



# **THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF CUSTOMER SATISFACTION BETWEEN SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY AMONG STAR GRADE HOTELS IN SRI LANKA**

**W.B.J.A.J. Fernando** 

Graduate School of Management, Faculty of Business Management and Professional Studies,  
Management and Science University (MSU), Malaysia  
jaustudy@yahoo.com

**Mohd Shukri Ab Yajid**

Graduate School of Management, Faculty of Business Management and Professional Studies,  
Management and Science University (MSU), Malaysia

**Ali Khatib**

Graduate School of Management, Faculty of Business Management and Professional Studies,  
Management and Science University (MSU), Malaysia

**S. M. Ferdous Azam**

Graduate School of Management, Faculty of Business Management and Professional Studies,  
Management and Science University (MSU), Malaysia

## **Abstract**

*The hotel industry, a key partner of tourism industry, assumes a pivotal job in Sri Lankan economy. The reason of this study is to determine the associations between service quality, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and to find the mediating effect of customer satisfaction. The target population is worldwide visitors who stayed Sri Lankan star grade hotels. The convenience sample technique is used and sample size is 400. The analysis disclose that there is a positive significant relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, and service quality and customer loyalty while having a*

*mediator effect of customer satisfaction. Hoteliers have to implement best practices that improve service quality thereby achieving customer satisfaction customer loyalty and profit. Since this study is limited to star grade hotels in Sri Lanka the further study can be performed for whole hotel industry to realize an improved image.*

*Keywords: Service quality, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, hotel industry*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The importance of production sector has decreased as of late and is being supplanted by a light service area in which the hospitality business has turned out to be one of the world's biggest ventures with a universal uniqueness (Ingram & Daskalakis, 2006). The tourism industry in which hotel industry is a vital segment has become third foreign currency earner of Sri Lanka (Central Bank Annual Report, 2016). It recorded 17.98 million international tourists arrivals to Sri Lanka while having 2981 USD million receipts in 2015 (WTO, 2017). There were 118 star grade hotels with 10794 rooms in 2016 (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2016 ).

Service Quality is the foundation for achievement of any business and seen as a key factor in gaining and managing competitive advantage. Numerous investigations have demonstrated that service quality increments pieces of the pie, customer satisfaction, responsiveness towards client arrangement, customer loyalty/maintenance gives more noteworthy return on venture and brings down production costs. Hence, enterprises see quality as a wellspring of upper hand which they continuously endeavor to accomplish. In addition, magnificent service increments client maintenance and prompts rehash customer purchase behavior (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Alemneh & Gebremichael, 2018). There are quite complaints in relation to service quality dimensions such as waiting time at the hotels, waiters are inattentive, price fairness comparing the service provided, lack of product offerings (The curionomist, 2012). Sri Lankan hotel industry is presently facing the issues with service quality , high cost , and service charges (Wettasingha, 2016).

Although tourists' arrivals get increased per day earning of an international tourist is not to the expected level. It indicates that Sri Lanka is mostly catering budget tourist. On the other hand the researches related to hotel industry in Sri Lanka are very limited. With the observations of the past and present literature of service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty considering international tourists of hotel industry in Sri Lanka and other parts of world, it can be concluded that there is a gap in the knowledge. Hence a study needs to be carried out to examine the root causes of the issues that lead to low service quality thereby

customer dissatisfaction & disloyalty and how to solve these issues and enhance the industry into the expected level. The overall objective of this study is to determine mediating effect of customer satisfaction along with linear relationships of service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. After this section literature review, methodology, results & discussion, and conclusion will emanate.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The hotel industry which is a vital component of tourism business provides much needed foreign currency to Sri Lankan economy. However it has been observed that Sri Lankan hotel industry is bringing down service quality which leads to customer dissatisfaction and disloyalty. Hence a study needs to be carried out to find the root causes and to propose solution for them. The literature review is very instrumental to formulate theoretical base to do the research. The literature review of this paper will cover service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty.

