Spice Gardens in Web-based Experiential Tourism: A Study from Matale Divisional Secretariat Division, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

With the digitalization of the tourism sector, many hosts and guests use digital platforms to conduct their businesses and travel worldwide. Web-based experiential tourism is an emerging platform where people can visit places virtually, enabling people to share knowledge and experience worldwide while earning an income. Sri Lanka is a popular tourist destination for spice tourism and is ideal for most of the world's spice crops. The Sri Lankan tourism industry was restricted to physical interactions and was hardly available on online platforms. This study examined the potential of 'web-based experiential tourism' for spice gardens in the Matale divisional secretariat division. Primary data was collected from 23 spice gardens to review the potential Web-based experiential activities. Twenty tour guides from the Matale district were interviewed to determine tourists' willingness to engage in available spice garden activities. Thereby, the 'Tourists Preference Index' (TPI) was developed. The results identified five activities with the highest tourist preference. Secondary data was collected from 'Airbnb' listings. The data was descriptively analyzed to introduce the possibility of monetizing spice garden activities as web-based experiential tourism.

Keywords: *Airbnb, Experiential tourism, Monetizing, Spice gardens, Tourist Preference Index, Web-based.*

1. Introduction

Tourism is challenging to define compared to other industries because there is no clear product. Tourism can be broadly defined as a social, cultural, and economic incident in which people migrate to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes (The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2023).

As a region, South Asia is mostly dependent on travel and tourism, particularly in terms of employment generation. It was estimated at 47.7 million in 2019 (Ward & McComb, 2020). In Sri Lanka, tourism is the third largest foreign exchange earner. Thus, Sri Lanka has earned $5.61 billion in revenue from tourism, with a record 2.5 million tourist arrivals in 2018 (ITA U.S. Department of Commerce, 2022; SLTDA, 2023). In addition, it contributes to generating employment opportunities and reduction of regional income disparity in the country (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2021).

Sri Lanka's many tourist attractions, such as beaches, wildlife, rainforests, tea estates, ancient ruins, and Buddhist cultural sites, along with its unique geographical position and favorable climate, make it a competitive tourist destination. Sri Lanka is also famous for its spices, which have been traded for centuries and have influenced its cuisine and medicine (Thushanga & Piyadasa, 2021; ITA U.S. Department of Commerce, 2022; Fernando et al., 2015). Spice tourism is a form of Agri-tourism that allows visitors to learn about and experience various spice crops in the spice gardens of the Matale district (Weerasingha & Ransi, 2015). Spice tourism will enable visitors to witness spice processing, buy products, stay in farms or cabanas, and enjoy spicy foods and Ayurvedic treatments. Spice tourism is one of the ways that Sri Lanka promotes itself as a diverse and unique destination. Thus, these spice gardens offer tourists unforgettable visits and a unique experience (Malkanthi, 2017).

The global tourism industry suffered a severe blow from the COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted travel and mobility. It incurred around 50% of the loss of income in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka, which relies heavily on tourism as a source of revenue, has faced multiple challenges in the past few years, including the Easter Sunday attack in 2019, the Ukraine-Russian war in 2023, and the ongoing economic crisis since 2020. As a result, tourist arrivals in Sri Lanka have plummeted by 73% in 2020 compared to 2018 (SLTDA, 2023; Keerthisinghe, 2022). Further, the number of tourists visiting the Central region has decreased because many tourists who come to Sri Lanka hang out near the beachside and do not come inland for long trips. Therefore, the spice industry also has suffered an economic setback. Tourism MSMEs are facing

numerous challenges to continue their business operations (SLTDA, 2023). This paper examines the status of spice garden experience tourism and explores digital marketing opportunities for involved MSMEs.

