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The impact of online reviews on inbound travellers' decision making

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Abstract

This paper explores the hotel experience of inbound travellers to five-star boutique hotels of Sri Lanka and ascertains how hotels have satisfied their customers' expectations through assessment of the positive and negative reviews. A qualitative research method of content analysis incorporating quantitative elements is engaged for this study. Data comes from a survey conducted by the TripAdvisor website. This study reveals that all dimensions of service quality played an equally important role from the perspective of customers. However, consumers are not satisfied due to the presence of perceived quality gaps. It was revealed that to maximise customer satisfaction, boutique hotels need to refer to online reviews to obtain authentic information from their guests. Sri Lanka is making strong efforts to support its tourism industry which got affected by the 2019 Sri Lanka Easter bombings, therefore the findings of this paper will undoubtedly be useful for the trade.

Keywords Word of mouth · Satisfaction · User-generate content · Inbound travellers

1 Introduction

Tourism is the world's largest civilian industry (Dixit et al. 2005; Hitchcock 2009), and in recent years, tourism has boomed into an attention-grabbing industry across the world for the noteworthy role it plays in promoting trade, stimulating consumption, and

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enhancing international communication (Qian et al. 2018). Logistics have played a vital role in connecting cities, countries, and continents around the world (Khan et al. 2019) and has vastly contributed to the growth of the tourism industry. Moreover, the advancement in information technology has further stretched the scope of tourism, and as its natural corollary, and online tourism has emerged to occupy a significant place in tourism marketing (Dixit et al. 2005). Online tourism has been defined as an innovative form of distribution of travel products where a service provider or a supplier offers services and/or products primarily utilising the internet to a group of customers, irrespective of their physical location (Singh 2003). The accessibility to information on destinations, maps, sights and attractions, impressions and opinions of other tourists who visited these places, creating the conditions for choosing a holiday and a good vacation is facilitating the accelerated growth in online tourism (Sofronov 2018). Independent travellers who do not rely on travel agencies are more likely to rely on information available online (Hays et al. 2013), and find online technologies helpful in purchase decisions of tourism products and services (Dixit et al. 2005). It is evident that the internet has revolutionised the travel industry, both as a sales channel and as a source of information (Dixit et al. 2005).

Tourism industry has largely been benefited by online tourism in many countries (Sofronov 2018), with Sri Lanka being no exception. In Sri Lanka the tourism industry has been on a growing trend (Fernando et al. 2013; Jayawardena et al. 2013) since the cessation of the 26-year long civil war that ended in 2009. Tourist arrivals hit a milestone of 1,527,153 by 2014, and the growth is estimated at 240% increase with respect to the number of tourist arrivals compared to 2009 (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority 2014). In 2018, contribution of travel and tourism to GDP for Sri Lanka was 11.1 billion US dollars (World Data Atlas 2019), where online tourism too has largely contributed. However, the numbers of tourist arrivals have plummeted following the 2019 Sri Lanka Easter bombings, and the Government of Sri Lanka is now on a venture to rebuild the industry which was badly affected. Tourism industry, including online tourism, has a reciprocal relationship with man-made and natural calamities (Chan et al. 2019), nonetheless, the industry will continue to grow in Sri Lanka, as most tourism businesses and large part of the marketing are now done online.

According to Buhalis and Law (2008) online sales form the biggest part of revenues in hotels, therefore, online feedback and reviews have become increasingly important. The feedback and reviews are fast, up-to-date and freely available, and have now become the word-of-mouth of the digital age (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). Therefore, from a standpoint of potential customers the online reviews are considered to be trustworthy, authentic, and useful, whilst being influential (Li and Hitt 2008). A considerable amount of time is spent by potential customers in reading online reviews to assist the decision making (Zhu and Zhang 2010).

TripAdvisor, established in 2000 is an early adopter of User-Generated Content (UGC) and is the largest “social travel website” in the world (Binbasioglu 2019). TripAdvisor has placed more attention on their digital presence in Sri Lanka and has earned a reputation for providing genuine and authentic information for users.

It is evident that the tremendous growth and potential of online consumer reviews, online reviews of hospitality and tourism are now playing a significant role in consumer attitude and buying behaviours (Hlee et al. 2018), particularly inbound travellers to Sri Lanka. The 2019 Easter Bombing attacks, as mentioned earlier, weighed on the tourism industry, and significant efforts are being made by the Government of Sri Lanka to review it. In this backdrop, the current study intends to fulfill the following objective.