### **Service Quality**

The attitudes of customers in the direction of services has been paying consideration on perceived service quality in the present marketing research. Perceived service quality is defined as “the customer's assessment of the overall brilliance or authority of the service” (Zeithaml, 1988). The first review by Parasuraman et al. (1988) exhibited ten measurements of service quality. At first SERVQUAL demonstrate had accompanied 22 sets of Likert-sort things, where one section measured perceived level of service given by a specific association and the other part measured expected level of service quality by respondent (Kuo, 2003). Cronin and Taylor (1992) established performance only model or SERVPERF model as an answer to the critics against SERVQUAL model .In this model, same questionnaire of the SERVQUAL model is administrated without considering the customers' expectations. It is only considered one view that is customers' perception (Rahman et al, 2017). Parasuraman et al. (1985; 1988) built up a SERVQUAL display which measures the perceived service quality as a contrast between clients' desires or fancies and their view of what is conveyed in light of the five measurements of service quality, specifically: Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy, and Tangibles (Zeithaml et al., 2006). Reliability is the capability to execute the assured service consistently and precisely, Assurance is the ability of employees to transfer faith and confidence, Tangibility is the physical appearance of facilities, equipment and employees, Empathy is the customizes service to individuals (Alnsour et al., 2014). Responsiveness is the preparedness to support customers and provide quick service (Upal & Dhaka, 2008). The outcome of the study reveals

that the service quality attributes have strong associations on customer satisfaction (Izogo & Ogba, 2015). Some researchers stressed the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. The greater perceived service quality that has been found to be a vital antecedent of customer satisfaction leads to a greater level of customer satisfaction and vice versa (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Kant & Jaiswal, 2017).

### **Customer Satisfaction**

Service quality is the customer's judgment that concerns the gap between perceived service and expected service while customer satisfaction is the immediate reaction of the customer after the consumption (Culiberg, 2010). Customer satisfaction that means meet or exceed customer anticipation is a requirement to face competition and to achieve business success in the present context. The excellent service quality can accomplish customer anticipation. The service quality and customer satisfaction are interwoven concepts. Customer feels satisfaction or dissatisfaction whether organization provides them good service or bad service. Customer dissatisfaction will result customer turnover (Gupta, 2017). If company fails to satisfy customers productively as competitors do company is probably to lose market share, clients, and stakeholders (Anderson et al., 2004). Service quality is the way of forming customer satisfaction that survives an organization in long term (Hafeez & Muhammad, 2012). Customer satisfaction can prompt customer loyalty since individuals have a tendency to be sound and hazard antagonistic so they may tend to lessen hazard and remain with the service provider which they as of now had great involvement with. In reality, Customer satisfaction has been recommended to be a predecessor of loyalty in service setting in past investigations (Belas & Gabcova, 2016; Coelho & Henseler, 2012). There are additionally many kind of connection between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty proposed, for example, fulfillment is the center of loyalty, satisfaction is one of the fundamental segments of loyalty, and satisfaction and loyalty are the parts of extreme loyalty and satisfaction as the beginning stage of loyalty (Munari et al., 2013). According to the outcome of the most of studies, customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty (Chodzaza & Gombachika, 2013; Chu et al., 2012).

### **Customer Loyalty**

A customer is believed to be loyal when he is having commitment to buy a favorite service or product again although he has potential to go for alternative product or service (Oliver, 1999). Despite the fact that customer satisfaction and customer loyalty are unmistakable builds, they are much related (Gelade & Young, 2005; Silvestro & Cross, 2000). Customer loyalty is alluded

