

# A study into the alignment of ethical marketing practices with national tourism policy frameworks for the promotion of sustainable elephant tourism in Sri Lanka

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## Keywords

*Elephant Tourism, Ethical Marketing, National Policy, Sri Lanka, Sustainable Tourism*

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## Abstract

*This study explores how ethical marketing practices can be aligned with national tourism policies to promote the long-term sustainability of Sri Lanka's elephant tourism industry. It addresses concerns related to animal welfare, unethical tourism practices, weak regulatory enforcement, and the rising global demand for responsible tourism. The study aims to examine the role of governance, stakeholder collaboration, and sustainable tourism strategies in strengthening ethical tourism development within the sector. An interpretivist paradigm with a qualitative exploratory multiple-case study approach was adopted. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with policymakers and key stakeholders in elephant tourism governance, along with field observations, policy documents, institutional reports, and secondary literature. Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich cases representing different elephant tourism contexts in Sri Lanka. Thematic analysis supported by NVivo software was used for data analysis. The findings identified three key themes: Governance for Ethical Framework Development, Collaborative Education through Integrated Management, and Fostering Innovative Sustainable Practices. The findings revealed that government regulation, ethical certification, stakeholder collaboration, and public awareness are essential for promoting responsible elephant tourism in Sri Lanka. The study identified sanctuary-based, eco-friendly, and community-based tourism as sustainable alternatives to exploitative activities. Key policy recommendations include strengthening regulatory enforcement, establishing national ethical certification standards, fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration, and promoting transparent marketing communication. The study contributes theoretically by extending understanding of how ethical marketing can be integrated with tourism governance and stakeholder theory to support sustainable elephant tourism. Practically, the findings provide guidance for policymakers, tourism authorities, conservation agencies, and tourism operators to strengthen governance, protect animal welfare, conserve the environment, and enhance the long-term sustainability and global credibility of Sri Lanka's elephant tourism industry.*

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## Introduction

Elephant tourism is a significant component of Sri Lanka's tourism industry, contributing to the national economy, preserving cultural traditions, and supporting rural livelihoods (Bandara & Tisdell, 2005; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2009; Fernando et al., 2011; Rathnayake, 2021). However, the sector has increasingly faced international criticism due to concerns regarding animal welfare, unethical tourism practices, and unsustainable management approaches (Flower et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2020). Practices such as elephant rides, chaining, forced performances, captivity in poor conditions, overcrowded safari experiences, and inappropriate tourist interactions have raised serious ethical concerns about sustainability (Fennell, 2012; Duminduhewa et al., 2020). Wild elephant tourism in protected areas such as Yala National Park has also become problematic because of vehicle congestion and wildlife disturbance (Newsome et al., 2005; Ballantyne et al., 2009). In addition, human–elephant conflict has caused significant losses of both human and elephant lives in Sri Lanka (Voice of America News, 2024; The Guardian, 2024; AP News, 2025). These issues show that elephant tourism sustainability is closely linked with environmental conservation and wildlife governance challenges.

Within this context, ethical marketing has emerged as an important mechanism for promoting responsible tourism through honesty, transparency, fairness, and accountability in tourism promotion (Kotler, 2011; Goodwin & Francis, 2003; Lee & Jin, 2019). Ethical marketing encourages operators to provide truthful information regarding animal welfare, conservation efforts, and cultural values while discouraging misleading promotional content (Font and McCabe, 2017; Sin, 2017). However, in Sri Lanka, ethical marketing remains weakly integrated into tourism governance systems, while promotional strategies often prioritize commercial attraction over sustainability and welfare concerns. This has created a disconnect between tourism marketing narratives and global ethical tourism expectations, where tourists increasingly demand responsible and sustainable experiences (Sharma & Sodani, 2023; Flower et al., 2021). The cultural and religious importance of elephants further strengthens the ethical dimension of this issue. In Sri Lanka, elephants are deeply embedded in Buddhist and Hindu traditions and are associated with spirituality and sacred identity, particularly through representations such as Lord Ganesha (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988; Michael, 1983; Flood, 1996). Therefore, unethical treatment of elephants in tourism is not only an environmental concern but also a cultural and moral issue affecting societal and religious values.

