

GUEST PREFERENCES AND FUTURE CHALLENGES IN THE POST COVID-19 SCENARIO- AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF HOTEL FRONT OFFICE DEPARTMENT

*Rahul Bharti¹ and Sonia Sharma²

¹Faculty, Institute of Hotel Management, Jyotisar, Kurukshetra, & Research Scholar, SOTHSM, IGNOU, Delhi,

²Associate Professor, SOTHSM, Indira Gandhi National Open University, Delhi

*rahul1769@gmail.com, soniasharma@ignou.ac.in

ABSTRACT

Background: *The hospitality industry is recovering, evolving, and adapting itself in the post COVID-19 era through innovative and sustainable practices backed by the use of technology in entire hotel operations. The hotel Front Office department is no exception in utilizing these evolved practices to understand and influence the customer behaviour while exploring all possible measures to enhance the overall guest stay experience in the post- COVIDtimes. The Front Office department plays a vital role in the passage of accurate and timely information required for flawless guest management in the hotels. Throughout the COVID-19 period, the Front Office practices have evolved through different stages depending upon the factors such as guest preferences, safety and security measures, hygienic conditions, sustainability and use of technology. Objectives: The major objectives are to study the post COVID-19 Hotel guest preferences of non-star category hotels with respect to changing scenario in the Hospitality Industry, to analyse the gaps between hotel guest expectations and perceptions in service quality with special mention of the front office department and to highlight the future challenges faced by hotel industry and suggest possible measures to overcome these challenges. Methodology: Hybrid research approach has been adopted in this study. Grounded theory in qualitative research approach with interview and semi-structured questionnaires are the data collection tools. Survey method with structured questionnaire are quantitative data collection tools. Collected data were analysed through content and thematic tools for qualitative data and quantitative data were analysed through descriptive statistics (Mean, SD, percentage) and paired t-test as an inferential statistical tool has been applied in this study for conclusion purpose. Results: Result indicates negative as Expected value – perceived value = - (negative). Conclusion: It is concluded that hotel-guests' are not satisfied as provided facilities are not as per guests' expectation. This study gives overview of guests' expectation. It helps hoteliers for modification of hotel's facilities for the guest. The limitation of the study is that the study is conducted in NCR only. Hotels of the same category in the other cities/town may be conducted for getting actual scenario of the phenomena of the hotels. In addition, the study proposes that hotels should adjust their room and service pricing to reflect the reduced demand during the COVID era. Furthermore, the hotel industry will face ongoing challenges, and hotels must be adaptable to remain competitive. By embracing new technologies, providing distinctive experiences, and implementing sustainable practices, hotels can overcome these challenges and flourish in the years ahead.*

Key Words: *NCR, Hotel, Guest Satisfaction, Accommodation Industry, Post- COVID, Adaptive Practices, Guest Satisfaction, Guest Preferences, Safety Measures, Sustainability, Technology.*

INTRODUCTION

Guests' preference in accommodation industry is very difficult as it is related numerous factors including demographic, and tangible and intangible factors. Units of the accommodation industry are hotel (star categories and non-star categories), and Guest house, Lodge, and others. Whatever units of the accommodation industry, the basic goal is to cater guests through their service to get profit for their existence, survival, and growth. Front Office in those units is crucial to draw attention of guests. Front Office is treated as a mirror of the accommodation units.

Hospitality industry has shown the signs of relief and rapid recovery after the pandemic. The global tourism and hotel product demand has seen a significant rise post- COVID and the industry feels promising ahead. The hotel brands have adopted the blend of technology and innovation with improvised service standards throughout the globe. Majority of the hotel brands have started truly caring about the sustainability factors to promote sales and attract customers. The hotels have also started to rely heavily on the Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) along with the internal reservation distribution channels during and post- pandemic. The growing demand has resulted into high competition and the battle for rooms, guests, labour and revenue will be fiercer in the coming days. According to Back to Hospitality Report(2021)the non-room revenue will play a vital role in the business mix. The hotels will be encouraged to implement various strategies to fight the competitive market of short- term rental reservations and can include the use of technology to enhance efficiency of operations.