as the last results of the generally speaking and aggregate experience which clients have with a firm (Brunner et al., 2008). Reichheld and Aspinall (1993) observed that loyal customers who buys company’s product or services for a lengthy period time make more profit can easily be served than other customers. Therefore, it is supposed that it is a cost benefit to keep an existing customer than to invite fresh customer, a satisfied customer seems to come again (Sulaiman & Olaniyi, 2017). Consumer satisfaction prompts client maintenance and loyalty which brings about high benefit and huge piece of the pie for the association. Lodging industry is likewise not exempted from a similar idea. In lodging industry too there is have to give magnificent service, which can prompt client fascination (Gupta, 2017). Customer loyalty is the primary goal of a business. A loyal customer benefit a company some ways such as cost reduction, no customer switching cost, and positive verbal exchange (Pratminingsih, 2018).Customer loyalty happens when a client purchases an item or a service consistently and he/she has a decent and uplifting disposition towards products and services offered by the supplier (Pratminingsih et al., 2013). Consumer satisfaction has an association with customer loyalty, which is suggested in research in both the marketing and management studies (Gillani & Awan, 2014). Specifically, it confirms that customer satisfaction partially mediates the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty, which features the job of customer satisfaction as a basic establishment for accomplishing customer loyalty (Minh & Huu, 2016).

**Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis**

The following conceptual framework is generated through the literature review mentioned in the previous section. This conceptual framework is used to formulate the hypotheses to be tested in the research.

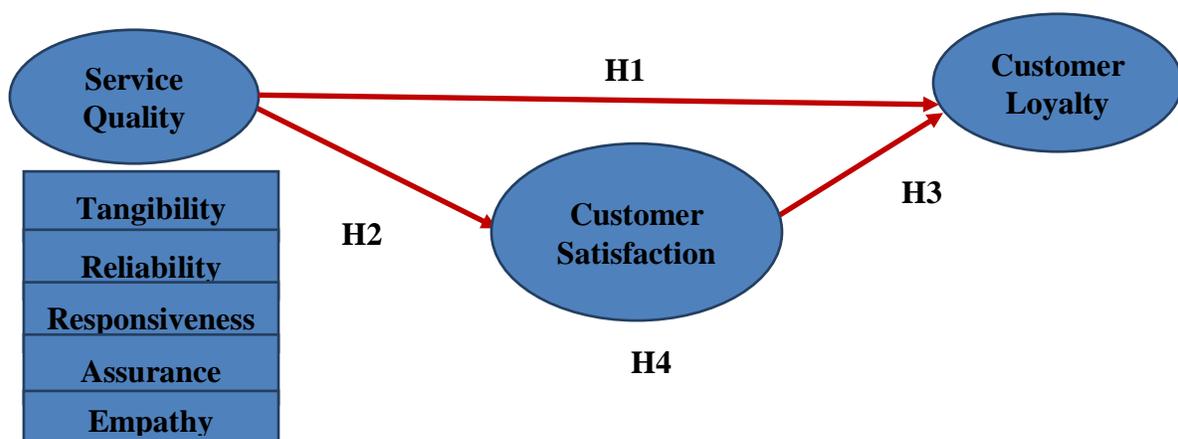


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The following hypotheses via conceptual framework based on the literature review can be generated to be tested in the research.

H1: There is a relationship between service quality and customer loyalty in star grade hotels in Sri Lanka.

H2: There is a relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in star grade hotels in Sri Lanka.

H3: There is a relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in star grade hotels in Sri Lanka.

H4: Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty in star grade hotels in Sri Lanka.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study is a deductive research as it is testing the theory based on the literature review. The study setting is non-contrived as this is a field study. Time horizon is a cross sectional as data collection is taken one shot or one time. The individual members are contacted to get the responses. The target population is international tourists who stayed in the star grade hotels in Sri Lanka in a calendar year. The sample size is 400 that is more than maximum sample size 384 considering random sample table. The convenience sampling technique which is one of the non-probability sampling methods is applied due to unavailability of sample frame. The data is collected by means of a structural questionnaire having five point Likert's scale questions with sharing online link to passengers who stayed in the star grade hotels in Sri Lanka after assessing their hotel of stay. The main data gathering point is departure terminal of Bandarnake International Airport in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The questions of the questionnaire are self- designed as well as adopted. The sources of adopted questions are Akbaba, 2006; Ali et al., 2015; Parasuraman et al, 2005. Data collected was subject to SEM using AMOS 19.

