

A STUDY ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF URBAN FORESTS IN ENHANCING TOURISTS' DESTINATION APPEAL WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KANDY, SRI LANKA

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Abstract

This paper investigates the effectiveness of Urban forests in augmenting tourists' destination appeal, with a specific focus on Kandy, Sri Lanka. Urban forests (UF), encompassing a diverse array of green spaces within urban and peri-urban areas, including woodlands, tree groups, and individual trees, are integral components of the tourism experience, whether deliberately sought or encountered serendipitously. Employing a mixed-method approach, the study delves into tourists' attitudes (TA) towards UF, their perception of UF imagery, and its influence on their behavioral intentions. Theoretical frameworks underpin the analysis, elucidating tourists' location-based understanding and preferences. The research methodology includes comprehensive literature surveys to understand the role of green infrastructure in urban destinations. Case studies conducted in Kandy encompass four diverse sites: Udawatta-Kele sanctuary, Wales Park, Kandy Lake-Round, and Dalada Street. Data collection methodologies include semi-structured interviews and questionnaire surveys, specifically targeting local tourists encountered at the sites to ensure a representative sample. A comparative analysis of the four sites was conducted, focusing on specific attributes such as plant variety, growth form, and planting pattern, revealing their significant impact on destination appeal. Tourists expressed a preference for UF concentrated in gardens, parks, or forests, composed of diverse plant species and naturally growing. Respondents' understanding of spatial dimensions also emerged as a crucial factor influencing their satisfaction and loyalty to UF destinations. The study concludes that UF play a vital role in enhancing tourists' satisfaction and experiences, contributing to the appeal of cities. Based on the findings, recommendations are outlined for designing and managing urban green spaces to optimize tourists' experiences and satisfaction levels, thereby bolstering destination appeal. This research provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of different UF compositions in enhancing tourists' destination appeal.

Keywords: Urban Forests (UF), Urban tourism (UT), Tourists' attitude (TA), Destination image, Tourist satisfaction & Loyalty

1. Introduction

UT, has grown significantly as tourists seek diverse, enriching experiences within urban areas or attractions. UT's appeal lies in its wide array of attractions, with lesser-known features further enhancing the tourist experience (Deng et al., 2010). The pressure of tourism often concentrates on major attractions, straining socio-cultural and climatic conditions, potentially reducing visitor

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satisfaction (Murugaiah, 2019; Hassan, 2021). Encouraging tourism in less-visited areas can help alleviate this strain, contributing to the destination's image and fostering visitor loyalty through increased satisfaction (Deng et al., 2010; Jiang et al., 2018).

UF, comprising woodlands, street trees, parks, and gardens, are essential components that enhance the traveler's experience and increase the allure of urban tourist locations (Terkenli et al., 2017). As defined by the FAO, 2016, UF are “ networks or systems comprising all woodlands, groups of trees, and individual trees located in urban and peri-urban areas; they include, therefore, forests, street trees, trees in parks and gardens, and trees in derelict corners”.

Defined as networks or systems encompassing all these green features, UF play a crucial role in enriching tourist experiences and enhancing the appeal of urban destinations. Despite their significance, the impact of UF on destination appeal has not been extensively studied. Most research treats UF primarily as recreational spaces for residents or focuses on specific attributes, leaving a gap in understanding how tourists perceive and utilize these green spaces. This gap raises a key question: **“How effective are UF in enhancing the appeal of an urban tourism destination?”**

This study aims to analyze how UF shape tourists' perceptions and behaviors, contributing to a city's appeal as a destination, and evaluates UF's role in enhancing the overall tourism experience, a positive destination image, and influencing satisfaction and loyalty.

