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Platformization of Travel and Tourism Real Estate: A Study on the Operation of Online Tourist Accommodation Booking Platforms in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Tourism enterprises, products and experiences, market environments, and destinations have all undergone major transformations due to digital technologies. The traditional roles of tourism producers and customers have also been changed by digitalisation, with the emerging new roles, partnerships, business models, and competencies. Therefore, paying attention to these developments is essential to make Sri Lanka a better tourist destination. As such, the present study explores the digital presence of tourist accommodation establishments in Sri Lanka with the intention of providing insights into a national digital strategy. The study is exploratory in nature and adopts an internet-based research methodology while reviewing relevant literature. The study found that most Star Class, Unclassified, and Boutique Hotels in Sri Lanka have a website and facilitate their customers to book their accommodation through the website equipped with a booking engine. In comparison, most guest houses, heritage bungalows, heritage homes, homestay units, hostels, rented apartments, and rented homes do not have a website. It was also found that many tourist accommodation service providers who provide their services through third-party online booking platforms are not registered with the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. This trend has been identified as a standard and compliance risk for all stakeholders in the industry. This study would be helpful for policymakers to understand the growing importance of these platforms and introduce incentives and appropriate guidelines for the sustainability of the tourism industry in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: *Platformization, tourist accommodation, online accommodation booking platforms, travel and tourism industry, Sri Lanka*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the world's largest industries and relies heavily on information. Information and communication technologies, including the internet, are the most effective means of disseminating any information (Marcussen, 2009). This has led to e-tourism, or the digitalisation of the entire tourism industry and infrastructure. Technology is reshaping the tourism industry, determining the strategy and competitiveness of tourism organisations and destinations (Buhalis & Law, 2008). In order to benefit from the technological paradigm changes, many organisations, as expected, had to transform their strategic management and marketing and reinvent the best operational practices. Technological advancements are a driving force behind tourism growth and competitiveness, and modern technologies have invented “democratised travel” by allowing more people and more communities to benefit from tourism’s growth (Van Doorn, 2020). Accordingly, tourists can now directly access reliable information, communicate with suppliers, and ultimately get the best value.

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Information and communication technology has increased competitiveness among tourism businesses by introducing openness, speed, versatility, and a wide range of options. The customer can easily select a destination, compare rates, and complete financial arrangements using information and communication technologies. These technologies provide innovative and valuable tools to tourism businesses, allowing them to expand their presence in the global tourism sector (Lassnig, 2006). To plan their journeys, an increasing number of people use online travel agencies (OTAs), digital user-generated content (UGC), and other digital tools. According to Lopez-cordova (2020), in 2014, 59 per cent of European Union residents travelling internationally used digital tools to book hotels, and 67 per cent used digital tools to book air travel. The proportion of travellers using online lodging services in the United Kingdom rose from 42 per cent in 2007 to 52 per cent in 2017 (Lopez-cordova, 2020). The consumption patterns of Millennials, who were born between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s, and Generation Z, who were born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, along with other emerging generations, will account for the majority of domestic and foreign visitors by 2040 (OECD, 2020). Since Millennials and Generation Z have grown up with instant and direct access to information provided by digital technology, how they use it and what they expect from technology will continue to affect how tourism services are delivered. Trends such as increased use of online and mobile platforms (e.g., websites, social media) to source information during the planning stage, decreased use of offline sources (e.g., tourist information centres, print media, hotel concierge), the tendency to stay online or connected in the destination and increased use of digital payment methods over the use of cash have a profound effect on the future of tourism (OECD, 2020). Furthermore, Millennials and Generation Z have embraced sharing over ownership more than previous generations. As a result, they are more engaged in the sharing economy (accommodation sharing, ride sharing, currency swap, and crowdsourcing) (OECD, 2020).

Tourist accommodation establishments are self-promoted businesses. They are physically present and have a beautiful stand where anyone can see them as a brand. This does not negate the fact that they must improve their exposure as much as possible. Because in the digital age, every organisation is ramping up its online marketing campaigns to increase sales and reach. Getting a website is the first step in establishing an online presence. It makes it easier for visitors to learn more about their options for accommodation, and it has become a common practice for potential travellers to use hotel websites or online travel agencies when they book a hotel room (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Wong & Law, 2005; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). By using websites, potential travellers can easily access different details, such as the price, availability, or previous customer reviews of a specific product. So they can look at the website, read the reviews, and book their accommodations. Hotel websites provide enormous revenue opportunities for hoteliers by increasing the number of reservations made through their own direct booking websites (Wong & Law, 2005).

