

Experiential Marketing for Creating Top-of-the-mind Awareness

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Abstract

Experiential marketing (EM) refers to the involvement of customers through two-way engagement with a brand namely capturing attention and creating an emotional attachment. This research aims to understand the relationship between EM and top-of-mind awareness (TOMA), in the context of top-star hotels in Sri Lankan hotel industry. A qualitative multiple case study approach was adopted in this study and the data was collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews with industry professionals and data was analyzed using generic qualitative data analysis method. As per the findings, star hotels practice two main EM strategies: enhancement of service offerings through additional experiences and personalization, and the enrichment of customer touchpoints with consistent experiential initiatives. Moreover, to achieve TOMA star hotels focus on creating memorable experiences and fostering emotional connections.

Keywords: Brand recall, Customer touchpoints, Experience, Experiential marketing, Personalized experience, Top of the mind awareness

Peradeniya Management Review – Volume 04, Issue II (December) 2022



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INTRODUCTION

Experiential marketing is a trend that organizations are utilizing to create value for their brand and customers. Researchers are exploring its impact on various aspects of branding, and the findings can provide more insight into the current experiential marketing strategy. Experience is a unique occurrence with emotional importance brought on by contact with stimuli associated with a product or brand (Österle et al., 2018). High market competitiveness leads to product and service imitation, affecting consumer choices more by emotional aspects. Experiential marketing focuses on creating unforgettable memories and engaging with customers, enhancing brand equity and enhancing sensory and emotional experiences, thereby enhancing customer mental availability (Dias et al., 2021). Experiential marketing enhances brand experiences, improves the marketing mix, and encourages quicker, more satisfying purchasing decisions in various industries, particularly in emerging countries (Philip & Hezekiah, 2021).

Iglesias et al. (2011) emphasized that experiential brands foster long-lasting brand loyalty through building brand passion, self-brand connection, and brand affection. However, the specific emotional mechanisms linking brand experience to these results remain underexplored. Future research could delve into how distinct emotional responses to brand experiences influence consumer loyalty and decision-making processes. While the sensory aspects of brand experiences have been extensively studied, more attention needs to be paid to the emotional and intellectual dimensions. The importance of emotional connections in building brand loyalty has been recognized, but more research was needed on how intellectual stimuli, such as problem-solving experiences, contribute to consumer engagement and memory retention (Loureiro, et al., 2012, Barnett & Ferris, 2016). Brand experiences are encoded into long-term memory and affect recall processes are complex. Moreover, Krishna (2012) discussed how sensory marketing influences

perception and judgment, but noted a gap in understanding the mechanisms by which these experiences translate into long-term brand recall and preference. Also, the brand evokes sensory emotional and intellectual experiences to stimulate action and evaluate it as a lasting trace stored in long-term memory (Schmitt et al., 2008).

Considering all these facts and figures of secondary data available,00 researchers have taken into account that there is a scarcity of research on linkage between experiential marketing and top-of-mind awareness at the same time it should be studied in the service sector, which is mentioned above. The rivalry is growing at star-class hotels and they require creative marketing strategies to meet customer expectations and to be competitive. However, the extant literature on experiential marketing is inadequate in Sri Lankan context, making it difficult for locals to understand importance of experiential marketing which can benefit the hospitality industry.

Researchers have conducted a study in the Sri Lankan hospitality industry to determine if experience marketing and destination trust can enhance foreign tourists' perception of Sri Lanka as a desirable destination (Chandrasiri & Wijesundara, 2022). Further on how the hotel sector in Sri Lanka retains its customers and customer satisfaction through experiential marketing (Ishara, et al., 2020). In line with experiential marketing some of the researchers discussed how service providers in the Sri Lankan tourism and hospitality industries use VR technology to more effective value creation to customers (Muwandeniya & Eranda, 2022). However, these studies have not focused on how experiential marketing leads to TOMA of customers for which this study aims to contribute. Therefore, the study aims to identify how experiential marketing affects consumer TOMA in the high-star hotel sector in Sri Lanka, linking experiential marketing with the top-of-the-mind awareness regarding the abovementioned area.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Experiential Marketing (EM)

EM involves customer involvement through two-way engagement, aiming to capture attention and create an emotional attachment to create a positive impression about the brand or product (Schmitt & Bernd, 1999). High market competitiveness leads to product and service imitateness, while emotional consumer choices are influenced more by experience seekers, making brands a source of differentiation for experienced companies.

