

Impact of Service Quality on Tourist Satisfaction: A Case of Sri Lankan Hotels

N. Nagendrakumar¹ and R.R.M.T.R.T. Rathnayake²

Abstract

The purpose of the study is to investigate the impact of service quality on tourist satisfaction in the hotel industry in Sri Lanka with reference to ABC hotels. In recent years, the hotel industry in Sri Lanka has become highly competitive and challenging. The SERVQUAL model has been applied to detect the quality improvement areas on tourist satisfaction based on five dimensions such as tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Data were collected from 376 respondents which consisted of 34 five-point Likert scale questions, using a stratified random sampling technique. The multiple regression analysis was run to establish the model and the model fit. Results indicated that all five dimensions of service quality had a significant impact on tourist satisfaction. The findings help managers of Sri Lankan hotels to identify the service quality areas that need to be improved and assist in related decision making to enhance tourist satisfaction.

Keywords: Service quality, Tourist Satisfaction, Hotel Industry.

Introduction

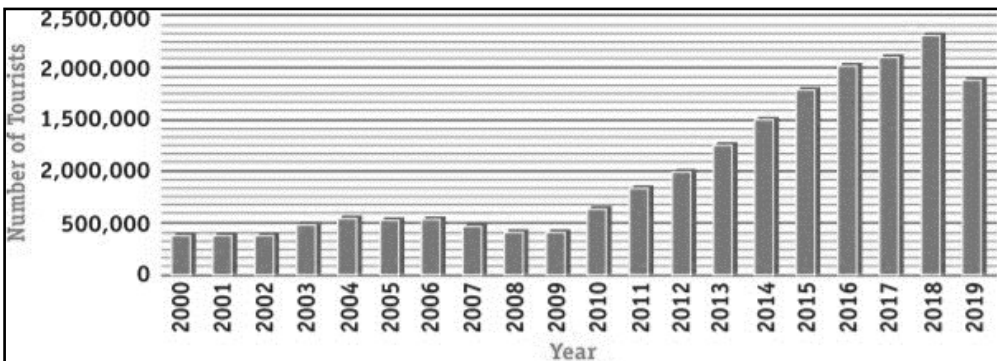
The tourism industry in Sri Lanka is one of the major industries which contribute to the Sri Lankan economy. After the end of a 30-year war, as a country, Sri Lanka endeavors to develop the tourism industry. Sri Lanka is one of the most popular and amazing tourist destinations for tourists in the world with a diverse range of attractions in terms of culture, people, geography, and climatic conditions (Ngyen, 2021). In 2019, Sri Lanka has been named the best travel destination in the world by world's leading travel authority, Lonely Planet (The Guardian, 2018).

¹ Associate Professor, SLIIT Business School, Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology, Malabe Sri Lanka, Email: nagalingam.n@slit.lk

² SLIIT Business School, Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology, Malabe, Sri Lanka

As per Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) the hotel industry in Sri Lanka is one of the key earners of foreign exchange (US \$ 3,606.9 billion) in 2019 . The records show that there are 156 classified and 239 unclassified tourist hotels registered under the SLTDA. Further, direct and indirect employment generated in the tourism sector increased from 359,215 in 2017 to 402,607 in 2019. Furthermore, 1,913,702 tourist arrivals were reported during the year 2019 (Figure 01), and the annual room hotel occupancy rate was 57.09%. This is a significant drop of 18% against the previous year 2018. Tourist arrivals showed a significant increase in the first three months of 2019 as 2.2%, 7% and 4.7% in January, February, and March 2019 respectively when compared to the year 2018. However, in April, tourist arrivals show a sharp drop (ACAP, 2019), thus marking the downturn of the growth trend since post-war 2009. With the Easter Sunday attack, the year 2019 faced a struggle for Sri Lanka's tourism industry. When the industry was picking up post-Easter Sunday attack, within a year, the outbreak of the Coronavirus disease (COVID -19) in early 2020 disrupted severely the tourism globally. In these circumstances, the progress achieved so far have backslid, burdened with uncertainty and instability with no signs of recovery. With that, hoteliers were targeting the local guests as the only option available and then had resorted to service differentiation. Here, hotel industry put in their best possible effort to provide maximum customer service to local guests who patronize their service during the pandemic situation.