Research Objectives:

1. Assess the status of UF in a city's character and image as a destination from the perspective of tourists, thus obtaining its relative importance.
2. Examine the relationship among tourists' attitudes toward UF, UF's (Destination) image, tourist satisfaction, and loyalty.
3. Identify specific attributes and characteristics that comprise the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of visitors' attitudes in the context of UF as related to satisfaction and loyalty.
4. Evaluate the most appealing combinations/compositions of urban green spaces

To achieve these objectives, the study will first identify key attributes of UF that impact tourists' perceptions and behaviors. Additionally, it will identify the most appealing combinations of urban green spaces. This research will be conducted in the context of Kandy, Sri Lanka, leveraging its distinctive landscape and significant green spaces to provide insights into these dynamics. Due to accessibility constraints, the study will focus on a limited number of respondents, primarily local tourists who are readily available for participation.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. URBAN FORESTS

UF, comprising wooded lands, tree clusters, and vegetation within urban environments, include settings like streets, parks, and residential areas, encompassing both planted and natural trees (Deng et al., 2010; Nowak, 2016). Recognized as part of "green infrastructure," UF encompass all urban and peri-urban woodlands, trees, and related vegetation (FAO, 2016). (FAO, 2016). Their defining feature is their proximity to human populations, which influences their composition and characteristics, integrating both natural elements and anthropogenic influences in their development and maintenance (Nowak, 2016).

2.1.1 Urban Forests Attributes

Urban forestry primarily focuses on the form and function of UF resources on a strategic level. Paquot (2005) emphasizes the significance of natural landscape resources in shaping the image of tourism destinations and generating positive environmental and social benefits, particularly through urban green structures that include trees, turf, and shrubs (as cited in Gazal et al., 2015). Studies have identified key attributes that enhance UF appeal.. Gazal et al. (2015) highlight critical characteristics manipulated in UF management to attract people. These attributes include: **Plant Variety**: Trees only, trees and grass, or trees, grass, and shrubs; **Planting Pattern**: Concentrated, in patches, or scattered; **Colour Variety**: Primarily green with a few other colours, or primarily green with many other colours; **Growth Form**: Natural or trimmed.

2.1. URBAN TOURISM AND URBAN FORESTS

UT, often termed "Gray tourism" due to its urban context (Deng et al., 2010), is driven by specific urban attractions and characteristics, offering diverse products and experiences tailored to tourists' motives and preferences. This engagement fosters a dialogue between tourists and the host community (Edwards, Griffin, & Hayllar, 2008), although visitors must prioritize attractions due to time constraints and varying preferences (Shoval & Raveh, 2004). UF play a significant role in UT, serving as major attractions within cities. These green spaces, managed for public benefit, encompass wooded lands, tree clusters, and other vegetation that enhance the urban environment (Gazal et al., 2015). Despite the term "Gray tourism," UT integrates "green" elements like parks and gardens, which are essential for enhancing city image and providing recreational benefits (Ashworth, 2004; Hunter, 2008). Categorized into different types of attractions, UF contribute to enriching tourists' experiences and behaviours, impacting their length of stay and consumption patterns (Deng et al., 2010). (refer to Fig. 1)



. **Fig. 1:** Typologies of UF Integration
(Source: author)

2.2. TOURIST ATTITUDE (TA) & DESTINATION PREFERENCE

Tourist destination preference is shaped by comparisons between locations, where one is preferred over another due to the destination's image and the perceptions of tourists (Decrop, 2000; Goodrich, 1978; Gensch, 1978; Basaran, 2016). This preference is influenced by tourists' self-perception and highlights the significant role of destination image in guiding travel choices and preferences.

TA encompasses thoughts, feelings, and behaviours towards tourism, crucial for predicting tourism-related perceptions and actions (Ajzen, 1991; Jiang et al., 2018). It reflects an inclination to respond positively or negatively to tourism-related stimuli. Accordingly, TA towards an object mainly comprises components of, **Affective**: Emotional responses and interest in tourism activities, **Cognitive**: Understanding, views, or knowledge about the tourism object, **Behavioural**: Inclinations to behave in a certain way toward the tourism object (Jiang et al., 2018).

2.2.1. Relating TA and tourists' behavioral intentions– Satisfaction & Loyalty

Tourist satisfaction, reflecting the degree to which a trip meets or exceeds expectations, is a key indicator of service quality and destination performance (Severt et al., 2007; Aliman et al., 2016). It integrates both affective and cognitive dimensions of the visitor experience (Jiang et al., 2018). High levels of satisfaction contribute to tourist loyalty, which is characterized by the intention to revisit or recommend a destination (Wang & Hsu, 2010). Satisfied tourists are more likely to remain loyal to a destination (Lobato et al., 2006; Aliman et al., 2016).