The term "experience" began to be associated with "management" and "marketing" in the late 1990s, thanks to publications by marketing practitioners and consultants, including Tynan & McKechnie (2009), Carbone & Haeckel (1994), Pine & Gilmore (1998) and Schmitt & Bernd (1999). This new approach was relevant not only from the customer's perspective but also from the supply side. Scholars introduced concepts such as engineering customer experience, EM and the experience economy. As the literature evolved, it expanded to cover different aspects of experiential concepts in different fields. These include customer experience management, brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009), service experience (Klaus & Maklan, 2012), EM (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009), customer experience quality (Lemke et al., 2011), online customer experience, travel experience (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009), retail customer experience (Grewal, et al., 2009), customer experience measurement (Klaus & Maklan, 2012), customer experience design (Verhoef et al., 2009) and customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). These studies emphasized the importance of co-creating experiences to create value.

Digital technologies have further enhanced the impact of EM. Social media and virtual reality (VR) allow brands to create and share immersive experiences with a wider audience (Dholakia &

Durham, 2012). For example, hotels can use digital platforms to offer virtual tours, interactive booking experiences and engaging content that showcases their unique offerings. The use of these digital tools not only improves the customer experience but also helps businesses stand out in a competitive market (Berezina, et al., 2015).

As Lekstutytė (2016) mentioned, EM helps companies differentiate their brands by creating unique experiences that appeal to consumers' five senses, heart, and mind, utilizing consumer aesthetics, rest conditioning, variety seeking, and psychotherapeutic resources (Lekstutytė, 2016). EM is mostly used in the service industry, rejecting traditional marketing with "features and benefits" and approaching marketing through experience creation. EM does not believe in quality but tries to strengthen and stimulate consumers' emotions and sensory organs. Furthermore, consumers engaged in EM make more positive and faster purchase decisions. Thus, the main objective of EM is to connect with customers on multiple levels (Maghnati, et al., 2012).

Using EM is essential because it produces memorable and captivating customer encounters that improve brand perception and client loyalty. According to Schmitt & Bernd (1999), EM goes beyond traditional marketing's emphasis on product attributes to engage customers through sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational experiences. (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) Emphasize businesses must offer unforgettable experiences to customers for competitiveness, with experiential marketing significantly impacting brand experience, promoting satisfaction and loyalty (Brakus, et al., 2009). By expanding the audience and increasing engagement, the incorporation of digital technologies, such as social media and virtual reality, enhances these benefits even more (Dholakia & Durham, 2012). Through customized and immersive encounters, experiential marketing, for example, can enhance client happiness and help brands stand out in the

hotel sector (Bilgihan, et al., 2016). To maintain a competitive edge and retain customers, EM must be implemented.

Experiential Marketing Strategies

EM builds enduring customer relationships by developing worthwhile customer perceptions, generating memories, and encouraging engagement and product and service trials (Datta & Veto, 2017). Accordingly, events involving sensory, emotional, and social information create more vivid images associated with the particular brand (Carlson et al., 2017). Both offline and online strategies can be implemented as EM strategies.