2. Literature review

With the digitization of the tourism sector, many hosts and guests use digital platforms to conduct their businesses and travel worldwide. One of the Key solutions to address the above issue is digital marketing and maintaining and ensuring the sustainability of tourism (SLTDA, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, 'Airbnb' (Air Bed and Breakfast) was one such popularized digital platform due to physical movement restrictions. This platform is an online marketplace that offers short-term and long-term housing and dining experiences. In addition to staying, experience and online experience are the new trends in the tourism Industry. It can provide various tours, events, and things along those lines in addition to booking places to stay. Airbnb launched online experiences in 2020 as a new way for people to connect, travel virtually, and earn income during the pandemic. It was a successful and valuable start-up in the tourism industry. According to the information provided by Airbnb, travelers can book experiences without renting accommodations on the platform, while hosts do not need to be accommodation hosts. Online Experiences became Airbnb's fastest-growing product and helped some hosts earn nearly $500,000. Due to the pandemic, virtual tourism and online experiences have been embraced by tourists as an alternative way to travel. Airbnb online experiences are activities and events led by expert hosts from Airbnb on Zoom. Online experiences also support human connection and community among hosts and guests. Hence, web-based digital platforms have introduced experiential tourism as a new segment of the tourism industry. Online experiences during the pandemic may increase tourists' loyalty and interest in visiting the destinations in person later. (Zaidi, 2023; Airbnb, 2023; Sthapit et al., 2021; Capineri & Romano, 2021; Zhang & Qiu, 2022).

In Sri Lanka, many spice garden owners maintain their websites to attract tourists since they can advertise their locations worldwide with minimal effort. As a result, 50% of Sri Lankan spice gardens have tended to use online platforms to promote their sites through social networks (Weerasingha & Ransi, 2015). With the use of online platforms, spice gardens can conduct spice garden activities as a web-based experience with their potential. Nevertheless, these facilities are yet to be redefined in the Sri Lankan spice tourism sector. The current research aims to create a bridge between web-based platforms and activities that can provide experiences of spice gardens.

This study explored the potential of incorporating web-based experiential tourism (WBET) for Sri Lankan spice gardens as a general objective. It was separated into three specific objectives for convenience. Such as (1) to identify the potential to conduct web-based experiential tourism in Sri Lankan spice gardens, (2) to analyze the likelihood/willingness of engaging with different activities available in the Sri Lankan spice gardens by the tourist community, and (3) to analyze the possibility of earning foreign exchange via web-based experiential tourism from Sri Lankan spice gardens.

3. Methodology

A leading spice garden district in Sri Lanka was considered for this study. Multistage sampling design was adopted in the selection district, divisional secretariat division (DS), and Grama Niladhari divisions. Further, a simple random sampling method was used for regional tour guides, thus drawing 23 spice gardens and 20 regional tour guides for the study.

This research was completed by employing the mixed method approach to achieve objectives. Qualitative and quantitative primary data was collected through face-to-face interviews using spice garden owners' structured type pre-tested questionnaire. Further, data was collected from regional tour guides through Zoom and WhatsApp. Secondary data was extracted from the 'Airbnb' digital platform.

Descriptive statistics such as means and percentages, 11 variables were identified as key activities through the pre-visit. Then, based on the previous visit, an improved spice garden owners' questionnaire was administered, and eight variables were identified as key variables ($V_1, V_2, V_3, V_4, V_5, V_7, V_9, V_{10}$). The choices (one to 11) were obtained based on two questions and points were assigned (zero to ten) according to the choice obtained for each variable. For example, when receiving the first choice, its value point was 10. Based on the sum of both values, the score was given according to the scoring criteria. Weightage was taken from the circulated questionnaire among 20 regional tour guides (experts) to take tourist willingness on these eight variables. Each variable was awarded points according to the developed scoring criteria. Accordingly, the Tourist Preference Index (TPI) was calculated, and each variable was ranked (Table 1). The tourists' willingness to engage in different activities in spice gardens was found.