A review of the literature reveals that there has been a considerable number of studies from Sri Lanka on hotel websites and online travel agents focusing on digital marketing strategy (Nuskiya, 2018; Punchihewa et al., 2018), decision-making behaviour of tourists (Gamage & Ahsan, 2014; Madhusankha et al., 2020), business performance (Samaraweera & Jayasiri, 2016) and business value (Abeysekara, 2017). However, there are no comprehensive studies about the digital presence of tourist accommodation service providers focusing on both hotel websites and third-party online accommodation booking platforms in Sri Lanka. To this end, the present study investigates the digital presence of tourist accommodation establishments in terms of brand

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website availability and association with third-party online accommodation booking platforms like Airbnb, Booking.com, Agoda, and Expedia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism can be defined as an act and a process of spending time away from home searching for leisure, relaxation, and enjoyment while making use of commercial services (John K. Walton, 2021). Tourism as a process has been identified as a series of five steps: dreaming, research, booking, experiencing and sharing (UNWTO, 2011). At present, in each phase of the process, digital platforms and digital technologies play a significant and dominant role. Information technology has considerably transformed international and local tourism by the relative simplicity and speed at which tourism-related facilities can be accessed (Aneja et al., 2020). At each phase of the tourism process, tourists are rapidly using new technology. The dreaming and research phases are facilitated by media advertisements, social media networks, information portals, and user-generated content websites like travel vlogs (UNWTO, 2011). Online booking services support the booking process for airlines, travel, and lodging (UNWTO, 2011). Digital technology enables travellers to recognise homestays or genuine tourism encounters that inspire travellers to experiment with authentic events, thus affecting the tourism experience process (Aneja et al., 2020). Lastly, in the sharing process, social media is used by people to post their interactions on social networking platforms (UNWTO, 2011). This interaction provides a feedback circle where the interactions exchanged on social networking sites and forums for knowledge sharing prompt others to dream and research stages (Aneja et al., 2020).

Digital technologies offer access to new markets for tourism service providers, lower entry barriers, and cost-effective marketing and advertising avenues (OECD, 2014). Tourism companies and service providers will benefit from the effective integration of digital technologies and, ultimately, the local economy. In a multitude of settings, tourism supports local economies. In the host country, foreign exchange income from tourism generates revenue and promotes demand for consumer goods and investment in other sectors of the economy (Hojeghan & Esfangareh, 2011). In addition, tourism leads to income from taxes. Tourism tax receipts are generated directly from income earned by businesses and workers and are generated indirectly by duties levied on goods and services purchased by tourists (Hojeghan & Esfangareh, 2011). For local entrepreneurs, the industry creates business opportunities that are particularly relevant in the age of the digital economy, as business opportunities are expected to increase for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and local industries due to the availability of digital technologies (Hojeghan & Esfangareh, 2011).

Zhang et al. (2006) have identified the characteristics of e-travel in their study as; 24/7 accessibility, destination information, search capability, feeling of being in control, a wide range of choices, low price, simple and easy to use, multimedia presentation, an online community to find answers to all questions and tech problems and online transactions. Travellers tend to book their trips online due to the convenience, control, lower fare/rates and more choices at the fingertip (Zhang et al., 2006). Therefore, Zhang et al. (2006) suggest that the user-friendly design of the e-travel websites' interfaces would make it easy and straightforward for travellers to search and locate the information they need. The concept of online accommodation booking platforms seems