Although Sri Lanka has institutional frameworks such as the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority and the Department of Wildlife Conservation, coordination between tourism marketing strategies and national policies related to animal welfare, sustainability, and conservation remains limited. Existing tourism policies do not sufficiently regulate how elephant tourism is promoted or ensure that marketing practices align with ethical tourism principles. Furthermore, theoretical perspectives such as Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), Utilitarianism (Mill, 1863), and ethical tourism approaches (Weeden, 2005; Jamal & Camargo, 2014) emphasize balancing stakeholder interests, maximizing collective well-being, and integrating ethics into tourism governance, yet these perspectives have not been effectively operationalized within Sri Lanka's elephant tourism policy environment. As a result, a gap exists between policy intentions, marketing practices, and sustainability outcomes. Accordingly, the research problem centers on the lack of alignment between ethical marketing practices and national tourism policies in Sri Lanka's elephant tourism industry, resulting in inconsistencies between tourism promotion, animal welfare protection, and sustainable tourism development. Tourism promotion continues to emphasize cultural symbolism and safari experiences while often neglecting welfare standards, conservation responsibilities, and ethical tourism principles (Font and McCabe, 2017; Sin, 2017). This disconnect undermines sustainability and affects Sri Lanka's international tourism reputation and long-term competitiveness.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how ethical marketing can be integrated with national tourism policies to promote the long-term sustainability of Sri Lanka's elephant tourism industry by examining tourism governance, stakeholder collaboration, regulatory mechanisms, and ethical communication practices. The study contributes to existing literature by advancing understanding of the relationship between ethical marketing and sustainable tourism governance within the context of elephant tourism in Sri Lanka (Worwag et al., 2019). Furthermore, it offers practical insights for policymakers, tourism authorities, marketers, and conservation agencies to strengthen governance frameworks, enhance ethical standards, and promote transparent tourism communication. This supports a tourism industry that is economically viable, culturally respectful, environmentally sustainable, and ethically governed.

## **Literature Review**

### **Ethical Marketing**

Ethical marketing involves promoting products and services in a responsible, honest, and transparent manner while considering the well-being of society, culture, animals, and the environment. Unlike traditional marketing approaches that mainly focus on profit generation, ethical marketing emphasizes fairness, accountability, and long-term social value. According to Kotler (2011), businesses should balance organizational profitability with social welfare in order to build sustainable customer relationships. Similarly, Freeman (2010) explained through Stakeholder Theory that organizations must consider the interests of all stakeholders, including customers, employees, communities, governments, and the

environment. Lee and Jin (2019) further identified transparency and social responsibility as core elements of ethical marketing practices.

Previous studies showed that ethical marketing could strengthen consumer trust and encourage responsible business conduct. Fennell and Malloy (1999) noted that ethical marketing reflected the moral values of an organization and positively influenced customer confidence. In tourism, unethical promotional activities created harmful impacts on wildlife, cultural heritage, and local communities (Horng et al., 2017; Babaita et al., 2010). Therefore, ethical marketing is increasingly recognized as an important component of sustainable tourism development. However, implementing ethical marketing practices remains challenging. Sin (2017) highlighted that some businesses falsely portrayed themselves as ethical without genuine commitment, a practice referred to by Duffy and Moore (2010) as “ethics washing.” In contrast, Font and McCabe (2017), Weeden (2005), and Jamroz (2007) argued that ethical marketing could promote responsible tourist behavior and support sustainable tourism practices. In Sri Lanka, Ekanayake and Eranda (2021; 2022) also emphasized the importance of transparent marketing in encouraging conservation-oriented tourism behavior.

### **Ethical Marketing in Sri Lankan Elephant Tourism Industry**

Ethical marketing gains significant attention within the elephant tourism industry due to the increasing global interest in responsible and animal-friendly tourism experiences. Babaita et al. (2010) explained that ethical marketing encouraged tourism activities that protected consumers, preserved cultural values, and supported environmental sustainability. Likewise, Weeden (2002; 2005) emphasized that ethical tourism practices helped attract socially responsible tourists while enhancing the reputation and competitiveness of destinations.