The model can be specified as the equation below;

$$\text{Tourist Preference Index (TPI)} = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \left[\frac{W_i L_i}{n} \right]$$

W_i is the mean weightage given by the experts for the ith parameter, L_i is the score for each variable. i and n are the numbers of variables. When considering the variables given here. V_1 is the spice garden tour experience, V_2 is the spice cultivation tour experience, V_3 is the spice harvesting experience, V_4 is the spice processing experience, V_5 is the value-added spice processing experience, V_6 is spice garden stay experience, V_7 is the ayurvedic medicinal treatment experience, V_8 is hela medicinal treatment experience, V_9 is cooking experience, V_{10} is traditional spice food restaurant experience, and V_{11} is product sales (spices, cosmetics, medicinal, products, etc.).

4. Result and discussion

The results of the study have been arranged in three sections. Those are potential in spice gardens, a Tourist preference Index, and an increase in economic status via web-based experiential tourism. The potential of the spice gardens was studied through spice garden factors and web-based features. Spice garden factors-- land area, cross-tabulation on land size vs. full-time employees, obtaining consultancy support, language skills of employees, cultivated crops, spice garden activities, and tourist arrivals in the last 12 months-- were studied.

Figure 1. Cross-tabulation on land size vs. full-time employees
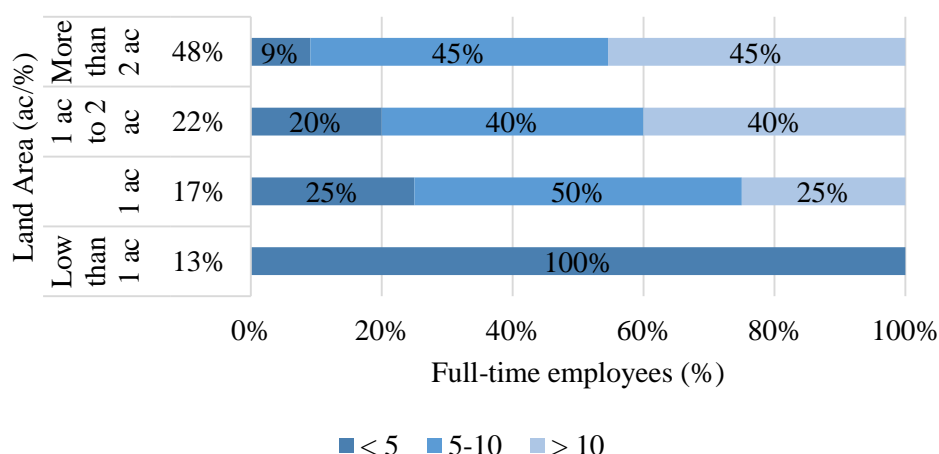
Source: Author,2023

According to cross-tabulation on land size vs. full-time employees (Figure 1), 48% of the spice gardens had more than two acres of land area, while 22% owned one to two acres, and the rest (30%) had one or less than one acre. Furthermore, spice gardens of more than one acre have more than ten full-time employees. As a

Figure 2. Spice garden activities
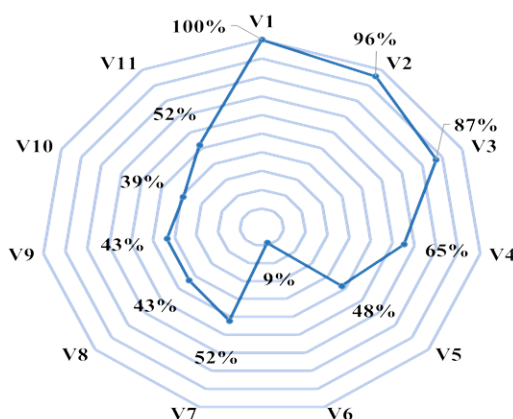
percentage, it is around more than 40%. Additionally, they have more than 40% of 5 to 10 full-time employees, 13% of spice gardens had a land area lower than one acre, while 100% of them had fewer than five employees.

