

Role of Employee Gender on Customer Delight in the Sri Lankan Tourism Industry

K. I. Uresha¹, S.G. Obeyesekere²

1Department of Human Resource Management, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka

2Human Resource Management Institute, Colombo 05, Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT : A burning issue which has captivated the attention of scholars around the world is whether employee's gender affects the service experience gained by the customer especially in the Tourism industry. Going beyond the customer experience and satisfaction, customer delight is considered as an emerging concept in the contemporary context. Reviewed literature provides various ideas on this issue in different contexts. Although the Tourism industry is considered as the backbone of the Sri Lankan economy this issue has not been theoretically argued or empirically tested in the Sri Lankan context. Owing to little research done related to employee gender differences on customer delight, a systematic empirical study was carried out to identify the effect of employee gender on customer delight to address the contextual and empirical gap and intellectual curiosity of authors. The study is aimed at discussing whether there is a significant difference in service provided by male and female employees which affects customer delight. Nature of the study is analytical, and unit of analysis was individual customers while time horizon was cross sectional. Survey method was utilized in the study where a self-administered questionnaire was used to gather primary data. A sample of 84 customers were considered utilizing convenient sampling method. Major findings of the study reveal that there's a high preference of Sri Lankan customers to be served by female employees in the Tourism industry yet, there is no significant difference between the service provided by male and female employees on customer delight.

Keywords: Employee Gender, Customer Delight, Tourism Industry, Sri Lanka.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism industry in Sri Lanka was predicted to cater to millions of arrivals in 2020. Goonetilleke and Samarasinghe (2019) forecast a major growth in tourism due to Government declaration of visa free zones to some countries and due to mega hoteliers Ritz, Hyatt, Carlton and Marriott launching operations in Sri Lanka. A globalized playing field challenges hoteliers to grapple with multiple attempts to somehow ensure customer delight and emerge successful among their competitors. Covid-19 impact has maximized its urgency further as business which was expected to cross 1.5 billion in 2020 plunged down below 25% in many regions compared to previous years globally (2020). However customer delight is as intricate as it sounds which can be tilted to delight or disgust in the fraction of a minute detail. Whilst there are diverse methods of taking the customer to a point of delight there are various points of exhilaration which propel customers to experience an astoundingly exceptional experience beyond their wildest imagination (Edwin and Sheryl 2013). In the context of the Tourism industry in Sri Lanka there has not been much research into exploring existing patterns of customer gender behavior or customer delight. Currently the female employment in the sector is a staggering

7% (Abeywardana and Priyadarshani 2017). Therefore, in this study authors examine customer preference on employee gender, relationship between employee gender and customer delight, and whether there is a difference between the service provided by male and female employees on customer delight in the Sri Lankan Tourism industry using univariate analysis and bivariate analysis.

2. Research Questions & Objectives

Authors have identified that there is a low female participation in the Sri Lankan tourism industry. But there is a hidden niche which tourism organizations have to address which is that some customers prefer to have been served by employee from a specific gender. Therefore, it is important to uplift the female labor force participation in the Tourism industry and to balance the employment between male and female workers. Hence to address the hidden niche and to identify the statistical relationship of authors logical beliefs following research questions were formulated.

1. Do customers prefer to be served by employees of a specific gender in the Tourism sector?
2. Is there a relationship between employees' gender on customer delight?
3. Is there is a difference between the service provided by male and female employees on customer delight?

Main objective of the study is "to investigate whether there is a significant difference in service provided by male and female employees which affect customer delight".

3. Literature Review

3.1 Employee Gender Differences in Tourism Industry

Tourism industry is considered as one of the most prominent industries which provides immense economic opportunities for women to uplift female workforce participation. Alarcon & Mullor 2018 (cited in Baum 2013) state, around 55% of work in tourism industry is done by women in the global context for instance it is recorded as 55.9% in Spain, Mexico 65% and Thailand 76.5%. Considering women empowerment the Tourism industry has shown the strongest impact. With stable development which happened in the Tourism sector, job creation in this sector drastically increased. Yet, not in a gender equal way. It is evident that female labour force participation is recorded to be low and importantly women are underrepresented in many industries around the globe. Yet, as the industry is masculinized in many countries under representation of women labour is visible in the Tourism industry (Alarcon & Mullor 2018).