India has witnessed a tremendous growth in the hospitality sector because of the increased demand of hospitality product during the last decade. The country has emerged as a global leader in the field of Information technology in the last few years which has positively contributed towards the increased demand of hospitality products especially in the developed cities of the country. Sadly, the COVID -19 pandemic and

repeated lockdowns thereafter, had an adverse impact on the economic growth of the nation, which reflected on the hospitality sector but even under these circumstances, the total contribution of tourism sector in India was 4.7% of the nation's economy. The figures of Indian Hospitality Trends and Opportunities-2021 shows that 31.7 million jobs, both directly or indirectly were generated by the tourism industry which added its contribution of 7.3% of the total employment in Indian economy. Owing to the nationwide lockdowns, the average hotel occupancies noticed a fiscal drop of 35.1% in the country and the Average Room Rate figure was Rs. 4598 during the year 2020-21. According to the 2022 Indian Hospitality Trends and Opportunities, the pandemic was the Great Indian Hospitality Reset (Khanna & Chalishazar, 2022), Organisations have paused, reflected, and acted on significant changes to their 'business as usual' approaches. Several of these modifications are likely permanent.

There are numerous challenges which need to be addressed for sustainable long-term growth; they comprise of expenses due to increase in inflation, supply chain disturbances and rise in the exchange rates. The Hotel Industry suffers from serious manpower crunch along with the talent deficit and it will take time to bring its truncated workforce to that of pre- COVID levels. The report also states that the nationwide occupancy was above 50% in 2021-22 and Average Room Rate was just short of Rs. 5000. The expected growth of the travel and tourism industry is forecasted at an average of 7.8% annually and it is also expected that additional 24 million jobs will be created in the coming decade. It is also mentioned in the 2022 Indian Hospitality Trends and Opportunities that the year 2022-23 can achieve 68% plus occupancy figures with a nationwide Average Daily Rate of Rs.5700. Similarly, the occupancy levels of 2023-24 will touch the figures of 70% with an ADR of about 6000 Rupees, thus it reflects that there will be promising recovery of the industry in the coming years. The study has significantly focussed on the Hotel Front Office Department, where the guest comes in direct contact with the

hotel staff. It is these aspects—the lodging of guests, the services this entails (reception, registration, food and beverage, house-keeping, etc.)—and the interactions specific to these establishments (guest-guest, guest-staff, and staff-staff) that require specific attention. The hotel is divided into various operational departments which work in coordination with each other for the success of common goals and objectives of the organization. There are four major departments in a hotel which are also known as the core hotel departments, the Front Office is one of them. This section reflects the face of the hotel and is one of the most important sections of the hotel organization. It serves as the first contact point for the guest and creates the initial impression of the hotel in the minds of the guests, reflecting the brand image of the organization. A positive impression created by the Front office staff serves as the key factor for comfortable and pleasant stay of the guest. The major functions of this department are to welcome the guest with warm greetings and smiling face, provide and manage guest rooms, circulate timely and accurate information to all departments and guests and manage guest room revenue. The department is the highest revenue producing section of the hotel thus majorly contributes to the hotel performance and yield statistics. It has different sub sections which perform various operations under front office such as: reservations, front desk, bell desk, information & telephone operators, business centre, concierge desk, travel desk, guest relations and back office.

The modifications to the SERVQUAL research instrument as developed by Parasuraman et al. (1991) remains the most commonly used model to assess the guest satisfaction towards the service quality offered by the front office depart of hotel industry.

Kumar and Vetrivel (2015) in their study report the impact, the front office practices have on guest satisfaction. They elaborate the greater impact of responsiveness among other factors on levels of guest satisfaction where communication skills are found to be detrimental factor. In National Capital

Region a considerable influence of tourists from different including non- English-speaking countries is expected. The proficiency of Front Office staff in different foreign languages removes the language hurdles and chances of miscommunication.

Varma and Patole (2013) studied this aspect in relation to Indian luxury hotel segment. This analysis strongly suggested foreign language proficiency of front office staff provides an edge over the competitors subsequently manifesting in customer loyalty and helps in building the brand image by positively impacting the guest satisfaction. The report suggests that the ability to communicate with customers in their language may lead to enhanced revenues as chances of room upgradation becomes significant.

Batinić (2014) highlights the importance of maintaining training and development standards in particular for front office employees. The standards include the basics for example implementation of personal hygiene standards, introduction to organisational affiliation standards, introduction to behaviour towards hotel guest standards etc. In addition to these, the author suggests the continuous need to develop the skill-set of front-office employees by facilitating various study and professional trips, providing facilities in form of language labs. In hotel premises for improving second language proficiency and through organization of seminars in sales psychology and quality of hospitality.