In the Sri Lankan context, elephants hold considerable cultural, religious, and economic importance. According to Bandara and Tisdell (2005), elephants contributed greatly to tourism development and national heritage. However, Fennell (2012; 2014; 2024) highlighted the growing concern of balancing tourism benefits with proper elephant welfare standards, especially in activities such as rides and performances that may harm animals. Existing studies and reports identified several unethical marketing practices within elephant tourism. Reports by Colombo Telegraph (2021) and HIDMC (2024) indicated that certain tourism operators used attractive promotional content while concealing poor animal welfare conditions. Similarly, the Born Free Foundation (2019) and Warwick et al. (2023) noted that emotional and cultural appeals were sometimes used to justify harmful practices including chaining and forced entertainment activities. In addition, increasing human-elephant conflict created further challenges for sustainable tourism management. The Department of Wildlife Conservation (2023), News First (2023), and The Guardian (2024) stressed the importance of maintaining a balance between public safety and wildlife protection. Researchers such as Freeman (2010), Eranda and Sumanarathna (2019), and Kontogeorgopoulos (2009) emphasized stakeholder collaboration, transparency, and welfare-based tourism management as essential elements of sustainable elephant tourism.

### **Alignment of Ethical Marketing with National Tourism Policies**

The alignment of ethical marketing with national tourism policies is essential for the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations. According to UNWTO (2015), sustainable tourism policies should balance economic growth, environmental conservation, and socio-cultural well-being. Similarly, Bramwell and Lane (2011) emphasized that effective policy coordination and governance are necessary to ensure tourism development benefits both communities and natural resources. Freeman (2010) highlighted that Stakeholder Theory emphasizes the importance of considering the interests of governments, tourism operators, local communities, tourists, and conservation organizations. Supporting this view, Byrd (2007) and Waligo et al. (2013) argued that stakeholder collaboration is critical for implementing sustainable tourism policies successfully.

Within wildlife tourism, policy frameworks promote responsible practices and accountability. Fennell (2020) stressed the integration of ethical considerations into tourism governance, while Newsome et al. (2013) highlighted the need for regulations, monitoring systems, and enforcement mechanisms to

minimize impacts on wildlife and ecosystems. Kotler et al. (2017) further argued that marketing should create value for businesses, consumers, and society, while Lacznia and Murphy (2012) emphasized transparency, honesty, and accountability as key ethical marketing principles. In Sri Lanka, tourism governance was managed by the SLTDA, DWC, and DNZG. However, stronger integration between tourism promotion and conservation policies is required to better support wildlife conservation, stakeholder engagement, and the sustainable development of Sri Lanka's elephant tourism industry (Eranda and Sumanarathna, 2019).

### **Theoretical Foundation: Utilitarianism**

This study was based on the theory of utilitarianism, which evaluates the morality of actions according to their outcomes and their ability to produce the greatest overall benefit. Early scholars such as Bentham (1789) and Mill (1863) explained that ethical decisions should aim to increase happiness and reduce suffering. Within tourism studies, utilitarianism was often used to assess whether tourism activities created positive economic, social, and environmental impacts for society (Yu et al., 2026). In Sri Lanka's elephant tourism industry, this perspective is highly relevant because the sector contributes to employment generation and tourism income while simultaneously raising concerns about elephant welfare and ethical treatment. Singer (1975) argued that animals capable of experiencing pain and suffering should also receive moral consideration. Similarly, Fennell (2012) emphasized the importance of integrating animal welfare into tourism ethics. Therefore, ethical marketing should promote transparent communication, responsible tourist behavior, and welfare-oriented tourism practices that balance economic advantages with social, environmental, and animal welfare responsibilities.