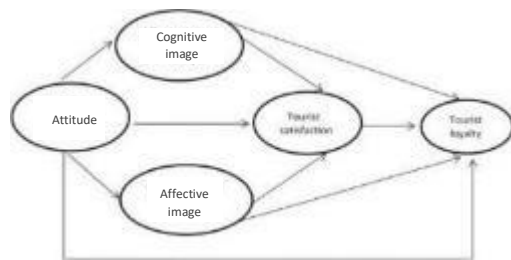


Fig. 2: Conceptual framework relating TD to destination image and behavioral intentions

(Source: Jiang et al., 2018)

The image of a destination plays a crucial role in shaping tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Research indicates a strong correlation between a positive destination image and increased satisfaction and loyalty, fostering more favorable future behaviors (Chi & Qu, 2008; Jiang et al., 2018). Positive attitudes towards a destination enhance satisfaction and the likelihood of repeat visits or recommendations (Lee, 2007). The conceptual framework illustrated in Fig. 2 illustrates how tourist attitudes, influenced by destination image, drive satisfaction and loyalty, thereby enriching the overall tourism experience.

2.3. Theorizing Tourists' Relationship Towards Destination-Based Understanding, Identity, and Attributes

2.3.1. Theory of Tourist Gaze

John Urry's Theory of Tourist Gaze highlights tourists' quest for unique visual experiences distinct from their everyday surroundings (Urry, 1990). his "tourist gaze" is influenced by social patterns and the distinctive visual elements of landscapes and urban settings, emphasizing the role of urban design in offering unique visual experiences that attract visitors (Nursanty & Budiarto, 2015).

2.3.2. Image Theory

Image Theory suggests that personal images, formed through emotional and analytical interpretations rather than objective reality, significantly affect human behavior (Jiang et al., 2018; Martineau, 1958). This theory conceptualizes image through a Three-Dimensional Continuum (functional-psychological, holistic-attribute, general-unique) and a Three-Component Approach (affective, cognitive, conative).

2.3.3. The Concept of Destination Image

Destination image refers to tourists' perceptions and ideas about a location, which significantly impact their experiences and behaviors (Jin et al., 2020). Environmental features play a key role in shaping this image, influencing tourists' decisions to visit (Lobato et al., 2006; Jiang et al., 2018). A positive destination image is associated with favorable attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behaviors, typically assessed through cognitive and affective components (Jin et al., 2020; Aliman et al., 2016).

2.3.4. Place Attachment Theory

Place Attachment Theory examines the emotional and psychological bonds between individuals and specific places, including tourist destinations (Jin et al., 2020). It explores Place Attachment (emotional connection), Place Dependence (functional reliance), and Place Identity (emotional and cognitive identification), helping to explain how emotional connections to places influence tourists' attitudes and behaviors (Jorgenson & Nickerson, 2016; Guo et al., 2021; Jin et al., 2020).

2.3.5. Semantic Differences for Spatial Image Perceptions

Category	Variables	Definitions
Space	Sense of space	Spatial intensity and looseness
	Sense of order	Orderliness and disorderliness
Distance	From urban areas	Distance from urban areas
	From rural areas	Distance from rural areas
Color	Hue	Brightness and contrast
	Color temperature	Overall hues
Style	Natural form	Natural form degree
	Artificial trace	Artificial trace degree
Psychology	Sense of belongingness	The sense of belonging and familiarity
	Sense of security	Security management
Environment	Greening coverage	Greening coverage
	Greening facilities	Improvement if greening facilities

Fig. 3: Evaluation elements and items of spatial image perception of UF (Source: *author*)

Osgood's Semantic Differential (SD) approach assesses spatial perceptions by capturing emotional responses to urban elements (Zhao et al., 2020). This method assumes shared emotional meanings across cultures, applicable to studying UF. The approaches involve using a semantic differential scale with various categories to gain insights into different aspects of UF, as illustrated in Fig.3.

3. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

The theoretical framework is a result of an extensive literature review, includes essential key constructs for evaluating UF appeal to tourists. (refer to Fig. 4)

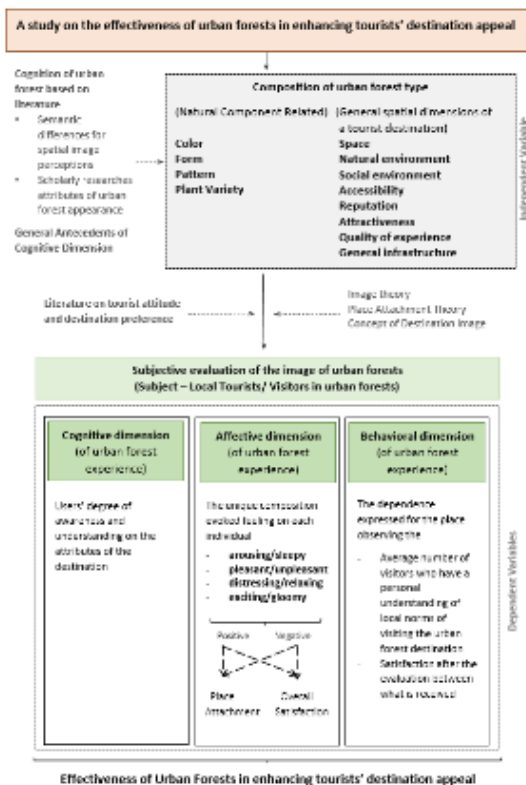


Fig. 4: Theoretical Framework

(Source: *Author*)

Latent Variable	Indicators	Definition
Cognitive dimension (spatial/temporal dimension) (Baloglu and McClary, 1999; A. & J., 2004; Martin and del Bosque, 2008; Qu, Kim, and Im, 2011; Chalip, Green & Hill, 2003; Obenour, Lengfelder and Groves, 2005)	1. Plant variety	Composition of different vegetation forms (Whether it is trees only, trees and grass only or a combination of trees, grass and shrubs)
	2. Planting pattern	Greening coverage (whether it is in patches, concentrated or scattered)
	3. Color	a. Hue b. Color Temperature
	4. Growth form	Degree of Natural or artificial trace (Whether the plants are in natural form or artificial form/trimmed)
	5. Space	a. Order b. Spaciousness
	6. Natural Environment	a. Variation in scenery
	7. Social Environment	a. Sense of belongingness b. Sense of security
	8. Accessibility	a. Distance
	9. Reputation	Reputation or Novelty
	10. Attractiveness	Availability of manmade attractions, special events, leisure activities and peaceful atmosphere
	11. Quality of Experience	Variation in activities
	12. General Infrastructure	Service and facilities available
Affective dimension (Evaluative dimension) (Slabbert, 2019)	a. Arousing/Sleepy	
	b. Pleasant/Unpleasant	
	c. Distressing/Relaxing	
	d. Exciting/Gloomy	
Behavioral dimension (Behavioral response) (Slabbert, 2019)	1. Tourist Satisfaction	a. General Satisfaction b. Attribute satisfaction c. Met expectation
	2. Destination Loyalty	d. Intention in revisiting e. Willingness to recommend

Fig. 5: Data Variables and Definitions

(Source: *Author*)

This framework integrates factors and principles established in the selection process, detailed in Fig.5. These variables and definitions offer a structured approach for assessing multiple dimensions, including visual aesthetics, environmental quality, recreational opportunities, cultural significance, and the overall visitor experience within UF settings. The cognition variable is assessed through factors such as plant variety, pattern, color, and form, as identified in the literature. Additionally, 8 crucial factors within the general cognitive dimension are considered: space, natural environment, social environment, accessibility, reputation, attractiveness, quality of experience, and general infrastructure. These factors are deemed highly influential in shaping tourists' perceptions of UFs. Affection and behavior are analyzed based on the overall composition of specific sites, forming the core of the theoretical framework.

