civil service cannot be reflected in general intelligence tests alone (Ramesh, 2020; Jayasundera, 2021). The empirical research in Sri Lanka emphasizes that the lack of alignment between the recruitment needs and functional needs may lead to a long post-recruitment training that lowers the efficiency of administration (Fernando and Gunasekara, 2020). The assessment of the SLAS examination design is therefore based on competency relevance.

Comparative Recruitment Practices

International civil services use various strategies to balance between merit, equity, and discipline-specific evaluation. The UPSC of India has optional papers in Public Administration and Management (Byju, 2024), and Bangladesh incorporates administrative knowledge in exams (Zafarullah and Huque, 1998). The UK and Singapore focus on developed competency models, situational judgement examinations, and leadership assessments (Public Service Division Singapore, 2021; Civil Service Careers, 2024). The practices illustrate how to align functional competencies with recruitment.

Representation, Quality of Governance, and Public Trust

Competency-based and equitable hiring enhances the legitimacy and trust of administration in the eyes of the people (Liyanage et al., 2019). The absence of governance-specific competencies can undermine the responsiveness of the policy and the effectiveness of the institution (Fernando and Gunasekara, 2020).

Research Gap

Although there is literature on equity, functional representation, and competency alignment, the study of how the SLAS examination structure influences the representation of Management and Public Administration graduates has had very little empirical research. The paper fills this gap by applying the Representative Bureaucracy and Social Equity theories to analyze the results of recruitment design, fair representation, and governance in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design to explore structural features of the SLAS Open Competitive Examination and their implications for disciplinary representation and competency recognition. The approach focuses on understanding recruitment design, competency frameworks, and administrative actors' perceptions, prioritizing analytical neutrality and evidence-based interpretation over evaluative judgement (Patton, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twenty purposefully selected SLAS officers, representing different grades, ministries, undergraduate disciplines, and Advanced Level streams. Interviews, conducted between January and March 2025, explored examination structure, competency alignment, disciplinary background, recruitment pathways, and administrative skills. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim with participants' consent.

Documentary Analysis

The official SLAS recruitment sources, such as gazettes, circulars, syllabi, and Sri Lanka Administrative Service Association reports (2015 - 2025), were systematically searched to analyse the eligibility, examination format, competency framing, and assessment systems.

Comparative Institutional Review

The practises of recruitment in India, Bangladesh, Singapore, and the UK were compared to determine the structural patterns, competency models, and principles that can be applied to Sri Lanka.

Procedure and Ethics of Analysis

Transcript familiarization, thematic categorization, cross-source interpretation, and theoretical framing through the Representative Bureaucracy and Social Equity prisms were all part of the analysis. The participants were from different ministries, grades, and academic backgrounds. The ethical standards were informed consent, anonymization, safe data management, and consequential interpretation (Israel & Hay, 2006).

Analysis

This paper applies the qualitative interpretative method in research, which is based on the Substantive Interpretive Analytical Framework (Figure 1). The framework allows to have systematic interpretation of the SLAS recruitment and selection procedures, which correlated the empirical data received in the interviews, official documents, and comparative civil service literature with the study objectives. It will enable the neutral and evidence-based analysis of the influence of recruitment mechanisms on the competency recognition, disciplinary representation, and governance outcomes.

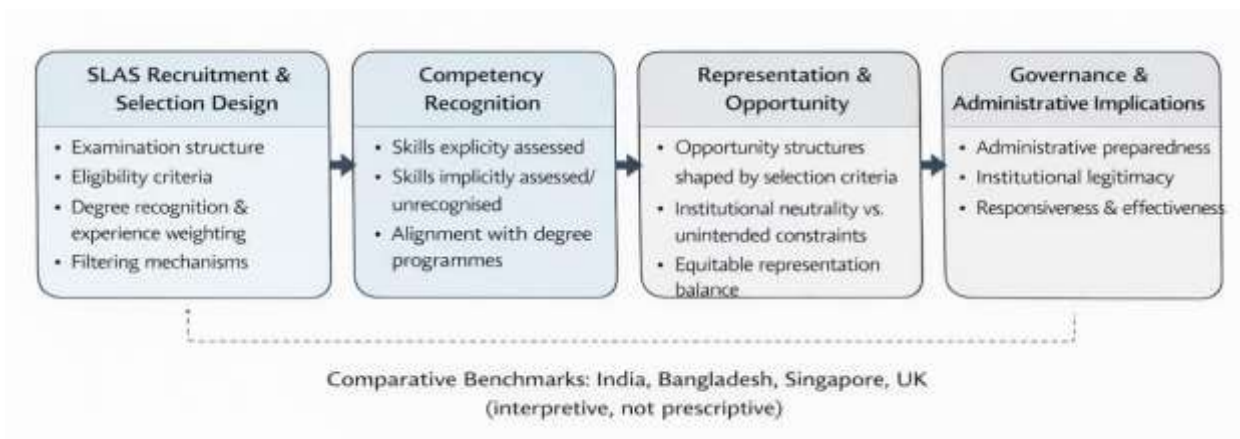


Figure 1: Analytical Framework

Source: Author

Note: The figure represents four interdependent dimensions (Design of SLAS Recruitment and Selection, Competency Recognition and Assessment, Opportunity Structures and Representation, and Governance and Administrative Implications) to relate to the sources of evidence (interviews, documents, comparative literature) and objectives of the research.

SLAS Recruitment and Selection Design

According to document review (2015-2021), general cognitive skills, reasoning, comprehension, and analytical ability are given priority, and eligibility is provided to all undergraduate degrees. Interviews ensure transparency and selection on merit, whereas expertise in specific disciplines is not identified. Interpretation: Meritocracy is preserved, and the graduates of governments have little chance to show specialised skills. Betterment: Implement an optional or weighted test in governance, public administration, or management.

Competency Recognition

The governance-specific skills (policy analysis, financial management, leadership, ethics) are not evaluated in SLAS. Interpretation: Misalignment requires post-recruitment training, which decelerates responsiveness. Functional applicability and alignment might be enhanced through discipline-based assessment.

Representation and Opportunity

The graduates of governance are given equal chances with the rest of the candidates. Comparative systems (India, Bangladesh, Singapore, UK) imply that weighted or competency-based selection may lead to better representation of all groups without impinging on merit.

Government and Administrative Implications

The process of recruitment affects the readiness of the administration and the quality of governance. Mentoring prevails, and disciplinary competencies are poorly appreciated. Interpretation: Alignment of recruitment with competencies that are relevant to governance has the potential to enhance efficiency, strategic decision-making, and institutional trust.

Analytical Notes

Results combine 20 interviews, reviews of documents, and comparative literature. The framework brings in coherence, transparency, and neutrality without assuming systemic inequity.

Key Findings And Discussion

Key results of the research rely on the substantive interpretive analysis of interviews with SLAS officers, complemented by document analysis and comparative evidence on civil service. The discussion is concerned with the opportunity offered by SLAS recruitment and selection to graduates trained in Management and Public Administration, preserving the principle of merit and evaluating practical skills required to work in the field of modern public administration.

General Cognitive Assessment Structural Emphasis

The SLAS test largely evaluates general cognitive skills, including logic, understanding, and learning. Officers observed that although these competencies facilitate selection based on merit, they do not adequately reflect those competencies essential to administrative effectiveness (policy implementation, strategic decision-making, and knowledge of public finance). Interpretation: The emphasis on broad cognitive aptitude assures standardization and fairness but restricts identification of governance-specific competences.

Poor Identification of Discipline-Specific Competencies

Interviewees noted that Management and Public Administration graduates have analytical, managerial, and policy skills, but the examination fails to formally recognise these skills. Interpretation: The equality of all undergraduate degrees fosters procedural fairness but diminishes the alignment between recruitment efforts and the job demands of the administrative jobs.

Disparity between Assessment Content and administrative functions

The content of the examination, though pertinent in the evaluation of analytical and communicative abilities, fails to incorporate the real-world governance situations. Officers proposed that case studies or scenario-based questions be included to capture the policy reasoning and practical decision-making. Interpretation: Adding practical exercises, such as in Singapore and the UK, may increase assessment of practical governance expertise without undermining meritocracy.

Institutional and Preparatory Constraints

General aptitude and previous questions are big areas of preparation towards examination. Graduates of governance frequently have no formal ways to use their subject-based knowledge. Interpretation: Equitable representation requires not just a well-designed examination, but also equitable access to preparation and informational resources, which implies closer institutional collaboration with universities and training institutions.

Inclusive Assessment Design Opportunities

The officers advised scenario-based questions, competency-based interviews, and evaluations of ethical reasoning and policy analysis as part of supplementing cognitive tests. Meaning: These actions, in line with good practises in other civil services, may enhance functional diversity and make sure that the recruitment process is representative of the variety of skills that modern public administration needs.

Synthesis and Implications

In general, the SLAS framework guarantees procedural fairness, yet it does not effectively evaluate competencies related to governance issues. It can be improved through applied governance assessments, prior preparatory guidance, and broader assessment tools, upholding meritocracy and advancing administrative performance, representational diversity, and institutional legitimacy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study underscores the fact that the existing SLAS assessment and hiring model does not sufficiently encompass the skills that successful public administration needs. Although general knowledge and cognitive skills have been tested, applied governance skills, policy analysis, decision-making, leadership, and emotional intelligence are not well tested by the system. As a result, a large number of the graduates of Management and Public Administration are not involved initially, as they see the system as less related to their experience, and the graduates of other fields seek government jobs, not due to a desire to work in the field of public administration.

Another finding of the study is that structural and informational gaps, including guidance limitation, absence of graduate streams, and exposure to real-life administrative activities, decrease motivation and readiness among specialized graduates. Comparisons to international practices in India, the UK, and Singapore have shown that competency-based, scenario-based, and discipline-specific assessment schemes have the potential to enhance participation, professional preparedness, and equity in civil service recruitment.

On the whole, matching the SLAS examination with applied administrative competencies, the introduction of the specialised streams, and adding emotional intelligence and practical examinations would not only improve the quality of recruitment but also the fairness of the representation of the management and Public Administration graduates in the Sri Lankan civil service.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of this study, several structurally feasible reforms are proposed to strengthen competency alignment and equitable disciplinary representation within the Sri Lanka Administrative Service (SLAS) open competitive examination.

Governance-Focused Assessment Component: A compulsory governance-oriented section should be incorporated within the existing examination framework to assess policy analysis, public financial management, administrative ethics and strategic decision-making. This would better reflect the functional demands of public administration whilst preserving merit-based competition.

Integration of Applied Scenario Questions: The examination should include structured case studies and situational judgement questions to evaluate practical administrative reasoning, thereby reducing overreliance on abstract cognitive testing.

Optional or Weighted Governance Paper: Consideration may be given to introducing an optional or weighted paper in Public Administration or Management, similar to the approach adopted by the Union Public Service Commission, ensuring recognition of specialised knowledge without compromising open competition.

Development of a Formal SLAS Competency Framework: The Ministry of Public Administration should articulate a clear competency framework to guide examination design and ensure transparency in recognising governance-related expertise.

Strengthened Institutional Preparatory Support: Greater coordination between universities and the Ministry should be established to provide structured guidance, thereby promoting equitable access to examination preparation.

Acknowledgment

This research is based on a dissertation submitted to the Department of Public Administration in 2025 as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the BSc. Honours in Management (Public) Degree. I extend my deepest appreciation to my research supervisor, Snr. Prof. (Mrs.) R. L. S. Fernando, for her invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous support throughout this study. Her expertise and encouragement have been instrumental in the successful completion of this research.

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Factors Affecting Early Retirement Decisions of Teachers in Government Schools: A Study of Kalutara Education Zone in Kalutara District in Sri Lanka

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Keywords: Early retirement, Government schools, Teachers

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of Study

Teachers play a significant role in providing education in formal education system. Numerous challenges currently affect teaching services, among which teacher shortages have emerged as one of the most critical. According to UNESCO's 2024 "Global Report on Teachers," a global teacher shortage has implications in terms of access and relevance: overcrowding classrooms, lower quality of teaching, and fewer learning opportunities, especially in communities with minimal resources (Dullewe, 2024). One of the significant factors to this shortage is early retirement of government schoolteachers, whereby teachers retire before their compulsory retirement age. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to identify the reasons that led to the early retirement of teachers and to propose strategies for minimizing these factors as a means of addressing the teacher shortage of the government.

1.2. Problem Statement

In an interview with *The Sunday Morning*, the president of the Ceylon Teachers' Union (CTU), S. Priyantha Fernando, highlighted the severity of the issue, stating, "There is a shortage of 40,000 teachers". Early retirement of government teachers further exacerbates teacher shortage. Chief among the factors for high turnover and shortage of teachers opined by numerous studies are teacher resignations and early retirement from the education system (Mafukata & Mudau, 2016) The rising percentage of early retirement of government schoolteachers has become a policy concern. According to primary data gathered from the Kalutara Zonal Education Office, the total number of teachers who have retired from 2020 to 2024 is 914, of which 118 are teachers who retired before the compulsory retirement age. Accordingly, nearly 13% of teachers in the Kalutara Education Zone have retired

before the compulsory retirement age. Furthermore, if teachers continue to retire early, the school system will lose experienced teachers in the future. Li & Zhao clearly show the early retirement of experienced teachers may lead to a loss of specialized knowledge in various subjects and teaching methods (Li & Zhao, 2022). Moreover, local empirical studies on early retirement decisions of government schoolteachers are limited and this creates a critical research gap.

1.3. Research Question

- Why do government schoolteachers make early retirement decisions in the Kalutara Education Zone?

1.4. Research Objective

- To explore why government schoolteachers, make early retirement decisions in the Kalutara Education Zone.

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study holds both theoretical and practical significance by contributing to the theoretical understanding of factors influencing early retirement decisions among teachers, particularly within government schools, while offering actionable insights for policymakers. At the individual level, this study makes it possible to get a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of teachers influencing retirement decisions. At the policy level, findings from this research will enable policymakers at the district and national levels to formulate policies to better the quality of the education system. Also, these shall enable the workforce in education to be further strengthened. By reducing early retirement, the government can reduce unnecessary expenses such as training costs and recruitment costs. The long-term benefits of this study include increasing the contribution of teaching professionals to reaching macroeconomic goals such as increasing employment, creating economic development, and increasing the literacy rate.

2. Literature Review

Early or voluntary retirement (ER) can be defined as the full exit from an organizational job or career path of long duration, decided by individuals of a certain age at the mid or late career before the mandatory retirement age, to reduce their attachment to work and close a process of gradual psychological disengagement from working life (Topa , Depolo, & Alcover, 2018). Nowadays, there is a worldwide tendency for early retirement among teachers. Ming shows that, despite comprising a relatively small percentage of the overall teacher workforce, the number of teachers seeking early retirement has notably increased in recent years (Ming, 2024).

Various theories and models of retirement can be used to identify the reasons that lead to the early retirement decisions of teachers. Mainly, this study based on Herzberg's two-factor theory and it is applied to assess how dissatisfaction with hygiene factors such as salary, workload, and job security, as well as the absence of motivating factors such as recognition, achievement, and opportunities for professional growth, contribute to teachers' withdrawal from government school employment. Role theory is used to examine how teachers perceive the transition from their professional role to post-retirement roles, particularly how difficulties in role exit or adaptation may encourage early retirement (Martinčeková & Škrobáková, 2019). Continuity theory informs the analysis of how teachers seek to preserve their identity, self-esteem, and activity levels beyond formal employment, explaining why some teachers view early retirement as a viable option for maintaining personal and professional continuity through alternative roles (Osuji & Nweze, 2014). Together, these theories provide a theoretical lens for interpreting teachers' early retirement decisions within the context of government schools in Sri Lanka.

The effect of early retirements of government schoolteachers hurts not only the school but also the entire education system, which needs their services to help improve the performance of students and further elevate the status of education in the country (Basiron & Shaid, 2024).

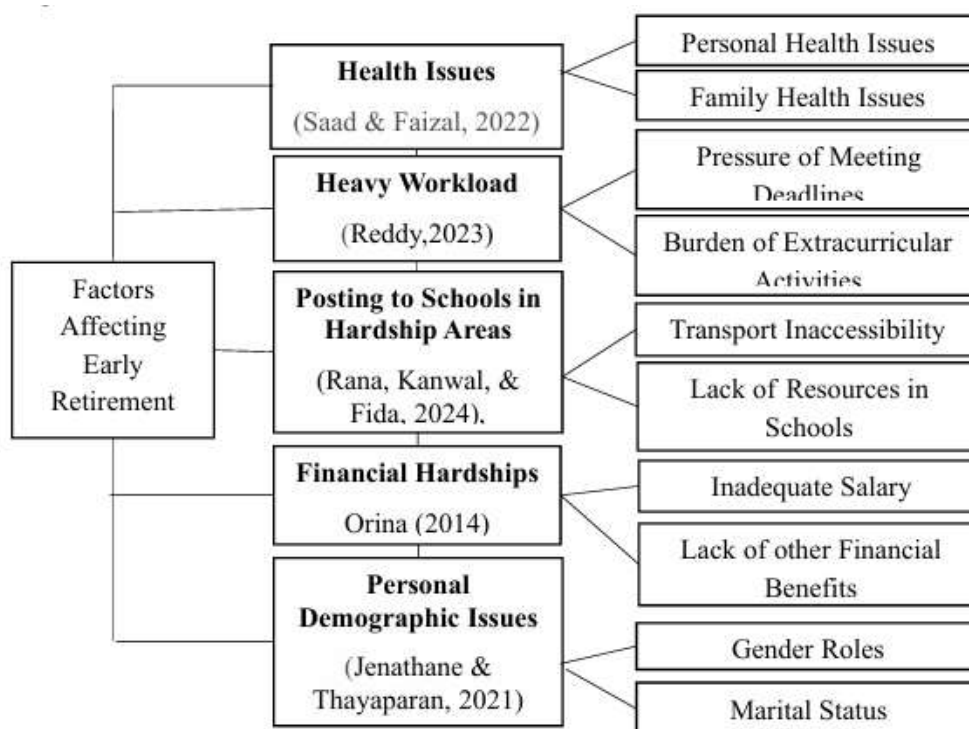
Empirical studies identify health issues, heavy workload, posting hardship areas, financial constraints and personal demographic factors as major reasons for early retirement among teachers. For instance, Orina carried out a study to assess factors leading to the early retirement of public secondary school teachers in Kajiado County, Kenya. The researcher found several factors such as workload, salary issues, posting in hardship areas, parenting, joining spouses in an area of residence, poor relationship with school principals, socio-cultural issues, political interference in school management, transfer issues, promotion issues, etc. (Orina, 2014). Apart from that, job satisfaction, work stress, organizational commitment, career advancement opportunities, and personal demographic issues are found by Ming as the factors affecting the early retirement of teachers. Among them, findings revealed that organizational challenges, including administrative burdens, workload, and dissatisfaction with school management, significantly impact teachers' retirement intentions (Ming, 2024). However, existing studies are largely concentrated in non-South Asian contexts and do not sufficiently examine early retirement decisions within government school systems in Sri Lanka, where institutional structures, socio-cultural expectations, and policy frameworks differ significantly. Moreover, prior research tends to focus on individual or organizational factors in isolation, with limited integration of retirement and motivation theories to explain teachers' early retirement decisions holistically. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the combined influence of organizational, personal, and contextual factors on early retirement decisions among teachers in

government schools in the Kalutara Education Zone, thereby contributing context-specific empirical evidence to the existing literature.

3. Methodology

This study is guided by a clearly defined theoretical framework, which informs the research design, shapes the analysis, and provides a foundation for interpreting the findings.

Figure 3.1: Theoretical Framework



This study adopted a qualitative research approach to get an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing early retirement decisions. As the exploratory nature of this study and the need of capturing personal experiences of participants, this approach was considered appropriate. The target population of this study was the 118 of early retired public schoolteachers in the Kalutara education zone in Kalutara district in Sri Lanka from 2020-2024. Due to practical constraints, a sample of 15 government schoolteachers in Kalutara education zone who retired before the age 55 was selected using the snowball sampling method. Furthermore, primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed the researcher to follow a set of guiding questions while also exploring participants' responses in greater depth through probing and follow-up questions. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, and this method enabled the identification of recurring patterns and key factors. To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, several strategies were employed such as; Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with participants and careful probing during interviews to obtain rich and detailed data. Furthermore, to enhance

dependability, the interview guide was consistently used across all participants while allowing flexibility for probing questions. Detailed documentation of the data collection and analysis procedures was maintained to ensure transparency and consistency. Moreover, ethical considerations were strictly observed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity of participants.

4. Analysis

Accordingly, five key themes were developed that aligned with the research objective, and data were collected and analyzed according to those five themes. Key themes and sub themes are as follows:

Table 4.1: Summary of identified themes and sub-themes

No.	Theme	Sub-themes
1	Health Issues	Personal Health Issues Family Health Issues
2	Heavy Workload	Pressure of Meeting Deadlines Burden of Extracurricular Activities
3	Posting to Schools in Hardship Areas	Transport Inaccessibility Lack of Resources in Schools
4	Financial Hardships	Inadequate Salary Lack of other Financial Benefits
5	Personal Demographic Issues	Gender Roles Marital Status

- Health Issues

This mainly focused on the effects of personal and family health issues on early retirement decisions. Personal health issues mainly affect teachers, who were facing physical health issues such as back pain, vein issues, sore throat, and other diseases, as T7 explained,

“I have been suffering from Arthritis for a long time. I found it difficult to climb stairs and stand for long periods. My health problem was the main reason I retired early.”

Furthermore, some interviewees mentioned that their family health issues also affected their early retirement decisions. For instance,

“I had a disabled sister. I retired early because I had to take care of her. She passed away a few years ago. So, I am still glad about my early retirement decision. Otherwise, I would not have been able to be near her and care for her during her final days.” (T15)

- Heavy Workload

Excessive administrative duties, frequent deadlines, and extracurricular activities emerged as major stressors. Many participants said they had to do much work within the stipulated time frame, covering their syllabus, evaluating examination papers, and preparing admissions for competitive examinations. Teachers are also required to participate in extracurricular activities held in schools. Most teachers who participated in the interviews contributed effectively and actively to these activities. For instance, T3 stated,

“I was assigned to prepare applications for competitive examinations such as the grade 5 scholarship, O/L, and A/L. Also, I was hindered from completing the syllabus. I was assigned an unbearable amount of work.”