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purely beneficial for all stakeholders. It gives travellers various choices within a vast range of prices, making the booking and planning quick, easy, and straightforward. Furthermore, the ratings and reviews on the accommodations and travel events are significant in increasing the ease of taking decisions on the places and events and improving the quality of services. On the other hand, it solves the problem of small and medium entrepreneurs' difficulty in reaching new customer groups due to the expensive marketing and limited options to address new customer groups by helping them to reach a global customer base and to market themselves professionally (Gössling & Lane, 2015). These digital platforms play a crucial role in "smart tourism". Smart tourism refers to using information and communication technologies to enhance tourism, much like smart cities (Tripathy et al., 2018). Smart tourism has been introduced in many parts of the world to build technical infrastructure that is accessible and convenient for visitors (Gretzel et al., 2015). In order to develop these infrastructures, modern technologies such as cloud computing, blockchain, the internet of things (IoT), and other technical developments concerning the integration of the technology with the real-world environment are being used (Gretzel et al., 2015). Smart tourism is an important development from "e-tourism", which relates to tourism facilitation by digital technologies (Aneja et al., 2020). It is a more advanced level of tourism informatisation. It leverages digital, smart, and virtual technologies to provide fully optimised and up-to-date knowledge related to tourism products and services, thus improving the user experience (Aneja et al., 2020).

Amidst these technological developments, the Sri Lanka Tourism Strategic Plan 2017-2020 recognized four significant failures that have affected the country's ability to thrive in the travel and tourism industry: coordination, institutional, resource, and market failures (Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs, 2017). Coordination failures and poor communication between government ministries, tourism-related institutions, and stakeholders concerning planning, management, and monitoring have adversely impacted the sector (Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs, 2017). New technology could provide a platform for such vital tourism services by directly connecting providers and customers, making the process much simpler and more convenient. As challenges to the tourism industry, the report identifies institutional shortcomings such as weak and politicised leadership and management at all government levels, lack of awareness and involvement in tourism by local communities, and insufficient attention to cultural heritage and natural habitat preservation (Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs, 2017). In this regard, digital platforms could be used to provide access and technological solutions that allow local communities to participate with fewer bureaucratic constraints. Social media platforms can be used to crowdsource community input and incorporate it into decision-making processes. Digital platforms could also foster sustainability by enabling underutilised assets to be efficiently utilised without new infrastructure (Pouri & Hilty, 2018). A well-planned digital strategy is essential to capitalize on the potential benefits offered by digital technologies for the Sri Lankan travel and tourism industry. Accordingly, it is necessary to identify the level of digitalisation and attempts made by various industry segments.

RESEARCH METHOD

The purpose of this study is to explore the digital presence of tourist accommodation establishments in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the following three research objectives were formulated.

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1. To analyse the website availability of registered tourist accommodation establishments in Sri Lanka.
2. To explore the online accommodation booking platforms operating in Sri Lanka.
3. To explore the future of online accommodation booking platforms operating in Sri Lanka.

The study is exploratory in nature and driven by an internet-based research methodology (Salkind, 2010). The following process was adopted to analyse the website availability of registered tourist accommodation establishments in Sri Lanka. First, registered tourist accommodation establishments in Sri Lanka were identified from the Sri Lanka Travel website *(https://www.srilanka.travel/)* published by Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau. Then, the name, type, grade, room capacity, and contact details of the listed establishments were scrapped from the website. Next, a comprehensive internet search was conducted through Google Search Engine to identify whether the establishments have a brand website and whether they are listed on an online accommodation booking platform. Finally, accommodation establishments that own a brand website were further analysed to identify whether they utilise a central reservation system for accommodation booking.

In order to analyse online accommodation booking platforms operating in Sri Lanka, primary data were collected through the web content analysis of online accommodation booking platforms identified using the Google search engine from August 2020 to September 2020. Search engines use special terms known as Boolean operators (AND, OR, and NOT) to allow users to combine search terms in different combinations. Accordingly, the "online accommodation booking" phrase was combined with "Sri Lanka" using AND operator to get the relevant search results. For this study, ten online booking websites were selected and determined by the location of the booking websites' headquarters or the target destination served by the websites (Table 01).