According to the research findings, 100% of spice gardens have established spice crops such as cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, pepper, cardamom, etc., and 96% have herbs and export agriculture crops. Only 57% have cultivated plantation crops like coconut and tea for demonstrations. Caused of that, some tourists are interested in buying herbal coconut oils, coconut-related products, and especially Sri Lankan tea products. Figure 4.2 indicates that more than 80% of spice gardens were conducted spice garden tour experiences, spice cultivation tour experiences, and spice harvesting experiences. In addition, 40%-70% of spice gardens offer spice processing experiences, ayurvedic medicinal treatment experiences, value-added spice processing experiences, *hela (local)* medicinal treatment experiences, and cooking experiences. Traditional spice food restaurant experiences are close to 40%, while only 9% given the experience of staying at the spice gardens.

As per the research findings, the spice garden employees can handle ten languages such as English, French, Russian, Chinese, Korean, German, Spanish, Japanese, Hindi, and Italian except for Sinhala and Tamil. It indicates spice gardens can conduct their activities online in ten native languages of the tourists. Moreover, most (87%) have taken consultancy support from experts in that field, except for 13%. According to spice garden owners, consultants bring them new technologies and methods. Perhaps they are familiar with travelers' whims and fancies. They work as guides for some spice gardens.

Further, based on research findings, looking at foreign and local tourist arrivals to the spice gardens in the last 12 months (2022), only 52% of spice gardens witnessed more than 60 foreign tourists, and 48% had less than 60 foreign tourists. Thirty percent of spice gardens had local tourist visits exceeding 60. However, the majority of spice gardens, which constituted the remaining 70%, saw a lower influx of local tourists, with numbers falling below 60. Due to COVID-19 and the ongoing economic crisis, many spice gardens have had to reduce their staff and operations because of the low number of foreign tourists. In particular, many spice gardens were not adequately maintained either.

Figure 3: Tourist attraction ways and use of reservation platforms
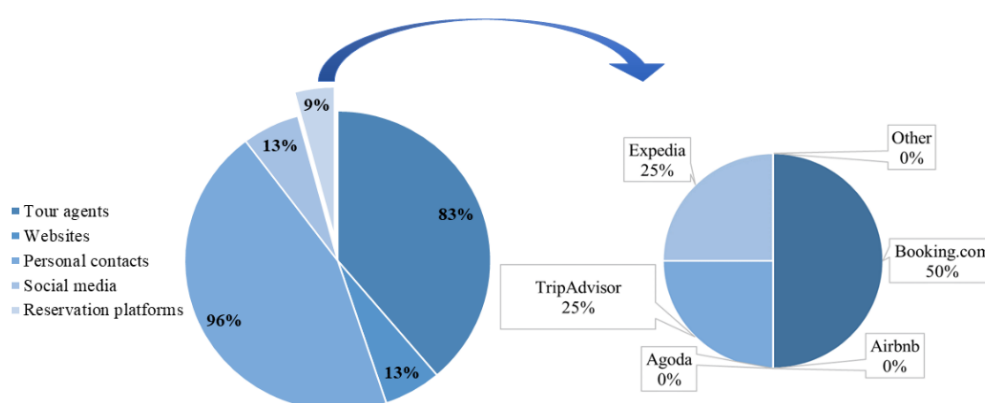
Source: Author,2023

As shown in Figure 3, most spice gardens used personal contacts (96%) and tour agents (83%) to attract tourists into the spice gardens. Of them, 13% used websites to do their promotions. Another 13% used social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Only 9% used reservation platforms such as 'Booking.com' (100%), 'TripAdvisor' (50%), and 'Expedia' (50%) while receiving reviews for 83% of them. None of the spice gardens used Airbnb or the Agoda reservation platform as an experience-sharing platform.

It was observed 74% of the respondents did not use a web-based system (WBS) or a web-based platform (WBP) to share their spice garden experience, while 26% used it. Of those who used the WBS or WBP, the majority used social media (83%), and 17% used TripAdvisor. Focused on providing an online experience (67%) and marketing physical experience online, which is 33%. Nonetheless, 83% of the respondents were aware of platforms that could provide them experience, while 17% were not. Despite this, 100% of them preferred to set up WBS or WBP to market

spice garden experiences, and the majority (82%) say they have the technical ability to handle web-based activities.

