

Tourist Expectation and Perception of World Heritage Site Sigiriya: Policy and Institutional Implications for Sri Lanka

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Abstract: *This study assesses the expectations and perceptions of tourists visiting the “Sigiriya” heritage site given the importance of tourism in Sri Lanka in the post LTTE era with the end of the 30 year old civil war. Data from 400 tourists was collected using the questionnaire method and the difference between the mean values of perception and expectation was used to indicate satisfaction gap. The results confirmed that tourist perceptions on seven variables fell short of their expectations. However, the mean difference of tourist expectations on heritage sites and natural attractions did not show a mismatch. Site attributes and site staff assistance were found to have the largest satisfaction gaps. Therefore, to further improve the heritage tourism sustainability in Sri Lanka, it is essential to reduce the gap between expectation and perception in some of the dimensions identified in this study. This study also discusses policy and institutional implications and provides lessons and insights for countries promoting heritage tourism.*

Keywords: Expectation, Heritage Tourism, Perception, Satisfaction, Sigiriya, Sri Lanka

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1. Introduction

Tourism sector is an important revenue earner for countries that place it as their strategic focus to pursue development. However, it is not without challenges as tourists nowadays are more well-informed about their destination even before travelling there given the ease of access to information in the era of information technology. Literature that deals with tourist satisfaction gap is limited especially those focusing on heritage site to encourage tourist revisits

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and promote tourism. Understanding the dimensions to bridge satisfaction gap will provide insights for policy-makers.

This study attempts to analyse tourist perception and expectations in Sigiriya, a world heritage site located in Sri Lanka. It will examine the satisfaction gap in relation to Sigiriya's attractions and services offered. Despite the government's strategic initiatives to promote tourism as the main income earner for the nation as well as the importance of Sigiriya as a key tourist destination, there is a dearth of studies examining tourist expectation and satisfaction in this heritage site. The main objective of this study is to discover what the expectations are of the international tourists who visit Sigiriya and those expectations are met with the attractions and services currently offered at the site. The study contributes in the following ways: first, it provides insights to the management and policy-makers to minimise the gap between expectation and perception that will lead to a satisfactory tour experience as it will have a positive effect on tourists who plan to re-visit or to recommend Sigiriya to potential tourists. Second, it offers some lessons for other countries promoting heritage tourism on the importance of each dimension that contributes to satisfaction gap and offers policy recommendations and institutional implications.

Sri Lanka, specifically Sigiriya, serves as an important case study. Recently, Sri Lanka, known as the "Pearl of the Indian Ocean" has emerged as an important tourist destination. In the past, the tourism industry was severely impacted by the prolonged civil war lasting 30 years. However, when it ended in 2009, the industry improved at a greater pace. Tourists had increased by nearly twofold from 400,414 in 2000 to 855,975 in 2011 (Tourism Development Authority, 2011). Indeed, the sector generated nearly US\$838.9 million in terms of tourist receipts in 2011 compared with US\$253 million in 2000. To further spur the sector, the tourism strategy was developed by the Ministry of Economic Development for 2011-2016 aimed at increasing tourist arrivals to 2.5 million by 2016 and creating 500,000 jobs. Policy-makers want an increase in foreign exchange earnings with a target of US\$2.75 billion by the 2016 (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Strategy, 2010). In attracting tourists, the world heritage site, Sigiriya's rock fortress, is important for Sri Lanka. Evidence shows that 44% of the international tourists who visited the cultural triangle where most of the heritage products are displayed regard it (Sigiriya and the surrounding sites) as one of the most outstanding attractions in the country (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Strategy, 2010).

In the case of Sri Lanka, 70% of the tourists who visited Sri Lanka had received information and recommendations from tourists who had visited the island before (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Strategy, 2010). It would indicate the tourists have formed an early expectation about their holiday destination and should there be any gap in the expectations and perceptions during their visits, it will eventually influence their level of satisfaction. In

this regard, planners and policymakers must ensure that the gap between expectation and perception is minimised. It has been documented that 30% of the tourists who visited Sri Lanka have visited Sigiriya in 2012 (SLTDA, 2012). This indicates a potential to lure more tourists to Sigiriya. Sri Lanka can focus on promoting Sigiriya which is a leading product representing Sri Lankan tourism and the cultural tradition of the country in the international market. Heritage tourism is a key form of tourism that has won the hearts of tourists all over the world. Yet, due to the civil war and resulting instability, the tourism industry was not much focused on promoting or developing these types of tourism extensively. Therefore, Sri Lanka's efforts in promoting Sigiriya's rock fortress in a more aggressive manner in the global market may require a full understanding about visitor expectations, perceptions and satisfaction.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sigiriya World Heritage Site