1.1 Objective

To discover how hotels have satisfied their customers' expectations through assessment of the positive and negative reviews of inbound travellers to five-star boutique hotels in Sri Lanka.

This research differs from existing studies, and hence contributes to the literature in four ways. Firstly, Sri Lanka being a country that is highly reliant on the tourism industry and focuses on immediate, medium and long-term expansion of it. The current study will be very helpful for the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority in relation to understanding inbound travellers' decision making processes which would aid in better business development and marketing. Secondly, the concept of UGC is not an exception to Sri Lanka. UGC may positively or negatively affect the tourism industry, particularly on traffic of inbound travelers. Thus, the need arises to keep up with the changes in the sectors and consistently refer to the reviews generated in order to assess areas for improvement in services, to avoid failures and to ensure prompt service recovery. Thirdly, there is a need to gain a greater understanding of what factors influence consumers to post a positive or negative review on certain hotels, how these hotels have responded to such comments, and what are the learnings that hotels can obtain from these comments. Although the reasons are clear as to why understanding internet review indirectly impact the tourism industry, there has been limited research in this area, and this research aims to fill the gap of applying this concept to Sri Lankan context. Finally, the findings will be useful, particularly to hoteliers who are desperately trying to recuperate their businesses after the 2019 Sri Lanka Easter bombings.

The remaining parts of this paper are organised as follows. Section 2 is devoted to the literature review, while Sect. 3 presents the data and methodology. Section 4 assesses the empirical hypothesis and test results, and Sect. 5 presents the concluding remarks.

2 Literature review

Online tourism has caused several alterations in the tourism industry, out of which the foremost impact has been on the interrelation between the service providers and traditional intermediaries (Antonioli and Baggio 2002). Travellers now have more freedom to learn about hotel features and service attributes through travel websites. Numbers of tourism and hospitality firms that have turned their attention to new business opportunities on the Web are continuously on the increase (Elçi et al. 2017). Travellers' attitudes towards selecting a holiday destination have strongly influenced and transformed by online tourism (Browning et al. 2013; Chong et al. 2018). In addition, online tourism has facilitated logistics, and inbound and outbound transportation (Khan 2019) that provide travellers easy access to tourist destinations (Zhang et al. 2019).

Tourism is an information-sensitive industry, therefore, it is crucial to understand the Hospitality and Tourism Online Reviews (HTORs) (Xiang and Gretzel 2010; Yang et al. 2017). With the growing use of the internet and the prevalence of social networking, UGC is playing a vitally important role in supporting the purchasing decisions of customers (Liu et al. 2011; O'Connor 2008). Online customer reviews are considered an influential source of information, and users rely heavily on UGC to make their travel decisions. Therefore, online consumer review platforms are rapidly growing popularity. Online reviews of hospitality and tourism are now playing an increasingly important role in consumer attitude and

purchasing intention (Browning et al. 2013; Litvin et al. 2008; Liu and Park 2015; Marchiori and Cantoni 2015; Wu et al. 2017). There is increased levels of consumer engagement in online reviews. As a result, HTORs are considered as social capital that offers experiential and economic benefits, and may reflect the potential demand for travel-related product and service innovations in the future (Zhang et al. 2010). In addition, positive or negative comments posted on the websites regarding service attributes and hotel experiences provide an insight for prospective customers and allows them to evaluate their alternatives (O'Connor 2010; O'Connor 2008; Shankar et al. 2003). Such reviews help tourists to assess the quality of service products without physically being there. It also enhances free communication among users through chat-blogs and review sites without any interventions from the service provider. Factors commonly affecting travellers' mindset with regard to their overnight stay includes both tangibles, such as physical facilities, the cadre, room location and intangible elements such as service quality, reliability, responsiveness and empathy.

The co-creation of tourists' experience encompasses not just personalised experience customisation by tourists, but also the collective involvement of all stakeholders and other tourists' experience sharing (Chen et al. 2012). In making decisions, travellers normally obtain the recommendation from friends, most commonly in the form of 'electronic Word of Mouth' (e-WoM) (Glynn Mangold et al. 1999; Ismagilova et al. 2019). This interpersonal communication method is considered more reliable and trustworthy, therefore, creating unique experiences includes not only tourists' participation but also an interconnection with the other potential tourists to the experience (Pine and Gilmore 1998; Shaw et al. 2011). Previous research result indicates that the content and nature of WoM are related to customers' satisfaction (Babin et al. 2005; Maxham III 2001) and the past experience (Ng et al. 2011; Zeithaml et al. 1993). Satisfied customers are likely to tell people about their experiences, while customers with milder views might spread fewer positives about their experience (Lovelock and Wright 2001). On the contrary, extremely dissatisfied customers do the exact opposite by telling others about their awful experience.