Figure 1: Tourist Arrivals to Sri Lanka 2000 - 2019



Source: SLTDA (2019).

The hotel industry is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world (Sekar & Sudha, 2019). The competition between hospitality suppliers grows increasingly day by day as many giants in this industry have tried to encroach on the hospitality market by providing excellent customer service and facilities. The hospitality industry faces different challenges than other service-based and manufacturing organizations that generate products because the nature of service differs from that of a commodity. When compared to the manufacturing industry, there is a higher risk of failure in the service industry. The reason is that unlike in a tangible product, service quality is not directly visible and therefore is subjective and largely relies on the quality of service offered by the staff. In both local and international contexts, several types of research have been conducted on service quality, but very fewer research studies have been carried out in the hotel industry in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, the present study fills the research gap by examining the impact of service quality on tourist satisfaction in the hotel industry in Sri Lanka with reference to ABC hotels.

ABC hotels too faced significant challenges in the year 2020 due to the Easter Sunday attack and with the outbreak of the COVID – 19. The covid-19 caused a severe impact to the Sri Lankan economy including the tourism and the growth of the overall service sector dropped significantly (SLTDA, 2019). As the number of foreign tourist arrivals declined sharply, ABC hotels had to focus on attracting locals to sustain the business. Due to the COVID-19 situation the management of the ABC had to retrench the staff to cover the operational expenses and remain afloat.

At the same time, ABC hotels were experiencing negative feedback from guests regarding the quality of its service. Some services for guests were delayed and not up to their expectations. Most of these complaints from guests were received during the high peak season due to not providing quality service. As a result, guests shared their disappointments in online reviews on TripAdvisor and Booking.com. This scenario directly affected the reputation of the hotel since tourists select hotels by reviewing online reviews. As a result, ABC hotels believed this could negatively affect the perception of potential guests, thus discouraging them from booking ABC hotels for their stay which can result in a decline in turnover in the long run. It was also noted that

the complaint rate of the ABC hotels had increased in the past few years. Hence, the objective of this study is to analyse the impact of provision of quality service embracing the SERVQUAL as the theoretical lens.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section two explains the literature review on the underlying concepts, while Section three contains the data and methodology. Section four evaluates the results as well as the discussion, and Section five sums up the research.

Literature Review

Service Quality

Service quality is a vital factor for any industry's achievement and success. Quality is in general referred to as the fitness for purpose. The aforesaid highly exposed to the tourism industry and accordingly, it becomes the lifeblood for the hotels, and it is further linked with customer loyalty (Saleem & Raja, 2014; Yurur et.al, 2021). When considering the hotel sector, service quality directly impacts the guest return behaviour, tourist satisfaction and company profit in the long run (Wei, 2019). In other words, guest satisfaction results in repeat bookings and better profitability. According to Tessera et al., (2016), good quality service has a positive impact on profitability by elevating the customer base. Another point is that service quality is directly related to the brand image (Azeem & Navaneetha, 2020; Cunill et.al., 2019). When considering the service quality and tourist satisfaction, service quality has emerged as the most important component within the ability of hotels to either maintain existing levels or advance to the next level of efficiency by improving and expanding their operations. One of the ways of achieving the above status is to adopt service quality models.

Service Quality Models

Various scholars have researched the instrument to measure service quality over time. SERVQUAL, SERVPERF, INTSERVQUAL, INSQPLUS, HOLSERV, DINESERV, CASERV, and LODGSERV are a few examples. Some measurements are industry-specific, such as DINESERV in restaurants, CASERV in casinos, LODGSERV and HOLSERV in hotels, and INTQUAL and INTSERVQUAL in

measuring employees' opinions of service quality (Akinyi, 2018). Priyo et.al, (2018) and Sekar and Sudha (2019) further emphasized a summary of the service quality models such as Technique and Functional Quality Model, Service Quality (SERVQUAL) model, LODGSERV model, DINESERV model, synthesized model of service quality, SERVPERF, and Antecedents and Mediator Model. Among these service quality models, SERVQUAL (SERVices QUALity) has become the widely used instrument for measuring service quality. This model has been mostly applied to diverse sectors including the hotel sector to measure service quality. The present study also appraises SERVEQUAL as it theoretical lens in analyzing the provision of service to the ABC hotels.

