

## **CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS AND SATISFACTION: AN ANALYSIS OF NEGATIVE CUSTOMER REVIEWS ON TRIPADVISOR FOR CLASSIFIED HOTELS IN WESTERN PROVINCE**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Meeting customer expectations is crucial for nurturing customer loyalty, satisfaction, and positive word-of-mouth (Campra et al., 2021). Understanding customer expectations and ensuring satisfaction are paramount for hotels in the hospitality industry. This understanding provides a vital foundation, enabling them to enhance service quality, enrich the customer experience, and foster sustained customer loyalty and profitability. Understanding explicit and implicit expectations is crucial for providing high-quality service, given that not fulfilling these can result in patron discontent and unfavorable word-of-mouth. Customer satisfaction, as noted by Fornell in 1992, catalyzes repeat business and favorable recommendations in the hospitality sector, ultimately resulting in increased hotel profitability.

Online platforms like Trip Advisor have shaped customers' perceptions and influenced their booking decisions. Analyzing customer reviews and feedback is essential for improving service quality and understanding customer preferences. Guest reviews have become increasingly important in the hospitality industry as they play a significant role in influencing customers purchasing decisions. A study by Sun et al. 2017 reveals that 93% of customers read online reviews before booking a hotel. The content of these hotel reviews is crucial, as it can sway a hotel's reputation and future reservations, as noted by Pearson et al. in 2011. A study by Griffin-Shirley et al. in 2017 highlights how positive reviews notably improve a hotel's future booking rate, while negative ones have a converse effect. The hotel industry is a crucial contributor to Sri Lanka's economy. Western province is a significant economic hub, particularly in the tourism industry, with a high concentration of classified hotels. Hence, it becomes crucial to pinpoint particular areas in classified hotels in Western province that require enhancement aligned with customer expectations.

Prior studies have focused on customer satisfaction and service quality. However, an empirical void prevails in Sri Lanka, particularly concerning the precise aspects within classified hotels in Western province that demand refinement. Further research is needed to explore customer expectations and satisfaction levels in classified Western province hotels and examine how online consumer reviews shape the Sri Lankan hotel industry. This study, therefore, aims to address this gap by identifying the specific areas in classified hotels within the Western province that warrant enhancement based on customer expectations through a comprehensive review of online customer reviews. By identifying these key domains, hotels can enhance their offerings and elevate service quality. In turn, it enriches the customer experience, fosters loyalty, and contributes significantly to the economic growth of Sri Lanka's hospitality industry.

## METHODOLOGY

The population of this qualitative study consists of all the classified hotels in the Western province of Sri Lanka, totaling 58 hotels that have been officially rated and classified by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. The sample comprised 15 hotels in the Western province of Sri Lanka, selected through stratified and convenient sampling methods. Stratified sampling ensured representation of all-star category hotels, and then hotels were chosen based on accessibility and availability of Trip Advisor reviews. Secondary data collection involved analyzing negative customer reviews on Trip Advisor for the Western province from 2017-2019 and 2022. Two hundred thirty-four negative reviews were selected, focusing on those rated as "Poor" and "Terrible."

The reviews' relevance to the research topic was thoroughly assessed. Thematic analysis was employed to scrutinize the textual content of the negative reviews. The researcher identified primary customer expectations and satisfaction themes, including room quality, service, food, location, and overall experience. Subsequently, the reviews were categorized according to these themes, allowing for data organization and the identification of interrelationships. The frequency and distribution of themes and their relationships were assessed to conclude customer expectations and satisfaction in Western province hotels of Sri Lanka.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following the research question, 'What are the customer expectations and the areas of improvement in hotels in Western province, Sri Lanka, as suggested by Trip Advisor hotel reviews?' Table 1 identifies guests' dissatisfaction with various aspects of hotels as observed in e-reviews.