Zeithaml et al. (1990) reported the service performance of a hotel is greatly impacted by the commitment levels of the managerial staff. The knowledge of standard operating procedures (SOPs) related to different departments one aspect but the other more important aspect is the commitment towards the effective implementation of these SOPs. The service performance and guest satisfaction go hand-in-hand. Both these factors influence each other as service performance determines guest satisfaction and the guests' satisfaction feedback provides parameters on which hotel property can work to improve the service.

Gumaste et al. (2015) in their study find innovative front-office practices like sending the bill to guest's room prior to departure for guest to check as important initiative in building the brand-image. They suggest several other practices to improve guest satisfaction level.

The speed of actions in regard to room-availability, booking and billing is found to improve the guest satisfaction as reported by Jones and Lockwood (2004). They comment on the role of technology in enhancing the speed and at same time laid stress on proper training in software for the front-office staff to achieve higher guest satisfaction. A similar observation in regard to use of technology to improve guest satisfaction is offered by Toh and Potapova (2013). They comment on the advantages of staff-familiarity with Tele-Check-in, property management systems and the motivational levels of management to bring-in and train the hotel staff in latest technologies.

Based on guest satisfaction feedback, the effect of implementation of improved service standards can be monitored through Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which as mentioned by Srivastava and Maitra (2016) can be identified based on understanding of organization's values, mission, vision and SOPs. In their study they identify following KPIs for hotel industry – occupancy and average room rate, sources of revenue (different departments of hotel), occupancy percentage trend and average daily rate trend on weekdays and weekends; and movement in ARR. The movement in ARR depicts the performance of Front Office Department. With these KPIs, Srivastava and Maitra could conclusively assess the performance of 5-star hotels in NCR region for year 2009-2014.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the global hospitality industry, causing unprecedented disruptions in various sectors, including the accommodation and hotel industry. Gerve (2021) in their study aims to analyse the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the accommodation sharing industry and explore the underlying reasons for its disruption.

Specifically, the research examined how the unique characteristics of the accommodation sharing industry, which initially drove its growth, became its weaknesses during the pandemic. The research also suggests potential measures for the recovery of the post pandemic accommodation sector. Sujit et al. (2022) in their research have highlighted the impact of post pandemic in the hotel industry of Bengaluru city of Karnataka, India. The study draws a comparison between pre-COVID and post- COVID marketing strategies of hotels with respect to consumer perceptions and the changes in perception.

No study has been conducted to understand guests' expectation and perception gaps, Post COVID -19, in the non-star category hotels of NCR Delhi. Thus, the following objectives have been concluded.

The objectives of the study were:

- To study the post COVID-19 hotel guest preferences of non-star category hotels with respect to changing scenario in the Hospitality Industry.
- To analyze the gaps between hotel guest expectations and perceptions in service quality with special mention of the front office department.
- To highlight the future challenges faced by hotel industry and suggest possible measures to overcome these challenges.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: Hybrid (Qualitative and Quantitative) research design, for qualitative research design, the grounded theory has been applied to collect the data from source/sources. The study has been conducted in two-tier, first variables are identified through qualitative data analysis; data were collected through interview. In second step, the identified variables are used to construct structured questionnaire using 5-point Likert scale.

Locale: The study was conducted in the non-star category hotels in the Delhi NCR. 15 hotels of different sizes and ownership participated in study.

Sampling Design: The respondents of the study were the hotel guests who came for the purpose of stay. The sample size of 100 responses was collected for convenience purpose.

Tools and Technique: The data collection tool and techniques were interview and semi structure questionnaire respectively for qualitative data collection and structure questionnaire for quantitative data collection.

Data Analysis and Statistical Analysis : Collected data were analysed through content and thematic tools. Descriptive statistic; mean, percentage, SD etc to summarise the data and inference statistic; paired t-test was used in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Key findings in guest preferences in post-covid hotel industry.

There has been reset of procedures and practices followed by the hotels during and post- COVID time and some of them have become the new normal in the hospitality sector. Considering the guest preferences based on safety and hygiene, digital transactions, contactless guest management certain innovative practices were adopted by the hotel front office department which may earlier have been considered as luxuries but now have become the necessities for hotels to survive and grow. The following guest preference based on reservations, registrations, welcoming, check-ins, check-outs, billings and travel arrangements have been modified to cope up with the present post- COVID scenario. The following parameters were taken for study, based on review of literature, as parameters to frame questionnaire to collect data based on guest preferences of staying in non-star hotels in Delhi NCR.