O'Connor (2010) stated how the internet is transforming from a push marketing medium to a new one where customer-to-customer recommendation and sharing of experiences, opinions and ideas have become the norm. This new approach has led to the introduction of UGC supported tools through the Web 2.0.¹ Web 2.0 applications provide fast and easy access to posted HTORs by consumers assessing the service quality of hotels and holiday resorts (Buhalis and Law 2008). These reviews pave the way for potential customers to make a decision in selecting a hotel. Although all dimensions are important to customers, some are more important than others depending on the nature of services and customer profile (Arlen and Chris 2008; Parasuraman et al. 1985). Thus, a shortfall in any element of the service quality can have its consequences on customer satisfaction.

Meanwhile, technological advances allow users to freely communicate and share their experiences on websites such as TripAdvisor in the form of reviews (Buhalis and Law 2008; Miguéns et al. 2008; Sparks and Bradley 2017). TripAdvisor, the worlds' leading advisory and information platform for travel related decisions, according to Law (2006), Litvin and Dowling (2018), and O'Connor (2008), represents the largest global network of tourists. Similar to other UGC websites, the website, as mentioned above, permits independent travellers to publish reviews on the quality of their visit to a tourist attraction, hotel

¹ Web 2.0 is the name used to describe the second generation of the World Wide Web, where it moved static HTML pages to a more interactive and dynamic web experience.

or even a restaurant (Amaral et al. 2014; Miguéns et al. 2008). Prospective tourists are then able to read the collection of reviews, and acquire an arguably objective report on a fellow tourists' experience (Ayeh et al. 2013). These reviews represent e-WoM communication and previous studies have shown that such communications affect the decisions of customers (Cantallops and Salvi 2014; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Filieri 2015; Sotiriadis and Van Zyl 2013). It is through online reviews that a majority of travellers search for updated tourism information on holiday destinations, accommodation, location, price and service quality. HTOR platforms such as TripAdvisor, Yelp and Dianping permit consumers to post their observations online on various travel-related products and/or services, such as hotel experiences and restaurants, and these reviews evoke reliance and great credibility in comparison to information delivered by third party and vendors of products (Hlee et al. 2016; Shin et al. 2017; Yang et al. 2017).

According to previous studies, 92% of customers refer to online reviews before making a final decision. More specifically, only 13% of customers consider using a business that has a one or two-star rating, showing the increasing influence and importance of online customer reviews on consumer behavior. Online consumer reviews are experiencing massive growth and are deemed a reliable source of information for choosing a holiday destination (Brown et al. 2007). This is mainly because online reviews provide updates and help customers make their assessment of a destination. However, text readability and reviewer characteristics influence the perceived value of reviews (Fang et al. 2016). According to Rhee and Yang (2015a) 'value' and 'rooms' are the main attributes that contribute to a high overall rating for the hotels, and Rhee and Yang (2015b) highlight that customers' overall ratings and/or hotels of different star-classifications may evoke alike or unlike attitudes from the guests.

Furthermore, research findings reveal that information presented first will have more impact than information that follows (Browning et al. 2013). This is a sound argument because generally, consumers make their judgment about a hotel based on what they observe first. Positively presented comments highlighting a product's advantages will convince consumers to try the product, whereas negatively framed information will discourage them from consumption.

Another study revealed that dissatisfied consumers would tell twice as many people about their awful experience. For example, Grégoire et al. (2015) stated that negative reviews had a higher impact on consumers' choice than positive ones. Although negative reviews do not always have a negative impact, they can create a commitment between the tourist and the service that is provided by such hotels. However, when reviewers conveyed intense negative emotions, the degree of helpfulness is diminished (Lee et al. 2017). In the same manner, a 'Positive Word-of-Mouth' (PWoM) increase the chances of consumers purchase intentions of a product or existing services, the opposite also happens with the 'Negative Word-of-Mouth (NWOM). Moreover, managerial response moderates the influence of ratings and volume of consumer eWOM on hotel performance (Xie et al. 2016).