3.1. CASE STUDY SELECTION

The research encompasses Kandy city, with survey sites selected employing Factor Analysis from a literature survey to comprehensively analyze UF components (Refer to table 5). The selection criteria were designed to ensure that the chosen sites were close to the city core and had a high density of potential study participants. This approach addresses time and scale constraints, enabling an in-depth examination of different UF typologies within Kandy.

Table 1: Criteria for case study selection

Criteria	Case study 01: Udawatta KaleSanctuary	Case study 02: Whales park	Case study 03: Kandy Lake Round	Case study 02: Dalada Street
UF Typology	Arboreta	Urban parks	Streetscapes	Street trees
Color	Primarily green with few other colors	Primarily green with many other colors	Mainly green with few other colors	Mainly green with few other colors
Form	Natural	Natural and trimmed	Natural	Natural
Pattern	Concentrated in forest	Concentrated in park	Scattered and in patches	Scattered
Plant Variety	Trees, grass and shrubs	Trees, Grass and shrubs	Trees and grass	Trees only



Fig. 6: Map of the case study locations

(Source: Author)

Kandy's selection as the research location is justified by its prominent status as a leading tourism destination, offering a diverse array of tourism products, including significant UF elements and land allocations (Sivesan, 2019). It ranks among the top six regions in tree cover, with 53% coverage, comprising 161,000 hectares of woodlands and 32,400 hectares of non-forest formations (Kandy, Sri Lanka Deforestation Rates & Statistics | GFW, n.d.).

3.2. DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND TOOLS

The research was conducted in stages, starting with the selection of case study sites to identify relevant impact variables. Constructs from the literature were used to assess tourist perceptions,

understandings and preferences. In Phase 1, interviews, content analysis, and photographic elicitation were employed to understand tourists' perceptions of destination images. Phase 2 focused on measuring the developed constructs using rating scales. The primary data collection method was a semi-structured questionnaire, conducted through interviews, divided into three sections: respondent profiles, attitudes toward selected UF cases - awareness, emotional responses, and propensity to act, and general preferences for UF appearances. Field observations and photography were also used. Final data collection involved face-to-face surveys with local tourists at selected sites, ensuring a balanced sample of 20 from each site, chosen without gender or age bias. Surveys were conducted over two weeks with four survey days per week (two weekdays and weekends), with respondents briefed on the study's objectives and the concept of UFs before completing the questionnaire. This approach ensured thorough data collection to evaluate UF's tourist appeal.

3.3. METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Data analysis involved comparing results logically using graphs, charts, and tables. The Semantic Differential (SD) scale by Russell and Pratt assessed the affective dimension, by comparing four primary emotions on a five-level rating scale from -2 to 2. The higher scores indicated the stronger preference for positive adjectives. For cognitive dimensions, Likert scales measured perceptions, attitudes, and satisfaction levels. To evaluate general preferences for UF appearances, a quantitative approach inspired by Rogelio T. Andrada II's study, "Relating Urban Forests and Urban Tourism: Exploring People's Preferences, Perceptions, and Movement in Washington DC" (2015) was employed, where respondents rated various UF qualities on a scale from 1 to 10. This scoring determined the overall preference level for each space type, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of tourist preferences.

4. Case Studies, Findings, and Analysis

As per the key findings and results, **Udawatta Kele Sanctuary** emerges as a highly attractive tourist destination, with its well-structured arboreta positively influencing all key dimensions of visitor experience. In comparison, **Kandy Lake Round** and **Wales Park** exhibit moderate potential in attracting tourists, offering engaging UF compositions that contribute significantly to visitor satisfaction. Although Dalada Street appears somewhat undervalued, it still plays a vital role in fostering a personal understanding of local UF norms.

Table 2: Observational Insights and Compositional Analysis of Case Study Sites

Udawatta Kele Sanctuary			Key Characteristics: Varied activity trails, Extensive greenery, Moderate accessibility, rich natural scenery
Wales Park			Key Characteristics: Strategic location (hilltop), order & variation of planting, Well-maintained infrastructure
Kandy Lake Round			Key Characteristics: Picturesque lake, Majestic tree-lined streets, Developed infrastructure, Scenic views, order & spaciousness
		Observations: Offers an inviting space for leisure activities, with its panoramic views and well-planned infrastructure enhancing the visitor experience and illustrating effective UF typologies.	