The world heritage site, Sigiriya's rock fortress, which is the focus of this study, is located at the Central Province of Sri Lanka and surrounded by an ancient city built by King Kasyapa in 477. It is world renowned for its exceptional archeological value and engineering skills. History states that King Kasyapa chose Sigiriya as his capital and constructed his palace on top of the giant rock that would provide him maximum safety. Sigiriya is an extraordinary site surrounded by gardens, ramparts, reservoirs and water gardens some of which are still functioning until today. Ruins of the ancient city are evident, surrounding the fortress. Ruins of a pair of stone lion's paws can be seen at the entrance to the palace; it was constructed on top of the rock and leads visitors through an open mouth of a lion. Sigiriya frescoes displayed on the way up the rock are unique and a key attraction of the site. Mirror walls that present poems and verses from the 8th century on themes such as irony, experiences and love are breathtaking (The Official Web Site of Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau, 2011). The site displays an impressive urban development. It is a wonderful blend of an arithmetical square module and natural geography. Architects and engineers involved in designing this unique invention had incorporated nature during the time of its construction. Lakes, rocks and hills were expertly integrated into the main plan. It is a combination of human intelligence and nature (Dissanaike, 1999).

Sigiriya was declared a world heritage site by UNESCO in 1982 under three selective criteria and operational guidelines by the world heritage convention. It is identified as a masterpiece of human creative genius, an exhibition and interchange of human values with a development of architecture and technology and bearing a unique testimony to cultural tradition (UNESCO

Official Website, 1995-2011).

2.2 Tourist Satisfaction: Gaps between expectation and perception

Satisfaction is the outcome of an assessment by visitor based on his or her expectation and perception after experiencing a product or service. When the service or product does not match the level of expectation, it will eventually cause dissatisfaction. Similarly, tourist satisfaction is caused by the evaluation of pre-travel expectations and post-travel experiences (Chen and Chen, 2010). Studies show that satisfaction of visitors is expressed by two different factors namely, the pre-expectations of the visitors before the travel and their perceptions post travel based on real experiences (Xia *et al.*, 2009; Song *et al.*, 2011; Huang and Su, 2010; Chen and Chen, 2010). Literature further identifies that consumer loyalty and satisfaction are correlated to a greater extent (Yoon and Uysal, 2005; Lee *et al.*, 2011). It is accepted that visitors who are satisfied will have intentions to re-visit as well as encourage others to visit by word of mouth (Huang *et al.*, 2006; Hui *et al.*, 2007; Su and Fan, 2011). In contrast, an unhappy tourist may discourage others by word of mouth which in turn will have a negative impact on such products and services. Thus, satisfaction is seen as the main determinant of loyalty (Alegre and Cladera, 2009).

Customers tend to evaluate their experience by comparing prior expectations or standards with actual outcomes and base their judgment on satisfaction (Caro and García, 2007). Some researchers have used the economics utility theory to examine the perceived quality demanded by the consumer and the sacrifices they are willing to make to obtain a product or service as the determinants of satisfaction (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Pedraja and Yague, 2000). Cronin and Taylor (1992) said that a perceived quality has a positive impact on customer satisfaction. Thus, the perceived quality of a heritage product can also provide a satisfactory tour experience to the tourists. Individual characteristics also contribute towards satisfaction. Experiences that give desired effects and benefits to the individual constitute satisfaction (Wagar, 1996). A model was developed by Fornell and associates at the University of Michigan in which the 'Customer Satisfaction Index' was proposed and which has been widely used in Sweden, the United States, Taiwan and New Zealand in assessing level of satisfaction (Foster, 1999). The model states that satisfaction is an outcome of three factors: perceived quality of experience, perceived value and expectations. It then either leads to a complaining behavior or loyalty of customers (Vavra, 1997). The model illustrates that satisfaction of customers is created through customer expectation and perceived value and strengthened by perceived quality (Davidson, 2003).

Managing tourist expectation is very important as it influences their destination choice and also the perception of experiences (Gnoth, 1997).