Table 01. The list of selected online accommodation booking platforms

Online Booking Platform	Headquarters
Agoda	*Singapore*
Airbnb	*San Francisco, California, United States*
Booking.com	*Amsterdam, Netherlands*
Booknow.lk	*Sri Lanka*
Expedia	*Seattle, Washington, United States*
Hotels.com	*Dallas, Texas, United States*
Orbitz	*Chicago, Illinois, United States*
Priceline	*Norwalk, Connecticut, United States*
Travelocity	*Dallas, Texas, United States*
Trip.com	*Singapore*
Vrbo	*Austin, Texas, United States*
Yoho Bed	*Sri Lanka*

The collected data were descriptively analysed using IBM SPSS, while spatial maps were produced using ArcGIS Pro. Finally, the future of online accommodation booking platforms was

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discussed by narratively reviewing the literature consisting of peer-reviewed articles, electronic magazines, and reports published by the SLTDA.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Tourist accommodation sector in Sri Lanka

The total number of SLTDA registered accommodation establishments as of 31st December 2019 was 2,620 (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2019), most of which are guest houses, followed by homestay units and bungalows. The majority of the accommodation establishments are clustered within the Colombo and Greater Colombo Resort Region and the South Coast Resort Region of Sri Lanka. Table 02 and figure 01 provide a detailed breakdown and spatial distribution of the accommodation establishments below.

Table 02. SLTDA registered accommodation establishments

Categorisation	Number of establishments	Percentage distribution %
Boutique Hotel	36	1.4
Boutique Villa	46	1.8
Bungalow	460	17.6
Classified Tourist Hotels	155	5.9
Guest House	1,050	40.1
Heritage Bungalow	4	0.2
Heritage Home	3	0.1
Home Stay Unit	548	20.9
Hostels	10	0.4
Rented Apartment	70	2.7
Rented Home	5	0.2
Tourist Hotel (Unclassified)	233	8.9

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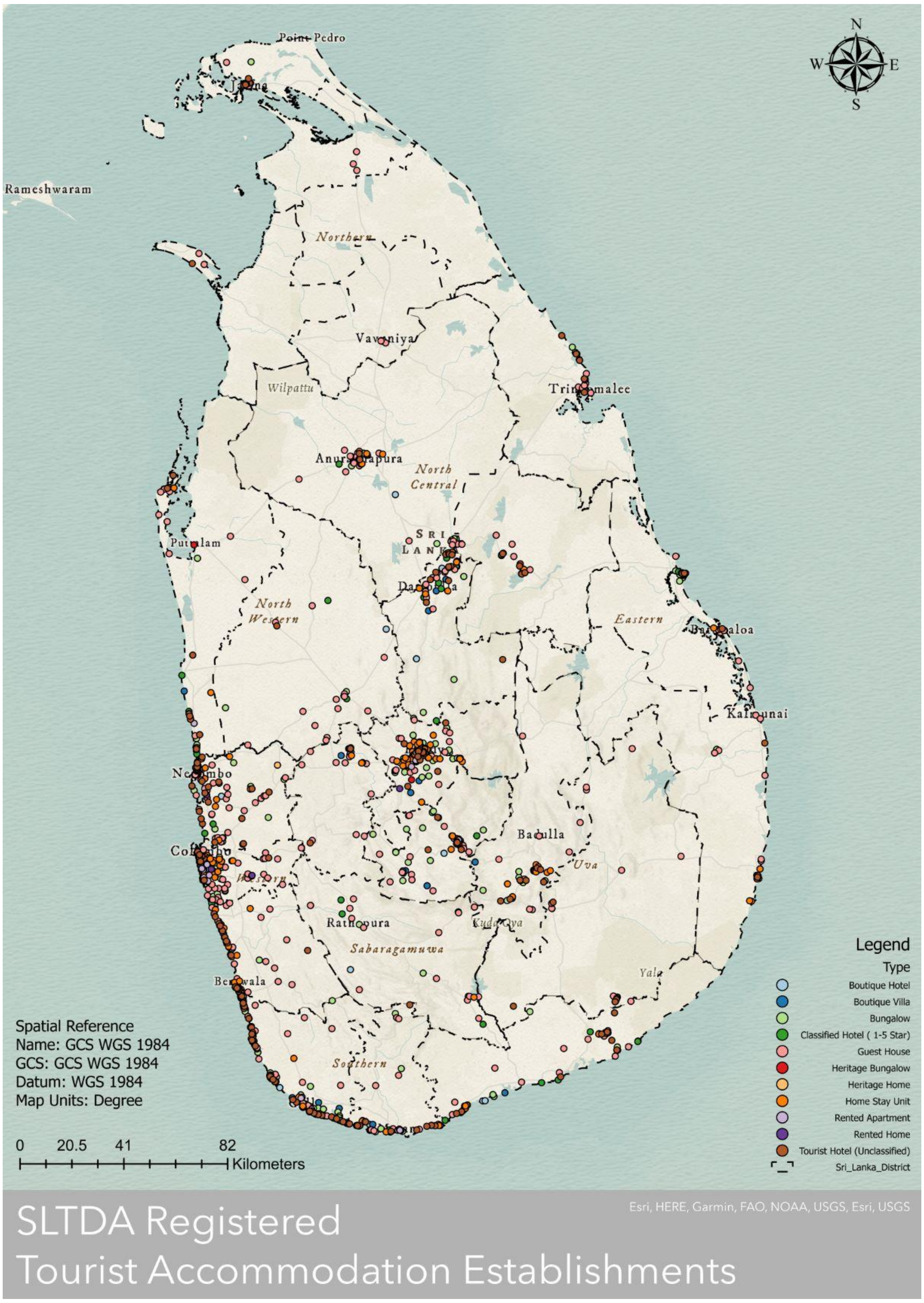