As a service sector industry, importance of employee gender is having a pivotal impact on customer satisfaction. Poria (2008) asserts, service providers gender is a pivotal factor to understand in order to ensure that customer will receive a delightful experience. Because gender roles influence the relationship between customer and service supplier. For instance, it was revealed that women customers tend to open up about their intimate issues they face more with female staff members which reflect that customers count on finer service and are more comfortable with employees of the same sex.

It is essential to identify customer expectations on gender of employees to ensure the gender balance of workforce. As per Ma et al (2014) cited from (Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1993) female customers are more aligned towards people while male customers are more towards goal achievements. This is an important factor to be addressed to identify the essentiality of balance between both male and female workers within the industry in order to give a delightful feeling for customers. Further, they write female customers depend more on interpersonal aspects of the service which indirectly reflects that female customers expect more interpersonal features of the service provided, which is highly provided by the female staff.

3.1.1 Causes of Lack of Female Workforce Participation in Tourism Industry

With the radical advancement of the Tourism industry around the globe it has become a highly debatable area in past literature. Different philosophers have identified a number of factors which lead to lack of female workforce participation in the Tourism industry. Yet, some common factors are focused in the study.

As per Jucan and Jucan (2013) higher gender discrimination and stereotyping, earn less than men and sexual objectification are reasons for underrepresentation of women employment in Tourism industry.

Further, Rinaldi & Salerno 2019 (Cited from Gallois et al. 1992) reveal; sex favoritism in which human resource managers tend to be bias in selecting more same sex applicants for the positions and differences of work expectations on men and women by employer results in women facing higher discrimination in the workplace. In addition they cited from (Doherty 1999; Guerrier 1986; Costa et al. 2017) disclose that, longer working hours which is required by the industry is preferable for men than women might be a key reason for low women participation in the industry. Also, they assert that as per UN report surprisingly still there is a gender pay gap which exist within the industry which result in women still earning 10 to 15% less compared to men. Moreover; Baum (2013) declares that International Labour Organization (ILO) has identified main barriers faced by women when employed in the Tourism industry. Those are; separation between qualifications and workplace reality, women doing unsafe jobs because they are unskilled or semi-skilled where they highly experience unsafe working conditions, workplace assault, sexual harassment, divergence opportunities and unfair treatment which result in women where they do not tend to continue the job lead to low labour participation of workforce in the Tourism sector. Also, it has been identified that women get paid less in tourism sector than other sectors.

With that revelation after examining deeply on this regard Baum (2013) have identified crucial causes of low women participation in tourism industry as;

- Direct discrimination – Women are paid comparatively lower than men for the same jobs in similar levels.
- Labour market segregation – gap between gender and pay are been fortified by labour market segregation. Also, due to this separation women are labeled as individuals who work in lower level positions with lower payments in which women are highly underrepresented in managerial positions.
- Underestimating women's work – Similar category jobs which require equivalent experience and qualifications tend to pay differently for men and women. Besides, it has been proven that even in performance evaluations evaluators tend to be biased favored to men.
- Work and family life balance – Family responsibilities are not fairly allocated between men and women. Thus, women tend to possess substantial family responsibilities than men which has restricted them from working longer hours which has a direct unfavorable impact on their career development and promotions.
- Traditions and gender stereotypes – Gender stereotypes such as women are preferable for lower level jobs and women are less likely to be successful in key positions has created constraints for women in the Tourism industry. Moreover, traditions rooted within the society like shorter working hours, rely complete responsibility of the family on women has limited their participation and engagement in work within the industry.

Understanding these issues are mainly important for employers, government and other related parties to create strategies to elevate gender equality in the current industry. Further, Feuguson 2009 (cited from Chant 2006) suggest that development in approach to materials does not have a significant impact on empowering women employment in the Tourism sector unless there are changes in legal, cultural and social structures towards gender equality.