Thus, analysing the satisfaction gap (the differences between expectation and perception) of tourists is essential in developing an effective strategy in a competitive market both locally and internationally. Measuring the level of satisfaction is focused entails providing insight obtained from the current customer to driving managers towards product and service improvements (Danaher and Haddrell, 1996). Thus, the effects of satisfaction, whether positive or negative, can be defined as vital in finding solutions for competitiveness-related concerns (Krishnan and Gronhaug, 1979).

Examining the level of satisfaction depends on understanding factors customers consider significant and on evaluating the performance of the said factors. Thus, evaluating the “gap” in current products and services offered based on their expectation and perception will help to formulate strategies to overcome the gaps which can increase satisfaction of the customers (Campos and Marodin, 2012). In earlier studies, “gap” models were associated with disconfirmation. Oliver (1980) noted that satisfaction was based on comparing the influence of expectation and disconfirmation. He developed the model for satisfaction as a psychological assessment of a current position with the expected outcome. This can be either positive or negative. In other words, Oliver suggested that customers analyse or examine if performance of a product or service is up to their expectations which influence and determines their satisfaction. In addition to variables of disconfirmations and expectations, perception of consumers on performance has been identified as one of the key variables that have a direct impact on satisfaction (Yi and La, 2003). Customer satisfaction is conceptualised as the gap between expected and perceived service (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1993). Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1985) discussed in depth the development of customer expectations in relation to product or service performance. The authors categorised five probable gaps in services based on expected and perceived experiences: first, the gap between consumer expectation and managing the perception of expectations; second, perceptions of managing consumer expectations and specifications of quality in services; third, gap between the specifications about the quality of service and actual services provided; fourth, gap between the service offered to the client and that which is communicated about the service and; finally, gap between consumer expectations and perceptions of the service received (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). Subsequently, this model was tailored for other industries to study level of satisfaction (Wong *et al.*, 1999; Dabholkar *et al.*, 1996). It has also been used in the tourism sector for measuring tourist satisfaction of a destination whereby satisfaction of the tourists is determined by reviewing the gap between the expected and perceived services (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). This study aims to assess the expectation and perception of tourists visiting Sigiriya and to find out if any expectation and perception gap exists.

2.3 Heritage Tourism Dimensions

It is essential to understand the dimensions of heritage tourism when analysing tourist expectation and perception of such a product. Past studies viewed heritage tourism as encompassing both eco-tourism and cultural tourism emphasising safeguarding of natural and cultural heritage (Pedersen, 2002). It was also broadly defined to include history and ideas of a host nation, values, art, dance, music and wilderness. It is a link of host communities, past and present and therefore, heritage is derived as a lived experience (Jafari, 2003). Heritage sites have diverse and unique characteristics which make them stand out among other tourist attractions. It is place-bound which is historically evolved, unique and extremely rare. Its authenticity is its main attractiveness for tourists (Khunou *et al.*, 2009). Historic sites and built heritage sites are significant to the concept of heritage tourism in developing countries. Many ancient sites in Asia, America, Africa, and the Eastern Europe have become world-class tourist attractions (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). Past studies suggest that the purpose of visiting heritage sites is to enhance learning, grow spiritually, satisfy curiosity, relax and get away from daily routines (Timothy and Boyd, 2003; Poria *et al.* 2004).

Heritage tourism also involves a wide interest of specialty travelling as an increasing number of tourists want to experience cultural diversity and cultural events and admire natural landscapes and monuments. Therefore, heritage tourism is coupled with visual attractions, festive activities, performing arts, monuments, historical sites and archeological buildings (Zeppel and Hall, 1992). Heritage tourists are motivated by cultural ruins, performing arts and other related attractions in the area (Peterson, 1994). Cultural heritage and natural attractions are the most important factors that influence the overall satisfaction of a tourist who visits a heritage site. Hence, there is a great potential for tourism in the areas which are enriched with natural, historical and cultural resources (ESCAP Tourism Review, 2001). Nature-related tourism integrates element of adventure, wildlife and cultural tourism (Gale and Hill, 2009). Nature in tourism, more specifically, involves natural attractions, wildlife and scenic views (Buckley, 2009). Site-specific variables such as employee friendliness, cleanliness, safety, professionalism, employee knowledge and delivery of quality service have an impact on visitor satisfaction (Ellis and Vogelsong, 2002). Additionally, attributes such as hospitality, accommodation, accessibility, indoor facilities, atmosphere, people, information centres, accommodation, service quality and food have a significance influence on visitors' satisfaction level (Huh and Uysal, 2003). Good and well-connected infrastructure such as railways, roads and quality accommodation are also important for tourists (Yang *et al.*, 2010).