Travellers to Sri Lanka post their experiences on TripAdvisor. These reviews are referred by potential travellers to the country when deciding on accommodation. These reviews are strong enough to mold the decisions of the potential travellers. It is highlighted that reviews written by local travellers are perceived more helpful than reviews written by unknown travellers, from foreign countries, or from other states in the same country (Yang et al. 2017). Therefore, it is important to understand what the inbound travellers reviews, particularly on the five-star boutique hotels, the target accommodations of this study and, whether hotels have responded to the reviews, and in which particular areas the hotels need immediate improvements. With the proliferation of destination rivalry, destinations

exploring to find innovative ways to differentiate their tourism products and services, and offer distinct experience value for the tourists (Neuhofer et al. 2012). Attempts made by the current study to understand the positive and negative comments on hotel experience and how the hotels have responded to the comments, will facilitate improvements to provide satisfactory services.

3 Data and methodology

3.1 Data

The data was collected through a manual self-administered questionnaire and reviews obtainable on TripAdvisor website. The questionnaire composed of three (3) sections, with the first part consisting of demographic characteristics of the correspondents, the second part focusing on the dimension of service quality of hotels, and the last section concentrating on the travellers' perception of five-star hotels. In addition, online reviews on five-star boutique hotels that are available on TripAdvisor were also used in content analysis.

An exploratory research methodology was adopted to determine the nature of the problem. UGC created by users regarding hotels was analysed to identify the presence of certain keywords within the reviews. This allows to quantify and analyse the meanings and relationships of certain concepts, and to make inferences about the reviews regarding each hotel. The online reviews have been limited to the ones posted within a span of 6 months from 1st January 2018 to 31st July 2018.

Samples were collected from 154 inbound travellers and visitors in the Colombo District. Questions were asked from travellers to identify respondents' perception of service quality, and to indicate the level of importance of statements with responses ranging from (1), not at all important to (7) extremely important on a Likert scale.

3.2 The conceptual model

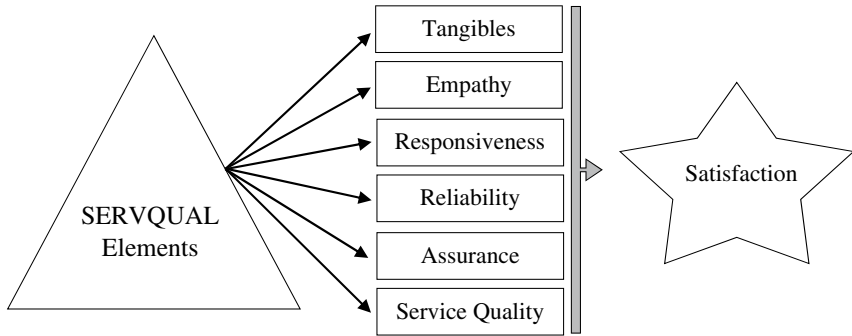
Service Quality (SERVQUAL), popularly known as the service quality model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985) is used as a conceptual tool to identify the influence of service elements and customer satisfaction from customers' perspective. The model is comprised of five major dimensions such as Reliability, Assurance, Tangibles, Empathy and Responsiveness (RATER) (Fig. 1).

3.3 Analytical tool

The analytical tool used for the study is following three linear regression models. To represent the collected data and interpret the relationship between the outcome variable and predicting variables, both single and multiple linear regression models have been used on the elements of service quality against customer satisfaction. The equations are explained as follows.

$$CS_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 TAN_1 + \beta_2 EMP_2 + \beta_3 RES_3 + \varepsilon_{1i} \quad (1)$$

$$CS_i = \gamma_0 + \beta_4 REL_4 + \beta_5 ASS_5 + \varepsilon_{2i} \quad (2)$$



Source: Researchers created

Fig. 1 Formulation of regression equations. Source: Researchers created

$$CS_i = \delta_0 + \beta_6 OSQ_6 + \varepsilon_{3i} \tag{3}$$

where *CS* denotes the level of the customer satisfaction of *i*th respondent. *TAN* denotes tangibles and *EMP* stand for empathy. Level of responses is denoted by *RES*. In Eq. (2) *REL* indicates the reliability while assurance is denoted by *ASS*. In (3) equation, *OSQ* represent overall service quality. Finally ε is the random error term and all above equations were tested using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

3.4 Empirical hypothesis

This study works on six hypotheses related to the interdependence of service quality against customer satisfaction, and all hypotheses can be summarised as follows;

Hypothesis 1 $\beta_1 > 0$: There is a positive impact from tangibles to customer satisfaction.