Therefore, participants’ common opinion was that their other responsibilities, besides teaching, increased the pressure they felt to meet deadlines. This reduces their job satisfaction and creates a mindset for early retirement.

- Posting Hardship Areas

When teachers are assigned to hardship areas, they face various challenges, such as a lack of infrastructure, transport inaccessibility, a lack of learning and teaching resources, and unfavorable working conditions. For these reasons, some teachers are less satisfied with their jobs. For instance,

“I was posted to a school about twenty kilometers from home. I had a leg injury and had to travel by three-wheeler every day. It was an unaffordable expense; for that reason, I decided to retire.” (T9)

- Financial Hardships

Participants mainly stated that their salaries are comparatively low compared to the amount of work they do and that they receive very few other financial benefits compared to those received in other professions. As a result, some teachers retire early, relying on their partners' income, while others focus on other sources of income, as T11 explained.

“Compared to the salary I earn, the income from tuition classes is very high, so instead of wasting my time teaching at the government school, I put more attention and effort into conducting tuition classes.”

- **Personal Demographic Issues**

Teachers' demographics may often factor into their decision to retire early. That is, the work assigned to teachers based on their gender and their responsibilities due to their marital status determines whether they continue to serve or retire early.

Some gender roles affect early retirement decisions. For example, according to interviewees' responses, female teachers are more likely to leave early than male teachers because women have to manage their professional and household responsibilities. For instance,

“My daughter was abroad. After her first child was born, I had to go to her. Because I have only one daughter, she is my priority in life. That is why I had to retire early from my job.” (T5)

From the observations made in the study and the comments received from the respondents, it became clear that the responsibilities assigned to teachers based on their gender greatly influenced their decision to retire early.

5. Key Findings and Discussions

This study found that teachers' health issues greatly influence their retirement decisions. Common conditions such as sore throat, back pain, and knee pain reflect the physically demanding nature of the teaching profession, particularly in public schools with large class sizes and limited resources. This finding is consistent with (Jenathane & Thayaparan, 2021), who identified health concerns as a key determinant of early retirement, suggesting that health-related strain is a persistent issue among teachers. Furthermore, one of the main factors influencing retirement among the participants in this study was excessive workload. Participants reported pressure to meet deadlines in addition to extensive extracurricular and administrative responsibilities, leading to increased stress and burnout. This finding aligns with Sala and Quines (2023), who highlighted the chronically overworked condition of public-school teachers in the Philippines. The similarity between these contexts indicates that heavy workload is a widespread challenge in public education systems, particularly in developing countries. This research also revealed that financial hardships are another major factor contributing to the early retirement decisions of government schoolteachers in Kalutara Education Zone. The key concerns were low salaries and a lack of other financial benefits such as overtime pay, bonuses, etc. These findings align with Rana, Kanwal, & Fida (2024) who highlighted that teacher compensation is another important factor in their decision to leave the profession. Furthermore, postings to hardship areas and demographic responsibilities intensified stress, especially for female teachers. Limited transport facilities, lack of school resources, and traditional gender roles collectively increased the burden on teachers, accelerating early retirement decisions.

From a policy perspective, the Sri Lankan case highlights the need for retirement policies that go beyond age-based criteria. Other countries can learn from this context by adopting comprehensive strategies that address teacher health, workload, financial incentives, and support for hardship postings. Failure to address these interconnected issues may further exacerbate teacher shortages and reduce the sustainability of public education systems.

6. Conclusion And Recommendations

This study concludes that heavy workload and financial hardships were the most affecting factors when deciding on early retirement of government schoolteachers in Kalutara Education Zone. Moreover, health issues, and demographic issues like gender roles significantly influenced the early retirement decision of the government schoolteachers in Kalutara Education Zone. However, posting hardship areas affected only a few teachers when deciding on early retirement. The recommendations of this study were mainly developed in line with Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory. Therefore, this research recommends to reduce workload by appointing school-level administrative assistants to handle documentation, data entry, and reporting tasks, digitizing attendance, assessment, and reporting systems to reduce paperwork, limiting non-academic duties such as election duties or excessive committee work for senior teachers. Financial hardships can be mitigated by introducing performance-based incentives, cost-of-living adjustment allowances for teachers. Provide health and wellness programs for teachers and strengthen pre-retirement consultations to make retirement decision efficiently. On the other hand, teachers can be motivated by publicly recognizing long service and contributions during school events and offering formal appreciation letters from the Ministry or Zonal Education Office. By using these kinds of strategies, it will be contributed to reduce job dissatisfaction and to enhance job satisfaction and encourage teacher retention.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. The small sample size and the use of snowball sampling limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the study focused on a single education zone, which may not fully represent the experiences of teachers in other regions of Sri Lanka. The qualitative nature of the study, while providing rich insights, does not allow for statistical generalization.

Future research is recommended to conduct from the different perspectives using a sample of educational administrators, principals, and retired teachers, it would be possible to identify the results more broadly and in depth.

Acknowledgment

This research is based on a dissertation submitted to the Department of Public Administration in 2025 as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the BSc. Honours in Management (Public) Degree. I extend my deepest appreciation to my research supervisor, Dr. P. I. Anuradha, for her invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous support throughout this study. Her expertise and encouragement have been instrumental in the successful completion of this research.

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Factors Influencing Students' Choice of Undergraduate Research Title: Evidence from Undergraduates of a Selected Faculty of State University, Sri Lanka

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Keywords: undergraduate research, research title selection, career aspirations, supervisor relationships, resource availability

Introduction

Background

As part of higher education, Research continues to provide systematic methodology for creating new knowledge; therefore, the process of Research is used to increase knowledge and understanding across many fields of study. According to the University system of Sri Lanka, it is necessary that the SLQF stipulates that an undergraduate, reading for a degree at Level 6, should complete a research component equivalent to a total of at least 6 credits of SLQF level 6, thus making Research a requirement for completing a degree program. All the Undergraduates at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce are required to complete an independent Research Study. When selecting an appropriate title for the research study, the students have to give more consideration. And also, this is a very influential and crucial academic decision that a student makes regarding their educational experience, development of skills, and future career path. Several factors that determine the selection of a research title include personal interest, career aspirations, availability of resources, supervisor support, peer influence, and constraints imposed by faculty. Understanding these factors is necessary in order to improve the overall Research Experience for Undergraduates and provide appropriate support for making informed and meaningful decisions regarding Research Title Selection.

Problem Statement

Choosing a research title is an important part of college education, but there aren't many studies that look at how Sri Lankan students make this important choice. Most of the literature on the topic of research challenges relates to postgraduate students and does not adequately address the unique issues faced by undergraduates, creating a lack of understanding of how undergraduates conduct research. These knowledge gaps present several challenges to the students, their supervisors, and the

institutions where they are enrolled. Adedokun et al.(2012) study suggested that there is a need for further studies that dig deeper into how the structures of UREs vary and how these variations affect student outcomes (Adedokun et al., 2012).

Conducting the pilot study with ten students attending the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce has presented some alarming trends. A large number of students do not know how to independently select research topics, but instead lean on their supervisors for advice, while the majority have been forced to drop a topic of interest in favor of one selected by their supervisor - this suggests a problem with academic autonomy and mentorship styles. Others indicated that they would choose research topics based on ease of access to the desired data and reduced workload, rather than personal interest or alignment with career goals. This suggests their decision-making is suboptimal.

Results from this study indicate that there are gaps in student support structures, knowledge, and alignment of their choices of research topics to their academic and career aspirations. However, without knowing what influences how students select their research titles, universities cannot create effective ways to enhance students' research experiences. To fill this important gap, this research systematically investigates what affects undergraduate students in selecting research titles and generates data for establishing guidelines and support mechanisms to enable students to make better-informed, more meaningful research decisions.

Research Question

What factors influence students in choosing their undergraduate research title?

Research objectives

- To identify the factors that influence students in choosing their undergraduate research title
- To propose guidelines to select the appropriate titles to successfully complete the research project

Significance of the Study

It is important to know what influences research title selection because many people have to consider these issues. For the students, this information will help them make better decisions based on their academic and professional goals. For the faculty and supervision, this information will help them better mentor and guide the student. For institutions, this study will provide valuable information for creating policies regarding support for research, allocation of resources, and designing undergraduate curriculum. The study was designed to fill a significant gap in research within Sri Lankan Higher Education, and the results provide a basis for practical recommendations to enhance the undergraduate research experience.

Literature Review

According to Ryan and Deci's SDT theory, motivation can be identified as intrinsic (engaging in activities for internal satisfaction) and extrinsic (caused by external outcomes). Intrinsically motivated students choose themes of personal interest or curiosity, while externally motivated students choose topics that match career objectives, institutional demands, or instructor preferences. The difference between autonomous and controlled motivation also affects the choice of subjects. Research projects with more autonomous choices are more creative and involve more people (Mosyjowski et al., 2017).

Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory proposes that human behavior is the product of the interaction between personal factors, environmental influences, and behavioral patterns. He emphasized the role of observational learning, social experience, and reciprocal determinism in human behavior, suggesting that people are both influenced by and actively influence their environments (Nickerson, 2024). Expectancy-value theory (EVT), one of the major approaches to the study of academic motivation, has been widely used to predict and explain students' task choices, learning persistence, and academic performance (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Undergraduate Research Title

Undergraduate students' participation in hands-on research is widely believed to encourage students to pursue advanced degrees and careers (Russell et al., 2015). The selection of a thesis topic is not a quick and easy process (Khan et al., 2023). The topic acts as a precursor in guiding the arrangements of later analysis. It provides a definite angle on what a researcher determines to produce (Khan et al., 2023). However, every student at the primary level faces hardship while deciding on an effective topic for their research paper (Khan et al., 2023).

Career Aspiration and Motivation

As noted by Moghaddam, Sadri & Yazdani, learners frequently select topics that correspond with their future career aspirations, aiming to improve their job prospects in a specific area (Moghaddam et al., 2020). Development and enhancement of research confidence and research identity promote career clarification (Adedokun et al., 2012). Undergraduate research experiences provide them with information regarding possible future career choices, help them to clarify their career options, and enhance their professional credentials (Adedokun et al., 2012).

Resources availability

According to Singh, Sharma, & Gupta, students tend to select research topics more frequently when they have straightforward access to necessary resources, including academic journals, data, and

guidance (Singh et al., 2021). The presence of data collection techniques and access to particular tools frequently leads students to limit their research choices to align with the resources they have available (Singh et al., 2021).

Relationships with supervisors

Peiris, Barbutiu & Hansson identified four major issues: availability and communication, cultural issues, students' lack of awareness of the role of their supervisor, supervisor friendliness, and constructive feedback (Peiris et al., 2018). According to their findings, a close student-supervisor relationship will enhance the students' motivation and encourage them to engage in research project activities (Peiris et al., 2018).

Peer influence

Robinson Huang & Wu found that students frequently choose topics that resemble those chosen by their classmates, particularly when the research subject is considered prestigious or results in favorable outcomes (Robinson et al., 2021). Peer groups establish social learning contexts that affect students' choices regarding research topics (Robinson et al., 2021).

Academic workload

The research project is offered as one-semester course. Although a semester includes half a year (26 weeks), there are only 13 weeks for academic activities (after deducting vacation time, study leaves, and examination periods). According to both supervisors and students, 13 weeks is not enough to conduct a research project (Peiris et al., 2018). Data show that many students are not able to properly manage their time with research activities and often waste time, especially when there is a lack of proper structure and no implemented monitoring system (Peiris et al., 2018).

Methodology

In conducting this research, the method was quantitative, and the aim was to identify the factors that make undergraduate students select a particular title for their thesis. To achieve this, the researchers created a questionnaire that contained questions relevant to the independent variables listed in the research project. A structured questionnaire is used for data collection in this study. It includes closed-ended and open-ended questions. The questionnaire includes Likert scale questions, open-ended questions, and multiple-choice questions for gathering data.

The sample population consisted of all undergraduate students who had completed either their third year or fourth year of study in a selected Faculty of a State University in Sri Lanka, which totaled 2647 students. A sample of 210 students was taken using simple random sampling techniques

(approximately 8%) so that all members of the population would have an equal chance of being selected. Primary data were collected, and later were processed with SPSS using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and multiple-regression methods in order to establish relationships between independent variables and the selection of research titles by undergraduate students.

Descriptive statistics are used to summarize data in an organized manner by describing the relationship between variables in a sample or population (Yellapu, 2018). A correlation means that there is a relationship between two or more variables (Cherry, 2023). Regression analysis is a statistical tool that helps evaluate relationships between a dependent variable and one or more independent or predictor variables (Gogtay et al., 2017). Correlation shows the relationship between two variables and does not explain how one affects the other. However, Regression focuses on how one variable affects another. And also, attention was paid throughout the research process to ethical considerations related to data handling and participant privacy. Furthermore, reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire. The KMO(Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) test was used to check the suitability of data for factor analysis and to confirm construct validity.

Conceptual framework

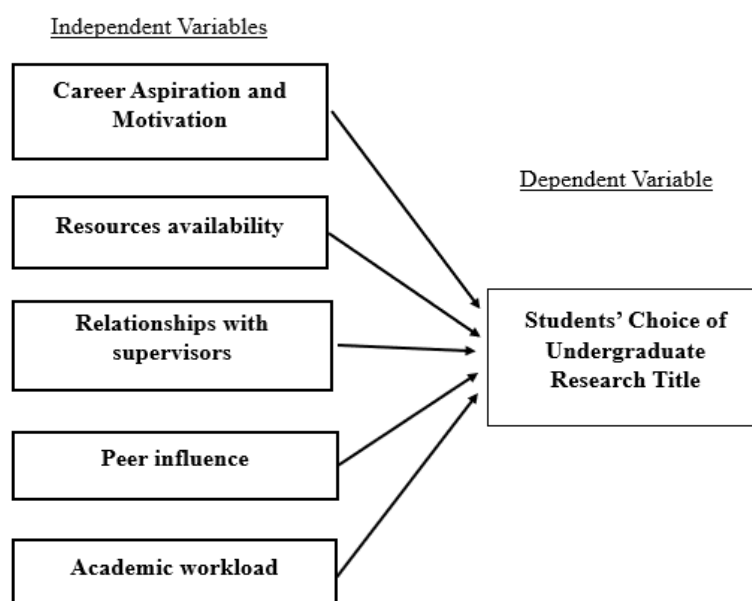


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Based on Literature Review

Hypothesis Development

- **H1:** Career aspiration and motivation significantly affect students' choice of undergraduate research title.
- **H2:** Resource availability significantly affects students' choice of undergraduate research title.
- **H3:** Relationship with supervisors significantly affects students' choice of undergraduate research title.
- **H4:** Peer influence significantly affects students' choice of undergraduate research title.
- **H5:** Academic workload significantly affects students' choice of undergraduate research title.

Ethical considerations

Throughout this study, principles of ethics were carefully implemented while conducting research. Participants gave informed consent before they participated in the study (voluntarily), were informed of the study's objectives, and were provided with their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Respondents' responses remained anonymous and confidential by not obtaining any information that could lead back to them, collecting only information necessary for academic purposes, and protecting the security of the data collected by storing it safely and allowing only the researcher to access it. Participants did not suffer any harm, force, or bias during this study, and the results of this study were reported honestly and accurately and in conformity with recognized ethical research standards.

Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics conducted using SPSS software on the data show that the participants were moderately satisfied with the research titles they selected ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.102$). The highest-ranking independent variable was trust in supervisor's advice ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.907$), which was followed by the selection of manageable topics within the limits of academic workload ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.986$) and selecting something of personal interest ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.975$). The lowest ranking independent variable in this survey was peer influence ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.077$).

- Dependent Variable (Students' Choice of Undergraduate Research Title)

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
How satisfied are you with your chosen research title?	210	3.61	1.102
Valid N (listwise)	210		

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis (Students' Choice of Undergraduate Research Title)

Source: Survey data, 2025

- Independent Variable (Career Aspirations & Motivation)

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
My career aspirations strongly influenced the research topics I chose.	210	3.44	1.136
Personal_interest_is_the_most_important_factor_for_me_when_selecting_a_research_topic	210	3.89	.975
When selecting a research topic, I focus on how it aligns with my career goals.	210	3.57	1.039
My_enthusiasm_for_the_subject_matter_affected_my_choice_of_research_title	210	3.68	1.017
Valid N (listwise)	210		

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis (Career Aspirations & Motivation)

Source: Survey data, 2025

- Independent Variable (Resource Availability)

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
The_availability_of_research_(e.g., data tools, literature) greatly influences my choice of research topic	210	3.80	.905
I_often_choose_a_research_topic_based_on_the_resources_available_to_me_(e.g._data_research_materials)	210	3.89	.865
The_availability_of_faculty_and_institutional_support_impacted_my_choice_of_research_title	210	3.77	.889
Valid N (listwise)	210		

Table 3: Descriptive Analysis (Resource Availability)

Source: Survey data, 2025

- Independent Variable (Relationships with Supervisors)

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I_am_motivated_to_choose_a_research_topic_that_aligns_with_my_supervisor's_suggestions_or_preferences	210	3.95	.952
My_supervisor's_opinion_has_a_significant_influence_on_my_choice_of_research_topic	210	3.90	1.000
I_seek_guidance_from_my_supervisor_when_choosing_a_research_topic	210	4.02	.880
I_trust_my_supervisor's_advice_when_deciding_on_a_research_topic	210	4.07	.907
Valid N (listwise)	210		

Table 4: Descriptive Analysis (Relationships with Supervisors)

Source: Survey data, 2025

- Independent Variable (Peer Influence)

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Peer_influence_plays_a_significant_role_in_my_decision_making_process_when_selecting_a_research_topic	210	3.11	1.077
I_frequently_discuss_potential_research_topics_with_my_peers_seniors_before_finalizing_my_decision	210	3.62	1.048
Peer_recommendations_influenced_my_research_title_selection	210	3.39	1.072
Valid N (listwise)	210		

Table 5: Descriptive Analysis (Peer Influence)

Source: Survey data, 2025

- Independent Variable (Academic Workload)

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
My_current_academic_workload_has_an_impact_on_my_choice_of_research_topic.	210	3.91	1.005
I_tend_to_select_research_topics_that_are_less_time_consuming_due_to_my_academic_workload	210	4.00	.988
The_time_required_for_data_collection_and_analysis_influences_my_choice_of_research_topic	210	4.13	.881
I_choose_research_topics_that_are_manageable_within_my_academic_workload_and_intern	210	4.15	.986
Valid N (listwise)	210		

Table 6: Descriptive Analysis (Academic workload)

Source: Survey data, 2025

Reliability

Cronbach's Alpha values greater than 0.70 are generally considered acceptable, while values above 0.80 indicate good reliability, and those exceeding 0.90 suggest excellent reliability (George & Mallery, 2003). According to table 7, the high Cronbach's alpha values confirm that the questionnaire is a reliable tool for investigating factors influencing students' choice of undergraduate research topics.

Table 7: Reliability Test

	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Career Aspirations	.871	4
Resource Availability	.843	3
Relationships with Supervisors	.907	4
Peer Influence	.875	3
Academic Workload	.923	4

Source: Survey data, 2025

Validity

The KMO(Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) test was used to check the suitability of data for factor analysis and to confirm construct validity. A KMO value above 0.70 is generally considered acceptable, meaning the data is suitable for factor analysis. According to table 8, this study KMO values were above 0.7, indicating that the data is suitable for factor analysis, and the questionnaire has good validity.

Table 8: Validity Test

	KMO Value (>0.7)	Sig. Value (<0.05)
Career Aspirations	.768	<.001
Resource Availability	.722	<.001
Relationships with Supervisors	.823	<.001
Peer Influence	.736	<.001
Academic Workload	.819	<.001

Source: Survey data, 2025

Normality Test

Researchers normally store data for analysis and processing by Kolmogorov-Smirnov goodness-of-fit statistics (Olusegun et al., 2020). If the p-value is greater than 0.05, it can be assumed that the data are normally distributed. As shown in Table 9, all variables show p-values (Sig.) greater than 0.05, indicating that the assumption of normality is not violated.

Table 9: Normality Test

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Career Aspirations and Motivation	.122	210	<.786
Resource Availability	.264	210	<.524
Relationships with Supervisors	.225	210	<.887
Peer Influence	.129	210	<.634
Academic workload	.176	210	<.774

Source: Survey data, 2025

Multicollinearity Diagnostics

Multicollinearity was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values. According to Table 10, all VIF values are well below the commonly accepted threshold of 5, indicating no multicollinearity problem among the independent variables.

Table 10: Multicollinearity Diagnostics

Variable	VIF
Career Aspirations & Motivation	1.42
Resource Availability	1.58
Relationships with Supervisors	1.56
Peer Influence	1.26
Academic Workload	1.52

Source: Survey data, 2025

Correlation Analysis

The results of the Correlation Analysis found statistically significant relationships ($p < 0.001$) between all independent variables and how they impacted a student's choice of title for their research project. The correlation coefficient of Career Aspirations was the strongest ($r = 0.522$), while Resource Availability ($r = 0.324$), Supervisor Relationships ($r = 0.321$), Peer Influence ($r = 0.278$) and Academic Workload ($r = .257$) were weaker but still statistically significant relationships.

Correlations		Students' Choice of Undergraduate Research Title	Career Aspirations and Motivation	Resource Availability	Relationships with Supervisors	Peer Influence	Academic workload
Students' Choice of Undergraduate	Pearson Correlation	1	.522**	.324**	.321**	.278**	.257**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001

Research Title	N	210	210	210	210	210	210
Career Aspirations and Motivation	Pearson Correlation	.522**	1	.367**	.448**	.367**	.402**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	210	210	210	210	210	210
Resource Availability	Pearson Correlation	.324**	.367**	1	.483**	.378**	.498**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	210	210	210	210	210	210
Relationships with Supervisors	Pearson Correlation	.321**	.448**	.483**	1	.322**	.474**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001
	N	210	210	210	210	210	210
Peer Influence	Pearson Correlation	.278**	.367**	.378**	.322**	1	.273**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001
	N	210	210	210	210	210	210
Academic workload	Pearson Correlation	.257**	.402**	.498**	.474**	.273**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	
	N	210	210	210	210	210	210
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).							