Sri Lanka's ancient sites are more than 3000 years old which include ancient cities of Sigiriya, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Digamadulla.

These ancient cities are renowned for their unique and fascinating townships, palaces, temples and monasteries that display a blend of heritage and nature (SLTDA, 2012). Given the rich natural reserves and abundant cultural heritages, Sri Lanka has an immense potential to offer value added products that could meet the expectations of high-end tourist markets. The Sri Lanka Tourist Development Authority (SLTDA) is currently developing a competitive strategy that aims to showcase Sri Lanka as a destination with value added mix of tourism products and tourist-friendly policies that encourage investments in the industry. One of its key projects is the development and promotion of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage icon, Sigiriya, as a high-end destination site (SLTDA, 2015). However, the island also faces many challenges which mean good and effective strategies are required to strengthen heritage tourism. Introducing policies and principles that are aimed at promoting tourism in heritage sites and ecological areas, development of infrastructure, educating the local communities, tourism strategies to attract heritage and eco-tourists who prefer specialised services are some of the challenges (The Island, 2015).

The present study measures these dimensions to gauge the satisfaction gaps. It evaluates the differences between expectation and perception of tourists visiting heritage sites. A comprehensive analysis on tourist expectation and perception therefore, provide insight to managerial and policy implications on heritage tourism in Sri Lanka. It is also an effective model to study tourist perception and expectations of other heritage sites in the world as well as conservation policies.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study location and Sampling

In order to understand tourist expectation and perception on attractions and services offered, the world heritage site, Sigiriya, was chosen as the study location given its importance and its popularity among tourists. Questionnaires were designed based on variables related to heritage tourism adapted from earlier studies (Huh and Uysal, 2003, Willis, 2009; Pedersen, 2002) to suit the current research study. The target population for this study was international tourists aged 18 years and above visiting Sigiriya. Selection was based on non-probability sampling namely, convenience sampling technique. A self-administrated questionnaire was distributed and data was collected from target samples. Five hundred questionnaires were distributed at the site spanning two weeks from January to March 2013. Questionnaires were distributed by the team of researchers who positioned themselves at the entrance of the "Lion's mouth" which is the central point of the rock whereby visitors have to pass it on their way down; they tend to stop for a short rest at this point thus, giving the numerators time to interview the respondents. Other

locations were at the exit and the parking area as the aim of the study was to interview visitors during their exit entrance as it gives them more information about their expectations and overall experiences at the site. In total, out of 420 questionnaires that were completed, only 390 could be used for analysis and therefore, providing a response rate of 78%.

3.2 Questionnaire Design and Variable Measurement

In this study, seven key dimensions that motivated tourists to visit to heritage sites namely, heritage, culture, nature, site general attributes, site facilities, site staff assistance and general destination attributes were considered. The questionnaire measures the expectation and perception of tourists based on the above seven dimensions. These dimensions were adapted from earlier studies to suit the current study's aims and target respondents (Huh & Uysal, 2003). For all the key dimensions, a five point Likert-type scale was used as a response format to study level of expectation, where 5 indicates very important and 1 indicates least important. Similarly, the level of perception after the visit was measured in a five point Likert scale for each item, where 5 indicates extremely satisfied and 1 indicates very dissatisfied. Data were analysed to confirm the validity and reliability of measurements. The seven dimensions in relation to expectation and perception were factor analysed to test if there were any underlying dimensions. In addition, reliability, a measurement consistency, was assessed by calculating Cronbach's alpha. The results of the analysis are reported in Table 1. Factor loading for both expectation and perception indicates that items for each of the dimensions measure adequately what they are supposed to measure given that the scores are more than 0.6 in most cases. Reliability is demonstrated when items measuring a single construct are highly correlated and when the alpha level is relatively high. As indicated in Table 1, the alpha (α) values are all above 0.6 and deemed acceptable for social science research (Nunnally, 1978).