Table 2: TPI calculation and ranking spice garden activities

Variable	V_1	V_4	V_9	V_5	V_3	V_2	V_{10}	V_7
Weighted Average	1.42	1.45	2.68	1.47	0.95	0.53	1.05	0.47
Score	5	4	2	4	4	5	2	2
TPI	7.1	5.8	5.4	4.4	3.8	2.7	2.1	0.9
Rank	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

Source: Author,2023

Tourists' willingness to engage in different spice garden activities by the tourist community was analyzed using the TPI Index. Table 2 shows that the spice garden tour experience (V_1) was the highest tourist preference activity. Then the spice processing experience (V_4), cooking experience (V_9), value-added spice processing experience (V_5), spice harvesting experience (V_3), spice cultivation experience (V_2), traditional spice food restaurant experience (V_{10}), ayurvedic medicinal treatment experience (V_7) are ranked respectively.

Figure 4: TPI values moving with TPI mean
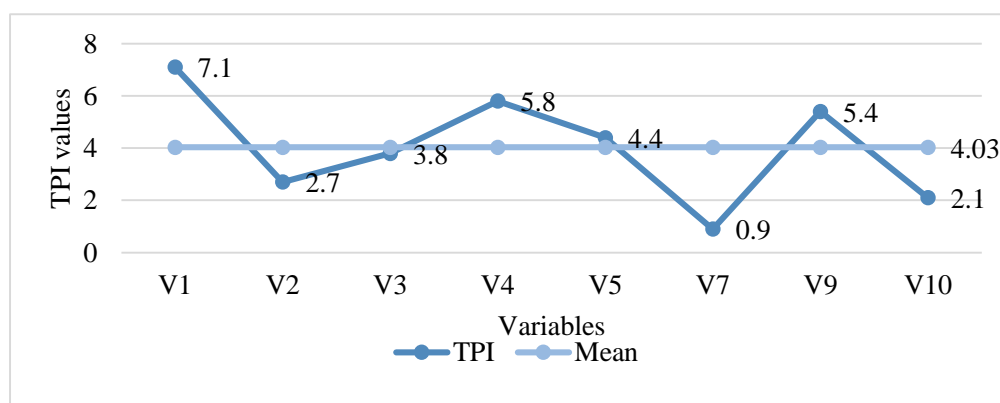
Source: Author,2023

The TPI mean value was calculated to find the most preferred five activities according to the tourist community. The mean value of TPI was 4.03 (Figure 4). V_1, V_4, V_9, and V_5 exceeded the TPI mean value. That is, tourist willingness is connected with those variables, respectively. Since the third variable (V_3) moves very close to the mean value, it can be assumed that it has the same tourist willingness as the above variables.

Airbnb is the only web-based platform in the world to share live online experiences over Zoom, allowing the chance to connect with people worldwide in small groups for a personal and memorable experience. Hosts and guests can attend using a PC, tablet, or mobile device (Airbnb, 2023).

Almost everyone can be a host for an experience by free signing up and sharing skills. There are several categories to share online experiences. Examples include cooking, entertainment, drinks, history and culture, social impact, and wellness. Examples of cooking are 'Learn the Indian Way of Masala Tea or Chai Making,' 'Spanish Tapas My Grandma's Style,' 'Make Mexican Street tacos with a Pro Chef,'' 'Irish Stew Cooking Class on Zoom Ireland,' and 'Cook Indian dishes like a Pro-new Menu Every Week,' etc. 'Go on a Leopard Safari in Sri Lanka,' 'Live Virtual Wildlife Safari in South Africa,' 'Virtual Experiences in Animal Sanctuary,' and 'New Zealand Nature Highlights' are the animal and entertainment category examples. Under history and culture, there is a 'Walk into the Taj Mahal with a Professional Tour Guide,' 'Meet My Bees,' and 'Discover Hoi, an ancient town,' etc. (Airbnb, 2023).