Table1: Demographic profile of the guests

Demographic Parameters	Frequency	Percentage
1. Gender		
a) Male	60	60%
b) Female	40	40%

3. Education		
a) 10 th	12	12%
b) 12 th	22	22%
c) UG Level	48	48%
d) PG and above Level	18	18%
4. Monthly income (Rs.)		
a) 5000 to 20,000	25	25%
b) 20,001 to 35,000	55	55%
c) 35,001 to 50,000	20	20%
5. Purpose of visit		
a) Personal	28	28%
b) Tourism	52	52%
c) Business	15	15%
d) Others	05	05%

Table -1 represents the demographic profile where the gender ratio of the participants that included males 60% and female participants were 40%. The age in years of the respondents in the age group of 18-20 years, 10% of the people were noted, in the age group 26-33 years, 45%, similarly 33-40 years, 25%, 41-48 years, 12% and above 49 years there were 8% respondents who contributed to the data. Education plays a vital role in travel and tourism as it provides valuable inputs for facilitation of travel and accommodation. Table – 1 mentions 12% of the respondents were high school pass outs, 22% were 12th pass, 48% were undergrads whereas postgraduates and above were 18% respectively. Monthly income is an important factor in the choice of hotels. The table depicts 25% respondents were earning between 5000 to 20,000 Rupees per month, similarly 55% were earning between 20,001 to 35,000, and 20% lied in the bracket of 35001 to 50,000. Similarly, 28% of the respondents mentioned in the purpose of visit as personal reasons of travel and stay, 52% mentioned tourism whereas 15% were travelling due to business purpose. Rest 5% had mentioned other nonspecific reasons for their stay and travel.

Mode of Reservation: Reserving rooms through the Online Travel Agencies is preferred by guests who is more convenient and provides discounts and offers. Websites like trivago.com, goibibo.com, makemytrip.com, booking.com etc. have developed their own mobile apps which are much easier to use. Although during COVID-19 pandemic majority of the reservations were confined to local/domestic guests, however now post-COVID the international travel is again gaining momentum. Advance payment of bookings is still preferred by the hotels. The bar graph -1 reflects that 84% of the respondents had bookings through online mode, 10% through telephonic whereas only 6% of the participant respondents preferred to arrive hotels as walk-in guest having on the spot booking.

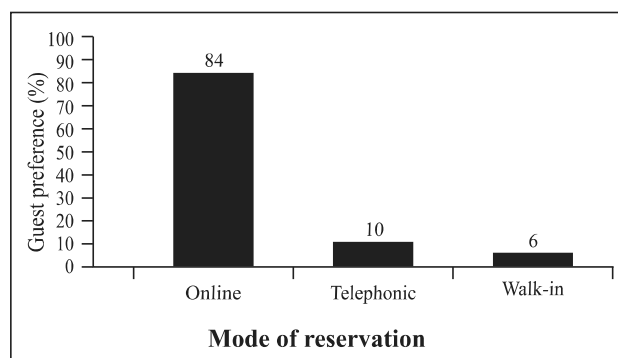


Figure 1: Guest preference with respect to mode of reservation

Thermal scanning and sanitization: During Arrival, some of the hotels which occupy place near the airport have thermal scanners to monitor body temperature, sanitization of hands and luggage is a part of normal procedures. Guests prefer that the welcome staff should wear face masks and welcome process is conducted without any contact. Hotels want to ensure that the check-in is processed with minimum delay and heavy traffic of guests in the hotel lobby is avoided all the times. A constant hygiene and sanitization of all hotel public areas including hotel lobby is ensured by housekeeping staff. The bar graph 2 suggests that 89% of the guests preferred the COVID-19 protocols to be followed, 5% did not preferred due

to various reasons and rest 6% were neutral of their opinion on thermal scanning and sanitization.

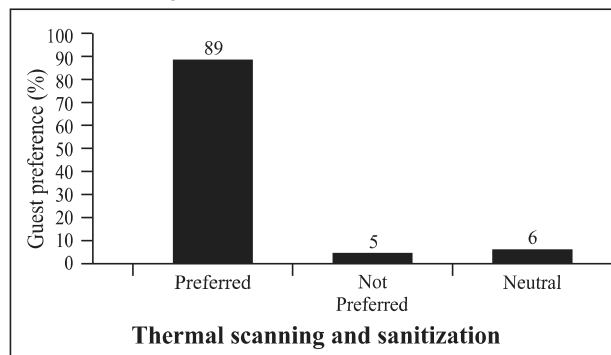


Figure 2: Guest preference with respect to thermal scanning and sanitization.