## **RESULTS**

538 departing passengers who stayed at star grade hotels in Sri Lanka had been contacted from March 2018 to May 2018 and 444 responses were received. After eliminating missing values and extreme cases, 400 responses were remaining for the data analysis with response rate of 73.34% which can be considered a very good rate as per Hair et al. (2010). The following table shows the outcome of reliability test performed by means of SPSS 21.

Table 1: The outcome of Reliability Test

Construct/Dimension Name	Initial No of items	Final No of items	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Tangibility	3	3	0.82
Reliability	3	3	0.85
Responsiveness	3	3	0.86
Assurance	3	3	0.81
Empathy	3	3	0.86
Customer Satisfaction	6	6	0.92
Customer Loyalty	6	6	0.90

Table 1 indicates that Cronbach's  $\alpha$  value for all dimensions and constructs are more than 0.7 that is the threshold value according to (Cronbach, 1951; Nunnally, 1978). Hence, reliability for all dimensions and constructs are accomplished. The following table shows the outcome of KMO test of Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA).

Table 2: The outcome of KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.962
	Approx. Chi-Square	7995.13
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	df	351
	Sig.	0.00

According to the outcome of KMO and Bartlett's Test as shown in the above table, KMO value is 0.962 that is well above threshold value 0.5. KMO value lies between 1 and 0 and anything above 0.9 is excellent but value above 0.5 is acceptable (Field, 2009). The cut off value of Bartlett's test of sphericity is less than 0.5 (George & Mallery, 2014). With this result, sample advocacy is obtained.

Finally, SEM was performed using AMOS 19 software to test the hypotheses generated and to find the relationships between constructs. SEM mainly concerns about several fitness indexes that show how model fits to the data set. Despite the fact that, there is no agreement between researchers which model fit indexes have to be used there are three categories of model fit indexes namely absolute fit, incremental fit, and parsimonious fit (Awang, 2012). It is recommended to take minimum one model fit index from each category (Hair et al., 1995; Hair et al., 2010; Holmes-Smith, 2006).