Servqual Model

The business world always concentrates on quality in providing goods and services to the customers. The quality aspect is a measurable construct. Accordingly, during 1998 Parasuraman and others developed SERVQUAL model to measure service quality. This model can be applied in many industries including the hotel industry. There were ten different dimensions in the originally developed service quality viz., tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, communication, credibility, security, competence, courtesy, understanding the customer, and access (Ngyen, 2021; Koc & Bozkur, 2017). But later the scales were reduced into five dimensions as three from original dimensions and two as combined dimensions viz., tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. These five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model have been applied to assess a multitude of features to measure general expectations of guests and guests' perception of the actual service provided by the hotel (Al- Ababneh, 2017). The researchers set light on each dimension as below.

Tangibility

Tangibility means the visibility and touchability of the phenomenon. Hence, the tangibility of service quality means the physical appearance which includes the land scapings, gardening, building, equipment, physical facilities, communication facilities cleanness of rooms, restaurants and other areas, the clean and proper attire used by the employees and usage of disposable gloves etc. (Al-Ababneh, 2017). This feature enables to achieve customer perception or even exceed

customer's expectations by delighting their hotel experience (Wei, 2019). Potential customers will not expect any form of service from a business organization if there are a lack of basic requirements (cleanliness, poor facilities, or untidy people). Overall, the state of the physical environment reflects the care of the service provider and attention to detail.

Reliability

Reliability stands for trustfulness which reveals consistency and accuracy of the service providers by the hotels to the customers (Wei, 2019). Reliability can cause a positive impact on tourist satisfaction. Providing accurate information to the customer tends to create a good overall impression of the service rendered by the hotel (Wei, 2019). Customers prefer to collaborate with firms that follow up on their promises regarding service outcomes (Ali, et al., 2021). If hoteliers can provide the services as promised and keep up with guest expectations, customers may not switch to alternatives. Further, this will create and retain a loyal customer base. The above all are possible only if the hotels follow the internationally accepted quality standards.

Responsiveness

This feature deals with the extent to which the hotels are online real time response providers to their customers. Responsiveness of service quality means the willingness to provide prompt services to the customers (Sharma & Srivastava, 2018). Responsiveness creates a significant impact on customer satisfaction and expectation. Further, this impacts on the potential customers, as customers prefer to have a speedy response rather than a sluggish service. The ability to deal promptly with customers' complaints is determined by the responsiveness of the capacity of the hotel (Wei, 2019). Especially the front-line staff such as receptionist, waitress, guest relations, hostess etc., should have adequate knowledge and skills to provide required information to the guest whenever they need it (Wei, 2019). In other words, providing timely attention and service to guests is critical in the hotel industry for guest satisfaction.

Assurance

This feature deals with extent to which hotels assures the quality service to their customers. Assurance of service quality means the

capabilities and the capacities of service providers to showcase awareness and politeness when delivering the service to its potential guests. Competence, courtesy, credibility, and security are the components of assurance that help to create a favourable impression and confidence in the service provided by the hoteliers. Assurance creates a significant impact on tourist satisfaction (Wei, 2019).

Empathy

This feature deals with extent to which the hotels show the soft side to their customers. In other words, empathy refers to a company's ability to deliver caring and personalized attention to its customers, thus wearing the shoes of the customer. Therefore, accessibility, communication, and understanding the customers are key components of the empathy of service quality (Wei, 2019). In the hotel sector, empathy is one of the factors that can make or break a business, determine the size of market share etc. The feeling of empathy refers to how a firm treats and attends to its customers on an individual basis to make them feel particularly appreciated and special. Hoteliers should arrange training programs to improve communication skills for their staff to deal with the customers (who are from diverse markets, having different expectations of service), for a good quality service offering. Customers are more likely to return to a company and do repeat bookings/repurchases etc., if they feel they are given individualized attention as part of service excellence. All the features discussed so far leads to customer satisfaction in hotels industry.