Contactless Registration and Guest Management: The process of registration has been further simplified with guests being allowed to fill up short registrations forms themselves. The use of cashless digital transactions using taping of credit/debit cards and scanning of QR (quick response) codes is encouraged and sanitization of key cards before handing over to guests is practiced in many hotels. Digital rate lists and information brochures are offered to guests over their mobile phones. Similarly in coffee shops and F&B outlets, digital menu is provided to the guests. The guests are encouraged to submit COVID-19 negative test reports and COVID-19 vaccination reports time to time as per the government notifications. Bar graph 3 states that 65% guests preferred contactless guest management, 20% did not preferred whereas 15% remained neutral.

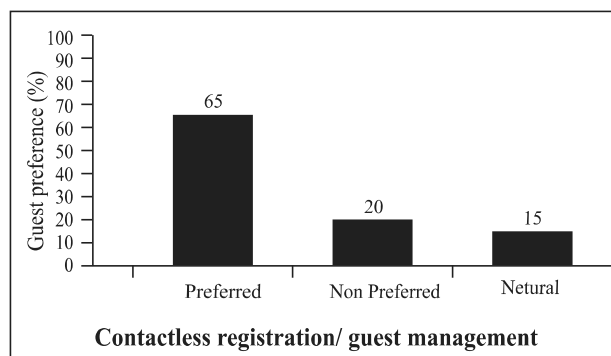


Figure 3: Guest preference with respect to contactless registration/guest management

Differential Pricing/ Discounts: Hotels have faced challenges in improving the situation of occupancy and attracting guests during the pandemic era. In order to overcome this, hotels have made revisions in their *room pricing strategies* from time to time. The customers expect lower room tariffs and welcomed discounts. This trend is continued throughout all hotel brands adopting the policy to sell at lower price than to leave room vacant. In order to improve the Revenue per available room, the pricing of the hotel rooms have continued to remain in favour of the consumers. Bar graph 4 depicts that 93% guests wanted discounts to be applied while no one seemed to disagree to that preference, 7% kept neutral on the discounting policy.

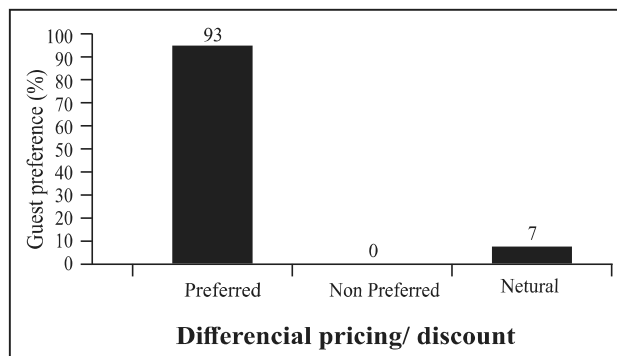


Figure 4: Guest preference with respect to differential pricing/discounts

Reduced Staffing: The hotel owners have learnt during the COVID-19 duration that reduced staffing and *multi-tasking* was the key to survive during hard times; therefore, hotels still adopt the COVID strategies of minimum hiring and maximum utilization of human resource available. Regular health check-ups and COVID-19 vaccination of staff ensures the safety of the in-house guests, in return it provides the guests peace of mind and health security. Bar graph 5 indicates that 52% guests were okay with reduced staffing while 40% did not favor that 8% remained neutral on staffing.

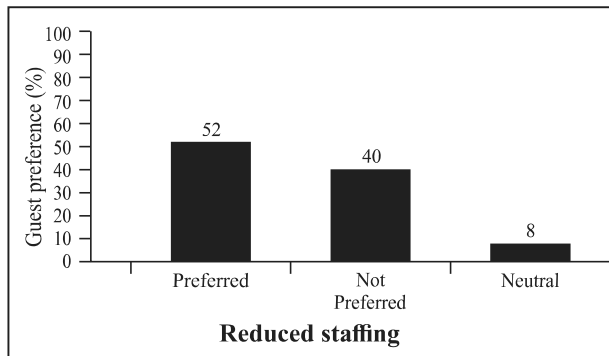


Figure 5: Guest preference with respect to reduced staffing

Simplified checkouts: Guest expectations are met during the departure process also. Majority of hotels have adopted timely express check out practices to ensure minimum waiting time during check out and final settlement of bills. Digitalized billing for final bill settlement and online feedback filling has been continued by the hotels post COVID also. Bar graph 6 indicates that 89% guests were happy over simplified check out, 2% did not preferred, and 9% remained neutral.