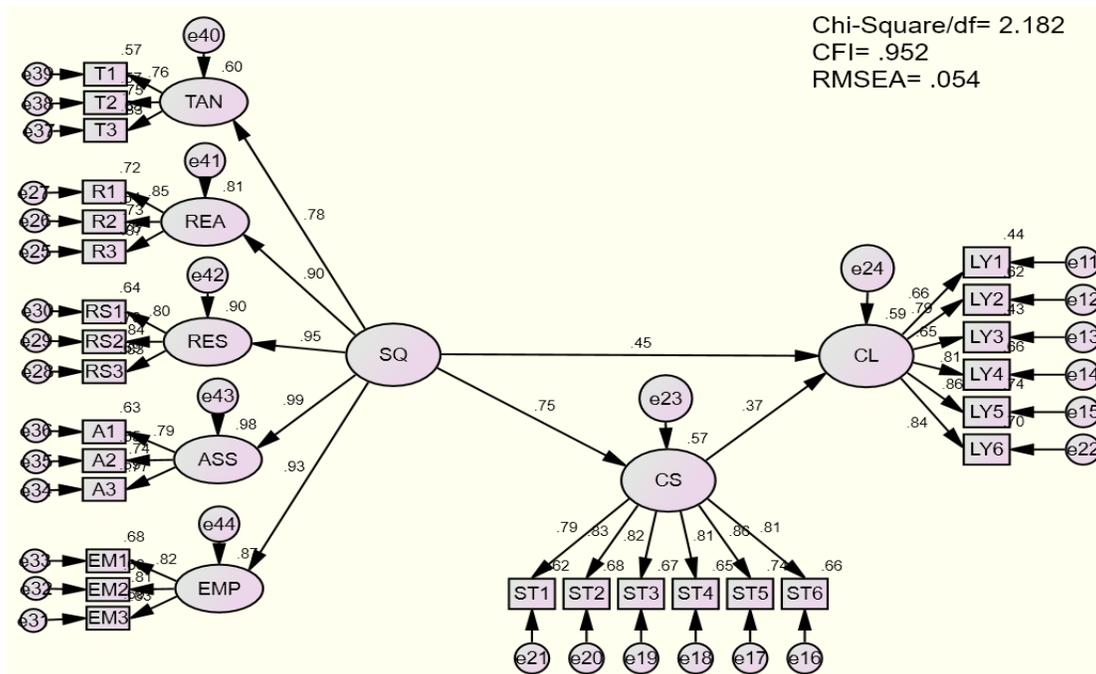


Figure 2: Structural Model

The goodness of fit indexes are shown in figure 02. According to the outcome of SEM, incremental fit is achieved through Comparative Fit Index (CFI) value which is 0.952, above the cut off value 0.9. Parsimonious fit is achieved via normed chi-square value which is 2.182, less than cut off value 5. The absolute fit is achieved via RMSEA which is 0.054, less than cut off value 0.08.

Following table depicts R<sup>2</sup> values for service quality construct.

Table 3: R<sup>2</sup> Values for service quality construct

Dimension Name	Factor Loading	R <sup>2</sup> Value
Tangibility	0.78	0.61
Reliability	0.90	0.81
Responsiveness	0.95	0.90
Assurance	0.99	0.98
Empathy	0.93	0.86

As above table shown, 98% of variance of service quality is explained by assurance dimension while only 61 % of variance of service quality is explained by tangibility dimension. All dimensions taken under service quality construct are explained more than 50% of variance of service quality construct.

The following table shows the linear relationships of hypotheses generated by means of conceptual framework based on literature review.

Table 4: Linear Hypothesis Testing

	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P-Value
Customer satisfaction ← Service Quality	0.877	0.061	14.468	***
Customer Loyalty ← Customer Satisfaction	0.428	0.074	5.780	***
Customer Loyalty ← Service quality	0.595	0.088	6.757	***

The results of the above table can be used to test the hypotheses linear generated in the study. The following table depicts the outcome of Sobel's test for mediating effect.

Table 5: The outcome of mediating test

	a	SEa	b	SEb	ab	SEa <sup>2</sup> b <sup>2</sup>	SEb <sup>2</sup> a <sup>2</sup>	SEab	ab/SEab	>1.96
SQ ST LY	0.88	0.06	0.43	0.07	0.38	0.00	0.00	0.07	5.20	YES

The above table shows that z value is more than 1.96 for service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty relationships.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The outcome of the analysis shown in the previous section can be used to discuss the hypotheses formed in the conceptual framework.

### **H1: There is a relationship between service quality and customer loyalty in star grade hotels in Sri Lanka.**

According to the outcome shown in the table 04, the actual regression coefficient (beta value) is 0.595. This indicates that when service quality goes up by 01 unit, customer loyalty goes up by 0.595 unit. The regression weight estimates has a standard error (SE) of 0.088. Critical Ratio (CR) value which is obtained by dividing beta (0.595) by SE (0.088) is 6.757. This implies that the regression weights estimates is having 6.757 above zero. The p-value (0.000) indicates level of significance for regression weights at 95% confidence level. It is the probability of achieving CR 6.757 in absolute value is less than 0.05. It can be determined that the association

between service quality and customer loyalty is significant as regression weights for service quality in the forecast of customer loyalty is significantly different from zero at the 0.05 level via two tailed test. This outcome matches with outcomes of subsequent researches. Customer satisfaction and customer loyalty get increased through high quality service (Kumar et al., 2009). Service quality is having a solid positive association with customer loyalty (Izogo & Ogba, 2015).

**H2: There is a relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in star grade hotels in Sri Lanka.**

According to the outcome shown in the table 04, the actual regression coefficient (beta value) is 0.877. This indicates that when service quality goes up by 01 unit, customer satisfaction goes up by 0.877 unit. The regression weight estimates has a standard error (SE) of 0.061. Critical Ratio (CR) value which is obtained by dividing beta (0.877) by SE (0.061) is 14.468. This implies that the regression weights estimates is having 14.468 above zero. The p-value (0.000) indicates level of significance for regression weights at 95% confidence level. It is the probability of achieving CR 14.468 in absolute value is less than 0.05. It can be determined that the association between service quality and customer satisfaction is significant as regression weights for service quality in the forecast of customer satisfaction is significantly different from zero at the 0.05 level via two tailed test. This outcome matches with outcomes of subsequent researches. Customer satisfaction and customer loyalty get increased through high quality service (Kumar et al., 2009). The outcome of study shows that service quality attributes namely tangibility, reliability; assurance, empathy, and responsiveness have an influence on customer satisfaction (AL-Mhasnah et al., 2018).