Table 7: Table of Correlations

Source: Survey data, 2025

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

According to the model summary (Table 8), there is a significant correlation ($R = 0.759$) between the variables and the students' choice of undergraduate research title. The model explains 29.5% of the variance, according to the R^2 value of 0.295, which is statistically significant ($F = 17.307$, $p < .001$).

Model Summary ^b									
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R-Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df 1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.759 ^a	.295	.280	.935	.295	17.307	5	204	<.001
a. Predictors: (Constant), Academic workload, Peer Influence, Career Aspirations and Motivation, Relationships with Supervisors, Resource Availability									
b. Dependent Variable: Students' Choice of Undergraduate Research Title									

Table 8: Model Summary

Source: Survey data, 2025

According to the ANOVA analysis, the F-value of 17.307 with a p-value ($<.001$) indicates that the overall regression model is statistically significant at the 0.01 level, meaning that the combined effect of the independent variables significantly predicts students' choice of research title.

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	75.581	5	15.116	17.307	<.001 ^b
	Residual	178.176	204	.873		
	Total	253.757	209			
a. Dependent Variable: Students' Choice of Undergraduate Research Title						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Academic workload, Peer Influence, Career Aspirations and Motivation, Relationships with Supervisors, Resource Availability						

Table 9: ANOVA

Source: Survey data, 2025

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	2.77	0.083		33.203	<.001
Career Aspirations and Motivation	0.522	0.085	0.487	6.141	<.001
Resource Availability	0.324	0.090	0.302	3.600	<.001
Relationships with Supervisors	0.321	0.092	0.298	3.489	<.001
Peer Influence	0.278	0.081	0.265	3.432	<.001
Academic Workload	0.257	0.083	0.241	3.096	<.001

Table 10: Coefficient Correlations

Source: Survey data, 2025

According to table 10, the coefficients show that every predictor has a significant impact on the undergraduate research title that students choose. Academic workload, peer influence, supervisory relationships, and resource availability all show significant beneficial impacts ($p < .001$), but career Aspirations and motivation ($B = 0.522$, $\beta = 0.487$) have the greatest impact.

Hypothesis Testing

	Hypothesis Description	Results
H1	Career aspiration and motivation significantly affect students' choice of undergraduate research title.	Accepted
H2	Resource availability significantly affects students' choice of undergraduate research title.	Accepted

H3	Relationships with supervisors significantly affect students' choice of undergraduate research title.	Accepted
H4	Peer influence significantly affects students' choice of undergraduate research title.	Accepted
H5	Academic workload significantly affects students' choice of undergraduate research title.	Accepted

Table 11: Summary of the findings

Source: Findings of the data analysis, 2025

Key Findings and Discussion

The outcome of the regression analysis revealed that the equation of $Y = 2.77 + (0.522) A1 + (0.324) A2 + (0.321) A3 + (0.278) A4 + (0.257) A5$ represents the selected Research Titles (Y). The five hypotheses were confirmed to be true, which proves that Students were motivated to choose their Research Titles by several factors, including career aspiration/motivation, availability of resources, mentorship by a supervisor, peer influence, and Academic Workload. The most significant determinants were career objectives and motivation ($B = 0.522$, $\beta = 0.487$, $p < .001$), followed by connections with supervisors ($\beta = 0.298$, $p < .001$) and resource availability ($\beta = 0.302$, $p < .001$). Academic workload ($\beta = 0.241$, $p < .001$) and peer influence ($\beta = 0.265$, $p < .001$) were statistically significant but slightly weaker predictors. The findings reveal that career aspirations and motivation, resource availability, and supervisory relationships significantly impact students' choices.

Furthermore, the study findings support policy implications. Universities should give career-oriented mentoring top priority when helping students choose research titles, since career aspirations and motivation showed the strongest standardized. The impact of Relationships with Supervisors was significant; Supervisees demonstrated a great deal of trust in their supervisor's advice. It demonstrates the need for effective mentorship in supervising students; this finding aligns with Peiris, Barbutiu, and Hansson's (2018) research. Students' long-term objectives and research participation may be better aligned if they get structured career counseling during the proposal stage. Pilot studies conducted revealed some troubling instances where the supervisees felt pressured into selecting topics suggested by their Supervisors; hence, a more collaborative approach is needed. Resource availability was found to be the second most important factor with a ($\beta=0.302$, $P<0.001$), indicating that students are restricted by the availability of resources that are practical within Sri Lankan University settings; the study supports the findings of Singh, Sharma, and Gupta (2021).

Moreover, the study findings contribute academically. This study enhances the current literature on undergraduate research by providing empirical evidence from a Sri Lankan university about the combined impact of motivational, institutional, and social factors on research title selection. Career aspiration and motivation are the strongest predictor, indicating that students select research titles that coincide with their career plans and personal goals; it reinforces the finding from Self-Determination Theory and aligns with Yaffe, Bender, and Sechrest's (2014) study showing that participation in research experiences clarifies a student's career direction and enhances their professional development.

Although peer influence and academic workload were statistically significant, they have a modest impact compared to the other relationships examined herein ($\beta = .265$ and $\beta = .241$, respectively). While students may discuss topics with their peers, they still make decisions based on personal preferences rather than peer recommendations. Academic workload does contribute to an inability to focus on a wider variety of research topics, as well as the increasing difficulty of balancing multiple roles as a student.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research on five factors that significantly impact undergraduate research title selection in Sri Lanka University has identified several variables affecting student research decisions, including Career aspirations and motivations; Resource availability and Supervisor Relationships; Peer relationships, and Academic workload. It has also been noted that there are recommendations to address all of these factors, including

- Including comprehensive career guidance programs in universities, matching students' career goals with research title selection,
- Providing better access to research resources, libraries & databases, paying for research, and building research facilities,
- Creating structured peer discussion forums before project selection to facilitate social learning,
- Correcting curricula to allow sufficient time for completing research projects by adjusting deadlines and scheduling schedules,
- Providing required research methodology workshops early in programs to help students learn the skills necessary to select appropriate research titles.

Future studies could explore financial constraints on research title selection, institutional policies and procedures that may influence research selection, and the influence of technology on research title selection through comparative studies between universities and disciplines to get information on how

financial constraints, institutional policies, and technological influences are related. Through longitudinal studies to follow the career development of students.

Acknowledgment

This research is based on a dissertation submitted to the Department of Public Administration in 2025 as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the BSc. Honours in Management (Public) Degree. I extend my deepest appreciation to my research supervisor, Snr. Prof. (Mrs.) R. L. S. Fernando, for her invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous support throughout this study. Her expertise and encouragement have been instrumental in the successful completion of this research.

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Evaluating Service Quality of Public Bus Transportation: Evidence from Passengers in Ratnapura District, Sri Lanka”

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Key Words: Public Bus Transportation, Passengers, Service Quality

Introduction

Background

Public bus transportation is a critical component of Sri Lanka's transport system, especially in areas with few other transportation options. In Ratnapura District, public buses are considered the primary means of transportation for a large portion of the local population. Residents of Ratnapura primarily depend on public bus services for both short- and long-distance travel due to the lack of railway connectivity and the high cost of owning a private vehicle. The bus is the main mode that facilitates access to employment, education, healthcare, and other essential services.

Problem Background

Sri Lankan public bus transportation has received harsh criticism for its poor performance, which has left passengers dissatisfied. “Sri Lanka’s public transport system is in a pitiful state. Buses are often overcrowded, especially during rush hours, causing discomfort and stress for daily commuters. Women face harassment, both verbal and physical, making public transport unsafe for them” (Ceylon Newspapers (Pvt) Ltd., 2024).

The data for the years 2019–2022 show evidence of a drastic decline in the share of private buses in all transportation, falling from 28.2% in 2019 to merely 8.5% by 2021. This situation thus calls for growing dissatisfaction with the quality of bus services. The share of government buses fell from 6.4% in 2019 to 5.1% in 2021, showing a sort of systemic inefficiency and failure to deliver the required service to the passengers (National Transport Commission., 2022). With the reduction of shares, it can be said that the quality of bus services is deteriorating day by day. Public transportation in Ratnapura probably faces the same challenges since it is part of the broader Sri Lankan context.

Ratnapura is an area that lacks rail connectivity, and therefore, public buses have become the most available and affordable means of transport for the locals. Due to such dependence, efficiency and the

good quality of bus services directly reflect on the livelihood and convenience of the locals. Understanding the perspectives of passengers about the service quality of public bus services is necessary for improving the transportation system, and there is a notable lack of research focusing on the perspectives of passengers about the service quality in the Ratnapura District. Therefore, the present study aims to find out the perspectives of passengers about the service quality of public bus transportation in Ratnapura District.

Research Objectives

The present study aims to:

- Find out the perspectives of both short-distance and long-distance passengers about the service quality of public bus transportation in Ratnapura District, Sri Lanka.
- Identify challenges to the service quality of public bus transportation in Ratnapura District, Sri Lanka.
- Provide suggestions to stakeholders for improving the service quality of public bus transportation in Ratnapura District, Sri Lanka.

Significance of the Study

To date, there is a noteworthy shortage of research focusing on passengers' perspectives in the Ratnapura District. The present study finds the perspectives of passengers about the service quality of public bus transportation in Ratnapura District, Sri Lanka. This study provides insights into the quality of public bus transportation in the Ratnapura District. Based on the perspectives of passengers, the study identifies areas for improvement. In addition, this study provides suggestions to stakeholders, including the government, transport authorities, bus staff, and passengers, for improving service quality.

Brief Literature

Research Gap

Several studies have examined the quality of public bus transportation in Sri Lanka. Fernando et al., 2023 and Hewage & Ranawana, 2015 focused on passenger satisfaction in Colombo District, while Amarasingha & Wimalasena, 2023 looked into office transport services. Liyanage, Jayaratne, & Kumarage, 2008 carried out comparative studies on urban and rural bus transport characteristics, while Wijerathna, 2016 studied the Kegalle District. These studies covered various areas of Sri Lanka.

However, no researchers have focused on the Ratnapura District. Therefore, research on passenger perspectives in Ratnapura District is important.

Definitions and Theoretical Background

Service quality means the ability of a service provider to satisfy customers in an efficient manner, through which the provider can improve business performance (Ramya, Kowsalya, & Dharanipriya, 2019). The SERVQUAL model is a well-established framework for assessing service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). This study adopts several SERVQUAL-based dimensions to analyze passengers' perspectives of public bus services.

Perspectives of Passengers about Service Quality of Public Bus Transportation

Previous studies show that service quality in public transport is multi-dimensional.

Accessibility is a critical dimension in shaping passenger views. Key factors include waiting time and provisions for vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, people with disabilities, or passengers with children (Beppler & Samsuzzoha, 2018) (Suthanaya, 2016). Comfort is another important dimension influencing passengers' satisfaction. The comfort level, including seating and the total ambiance inside the bus, greatly influences the perception of service (Yarmen & Sumaedi, 2016). Customers reported overcrowding as a dissatisfying factor in public (Robbines & Johnson, 2016).

Lack of perceived safety can deter individuals from using public transport, highlighting the importance of addressing safety concerns to enhance service quality (Amarasingha & Wimalasena, 2023).

The behavior of bus staff shapes user satisfaction, and thus, transport operators must prioritize staff training and development to ensure that interactions with passengers are polite and helpful (Borhan, Ibrahim, Syamsunur, & Rahmat, 2019).

The availability of crucial information, such as bus routes and schedules, is important to attract people to use public transport (Borhan, Ibrahim, Syamsunur, & Rahmat, 2019).

Reliability, including travel time, operating on schedule, and frequency of bus services, affects the perspectives of passengers (Sooriyabandara & Hewage, 2018).

Users possessed a positive attitude toward buses because of the lowest travel cost (Worku, 2018) (Rahman, 2017). However, Wijerathna, 2016 revealed dissatisfaction among passengers about the cost in Kegalle District, Sri Lanka (Wijerathna, 2016).

Challenges to the Service Quality of Public Bus Transportation

There are several challenges to the service quality of public bus transportation. Poor operator behavior, including lingering, racing, and other dangerous driving behavior by buses and undisciplined behavior by crews, is a major challenge (Kumarage, Gwilliams, & Jayaweera, 2005).

Lack of proper policies leads to issues in public bus transportation (Maduwanthi et al., 2016). Infrastructural deficiencies, including the number of bus turns, facilities, and the maintenance of bus stops and terminals, overcrowding, cleanliness of buses, and poor road infrastructure, further reduce service quality. Furthermore, the lack of an information-sharing system, complaint management, cost, and ticketing process are major challenges to the service quality of public bus transportation (Wijerathna, 2016).

Additionally, congestion and adverse weather conditions can seriously affect bus reliability (Zhuang, Cheng, Yao, Wang, & An, 2022). Some groups, such as visually impaired and elderly passengers, face extra difficulties because public buses do not provide adequate support facilities (Suraweera, Bandara, Wickramaarachchi, & Perera, 2022). These studies suggest that public bus service quality problems are widespread and complex.

Suggestions from Literature

Previous researchers emphasized that better policies, staff training, and improved facilities are needed to improve bus services. Hewage & Ranawana, 2015 stressed the importance of proper transport policies and visible timetables, while Rohani, Wijeyesekera, & Abd Karim, 2013 highlight cooperation between bus operators and staff. Liyanage, Jayaratne, & Kumarage, 2008 further emphasize the importance of including passenger feedback in improving service quality.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology. When examining personal perspectives, qualitative methods are especially appropriate. Passengers utilizing public bus transportation in the Ratnapura District represented the study population. The target population included passengers waiting at the Ratnapura Main Bus Station because it serves as the district's central transportation hub for travel within and between districts. Convenience sampling was used to select participants based on their willingness and ability to participate in the study. The study included thirty passengers, including both long-distance and short-distance passengers, ensuring a variety of perspectives.

An interview guide developed based on service quality dimensions identified in the literature was used to conduct in-depth interviews to collect data. Each interview lasted approximately 20–40 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The interviews were conducted in Sinhala and were later transcribed and translated into English by the researcher. To ensure that the original meaning of participants’ responses was preserved, the translated transcripts were carefully checked against the original audio recordings.

Throughout the whole research process, validity was ensured by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participants’ experiences. Reliability was ensured by recording and transcribing all interviews and by conducting a small pilot study to test the interview guide. The study employed a thematic analysis approach.

The analytical framework was developed based on the SERVQUAL model and insights from previous public transport studies. Core dimensions such as accessibility, comfort, safety, reliability, and empathy were derived from SERVQUAL, while information availability and cost were incorporated based on recurring themes identified in prior transportation research. Sub-dimensions, including waiting time, passenger load factor, staff behavior, service frequency, and accessibility for vulnerable groups, were selected through a comprehensive review of existing literature and adapted to the context of public bus transportation in Ratnapura District

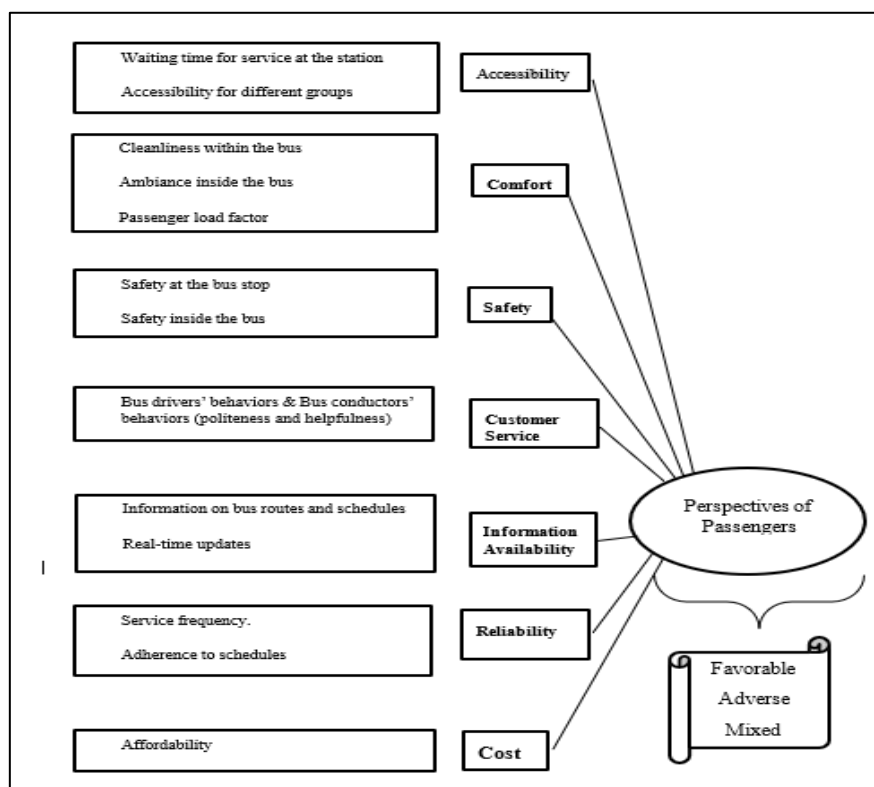


Figure 01: Analytical Framework

Analysis

The study used thematic analysis based on an analytical framework developed from the literature. Key variables and sub-dimensions such as accessibility, comfort, safety, customer service, information availability, reliability, and cost were first identified from previous studies.

The interview transcripts were read carefully, and participants' responses were coded according to these variables and sub-dimensions. The data were analyzed deductively, meaning that the analysis was guided by the framework from the literature rather than creating new themes. In-depth interviews with thirty passengers from the Ratnapura Bus Station were used to gather the information, and they are briefly covered in this section. For analytical purposes, passengers were categorized into short-distance (intra-district) and long-distance (inter-district) travelers based on their travel patterns. Short-distance passengers travel within Ratnapura District, while long-distance passengers travel between districts.

Table 12: Sample Profile

Passenger ID	Gender	Travel Frequency	Travel-Distance	Purpose of Travel	Residence Location
Passenger 1	Female	Daily	Short	Work	Gangulvitiya
Passenger 2	Male	Once a week	Long	Work	Ayagama
Passenger 3	Male	Daily	Short	Work	Kuruwita
Passenger 4	Female	Daily	Short	Work	Pelmadulla
Passenger 5	Female	Daily	Short	Work	Dellabada
Passenger 6	Female	Twice a week	Short	Shopping	Eheliyagoda
Passenger 7	Male	Once a week	Long	Trade	Colombo
Passenger 8	Female	Daily	Short	Work	Pelmadulla
Passenger 9	Male	Twice a month	Long	Work	Galle
Passenger 10	Male	Rarely	Short	Other	Koliyapitiya
Passenger 11	Male	Twice a week	Short	Education	Dimiyawa
Passenger 12	Female	Rarely	Short	Other	Karapincha
Passenger 13	Male	Daily	Short	other	Watapotha
Passenger 14	Male	Daily	Short	Other	New-Town
Passenger 15	Male	Twice a week	Long	Other	Kegalle
Passenger 16	Female	Daily	Short	Education	Kotamulla

Passenger 17	Female	Once a week	Long	Education	Elapatha
Passenger 18	Male	Once a week	Long	Education	Elapatha
Passenger 19	Female	Daily	Short	Education	Dellabada
Passenger 20	Female	Twice a week	Long	Trade	Gangulwitiya
Passenger 21	Male	Rarely	Short	Other	Pallegedara
Passenger 22	Female	Once a week	Short	Shopping	Hangamuwa
Passenger 23	Male	Daily	Short	Work	Palawela
Passenger 24	Male	Once a week	Long	Other	Karapincha
Passenger 25	Female	Once a week	Long	Shopping	Hidallana
Passenger 26	Female	Daily	Long	Work	Gangulvitiya
Passenger 27	Female	Daily	Short	Trade	Damme
Passenger 28	Male	Twice a month	Long	Education	Palawela
Passenger 29	Male	Once a week	Long	Work	Elapatha
Passenger 30	Female	Once a month	Long	Work	Pathulpana

Findings and Discussion

Objective One: To find out the perspectives of both short-distance and long-distance passengers about the service quality of public bus transportation in Ratnapura District, Sri Lanka

Variable	Sub Dimension	Respondent Category	Respondent's quotations	Researcher Interpretation	Discussion
Accessibility	Waiting Time	Short	P1 "We plan our trips according to the bus arrival time, so we don't stay at the bus stop for more	This indicates that short-distance passengers experience predictable service due to familiarity with fixed	This finding aligns with Robbins & Johnson (2016), who emphasized dissatisfaction among passengers

			than 3–4 minutes.”	village schedules.	regarding long waiting times.
		Long	P29 “Sometimes I have to wait a long time. Last week, I waited for one hour for a bus to come to Colombo.”	Long-distance passengers hold an adverse perspective regarding waiting time.	
	Accessibility for vulnerable groups	Short	P14: “All the people give their seats to needy people like small children, pregnant women, elderly and disabled people.” P27 “Disabled passengers struggle to board buses, and also there is no supportive thing to get on and get off.”	Reflects strong social support and empathy among village passengers toward vulnerable groups	This finding aligns with (Suthanaya, 2016) who found accessibility gaps for elderly and differently abled passengers. This reflects weaknesses in empathy and tangibles dimensions of SERVQUAL.

		Long	<p>P7 “Passengers are reluctant to give up their seats... we also can’t travel standing for long hours.”</p> <p>P28 I have seen also elderly passengers getting onto the bus with difficulty because there is no support to board the bus.</p>	Shows that long-distance passengers prioritize personal comfort and that buses lack proper facilities for disabled and elderly passengers.	
Comfort	Cleanness	Short	P14 “The buses are usually clean. The villagers keep the buses clean by not littering.”	Cleanliness is positively perceived in short-distance routes due to shared community ownership	The finding supports (Yarmen & Sumaedi, 2016), who highlighted physical conditions as important for comfort.
		long	P18 Although there is some cleanliness on buses running in	Long-distance buses face hygiene	Cleanliness differences relate to the tangibles

			the morning, garbage such as packets is seen on buses in the evening, possibly caused by passengers	neglect, possibly due to weaker social accountability.	dimension of SERVQUAL.
	Passenger load factor	Short	P13 “During school time we can see some crowd on buses, however, there's no problem with the crowds on the buses during the afternoon	Overcrowding occurs mainly during peak hours but is manageable.	This finding aligns with Robbins and Johnson (2016), who found overcrowding as a major dissatisfaction factor. In Ratnapura, limited bus turns intensify this issue, affecting tangibles and reliability.
		Long	P17: “I stood for more than 3 hours... the conductor keeps loading more people.”	Severe overcrowding reduces comfort, especially for long journeys.	
Safety	At the bus stop	Short	P11 “There is nothing to fear.”	Passengers feel safe due to familiarity and	This supports (Amarasingha & Wimalasena, 2023), who emphasized

				community environment.	safety concerns in public transport, particularly for women. Overcrowding increases vulnerability, affecting assurance.
		Long	P30 "There's no problem. But for a girl, the security is a bit lacking."	Some passengers, especially women, feel security is insufficient.	
	Inside the buses	Short	P22 "...I haven't seen anyone get robbed or theft yet, and no one has bothered me unnecessarily . I think the reason is that the people in the village use the bus."	Low incidents of theft or harassment; perceived as safe.	
		Long	P 17 "Especially when the buses are crowded, one	Higher risk of theft and harassment due to overcrowding.	