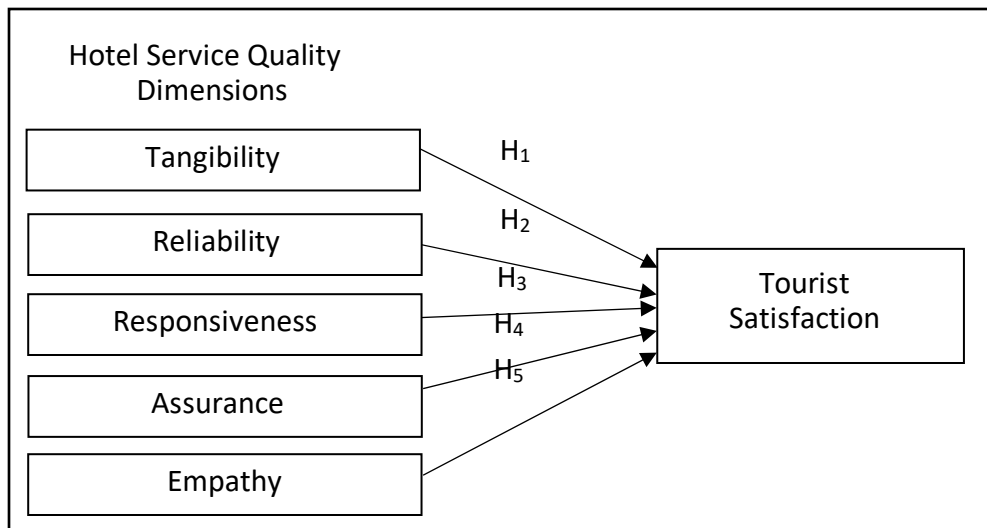
Tourist Satisfaction

In the competitive market, customer satisfaction is a key component in any industry to enhance reputation, repurchases and customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction is even more crucial in the hotel/hospitality sector influences guest perceptions too; it is one of the critical success factors or key performance indicators. The hoteliers can generate more profits satisfying the customers by understanding the needs and requirements of the customers. Customer satisfaction is largely dependent on whether the guests return to the hotel or not (Jr & DiPietro, 2017). Jayampathi & Munasinghe (2019) found out that tourist satisfaction led to the intention for revisiting the same place in the future. Satisfied customers share their 'good experience' regarding the hotel service and also recommend it to others (Azeem and

Navaneetha, 2020). Spreading the word of mouth, this kind of publicity is strong enough to reaffirm existing guests as well as influence potential guests in choosing the respective hotel for their repeat bookings and initial reservation respectively. On the contrary, if customer expectations are not met, they will be dissatisfied or unhappy (Ha, 2018).

The literature argument so far leads to the below mentioned conceptual framework and five hypotheses.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework



Source: Authors' illustration.

H1: There is a significant impact of tangibility of service quality on tourist satisfaction.

H2: There is a significant impact of reliability of service quality on tourist satisfaction

H3: There is a significant impact of responsiveness of service quality on tourist satisfaction.

H4: There is a significant impact of assurance of service quality on tourist satisfaction.

H5: There is a significant impact of empathy of service quality on tourist satisfaction.

Methodology

The research adopted quantitative approach and primary data were collected. The primary data were collected through a survey questionnaire with 5-point Likert scale questions scale (1- strongly dissatisfied to 5- strongly satisfied) to test the developed hypotheses. The questionnaire was organized under three sections and 28 questions covering the five service quality dimensions based on the SERVQUAL model. The questionnaire was designed as per questionnaires used in similar studies, thus referring to literature of previous and existing studies (Azeem & Navaneetha, 2020; Tjahjaningsih et.al., 2020; Ngyen, 2021). The participants were requested to respond to questions based on their perception and the level of satisfaction with the service quality offered by the ABC hotels. As the population, this research considered guest arrivals of ABC hotels during the year 2020. Therefore, the total population consisted of 19,542 guests. A stratified random sampling method was used to select the sample (see Table 1). A total of 376 Google form questionnaires were distributed to guests who visited ABC hotels, with a 100% response rate. Collected data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS v. 26) software. Reliability analysis with the Cronbach's Alpha value has been performed here to verify the reliability of the variables. To measure the interrelationship between variables the Pearson correlation analysis was used. The regression analysis method was used to test the hypothesis in the study. These assumptions were verified during the application of the regression model. The regression model recorded to obtain the model fit measures with the R squared value.