Figure 01. Map of SLTDA registered tourist accommodation establishments

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Apart from registered tourist accommodations, a surge in informal sector accommodations can be seen due to third-party online booking platforms. These online booking platforms have changed the nature of the traditional tourism accommodation sector, which primarily relied on phone calls and walk-in reservations. As these platforms operate all the time, potential tourists can make bookings whenever they prefer. It also offers a ranking of accommodations that helps tourists make decisions. In addition, these third-party online booking platforms provide an online marketplace that allows low-budget accommodations in the informal sector.

In Sri Lanka, these informal accommodations account for about 50 per cent of the business (Jayasinghe, 2017). The quality of the accommodations is crucial as it plays a significant role in the success of a tourist destination. Hence, in making Sri Lanka a top tourist destination, paying attention to the quality of the property is significant.

Along with online booking platforms, the informal accommodation sector shows a boom in the tourism industry, and it seems that the trend will continue to grow. Therefore, it is essential to pay attention to the operation of online booking platforms within the tourist accommodation sector in Sri Lanka.

Website availability of registered tourist accommodation establishments in Sri Lanka

According to table 03, around 27% of total tourist accommodation establishments have a brand website, and 44% of those websites include a central reservation system. About 34% of all tourist accommodation establishments are listed on single or multiple online booking platforms. Based on the tourist accommodation establishment category, the majority (74%) of classified tourist hotels maintain a brand website, and 71% of those websites include a central reservation system. Simultaneously, most properties (74%) are either listed on a single or multiple online accommodation booking platforms. On the other hand, accommodation categories like heritage bungalows, heritage homes, homestay units, hostels, and rented apartments have little to no digital presence, where the only digital record is the registered tourist accommodation registry's entry on the Sri Lanka Travel Website (https://www.srilanka.travel/).

Table 03. The digital presence of registered tourist accommodation establishments

Categorisation	Number of Establishments	Website Availability %	Availability of Central Reservation System* %	Listed on Online Booking Platforms* %
Boutique Hotel	36	89	63	97
Boutique Villa	46	89	61	96
Bungalow	460	27	18	48
Classified Tourist Hotels	155	74	71	74
Guest House	1,050	25	38	33
Heritage Bungalow	4	0	-	0
Heritage Home	3	0	-	0

ISSN 2722-2152 (online)

Home Stay Unit	548	1	0	1
Hostels	10	0	-	0
Rented Apartment	70	9	0	10
Rented Home	5	0	-	0
Tourist Hotel (Unclassified)	233	48	52	52
Total	2,620	27	44	34

* *Computed as a percentage from the number of properties with a website.*
* *Online Booking Platforms mentioned in Table 01.*