			<p>day I lost my wallet and got into a lot of trouble, there are countless men who have tried to touch me unnecessarily .”</p>		
Customer Service	Bus Drivers and Conductors ' behaviors	Short	<p>P 1</p> <p>The driver and conductor don't behave badly because of the village bus. They treat us well and help us load and unload our luggage when we have too much luggage</p>	Staff behavior is friendly and supportive in village routes.	This aligns with (Borhan, Ibrahim, Syamsunur, & Rahmat, 2019) and affects assurance and empathy.

			to carry. Very friendly.		
		Long	P 18 "Most conductors speak to us without any respect."	Staff behavior is sometimes perceived as disrespectful in long-distance routes.	
Information availability	Information on bus routes and schedules, fare	Short	P 14 "The schedule is not mentioned anywhere; however, we know our usual fare and bus schedule.	Passengers rely on habitual knowledge rather than formal information systems.	This finding aligns with (Borhan, Ibrahim, Syamsunur, & Rahmat, 2019), who identified importance of information.
		Long	P 2 "There is no proper way to get information. I have to ask people or wait	Lack of proper information systems increases uncertainty.	

			until a bus arrives.		
	Real-time updates	Short	P1 there is no special way to know about cancellations	No formal update system, but passengers manage through familiarity.	
		Long	P9 "When a bus is canceled, no one tells us. We just stand there waiting without knowing whether another bus will come soon or not."	No cancellation notifications, increasing waiting frustration.	
Reliability	Service Frequency	Short	P14 it would be good if there was at least one bus at night for convenience.	Lack of buses at night	This aligns with Robbines and Johnson (2016) who found dissatisfaction regarding

		Long	P30 There are very few long-distance buses from the Ratnapura bus stand	Limited bus frequency, especially in long-distance routes, reduces reliability.	the reliability of public bus transport due to time uncertainty in Australia.
	Adhering to Schedules	Short	P22 "The buses usually follow the schedule."	Both types of distance buses generally follow expected schedules.	
		Long	Passenger 7 "The buses run on time. Not late."		
Cost	Affordability	short	P23 It is affordable"	Bus fares are affordable for both short- and long-distance passengers.	This finding aligns with Sooriya Bandara and Hewage (2018), who identified affordability as a strength of Sri Lankan public transport. However, it
		long	P18 It's fa		

					differs from Wijerathna (2016), who found dissatisfaction in Kegalle District.
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Objective two: Challenges to the Service Quality of Public Bus Transportation in Ratnapura District, Sri Lanka

The study identified several challenges affecting the service quality of public bus transportation in Ratnapura District, including poor operator behavior, weak policy enforcement, infrastructural deficiencies, and inadequate support for vulnerable passengers. Similar to Kumarage, Gwilliams, and Jayaweera (2005), unsafe and undisciplined behavior, as one passenger stated, “I saw, once driver blamed on elderly man, who took more time to board the bus.” Policy and regulatory issues were also evident, supporting (Maduwanthi, Marasinghe, & Shusaku, 2016), as passengers questioned whether transport rules are properly enforced. Infrastructural problems, such as the lack of shelter at rural bus stops, align with Wijerathna (2016). Furthermore, consistent with (Suraweera, Bandara, Wickramaarachchi, & Perera, 2022), elderly passengers face difficulties in boarding buses due to the absence of supportive facilities. Although (Zhuang, Cheng, Yao, Wang, & An, 2022) identified congestion and weather as major reliability issues, these factors were not found to be significant in Ratnapura. Overall, the findings show that service quality challenges in Ratnapura are mainly related to behavioral, regulatory, and infrastructural weaknesses.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study provides suggestions to key stakeholders.

Government Authorities

- Introduce low-floor buses with handrails to improve accessibility for elderly and disabled passengers.
- Install simple digital or notice-board-based bus arrival information at main terminals.
- Develop basic shelters and seating at village bus stops using cost-effective local materials.

Transport Authorities

- Increase bus frequency during peak hours instead of adding buses throughout the day.
- Allow passengers to suggest and test new routes before permanent implementation.
- Monitor service quality regularly through passenger feedback mechanisms.

Drivers and Conductors

- Treat all passengers respectfully and avoid discriminatory or rude behavior.
- Drive safely without sudden braking to improve passenger comfort and safety.
- Avoid overloading buses beyond capacity to reduce accidents and discomfort.

Bus Station Management

- Display clear route and fare information on boards for passenger convenience.
- Provide simple complaint systems so passengers can report service issues.
- Keep stations clean and well-organized to improve passenger experience.

Passengers

- Respect priority seating for elderly and disabled passengers.
- Maintain cleanliness inside buses to support a hygienic environment.
- Provide constructive feedback to authorities for service improvement.

In conclusion, this study found the perspectives of both short-distance and long-distance passengers about the service quality of public bus transportation in Ratnapura District, Sri Lanka, the challenges to service quality, and provides suggestions to relevant stakeholders to overcome those challenges. The main limitation of the present study is that it focuses only on Ratnapura District; therefore, the results might not be generalizable to other parts of Sri Lanka. This study also deals only with qualitative data. Future researchers can use a quantitative approach in Ratnapura District to quantify passengers' perspectives on various aspects such as comfort, safety, and punctuality.

Acknowledgment

This research is based on a dissertation submitted to the Department of Public Administration in 2025 as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the BSc. Honours in Management (Public) Degree. I extend my deepest appreciation to my research supervisor, Dr. R. P. C. K. Jayasinghe, for her invaluable

guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous support throughout this study. Her expertise and encouragement have been instrumental in the successful completion of this research.

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Effectiveness of the Secondary Education System in Preparing a Workforce for the Contemporary Job Market in Sri Lanka: A Study of the Kolonnawa Education

Division

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Key Words: Secondary Education, Workforce Readiness, Curriculum Alignment, Skill Gaps, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Secondary education plays a critical role in shaping individuals for higher education, vocational pathways, and entry into the labor market. In Sri Lanka, secondary education functions as a bridge between primary education and employment, contributing significantly to human capital formation and national economic development. (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2019; Grero, 2019). Despite high literacy rates and free access to education, the country continues to face rising youth unemployment, particularly among school leavers who have completed secondary education but lack employable skills. (World Bank, 2019; Grero, 2019; Hettige, 2021).

The Sri Lankan secondary education system places strong emphasis on academic achievement and examination performance, primarily through the General Certificate of Education (G.C.E.) Ordinary Level and Advanced Level examinations. While this system has succeeded in improving access to education, concerns remain regarding its effectiveness in preparing students for the current job market. (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2019) Employers frequently report deficiencies in practical skills, vocational competencies, digital literacy, and soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability. (Grero, 2019; Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, 2020) As a result, many school leavers struggle to transition successfully from education to employment. (Fernando, 2018; Hettige, 2021)

This research focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of the Sri Lankan secondary education system in creating a job-ready workforce, with special reference to the Kolonnawa Education Division. Kolonnawa represents an area with mixed socio-economic characteristics, where resource limitations, regional disparities, and limited access to career guidance further influence

students' employability outcomes (Careemdeen, 2024; Grero, 2019).

Problem Statement

Despite several educational reforms, Sri Lanka's secondary education system remains largely examination-oriented and theoretically driven, with limited integration of practical and vocational components. This has resulted in a significant mismatch between the skills provided by the education system and the competencies required by the labor market. The absence of structured career guidance, limited industry exposure, and inadequate vocational training opportunities has further intensified youth unemployment among secondary school leavers.

Although Sri Lanka has achieved high literacy and broad access to secondary education, the system remains largely theoretical and examination-oriented, limiting the development of practical, vocational, and soft skills required by the modern job market. This misalignment between educational outcomes and labor market expectations has resulted in rising youth unemployment and difficulties in the education-to-employment transition among school leavers.

This study contributes to academic and policy discussions on education reform and workforce development in Sri Lanka by providing an in-depth understanding of the existing gaps between secondary education outcomes and labor market requirements. The findings are particularly significant for policymakers, education administrators, teachers, and employers, as they offer evidence-based insights into curriculum relevance, prevailing skill gaps, and regional disparities that influence employability. By highlighting the experiences and perspectives of unemployed school leavers, the study presents practical implications for improving curriculum design, teaching methods, and career guidance mechanisms. Furthermore, the research emphasizes the necessity of aligning secondary education with evolving labor market needs in order to enhance youth employability, reduce unemployment, and contribute to long-term socio-economic development in Sri Lanka.

Research Objectives

1. To evaluate the alignment of the secondary education curriculum with job market requirements.
2. To identify key skills and practical knowledge gaps between secondary education outcomes and labor market expectations.
3. To propose recommendations to improve the secondary education system in Sri Lanka to better prepare students for employment.

Literature Review

Globally, secondary education systems are increasingly expected to equip students with both academic knowledge and employability skills in response to rapid economic and technological changes. (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2019). Studies by international organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD emphasize the importance of integrating vocational training, digital literacy, and soft skills within secondary education to meet the evolving demands of modern labor markets. These studies argue that education systems that balance theoretical instruction with practical skill development are better positioned to prepare students for employment and lifelong learning. Countries such as Finland, South Korea, and Germany have successfully implemented competency-based and industry-linked curriculum models that combine classroom learning with practical and work-based training, resulting in smoother school-to-work transitions and comparatively lower youth unemployment rates (OECD, 2018; World Bank, 2019)

In the Sri Lankan context, several studies highlight persistent structural and curricular challenges within the secondary education system (Careemdeen, 2024; Grero, 2019; Hettige, 2021; Fernando, 2018). Research indicates that school curricula remain largely examination-oriented and overly focused on rote learning, with limited opportunities for experiential learning, vocational exposure, and practical skill development. Although recent policy initiatives have aimed to introduce technical subjects and information technology into secondary education, their implementation has been uneven and constrained by resource limitations. Employers in Sri Lanka have frequently expressed dissatisfaction with the preparedness of secondary school graduates, particularly in relation to communication skills, technical competencies, problem-solving abilities, and workplace adaptability, all of which are increasingly valued in the contemporary job market (Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, 2020; Grero, 2019).

Previous studies also (Careemdeen, 2024; Silva, 2018; Grero, 2019). reveal significant disparities between urban, semi-urban, and rural regions in terms of educational infrastructure, access to technology, teacher training, and career guidance services. Such regional inequalities further contribute to unequal employment outcomes among school leavers. However, despite growing scholarly attention to education–employment mismatches at the national level, limited research has specifically examined the effectiveness of secondary education in preparing students for employment at the divisional level. In particular, empirical evidence focusing on areas such as the Kolonnawa Education Division remains scarce. This study addresses this gap by providing localized, qualitative insights into curriculum relevance, skill gaps, and employability challenges, thereby contributing context-specific evidence to the broader discourse on education reform in Sri Lanka. (Careemdeen, 2024; Little, 2003; World Bank, 2019).

Employers in Sri Lanka have consistently expressed concerns regarding the employability of secondary school graduates, particularly highlighting deficiencies in technical skills, soft skills, and practical exposure (Fernando, 2018). These skill gaps are most evident in sectors such as information technology, construction, and hospitality, which require industry-specific competencies and adaptability. Employers emphasize the need for stronger collaboration between educational institutions and industries to align curricula with labor market requirements. The lack of practical experience, communication skills, and workplace readiness among school leavers further limits their employability (Grero, 2019). To address these challenges, employers advocate for initiatives such as internships, apprenticeships, industry-led training programs, and standardized vocational qualifications. Strengthening vocational education and integrating industry-relevant skills into the secondary education system are, therefore, essential steps toward reducing the gap between education outcomes and employment expectations.

A skilled workforce is essential for sustainable economic growth, requiring technical expertise, practical knowledge, and soft skills such as communication and adaptability. Although Sri Lanka's Free Education Policy of 1945 expanded access to education, the continued emphasis on examination-oriented learning has limited the development of practical and vocational competencies, creating a mismatch between education outcomes and labor market needs (Careemdeen, 2024). International research highlights that an effective secondary education system is crucial for economic competitiveness and workforce readiness (OECD, 2018). Global frameworks further emphasize the need to integrate vocational training, digital literacy, and soft skills development into school curricula to enhance employability (UNESCO, 2020; ADB & ILO, 2017). Addressing these gaps through curriculum reforms and industry-aligned education strategies is essential to developing a competent and adaptable workforce capable of meeting both local and global economic demands.

Effectiveness in education refers to the ability of an education system to prepare students with the knowledge and skills required for the labor market. In Sri Lanka, educational effectiveness is mainly measured through examination results and university admissions; however, these indicators do not adequately reflect broader competencies such as critical thinking, practical skills, and employability (Careemdeen, 2024; World Bank, 2019). The theory-oriented curriculum, limited vocational training, and insufficient industry exposure have contributed to a mismatch between secondary education outcomes and job market expectations (Grero, 2019). Resource constraints, including shortages of qualified teachers and inadequate infrastructure,

further reduce system effectiveness (Seneviratne, 2020). International research emphasizes that integrating practical learning, technology, and industry collaboration is essential for improving workforce readiness (OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2020). Strengthening curriculum relevance and teacher development is therefore crucial to enhancing the effectiveness of secondary education in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of school leavers regarding secondary education and employability. A case study method was employed, with the interview focusing on the Kolonnawa Education Division.

Population and Sample

The study population consisted of school leavers who had completed secondary education in the Kolonnawa Education Division and were currently unemployed. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 24 participants who met the study criteria. This approach enabled the researcher to collect rich, relevant data from individuals directly affected by the issue under investigation.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. The interview guide focused on participants' educational backgrounds, perceptions of curriculum relevance, skill gaps, challenges in entering the job market, and suggestions for improving secondary education. Interviews were conducted with participants' consent and were recorded for accuracy.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involved coding interview transcripts, identifying recurring patterns, and organizing themes related to curriculum alignment, skill deficiencies, and employability challenges. The analysis was guided by Human Capital Theory and Curriculum Theory, enabling a systematic evaluation of how education contributes to workforce readiness, to identify the skill gaps in the study, and to apply the international soft skill frameworks which use by countries such as the US, Canada, and Australia (Grero, 2019).

Analysis, Key Findings, and Discussion

The thematic analysis revealed several key findings related to the effectiveness of the secondary education system in preparing students for employment. The findings highlight persistent structural and curricular limitations that hinder the development of job-relevant skills among secondary school leavers and contribute to difficulties in transitioning from education to the labor market.

Curriculum Alignment and Practical Relevance

Participants consistently reported that the secondary education curriculum places greater emphasis on theoretical knowledge than on practical application. While core subjects such as mathematics, languages, and commerce were perceived as moderately useful in developing basic cognitive and analytical skills, many other subjects were viewed as outdated and insufficiently aligned with contemporary job market demands. The curriculum was largely described as examination-oriented, with limited opportunities for applied learning or problem-based activities. The absence of industry-specific content and minimal engagement with real-world work environments were identified as major weaknesses, reducing students' exposure to practical skills and workplace expectations.

P3: "The subjects taught in school are useful to some extent, but they do not provide the expected depth of knowledge. For example, in the case of IT, the curriculum offers a basic theoretical understanding of the subject. While it may spark interest, it does not equip students with the comprehensive knowledge and practical skills needed to excel in the field."

This quotation highlights a key limitation in the secondary education curriculum; while participants especially mentioned subjects like IT that introduce students to fundamental concepts, they do not provide in-depth knowledge. The respondent acknowledges that the curriculum can generate interest in a subject but argues that it falls short in delivering the level of expertise required for real-world applications.

Skill and Knowledge Gaps

A significant finding of the study was the widespread lack of soft skills among secondary school leavers. Participants highlighted deficiencies in communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, and time management competencies that employers increasingly consider essential for workplace performance. In addition to soft skill deficiencies, participants also reported inadequate development of technical skills, particularly basic computer literacy, digital skills, and

job-specific competencies. This dual gap in both soft and technical skills was perceived as a major barrier to securing employment, even for students who performed well academically.

P4: *"I acquire only about fifty percent of the necessary knowledge from the subjects taught in school; once I get the job, while the rest must be gained through practical experience on the job. The secondary education system does not fully equip students with the knowledge required for the job market."*

The participant suggests that while schools offer foundational knowledge, they do not fully prepare students for real-world employment.

Lack of Practical Exposure and Career Guidance

The study further revealed that students receive minimal practical exposure during secondary education. Opportunities such as internships, apprenticeships, workplace visits, and project-based learning were largely absent from participants' school experiences. As a result, many school leavers entered the job market with a limited understanding of workplace culture, employer expectations, and available career pathways. Moreover, participants emphasized the lack of structured career guidance and career readiness assessments within schools. The absence of systematic guidance left students uncertain about suitable career options, vocational pathways, and further training opportunities after completing secondary education.

P6: *"The government curriculum lacks practical knowledge, employers expect qualifications like AAT or CA for commerce students, school education alone isn't enough."*

According to participant P6, the third quotation states that school education will never be sufficient to attain employment in any of the commerce-related careers. It clearly states that the employers seek candidates who have industry-recognized qualifications such as AAT or CA, not only commerce-related job seekers, but also for all job seekers from any kind of subject scheme, the employers are asking for professionals.

Regional Disparities

Resource limitations within the Kolonnawa Education Division were found to further exacerbate employability challenges. Participants reported inadequate physical infrastructure, limited access to technology and learning materials, and insufficient teacher training, particularly in technical and vocational subjects. These constraints negatively affected the quality of teaching and learning, resulting in unequal opportunities for skill development compared to students in better-resourced urban areas. Such regional disparities contribute to uneven employment outcomes and reinforce existing socio-economic inequalities.

P16: *“The schools in our area have limited facilities, like an outdated operating system that hasn’t been updated, and some learning tools are not compatible with it, while popular schools in major divisions have better resources.”*

According to the participant, P16 emphasizes how outdated operating systems and incompatible learning tools hinder students’ ability to develop relevant technical skills. This creates a gap between students from wealthy urban schools and other schools from underprivileged regions.

Overall, these findings align with existing literature ((Grero, 2019; Fernando, 2018; Careemdeen, 2024; Hettige, 2021) and reinforce concerns regarding the mismatch between secondary education outcomes and labor market expectations in Sri Lanka. The study underscores the need for curriculum reform, improved resource allocation, and stronger school-industry linkages to enhance the employability of secondary school leavers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that the secondary education system in Sri Lanka is not sufficiently effective in preparing students for the current job market. The dominance of an examination-oriented curriculum limited vocational training, inadequate soft skills development, and lack of practical exposure contribute significantly to youth unemployment among school leavers.

To address these issues, the study recommends the following:

- Integrating vocational and technical training into the secondary education curriculum
- Strengthening career guidance services and introducing career readiness assessments
- Promoting experiential learning through internships, industry collaborations, and project- based learning
- Enhancing soft skill development as a core component of secondary education
- Reducing regional disparities through improved resource allocation and teacher training

Implementing these recommendations would enhance workforce readiness, improve youth employability, and support sustainable socio-economic development in Sri Lanka.

Acknowledgment

This research is based on a dissertation submitted to the Department of Public Administration in 2025 as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the BSc. Honours in Management (Public) Degree. I extend my deepest appreciation to my research supervisor, Snr. Prof. (Mrs.) R. L. S. Fernando, for her

invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous support throughout this study. Her expertise and encouragement have been instrumental in the successful completion of this research.

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The Impact of Financial Literacy on Economic Empowerment among Rural Women in Kandy District, Sri Lanka”

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Key Words - Economic empowerment, financial literacy, Rural women

Introduction

Background of the study

Women play a crucial role in society, contributing significantly to households, communities, and national development. They tend to control resources and finances within the family, enhancing the living standards and stability of the family. Beyond the household, women engage in caregiving, education, community health, democracy, cultural preservation, and conservation of the environment. Women's marginalization is a setback to national development since they constitute a large segment of the population with vital social, economic, and developmental roles.

Empowerment refers to the process whereby individuals are empowered to make strategic life decisions (Kabeer, 1999) and is associated with the spread of choice (Bhattacharya & Banerjee, 2012). Empowerment of women entails economic independence, self-reliance, and self-esteem, which makes them contribute meaningfully to development activities (Kapila, Singla, & Gupta, 2016). Economic empowerment is a particular term that denotes the capability of women to achieve economic success and make decisions that impact their lives, such as the ability to control material, intellectual, and financial resources at the household, community, and societal levels (Cornwall cited in Wijewardhana & Dias, 2021).

Economic empowerment improves financial well-being and decision-making power. Access to income generation, savings, and credit reduces dependence on others and enables informed household decisions, contributing to poverty reduction and economic growth (Vithanagama cited in Kumari 2020). Financial literacy is a key determinant, strengthening decision-making, well-being, and resilience against poverty (Kumari ,Azam & Khalidah, 2020). It equips women with the skills and confidence to manage household finances, engage in starting their own businesses, and be active members of the economy (PACFL, 2008).

Problem Identification

Although financial literacy is widely recognized as a crucial element of economic independence and poverty alleviation, many rural women in Sri Lanka continue to face significant challenges in accessing formal financial systems and financial knowledge (UN Women , 2020). Sociocultural barriers, low participation in the formal labor market, and limited access to organized financial education limit women's capacity to make wise financial decisions, especially in rural areas(OECD, 2019).

These disparities are also emphasized at the national level. According to the Financial Literacy Survey Sri Lanka (2021), the gender gap in the overall financial literacy is 5.9 percentage points, with women scoring lower than men in financial knowledge and financial behavior (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2021). A rural-urban gap is also present in the same survey, with people living in rural regions showing worse financial literacy rates than those living in urban regions, which is an unequal access to financial resources and access to financial education opportunities (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2021).