### **Methodology**

This research was conducted using the interpretivist research paradigm, which focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and experience social realities within a particular context (Creswell, 2014). The approach was considered suitable because ethical marketing and tourism policy alignment in Sri Lanka's elephant tourism industry are influenced by cultural values, stakeholder perceptions, institutional practices, and governance structures. The study recognized that different stakeholders may hold different views regarding ethical tourism and sustainability. The research incorporated the philosophical dimensions of ontology, epistemology, and axiology. From an ontological perspective, the study adopted a relativist position, acknowledging the existence of multiple realities shaped by the experiences and interpretations of tourism operators, policymakers, and other stakeholders (Creswell, 2013; Yilmaz, 2013). Epistemologically, the research followed a constructivist approach, where knowledge was constructed through interaction between the researcher and participants during semi-structured interviews (Heron & Reason, 1997). From an axiological standpoint, the study accepted that researcher values and ethical concerns may influence interpretation, particularly in relation to elephant welfare and sustainable tourism practices. Therefore, reflexivity and transparency were maintained throughout the research process.

An exploratory qualitative research design was adopted because the integration of ethical marketing with tourism policies in Sri Lanka's elephant tourism sector remains relatively underexplored. A multiple-case study strategy was applied to examine different tourism and governance settings (Yin, 2018). Four cases were selected, including an ethical elephant sanctuary, a religious or cultural institution involving elephants, a government-managed elephant orphanage, and a private tourism organization moving toward a semi-sanctuary approach (Fernando et al., 2011; Flower et al., 2021). These cases represented different institutional perspectives on ethical tourism and sustainability.

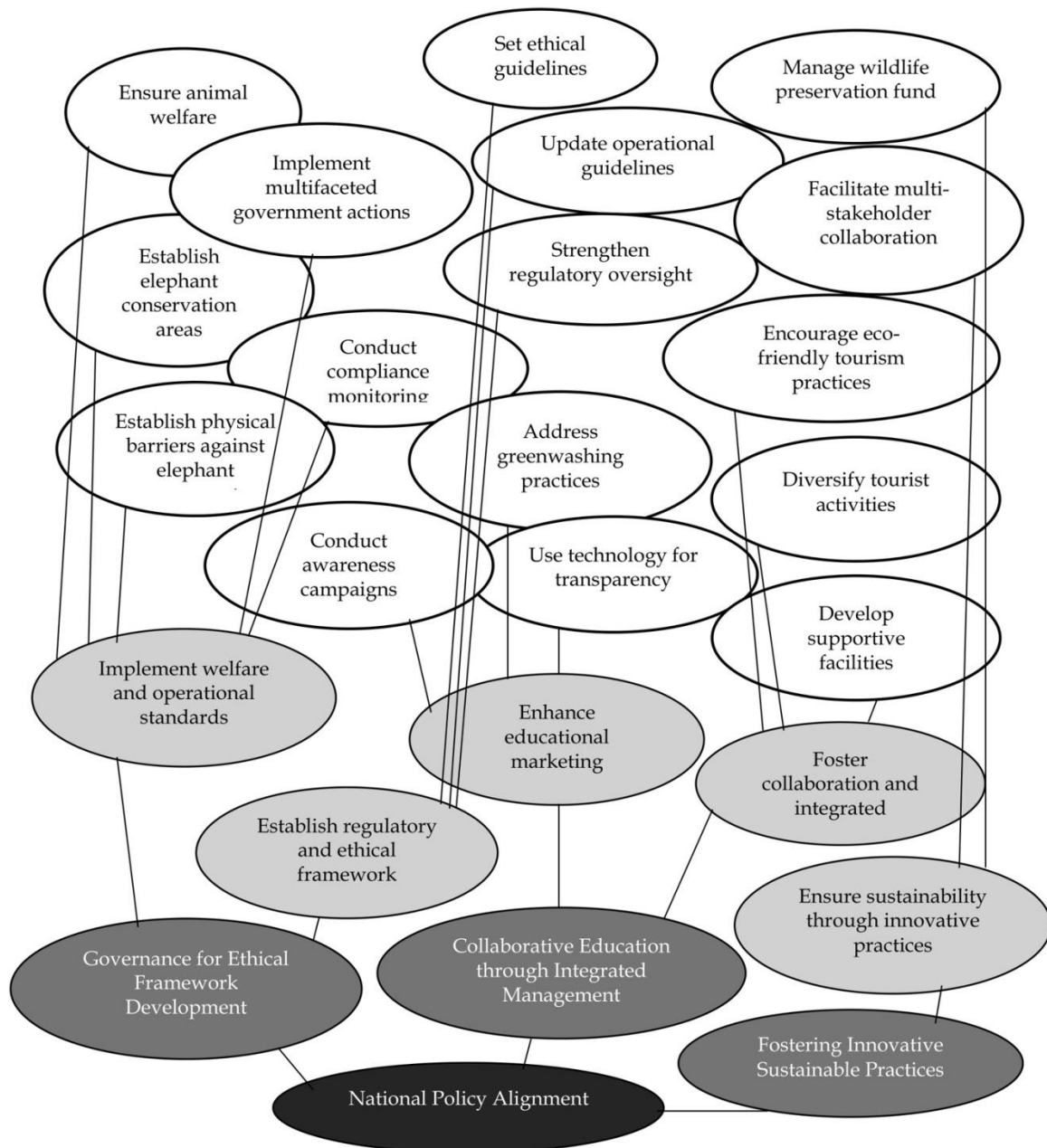
Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with direct experience and knowledge related to ethical tourism and policy implementation (Coyne, 1997; King et al., 2019). Primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, while secondary data included policy documents, institutional publications, tourism websites, academic sources, and media reports. Observational data also supported the understanding of tourism practices and promotional activities. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis employing both inductive and deductive coding approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo

software assisted in organizing and managing the data systematically. Research quality was strengthened through triangulation, rich descriptions, transparent procedures, and continuous reflexivity to improve credibility, dependability, and accuracy of interpretation.

### Findings and Discussions

Based on the analysis of the collected data, the following themes were developed with respect to the alignment of ethical marketing with national tourism policies to promote

Figure 1: Thematic Map for alignment of ethical marketing with national tourism policies



Source: Compiled from Analysis

The themes related to the alignment of ethical marketing with national tourism policies are presented in Figure 1. Each theme is explained using the relevant evidence from here onwards.

### **Governance for Ethical Framework Development**

This theme highlighted the importance of strong government involvement in establishing and enforcing ethical standards within Sri Lanka's elephant tourism industry. Policymakers emphasized that clear regulations, regular monitoring, certification systems, and incentives are essential to ensure that ethical marketing claims genuinely reflect animal welfare practices. Policy Maker 1 stated, "We conduct regular inspections to ensure operators follow ethical guidelines and welfare standards," which demonstrates the importance of active monitoring and legal accountability. Policy Maker 2 emphasized the need for certification by explaining, "A national ethical tourism certification would help tourists identify genuinely responsible operators," showing how certification systems can reduce misleading marketing and improve transparency. Policy Maker 3 further highlighted the role of incentives and enforcement, noting, "Tax relief, recognition, and strong regulations can encourage operators to adopt ethical practices." Another statement from Policy Maker 1 indicated the importance of measurable welfare standards: "Operators must meet specific standards to ensure elephants are treated safely and respectfully." Overall, the findings suggest that effective governance, certification systems, incentives, and strict policy enforcement are essential to improve ethical marketing credibility, strengthen elephant welfare, and support the long-term sustainability of Sri Lanka's elephant tourism industry.

### **Collaborative Education through Integrated Management**

This theme emphasized the importance of collaboration among government authorities, tourism operators, conservation groups, and local communities to strengthen ethical marketing and sustainability in Sri Lanka's elephant tourism industry. Policymakers highlighted that stakeholder cooperation, educational programs, and joint communication strategies are essential to create a shared understanding of responsible tourism practices. Policy Maker 2 stated, "We need formal platforms and joint campaigns to promote ethical tourism together," highlighting the importance of coordinated communication and unified ethical marketing messages. Policy Maker 3 explained, "Collaboration exists, but it is often fragmented, so stakeholders need to meet regularly," showing the need for stronger coordination among institutions and communities. Policy Maker 1 emphasized the role of awareness by stating, "We educate both local communities and visitors about responsible tourism practices." This indicates that ethical tourism depends not only on regulations but also on public education and community involvement. Another statement from Policy Maker 2 further reinforced the theme: "The government, private sector, and conservationists must work from the same page." This reflected the importance of integrated management in addressing sustainability and welfare challenges collectively. Overall, the findings suggest that collaborative stakeholder engagement and educational initiatives are essential for strengthening ethical marketing, reducing misinformation, improving conservation awareness, and promoting shared responsibility for sustainable elephant tourism in Sri Lanka.

