

## **Impact of Tourist's Perception on Hotel Brand Choice: The Intermediate Role of Brand Loyalty with Special Reference to Four- and Five-Star Hotels in Southern Province of Sri Lanka**

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Branding is one of the most dominant trends in the hotel and catering industry. Various studies have shown that brand loyalty results from many factors. Among them, perception is one of the factors that play a significant role in rapid and active share in brand loyalty which influences the brand choice of the people. This study seeks to contribute to the literature on tourist's perception of hotel brand choice; the intermediate role of brand loyalty. The study used a quantitative approach to bridge the gap between service industry brand loyalty and brand choice in the Sri Lankan context. Primary data were collected by using a purposive sampling method and surveying a sample of 120 foreign tourists who visited selected six-four and five-star hotels in Southern province. Proportionate to the number of rooms, tourists were selected from each hotel. The main objectives of the study were to identify the relationship between tourists' perception and brand choice and ascertain the intermediate role of brand loyalty. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, regression, correlation, and Baron and Kenny Approach for mediator analysis with the support of SPSS. According to the findings, the brand image represented the highest mean value of the dimension and demonstrates that the brand image as the most influential aspect of brand loyalty, and most of the tourists were high spenders who came from European countries. There is a strong positive relationship between the tourists' perception and brand loyalty but the mediator effect is partially insignificant. To achieve the highest level of loyalty from the tourist and to build up strong brand loyalty among tourists, hoteliers can arrange effective marketing strategies like follow-up (email) marketing. This study was limited with cross-sectional data and was conducted based on the four and five-star hotels and therefore, it can be applied to another type of classified hotel or restaurant.

*Keywords:* Tourist perception, Brand loyalty, Brand choice, Brand image