3.2 Tourism Industry in Sri Lanka

Tourism industry is considered as the backbone of the country contributing 5% to Sri Lanka's GDP by being the top 3rd foreign exchange earner and create both direct and indirect jobs, in the present its around 300,000 in the formal sector with seasonal employment (DailyFT.lk 2019). Additionally, it states although Sri Lanka indicates a higher literacy level of women rating 94.6% and has established the top on women's human development indicators yet, represents the 14th largest gender gap globally with majority of economically inactive women.

A crucial issue Sri Lanka's Tourism industry currently is faced with is a high labor shortage. It is estimated that around 25,000-30,000 additional employees are needed every year but only around 10,000 graduates are

supplied to the industry from hotel schools. Moreover, in this context female enrollment in hotel schools are extremely low compared to other countries and women are highly underrepresented in hospitality industry in more managerial or administrative occupations except for guest relations, front office staff and marketing functions (Wijayasiri 2020).

Moreover, Wijayasiri (2020) disclose that social, norms and perception of people towards Tourism industry are highlighted as key issues which keep women away from employment in the industry.

3.3. Customer Delight

In the world of customer service, customer is supposed to be ‘king’. However, in the appropriation of delight the ‘king customer’ can be made to cross over to derive an experience beyond his/her wildest imagination which in actuality is within the grasp of a capable employee who could propel the customer’s expectation to a point of delight. Customer delight refers to a positive reaction where a customer responds to an emotional surprise which exceeds his/her expectation and perception regarding a product or service. According to the business dictionary (2020) customer delight is concerned with the customer’s extremely favorable experience which surpasses his/her initial expectation. Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs pyramid indicates self-actualization which can be taken as a rationale in relation to customer delight based on personal needs.

Kwong and Yau 2001 (cited from Estelami 2000) suggest that the challenge for companies would be perhaps to shift the customer from a point of ‘boring satisfaction’ to ‘delight satisfaction’ as delight is a complex emotion and board, outraged, angry customers could be converted to delighted customers as explained in the below table;

Table 01: Cognition - Emotion mix and Customer Responses
Cognition

		Negative	Positive
Emotion	HI	Outrage-Dissatisfaction	Delight-Satisfaction
	Low	Calm-Dissatisfaction	Boring-Satisfaction

Source: Kwong and Yau2001 (cited from Estelami 2000)

3.3.1 Factors that influence customer delight

Over the year’s researchers have explored the patterns and thinking that influence customer delight and have identified a substantial array of various factors that cause significant influence on delight however in the Sri Lankan context there is a lack of previous research in this area. The complexity and diversity of these and other emerging factors point to immense possibilities where delight could be influenced by capable employees.

Goswami and Sarma (2019) point out that customer delight occurs as a result of happiness and perceived excitement which culminated in contributing to positive feelings. In that sense it is possible to believe that customer delight is impacted by the perceived positive feelings generated by the customer and the happiness at the point of their experience. The power of perceived expectations in that sense is dominant in the actual deliverability of customer delight. In addition, Chen and Hu (2010) suggest that determinant attributes based on service quality significantly influenced the customer’s perceived value on the aspects of functional and symbolic dimensions

Al-Hawari (2011) explains that automated services directly influence customer delight in a positive manner which in turn affects customer loyalty and customer commitment. That way it is important to understand the opportunity availed by customer delight in terms of captivating the customer’s trust and loyalty which is a highly valuable aspect for businesses to survive in the competitive world of tourism today.

This is further emphasized by Torres, Fu and Lehto (2014) who found that although there are universally accepted service elements, specific customers who come from various cultures can be delighted by the provision of diverse services and facilities which they could culturally relate to. In that sense it is possible that cultural expectations of a customer is present and very real in the actual context and could be surpassed in

creating an experience that could impact delight or create a conflicting effect to delight which could impact the perception of the customer regarding the entire hospitality experience.