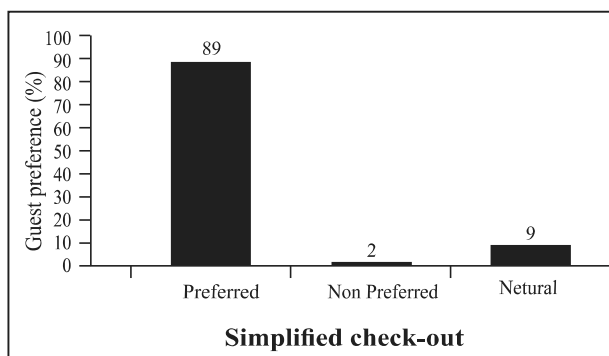


Figure 6: Guest preference with respect to simplified checkout

Personalized services: During the stay experience of the guests have also been improvised through high standard of personalized service, up-gradation of cleanliness standards and timely supply of desired information through technology and networking mobile apps. Bar graph 7 shows inclination of guests towards personalized services which raises the standard bars, 3% did not wanted any such standards, 15% opted for neutral opinion.

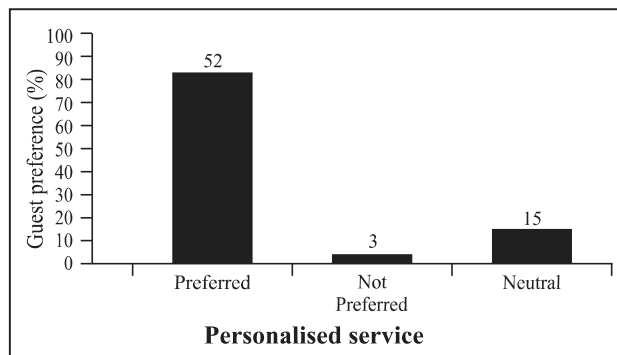


Figure 7: Guest preference with respect to personalized service

Table 2: Paired t-test on scores by visitors towards expectations and perceptions of tangibility

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	Computed t-value
Appealing décor & ambience of hotel	Expectations	4.24	100	0.509	-0.23	15.499*
	Perceptions	4.01	100	0.574		
Modern and well-placed equipment & gadgets at hotel	Expectations	4.27	100	0.543	-0.29	14.424*
	Perceptions	3.98	100	0.614		
Neat, clean appearance of the employees along with their uniforms, and grooming standards of the service providers	Expectations	4.35	100	0.577	-0.70	12.785*
	Perceptions	3.65	100	0.608		
Promotion/Marketing	Expectations	4.54	100	0.654	-0.89	13.334*
	Perceptions	3.65	100	0.491		
Tangibility	Expectations	4.95	100	0.470	-1.20	20.979*
	Perceptions	3.75	100	0.406		

N.B:- * - Significant at 5% level ($P < 0.05$) for DF = 99.5-point Likert scale used 1= very bad and 5= very good.

The result shows that there are gaps between expectation and perception. It is meant guest are not satisfied as mean differences are in negative. Guests are stratified if $Expectation > perception$.

The New Normal and the future trends in hospitality:

The data indicates that despite the pandemic-related issues, people still have a strong urge to travel and socialize. These are just some of the key trends that will shape the hospitality sector in the post-COVID era. To succeed in this new,

Table 3: Paired t-test on scores by visitors towards expectations and perceptions of reliability

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	Computed t-value
On time delivery / performance of all activities as promised	Expectations	4.19	100	0.482	-0.67	12.313*
	Perceptions	3.52	100	0.679		
Sincere interest shown by the staffs to solve any queries / problems	Expectations	4.13	100	0.439	-0.43	22.191*
	Perceptions	3.70	100	0.597		
Well maintained & Error free records keeping activities	Expectations	4.13	100	0.438	-0.29	27.633*
	Perceptions	3.84	100	0.554		
Professional and competent front office staff	Expectations	4.17	100	0.497	-0.49	16.949*
	Perceptions	3.68	100	0.642		
Efficiency in operations	Expectations	4.14	100	0.460	-0.58	16.339*
	Perceptions	3.56	100	0.609		
Reliability	Expectations	4.15	100	0.421	-0.50	30.279*
	Perceptions	3.65	100	0.467		

N.B:- * - Significant at 5% level ($P < 0.05$) for DF = 99.5-point Likert scale used 1= very bad and 5= very good.