Table 1: Factor loading and Cronbach's Alpha (α), Validity and Reliability

Dimensions	Expectation	Perception
	Factor Loading	Factor Loading
<i>Heritage Attractions</i>	$\alpha = 0.847$	$\alpha = 0.874$
Historical Buildings Archeological Value	0.779	0.853
Paintings/Arts	0.758	0.789
Architecture	0.804	0.786
Authenticity	0.715	0.761
<i>Cultural Attractions</i>	$\alpha = 0.860$	$\alpha = 0.885$
Art/music & Dances	0.778	0.769
Cultural Villages	0.738	0.784
Handicrafts	0.811	0.828
Souvenirs	0.712	0.753

Table 1: (Continued)

Dimensions	Expectation	Perception
	Factor Loading	Factor Loading
Festivals/Events & Variety of Activities	0.687	0.763
Site Facilities	$\alpha = 0.748$	$\alpha = 0.720$
Cafeteria	0.858	0.763
Shops	0.744	0.871
Washrooms	0.528	0.490
Site Staff Assistance	$\alpha = 0.811$	$\alpha = 0.843$
Friendliness	0.744	0.696
Knowledge	0.886	0.864
Professionalism	0.866	0.870
Guide Assistance	0.488	0.619
Site General Attributes	$\alpha = 0.664$	$\alpha = 0.665$
Safety	0.611	0.467
Entrance Fee	0.585	0.680
Information Centres	0.707	0.784
Accessibility	0.722	0.636
General Destination Attributes	$\alpha = 0.901$	$\alpha = 0.900$
Quality of Meals	0.719	0.654
Hotel Facilities(rooms)	0.821	0.838
Hotel Staff Assistance	0.818	0.812
Hotel Service Quality	0.862	0.850
Infrastructure	0.748	0.807
Security	0.706	0.760
Cost	0.592	0.556
Natural Attractions	$\alpha = 0.837$	$\alpha = 0.810$
Natural Scenery	0.824	0.854
Landscape	0.913	0.887
Wild life activities	0.642	0.609
Climate & weather conditions	0.639	0.536

Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring.

The mean scores of perception and expectation for each variable was used to analyse the satisfaction gap. A positive mean difference value indicates that tourist experience with regards to the given dimension is above the initial importance placed on the dimension. It means that tourists obtained more satisfaction than what was initially expected and vice-versa. In order to test the statistical significance of the gap, paired sample *t*-test and Wilcoxon test were used. The following section reports the findings of the study.

4. Results

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are as follows: Out of the 390 respondents, 225 (59%) were males and 164 (42%) females. The mean

age was 39. The median is 39, indicating that at least 50% of the respondents are aged below 39. The majority of the respondents, 240 (62%), are employed full time, 52 (14%) are retired and the rest unemployed. In terms of country of origin, 216 (61%) are Europeans and 79 (22%) are Chinese. About 328 (84%) of them were visiting Sigiriya for the first time and their key mode of information was the Internet (197 or 51%) while 75 of them (20%) knew about the heritage site from word-of-mouth; the rest found knew about the site from magazines, television and newspapers. Nearly 90% reported that they are likely to recommend Sigiriya to potential tourists.

Both paired sample *t*-test as well as a non-parametric paired sample Wilcoxon test were performed in order to assess the mean difference between expectation and perception of the tourists to visiting Sigiriya. A non-parametric approach was used to check the robustness of the results since it is not subject to normality assumption in the case where the distribution does not satisfy the assumptions. The gap (mean difference) between perception and expectation indicates the level of satisfaction. Table 2 and 3 shows the expectations and perceptions of overall satisfaction as well as individual items under each of the seven dimensions in order to assess the satisfaction gap. The overall differences in satisfaction (difference between perception and expectation) within the seven main dimensions indicate the largest significant differences exist in Site General ($-0.37, p=000$), Staff Assistance ($-0.30, p=000$), General Destination ($-0.25, p=000$) and Site facilities ($-0.18, p=000$). Only Cultural Attractions ($0.01, p=0.71$) has a positive mean difference; however, it is not statistically significant. It indicates in most cases, the real experiences of the tourist did not meet his or her initial expectation. The findings reveal a mismatch between the respondent's expectation and perception on site general attributes, site staff support and site facilities. It is for these reasons the government and the private sector should enhance facilities at the current sites ensuring staff assistance at all times. Public investments to improve the facilities at the sites are vital.