Further, Edwin and Sheryl (2013) emphasize that charismatic delight, fulfillment delight, comparative delight, professional delight and problem resolution delight are prominent for typology in customer delight in the Tourism sector. In that sense it could be understood that customer delight is affected by employees and the Tourism industry has a good opportunity to influence customer delight via the human resource at hand.

On the other hand, Dixon et al (2010) point out that customer delight does not develop loyalty and companies that urge their frontline employees to exceed the expectations of customers are actually pertinent to yield confusion, waste of time and effort and waste of expensive gifts where they suggest that companies should stop trying to delight their customers.

4. Conceptual Framework

Tourism industry employment is of great significance at this juncture in Sri Lanka, the employment potential and the true feelings on this of its future leaders is critical for the success of the fast-growing Tourism industry of the country. Yet there's a notable gender gap considering the employment of Tourism industry in Sri Lanka. There's a contextual and empirical niche in the literature that not many studies have been conducted to check the influence of employee gender on customer delight which is going to be addressed through this study. Customer delight is an emerging concept thus high concentration on researchers on this is needed as concentration for this has been raised recently.

Further different philosophers have discovered that employees' gender has an influence over customers. Proving the fact Poria 2008 (cited from Bristor 1997) writes employees' gender has a strong direct link with the service quality provided by the employee.

As per Jucan & Jucan (2013) employee gender differences in tourism sector is considered as an important feature in the present with the rise of living alone of women over 30 years has led women to consider gender differences in the Tourism industry when deciding their tourist destination as well as identifying the holiday consumption pattern of midlife single women which has become a prime focus by present employers.

Moreover, Ma et al 2014 (cited from Pulkkinen 1996) state, female customers are highly focused on; people, compliance and devotion which possess mostly by female employees while; assertiveness, individualism and task mastery are highly concerned by male customers. In addition, they cite from Ndhlovu and Senguder (2002) reveals customers do not perceive any difference between service provided by male and female workers.

Hence, below hypothesis has been formulated standing on the perspective of above empirical findings and logical beliefs of philosophers. Relevant null hypothesis follows the alternative hypothesis.

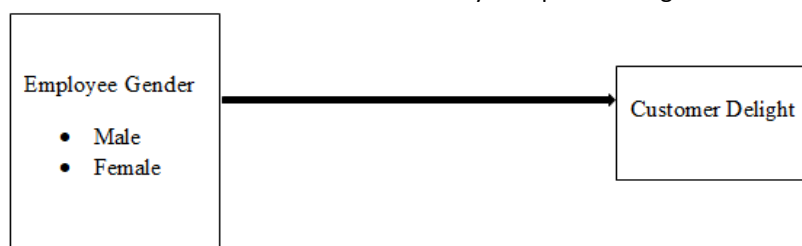
H1: There is a significant relationship between employee gender and customer delight.

H0: There's no significant relationship between employee gender and customer delight.

H2: There is a significant difference between the service provided by male and female employees on customers delight.

H0: There is no significant difference between the service provided by male and female employees on customers delight.

The theoretical framework of the study is depicted in Figure 01.



5. Methodology

A systematic survey was carried out to address the research questions of the study. Self-administered questionnaire was used to gather data. Questionnaire consists with three main parts. First part contains demographic factors namely location of the customer and the gender of the customer. Second part contain the question to identify which gender of staff customer is preferred to be served at the hotel and the third part consist of questions to measure customer delight. Statements used to measure customer delight were framed by Almeida et al. (2015) yet, adjusted and edited by the authors to match with the context. Final questionnaire contains 15 questions. Data was gathered using a Google form and 84 responses were received from around the country by both male and female customers. Majority of the responses were from Colombo district. Responses of individual statements were scaled under Five-point Likert scale coded from 1 to 5 as strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4) and strongly agree (5) respectively.

5.1 Validity and Reliability of Instruments

5.1.1 Reliability

Inter item reliability was checked by performing Cronbach's alpha test. As per the Table 02 Cronbach's alpha coefficient of dependent variable customer delight is greater than 0.7 ($p > 0.7$) which reflects that internal reliability of the instrument is in a satisfactory level.