Although financial literacy as a means of women's economic empowerment has gained more and more importance, the current research in Sri Lanka has largely been concerned with the general population trends or urban areas, and little empirical evidence has been conducted on rural women (Kumari & Gunasinghe, 2017). Additionally, the research is not context-specific and empirically investigates the role of financial literacy in economic empowerment outcomes, including income generation, savings behavior, entrepreneurship, and financial decision-making among rural women in Sri Lanka (World Bank, 2018).

This lack of specific empirical data limits the formulation of specific and effective financial education and inclusion policies towards rural women. Thus, it is necessary to fill this research gap to empower rural women economically, decrease the cycles of poverty, and encourage the inclusive community growth and gender equality in Sri Lanka (OECD, 2019).

Research Questions and Objectives

Research questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the level of financial literacy among rural women in Kandy District, Sri Lanka?
2. How does financial literacy influence the economic empowerment of rural women in Kandy District, Sri Lanka?

3. What are the key challenges that rural women face in improving their financial literacy and achieving economic empowerment in Kandy District, Sri Lanka?

Research objectives

Accordingly, the objectives of the study were to:

1. To identify the level of financial literacy among rural women in Kandy District, Sri Lanka.
2. To investigate the impact of financial literacy on the economic empowerment of rural women in Kandy District, Sri Lanka
3. To identify the challenges faced by rural women in achieving economic empowerment due to limited financial literacy and access to resources in Kandy District, Sri Lanka

Significance of the study

This study examines the connection between economic empowerment and financial literacy of rural women in Sri Lanka. The research provides information to enable policymakers, financial institutions, and development stakeholders to develop effective context-based financial education programs by examining the level of financial literacy of women and how it affects their economic decision-making. By enhancing their financial literacy, rural women will be able to make improved financial choices, enhance their financial security, and become less dependent on male relatives. Moreover, women's economic empowerment not only benefits individuals but also society at large by alleviating poverty, improving household welfare, and promoting sustainable development. Nevertheless, rural women face special challenges, including inaccessibility to financial education, institutional financial services, and economic opportunities.

This research will reveal the potential areas of intervention that can be used to meet the unique needs of rural women by identifying barriers associated with education, resources, and socio-cultural constraints. Household decision-making will be enhanced by enhancing financial knowledge, which will have a positive impact on the education of children, their healthcare, and the overall well-being of the household.

On the community level, more women having financial capability can help in national development and empower local economies. Moreover, the research focuses on gender equity by pointing out the differences in financial literacy among men and women, and rural and urban populations. Its results can be used to make inclusive policies that will provide equitable access to financial education and resources to support future research and policy efforts to promote financial literacy and economic empowerment of rural women in Sri Lanka.

Literature Review

The empowerment of women has been well known as one of the major contributors to sustainable development, poverty eradication and inclusive economic growth. The world has made global agendas like the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals emphasize gender equality and women empowerment as preconditions to socio-economic development (Boateng, Kuuire, Amoyaw, Armah, & Issac, 2012). Empowerment is the process of improving the capacity of women in making strategic choices in life, practicing their autonomy and being involved in the economic, social and political arena.

Economic empowerment is one of the dimensions of empowerment that is vital. It enables women to have access to and manage productive resources, attain jobs, and become economically self-reliant, which adds to the household well-being and national growth (Sida, 2009). Key determinants include education, skills development, paid employment, asset ownership, collective action, and social protection (Hunt & Samman, 2016). Economic empowerment is reflected in household decision-making power, control over resources, leadership in community activities, and financial independence (Linn, 2021). Women with higher education, income, and employment demonstrate greater authority over household resources (Rathiranee, 2013).

Economic empowerment is highly dependent on financial literacy, which entails knowledge, awareness, skills, attitudes and behaviours necessary to make informed financial choices and enhance financial wellbeing (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). Financially literate women better manage income, savings, credit, and investments, reducing vulnerability to financial shocks and enhancing independence (Lusardi & Messy, The importance of financial literacy and its impact on financial wellbeing, 2023). It has been established that education, income, employment, gender and access to financial education determine financial literacy, with rural women generally having lower financial literacy (Hung, Yoong, & Brown, 2012).

A multidimensional measure of financial literacy is commonly applied in the literature to assess financial literacy beyond basic financial knowledge to the skill of individuals to use financial concepts in their everyday decision-making (Lusardi & Mitchell, Financial literacy and planning: Implications for retirement wellbeing, 2011). When considering the rural women, researchers highlight the necessity of context-specific measurement instruments, which consider informal sources of income, restricted access to formal financial services, and lower rates of formal education, which have resulted in the application of Likert-scale questionnaires and self-reported financial practices to classify the level of financial literacy (Atkinson & Messy, 2012).

Several barriers affect women's economic empowerment at the national level such as the lack of decision-making power in family matters, attending extended educational needs, unattainable

promotions of jobs, a lack of a compassionate working environment, and an increased risk of un-infectious diseases (Wijewardhana & Dias, 2021). On the other hand, there is a logical association between poverty and disempowerment because of the insufficiency of resources, and the greater significance of some choices have than others in terms of their consequences for people's lives. It emphasized that the more women become empowered, the more men feel they lose their identity (Bhattacharya & Banerjee, Women empowerment and poverty reduction, 2012)

Financial literacy is highly diverse across nations and regions, depending on education, income, occupation, gender, and access to financial information. In developed nations like Australia, financial literacy is higher among men, older people, and those with professional occupations or higher education (Worthington, 2005). In India, the lack of financial literacy is limited by low literacy levels and awareness, emphasizing the need for initiatives and programs to improve the use of financial services (Rahman & Laskar, 2024)

Overall, literature confirms a strong link between financial literacy and women's economic empowerment. Enhancing financial literacy among rural women is essential for improving financial well-being, strengthening decision-making, increasing access to resources, and fostering inclusive economic development in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design with a descriptive and explanatory approach to examine the relationship between financial literacy and women's economic empowerment. The population comprised approximately 8,870 married rural women residing in the selected Grama Niladhari Divisions of the Kandy District. Based on a 95% confidence level, the recommended sample size was 369 respondents using an online sample size calculator; however, due to time and resource constraints, the final sample was reduced to 120 respondents for the feasibility of data collection. The primary data were gathered based on a structured questionnaire that was given to the married rural women who were sampled based on a stratified random sampling method in four Grama Niladhari Divisions: Udaperadeniya, Palleperadeniya, Bowalawatta, and Augastawatta.

The questionnaire measured four dimensions of financial literacy: financial awareness, financial knowledge, financial skills, and financial attitudes and behavior, using a five-point Likert scale. The economic empowerment of women was measured based on factors like the power of decision-making in the household, financial independence, access to financial resources, and economic activity.

Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, who were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, all data were well stored and used only for

academic purposes, with findings reported in aggregate form only. To ensure inclusivity, language support was provided for Tamil-speaking respondents through a Tamil-speaking assistant to facilitate a clear understanding of the questionnaire.

The analysis of data was performed with the help of IBM SPSS Statistics 25, where descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis were used. A pilot study ($n = 20$) was conducted to assess the reliability of the research instrument, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.922, which indicates a high level of internal consistency and reliability of the measurement scale.

Analysis

The analysis shows that there are significant differences in the economic empowerment of rural women in socio-economic and financial literacy levels. Descriptive findings reveal that the level of empowerment to participate in income-generating activities is very low among housewives, with 76.8% indicating a 'very poor' level, which shows the endemic structural and socio-cultural limitations. Conversely, the empowerment of employees in the public sector is relatively greater, with 58.3% of the employees reporting a 'Good' level of empowerment. Education shows a strong association with household financial decision-making power, as women with no formal or only primary education predominantly report "Poor" participation, whereas those with secondary and higher education exhibit markedly higher levels of financial decision-making autonomy. The involvement in community financial programs is still low among the occupations, and the majority of the respondents claim 'poor' or 'neutral' empowerment. The income-based analysis also shows that women in low-income households (under LKR 40,000) are mostly unable to sustain multiple sources of income, and higher-income groups are more and more reporting 'Good' or 'Excellent' empowerment.

The overall level of financial literacy is moderate, and the mean scores of financial attitudes and behaviors ($M=3.20$) are relatively high in comparison with financial knowledge ($M = 2.19$). Cronbach's Alpha of 0.865 indicates good internal consistency reliability for the scale. This suggests that the items in the scale are strongly related and are likely to measure the same underlying construction. This indicates that all items are contributing positively to the scale's internal consistency. Correlation analysis proves that there are significant and positive correlations between economic empowerment and all financial literacy dimensions, especially financial skills ($r = 0.768$) and financial attitudes and behaviors ($r = 0.735$). The findings of multiple regression also prove the predictive value of financial literacy, where the model predicts economic empowerment by 68.1%. (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.670$, $p < 0.05$). Financial skills ($\beta = 0.455$, $p < 0.05$) and financial attitudes and behaviour ($\beta = 0.436$, $p < 0.05$) emerge as the most significant predictors, while financial awareness and knowledge show weaker but positive effects. Overall, the findings underscore that beyond awareness and knowledge, practical

financial skills and positive financial behaviors play a decisive role in enhancing the economic empowerment of rural women in the Kandy District.

This research paper has shown that not every aspect of financial literacy helps women to be economically empowered. The direct effect of financial awareness ($p = 0.442$) and financial knowledge ($p = 0.184$) on economic empowerment was not statistically significant at 5% level of significance ($p > 0.05$), which implies that financial awareness and theoretical knowledge alone cannot create measurable empowerment outcomes. Conversely, financial skills ($p = 0.000$) and financial attitudes and behavior ($p = 0.001$) had a statistically significant positive contribution to the economic empowerment of women ($p < 0.05$). These findings highlight those practical financial competencies, such as budgeting, savings management, income planning, and disciplined financial behavior, are decisive factors in enhancing women's financial independence and participation in economic decision-making.

5. Key Findings and Discussion

This study has examined how financial literacy affects the economic empowerment of rural women in the Kandy District of Sri Lanka, and how these differences vary based on employment status, education, and income levels. The results indicated that financial literacy and economic empowerment of women were strongly related, but the strength of the relation was different according to socio-demographic factors. The very poor ability to participate in income-generating activities was reported by a huge majority of housewives (76.8%), which were structural and socio-cultural barriers, including lack of financial independence, accessibility to markets, and household chores (Pitt & Khandker, 1998). Conversely, the employees in the public sector were found to be relatively more empowered, with 58.3% reporting a Good level of empowerment, probably due to job security, consistent income, and institutional benefits (Rao & Walton, 2004).

Education emerged as a significant determinant of financial decision-making. Women who did not get any formal education or received only primary education mostly said that they were not involved in financial decision-making, and the level of education acquisition was a key factor in improving financial knowledge and confidence (Van Rooij, Lusardi, & Alessie, 2012). On the other hand, women who had secondary and higher education were more financially competent, which proves the thesis that education is a contributor to economic independence (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014). Similarly, the income levels also affected empowerment because low-income families were mainly reliant on one source of income, but high-income households were more likely to claim that they had the ability to diversify their incomes (Banerjee & Duflo, 2007). Although the overall financial attitudes and behavior of the participants were positive, they were not necessarily accompanied by financial knowledge and skills, which signifies the discrepancy between the disposition towards financial management and technical knowledge (Bucher-Koenen, Lusardi, Alessie, & van Rooij, 2017).

Hypothesis testing revealed differentiated effects of financial literacy dimensions on economic empowerment. Financial awareness did not have a significant effect on empowerment, which indicates that financial institutions and services knowledge alone is not enough without a favorable structural environments (Sarker , Hossain, & Rahman, 2019). Similarly, financial literacy failed to generate a meaningful impact, which suggests that theoretical knowledge without practice does not have much impact on economic performance (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014). Financial skills, on the contrary, showed a strong positive impact, and practical skills, including budgeting, saving, record-keeping, and income management, allowed women to make sound financial decisions and increase the economic stability of the household (Sibhatu & Qaim, 2017). It was also established that financial behaviors were very strong predictors of financial well-being (Van Rooij , Lusardi , & Alessie, 2012). Empowerment was greatly promoted by positive financial attitudes and behavior, which highlighted the essence of having disciplined financial behavior, like responsible borrowing, saving, and long-term planning (Xiao & Porto, 2017).

Despite these findings, rural women face multiple barriers that limit their financial literacy and empowerment. The family structure is patriarchal, which limits the autonomy of decision-making, and the general literacy level and inability to comprehend complex financial documents are barriers to using formal financial services(Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014). Other barriers are the lack of awareness about government programs, low income, high household costs, geographic distance to banking services, distrust of formal institutions, and absence of collateral or digital literacy(Klapper, Lusardi , & Van, 2015). Institutional and geographic constraints further reduce access to formal finance (Demirgüç-Kunt , Klapper , Singer , Ansar , & Hess, 2018). These interconnected barriers highlight the need for simplified financial systems, experiential financial education, and inclusive policy interventions to enhance economic empowerment among rural women (World Bank, 2017).

Overall, the research indicates that practical financial skills and positive financial behavior are more essential to attain economic empowerment compared to knowledge or awareness. The policymakers and development practitioners must also consider developing specific interventions that would integrate financial education with the chances of applying skills and behavioral reinforcement, thus allowing the rural women to transform financial literacy into actual economic benefits.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings reveal that financial knowledge alone does not significantly improve women's economic empowerment; rather, financial skills, attitudes, and responsible practices play a more decisive role in achieving financial independence and participation in household and community decisions. Housewives and self-employed women face socio-cultural barriers, financial dependence, and limited market access, while public sector employees and educated women demonstrate stronger confidence

and decision-making power. Higher income levels further enhance financial security and diversification capacity. Despite generally positive attitudes, rural women encounter barriers such as limited access, gender bias, low literacy, and mistrust. Therefore, empowerment requires practical skills, institutional support, inclusive policies, and socio-cultural transformation.

Policy Recommendations

It is recommended that policymakers and government officials focus on creating and implementing inclusive financial policies that tackle the structural challenges faced by rural women. This can be achieved by integrating hands-on financial training into national and local programs, covering budgeting, saving, credit management, investment, and risk management. Training can be delivered through community workshops, village-level financial literacy sessions, and practical demonstrations, ensuring accessibility for women with low literacy levels.

Public awareness campaigns should use community meetings, local radio programs, printed materials in local languages, visual aids, and storytelling techniques to enhance understanding of government programs, microfinance services, and other financial resources. To improve access to formal financial systems, policymakers should promote mobile banking and digital financial services in rural areas, along with targeted digital literacy programs teaching women to safely and effectively use mobile apps and ATMs. Additionally, policies can encourage flexible micro-savings and collateral-free credit programs tailored for rural women, while motivating financial institutions to design products that meet the unique socio-economic and cultural needs of these communities. By combining practical training, awareness campaigns, and broader access to digital and formal financial services, policymakers can foster an environment that empowers rural women to actively participate in economic activities and achieve sustainable financial independence.

Institutional Recommendations

Financial institutions, microfinance institutions, and community-based organizations should provide specialized workshops and counseling sessions that focus on the particular financial requirements of rural women, including those with low literacy. Hands-on training sessions on budgeting, saving, credit management, investment, and risk management should be conducted in a simplified manner. Learning sessions in groups and peer-to-peer learning can help enhance understanding. Institutions should implement flexible micro-saving programs with lower minimum requirements and micro-insurance options that are more affordable, thus reducing risks associated with health shocks or business failures. Collateral-free group lending programs like joint liability and village banking programs should be scaled up. Digital financial inclusion can be implemented through hands-on training sessions on mobile banking, ATMs, and digital technology. Financial resource centers in local

areas can be established to provide constant counseling support to women, thus enabling them to develop financial literacy, make better decisions, and become more financially resilient and empowered in the long term.

Research Recommendations

Future studies should use mixed-method research designs to provide comprehensive quantitative and qualitative insights into the behavioral, socio-economic, and contextual factors affecting women's financial empowerment. Expanding the geographic scope beyond the Kandy District would improve the external validity and generalizability of the findings. Research should also include rural men, urban men, and urban women to enable comparative analyses across gender and regional contexts.

Longitudinal designs are recommended to assess the long-term impacts of financial literacy interventions on economic empowerment, financial resilience, and income stability. Additionally, incorporating qualitative approaches can offer deeper understanding of socio-cultural factors and the long-term trajectories of financial and economic empowerment among diverse population groups in Sri Lanka.

Acknowledgment

This research is based on a dissertation submitted to the Department of Public Administration in 2025 as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the BSc. Honours in Management (Public) Degree. I extend my deepest appreciation to my research supervisor, Prof. M. H. A. Sisira Kumara, for his invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous support throughout this study. Her expertise and encouragement have been instrumental in the successful completion of this research.

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Emerging Street Food Industry in Sri Lanka: Characteristics, Contributions, and Challenges

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Keywords: Street Food, Vendors, Public Health, Informal Economy, Consumer Behaviors

Introduction

The street food industry is an important economic and socio-cultural component in many developing countries, driven by rapid urbanization, changing lifestyles, and increasing demand for convenient and affordable meals (Alimi, 2016). Sri Lanka reflects these trends, where street food plays a central role in daily life and represents the country's multicultural culinary identity. Popular foods such as kottu roti, appa, and isso wade are widely consumed across socio-economic groups and are deeply embedded in local food culture (Perera, 2024). Street vending has also become a key livelihood strategy, especially for low-income and marginalized individuals who rely on it as an accessible form of self-employment in the absence of stable formal-sector opportunities (Jayasuriya, 1994).

Globally, the street food sector contributes to employment generation, food accessibility, cultural preservation, and tourism development (Tinker, 1997; Bhowmik, 2007). In countries such as India, Thailand, Mexico, and Vietnam, street food forms a vital part of urban economies and supports millions of informal workers. It also enhances tourism by offering authentic local culinary experiences (FAO, 2016). However, international studies consistently highlight challenges related to hygiene, infrastructure, financial exclusion, and regulatory uncertainty (FAO, 2016; Habib, 2016).

In Sri Lanka, the street food industry similarly operates within the informal economy and contributes to income generation, urban food supply, and cultural expression. Food tourism further strengthens its importance, as local cuisine forms a key part of visitor experiences and contributes to national tourism earnings (Authority, 2023). Despite these contributions, the sector remains largely informal and faces structural challenges such as unclear regulations, limited infrastructure, inadequate sanitation, and health concerns (Habib, 2016; Salamandane et al., 2023). Vendors also face financial constraints due to limited access to formal credit and institutional support (Karunaratna & Tjandra, 2021).

Although street food is widely consumed, research in Sri Lanka has focused mainly on food safety, leaving gaps in understanding the sector's broader economic, social, cultural, and tourism contributions (Hettiarachchi et al., 2021). Limited attention has also been given to vendor livelihoods,

consumer behavior, and the role of government authorities. This lack of comprehensive research restricts effective and inclusive policy development (Jayasuriya, 1994).

Addressing these gaps, this study examines the characteristics, contributions, and challenges of the street food industry in Sri Lanka, with particular attention to vendor experiences, consumer perceptions, and government engagement. The findings aim to support evidence-based policy formulation and promote the sustainable development of this culturally significant and economically important informal-sector industry.

Research Objectives

- To identify the **key characteristics** of the street food industry in Sri Lanka.
- To examine the **economic, social, cultural, and tourism contributions** of the street food sector.
- To explore the **major challenges** faced by street food vendors.

Literature Review

Street food culture is widely documented across Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Research shows that street food contributes significantly to employment generation, household income, convenience-based consumption, and food accessibility (Tinker, 1997). In countries such as India, Thailand, Mexico, and Vietnam, it forms an essential part of urban life by providing affordable meals to workers, students, and travelers, while also supporting tourism through authentic culinary experiences (Bhowmik, 2007). However, studies consistently identify challenges related to hygiene, sanitation, infrastructure, and regulatory uncertainty (FAO, 2016; Salamandane et al., 2023). Similar issues are evident in African contexts such as Kenya, where limited access to clean water and poor food-handling practices remain concerns (Muinde & Kuria, 2015).

Sri Lankan research reflects these global patterns but remains limited in scope. Most studies focus on food safety and hygiene risks, including contamination and unsafe handling practices (Hettiarachchi et al., 2021). While important, these studies pay less attention to the broader economic, social, and cultural significance of street food, vendor livelihood strategies, and consumer motivations. As a result, a comprehensive understanding of the sector's characteristics, contributions, and challenges is still lacking.

Historically, street food has evolved across cultures, preserving culinary traditions and reflecting local identity (Czerwińska et al., 2020; Sgroi et al., 2022). In Sri Lanka, street food reflects the country's diverse ethnic influences and long-standing food culture (Mihiranie et al., 2020). Vendors also vary in

behavior, functions, and demographic backgrounds, demonstrating the diversity of this informal sector (Karunaratna & Tjandra, 2021).

Street food provides key contributions. Economically, it offers employment and income opportunities for low-income and marginalized groups (Crush & Young, 2019; Njaya, 2014) and supports food security through affordable ready-to-eat meals (Riet, 2002). Socially and culturally, it preserves traditional recipes and strengthens community interaction (Wickrematilake et al., 2022). It also enhances tourism by offering authentic food experiences (Gupta & Sajani, 2019; Gaffar et al., 2022). However, environmental concerns arise from inadequate waste disposal and sanitation infrastructure (Habib, 2016).