Tourist accommodation service providers usually use several online distribution platforms to have more online presence and draw as many customers as possible. Brand websites of tourist accommodation providers and third-party online travel agents or online accommodation booking platforms are such sources for booking accommodations online. Additionally, there are travel blogs, vlogs, information websites, and social media pages that direct to official websites or the listing page on an online accommodation booking platform. As per analysis in advertising and promoting their services, most boutique hotels, boutique villas, bungalows, and classified tourist hotels have established their brand websites to attract customers. Furthermore, they have provided the ability to book a room directly on the website without using intermediaries. Thus, they do not have to pay fees to online travel agents or other third parties and may directly offer their services to customers, making it the most profitable platform for tourist accommodation providers. While the rest of the accommodation categories are less likely to have a brand website, and even if they maintain a website, they rarely provide the facility to book a room through the website. Instead, these websites merely act as promotional tools to provide clients with necessary information such as room types, amenities, photographs of the premises, and contact information. Regardless of the category, most accommodations have been listed on one or more online accommodation booking platforms. The most popular online accommodation booking platform is Booking.com, followed by Agoda, Expedia, and Trip Advisor.

Online accommodation booking platforms operating in Sri Lanka

As Sri Lanka is a popular tourist destination, adapting new technology in the Sri Lankan tourism industry is essential. Therefore, Online Accommodation Booking Platforms or Online Travel Agents (OTAs) operating within Sri Lanka plays an important role. These platforms can be divided into two main categories based on the country of origin as Local and Global Accommodation Booking Platforms.

Many websites of Sri Lankan origin provide details on tourist accommodation services available in Sri Lanka. However, very few websites facilitate online booking with a central reservation system. Table 04 provides information on local online booking platforms operating in Sri Lanka.

ISSN 2722-2152 (online)

Table 04. Local Online Accommodation Booking Platforms

Platform	Description
Booknow.lk	Around 36 properties are listed.
Yohobed.com	More than 500 properties are listed.
Golanka.com	More than 300 properties are listed.

Global online booking platforms are also operating in Sri Lanka with much popularity. These platforms hold many properties in the various territories in Sri Lanka, providing opportunities for hosts to reach a more significant customer base than Local Online Accommodation Booking Platforms. Table 05 provides some information on global online platforms operating in Sri Lanka.

Table 05. Global Online Booking Platforms

Platform	Headquarters	Description
Agoda	Singapore	More than 11,002 properties in Sri Lanka are listed.
Airbnb	San Francisco, California, United States	More than 12,000 properties in Sri Lanka are listed.
Booking.com	Amsterdam, Netherlands	More than 13,183 properties in Sri Lanka are listed.
Expedia	Seattle, Washington, United States	More than 4,863 properties in Sri Lanka are listed.
Hotels.com	Dallas, Texas, United States	More than 4,494 properties in Sri Lanka are listed.
Orbitz	Chicago, Illinois, United States	More than 4,863 properties in Sri Lanka are listed.
Priceline	Norwalk, Connecticut, United States	More than 750 properties in Colombo and several properties in other cities are listed.
Travelocity	Dallas, Texas, United States	More than 4,863 properties in Sri Lanka are listed.
Trip.com	Singapore	More than 7,104 properties in Sri Lanka are listed.
Vrbo	Austin, Texas, United States	More than 300 properties in Sri Lanka are listed.

Rise of informal tourist accommodations in Sri Lanka

According to the Tourism Act, No. 38 of 2005, it is mandatory to register all institutions that engage in tourist accommodation under Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA). In addition, all non-star class hotels are encouraged to promote themselves to star grade. According to the gazette, the government has imposed mandatory and non-mandatory requirements to be followed by star-class hotels (Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 2016).

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Nevertheless, many informal tourist accommodation institutions advertise them as formal accommodations but have not fulfilled the requirements. These informal accommodations can easily spot through online accommodation booking platform listings. For example, according to table 03, there are only 2,620 registered accommodations, but there are more than 10,000 property listings on leading Online Booking Platforms like Booking.com, Airbnb, Agoda, and Expedia. Furthermore, according to SLTDA statistics, there are only 548 registered homestays, 05 rented homes, and 70 apartments, but there are more than 12,000 listings on Airbnb that continue in business, covering those three categories (Figure 02).