4.1. COGNITIVE DIMENSION

4.1.1. Cognitive Dimension of Natural Components

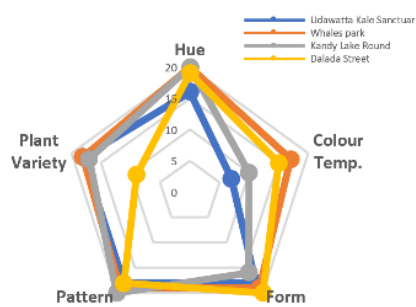


Fig. 7: Natural Components' Influence on Visitors' Destination Appeal (Source: Author)

According to Figure 7, preferences for natural components are varied across the four case studies. At Udawatta Kele Sanctuary, attributes such as the form, pattern, and plant variety are highly valued, with color being less influential. Wales Park shows a balanced appreciation for plant variety and pattern, while color remains less impactful. At Kandy Lake Round, form and plant variety are preferred. On Dalada Street, the natural form is the most significant factor, whereas color, pattern, and plant variety are rated lower, indicating a preference for structural elements.

4.1.2. Cognitive Dimension of Spatial Characteristics

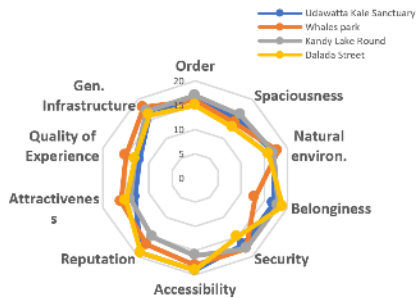


Fig. 8: Spatial Dimensions' Influence on Visitors' Destination Appeal (Source: Compiled by author)

According to Figure 8, spatial preferences vary across the sites. In Udawatta Kele Sanctuary, the natural environment and accessibility are emphasized. Wales Park highlights accessibility and infrastructure, with reputation playing a moderate role. Kandy Lake Round's appeal is influenced by social environment factors like belonging and security, alongside the natural environment and accessibility. Dalada Street places high importance on the social environment, accessibility, and reputation, with other spatial qualities being less critical.

4.2. AFFECTIVE DIMENSION

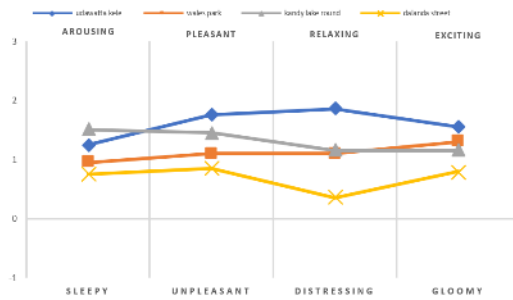


Fig. 9: Impact of Evoked Emotional Responses on Visitor Satisfaction and Place Attachment

(Source: Compiled by author)

According to Figure 9, the affective responses of visitors across the case studies show significant variation. Udawatta Kele Sanctuary generates strong satisfaction and place attachment, with visitors resonating with its pleasant, relaxing, and exciting atmosphere leading to high emotional connection. In contrast, Wales Park, Kandy Lake Round, and Dalada Street elicit more moderate emotional responses, suggesting that while all locations positively influence visitor experiences, the depth of emotional connection varies.

4.3. BEHAVIOURAL DIMENSION

Visitor satisfaction and loyalty across the case study sites reveal notable patterns in how UF compositions influence behavioral outcomes.

- **Udawatta Kele Sanctuary** demonstrates high satisfaction, with 90% of visitors content with its composition. Loyalty is also strong, with 65% planning to return and 90% willing to recommend the sanctuary, though 35% remain uncertain about a return visit. The sanctuary's appeal is further reinforced by 88.75% of visitors understanding and appreciating the local norms associated with it as an UF.
- **Wales Park** shows moderate but positive satisfaction, with 85% of visitors expressing good to excellent satisfaction levels. The park's attributes meet expectations for 80% of respondents. Loyalty is evident, with a significant portion intending to revisit and recommend the park, reflecting its potential for sustained visitor engagement.
- **Kandy Lake Round** also sees 85% satisfaction, with visitors similarly willing to return and recommend the location. This consistency suggests a positive visitor experience and alignment with local expectations.
- **Dalada Street** receives mixed feedback, with 65% satisfaction but 35% expressing dissatisfaction. Loyalty remains moderate, with 75% intending to return and 65% willing to recommend the destination. Despite some reservations, 83.75% of visitors understand local norms, indicating that Dalada Street retains its appeal as an UF destination.