Table 1: Guest arrivals to ABC hotels in year 2020 and expected stratified sample from each hotel.

Property	Local / Foreign guests	Stratified Sample
RH	895	22
TW	3,300	64
LG	8,849	169

Analysis of Customer Satisfaction and Internet Service Quality During the Covid 19 Pandemic in Sri Lanka

Property	Local / Foreign guests	Stratified Sample
HK	5,023	94
TH	1,475	27
Total guests (Local/Foreign)	19,542	376

Source: ABC Internal Company Data (2020).

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics of the Sample

As per the results summarized in Table 2, most of the respondents (158) was from the age level of 35 years to 49 years representing 42% of the sample. In terms of marital status, 206 guests are married (55 %). Gender wise, 53 % of respondents, i.e., 199 guests are males. Moreover, 135 respondents have visited the same hotel 2 to 5 times, while for 180 respondents, it was their first visit to the respective hotel. Furthermore, 49 % of the sample and 184 guests are employees in the private sector. A 95% of the respondents (357 guests) have visited the hotels for recreation and entertainment purposes. Also, 169 respondents (45%) have checked-in at the LG hotel and represents 45 % of the sample.

Table 2: Demographic profile of respondents.

Demographics	Categories	N	Percentage
Age	18-24	26	7%
	25-34	146	39%
	35-49	158	42%
	50 – Above 46	46	12%
Marital	Married	206	55%
	Unmarried	170	45%
Gender	Male	199	53%
	Female	177	47%
No of visits	First visit	210	56%
	2 to 5 visits	119	32%
	6 to 10 visits	38	10%
	More than 10 visits	9	2%
Occupation	Private sector	184	49%
	Government sector	110	29%
	Self employed	70	19%

Demographics	Categories	N	Percentage
Purpose of visit	Un employed	12	3%
	Holiday	357	95%
	Conference	10	2%
	Business travel	7	2%
	Historical and cultural	2	1%
Hotel	LG	169	45%
	HK	94	25%
	TW	64	17%
	TH	27	7%
	RH	22	6%

Source: Compiled by authors.

Normality Test

The researchers of the present study used kurtosis and skewness value of the study for measurement of normality level. Accordingly, the data was normally distributed having the skewness value within the range of -1 and +1 whereas kurtosis values lay between the +3 and -3

Reliability and Validity Test

The alpha values for this study lied in the range of 0.769 and 0.889 indicating that variables in this data set are within the acceptable level and therefore, are reliable. The KMO value for this study was 0.892 which falls within the acceptable range of 0.8 and 1 and the items in the data set are valid.

Multicollinearity Diagnostic Test

The correlation coefficient values of any of the two independent variables are less than 0.8 and hence it is confirmed absence of multi-collinearity issue. The measures of VIF value also falls within the range of 1-10 and hence it is reconfirmed absence of multi-collinearity issue.

Multiple Regression Model

A multiple regression model was developed where the coefficient results are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Multiple linear regression results.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	-1.383	.148		-9.337	.000		
Tangibility	.434	.043	.354	10.193	.000	.406	2.462
Reliability	.211	.035	.193	5.990	.000	.472	2.119
Responsiveness	.140	.028	.145	4.962	.000	.569	1.757
Assurance	.369	.070	.214	5.265	.000	.296	3.380
Empathy	.261	.055	.167	4.712	.000	.389	2.570

a. Dependent Variable: Tourist Satisfaction

Source: Authors' calculations.

