

## **Are We Ready to Hit?; The Preparedness of Hotel Sector to Grab the New Normal Market Bloom – Evidence from Major Chain Hotels in Sri Lanka**

**B.G.L.T. Wijesinghe**<sup>\*</sup>, A.C.I.D. Karunarathne and R.A.A.K. Ranaweera

*Department of Tourism Studies, Uva Wellassa University, Badulla, Sri Lanka*

*\*Corresponding Author E-mail: lakindutharakaw@gmail.com, TP: +94713426507*

The COVID -19 pandemic has made the global tourism industry more vulnerable. Many developing economies mainly relying on tourism are strongly challenged in industry resources and operational procedures hence demands a paradigm change. Consequently, the Sri Lankan hospitality industry is also tremendously affected from this pandemic. Currently, the hotels are seeking to reopen accepting the new normal condition, while adhering to the social restrictions and strict health regulations and emphasizing the importance of assessing the preparedness for the new normal pandemic situation. Hence, the current study was extended in order to investigate the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the Sri Lankan hotel sector, to investigate the preparedness of the Sri Lankan hotel sector for the operations during the new normal condition of COVID-19 pandemic, and to examine the challenges ahead for the operations of hotel industry in preparing for the new normal condition of COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative research approach was adapted to provide a more comprehensive overview of the context. A representative sample of ten management level employees representing three major hotel chains in Sri Lanka were employed in data collection process selected through purposive sampling. In order to understand the context more deeply and elaboratively, the structured interviews were occupied to gather primary data in this study. The key findings indicated that hotels have been affected severely by the pandemic in terms of financial and operational aspects. Hotels have assessed their departments and established safety protocols to ensure a seamless hotel operation prioritizing the adherence to SLTDA operational guidelines introduced recently. It also revealed that lack of travel motivation of the public, high switching costs, various travel restrictions, challenge of ensuring safety of the guest and staff, human resource management practices, continuity of service quality, and competitiveness as key challenges faced by hotels due to the pandemic. Moreover, focusing more on the domestic segment, additional and redesigned training to employees, contactless services, promoting ayurvedic treatments and immunity boosting foods, are recommended for the Sri Lankan hotel industry. In conclusion, the study revealed that the Sri Lankan hotel sector is well prepared to operate under the new normal condition of COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** Hotel Sector; COVID-19 Pandemic; Preparedness; Impact and Challenges; New Normal Condition; Sri Lanka