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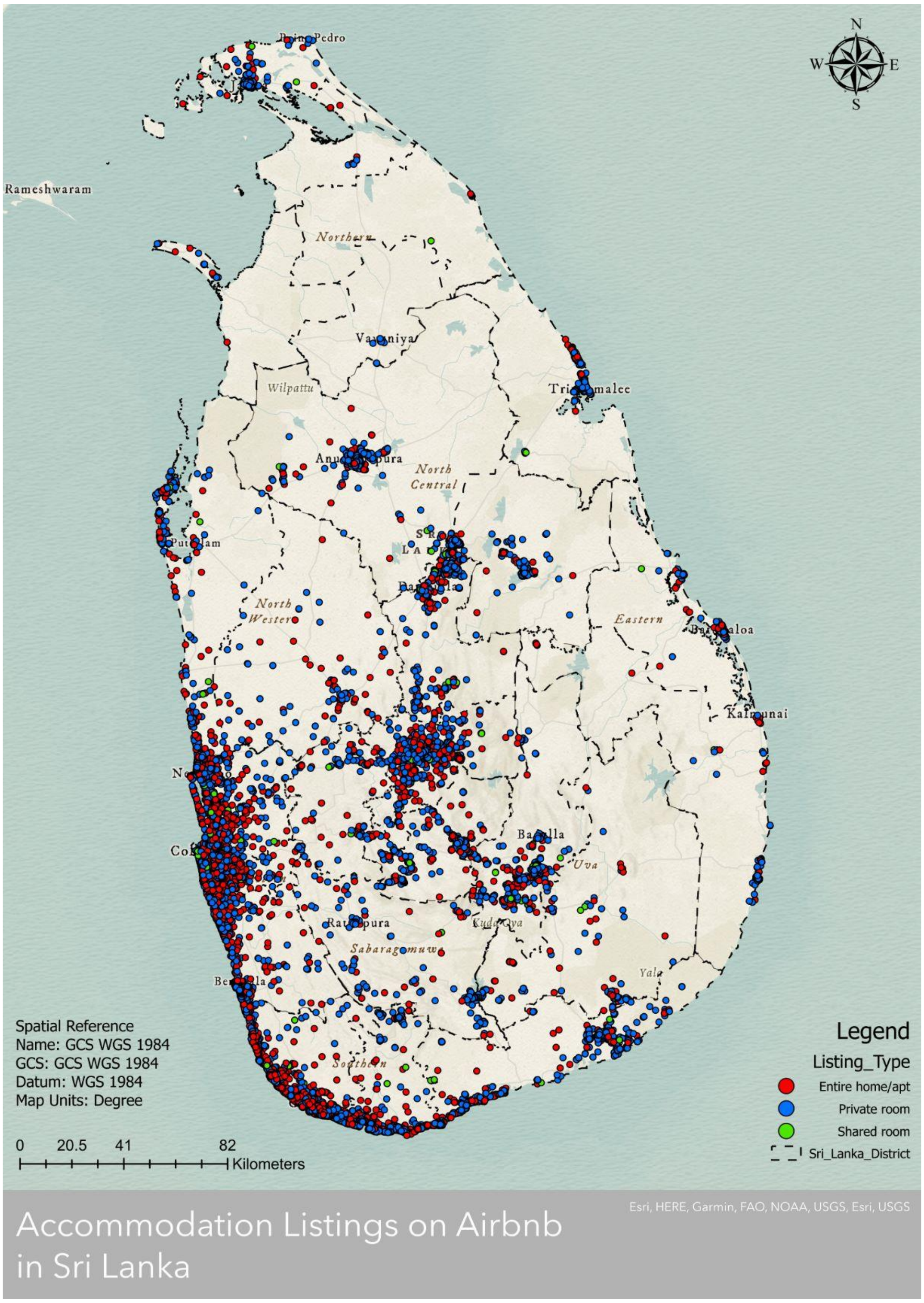

Figure 02. Map of accommodation listings on Airbnb in Sri Lanka

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The future of online accommodation booking platforms operating in Sri Lanka

"Sri Lanka Tourism Strategic Plan 2017-2020" by the Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs has pointed out online accommodation booking platforms as a potential driver of the future of the travel and tourism industry in Sri Lanka.

El-Said (2020), Phillips et al. (2017), and Sparks et al. (2013) have identified that consumers are increasingly relying on reviews on online accommodation booking platforms and social media platforms to research, choose and book accommodations, transportation, and other services while ignoring traditional registration, licensing and star ratings. Under the "Sri Lanka Tourism Strategic Plan 2017-2020", the Ministry of Tourism Development and Christian Religious Affairs has identified that Sri Lanka should take advantage of this new paradigm.