Despite these benefits, vendors face challenges such as limited access to finance, poor infrastructure, competition, and weak regulatory recognition (Karunaratna & Tjandra, 2021; Somasundaram & Syed, 2015). Food safety risks remain significant where access to clean water and sanitation is limited (Rane, 2011; Kolamunna & Dissanayake, 2023). Vendors are also vulnerable to economic shocks, political instability, and pandemics that reduce demand and increase operating costs (Meher et al., 2021). Recent literature highlights continuing food safety risks in street food systems due to sanitation and infrastructure constraints (Salamandane, Malfeito-Ferreira, & Brito, 2023)

Although international research emphasizes the economic, social, cultural, and tourism contributions of street food, research on Sri Lanka remains limited. Existing studies mainly address food safety, with less attention to broader contributions, vendor livelihoods, consumer behavior, and government involvement. Little research has also examined the impact of recent economic crises and post-pandemic conditions on Sri Lankan vendors. Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by examining the characteristics, contributions, and challenges of the street food industry in Sri Lanka to support evidence-based policy and sustainable sector development.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the characteristics, contributions, and challenges of the street food industry in Sri Lanka. A qualitative approach was appropriate because it allows an in-depth understanding of participants lived experiences, perceptions, and practices within natural informal-sector settings (Singh, 2023). The research was conducted in Negombo, Western Province, focusing on active street food locations such as Periyamulla (near the main road), Canal Road (towards Browns Beach), and the beach-front, where street food vending is concentrated and vendor–consumer interactions are frequent.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and direct field observations during peak vending hours between 7.00 p.m. and 11.00 p.m. A convenience sampling technique was used,

selecting participants based on their availability and active involvement at vending sites. The final sample included 17 respondents: 8 street food vendors, 8 consumers, and 1 Public Health Inspector (PHI). Vendors ranged from 19 to 53 years old, included both men and women, and had 2–8 years of business experience. They sold both traditional Sri Lankan foods (e.g., kottu, hoppers, isso wade) and fast-food items, with four licensed and four unlicensed businesses. Consumers, aged 23–50, represented diverse occupations such as students, office workers, drivers, and government employees, with varying consumption patterns and concerns related to price, hygiene, and accessibility.

An interview guide (Annexure 1) ensured consistency while allowing flexibility. Questions covered business operations, income patterns, sector contributions to livelihoods, consumer behavior, hygiene practices, challenges, and perceptions of government regulation and support. Field photographs were taken with participant consent to document vending environments and infrastructure conditions.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview recordings were transcribed, coded, and grouped into broader themes reflecting sector characteristics, contributions, and challenges. Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure an accurate representation of participant perspectives. The inclusion of the PHI provided a regulatory viewpoint, enhancing credibility. Field observations and visual data further supported the interpretation of environmental and operational conditions (see Figures 1–4).

Analysis

This section analyses the street food industry in Sri Lanka in relation to the study objectives: the **characteristics** of the sector, its **contributions** to livelihoods and cultural identity, and the **challenges** shaping its development. The analysis reflects vendor experiences, consumer behavior, and government engagement in Negombo.

Characteristics of the Street Food Industry

The street food industry in Sri Lanka operates largely within the informal economy and is shaped by cultural traditions, livelihood needs, and adaptive business practices. Vendors in Negombo generally begin with minimal start-up capital and depend heavily on family labor, using flexible and low-cost methods to sustain daily operations. Many vendors entered the industry due to unemployment or financial difficulties and viewed street vending as one of the most accessible ways to generate income. Over time, street food vending became the primary livelihood for several vendors, offering a degree of stability despite broader economic volatility.

The range of food items offered reflects Sri Lanka's multicultural culinary identity. Popular dishes such as kottu roti, appa, isso wade, rolls, and fried snacks attract both local residents and tourists. Vendors frequently adjust menus and prices in response to customer preferences and changing market conditions, demonstrating the sector's adaptability. This flexibility is particularly evident in high-traffic locations such as beaches, bus stands, markets, and coastal tourist areas.

Vendor 4

"My husband, my sister, and I are running this together. My husband goes to work and comes to help me."

Vendor 2

"It has been about two years since we started this. First of all, there is a garage here, and I started this by using the equipment available in that garage, because street food was in trend at that time."

Vendor 1

"I am an engineer by profession, I have created this as a hobby and my main goal was to provide entertainment to people."

Consumer 2

"We come here to be free and have a good time."

Consumer 2

"These stores cannot be expected to be very clean. So, for me, I eat what I love."

Officer

"There is no definition for the street food industry. It is usually a hut or a wheeled stall that can be pushed on a main road or side road without sitting or sitting. Although businesses can be started anywhere, they should be started in places that do not cause trouble to customers."



Figure 2: Organized Street food vending area with seating and lighting in Negombo

Source: Field photograph taken by the researcher (2025)

From the consumer perspective, affordability, taste, convenience, and cultural familiarity strongly influence street food consumption. Many consumers explained that rising living costs have made street food a practical alternative to restaurants. In tourism-oriented areas like Negombo, street food stalls also function as informal social spaces where locals and visitors interact, contributing to urban vibrancy and tourism experience.



Figure 3: Beverage vendor preparing drinks at a roadside street food stall

Source: Field photograph taken by the researcher (2025)

Contributions of the Street Food Industry

The street food industry contributes to livelihoods and everyday life through economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Economically, it provides an accessible source of income, especially for individuals with limited opportunities in the formal sector. Vendors described street vending as a viable livelihood option because it can be started with low capital and maintained with family support.

Socially, street food enhances food accessibility by offering affordable and convenient meals to a wide range of consumers. Its presence in public spaces makes it easier for people to obtain quick meals

during daily routines. In Negombo, street food locations also serve as informal gathering points, supporting relaxation, social interaction, and shared experiences.

Vendor 1

“Without any educational background, this business can be started and run smoothly with good dedication. It is a good source of income.”

Vendor 8

“Since Negombo is a tourist area, many tourists come to the beach. Even then, they eat the food they see.”

Vendor 3

“This is a business that has been going on for generations, a family business. My primary business is this, all the brothers in our family come together, and do this business. All our stakeholders make a living from this business.”

Consumer 4

“I have seen many job opportunities being created for these workers in addition to traders. The garbage collectors and wholesalers are getting more job opportunities, the best examples are the people who carry goods, delivery boys, and they are also getting job opportunities.”

Consumer 2

“You can buy food here at a low price. It is just like the food in big restaurants, but it is even tastier here. But we come here because we can buy them at a lower price.”

Officer

“From an economic perspective, this is a great help to the country. Because several job opportunities are identified through this. For example, government employees do not get enough of their salaries. Therefore, they are largely engaged in this job opportunity as a side income. It indirectly affects the economy of the country.”

“Street food is a new concept that has emerged from the coronavirus pandemic. With the economic downturn, those involved in the tourism industry have largely turned to this street food industry.”



Figure 4: Structured outdoor street food dining space with shared seating

Source: Field photograph taken by the researcher (2025)

Culturally, the industry reflects Sri Lanka's culinary diversity. The continued demand for traditional foods and the presence of street food in tourist areas reinforce cultural identity while enriching tourism experiences through exposure to local flavors and street-side food culture.

Challenges of the Street Food Industry

Despite its importance, the sector faces several challenges that limit its sustainability. Regulatory ambiguity is a key issue. Vendors reported unclear licensing requirements and inconsistent monitoring by local authorities and Public Health Inspectors, creating uncertainty and discouraging business formalization.

Financial constraints also restrict vendor development. Limited access to formal credit, lack of collateral, and low financial literacy force many vendors to rely on personal savings or informal borrowing, limiting investment in better equipment and hygiene facilities.

Infrastructure gaps further affect operations. Many vendors lack access to clean water, stable electricity, proper waste disposal, and adequate shelter, which negatively impacts hygiene and working conditions, particularly during adverse weather. Rising ingredient costs, inflation, and increasing competition from both new vendors and formal food outlets add additional pressure, while rainy weather often reduces customer turnout and daily income.

Vendor 2

" We don't have a permit. But we took a ticket for Rs. 100 for Saturdays."

Vendor 3

"We have a license. But we need a separate license to use liquor. We can't get one. We have to pay a lot of money for it."

Consumer 4

" Register these, there is some kind of legal system. But we don't have much understanding about that process."

Officer

"Although there is no firm law, the law is enforced by issuing necessary instructions. They are punished under the Food Act. Legal action is taken after initial awareness. Not having garbage bins, wrapping food in newspapers, and using the same type of oil for a long time are all punishable offenses.

"For example, the Food Safety Act states that food handlers must be healthy, that is, they must not eat betel nuts, undergo medical examinations, wear a hair covering, and wear appropriate uniforms. It is a regulation in the Food Act."

Consumer 3

"We don't go out to eat during rainy days."

Vendor 1

"A health checkup should be done for every employee. Employees leave here after about three months of training. Then it is our cost, if it is an employee who stays for a long time. But doing a health checkup for employees who stay for a short time like three months creates a cost for the business."

Consumer 8

"We haven't seen it, but we are using current unknowingly. But we don't drink water."

officer

"They are not provided with electricity or water because there is no regulation. They do not get regular water or electricity because they have to adhere to pedestrian safety and traffic rules."



Figure 4: Street food vendor operating inside a semi-permanent food stall

Source: *Field photograph taken by the researcher (2025)*

Key Findings and Discussions

The findings show that Sri Lanka's street food industry plays an important economic, social, and cultural role, while facing significant sustainability challenges. Economically, the sector provides self-employment and income opportunities, particularly for individuals with limited access to formal-sector jobs. For many vendors, street food vending is a primary livelihood, while others depend on it as a supplementary income source. The sector also indirectly supports suppliers, transport workers, and others involved in food distribution, contributing to local economic circulation.

From a social perspective, street food improves food accessibility by offering affordable and convenient meals to students, workers, and low-income consumers. Street food spaces also serve as informal social environments where people gather, relax, and interact, highlighting the industry's role in everyday urban life beyond food provision. Culturally, the sector reflects Sri Lanka's culinary heritage, with traditional foods such as kottu roti, hoppers, and isso wade remaining central to vendor menus and attracting both locals and tourists. In tourism areas such as Negombo, street food enhances visitor experiences and adds vibrancy to public spaces. Environmentally, the sector interacts closely with the urban setting, but its contribution is closely tied to available infrastructure, as many vendors still face challenges related to waste disposal and sanitation.

Despite these contributions, several barriers affect the sector's sustainability. Regulatory challenges are significant, as many vendors operate without licenses due to unclear or inconsistently enforced procedures, creating insecurity and limiting business development. Financial constraints further restrict growth, as vendors often lack access to formal credit and depend on personal savings or informal borrowing, limiting investment in improved equipment and hygiene practices (Lanka.,

2025). Infrastructure limitations are also common, with many vendors operating without clean water, stable electricity, proper waste disposal, or adequate shelter, which affects both hygiene and working conditions.

Hygiene concerns were raised by both vendors and consumers. While vendors expressed willingness to maintain cleanliness, structural barriers often made this difficult. Consumers acknowledged risks but frequently prioritized affordability and taste (FAO, 2016; Hettiarachchi et al., 2021). The sector is also vulnerable to inflation, rising ingredient costs, pandemics, weather conditions, and increasing competition from formal outlets and new vendors. Overall, while the street food industry remains a key contributor to livelihoods, urban life, and cultural identity, its long-term sustainability is constrained by regulatory gaps, financial exclusion, infrastructure shortages, and environmental challenges.

Conclusions & Recommendations

This study concludes that the street food industry in Sri Lanka is a culturally embedded, economically important, and socially significant sector within the informal economy. The findings show that the industry contributes to livelihood generation, food accessibility, urban social interaction, and local cultural identity, particularly in tourism-oriented areas such as Negombo. However, the informal nature of the sector exposes vendors to financial insecurity, infrastructure limitations, regulatory uncertainty, and health-related risks.

Economically, street food provides self-employment and income opportunities for individuals with limited access to formal-sector work. Socially, it offers affordable meals and creates informal public spaces where people gather and interact. Culturally, the sector sustains traditional Sri Lankan foods and enhances tourism through local culinary experiences. At the same time, environmental and public health concerns remain due to inadequate waste management, sanitation challenges, and insufficient infrastructure.

The study highlights that long-term sustainability depends on structured and supportive interventions. Clear and accessible licensing systems would reduce uncertainty and encourage legal operation. Establishing regulated vending zones with clean water, waste disposal, electricity, and lighting would improve hygiene and working conditions. Expanding financial inclusion through microfinance programs and financial literacy training would help vendors strengthen business resilience.

Capacity-building programs on food safety, sanitation, and small-business management are also essential to improve vendor practices and consumer confidence. Collaboration between local authorities, Public Health Inspectors, and vendor associations should focus on supportive monitoring

rather than punitive enforcement. With consistent policy attention and infrastructure support, the street food sector can become a more secure and recognized contributor to inclusive economic growth, urban life, and cultural tourism in Sri Lanka.

Acknowledgment

This research is based on a dissertation submitted to the Department of Public Administration in 2025 as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the BSc. Honours in Management (Public) Degree. I extend my deepest appreciation to my research supervisor, Prof. M. H. A. Sisira Kumara, for his invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous support throughout this study. Her expertise and encouragement have been instrumental in the successful completion of this research.

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The Impact of Digital Marketing Strategies on SME Owners in The Mushroom Industry: An Evaluation Based on Kegalle District, Sri Lanka

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Key Words: *Digital Marketing, SMEs, Mushroom Industry, Kegalle District, Sri Lanka*

Introduction

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) are an important phenomenon in the economy of Sri Lanka, as they significantly add to the creation of jobs, rural development, and income generation (Asian Development Bank, 2020). Over the past few years, the breakneck pace of development of information and communication technologies has changed the way businesses are conducted traditionally, giving businesses the opportunity to increase their market reach, efficiency, and customer interactions. Digital marketing has become a valuable element of this change (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Using digital channels, including social networks, mobile applications, and online communication tools, companies are able to advertise goods, interact with the audience directly, and to minimize the reliance on traditional intermediaries. In the case of the SMEs with limited financial and human capabilities, digital marketing provides a rather affordable and bendable substitute to conventional marketing approaches (Taiminen and Karjaluo, 2015).

In the agricultural sector, the mushroom industry has been receiving more importance in the face of increasing demand of nutritious and environmentally friendly food products among consumers. Mushrooms are specifically to be cultivated by small-scale business owners since they do not need much land, the start-up costs are relatively low, and the production period does not last long. The Kegalle District has grown to be a main location in mushroom growing because of favourable climatic conditions and participation by SME owners in rural. Nonetheless, this possibility, most mushroom SMEs are still struggling to market their produce to the best of their abilities.

Small and medium-sized businesses, or SMEs, are essential to Sri Lanka's economic growth. They have a major impact on GDP growth, rural industrialization, poverty alleviation, and job creation (Asian Development Bank, 2020). SMEs make up more than 75% of businesses and approximately 45% of job prospects in emerging nations like Sri Lanka. SMEs are a major source of household income and local economic stability, especially in rural districts like Kegalle. Despite their significance, a lot of

SMEs struggle with issues like poor adoption of technology, limited financial resources, restricted market access, and a lack of managerial competence.

The corporate environment has changed significantly as a result of the quick development of information and communication technology (ICT). Digital marketing has become a strategic strategy that allows companies to use digital technology and online platforms to advertise goods and services (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Digital marketing enables direct communication between producers and consumers, cost-effective advertising, real-time feedback, and data-driven decision-making, in contrast to traditional marketing strategies like newspaper ads, physical markets, and middlemen.

Mobile phone and internet penetration in Sri Lanka have increased, but the use of digital marketing by agricultural SMEs in the rural areas has not been embraced fully. The traditional marketing channels used by the Mushroom SME owners in the Kegalle District are mostly local vendors, intermediaries, roadside sales, and word-of-mouth promotion. The practices hold down market growth, reduce profitability, and enhance reliance on agents. Additionally, the product is very sensitive to marketing risks because mushrooms are highly perishable, and delays in the sale or distribution channels may lead to immediate losses. Although the digital tools are available, there is a significant gap between access to technology and its proper use by the mushroom owners of SMEs. There are a lot of entrepreneurs who have simple knowledge of digital platforms but do not have the skills, confidence, or resources to implement them in a strategic way to serve business interests. Besides, there is a limited number of empirical research studies that have been conducted on the adoption of digital marketing in niche agricultural industries on a district level.

It is against this background that the primary aim of the proposed study will be to investigate the implementation of digital marketing concepts and the perceived effect on mushroom SME owners in the Kegalle District in Sri Lanka. Particularly, the research aims at establishing the extent of awareness and use of digital marketing tools by the owners of mushroom SMEs, investigate the major obstacles to the adoption of digital marketing, measure the perceived effects of digital marketing adoption on customer interactions, business sales and business sustainability, as well as offer suggestions on how to improve the adoption of digital marketing by the owners of mushroom SMEs. By solving these purposes, the study has a context-related contribution to the digital marketing adoption of agricultural SMEs in Sri Lanka and gives useful implications to policymakers, development agencies, and rural development entrepreneurs.

Literature Review

The existing literature points out that the use of digital marketing has the potential to enhance the performance of SMEs by making the product more visible, building strong customer relationships, and promoting competitiveness (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Digital platforms provide small businesses with the opportunity to go beyond the geographical boundary and establish a direct connection with the customers, which is a valuable argument, especially when the enterprise has scarce financial and human resources. SMEs are also able to react faster to market changes and customer preferences through digital interaction.

Digital marketing has been determined as the means to promote perishable products in the agricultural context, as it creates trust with the help of visual content and open communication that triggers demand (Wijeratne and Silva, 2014). Research also indicates that the application of social media is particularly appropriate to fresh food products due to the fact that images, video and customer comments make a significant contribution to the decision to buy the product. Nevertheless, in rural agricultural areas, the expansion of digital marketing is still uneven despite the above benefits.

Available literature reveals that digital marketing adoption among SME is dependent on a number of factors. These are the degree of digital literacy, perceived usefulness of technology, cost factor, infrastructure availability, and institutional support availability. Other obstacles that rural entrepreneurs have to overcome in most of the developing countries include the lack of training opportunities and the lack of confidence in using digital tools to conduct business.

The conceptual frameworks applied in this study are the Resource-Based View and the Diffusion of Innovation perspectives (Barney, 1991; Rogers, 2003). According to the Resource-Based View, digital marketing capabilities may be interpreted as strategic resources, which contribute to higher competitiveness in the case of efficient use. The Diffusion of Innovation approach would view the issue as perceived benefits, complexity, and compatibility with the current practice, together with the social environment that entrepreneurs would be working in. These two views offer a convenient conceptual framework to use in the study of the differences in adoption of digital marketing among mushroom SME owners.

There are many different technologies and platforms used in digital marketing, including:

- Marketing on social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok)
- Messaging Apps (Messenger, WhatsApp Business)

- Google Ads, or search engine marketing
- SEO, or search engine optimization
- Email Promotion
- Content marketing (blogs, pictures, and videos)
- Online shopping portals
- Payment Systems Online

These tools give SMEs, particularly those in agriculture, inexpensive chances to go beyond regional markets and establish enduring client relationships. However, strategic planning, ongoing engagement, and digital literacy are necessary for the use of these tools.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was chosen to have an in-depth opinion about the experiences and perceptions of the mushroom SME owners on the adoption of digital marketing. This method was found suitable because the research aimed to investigate attitudes, challenges, and perceived outcomes instead of quantifying the causal relationships.

Ten mushroom SME owners of Kegalle District were sampled in the study using purposive sampling according to their active participation in mushroom cultivation and marketing endeavours. The semi-structured interviews with these owners of SMEs were used to gather primary data for the study. The interviews were aimed at digital marketing tool awareness and use, difficulties in adoption of the tools, and perceived business results. All the interviews were held in Sinhalese to be clear and to make the participants comfortable.

Besides, secondary data was also utilized to offer the contextual meaning of the study. They were based on the published reports, academic literature, and policy documents on SMEs, digital marketing, and agricultural development in Sri Lanka. Qualitative data collected were analyzed by thematic analysis that included transcription, coding, and identification of vital themes that were in line with the objectives of the research.

Analysis and Discussion of Themes

This chapter analyzed qualitative data collected from ten small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) owners in the mushroom industry in the Kegalle District of Sri Lanka. The analysis explored four main

areas: motivational factors for digital marketing adoption, challenges faced by SMEs, effective digital marketing strategies, and the impact of digital marketing on business performance.

Sample Profile Insights

The sample included SME owners with varying ages and business experience. Younger entrepreneurs preferred visual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, while older owners mainly used Facebook due to familiarity. Across all age groups, WhatsApp Business was widely used for customer communication.

Participants who used digital marketing daily reported higher engagement and sales compared to occasional users (P1, P6). This indicates that consistency in digital marketing is important for SME success.

Motivational Factors for Digital Marketing Adoption

Cost efficiency was a major reason SMEs adopted digital marketing. Owners felt online promotion was cheaper than traditional advertising. As one participant said, "Facebook marketing is affordable compared to traditional advertising" (P6). However, some still struggled with paid advertising costs (P9).

Business growth potential was another key motivation. Many SMEs reported increased customer reach and brand awareness after using social media. One owner stated, "I saw a 30% increase in customers after Facebook marketing" (P1). Another mentioned improved brand recognition through daily Instagram posts (P2).

Customer engagement also encouraged adoption. Platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp allowed SMEs to communicate directly with customers and receive instant feedback. "WhatsApp Business is best for maintaining customer relationships" (P10). SMEs also felt pressure to adopt digital marketing because competitors were already online (P7, P9).

Challenges in Digital Marketing Adoption

Despite its benefits, SMEs faced many challenges.

The most common problem was lack of technical knowledge. Many owners did not know how to run ads, analyze results, or create content effectively. One participant said, "I don't know how to properly run Facebook ads" (P3).

Financial constraints were another barrier. Some SMEs could not afford continuous paid advertising. "Digital marketing costs are high; I can't afford ads regularly" (P1).

Platform complexity also created difficulties. Social media algorithms change frequently, making it hard to reach customers organically. “Each platform has different algorithms” (P10).

Digital literacy gaps were evident, especially among older owners. Some depended on family members to manage social media (P9). Poor internet connectivity in rural areas also limited online marketing activities. “Poor internet makes online marketing difficult” (P6).

These challenges show that SMEs need training, infrastructure support, and affordable digital tools.

Effective Digital Marketing Strategies Used by SMEs

The study found that SMEs mainly used social media marketing, WhatsApp Business, paid advertising, business websites, and influencer marketing.

Social media marketing through Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok was the most common strategy. “Posting daily on Instagram helped build recognition” (P2).

WhatsApp Business was effective for maintaining customer relationships and processing orders. “WhatsApp helps me get repeat customers” (P10).

Paid advertising through Facebook Ads helped attract new customers but required financial investment. “Facebook Ads helped me attract customers but are costly” (P6).

Some SMEs used websites to improve credibility. “A website makes my business look professional” (P4). Influencer marketing and customer reviews also helped increase trust and sales (P3).

Impact of Digital Marketing on SME Performance

Digital marketing had a positive impact on business performance in several ways.

First, SMEs reported increased customer bases. “Digital marketing brought customers from outside my district” (P5).