Table 4: Paired t-test on scores by visitors towards expectations and perceptions of responsiveness of front office staff

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	Computed t-value
Properly informing the customers about the services and what to be expected from the hotels	Expectations	4.19	100	0.482	-0.67	19.68*
	Perceptions	3.52	100	0.679		
Employees are always willing to help the customers	Expectations	4.13	100	0.439	-0.43	4.898*
	Perceptions	3.70	100	0.597		
Promptness in offering the various services	Expectations	4.12	100	0.438	-0.28	9.694*
	Perceptions	3.84	100	0.554		
Prompt responses towards queries & complaints of the customers	Expectations	4.17	100	0.497	-0.49	27.064*
	Perceptions	3.68	100	0.642		
Responsiveness	Expectations	4.15	100	0.421	-0.51	19.47*
	Perceptions	3.64	100	0.467		

N.B:- * - Significant at 5% level ($P < 0.05$) for DF = 99.5-point Likert scale used 1= very bad and 5= very good.

landscape, hotels will need to remain flexible, adapt quickly to changing circumstances, and prioritize the health, safety, and

Table 5: Paired t-test on scores by visitors towards expectations and perceptions of assurance

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	Computed t-value
Courteous and friendly (Respectful) behaviour of the front staff	Expectations	4.10	100	0.343	-0.24	33.646*
	Perceptions	3.86	100	0.465		
Sense of safety (Physical) & security (psychological) while dealing with the hotel	Expectations	4.09	100	0.335	-0.26	31.471*
	Perceptions	3.83	100	0.466		
Trustworthy Staffs	Expectations	4.15	100	0.394	-0.23	32.051*
	Perceptions	3.92	100	0.417		
Adequate knowledge & Skills possessed by the employees to serve the customers	Expectations	4.12	100	0.367	-0.41	23.324*
	Perceptions	3.71	100	0.514		
Assurance	Expectations	4.11	100	0.318	-0.28	40.577*
	Perceptions	3.83	100	0.337		

N.B:- * - Significant at 5% level (P<0.05) for DF = 99.5-point Likert scale used 1= very bad and 5= very good

Table 6: Paired t-test on scores by visitors towards expectations and perceptions of empathy

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	Computed t-value
Understanding the specific needs of the customers	Expectations	4.15	100	0.404	-0.38	23.277*
	Perceptions	3.77	100	0.608		
Individual / Personal attention given to the customers	Expectations	4.11	100	0.353	-0.32	25.739*
	Perceptions	3.79	100	0.542		
Convenient hours of operations of the hotel	Expectations	4.24	100	0.475	-0.72	9.733*
	Perceptions	3.52	100	0.561		
Employees have the best interests of the customers while dealing with them	Expectations	4.17	100	0.436	-0.47	20.820*
	Perceptions	3.70	100	0.552		
Obtaining personal feedbacks from the customers	Expectations	4.42	100	0.528	-0.73	6.777*
	Perceptions	3.69	100	0.578		
Empathy	Expectations	4.22	100	0.333	-0.53	23.657*
	Perceptions	3.69	100	0.401		

N.B:- * - Significant at 5% level (P<0.05) for DF = 99.5-point Likert scale used 1= very bad and 5= very good.

well-being of their guests and employees. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the travel and tourism industry, as a result, many businesses forced to shut down temporarily or permanently. However, as vaccination for the cure of COVID-19 continue to roll out worldwide, this section

is recovering slowly. Palmer (2020) discusses the impact of COVID-19 on the travel and tourism industry and the potential long-term effects on consumer behaviour. As per Hospitality Industry: All your questions answered (2021), the industry includes various sectors, including food and beverage, lodging, travel and tourism, and recreation. With a history that dates back to ancient Greece, the hospitality industry has evolved to prioritize customer satisfaction and service. The use of technology and the increasing demand for sustainable tourism are some of the significant trends shaping the hospitality industry's future. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the industry's vulnerability to unexpected changes such as natural disasters, pandemics, and geopolitical events.