5. Tourists' General Preference for the Appearance of the Urban Forests

The analysis of general preference for the appearance of UF built up through the perception statements illustrated in Fig.10, which represented a conceivable combination of UF qualities and levels.

Code	Statement
P1	Composed of trees only ; concentrated in gardens and parks; primarily green with a few other colors ; and groomed
P2	Composed of trees, grass and shrubs ; concentrated in gardens and parks; primarily green with a few other colors ; and growing naturally
P3	Composed of trees and grass ; scattered all through the city; primarily green with a few other colors ; and naturally growing
P4	Composed of trees and grass ; concentrated in gardens and parks; primarily green with many other colors ; and naturally growing
P5	Composed of trees, grass and shrubs ; planted in patches ; primarily green with a few other colors ; and naturally growing
P6	Composed of trees only ; scattered all through the city; primarily green with a few other colors ; and naturally growing
P7	Composed of trees only ; planted in patches ; primarily green with many other colors ; and groomed
P8	Composed of trees and grass ; planted in patches ; primarily green with a few other colors ; and groomed
P9	Composed of trees, grass and shrubs ; scattered all through the city; primarily green with many other colors ; and groomed

Fig. 10: Summary of perception statements
(Source: author)

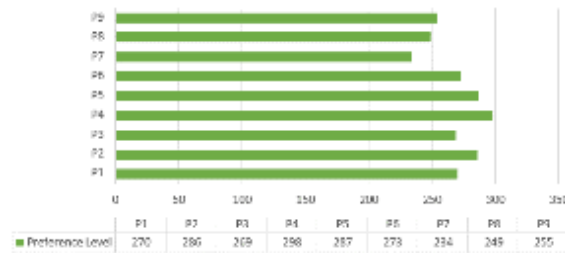


Fig. 11: General preference for the appearance of UF (Source: author)

Based on the overall results of tourists' preferences regarding the appearance of UF, it is evident that respondents significantly favour UF concentrated in gardens and parks characterized by trees and grass. These preferred UF are primarily green with a variety of other colours and exhibit natural growth. In Comparison, UF consisting of trees planted in patches, which are maintained

Or groomed and also primarily green with numerous other colors, are less favored by respondents. (refer to Fig.11)

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of UF in enhancing tourist destinations, revealing how these green spaces influence visitor satisfaction and engagement. By examining UF across four diverse sites in Kandy, Sri Lanka - Udawatta Kele, Wales Park, Lake Round, and Dalada Street, the research identifies key factors that shape tourist perceptions and preferences.

The findings demonstrate that visitors are highly responsive to natural components, such as plant diversity, growth forms, and planting patterns, with a clear preference for environments resembling arboreta that feature trees and grass in natural, accessible settings. The positive impact of UF on tourist satisfaction is strongly linked to their spatial traits and overall accessibility. Parks and gardens, in particular, are favoured for their openness and natural features. Accordingly, design improvements for UF should focus on increasing accessibility, integrating vegetation into built environments, and incorporating elements like flowering plants and seating areas. Allowing natural growth and minimizing excessive trimming align with visitor preferences and contribute to a more appealing experience.

The study underscores that while all four UF types - arboreta, parks, promenades, and street trees have varying degrees of appeal, Udawatta Kele Sanctuary is especially notable for its highly engaging natural composition. Forest formations around Kandy Lake Round and Wales Park also show considerable potential, while Dalada Street, despite being less prominent, still offers value for understanding UF norms.

In summary, effective UF planning and management can significantly enhance tourist experiences, suggesting that UFs are a vital component in the development of appealing and satisfying tourism destinations.

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