Table 02: Results of Cronbach's alpha

Instrument	Cronbach's alpha
Customer Delight	.935

5.1.2 Validity

As per Uresha (2020) potential of an instrument to measure what it actually expects to measure is considered as the validity. The content validity of the instruments of the present study was ensured by conceptualization presented in the literature review and indirectly through high internal consistency reliability indicated by Alphas.

5.2 Data Analysis Techniques

The primary data which was collected via self-administered questionnaire using a Google form was analyzed using the computer based statistical data analysis package, SPSS (version 23.0). The data analysis includes both univariate and bivariate methods and under bivariate method; Eta analysis and Independence Sample T-test was performed.

6. Results

Present study examines the customer preference on employee gender, relationship between employee gender and customer delight, and whether there is a difference between the service provided by male and female employees on customer delight in the Sri Lankan tourism industry which was ascertain by univariate analysis and bivariate analysis.

Table 03 depict the descriptive statistics of the dependent variable customer delight.

Table 03: Descriptive statistics of Customer Delight

Central Tendency Dispersion Measures	Value
Mean	4.2619
Median	4.0000
Mode	5.00
Standard Deviation	.76235
Variance	.581
Minimum	2.00
Maximum	5.00
Range	3.00

As per Table 03 data majority of customers possess higher customer delight as the mean value is greater than 4. (data were coded in the study as; 1= very low degree, 2 = low degree, 3 = moderate degree, 4 = high degree and 5 = very high degree). Also, as the standard deviation is less than 1 (.76235) it reflects that the data is not much dispersed from the mean value.

Table 04 present the data to address the research question that which gender of employees' customers prefers more to be served in the Tourism sector. As per data recorded, from 84 respondents only 25 customers prefer to be served by male employees having the percentage of 29.8. Further among 84, 59 respondents are preferred to be served by female employees having a higher percentage of 70.2. This outline that more than half (70.2%) of the respondents are willing to be served by female employees which answer the first research question "From which gender employees that Sri Lankan customers are preferred to be served?"

Table 04 – Frequencies of employee gender preferred by customers

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Male	25	29.8	29.8	29.8
Female	59	70.2	70.2	100.0
Total	84	100.0	100.0	

Table 05 indicate the results of eta analysis. According to (Sage publications 2019) eta coefficient test is a technique to identify the strength of association or relationship between a categorical variable and scale or interval level variable. As our independent variable gender of employee is a categorical variable and dependent variable customer delight is a scale variable eta coefficient test is performed.

Table 05 – Directional Measures

	Value
Nominal by interval Eta Employee Gender Dependent Customer Delight Dependent	.296 .016

According to Table 05 data, as customer delight is our dependent variable, .016 is taken as eta coefficient. As the eta coefficient is less than 1 which is very close to zero ($\eta < 1$) can conclude that there is no relationship between gender of the employee and customer delight. Further, the Eta squared is .000256 (0.025%) which

indicate that only 0.025% of variance of gender on customer delight which shows very weak association. Hence, it is possible to reject first alternative hypothesis (H1) that “There is a significant relationship between employee gender and customer delight.

To test the validity of second hypothesis (H2) Independence Sample T-test was performed which depict in Table 06. Based on the results, statistical analysis claim that there is no significant difference between male and female employees’ service patterns on customer delight as the p value is .903 which is greater than .05 ($p>0.05$). Thus, it is not possible to accept alternative hypothesis (H2) “There is a significant difference between service of male and female employees on customer delight”.

Table 06 – Results of Independence Sample T-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig	t	Df	Sig (2-tailed)
Customer Delight	Equal variances assumed	6.061	.016	.141	82	.888
	Equal variances not assumed			.124	35.356	.902

Major findings of the study indicate that;

1. Sri Lankan customers under the study has higher degree of preference to be served by female employees in Tourism industry.
2. There is no significant relationship between gender of employees and customer delight.
3. There is no significant difference between the service provided by male and female employees on customer delight.