Table 2: Overall level of perception and expectation

Dimensions	Perception Mean (SD)	Expectation Mean (SD)	Mean Difference (Level of Satisfaction)	SD	p1	p2
Heritage Attractions	4.12 (0.70)	4.20 (0.72)	-0.07	0.05	0.01	0.00
Cultural Attractions	3.47 (0.72)	3.46 (0.84)	0.01	0.74	0.71	0.70
Site Facilities	3.22(0.70)	3.41(0.86)	-0.18	0.92	0.00	0.00
Staff Assistance	3.84(0.65)	4.15(0.65)	-0.30	0.69	0.00	0.00
Site General	3.60(0.66)	3.97(0.66)	-0.37	0.80	0.00	0.00
Attributes	3.84(0.66)	4.09(0.65)	-0.25	0.63	0.00	0.00
General Destination						
Natural Attractions	4.18(0.64)	4.29(0.69)	-0.11	0.57	0.00	0.00

Note: p^1 value based on parametric test; p^2 value based on non parametric test

The study sub-categorises the dimensions (see Table 3) to provide a more detailed insight on the areas of improvement which managers and policy-makers may find useful in devising tourist-friendly policies. It will help reduce the difference gap that measures tourist satisfaction. Tourists have the highest expectations in the areas of authenticity and historical buildings/archeological values. The mean difference for authenticity is narrow ($-0.072, p=0.03$) and statistically significant in contrast to archeological value dimension where the difference is greater ($-0.128, p=0.00$) between perception and expectation. In addition, architecture has contributed to the overall mean difference recording a difference of $-0.095 (p=0.01)$ and it is statistically significant at 5% level. In general, there is a need to improve and preserve archeological, architecture as well as authenticity values. It is also important to present and interpret heritage attractions in a more effective manner in order to highlight the unique attributes of the product. This will ensure tourist loyalty (revisits) further promoting the heritage tourism sector in Sri Lanka. A negative gap (mean difference) for the Cultural Attractions is only significant for cultural villages ($-0.194, p=0.00$) and events and activities ($0.134, p=0.00$). The only positive gap is for souvenirs ($0.387, p=0.00$) where perception exceeds expectation indicating that these characteristics are well developed in Sri Lanka. Better planning and improvements are needed to enhance the image of cultural villages as well as events and activities where tourists can participate in cultural activities such as art, music, dancing and traditional village activities in the surrounding area.

As for site facilities, further improvement is needed such as having more washrooms and toilets ($-0.69, p=0.00$). Staff knowledge ($-0.40, p=0.00$) and staff professionalism ($-0.43, p=0.00$) of those manning the heritage sites require further attention given that they have the highest satisfaction gaps. Providing adequate training will enhance staff competence in terms of providing quality service and information about the site. In the case of site attributes, entrance fee ($-0.76, p=0.00$), information centres ($-0.49, p=0.00$) and safety ($-0.44, p=0.00$) were the main concerns. Entrance fee was considered high and offered low value for money as some of the sites were considered not that attractive contributing to a lower satisfaction level among tourists. This translates to a higher gap in satisfaction. In general, policymakers need to improve on safety, availability and services provided by information centres in addition to revising the entrance fee downwards or providing more value for money by improving the cultural attractions at the heritage sites. Indeed, improving on-site facilities and staff assistance will ensure that tourists experience value for money. All the seven characteristics that represent destination attributes need improvement. Importantly, cost ($-0.36, p=0.00$), infrastructure ($-0.25, p=0.00$), security ($-0.24, p=0.00$) and service quality ($-0.23, p=0.00$) require immediate attention.