Online accommodation booking platforms like Booking.com and Airbnb play a significant role in the global tourism industry. Several studies indicated that online accommodation booking platforms have been crucial in promoting rural tourism to ease pressure on popular tourist destinations (Airbnb, 2020; Cors-Iglesias et al., 2020; Hausold, 2017; Sood et al., 2017). These platforms also have a diverse impact on the traditional tourist accommodation sector, especially on the mid-scale to budgetary accommodation providers (Koh & King, 2017; Zervas et al., 2017). Online booking platforms function either as an alternative for long-term house rental or as a platform for professional agencies (Business-to-Consumer services). This has resulted in a shortage of long-term rental homes and increased housing prices (Benítez-Aurioles & Tussyadiah, 2021).

In order to overcome the problems that businesses face and to introduce measures to mainstream more unregistered establishments, it is critical to review and better define the "informal sector". The presence of a significant and increasing proportion of tourism service providers who are not registered with the SLTDA has been identified as a standard and compliance risk for all stakeholders. This includes activities that are required to be registered or licenced by the SLTDA or provincial council, as well as activities for which licencing and registration requirements are unclear or unnecessary. The regulation of these informal accommodations offered by platforms like Airbnb is being reformed globally (Avdimiotis & Poulaki, 2019; Nieuwland & van Melik, 2020), and it has yet to be adopted by Sri Lanka accordingly.

CONCLUSION

Tourism as a process has been identified as a series of five steps: dreaming, research, booking, experiencing and sharing. In each phase of the process, digital platforms and digital technologies play a significant and dominant role. Currently, the accommodation booking process is supported by in-house booking systems developed by accommodation providers and online accommodation booking platforms like Booking.com, Airbnb, and Agoda.

Both formal and informal tourist accommodation providers have widely adopted these systems and platforms in Sri Lanka. Most traditional tourist establishments like star class, unclassified, and boutique hotels in Sri Lanka help their customers book their accommodations through their websites equipped with a booking engine. In comparison, most guest houses, heritage bungalows, heritage homes, homestay units, hostels, rented apartments, and rented homes do not have a website. When they have a website, usually it is without an in-house booking engine where those websites only facilitate as an information source. So those accommodation establishments

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mainly utilise third-party online accommodation booking platforms to provide accommodation booking services. These platforms provide accommodation booking and other value-added services: in-depth insights into property's performance, host and customer service support, expert online marketing, verified guest reviews, complaint management, and payment gateways at a cost charged as a commission (often being a percentage of the room price) from the property owners. Moreover, even though star class, unclassified, and boutique hotels have their own websites and booking engines, they tend to get listed on these online platforms, mainly due to their wider reach and expert marketing approaches.

Consumers increasingly rely on ratings on online accommodation booking platforms and social media platforms to research, choose, and book accommodations, transportation, and other services. Sri Lanka should capitalise on this new paradigm. Therefore, Sri Lanka should review and redefine the “informal sector” to resolve the challenges that businesses face and implement steps to mainstream more unregistered establishments resulting from social, economic, and technological developments in the tourism and hospitality sector. It has been identified that having a large and increasing proportion of tourism service providers who are not registered with the SLTDA is a standard and compliance risk for all stakeholders in the sector. Therefore, it was proposed to mainstream the "informal sector" while sustaining its potential by employing adequate regulation, facilitating finance, encouraging innovation, product development, and investment while growing consumer trust.

LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

A few limitations in the study could inspire more studies in the area. First, the study explored the digital presence of tourist accommodation establishments focusing on the availability of brand websites and whether they have been listed on third-party online accommodation booking platforms. However, the social media presence of those establishments was not explored due to time constraints which is an exciting area of research due to the massive popularity of social media platforms. Regarding tourist accommodation presence on online accommodation booking platforms, the study only focused on ten selected platforms due to time constraints. However, there are many alternative platforms where tourist accommodations could have been listed. Finally, since the study adopted an internet-based research methodology, there is an inherent limitation that certain websites may not have been captured when searched through a search engine due to the search algorithm adopted by the specific search engine.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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