7. Discussion

Based on the findings this research suggests that female employee presence will clearly provide an opportunity to give customers an experience beyond their expectations which is the crux of the concept of delight suggested by Goswami and Sarma (2019). The overall view of most contenders clearly support customer preference for female employees more than for male employees. A similar view is suggested by Kedia (2017) in the travel trade where recruitment of females supersede the recruitment of males due to customer preference where it has been revealed that female employees are preferred for their ability to listen, trainability and customer’s willingness to listen to female employees more than to male employees. The gender specific impact is highlighted by Mansoor (2017) with relevance to service encounters suggesting that male to male and male to female interactions are different due to the reaction most customers have in opposite gender interactions.

Results of the study reveal that there is no relationship between employee gender and customer delight according to the eta analysis. Additionally, based on the results of Independence Sample T-test statistical results present that there is no significant difference between the service provided by male and female employees on customer delight. A similar idea to these findings is presented by Ma et al. (2014) cited from Ndhlovu and Senguder (2002) that customers do not perceive any difference between service provided by male and female workers.

Considering that Sri Lankans do have a cultural orientation towards hospitality (SLT operational guidelines 2020) and service being a female dominated field within the nation, it could be suggested that the high percentage of participants’ preference shown in the survey for female employees may have emerged due to such traditions and cultural factors. Domestically the mother/housewife is the person who is mainly responsible for food preparation and serving food at home where in some traditional family’s females do not sit at the table but attend to serve others and eat after others have consumed the food. Another factor that could justify the high preference shown by the contenders for female employees in the Tourism industry could be due to the fact that there is a ‘care-giving’ element attached to the employees in the Tourism industry and

the role of 'care-giver' is often associated to females rather than males. In example stereotypical job roles such as 'nurse', 'teacher' highlighted by Abeywardana and Priyadarshani (2017) as roles mainly attributed to females whereas job roles such as 'fire-fighter' and 'mechanic' are typically attributed to males in the Sri Lankan context.

8. Recommendations & Future Research

As the findings of the research signify that Sri Lankan customers show a high preference to be served by female employees it is recommended that employers explore this opportunity further by taking full advantage of the existing avenue to create delight in customers by increasing the number of female employees in the industry. Further authors recommend that since there is no significant relationship between gender and customer delight and there is no significant difference between the service provided by male and female employees, it is vital to revisit job descriptions and designations in the industry to investigate any areas that may have segregated to become gender dominant roles over the years and take steps to remove such restrictions which could apply to specific 'male only jobs'. In addition employers should look at working conditions, working time patterns, shift work schedules and eliminate gender inequality in the workplace by ensuring gender mainstreaming to make the industry an attractive, equitable and safe work arena for females to work. Abeywardana and Priyadarshani (2017) have emphasized that family pressure has caused reduction of female employment in the hotel trade where female applicants are reluctant to take jobs due to parent's wishes, marriage and children. Therefore, authors recommend that employers become mindful, empathic and cautious to retain female employees and use customized, effective recruitment mechanisms to educate and induct and reward female applicants and new recruits to the industry for a productive and delightful employment relationship.

In considering that this research was conducted during a global pandemic necessitates authors to deem the mindset of the contender which may have been impacted by trauma primarily or at a secondary level with the effects raised by Covid-19. Therefore, authors feel that further study is essential to explore comparative findings of non-pandemic situations and examine any possibility of emerging patterns of customer behavior pertaining to the themes under discussion.

9. Conclusion

A gap and the need for more female employees in the Tourism industry in Sri Lanka has been highlighted in the Tourism Roadmap (2018). The Tourism Strategic Plan (2017- 2020) by the Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Religious affairs which has however not identified the female presence in numbers whereas it outlines that 319,436 males were employed in the sector in 2015. It is debatable whether the customer preference for females is unnoticeable in the macro level. Similarly, Wijayasiri (2020) points out that female applicant rate in the Tourism industry is disturbingly low. Comparing the above described findings of this study and the existing literature supporting the need for more female presence in the Tourism industry research findings could be highlighting a crucial and urgent gender equity and equality issue lying within the industry in Sri Lanka.

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INFO:-

Corresponding Author: *K. I. Uresha, Department of Human Resource Management, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka.*

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