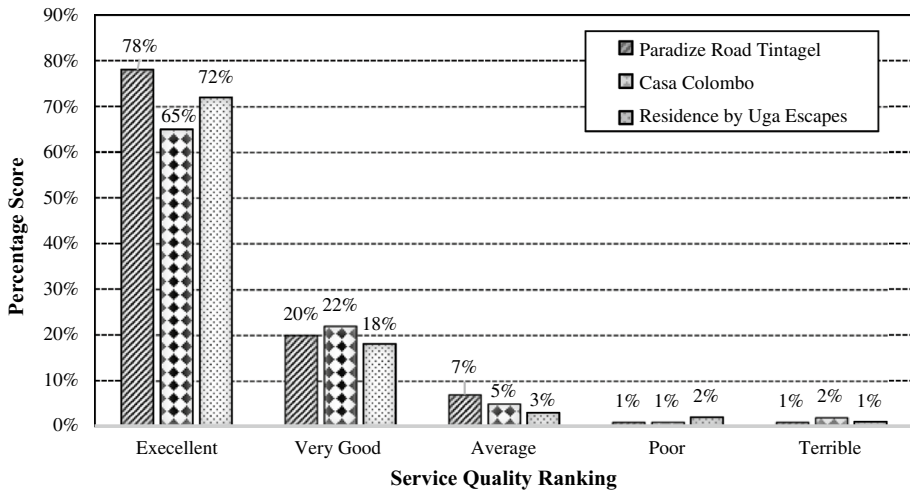
Hypothesis 2 $\beta_2 > 0$: There is a positive impact from empathy to customer satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3 $\beta_3 > 0$: There is a positive impact level of responses to customer satisfaction.

Hypothesis 4 $\beta_4 > 0$: There is a negative impact from reliability to customer satisfaction.

Hypothesis 5 $\beta_5 > 0$: There is a negative impact from assurance to customer satisfaction.

Hypothesis 6 $\beta_6 > 0$: There is a negative impact from overall service quality to customer satisfaction.



Source: Authors' illustration based on TripAdvisor bubble ranking (2018).

Fig. 2 Bubble ranking of the three boutique hotels. *Source:* Authors' illustration based on TripAdvisor bubble ranking (2018)

4 Results and discussion

Out of the 154 participants 60.4% were male and 39.6%, female. A majority of the respondents had completed undergraduate studies (41.6%), followed by master holders being 26%, and other levels made the remaining 32.4% of the total sample. A great majority of the correspondents, 39.6% claimed that they came down to Sri Lanka for other purposes, followed by 31.2% to spend their holidays. Another 15.6% included independent tourists who had come to see the tourist destinations and explore the country. While the last 13.6% was here on business, visit friends and attend events (Fig. 2).

The unique attribute of boutique hotels makes the highest with 29.2%, followed by other reasons 27.3%, love for the place 22.1%, and people's recommendation 20.8% respectively.

4.1 Reliability analysis

As survey data are used for analysis, it is necessary to report internal consistency reliability. The most common measure of the reliability is Cronbach's alpha (α) value which was employed to determine whether the internal instruments are consistent (Cho 2016; Cronbach 1951). Generally, a reliability coefficient that is greater than 0.6 indicates that there are considerable consistency (Hirata 2019; Tsai 2014). For judging internal consistency, or the estimate of the reliability indicating the degree to which items measure different aspects of the same concept, the study used Cronbach's alpha, and considered greater than or equal 0.6 an acceptable value. The results revealed that these six dimensions were acceptable and can be employed to explain the service quality of boutique hotels in this study (Table 1).

Furthermore, the test is robust enough that even if any item removed from the test, the Cronbach alpha reliability would not drop below the acceptable value of 0.70. It is

Table 1 Internal consistency *Source:* Authors' calculations

Dimensions	Observation	Cronbach alpha for dimensions	Correlated items total correlation	Cronbach alpha if item deleted
TAN	154	0.644	0.824	0.910
EMP	154	0.679	0.795	0.915
RES	154	0.727	0.832	0.909
REL	154	0.988	0.775	0.919
ASS	154	0.732	0.842	0.906
OSQ	154	0.754	0.785	0.916

Table 2 Regression results *Source:* Authors' calculations

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
TAN	0.296*** (0.072)		
EMP	0.295** (0.064)		
RES	0.253*** (0.059)		
REL		0.343** (0.066)	
ASS		0.525*** (0.062)	
OSQ			0.927*** (0.420)
Constant	1.367* (0.231)	1.044* (0.242)	0.689** (0.218)
R-Squared	0.716	0.699	0.764
Adj. R-Squared	0.711	0.695	0.762
Observation	197	197	197