The following model has been established with the results generated from the present study.

$$TS = -1.383 + 0.434 T + 0.211 R + 0.140 RE + 0.369 A + 0.261 E + 0.148 \mu$$

where, TS = Tourist Satisfaction, a = intercept of the regression line, b₁, b₂, b₃, b₄, b₅ = coefficients of the independent variables or the predictor variables T = Tangibility, R = Reliability, RE = Responsiveness, A = Assurance, E = Empathy, μ = standard error term.

According to the above equation, it can be stated that tourist satisfaction will be at a constant value of -1.383 when all the independent variables; tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy held constant. Also, when the hotels increase the level of concentration tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy of SERVEQUAL the tourist satisfaction would increase by the times of 0.434, 0.211, 0.140, 0.369 respectively.

Table 5: Model summary results

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.905 ^a	.819	.817	.419	2.180

a. Predictors: (Constant), Empathy, Responsiveness, Reliability, Tangibility, Assurance

b. Dependent Variable: Tourist Satisfaction

Source: Authors' calculations.

The R squared value is expected to be higher than 0.6 at least to have the better model fit (Abuella & Chowdhury, 2015). Here, R squared value has been recorded as 0.819 (Table 5). This explains that 81.9 % of the variation around the mean can be explained by the model in tourist satisfaction as explained by tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. This is a higher value and thus the model fit acceptance has been accomplished by the study.

Hypotheses Testing

All five hypotheses tested in this study are significant and accepted (Table 3). Hence, it is argued that all the dimensions in the SERQUEL model have an impact on customer satisfaction in hotel industry. Saleem and Raja (2014) and Yurur et.al (2021) claimed that the quality would be the paramount dimension for any industry, and it has been again substantiated through this study. Also, it is important to note that the study was conducted during COVID-19 with many different spreads. Many hotel seekers were from abroad and kept under coronatine. Still Parasuraman's (1998) SERQUAL dimensions became the critical in selecting the hotel accommodations.

Table 3: Hypotheses testing summary.

Hypotheses	Measures	Accepted/Rejected
(H1 ₁): There is a significant impact of tangibility of service quality on tourist satisfaction	B = 1.005 P = 0.000	Accepted
(H2 ₁): There is a significant impact of reliability of service quality on tourist satisfaction	B = 0.802 P = 0.000	Accepted

Hypotheses	Measures	Accepted/Rejected
(H3 ₁): There is a significant impact of responsiveness of service quality on tourist satisfaction	B = 0.642 P = 0.000	Accepted
(H4 ₁): There is a significant impact of assurance of service quality on tourist satisfaction	B = 1.372 P = 0.000	Accepted
(H5 ₁): There is a significant impact of empathy of service quality on tourist satisfaction	B = 1.130 P = 0.000	Accepted

Source: Researchers created.

Conclusion

The study recorded a high impact of SERVEQUAL dimensions on tourist satisfaction. This phenomenon has been substantiated by earlier studies too. Accordingly, it is argued that introducing, implementing, and maintaining a high level of SERVEQUAL dimensions in hotels are essential requirements. Also, the same was observed during the COVID 19 period which explored that the SERVEQUAL requirements stood and had significant impact on tourist satisfaction. The hotel sector is generally vulnerable to upheavals in the external environment such as disasters, pandemics etc. Therefore, building these kinds of strengths via enhancing customer satisfaction can help the hotel industry to gain a competitive advantage and aim for improved levels of resilience to withstand such shocks, minimise risks of losing their valued customer base and profitability in the long run. The study recommends having the fine-tuned procedures and strategies in place, monitor, review and benchmark with industry trends and competitors etc., in managing the services along with five factors discussed in this study.

Direction for Future Research Studies

The current research can be used as one of the foundations to reach and expand future studies. It is important to have a more reliable and relevant classification of the service factors to have better and deeper insights about this subject in the future. Furthermore, other than the factors discussed in this study (those impacting the service quality),

there can be many more factors that impact tourist satisfaction. The application of these factors in the study also enables researchers to identify the many facets and see the broader picture on future studies. Moreover, it can help conduct deeper investigations on the impacts on the customer service in the hotels. Further, sample selection can be stratified and selected as per segmentation of the hotels /star classification or rating of hotels (as per tripadvisor/bookings.com etc.) where feedback answers can be generalized and applied in future studies.

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