**H3: There is a relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in star grade hotels in Sri Lanka.**

According to the outcome shown in the table 04, the actual regression coefficient (beta value) is 0.428. This indicates that when customer satisfaction goes up by 01 unit, customer loyalty goes up by 0.428 unit. The regression weight estimates has a standard error (SE) of 0.074. Critical Ratio (CR) value which is obtained by dividing beta (0.428) by SE (0.074) is 5.780. This implies that the regression weights estimates is having 5.780 above zero. The p-value (0.000) indicates level of significance for regression weights at 95% confidence level. It is the probability of achieving CR 5.780 in absolute value is less than 0.05. It can be determined that the association between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty is significant as regression weights for customer satisfaction in the forecast of customer loyalty is significantly different from

zero at the 0.05 level via two tailed test. This outcome matches with outcomes of subsequent researches. Customer satisfaction results customer loyalty and retention (Gupta, 2017). Customer satisfaction has a positive influence on customer loyalty in hotel and tourism industry (Khajeh & Rostamzadeh, 2018).

#### **H4: Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty in star grade hotels in Sri Lanka.**

This is the fourth hypothesis to be tested and tests mediation relationship. The mediation effect is calculated by means of Sobel test and the results are reconfirmed in terms of bootstrapping. The table 5 shows that z value is greater than 1.96 (that is critical value at 95% confidence level). Thus, mediation effect is significant. This outcome matches with outcomes of subsequent researches. Customer satisfaction works as a mediating variable the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty (Bahri, 2017). Customer satisfaction that is reflected as an intervening variable mediates relationship between service quality and customer loyalty (Kaura et al., 2015).

According to the outcome of research it can be concluded that all three linear hypotheses and mediating hypothesis generated via conceptual framework are significant in the star grade hotels in Sri Lanka. It is quite useful for hoteliers to understand the relationships. The hoteliers need to implement strategies through which good service quality can be achieved. It is also very vital to aware the hotel employees about service quality attributes and arrange training programmes in this regard.

Ultimately, it is quite worthwhile to understand relationships of these important service marketing concepts so that the required strategies can be formulated to achieve better service quality thereby achieving better customer satisfaction and customer loyalty to retain in the highly competitive hotel industry comfortably.

#### **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of the study are very vital for hotel owners, management and employees. The most important factor is that customer loyalty which leads to make profit for the organizations is the dependent variable of the research. The study finding reveals that customer loyalty is dependent on both service quality and customer satisfaction. The other important finding is that customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. It is very significant to note that all the service quality attributes namely tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy have an impact on service quality. The assurance makes the most impact on service quality and tangibility makes the least impact.

Then, hotel management needs to identify this and formulate their strategies accordingly. It is quite essential to aware the employees regarding findings and it is also quite good to conduct awareness and training programmes for hotel employees based on the findings.

On the other hand, customer satisfaction works as a mediator and having direct influence on customer loyalty as well. The satisfied customers are always asserts to a company thus, it is highly required to make a customer friendly environment. It is a requirement to keep on communicating with existing customers to make sure them to be continuously loyal. Hence, it is advisable to maintain database of existing customers. This type of data base can be utilized to get customer feedback and to communicate them to new developments of tourism, hotel sector, company itself and Sri Lanka. Ultimately, the hotels management should make policies, programmes, procedure and standard to enhance the hotel sector and their respective companies based on research findings.

## WAY FORWARD

The implementation of research findings can be performed with a solid action as well a good follow up mechanism. This study can further be extended in way forward to whole Sri Lankan hotel industry rather than limiting to star grade hotels to get a much comprehensive image.

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