### **Fostering Innovative Sustainable Practices**

This theme focused on promoting innovative and sustainable tourism models that prioritize elephant welfare, environmental protection, and community benefits within Sri Lanka's elephant tourism industry. Policymakers emphasized the importance of shifting away from harmful traditional tourism activities and encouraging sanctuary-based and eco-friendly experiences. Policy Maker 1 indicated, "Sanctuary-based tourism allows elephants to live more naturally," highlighting the need to replace exploitative activities with welfare-oriented practices. Policy Maker 2 explained, "Green tourism and community-based tourism are important for sustainable development," demonstrating the value of environmentally responsible tourism that also supports local communities. Policy Maker 1 further added, "Tourism operators should reduce waste, conserve energy, and minimize environmental impacts," showing that sustainability extends beyond animal welfare to broader environmental management practices. Meanwhile, Policy Maker 3 noted, "Ethical sanctuary experiences create deeper connections for tourists," emphasizing that

meaningful and educational tourism experiences can enhance visitor satisfaction while protecting elephants. Overall, the findings suggested that innovative, eco-friendly, and community-focused tourism practices are essential for improving elephant welfare, promoting environmental sustainability, supporting local communities, and strengthening Sri Lanka's image as a responsible and ethical tourism destination.

### Discussion on Key Findings

The findings of this study revealed that ethical marketing for sustainable elephant tourism in Sri Lanka depends on the integration of strong governance, stakeholder collaboration, and innovative sustainable tourism practices. Policymakers emphasized that government regulation, monitoring, and certification systems are essential for ensuring credible ethical marketing and protecting elephant welfare. These findings align with previous literature highlighting the importance of stronger regulatory frameworks and enforcement mechanisms within wildlife tourism (Kamble & Bouchon, 2014; Duffy, 2015; Warwick et al., 2023). Policymakers stressed the importance of regular inspections, legal accountability, and clear welfare standards to reduce unethical practices and misleading marketing claims. The need for a national certification system was also highlighted as a mechanism to guide tourists toward ethical operators while reducing greenwashing and improving transparency. In addition, the study extended existing literature by emphasizing a balanced governance approach that combines strict enforcement with incentives such as tax relief and official recognition to encourage ethical tourism practices. The study further identified weaknesses in Sri Lanka's current regulatory framework, including limitations within the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance No. 2 of 1937 and the delayed implementation of the Animal Welfare Bill (Department of National Zoological Gardens, 2019; SL Animal Welfare Coalition, 2023), indicating the need for updated welfare and marketing regulations specifically designed for elephant tourism.

The findings also emphasized the importance of collaboration among government agencies, tourism operators, conservation groups, and local communities in promoting ethical tourism practices. This strongly supported Freeman's stakeholder theory and the collaborative approaches discussed by Font and McCabe (2017). Policymakers highlighted the importance of establishing formal platforms for stakeholders to work together and create unified ethical marketing campaigns. However, the study revealed that collaboration within the industry remains fragmented, supporting Duffy's (2015) argument on the practical difficulties of coordinating multiple stakeholders in tourism development. The findings extended the literature by identifying unified communication as a strategic outcome of collaboration, where joint marketing campaigns can communicate consistent ethical messages to tourists, reduce misinformation, strengthen awareness regarding ethical tourism, and create collective responsibility for elephant conservation. Furthermore, the study highlighted the importance of transforming elephant tourism through innovative and sustainable tourism models that prioritize elephant welfare, environmental protection, and community benefits.