Second, revenue growth improved. “My revenue grew by 40% after Facebook Ads” (P6).

Third, brand awareness increased. “More people recognize my business now” (P8).

Fourth, SMEs gained a competitive advantage. “Online presence gives my business credibility” (P2).

Finally, customer loyalty improved through regular online communication. “WhatsApp increased repeat customers” (P7).

However, SMEs lacking strategic planning and analytical skills struggled to maintain long-term benefits.

Overall Interpretation

The findings show that digital marketing is a valuable tool for mushroom SMEs in Kegalle District, improving customer reach, sales, and brand recognition. However, adoption remains informal due to lack of skills, financial constraints, and infrastructure barriers.

The study highlights the need for structured training, affordable internet access, and institutional support to help SMEs fully benefit from digital marketing. Strengthening these areas can improve SME competitiveness and contribute to rural economic development in Sri Lanka.

Key Findings

The most important results of the research are described in accordance with the objectives of the research, showing the trends concerning the recognition and application, obstacles to adoption, and the perceived effects of digital marketing on mushroom SMEs.

With regard to the initial aim, the results show that the knowledge about the digital marketing tools among mushroom SME owners is quite high. The most popular sites (Facebook and WhatsApp) were known by a majority of participants, mostly by personal experience, not through business education. The usage was, however, mainly simple and relaxed. A small group of owners of the SMEs used these platforms systematically in business promotion, order management, or customer relationship building. It means that digital tools are available, but their potential is not used, and there are no organized marketing plans, and a lack of technical skills.

Speaking of the second goal, the research came up with various hindrances that prevent successful implementation of digital marketing strategies. The poorest digital literacy was the constraint that was most mentioned, especially by the older entrepreneurs. Other difficulties involved the absence of formal training prospects, expensive mobile data services, poor internet connectivity, and the issue of internet security for online payments. These challenges were further enhanced by the perishable nature of mushrooms because the SME owners did not want to create a demand that they could not satisfy, either through storage, transportation, or time limitations.

Considering the third objective, users of digital marketing showed mostly positive results of the perceived effects of the adoption. Those who actively participated in digital marketing indicated that they had better communication with customers, and they became more visible and less dependent on

intermediaries. WhatsApp was found to be the best platform to sustain the relationship with the regular customers and repeat purchases, whereas Facebook was primarily employed to attract new customers and create awareness. Although these advantages are positive, as the results indicate that the majority of SME owners simply were not capable of analyzing their online presence or measuring marketing performance, the long-term strategic value of adopting digital is constrained.

On a bigger scale, the discussion implies that digital marketing is an effective strategic asset of mushroom SMEs provided that it has sufficient skills, infrastructure, and institutional support. Perceived ease of use, compatibility with current business practice, and confidence in handling digital tools were strong factors that affected adoption decisions. Absent specific support measures, the advantages of digital marketing would be skewed among the owners of SMEs.

According to the survey, mushroom SMEs' use of digital marketing is mainly restricted to simple social media use. SMEs understand the value of digital platforms for expanding their businesses, but they don't know enough about organized digital marketing tactics.

Three stages of digital marketing adoption among mushroom SMEs are identified by the study:

1. Basic Level: Answering WhatsApp questions and posting goods on Facebook.
2. Intermediate Level: Consistent customer communication and content updates.
3. Advanced Level: Customer database administration, analytics tracking, paid advertising, and strategic planning.

By expanding market access, boosting direct sales, strengthening brand image, and decreasing reliance on middlemen, the results validate that digital marketing tools may revolutionize SME operations. However, long-term sustainability is limited by a lack of digital skills and performance measurement tools.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has explored the process of taking up digital marketing tactics and how they are perceived to affect mushroom SME owners in the Kegalle District in Sri Lanka in accordance with the stated research objectives.

With reference to the first goal, the research makes the finding that despite the high levels of awareness of digital marketing tools, the level of actual use is very informal and non-strategic. Knowledge is never effective without adoption skills and directions.

Concerning the second goal, the paper concludes that the digital literacy gap, lack of access to training, cost, and infrastructural barriers, and fear of online transactions are major obstacles to the implementation of digital marketing practices. They are especially acute in rural and agricultural settings where institutional support is scarce.

As far as the third goal is concerned, the research finds that the owners of SMEs who have embraced digital marketing have felt actual benefits such as the ability to connect better to customers, improve access to the markets, and less reliance on intermediaries. Nevertheless, lack of analytical and strategic skills curtails the power of SMEs to maintain and expand such benefits in the long-run.

According to these results and in accordance with the fourth objective, the study advises introducing specific digital marketing training programmes to the agricultural SMEs, to develop cooperative-based logistics and distribution networks to handle the perishability of mushroom products, and to introduce easier-to-use digital platforms in the local languages. To increase the digital marketing uptake and the long-term sustainability of the mushroom SMEs in the Kegalle District, there is a need to strengthen the capacity-building efforts and institutional support.

According to the study's findings, digital marketing holds great promise for improving the sustainability and competitiveness of mushroom SMEs in the Kegalle District. However, because of institutional limitations and a lack of digital skills, adoption is still informal and underdeveloped.

In summary, the study suggests the following to improve SME performance with digital marketing as follows,

- Holding organized courses on digital marketing that emphasize useful tools like Facebook Business, WhatsApp Business features, SEO fundamentals, and digital advertising.
- Creating collaborative online markets for mushroom growers.
- Offering basic analytics training to assist SMEs in tracking client reach, engagement, and sales conversion.
- Encouraging digital payment methods to increase confidence in online transactions.
- Promoting the provision of subsidized internet connectivity for rural SMEs by government and development organizations.

Acknowledgment

This research is based on a dissertation submitted to the Department of Public Administration in 2025 as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the BSc. Honours in Management (Public) Degree. I

extend my deepest appreciation to my research supervisor, Prof. M. H. A. Sisira Kumara, for his invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous support throughout this study. Her expertise and encouragement have been instrumental in the successful completion of this research.

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**Impact of Declining Traditional Woodcarving Craftsmanship and Sustainability Strategies: A
study with reference to Pathadumbara Divisional
Secretariat Area**

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Key Words: *Artisans, Cultural Heritage, Livelihood, Sustainability, Triple Bottom Line,
Traditional Woodcarving Craftsmanship*

Introduction

Traditional craftsmanship has played a significant role in shaping the cultural identity and socio-economic structure of Sri Lanka from ancient times. Among various traditional crafts, woodcarving occupies a special position due to its close tie with religious practices, temple architecture, royal buildings, and traditional household designs. Sri Lankan woodcarving, particularly in the Kandyan region, reflects a deeply rooted artistic heritage that has been preserved and transferred across generations through informal family-based learning systems. Renowned historical sites such as the Temple of the Tooth Relic and Embakke Devalaya stand as living evidence of the artistic excellence and cultural value of traditional woodcarving.

The Pathadumbara Divisional Secretariat Area, located within the Kandyan zone, has historically been recognized for its skilled woodcarving artisans. For generations, woodcarving served not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a primary source of livelihood for many rural families in the area. Traditional woodcarvers maintained a strong relationship with nature, using locally available timber resources responsibly and practicing environmentally conscious methods long before the modern concept of sustainability emerged.

However, in recent decades, traditional woodcarving craftsmanship in the Pathadumbara area has experienced a gradual decline. Rapid socio-economic transformations, globalization, technological advancements, and changing consumer preferences have significantly affected the demand for handcrafted products. Mass-produced wooden items and factory-made decorative goods have replaced traditional woodcarvings in many markets due to their lower cost and wider availability. As a result, traditional artisans face increasing difficulty in sustaining their livelihoods, leading to occupational shifts, income instability, and the gradual erosion of cultural knowledge.

This decline does not merely represent the loss of an occupation but signals a broader cultural and social issue. The disappearance of traditional woodcarving threatens the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, weakens rural economies, and disrupts intergenerational knowledge transmission. Therefore, understanding the causes, impacts, and possible sustainability strategies related to the decline of traditional woodcarving has become an urgent academic and policy concern.

Problem Statement

Despite the strong historical and cultural importance of traditional woodcarving, the craft currently faces serious challenges that threaten its continuity in the Pathadumbara Divisional Secretariat Area. Traditional woodcarving has long supported cultural identity and rural livelihoods in Sri Lanka, yet processes of modernization, commercialization, and changing consumer preferences have reduced its economic viability and social recognition (Aamir, 2018; Dhananjani, 2016). The industry now experiences declining demand, limited market access, scarcity of raw materials, lack of skilled successors, and insufficient institutional support, which has grown over the period. Many experienced artisans are aging without successors, while younger generations show limited interest in pursuing woodcarving as a profession due to unstable income opportunities and weak entrepreneurial prospects (Bayocot, 2021).

Although previous studies (Rasiah, 2019; Fernando, 2020) have discussed traditional crafts in relation to cultural preservation and sustainability, empirical research focusing specifically on the decline of traditional woodcarving craftsmanship in Sri Lanka remains limited, particularly at the divisional level. Existing studies often emphasize heritage value or economic contribution but provide a limited understanding of the underlying causes of decline and the livelihood challenges faced by artisans. This research gap is especially evident in the Pathadumbara area, which holds strong historical significance in Sri Lankan woodcarving traditions.

Without a clear understanding of the factors driving this decline and its impact on artisans' livelihoods, policymakers and development agencies face difficulties in designing effective and context-sensitive strategies. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining the decline of traditional woodcarving craftsmanship in the Pathadumbara Divisional Secretariat Area and proposing sustainability strategies grounded in the local cultural, economic, and social context

Research Questions and Objectives

1. What are the key factors contributing to the decline of traditional woodcarving craftsmanship in the Pathadumbara Divisional Secretariat Area?
2. How does the decline of traditional woodcarving craftsmanship affect the livelihoods and economic stability of artisans in the Pathadumbara Divisional Secretariat Area?
3. What strategies can be implemented to sustain and revitalize the traditional woodcarving industry in the Pathadumbara Divisional Secretariat Area?

Based on these research questions, the main objectives of the study are:

- To identify and analyze the socio-economic, cultural, and environmental factors leading to the decline of traditional woodcarving craftsmanship.
- To assess the impact of this decline in traditional woodcarving craftsmanship on the income, job security, and overall economic well-being of artisans.
- To explore and recommend effective strategies and initiatives that can be implemented to support, sustain, and promote the traditional woodcarving industry in the Pathadumbara Divisional Secretariat area.

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant value for multiple stakeholders. From a cultural perspective, it contributes to the preservation of Sri Lanka's intangible cultural heritage by documenting the experiences and challenges of traditional woodcarvers. Economically, the research highlights livelihood vulnerabilities faced by rural artisans and emphasizes the need for inclusive development strategies. Socially, it draws attention to the weakening of community-based knowledge systems and declining intergenerational skill transmission.

Furthermore, the findings of this study are valuable for policymakers, cultural institutions, and development agencies seeking to integrate traditional crafts into sustainable rural development and tourism strategies. By providing context-specific evidence, the study supports informed policy formulation and encourages targeted interventions to protect and revitalize traditional woodcarving craftsmanship.

Literature Review

Existing literature recognizes traditional craftsmanship as an important component of cultural identity and rural livelihoods across many regions of the world. Traditional crafts often support community cohesion, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and local entrepreneurship, yet processes of globalization, industrialization, and mass production have reduced market demand and undermined the economic value of handcrafted products (*Aamir, 2018*). In South Asian contexts, colonial legacies and modern economic structures have further marginalized indigenous craft traditions and limited their integration into contemporary markets (*Dhananjani, 2016; Rasiah, 2019*).

Research on woodcarving in countries such as India, Turkey, and the Philippines reveals common challenges, including declining skilled labor, raw material scarcity, weak innovation capacity, and limited policy support (*Aktürk, 2020; Bayocot, 2021*). Studies conducted in China also highlight that modernization and urban-oriented development reduce youth participation in traditional crafts, weakening long-term sustainability (*Zhang et al., 2023*). These studies emphasize that craft-based livelihoods require entrepreneurial support and institutional engagement to remain viable.

Several scholars analyze traditional crafts using sustainability frameworks, particularly the Triple Bottom Line approach. The Triple Bottom Line framework emphasizes the need to balance economic viability, social continuity, and environmental responsibility in sustaining traditional industries (*Elkington, 1998*). Recent literature applies this framework to traditional crafts, arguing that income stability, community participation, and responsible resource use are essential for long-term survival (*UNESCO, n.d.; Zbucheá, 2022*).

In the Sri Lankan context, studies on traditional industries such as handloom reveal strong sustainability potential but also highlight structural barriers, limited market access, and insufficient innovation (*Wanniarachchi, 2020; Fernando, 2020*). Social Capital Theory (*Bourdieu, 2018*) further explains how weakened community networks and declining social cohesion disrupt inter-generational knowledge transfer and reduce collective support for artisans (*Perera, 2021*).

However, literature focusing specifically on traditional woodcarving in Sri Lanka remains limited, particularly at the regional and divisional levels. Most studies emphasize artistic value, heritage preservation, or tourism potential rather than examining the lived realities of artisans and livelihood impacts. This study addresses this gap by integrating Social Capital Theory and the Triple Bottom Line framework to analyze the social and sustainability dimensions of woodcarving decline in the Pathadumbara Divisional Secretariat Area.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in an interpretivist research philosophy. Interpretivism is suitable for this research as it emphasizes understanding social reality through the perspectives and lived experiences of individuals. Since traditional woodcarving is deeply embedded in cultural, social, and economic contexts, a qualitative approach allows for a richer and more nuanced understanding of the issue.

The research follows an inductive approach, enabling theory development based on empirical data rather than testing predefined hypotheses. A case study strategy was employed, focusing specifically on the Pathadumbara Divisional Secretariat Area to capture contextual realities.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with approximately 20 participants, including woodcarvers who are currently engaging with woodcarving, former woodcarvers, and relevant stakeholders that have an interest for the woodcarving industry. Snowball sampling was used to identify participants, as traditional woodcarvers are a dispersed and difficult-to-reach population. Interviews were conducted in Sinhala to ensure authenticity and depth of responses.

Secondary data were gathered through document analysis, including academic literature, policy documents like the National Craft Policy, historical records like Cultural publications, and institutional reports like Central Cultural Fund reports. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, following systematic steps of familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation.

The study ensured trustworthiness through ethical practices, participant consent, anonymity, and member-checking of interview transcripts.

For the data collection process, semi-structured interview guide was used. And the interviews were held for 30 minutes to 45 minutes approximately in order to collect the relevant data. All the participants are male artisans since female artisans are not currently engaging with this industry. The Sample profile is as follows.

Participant	Age	Experience	Urban / Rural	Currently engaging or not
P01	69 y/o	43 years	Rural	Yes
P02	45 y/o	26 years	Urban	Yes
P03	72 y/o	48 years	Rural	No
P04	60 y/o	40 years	Rural	Yes
P05	55 y/o	30 years	Urban	No

P06	59 y/o	25 years	Rural	No
P07	48 y/o	30 years	Rural	Yes
P08	50 y/o	40 years	Rural	Yes
P09	52 y/o	30 years	Rural	Yes
P10	45 y/o	25 years	Rural	Yes
P11	46 y/o	20 years	Rural	No
P12	42 y/o	22 years	Rural	Yes
P13	48 y/o	28 years	Rural	Yes
P14	45 y/o	25 years	Rural	Yes
P15	50 y/o	30 years	Rural	Yes
P16	47 y/o	25 years	Rural	No
P17	23 y/o	2 years	Rural	Yes
P18	38 y/o	18 years	Urban	Yes
P19	63 y/o	45 years	Rural	Yes
P20	30 y/o	7 years	Urban	Yes

Analysis

The study analyzed qualitative data using thematic analysis. The researcher transcribed interview data and conducted open coding to identify recurring patterns. Related codes were grouped into themes, which were later organized under economic, social, and environmental dimensions. This process allowed the researcher to interpret artisans' lived experiences and link findings with Social Capital Theory and the Triple Bottom Line framework.

The findings show that economic constraints strongly influence the decline of woodcarving. Artisans explained that income from woodcarving has become unstable and insufficient to support household expenses. High production costs, irregular demand, and low profit margins discourage artisans from continuing the craft as a full-time occupation. High product cost in terms of high material and tool cost. Tools like Chisels, Mallet, Adze, Rasp and file etc. and Timbers like Kaluwara, Teak, Satinwood, Mahogany, Gansooriya etc. which are used for woodcarving now in high cost that traditional woodcarvers difficult to burden. Because of such causes, artisans now practice woodcarving only as a secondary income activity.

Market competition further contributes to this decline. Participants highlighted that machine-produced wooden products dominate markets due to their lower prices and quick availability. Traditional woodcarvings require more time and skilled labor, which increases costs and reduces competitiveness. To cope with this situation, some artisans reduce design complexity, which gradually weakens the artistic value of the craft.

The analysis also identified a shortage of skilled successors as a major challenge. Younger generations show limited interest in learning woodcarving because of poor income prospects and low social recognition. The weakening of family-based apprenticeship systems disrupts intergenerational knowledge transfer and reduces community support networks, indicating a decline in social capital.

Limited access to quality raw materials also affects sustainability. Artisans reported difficulties in obtaining suitable timber due to rising costs and regulatory restrictions. Although environmental regulations aim to protect forests, they unintentionally increase production challenges for traditional craftsmen.

In addition, participants expressed concerns about limited government and institutional support. They pointed out the absence of targeted financial assistance, training programs, and market promotion initiatives. This lack of support leaves traditional woodcarvers marginalized within broader development policies.

Overall, the analysis shows that the decline of traditional woodcarving in Pathadumbara results from interconnected economic, social, and institutional factors. Addressing these challenges requires integrated and context-based strategies that support artisans' livelihoods while preserving cultural heritage.

Key Findings and Discussion

The findings reveal that the decline of traditional woodcarving in the Pathadumbara area is a multidimensional issue shaped by economic, social, and environmental factors. The study highlights that artisans face increasing economic vulnerability due to unstable income and limited market access. Socially, the weakening of community-based learning systems and declining youth participation threaten the continuity of the craft. Environmentally, restricted access to quality raw materials affects production sustainability.

In simply, the findings identified three main thematic areas.

Economic factors: include unstable income, high production costs, and limited market access, which force artisans to treat woodcarving as a secondary livelihood.

Social factors: include weak intergenerational skill transfer, declining youth participation, and

reduced social recognition of artisans.

Environmental factors: relate to limited access to quality timber and regulatory constraints that affect production sustainability.

By applying Social Capital Theory and the Triple Bottom Line framework, the study emphasizes the need for integrated sustainability strategies. Strengthening community networks, improving policy support, expanding market opportunities, promoting skill development, and integrating woodcarving into cultural tourism are identified as key strategies for revitalization.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the decline of traditional woodcarving craftsmanship in the Pathadumbara Divisional Secretariat Area and identified economic, social, and institutional factors that threaten its sustainability. The findings show that unstable income, limited market access, weak intergenerational skill transfer, and insufficient policy support have reduced artisans' ability to continue the craft as a stable livelihood. The decline also affects cultural identity and community-based knowledge systems.

To address these challenges, relevant authorities should provide targeted financial support like tax concessions, development credit schemes etc., skill development programs and improved market opportunities for traditional woodcarvers. To successfully cater to the indigenous market, artisans can target into the Niche Market which can be still worthy for them to sustain. Apart from that they can engage with tourists to market their unique products to them. Strengthening community networks and encouraging youth participation can support knowledge transmission. Integrating traditional woodcarving into cultural tourism and rural development initiatives can also improve economic sustainability while preserving cultural heritage. Coordinated efforts are essential to protect this traditional craft and support artisan livelihoods.

Limitations and Future Research

This study focuses on traditional woodcarving artisans in the Pathadumbara Divisional Secretariat Area and adopts a qualitative research approach to explore lived experiences and contextual realities. Due to the focus on a single geographical area and a limited number of participants, the findings may not fully represent the situation of traditional woodcarving artisans in other regions of Sri Lanka. In addition, the study relies on interview-based data, which reflects participants' perceptions and may not capture measurable economic outcomes such as income levels, production volumes, or market performance.

Future research can address these limitations by adopting quantitative or mixed method approaches to examine the economic and entrepreneurial dimensions of traditional

woodcarving. Surveys and statistical analysis can measure income stability, employment generation, and market access across different regions. Further studies can also explore emerging trends such as digital marketing, cultural tourism, design innovation, and youth entrepreneurship as potential pathways for revitalizing the industry. Examining policy interventions and institutional support mechanisms can provide practical insights for sustaining traditional woodcarving within a modern economic context.

Acknowledgment

This research is based on a dissertation submitted to the Department of Public Administration in 2025 as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the BSc. Honours in Management (Public) Degree. I extend my deepest appreciation to my research supervisor, Mr. W. G. T. S. Senanayake, for his invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous support throughout this study. Her expertise and encouragement have been instrumental in the successful completion of this research.

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Culture. Society. Economy. Politics,

Challenges to Wildlife Tourism Development: A Study of the Galgamuwa Division in the North Western Province of Sri Lanka

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Key words: Community Participation, Human–Elephant Conflict (HEC), Rural Development, Sustainable Ecotourism, Wildlife Tourism.

Introduction

Background of Study

Tourism is a multi-billion-dollar industry that is a significant contributor to the global economy. It has become a key driver of economic growth and rural development in many developing countries. Sri Lanka is one of the developing countries in the world that consists of a rich volume of natural resources, and it has the potential to grow the tourism industry in the country by utilizing these diverse resources. Hence, in the first half of 2024, Sri Lanka's tourism sector demonstrated remarkable growth, with revenue exceeding \$1.5 billion, a 78% increase from the same period in 2023 (Daily FT). statistics it shows that the Sri Lankan tourism sector has a great ability to attract visitors as one of the best travel destinations. When compared with the previous year, it is seen a 62% rise in the tourist's arrival into the country, attracting millions of tourists per year (Bhutia, 2024).