Standard errors in parentheses

*Significant at 10% level

**Significant at 5% level

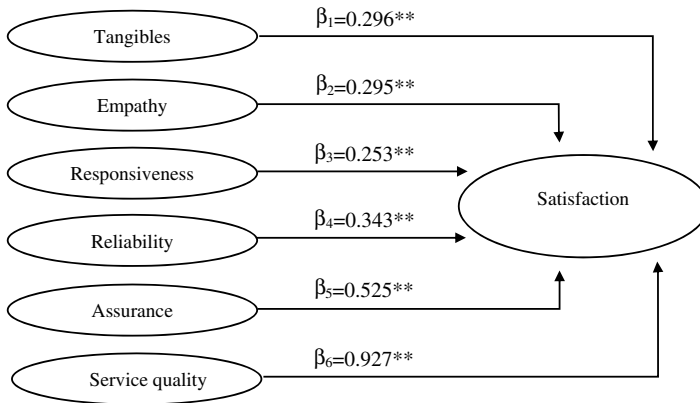
***Significant at 1% level

therefore realised that all dimensions showed a high value of reliability when an item is deleted with an average score of 0.91. This suggests that all elements in the questionnaire are significant and deleting any one element would lead to lower Cronbach Alpha, an indicator of poor reliability.

4.2 Regression analysis

Regression analysis is a statistical method used to examine the relationship between two or more variables of interest. Although there are many types of regression, the basis is examining the relationship between one or more independent variables on a dependent variable. In the current study, the six dimensions of SERVQUAL model, consisting of reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness serve as predicting variables, whereas customer satisfaction is the outcome variable.

Information presented in Table 2, highlights that all the independent variables including reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness in the standard model are significantly predictive of customer satisfaction. All three models explain more than 70% of the total variation of service quality, suggesting good explanation power.



Source: Authors' demonstration based on modelling results.

Fig. 3 SERVQUAL model for Inbound travellers. *Source:* Authors' demonstration based on modelling results

The hypotheses tests are positive on this occasion with statistically significant values in all the relationships identified in the study, and have been mapped with hypotheses that are proven comprehensively. The regression model results are summarised in Fig. 3.

In the first model (1) significant positive signs of first three dimensions (reliability, assurance, tangibles) indicates there is a significant positive impact of reliability, assurance, tangibles towards the service quality. The positive coefficient of 'tangible' in Eq. (1) shows that improvement in average 'tangibles' will increase overall customer satisfaction of guests in boutique hotels in Sri Lanka. To be specific, for every percentage point improvement in 'tangibles', there will be a 0.30% increase in total customer satisfaction. Similarly, the positive coefficients of 'empathy' and 'responsiveness' show that for every percentage improvement of each item there will be 0.30% and 0.25% increase in total customer satisfaction.

Correspondingly, the positive coefficients of 'reliability' and 'assurance' in equation two (2) indicates that one percentage point improvement in each item would lead to 0.34% and 0.52% increase in the overall customer satisfaction since there is a positive and strong correlation between predicting and outcome variables.

Similarity, the positive coefficient of the 'overall service quality' in model three (3) highlights that one% point improvement in the overall service quality leads to 0.93% increase in customer satisfaction. The 0.93% is an incredibly high percentage and it makes sense in the context of five-star hotels and other service organisations as well. If any service providing organisation improves its overall service quality, customer satisfaction will increase unquestionably.

Furthermore, the relationship between customer satisfaction and the dimensions of service quality was examined with regard to travellers' experience in boutique hotels in Sri Lanka. It was found that respondents' overall perception of service quality on a scale of 1–7 was 5 on each item of the SERVQUAL model. This provides a solid basis for affirming whether customers are satisfied with service quality in five-star boutique hotels or not since the average customer satisfaction score is 4.5 out of 7. A lower average score of 4.5 indicates that customers are not quite satisfied with the service offerings of the three five-star hotels in certain areas.

The presence of this service gap is due to the shortfalls in one or more dimensions of the SERVQUAL model. In the gap model, this is known as the perceived service quality gap. More specifically, this gap appears due to a lack of management knowledge or poor marketing communication, where service employees fail to deliver the right experience that was promised to customers in the first place.

