

# **ELECTRONIC WORD MOUTH (E-WOM) AS A WAY-FORWARDING STRATEGY TO UPLIFT THE PROFITABILITY OF BOUTIQUE HOTELS IN COVID-19 ERA REFERENCE TO SOUTHERN COAST, SRI LANKA**

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Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) has gained a prominent place in hospitality industry by providing consumers a preview of the services before they purchase the particular services, since the services are intangible and perishable in the hospitality industry. Within that light, this study identifies the perceptions of boutique hotels operators on e-WOM. The objective of this study is to investigate the hoteliers' perceptions on e-WOM as a strategy to enhance the profitability during Covid-19 era. The study caters to boutique hotels in the southern coastal belt and the sample consisted from supervisors and hotel managers related with handling e-WOM in boutique hotels. Purposive sampling technique was used to determine the sampling units and structured interviews were used to gather data. The qualitative analysis method has been adopted and conducted a content analysis to identify the data patterns. According to the findings, e-WOM defines the service, is less expensive, builds brand image, maintains customer relationships and is popular. Further the research predicate that capturing domestic markets, promoting uniqueness of Sri Lankan tourism and using brand ambassadors are ways to improve profitability of boutique hotels during post Covid-19 era. Recommendations provided from the findings as; (a) familiarizing with blogging (b) attention to website (c) researching on new e-WOM dissemination channels. The research would help in understanding and identifying the significance of e-WOM to enhance profitability of hotels post Covid-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** *Boutique Hotels; Covid-19; E-WOM; Profitability; Tourism*

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