

Bridging the Gap Between Online Reviews and Actual Tourist Experiences: A Study of Key Destinations in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Online reviews have become one of the most influential sources shaping tourists' destination expectations and travel decisions. However, a gap often exists between the expectations created by the reviews and the actual experiences, which mainly impacts tourist satisfaction levels and future travel behaviour. There are limited studies which have investigated the expectation-reality gap in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, it is aimed to analyse how online reviews impact tourist expectations, assess the alignment of actual experiences with expectations, and evaluate the influence on overall tourist satisfaction through this study. For data collection, a mixed-method approach was used for a comprehensive understanding of this study, and data were collected through a structured survey with 100 tourists, with qualitative content analysis of online reviews taken from major online platforms. The study focused on four key destinations—Sigiriya, Ella, Galle, and Colombo—representing diverse tourism experiences such as cultural, coastal, and eco-tourism. Findings of the study imply that, while most of the tourists rely on online reviews for planning, distinctiveness between expectations emerging from online reviews and real-life experiences is common, especially in factors like accommodation quality, transportation credibility and availability of public services. The results of the study reveal a strong correlation between the gap between expectation and reality and tourist satisfaction levels, with tourists whose real experiences mostly aligned with expectations showing significantly higher satisfaction and a greater likelihood of revisiting or recommending the destination, as indicated by online reviews. The study offers great implications for Sri Lankan tourism stakeholders to improve service quality and digital communication strategies and ultimately enhance tourist satisfaction and destination competitiveness.

Keywords: destination experience, expectation–reality gap, online travel reviews, Sri Lankan tourism, tourist satisfaction