**Table 1**

*Guests' dissatisfaction with various aspects of hotels as observed on e-reviews*

Theme	Focused Codes	Open Codes
Product Quality	Room quality	Uncleanliness of the room Poor Decorations Bad View from the room Size and layout
	Food and beverages	Poor quality No variety of foods
	Clean and hygiene	Bathroom uncleanliness Lobby area uncleanliness Presence Cockroaches Presence of Ants Food and beverages
Staff and service quality	Staff behaviors	Unfriendly Not helpful No 24-hour service
	Staff service quality	Poor service of Front desk and staff Poor service of Housekeeping staff Poor service of F&B staff Poor service of Managers Poor service of Personalized service
Amenities and facilities	Room amenities	No Comfort beds/pillow Unquality linen and towels Unquality toiletries

	Property amenities	Dirty Carpets No Minibars Poor Pool services Poor Spa services
Location	Local assessability	Not as advertised Public transport
Price and value for money	Room rates Additional charges	No value for the price paid Charge extra for food and beverages

Table 1 offers a comprehensive insight into customer expectations derived from negative reviews of classified hotels in Sri Lanka's Western province. The analysis of Trip Advisor reviews reveals five prominent themes: product quality, staff and service quality, amenities and facilities, location, and price and value for money.

The identified themes were further broken down into specific focused and open codes. Under "Product Quality," guests voiced concerns about room cleanliness, subpar decor, unattractive views, cramped size, and unfavorable layout. The food options were criticized for their lack of quality and variety. Cleanliness issues encompassed complaints about unclean bathrooms, lobby areas, food and beverage spaces, and cockroaches and ants. Within the "Staff and Service Quality category," negative feedback revolved around unfriendly and unhelpful staff, limited 24-hour service availability, and a lack of personalized service. Guests also expressed dissatisfaction with room amenities and carpets. Concerning "Amenities and Facilities," guests were dissatisfied with property facilities, including the pool and spa. Under the "Location" theme, guests expressed disappointment over disparities between the advertised and actual location, along with issues related to public transport accessibility. Lastly, in the "Price and Value Category," guests questioned the value provided in exchange for high room rates and were unhappy about additional charges, particularly for food and beverages.

One of the significant product quality issues highlighted in the study is food quality, which aligns with existing literature on the importance of food quality in hotel guest satisfaction (Kim et al., 2020). A study by (Cantalops & Salvi, 2014) found that food quality is the most critical factor influencing guest satisfaction and loyalty in the hotel industry.

The study also revealed that room cleanliness is a significant issue for guests under product quality. This fact aligns with existing literature that shows that cleanliness is one of the essential factors influencing hotel guest satisfaction (Ladhari & Morales, 2008).

Another exciting finding regarding product quality is cockroaches in star hotels. There is limited research on the prevalence of cockroach infestations in hotels, particularly in Sri Lanka. However, several studies have investigated the impact of pests on guest satisfaction and hotel reputation. In a study conducted by Gaultney, Arnette, and Ranson (2012), guests who reported pest sightings in their hotel rooms were significantly more likely to give negative feedback about their experience and recommend the hotel less frequently.

Another important finding of the study is that the quality of staff and service behaviors in the front office and housekeeping departments require improvement. This fact aligns with existing literature, demonstrating that staff and service quality significantly impact guest satisfaction (Ribeiro & Prayag, 2019). The research highlights an issue related to price and value for money, particularly in the subcategory of additional charges for food and beverages. These additional charges harm guests' perceptions of value for money. This finding is consistent with existing literature, demonstrating that hidden costs and fees can result in guest dissatisfaction and negative reviews (Ammirato et al., 2022).

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, the research findings offer valuable insights for hotels in the Western province of Sri Lanka, aiming to enhance guest satisfaction. Addressing product quality, staff and service excellence, pricing strategies, and sustainability concerns can create a more positive guest experience and foster lasting loyalty. Western province hotels can enhance their competitiveness and amplify customer content by addressing these areas of customer dissatisfaction and tailoring services to cater to the needs of distinct customer segments. This may involve room cleanliness improvements, cultivating attentive and responsive staff, and diversifying high-quality dining options. Future research explores these factors' impact on guest satisfaction in diverse Sri Lankan regions. Moreover, a comparative analysis with renowned global tourist destinations could discern best practices for enhancing guest satisfaction.

**Keywords:** Classified hotels, customer expectations, customer satisfaction, online reviews, trip advisor

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