The results of this study show that consumers are not greatly satisfied due to the presence of perceived service quality gap. The 'responsiveness' component with a coefficient score of 0.093 recorded lowest followed by 'empathy' with a coefficient of 0.172, while other dimensions such as 'reliability', 'assurance' and 'tangibles' have relatively scored high. This indicates that less attention has been placed on 'responsiveness' and 'empathy' components by the hotel managers, although, it was discovered that all elements played an equally important role from the standpoint of customers. Overall, travellers are satisfied to a certain extent since their average score is 5 for all items. This represents that 71% of the total service quality was satisfactory but hotels need to put in a genuine effort address the gap of the remaining 29% by improving service quality and standards.

4.3 Content analysis

Content analysis is the method of classifying qualitative information into particular categories with certain similarities used to identify consistent patterns and relationships between variables. This method is commonly used to analyse a wide range of textual data such as interview transcripts, recorded observations and responses to open-ended questionnaire items. In this case, the content analysis is organised into three sections based on the three five-star hotels, where each hotel was analysed separately. Some 120 reviews are classified as either positive, average or negative. This has been facilitated by TripAdvisor through the bubble ranking option which allowed reviewers to rank their experience as either 'terrible', 'poor', 'average', 'very good' or 'excellent'.

The bubble rating mechanism facilitated by TripAdvisor allows reviewers to rate their experience using a grade of 1–5 bubbles or stars. The bubble ranking of Paradise Road Tintagel had 78% reviewers ranking their experience as 5/5 stars, Residence by Uga Escapes had 72%, and Casa Colombo 65% respectively. According to the chart above Paradise Road Tintagel outperformed the other two boutique hotels in terms of bubble ranking.

It was revealed that each boutique hotel was unique in one way or the other, yet associated with certain issues as well. A majority of the reviewers mentioned the architecture of each hotel to be breathtaking, but few have been unimpressed. Those who were unimpressed were the reviewers of the Casa Colombo. However, overall guests have been mesmerised by the unique beauty associated with each hotel, both historical and modern.

Overall service from reception to the masseuse, to the waiters have been decent. The staff maintained professionalism and were friendly towards guests. Paradise Road Tintagel has excelled in service where guests are treated in an exceptional manner. Whereas, in Casa Colombo, there were several reviews which remarked the service terrible, especially, at the restaurant. However, the Casa Colombo offers a personal butler service, which most guests found interesting and useful.

Location was another important aspect with regard to hotels in Colombo. The ideal scenario for a hotel is to be placed in a picturesque area with mountains or beaches, but for a hotel in Colombo, a hustling and bustling city, the case is completely different. However, most reviews of the Paradise Road Tintagel and the Residence by Uga Escapes remarked the peaceful location of the hotel that had made guests feel like they



Source: Authors' illustration based on WordClouds.com (2015).

Fig. 4 WordCloud illustration of the travellers' general reviews on boutique hotels

are not really in Colombo. As for Casa Colombo, a number of reviewers have complained how the external noises have disturbed their stay.

Furthermore, the cuisine is an important area where hotels have to excel in. As guests are paying a very high price for the stay, their expectations are higher regarding all the features of a hotel, especially the food served. The food not meeting the expected standards was a common issue associated with the Residence by Uga Escapes. Being a five-star hotel, it is critical that the food served will forever be in the memory of its guests. As for complaints made by a number of customers who resided at the Paradise Road Tintagel was that the restoration of the mansion has not been executed properly. The wiring system, the plumbing and leaks on the ceiling were the major issues.

The management's response is considered critical as this option has facilitated damage control and service recovery, which some hotels have still not realised. Management should use the most polite, professional and appropriate language while responding to customer complaints, providing pleasing answers or personal responses is not acceptable. It is important to understand that TripAdvisor publicises the hotel experience to the entire international community and is used daily to understand how good the hotel is exactly.

Moreover, regression results further confirmed by the content analysis which is presented in Fig. 4.

Figure 4 represents the general opinion of travellers who have visited the boutique hotels during their stay in Sri Lanka. These comments were extracted from correspondents' answers to open-ended questions and the online content available on TripAdvisor website. Their thoughts and perceptions vary based on the type of experience they have received. The more magnified descriptions in the map translates the gravity or importance of certain areas either being positive or negative, while the least magnified concepts appear to be areas of less concern for the guests. For instance, the service concept seems the most vital component from the perspective of customers among other components. This is truly applicable in today's service-centric business environment. The comments encompass almost

all dimensions of service quality and standards, amenities such as location, architecture, design, location, food, the environment and everything else.