The foreign exchange income of a few selected Airbnb experiences is described in Table 3. Their revenue is mainly based on the per-guest price.

As depicted in Table 4, "Go On Leopard Safari in Sri Lanka" costs $14 per participant for 60 minutes. He conducted it since 2020 and now received 600 reviews, and his estimated income is $8400 in the two years. Per year income is around $4,200. "Animal Sanctuary Virtual Experience" was facilitated by a US woman for 30 minutes. The fee per participant is $19 and she received 419 reviews. A sum of $7,961 can be estimated as the total income for two years while $3,980 can be assumed as per the yearly income rate. A New Zealander has given "New Zealand Nature Highlights" as an experience since 2020 for 60 minutes. It received 937 reviews for this experience while charging $22 per head. His two-year income was around $20,455 and $10,227, respectively. Similarly, spice gardens can also offer experiences about spice crops with harvesting and processing experiences to tourists.

Table 3: Foreign exchange earnings via Airbnb

Experience name	Country	Time duration (min)	Started year	Price Per guest	Total reviews	Total income	Income per year
Go on a Leopard Safari in Sri Lanka	Sri Lanka	60	2020	$14	600	$8,400	$4,200
Animal Sanctuary Virtual Experience	United States	30	2020	$19	419	$7,961	$3,981
New Zealand Nature Highlights	New Zealand	60	2020	$22	937	$20,455	$10,227
Meet a Real-Life Shark Scientist	South Africa	60	2020	$20	1231	$24,349	$12,175
Walk into the Taj Mahal with a professional Tour Guide	India	60	2021	$5	260	$1,300	$1,300
Meet My Bees	Portugal	60	2020	$21	385	$8,193	$4,096
Spice it up with Dancing Indian Chef	Germany	60	2020	$22	165	$3,686	$1,843
Make Mexican Street Tacos with a Pro Chef	Mexico	90	2021	$28	4566	$,127,848	$,127,848
Pasta with the grandmas	Italy	90	2020	$36	3550	$127,800	$63,900
E-Cook - Indian Food with Number One Class in Delhi	India	120	2021	$55	1285	$70,675	$70,675
Chai Tea Masterclass - Vegan Friendly	India	30	2021	$15	320	$4,800	$4,800

Source: Airbnb, 2023

Moreover, "Meet a Real-Life Shark Scientist" was hosted by a South African. He has been doing it since 2020, charging $20 per person while receiving 1231 reviews. His total and per-year incomes are around $21,349 and $12,145, respectively. An Indian facilitated "Walk into the Taj Mahal with a professional Tour Guide" using pre-recorded videos since 2021. Up to now, 260 reviews have been received, and $5 is charged per person for 60 minutes. The total income is around $1,300 per year. A Portugal woman conducts "Meet My Bees," a virtual tour for 60 minutes. In two years, her income is $8,193 with 385 reviews since 2020. She charges $21 per person, earning around $4,096 annually. Spice Gardens can offer a virtual spice garden tour, spice cultivation tour, value-added spice processing experience tour, and an ayurvedic medicinal treatment tour.

Nowadays, cooking is the most popular virtual experience around the world. On 'Airbnb,' many people offer online cooking experiences, and the number of reviews they get increases rapidly because most people like to try various foods. Indian female chef in Germany who uses a variety of spices presents "Spice it up with Dancing Indian Chef" for 60 minutes. Since 2020, she received 165 reviews and earned $3,686. Her annual income is $1843 with a per-person charge of $22. In another move, "Make Mexican Street Tacos with a Pro Chef," hosted by a Mexican woman since 2021, reported a yearly income of $ 127,848 for 4566 reviews. It charged $28 per person. The duration of an episode is 90 minutes. "Pasta with the Grandmas" costs $36 per participant for a 90-minute slot. They have been conducting it since 2020 and have received 3550 reviews, and their estimated income is $127,800 in the two years. Per year income is around $63,900. Neha is an Indian woman sharing her experience as an "E-Cook - Indian Food with Number One Class in Delhi" for one year. She has received 1285 reviews and an income of around $70,675 with $55 per person for a 120-minute time slot. "Chai Tea Masterclass - Vegan Friendly" is a 30-minute Indian experience based on spices. It costs $15 per person, and his income was around $4,800 with 320 reviews (Airbnb, 2023). In that manner, Spice Gardens can provide facilities for cooking experiences and traditional spice food restaurant experiences.