Wildlife tourism is a rapidly growing sector that generates income while supporting biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource management. It involves observing wildlife in their natural habitats. Sri Lanka, as a global biodiversity hotspot with diverse ecosystems and iconic species like the Asian elephant, has strong potential for wildlife tourism. However, tourism is mainly concentrated in parks such as Yala, Udawalawa, and Wilpattu, leading to overcrowding, environmental damage, and increased human–wildlife conflict. Therefore, there is a growing need to develop underutilized rural areas with wildlife potential to ensure balanced regional development. Galgamuwa, located in the Northwestern Province of Sri Lanka, covers an area of approximately 62 square kilometres. In 2010, around 8.32 square kilometres of this land more than 30% of the total area was covered by natural forest, providing essential habitats for the region's diverse wildlife, particularly elephants. As of 2012, Galgamuwa had a population of 55,078, with a population density of 168 people per square kilometre, is one such region. The area is characterized by forest reserves, water bodies, agricultural landscapes, and a significant

elephant population. Although Galgamuwa exhibits strong potential for wildlife tourism, it has not been adequately developed or integrated into the national tourism framework.

Problem Statement

Wildlife tourism offers a collection of benefits to a developing country that consists of high natural resources such as environmental, social, economic, and educational. It contributes to the sustainable development and well-being or quality of the lives of the people. (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2020; World Tourism Organization, 2024). As stated by the SLTDA (2024), lesser-known or untapped areas such as Galgamuwa are a kind of solution for overcoming the challenges associated with the well-known tourist destinations in the country. The challenges such as overcrowding in Yala, Horton Plains and Udawalwa that leads to environmental degradation and reduced visitor experiences and human wildlife conflict.

Galgamuwa is an area that faces some issues such as unemployment, poverty, human-elephant conflicts and so on. According to Thennakoon, Kandambige, & Liyanage (2017), the impact of wild animals on the livelihood of the rural population in Sri Lanka takes a higher value. Because of this (HEC) number of elephants and humans die annually, in recent cases, elephant deaths in 2022 hit an all-time high of 473, while human fatalities from these conflicts were also a record 145 (Miththapala, 2024). Hence, Galgamuwa is an area that still faces this human-elephant conflict. In a study conducted by Samaraweera (2023), it is evident that this conflict has severe consequences for both humans and elephants in Galgamuwa. Crop damage and property damage can be seen everywhere and deaths and injuries to humans can also be seen quite often in this area.

Despite Galgamuwa's rich biodiversity and strong potential for sustainable tourism, its contribution to rural development remains limited within the Sri Lankan context. Although the area has sufficient resources to attract visitors, wildlife tourism development is slow due to several challenges. This study therefore focuses on identifying these challenges to support a more sustainable and beneficial approach to tourism development in Galgamuwa..

Research Questions

The following research questions address the challenges to wildlife tourism development in Galgamuwa division Sri Lanka.

1. What are the challenges in developing Galgamuwa as a wildlife tourism area?
2. What are the possible strategies to develop Wildlife tourism in Galgamuwa?

Significance of Study

This study contributes to the limited research on wildlife tourism in rural Sri Lanka and provides useful insights for promoting sustainable tourism while addressing human-wildlife conflict. It helps public officers in Galgamuwa identify key challenges and develop suitable policies. The findings also support community-based tourism and rural development efforts.

Literature Review

Wildlife Tourism

Any living non-human, undomesticated organism in the animal kingdom is generally considered to be wildlife. Thus, wildlife tourism is a subset of nature-based tourism (Ranasinghe & Weerasinghe, 2020), specifically involving encounters with non-domesticated animals, either in their natural habitats or in captivity. There are several forms of wildlife tourism, such as wildlife-watching tourism, captive wildlife tourism, hunting tourism, and fishing tourism (Higginbottom, 2004).

Wildlife Tourism: Global Overview

Wildlife tourism is one of the fastest-growing segments of the global tourism industry in both developed and developing countries (Gnanapala, 2017; Mutanga, Gandiwa, Muboko, & Chikuta, 2021). Its demand has increased significantly over the years, particularly in countries rich in forests and wildlife resources such as Australia, South America, Africa, Canada, India, Indonesia, and Bangladesh (Newsome, 2017). In sub-Saharan Africa, wildlife is a key economic asset (Amare, 2015), attracting millions of visitors annually to destinations like the Serengeti in Tanzania and Kruger National Park in South Africa. Wildlife tourism in African countries, including Ethiopia, is promoted through safari tourism, ecotourism, and recreational tourism (Amare, 2015).

Wildlife Tourism: Sri Lankan Overview

Marasinghe, Pilapitiya, & Wijesinghe (2021) alleged that Sri Lanka, being a tropical island nation, supports a wide range of natural ecosystems, offering many opportunities for wildlife-related tourism. This is also a rapidly growing segment in Sri Lanka, where nearly 50% of all tourists visiting the country visited at least one wildlife park in 2018 (Badola, et al., 2017). A wide range of National Parks, nature reserves, and safari lodges and camps have been established throughout Sri Lanka, covering vast areas of bio-diverse terrain, all the way from Willpattu National Park in the north of the country, down to Yala National Park in the south, with many others in between. However, some challenges must be taken into consideration when developing an area into a wildlife tourism area.

Theories

Butler's Tourism Area Lifecycle (TALC): This theory suggests destinations go through six stages: Exploration, Involvement, Development, Consolidation, Stagnation, and Rejuvenation/Decline. Galgamuwa is currently in the exploration stage, characterized by high potential but limited infrastructure.

Sustainable Ecotourism Values and Principles Model: This framework integrates environmental, social, and economic goals, emphasizing harmony and long-term sustainability.

Social Exchange Theory: This theory explains that community support for tourism depends on the residents' assessment of the costs and benefits. It provides a lens to analyze challenges in Galgamuwa by balancing perceived local costs against potential benefits.

Analytical Framework

An analytical framework is a model that helps to explain how a certain type of analysis will be conducted. The following analytical framework was developed to this study.

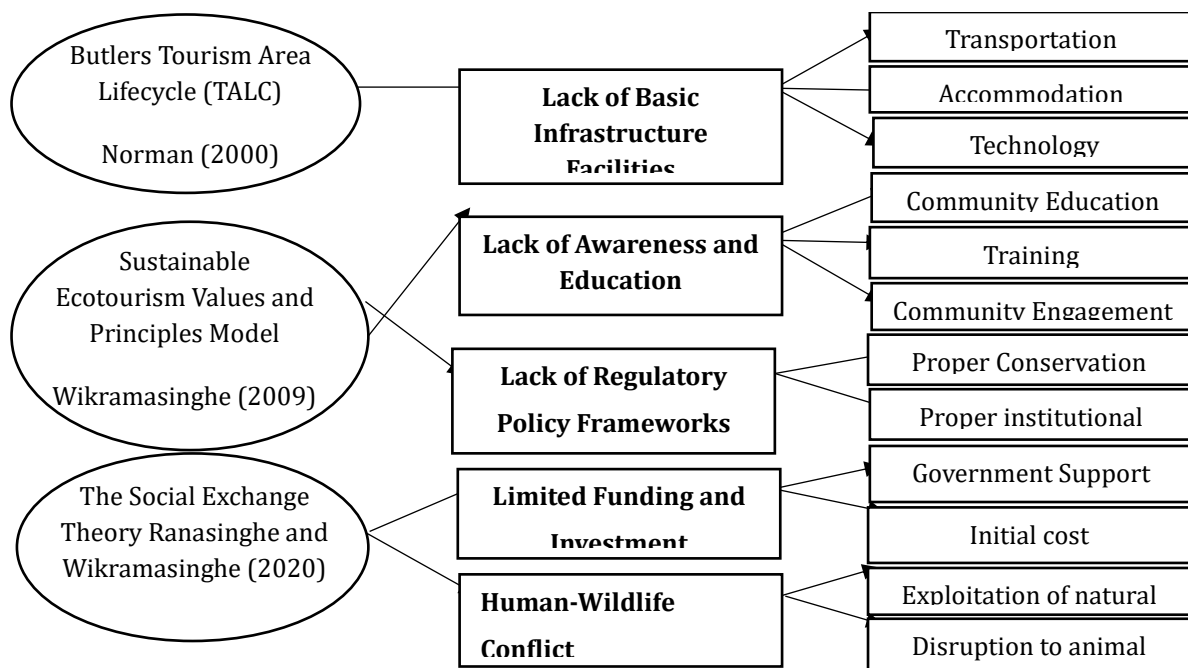


Figure 5: Analytical Framework

As mentioned in the framework, there are five challenges which derived from the existing theories.

Challenges to Wildlife Tourism

Inadequate Infrastructure

Wildlife tourism in rural areas is often constrained by poor infrastructure, including limited transportation, accommodation, visitor services, waste management, and communication facilities. These deficiencies reduce accessibility, discourage investment, and weaken the competitiveness of destinations (Upadhyay, 2016; Bjornsdottir, 2018; Bar, 2022).

Limited Awareness, Education, and Skills

Low awareness, education, and technical skills among local communities can lead to negative perceptions, low participation, and poor service quality. Excluding residents from planning and training reduces support for conservation-oriented tourism, while inadequate tourist awareness can result in littering, habitat disturbance, and non-compliance with guidelines (Teare et al., 2013; Dissanayaka & Samarathunga, 2016; Yogendran & Eranda, 2022).

Lack of Regulatory Policy Frameworks

Limited funding, weak policies, and poor coordination among government, conservation authorities, private sector, and communities hinder sustainable tourism development. This institutional weakness fragments decision-making and reduces the ability to balance economic growth with environmental protection (Amare, 2015; Upadhyay, 2016; Gnanapala, 2017).

Limited Funding and Investment

Yogendran & Eranda (2022) highlight insufficient financial support as a major challenge for developing rural tourism. Progress in this sector has been limited due to constraints faced by entrepreneurs, including lack of capital, inadequate credit, high interest rates, and limited expertise in management and marketing (Jelena, 2007 as cited in Yogendran & Eranda, 2022). Adequate funding for ecotourism development and promotion is often unavailable, as governments and institutions may lack resources for environmental infrastructure, awareness, and education initiatives (Bar, 2022; Gnanapala, 2017). Similarly, Dissanayaka & Samarathunga (2016) emphasize that securing sustainable funding is a key challenge for implementing and promoting community-based tourism, as seen in Mihintale.

Human-Wildlife Conflict

Human-wildlife conflict, driven by habitat loss, agriculture, and tourism disturbances, causes economic losses, safety threats, and retaliatory actions against wildlife. Such conflicts undermine

conservation efforts and threaten the long-term sustainability and social acceptance of rural wildlife tourism (Amare, 2015; Wandaka & Kabii, 2018).

Methodology

Qualitative Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was employed to obtain rich and in-depth insights into the lived experiences of stakeholders in achieving the research objectives.

Target Population and Sampling

The target population comprised local community members residing in Galgamuwa, individuals engaged in tourism-related activities such as wildlife photographers and tour guides, and public officers responsible for regional development. A total of 23 respondents were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevant and informed perspectives.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews using three interview guides tailored to each stakeholder group.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, where recurring patterns and themes were systematically identified and categorized.

Deriving Narratives

Narratives were derived by interpreting the identified themes in relation to existing theoretical frameworks and the broader socio-economic context of Galgamuwa. Participant experiences were synthesized to construct a coherent account of the challenges and potential strategies for wildlife tourism development. Direct excerpts from interviews were used to support the emerging narrative, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participant perspectives rather than researcher assumptions.

Validity

Credibility of the study was strengthened through stakeholder triangulation by collecting data from multiple participant groups. Consistency was maintained between research objectives, interview questions, and thematic interpretation to ensure internal coherence of findings.

Reliability

Reliability was ensured by using structured interview guides and maintaining a systematic approach to data coding and theme development. Clear documentation of the data collection and analysis process enhanced transparency and consistency of the research procedures.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly maintained throughout the study. Participants were provided with an information sheet and a consent form before the interviews. They were fully informed about the purpose of the study, and participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, and all collected data were used solely for academic purposes.

Sample Profiles

Sample Profile of Community Members

Name (Anonymous)	Gender	Age	Occupation	Years Lived in the Area
C01	Male	59yrs	Cowherd	55 yrs
C02	Female	31yrs	Work in private s	31yrs
C03	Male	55yrs	Grocery Shop Owner	55yrs
C04	Male	59yrs	Cultivation	59yrs
C05	Male	55yrs	Cultivation	55yrs
C06	Male	65yrs	No	65yrs
C07	Male	42yrs	OPD attendant	42yrs
C08	Male	58yrs	Cultivation	58yrs
C09	Female	51yrs	No	51yrs

Source: Field Data

The community members were long-term residents of Galgamuwa, with occupations mainly in cultivation and small-scale businesses. Their insights provided an understanding of how the local people perceive wildlife tourism development in the area. Most of the community members were

male, and only two of them were female. Further, the majority of the respondents were victims of the human-elephant conflict.

Sample Profile of an Individual who engages in tourism activities

Name (Anonymous)	Gender	Age	Occupation	Related tourism activity
PG 01	Male	36yrs	Area Manager	Sales Wildlife photography
PG 02	Male	34yrs	Farm Owner	Wildlife photography and guiding
PG 03	Male	37yrs	no	Wildlife photography
PG 04	Male	39yrs	Private employee	sec Wildlife photography
PG 05	Male	36yrs	Photographer and guide	Wildlife photography and guiding
PG 06	Male	35yrs	Shop owner	Wildlife photography

Source: Field Data

This category included photographers, tour guides, and those involved in small-scale eco-tourism activities. Most of them are engaging in wildlife tourism as an alternative to doing a job. All these respondents were male, and they were between 30 and 40 yrs old. They were experienced with wildlife photography and tour guiding in Galgamuwa area.

Sample Profile of Public Officers

Name (Anonymous)	Gender	Age	Designation	Years of serving in Galgamuwa
PO 01	Male	40yrs	Grama Niladhari (Village Officer)	More than 15 yrs
PO 02	Male	34yrs	Range Forest Officer	12 yrs

PO 03	Male	49yrs	Grama Niladhari (Village Officer)	20 yrs
PO 04	Male	52yrs	Administrative Niladhari	Grama More than 25 yrs
PO 05	Male	51yrs	Deputy Director (Planning)	More than 7 yrs
PO 06	Male	45yrs	Wildlife Officer	More than 5 yrs
PO 07	Female	38yrs	Cultural Officer	5 yrs

Source: Field Data

Government officers, including Grama Niladaris, wildlife officers, and range forest officers, were interviewed to understand the regulatory and policy-related challenges that affect wildlife tourism in the region. Out of seven members, four members had more than 10 yrs time experiences in Galgamuwa area. Further, most of them were male.

Brief of questions, asked of individuals who engage in tourism activities

Part I: General Information, age, occupation, and monthly income, along with identifying the most popular attractions that bring tourists to the area.

Part II: Challenges to Wildlife Tourism Development includes questions about respondents' involvement in tourism, their experience in the field, and their opinions on developing Galgamuwa as a wildlife destination, the benefits it brings to the community and environment, and the challenges faced, including human–elephant conflict, poor infrastructure, limited technology use, and insufficient government support. Other questions address financial constraints, training and resources needed, and how collaboration between the community, government, and private sector can enhance tourism. Respondents are also asked for recommendations to improve tourism in the area.

Additionally, two other interview guides were prepared: one for public officers and another for community members, ensuring perspectives from all key stakeholders involved in wildlife tourism development in Galgamuwa.

Data Analysis

Challenges in developing Galgamuwa as a wildlife tourism area

Lack of Basic Infrastructure Facilities

Although access to Galgamuwa town has improved through highways and railways, internal transportation within villages and forest areas remains weak. While some stakeholders perceived poor infrastructure as an opportunity for adventure-based tourism, the majority viewed it as a serious constraint. Apart from transportation, the availability of suitable accommodation is another critical challenge that affects wildlife tourism development in Galgamuwa.

“To develop wildlife tourism here, I think, we don’t have the right foundation. Of course, we have attractions. The problem is the conditions of the roads. Main roads are well made, but in the villages, there are no proper roads, making it difficult for vehicles to get through”. (PO 05)

“Most of the time, I had to find friends’ places to facilitate my tourists’ stay. You know elephants are moving every day. But we can mostly see them in the evening. Of course, the tourist has to stay overnight. So, I get help from my friends, but they also cannot give them all the facilities.”. (PG 02)

Lack of Awareness and Education

A significant challenge is the limited awareness among local communities regarding the economic and conservation value of wildlife. Many residents perceive elephants primarily as threats due to crop damage and human elephant conflict, rather than as potential tourism assets.

“We do nothing about tourism. How can we use elephants? It is so risky. And most people hate elephants and other animals because of the conflict. And on the other hand, who knows, after starting these kinds of activities, the environment and the animals will be in danger. (C 09).

Lack of Community Engagement

Closely linked to limited awareness is the low level of community engagement in wildlife tourism initiatives. Many residents lack confidence, time, motivation, or willingness to participate due to livelihood pressures, fear of wildlife, and uncertainty about benefits.

“it is a major challenge. We cannot develop wildlife tourism without people’s support. There must be a mutual relationship between people and animals. Like in Minneriya, where communities have built their livelihoods around wildlife and protect elephants, we also need to convince people here so they can benefit.” (PG 03).

Lack of Regulatory and Institutional Frameworks

The absence of clear conservation guidelines and weak institutional coordination significantly hinders wildlife tourism development. Respondents highlighted inadequate enforcement of environmental regulations, lack of protected areas, absence of elephant corridors, and poor collaboration among government agencies.

“There is no proper way to protect the animals and the forests. Day by day, illegal hunting and farming continue to happen. This could also become an issue for tourism. Before starting this, clear rules and regulations must be drafted. Human wildlife conflict should be stopped (PO 05)”.

Limited Funding and Investment

Limited access to funding and investment is a critical constraint for both communities and tourism operators. High initial costs, lack of government financial support, difficulty accessing loans, and overall poverty among rural residents prevent the initiation and sustainability of tourism ventures.

“At this moment, we will start this. Everyone must bear the costs individually. But if we get through this stage, big investments will flow into this area in the future. If the government can facilitate this even with a small loan or something be a big help. People who live in rural areas don’t have money. So, government or any other organizational support is a must. Otherwise, it is challenging. (PG 02)”.

“We do not have the money to invest in this type of activity. We hardly make enough money to find food. You know we do farming. When we harvest, we have money, but by that time, we have a lot of loans and other expenses to pay. Even if we cannot save at least one rupee out of the income.”(C 01)

Human-Wildlife Conflict

Human-wildlife conflict, particularly human-elephant conflict, is the most complex and deeply rooted challenge. Agricultural expansion into forest areas, illegal land use, habitat loss, and disruption of animal behavior have intensified conflicts, reduced wildlife presence, and increased fear among communities.

“People are growing plants in larger scale. That occupied the land, including forest areas and lake reserves. That’s huge. In the past, usually there were a lot of elephants and other species like deer, peocoks and wild pigs near the lakes. But now we see them rarely.” (PG 01)

“Tourists will not come here because of the human elephant conflict. They are afraid. Also, people who live in these villages do not love these animals or want to protect them. That will be a challenging one...” (C 06)

Key Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Galgamuwa has strong potential for wildlife tourism, but several challenges need to be addressed, which align with previous research. Inadequate infrastructure, including poor roads, limited accommodation, and digital gaps, was identified as a major constraint, consistent with studies on rural tourism development (Upadhyay, 2016; Dissanayaka & Idroos, 2021; Amare, 2015; Bar, 2022). Respondents suggested that eco-lodges, treehouses, and community-based homestays could mitigate these limitations, supporting recommendations from SLTDA (2025) and Bjornsdottir (2018).

Community-related challenges, such as limited awareness of wildlife's value, negative attitudes due to human-elephant conflict, and low engagement, also emerged. These findings align with the Social Exchange Theory and studies from Sri Lanka and Nepal, which highlight the importance of education, training, and capacity-building for fostering local participation in tourism (Ranasinghe & Weerasinghe, 2020; Dissanayaka & Samarathunga, 2016; Wandaka & Kabii, 2018; Hasan & Sharma, 2017).

Financial constraints, weak institutional frameworks, and human-wildlife conflicts were further identified as critical barriers, echoing global evidence that these factors hinder sustainable rural tourism (Tisdell, 2003; Miththapala, 2024; Avila, Sanchez, & Aguilar, 2017; Bar, 2022). Overall, the study's findings align with existing literature, highlighting that infrastructure development, community engagement, regulatory support, funding, and conflict mitigation are essential for sustainable wildlife tourism in Galgamuwa.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study examined the challenges of developing Galgamuwa as a wildlife tourism destination through interviews with 23 community members, public officers, and tourism stakeholders. While the area has strong potential due to its biodiversity, including elephants, forests, and water bodies, development is hindered by poor infrastructure, low community awareness and engagement, weak conservation guidelines, financial constraints, and human-wildlife conflict. Addressing these challenges could enable sustainable wildlife tourism, and the study offers stakeholder-focused recommendations to reduce human-elephant conflict and improve rural livelihoods.

Government Institutions and Policy Makers

The study recommends prioritizing basic infrastructure development, including roads, visitor facilities, sanitation, and communication services. Integrated land-use planning and strict

enforcement of conservation regulations are essential to reduce habitat destruction and human–elephant conflict. Better coordination between tourism, wildlife, and rural development authorities can ensure wildlife tourism promotes sustainability and rural livelihoods.

Local Community

Greater community participation is needed in tourism planning and implementation. Residents should be involved in decision-making and engaged in activities such as homestays, guiding, handicrafts, and local food services. Capacity-building programs can enhance skills, service quality, employment opportunities, and equitable benefit-sharing.

Private Sector and Tourism Entrepreneurs

The private sector should invest in eco-friendly, low-impact tourism infrastructure and collaborate with local communities to develop inclusive business models. Adoption of sustainable practices such as waste management, renewable energy, and responsible tourism standards is vital for long-term success.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

NGOs can support sustainable tourism by facilitating community awareness, providing technical training, and assisting with conflict mitigation and conservation initiatives. Their involvement helps bridge gaps between the government and local communities for participatory tourism development.

Tourists and Visitors

Tourists should be educated on responsible wildlife tourism, encouraged to follow conservation guidelines, minimize environmental impacts, and support community-based initiatives, contributing to sustainable tourism and conservation outcomes.

Acknowledgment

This research is based on a dissertation submitted to the Department of Public Administration in 2025 as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the BSc. Honours in Management (Public) Degree. I extend my deepest appreciation to my research supervisor, Dr. P. I. Anuradha, for her invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous support throughout this study. Her expertise and encouragement have been instrumental in the successful completion of this research.

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