Table 3: Gap analysis of expectation and perception

Dimensions	Perception Mean (SD)	Expectation Mean (SD)	Mean Difference (Level of Satisfaction)	SD	p1	p2
<i>Heritage Attractions</i>						
Historical Buildings/ Archeo-logical Value	4.08 (0.89)	4.21 (0.90)	-0.128	0.731	0.00	0.00
Paintings/Art	4.06 (0.83)	4.07 (0.93)	-0.005	0.808	0.90	0.73
Architecture	4.11 (0.82)	4.20 (0.83)	-0.095	0.768	0.01	0.01
Authenticity	4.25 (0.74)	4.32(0.79)	-0.072	0.721	0.05	0.03
Cultural Attractions						
Art/Music & Dances	3.37(0.86)	3.43(1.04)	-0.062	0.939	0.19	0.15
Cultural Villages	3.57(0.86)	3.76(0.96)	-0.194	0.936	0.00	0.00
Handicraft	3.48(0.85)	3.40(1.06)	0.080	0.970	0.10	0.18
Souvenirs	3.41(0.86)	3.02(1.19)	0.387	1.087	0.00	0.00
Festivals/Events & Variety of Activities	3.56(0.87)	3.69(1.00)	-0.134	1.001	0.01	0.00
Site Facilities						
Cafeteria	3.15(0.84)	3.23(1.11)	- 0.08	1.18	0.16	0.26
Shops	3.24(0.77)	3.05(1.04)	0.19	1.06	0.00	0.00
Washrooms/Toilets	3.27(1.03)	3.96(1.03)	- 0.69	1.27	0.00	0.00
Staff Assistance						
Staff friendliness	3.95(0.77)	4.18(0.78)	- 0.22	0.87	0.00	0.00
Staff Knowledge	3.81(0.81)	4.21(0.74)	- 0.40	0.92	0.00	0.00
Staff Professionalism	3.81(0.80)	4.24(0.73)	- 0.43	0.94	0.00	0.00
Guide Assistance Knowledge	3.78(0.86)	4.00(0.98)	- 0.22	0.94	0.00	0.00

Table 3: (Continued)

Dimensions	Perception Mean (SD)	Expectation Mean (SD)	Mean Difference (Level of Satisfaction)	SD	p1	p2
Site Attributes						
Safety	3.77(0.84)	4.21(0.86)	- 0.44	1.05	0.00	0.00
Entrance Fee	3.03(1.13)	3.79(0.96)	- 0.76	1.42	0.00	0.00
Information Centres	3.42(0.91)	3.91(0.79)	- 0.49	1.09	0.00	0.00
Accessibility	3.62(0.84)	3.82(0.86)	- 0.20	1.05	0.00	0.00
Destination Attributes						
Meals	3.83(0.90)	4.03(0.91)	- 0.20	0.84	0.00	0.00
Hotel Rooms	3.78(0.83)	4.11(0.80)	- 0.33	0.93	0.00	0.00
Hotel Staff Assistance	3.93(0.83)	4.09(0.83)	- 0.15	0.83	0.00	0.00
Service Quality	3.90(0.82)	4.14(0.80)	- 0.23	0.86	0.00	0.00
Infrastructure	3.73(0.85)	3.98(0.85)	- 0.25	0.99	0.00	0.00
Security	3.94(0.77)	4.19(0.78)	- 0.24	0.86	0.00	0.00
Cost	3.74(0.86)	4.10(0.74)	- 0.36	1.00	0.00	0.00
Natural Attractions						
Natural Scenery	4.28(0.83)	4.38(0.87)	- 0.10	0.68	.004	.002
Landscape	4.36(0.78)	4.41(0.78)	- 0.05	0.69	.123	.103
Wild Life Activities	4.04(0.81)	4.19(0.89)	- 0.16	0.80	.000	.000
Climate & weather	4.05(0.77)	4.17(0.81)	- 0.12	0.87	.005	.004

As for natural attraction, natural scenery, wildlife activities, climate and weather have significant negative gaps. Although natural scenery and climate are beyond the control of the authority and managers, diversity in terms of wildlife activities can be further improved to reduce the gaps between expectation and perception. In sum, there is an urgent need for improvement in staff assistance, site general attributes and general destination attributes.

5. Discussion and Implications

This section summaries main findings and discusses policy and institutional implications for Sri Lanka which include identifying constraints and improving rules and regulations governing heritage sites to enhance tourist satisfaction.

Findings reveal that tourist perceptions on general attributes at Sigiriya such as safety, information centres, accessibility and entrance fee fell far short of their expectation. Additionally, staff assistance which includes staff professionalism, friendliness, knowledge and guide assistance were not up to par. Other general destination attributes such as hotel facilities, price, infrastructure and service quality also did not match visitor expectations. The findings point out major areas for improvement especially for industry service providers. Policy-makers should look into enhancing safety aspects of the site by maintaining safe hand railings with either side covered on the stairways, regular maintenance on hand railings, stairways and pathways that lead the tourists up to the rock where the ruins of the ancient castle are located. The creation of formal institutions is required. Specifically, sufficient information and support centres and sign boards should be made available to assist travellers who do not wish to have guide assistance. On-site infrastructure could be developed to provide easy accessibility and the site should be planned and organised more efficiently to enable visitors enjoy and appreciate the attractions and cultural values of Sigiriya. Overall, these findings suggest the management should work towards providing a quality environment with added facilities such as cafeteria and washrooms. This would go in part to allay concerns on high entrance fee that is being imposed on international tourists.