5. Conclusion

Sri Lankan spice gardens have the potential to offer WBET, with a significant demand among tourists. Multilingual employees can positively impact WBET. Consultancy support has enabled the learning of new technical and scientific methods for spice garden activities. It will help understand the pros and cons of dealing with new technology. Thus, spice gardens are well-equipped to venture into WBET. Spice garden tours, spice processing, cooking, value-added spice processing, and harvesting experiences have high tourist demand. However, the cooking and value-added spice processing experiences require more focus. Sri Lankan spice products are popular among foreign tourists, and with that spice garden owners should maintain high-quality production and packaging while engaging in WBET to promote their products and attract them.

The tourism sector, particularly in promoting attractions like spice gardens, could benefit from improved digital technology. Currently, most spice gardens rely on tour agents and personal contacts to attract tourists, indicating a potential gap in the use of digital technology. Despite tourists' increasing connectivity with digital platforms, there seems to be a reluctance to use reservation platforms for spice gardens due to

various reasons, such as lack of awareness, trust issues with online platforms, and a lack of a dedicated, user-friendly, and reliable digital platform. Delivering the activities of spice gardens as web-based experiences requires a different approach than traditional. Therefore, training or awareness sessions to develop the practical knowledge and skills need to be presented in an attractive, practical, and entertaining manner.

Therefore, considering the high tourist demand for spice garden activities and the high potential of Sri Lankan spice gardens to meet this demand, the Airbnb platform could be used as a bridge for this demand and supply. This approach would be a successful solution to gain foreign exchange into the Sri Lankan economy. If Sri Lankan spice gardens could deliver an outstanding web-based experience, tourists would reconsider to have physical visits. Overall, it is an exciting prospect for both spice garden owners and the tourists. It is a win-win situation where tourists enjoy unique experiences, and spice garden owners expand their reach and improve their business.

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Appendix 1 Table A1- Calculation of weighted values

Variable	Expert 01	Expert 02	Expert 03	Expert 04	Expert 05	Expert 06	Expert 07	Expert 08	Expert 09	Expert 10	Expert 11	Expert 12	Expert 13	Expert 14	Expert 15	Expert 16	Expert 17	Expert 18	Expert 19	Expert 20	Weighted Average
V_1	0	0.5	0	1.4	1	1	3	0.5	0.5	1.5	1	2.5	2.5	5.5	1	0	1	1.5	2	2	1.42
V_2	0	1.5	1	1	0.5	1	0	0.5	1	1.5	0.5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0.53
V_3	0	1	3	1.4	0.5	2	2	1.5	2	2	0.5	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0.95
V_4	0	2.5	0	1.4	3	2	1	2	2	1	2.5	0.5	1	1.5	0.5	5	2	0	1	0	1.45
V_5	0.5	2.5	0	1.4	2	1.5	2	1.5	1.5	0.5	2	1.5	1	1.5	0	2.5	3	2	2.5	0	1.47
V_7	0	0.5	0	0.4	0	0	0	0	0.5	0	0.5	1	0	0.5	0.5	2.5	1	1	0	1	0.47
V_9	8	1.5	6	2	2	2.5	2	2	2	1.5	2	2	2.5	0	7	0	3	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.68
V_{10}	1.5	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	0.5	2	1	2.5	2	1	1	0	0	1	2	2.5	1.05

Source: Author,2023.