

A Study on the Future Prospects of Tourist Hostel Operations under Covid – 19: Hostel Operators’ Perspective in Western Province of Sri Lanka

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“Tourist hostel” being a novel concept of accommodation category shows an exponential growth potential in the emerging backpacker market. Backpackers are budget-oriented, shared rooms, and a non-threatening communal space for travellers who value social interaction (SI) during their stay. Due to the COVID 19 epidemic, the largest global health pandemic in the century, Tourist Hostel Operators in Sri Lanka currently deal with substantial controls on hostel operations mainly imposed on maintenance of social distance and travel restrictions and unable to allow social interaction which is vital for backpacking and hostel culture. Hence, this study focuses to identify the nature of the tourists staying at tourist hostels; to explore the nature of tourist hostel operations before Covid-19 pandemic, and to identify specific challenges faced by tourist hostel operators under the new normal condition of Covid-19; from operators’ perspective. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews from 15 selected tourist hostel operators in the Western province of Sri Lanka which has been listed on Hostelworld website. Purposive sampling was used to formulate the sample under qualitative research approach, collected data were transcribed and analyzed by using the content analysis method. As results illustrated, backpacker travelers were the main customer base mainly from Europe. Budget, SI and travel independence were identified as the major motives to accommodate in tourist hostels. Before the pandemic, operators had more focused on enhancing SI with physical and service attributes. However, SI has been challenged specifically and financial instability, lack of local demand, government regulations as well due to health concerns during the new normal condition. Even so, operators willingly encourage SI further without focusing alternative concepts; moving towards non-tourism activities, focusing alternative tourism concepts such as volunteer tourism, community based tourism etc. due to reduction on conventional mass tourism. Further, recommending a mechanism to adopt by highlighting sustainable approach for hostel operations while adhering to mandatory health and safety protocols imposed by the National Health Authorities.

Keywords: Backpackers; Covid-19 outbreak; Hostel Operators; Social interaction; Tourist hostel