5 Conclusion

The result of this research has shown that online reviews have played a central role in influencing customers' mindset while choosing a hotel for accommodation. In this new era of great dependence on the internet, it is mostly through online reviews that travellers search and choose holiday destinations. It was also revealed that all five dimensions in the service quality of boutique hotels played an equally important role in measuring customer satisfaction.

Meanwhile, Paradise Road Tintagel performed better than the Residence by Uga Escapes and Casa Colombo. This assessment was done based on who satisfied their customers' needs and expectations better, and who provided quick service recovery. Overall, boutique hotels excelled relatively well in 'reliability' and 'assurance', and average in 'tangibles'. However, 'empathy' and 'responsiveness' components needed further improvements if boutique hotels are to offer a more personalised service. Besides other issues, amenities such as food, price, location, cuisine and the architecture of the hotels were factors mostly hindering satisfaction of customers.

Generally, customers of such boutique hotels expect more from the service providers. Therefore, five-star boutique hotels must strive to improve all aspects of service quality to increase customer satisfaction because customers want the service of such hotels not to be just expected but surprising and unbelievable. This is so because guests pay a premium price, which is why the expectations, priorities and benefits sought should be maintained to the highest level to keep customers delighted. To achieve this, five-star boutique hotels have to maintain a balance between processes, people and strategies which would give them a competitive edge to offer excellent service, terrific delivery system and build long-term customer relationships.

A theoretical contribution of this study is the identification of the existing SERVQUAL model that provide as an important characteristics for academic scholar. However, no study has been examined how hotels have satisfied their customers' expectations through assessment of the positive and negative reviews in the Sri Lankan context by using content analysis which incorporated quantitative elements. Meanwhile, this study fills the gap presented by Parasuraman et al. (1985). Not only have the authors focused on the impact of SERVQUAL elements on customer satisfaction, but have also classified all dimensions of service quality of boutique hotels of existing literature.

5.1 Implications for the management

Firstly, a key practical advantage offered by this study is that hotel managers and investors can gain a clearer understanding of the generalised demand for service quality of hotels. Hoteliers have been criticised for judging hotel behaviour based on guess work instead of relying on a scientific approach. The service quality model developed in this research thus significantly contributes to the generalisation of the hotel experience by visitors in Colombo.

Secondly, understanding the macroeconomic variables that are associated with tourism and hospitality, enables hotel practitioners and policymakers to perform more

accurate planning activities. In the Sri Lankan context, for instance, policymakers could plan to develop new service packages to attract more travellers, since customer satisfaction has a positive correlation with the overall service quality.

Thirdly, the result arising from this study shows that focus should be concentrated on both on human aspects and tangible elements of hotels. Based on statistical findings, the two areas where boutique hotels have failed were 'responsiveness' and 'empathy'. Both items are related to employee behaviour, their psychology and how they treated the guests.

Lastly, with the increasing availability and popularity of travel-related review websites, the marketer of boutique hotels must offer genuine and adequate information that are useful to travellers so as to reduce time and cost in the HTOR setting.

Consequently, service quality is quite subjective and individualistic. It is critical for service providers to offer the same service to different customers with the same level of satisfaction. In other words, maintaining perfect reliability throughout service quality is difficult in practice. It is so due to two main reasons; the customer's choice and service employees' attitude and the way they serve customers. The different aspects of service will be perceived differently by individual customers. Therefore, achieving 100% customer satisfaction in the context of five-star boutique hotels seems less likely, however, having the right combination can improve customer satisfaction to a great extent.

5.2 Recommendations

1. Five-star boutique hotels must conduct ongoing researches on customer reviews, service quality and customer satisfaction to obtain a general understanding of their service offering and customers' perception.
2. It is significantly important that hotel managers should not just rely on profit margins as a good indicator of business performance, rather, they should develop strategies based on customer reviews that will assist them to capture customers' perceptions on demand.
3. Policymakers of five-star boutique hotels, and tourism trade should place equal importance on all dimensions of service quality and be more customer oriented to achieve maximum customer satisfaction.
4. Five-star hotels should create excellent service, terrific delivery system, winning-mindset and build long-term customer relationships that endure and mature over time.

5.3 Limitations

There are several limitations in this paper. The results and analyses of this study were limited to three five-star boutique hotels in Colombo which included a total of 154 inbound travellers, and online reviews on TripAdvisor. Therefore, future studies should expand to cover a comprehensive collection of inbound traveller destinations in Sri Lanka and meta-analysis is strongly recommended to determine overall trends in the tourism industry in Sri Lanka.

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