Sigala (2020) explored the impacts and implications of COVID-19 on the tourism industry and its research. The author discussed how the pandemic has affected various aspects of the industry, including tourism demand, supply chains, and destination management. The paper also highlighted the importance of advancing and resetting industry and research to support post-pandemic recovery. Sigala (2020) recommended several actions, such as embracing innovation, enhancing collaboration, and developing sustainable tourism practices, to promote the industry's resilience in the face of future crises. In their report for the World Economic Forum, Oaten et al. (2015) discuss the adaptability of the global hotel industry to uncertainty. The authors highlight the increasing resilience of the industry to terrorism shocks, as indicated by Deloitte and STR Global analysis. The authors also discuss the importance of technology in enhancing the industry's adaptability, such as the use of big data analytics to anticipate changes in demand and the adoption of mobile technologies to improve the guest experience.

Based on the telephonic as well as face-to-face interview with the guests and the hotel staff of hotels included in the study and the review of the latest literature on COVID and Post- COVID

duration, some latest trends that are likely to influence and shape the hospitality sector in the post-COVID era were identified and are mentioned 1) Health and Safety: The pandemic has highlighted the importance of health and safety in the hospitality sector. Therefore, hotels will continue to prioritize hygiene and cleanliness measures, such as frequent sanitization, social distancing for staff and guests.

2) Contactless Technology: To reduce physical contact, contactless technology such as mobile check-in, virtual concierge, and digital payments will become more prevalent in hotels. 3) Flexibility and Adaptability: With the on-going uncertainty around travel restrictions and changing consumer preferences, hotels will need to remain flexible and adaptable to respond to changes in demand. 4) Personalization: As guests become more selective about their travel experiences, hotels will need to offer more personalized services to meet their individual needs and preferences. 5) Sustainability: The pandemic has increased awareness of environmental issues, and hotels will need to implement more sustainable practices, such as reducing plastic waste, sourcing local and organic food, and reducing energy consumption. 6) Wellness: Guests will place a greater emphasis on wellness and wellbeing, and hotels will need to offer more health and wellness services, such as fitness centres, spas, and healthy food options. 7) Local Tourism: With on-going travel restrictions, local tourism will become more popular, and hotels will need to adapt their offerings to appeal to domestic travellers. 8) Social Responsibility: Guests will expect hotels to act in a socially responsible way, such as supporting local communities, promoting diversity and inclusion, and reducing their environmental impact. 9) Flexible Booking Policies: To provide peace of mind for guests, hotels have introduced flexible booking policies, which allow guests to cancel or modify their reservations without penalty. 10) Emphasis on Outdoor Spaces: Many hotels are emphasizing outdoor spaces, such as rooftop terraces, gardens, and balconies, to provide guests with more space and fresh air. 11) Rise of Work

cations: With more people working remotely, hotels are catering to this new trend by offering "workcation" packages that provide guests with a comfortable workspace and high-speed internet. 12) Embrace of Technology: Hotels are leveraging technology to enhance the guest experience, from digital room keys to mobile room service orders and virtual concierge services.

CONCLUSION

Based on the study, it can be inferred that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the entire hospitality industry. To ensure the survival and future growth prospects of hotels, they must adopt innovative and sustainable practices that evolve over time. During the pandemic, certain front office practices have either completely changed or become less important. Going forward, the "new normal" will prioritize safety, hygiene, and cleanliness, digital and mobile-based procedures, and reduced human contact. Technology will play an important role in all hotel practices. The study suggests that hotels should prioritize the use of practices such as paperless digital check-ins and check-outs, innovative technology, social distancing, minimal traffic in public areas, enhanced hygiene and safety standards, and limited guest contact management. The study also suggests that room and service pricing should reflect the decreased demand during the COVID era. The hotel industry will continue to face challenges in the future, and hotels need to adapt to stay competitive. By embracing new technologies, offering unique experiences, and adopting sustainable practices, hotels can overcome these challenges and thrive in the years to come. Based on the above study, it can further be concluded that the hotel industry will continue to face challenges in the future, and hotels need to adapt to stay competitive. Following measures can be adopted to overcome the challenges ahead:

- Embracing new technologies
- Offering unique experiences
- Adopting sustainable practices

- Prioritizing health and safety
- Offering flexible booking policies
- Leveraging technology

Technology can play a pivotal role in creating safe spaces for social distancing, facilitating a contactless guest interface to alleviate guest concerns for safe hygiene and rebuilding customer confidence to address the trust deficit. Thus, hotels can adapt to the new normal and emerge stronger in the long run.

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