In terms of site staff assistance, policymakers as well as the management should take necessary measures to recruit skilled staff and provide professional training on customer services prior to appointing them. Brainstorming sessions, grooming, communications skills and soft skills development programmes should be carried out on a regular basis and staff should be rewarded based on their performances. Setting a code of ethics, service standards and information/guidelines should be made available to the staff to provide better services. Overall, the results from the general destination attributes imply that further improvement and development in the tourism industry are needed to attract

tourists to the island. Although heritage, natural and cultural attractions show a negative mean difference, relatively, the mean scores indicate that visitors were satisfied in these dimensions. Nevertheless, it still implies room for improvement on heritage, natural and cultural dimensions.

Just as it is essential to effectively promote and preserve the heritage sites, it is also important have good tour guides to provide a superior tour experience. Providing an effective interpretation on the history, structures of the historic buildings and paintings/art throughout the site and at every significant station is imperative. Free pocket site maps, brochures in different languages and a sufficient number of sign boards and clear directions on each path way will ensure a more enjoyable experience for visitors.

Cultural activities such as cultural villages are another important aspect which the managers can pay attention to. They can also develop unique cultural products such as providing a typical cultural village experience and engage in cultural actions such as harvesting/cultivation. Visitors should also be encouraged to revisit to experience the outcome of their participation in these agricultural activities. Additionally, involving visitors in preparing Sri Lankan food using village-grown vegetables/fruits, allowing hands-on activities in making their own *batik* prints, handicraft and paintings, participating in traditional singing, music and dance activities, dairy farming activities and allowing visitor participation on cultural sports will reduce the gap resulting from expectation and perception.

More nature-based activities such as sightseeing, cycling, trekking, nature walks, presentation and interpretation of the landscaping and wildlife watching should be promoted and included in the product bundle or package offered to tourists visiting the site. Incorporating the natural aspect to the fullest to provide a satisfactory tour experience that meets expectation is important. The guides and site staff may highlight the surrounding nature and its unique beauty such as animals in the park that include tigers, deer, birds and butterflies among others. Showcasing photographs, richly demonstrative panels or stuffed specimens of animals in their habitats will produce a unique feeling of the natural environment. Furthermore, a sense of belonging and involvement will enable tourists to enjoy themselves as well as convey to visitors that preservation and environmental protection is everyone's responsibility.

Future research can examine other tourism products and its weaknesses in similar areas of research. The focus can also be on socio-demographic characteristics of the visitors which may affect their expectations and perceptions. Thus, this study will be beneficial to distinguish issues affecting the expectations and perceptions of tourists visiting the heritage sites of Sri Lanka.

6. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, several conclusions can be made. Service providers must take the trouble to understand tourist needs and their expectations which is key to successful tourism. Thus, site managers and service providers must ensure a positive experience is provided to visitors at all times. By analysing the perception of visitors, the site managers can develop and formulate marketing strategies to meet the needs of their target market segments. It is essential to meet visitor expectations regarding general attributes such as ensuring safety of the visitors climbing up the rock, providing on-site facilities to get value for money experience ensure information on the site and the surroundings are easily available and accessible. It is also important to ensure that the heritage, natural and cultural aspect of the site are well maintained, effectively interpreted and preserved for future tourists. When tourists' wants and needs are understood and appreciated, managers are able to minimise dissatisfactions and ensure visitor loyalty towards their products and services. The findings of the study are useful for policy-makers to better understand and allocate resources and devise more effective strategies to provide a satisfactory experience to tourists who visit Sigiriya. Thus, if their expectations are met, it will more likely encourage revisits or to influencing them to recommend the site by word of mouth.

Note

¹ North defines institutions as formal and informal arrangements that affect economic performance. In a similar way, institutions, both formal and informal, affect expectations and satisfaction of tourists.

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