Policymakers promoted sanctuary-based tourism, eco-friendly practices, and community-based tourism as sustainable alternatives to harmful traditional tourism activities such as elephant rides and performances. These findings aligned with welfare-centered tourism approaches discussed by Warwick et al. (2023), Fennell (2014), and the sustainability principles promoted by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA, 2023). The findings also reflected the principles of Utilitarianism, which emphasize maximizing benefits for all stakeholders, including elephants, tourists, local communities, and the tourism industry (Bentham, 1789; Mill, 1863; Fennell, 2006). Policymakers further emphasized that ethical marketing should actively promote welfare, environmental conservation, and local prosperity rather than merely avoiding harm. Nevertheless, the findings revealed tensions between long-term sustainability objectives and the immediate commercial pressures faced by tourism operators. Overall, the study confirms that ethical marketing can significantly contribute to sustainable elephant tourism when supported through strong governance, stakeholder collaboration, and innovative policy-driven tourism models (Mill, 1863; UNWTO, 2015).

### Concluding Remarks

The study revealed that aligning ethical marketing with national tourism policies is essential for the long-term sustainability of Sri Lanka's elephant tourism industry. This alignment is supported by three key pillars: governance for ethical framework development, collaborative education through integrated management, and the promotion of innovative sustainable tourism practices. A strong and transparent regulatory framework, supported by consistent enforcement, certification systems, and policy incentives, is crucial for improving accountability and sustainability. A National Ethical Elephant Tourism Certification Scheme emerged as a key mechanism to reduce greenwashing, enhance transparency, and assist tourists in identifying genuinely ethical operators. However, ethical marketing cannot succeed through isolated organizational efforts alone. Sustainable progress depends on collaboration among government institutions, tourism operators, NGOs, conservation organizations, local communities, and tourists. Joint awareness campaigns and stakeholder engagement are necessary to promote responsible tourism behaviour. In addition, sanctuary-based tourism, community-based tourism, and environmentally responsible tourism models were identified as effective approaches for improving elephant welfare while generating socio-economic and environmental benefits.

The study recommends that the government implement a transparent National Ethical Elephant Tourism Certification Scheme with clear welfare and sustainability standards. Regulatory bodies such as the Department of Wildlife Conservation, the Department of National Zoological Gardens, and the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority should strengthen monitoring through inspections, transparent reporting, and strict enforcement. Policymakers may also introduce incentives such as tax benefits and marketing support for ethical operators. Furthermore, structured stakeholder platforms can improve communication, knowledge sharing, and policy implementation. National awareness campaigns are also essential to educate tourists and discourage exploitative practices such as elephant rides and performances. NGOs and conservation organizations can serve as independent monitors and facilitators of collaboration. This study contributes to the literature on ethical tourism, sustainable destination management, and wildlife tourism by demonstrating the importance of integrating ethical marketing within national policy frameworks. The findings indicate that ethical transformation is a gradual process influenced by policy support, enforcement mechanisms, stakeholder collaboration, and tourist expectations. The study extends utilitarianism by showing how ethical marketing and tourism policies can balance benefits for elephants, tourists, local communities, tourism businesses, and the environment. It also highlights the influence of cultural values and governance structures on ethical marketing practices.

Furthermore, ethical marketing is repositioned beyond a firm-level promotional tool to a broader tourism governance mechanism. Sustainable elephant tourism requires the integration of ethical marketing and national policy within a unified framework in which conservation, animal welfare, tourism promotion, and sustainability operate collectively. Ethical marketing thus shapes stakeholder behaviour, strengthens accountability, and guides sustainable tourism development. The study introduces the concept of policy-driven ethical marketing, where ethical practices are embedded in national regulations rather than left to voluntary adoption. It extends stakeholder theory by highlighting the coordinating role of government institutions in aligning stakeholder interests. Ethical certification systems are identified as governance tools that reduce greenwashing and improve transparency. Overall, ethical marketing, governance, and collaboration together support conservation, enhance destination credibility, and ensure long-term sustainability. Future research can further examine stakeholder collaboration and the effectiveness of enforcement and certification systems in Sri Lanka's elephant tourism industry.

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