**A conceptual paper on understanding the cross-cultural differences in online complain behaviour of hotel guests: the case of Sri Lanka hotel industry**

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**Abstract**

Consumer complaining behaviour is varied depending on the cultural background of the customers (Ngai et al., 2007; Yuksel et al., 2006; Kwortnik Jr and Han, 2011). Thus, understanding the cross-cultural differences of customer complain behaviours is vital for businesses which interact with a multicultural customer base, such as the hotel industry. On the other hand, the internet has changed the complaint behaviour of customers (Serra-Cantallops et al., 2018) by empowering them to express their emotions and dissatisfaction online in the form of negative online reviews, freely and easily to a wider audience (Au et al., 2014). This further complicates the matters for hoteliers to deal with different complaint behaviours on numerous online platforms by distinct cultural backgrounds in the diversified and dynamic industry. A thorough understanding of the numerous complaint behaviours due to different cultural backgrounds would be beneficial for the hoteliers (Kuo, 2007) to design and implement effective marketing strategies (Hsieh and Tsai, 2009), to ensure customer satisfaction and to provide an effective service delivery align with the cultural values of their diverse customer base (Mattila, 2000) and most importantly to respond effectively to negative online reviews to ensure and rebuild the trust and satisfaction of complaining customer and potential customers as both the review and respond is publicly visible on online context (Casado-Díaz et al., 2020, Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012). Management responding to negative online reviews is referred to as webcare in the recent academic literature.

The context of cross-cultural differences of complaint behaviour and webcare have become a significant concern for both academics and practitioners during the past few decades. Though there are studies focus on cross cultural differences in complaint behaviour in physical context of the hotel industry (Defranco et al., 2005; Yuksel et al., 2006; Ngai et al., 2007,) and other industries (Park et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2014), cultural differences in complaint behaviour in the online context is limited. The unique nature of the online context creates significant differences in compliant behaviours between offline and online contexts such as differences in coping strategies (Mattila and Wirtz, 2004), and perceived behavioural control (Chang and Chin, 2011). According to Hofstede (1980), cultures vary across four dimensions: uncertainty avoidance, individualism or collectivism, power distance, and masculinity or femininity. The individualism or collectivism dimension is particularly allied with basic differences in consumer behaviour between Eastern and Western cultures (Patterson and Smith, 2003).

Accordingly, it’s noteworthy to mention at this juncture that there are a few recent studies which have taken the initiatives to identify the cultural differences in online compliant behaviours in the hotel industry. Accordingly, Sann et al., (2020) have identified that Asian guests, who are from cultures that are low in individualism, are more likely to complain about service when compared to non-Asian guests while non-Asian guests tend to complaint more about cleanliness, room, sleep quality, and location than Asian guests. Hien et al., (2022) identified that Vietnamese guests are more inclined to complain about service and value while non-Vietnamese are more inclined to complain about rooms. A study conducted by Au et al., (2014) has also identified that there are significant differences in complaint behaviour between Chinese and non-Chinese guests.

Though these studies confirm significant differences of complaint behaviour in online in the cross cultural context, more studies are further needed to identify cultural diversity in online complaint behaviour in the international hotel industry. Consequently, hoteliers can effectively formulate webcare strategies to meet customer expectations and to improve customer satisfaction.

As there are no studies on online complaint behaviour in Sri Lanka’s hotel industry, the first phase of this PhD study will be dedicated to understanding and developing a typology of online complaint behaviour and webcare of Sri Lanka hotel industry based on three different national cultures: India, United Kingdom and Russia. These three countries have the largest source markets for Sri Lanka tourism according to the tourist statistical reports by Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority in 2022 (SLTDA,2022). The country’s economy is heavily reliant on the tourism industry as it is the third largest source of foreign exchange. Therefore, understanding the behaviour of international tourists, particularly their complaint behaviour, will provide significant insights for the practitioners. Further, it will enhance the hotel management, webcare and online consumer complaint behaviour literature in cross cultural context. The novelty of this study in terms of identifying both cross cultural differences of online complaint behaviour of international hotel guests and hotels’ webcare, will be the major contribution.

The study intends to use the negative online reviews posted on TripAdvisor, one of the most popular and powerful online travel community websites around the world (Papathanassis and Knolle, 2011) in which travellers express and share their travel experiences, personal opinions, accommodation experiences and recommendations (Lee and Ro, 2016). It also provides reviewers’ nationality and is integrated with multilanguage interface. TripAdvisor reviews, which are rated as ‘terrible’ and ‘poor’, of 159 classified hotels registered with Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, will be analysed to identify the cross-cultural differences of online complaint behaviour and hotels’ webacre to those reviews to develop a typology of online complaint behaviour in Sri Lanka.

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