The EM approach is a holistic concept that consists of other marketing aspects like event marketing, viral marketing, guerilla marketing, buzz marketing with Instagram settings, etc. that give opportunities for differentiation and be a topic for customers (Klepek & Martin, 2014). Product showcases, immersive experiences, relatable content stunts, and brand activations with mini-events incorporating product sampling are strategies used to engage customers. It goes beyond traditional marketing strategies that incorporate new technological applications like artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and virtual reality to become key drivers in incorporating tracking EM with technology like wearables, NCF technology, RFID technology, QR codes mobile event apps, facial recognition, handheld scanners, etc. that impact EM strategies in the dynamic environment and lead to a more personalized customer experience (Rust & Roland, 2020).

Digital and social media platforms significantly influence EM strategies, requiring a multisensory experience for customers. The strategy should consider sensory, feeling, cognitive, action, and

relational dimensions for maximum results in experiential management (Larocca et al., 2020). Despite the success of quantitative metrics, measuring the impact of marketing strategies on consumers is a major challenge because it has not been demonstrated that those metrics provide appropriate proxies for evaluating EM campaign outcomes (Gräve & Frederik, 2019). The main results, or outcomes, of an EM campaign, include outcomes of customer mindset, customer behavior, product market performance, and financial aspects (Katsikeas et al., 2016).

Top of the Mind Awareness (TOMA)

TOMA is a crucial market research concept that measures the awareness of a brand in consumers' minds. It indicates which companies are most popular within an industry, and the first brand that comes to mind is the one with the highest awareness (Hakala et al., 2012). This helps identify the most prominent options for customers when they need a brand. It can indicate the state of mind of consumers that allows them to keep a particular brand on the tip of their tongue and be aware of that brand (Masoom & Rehan, 2013). Recall of a brand when presented with a name is called aided recall. TOMA is used when consumers mention a specific brand name first when asked about a retailer type, merchandise type, or service type (Pauly et al., 2018). TOMA is dealing with the customer's mind most of the time, especially with memorizing and experiencing a brand, product, or service. On the other hand, it can occur without any physical interaction with the brand, thus increasing the popularity and reputation of the brand as well.

In brand awareness, there are two main levels: stimulus-based recognition and memory-based recall (Kapferer & Noël, 2017). As the study by David TOMA indicates, customers recalled the brand without any memory aid. The top-of-mind recall is more thought-provoking because it is

truly a behavioral propensity. According to Woodside and Wilson (Woodside & Wilson, 2003), if a customer has a higher level of TOMA toward a brand, it demonstrates a strong predilection for that brand. The TOMA of a brand can be considered to be included in the evoked set of the customer and can be led by habitual purchasing or habitual engagement between the brand and the customer (Pauly et al., 2018). Based on customers' past experiences, they have a limited number of brands in their evaluation or consideration set, and they follow a narrow decision-making process looking at the low risk of purchase (Elliott et al., 2015).

Experiential Marketing (EM) and Top of the Mind Awareness (TOMA)

When considering both concepts, there is a relationship that can be more elaborated as follows: TOMA is discussing the availability or mind share that a brand deserves in the customer's mind. It shows how the brands are ranked in the customer's mind, and EM is simply talking about customer engagement. As in the Carlson et al. (2017) study of engagement marketing, they hypothesized that the experience that comes from engagement among the brand and customer reinforces and enriches the client's mental representation of the fundamental offering. It can stimulate feelings of psychological ownership of the brand, product, or service (Dyne & Pierce, 2004).

Research in cognitive psychology on knowledge structures advocates that insights from the core offering are stored in customers' minds as an associative link, containing cognitive bonds (Anderson & John, 1983). Experiences of a core offering, including product performance and brand associations, can shape cognitive bonds and knowledge structures, affecting existing and new cognitive bonds. This effect subsequently affects the recall of product information, the

identification of new pertinent information, and product imagery, finally strengthening the connection between product experience and customer engagement (Burke & Srull, 1988). According to the study *Impact of Dominance and Relatedness on Brand Extensions* (Herr et al., 1996) events, activities, news, and societal trends are examples of outside influences on top of the mind awareness. It emphasizes the fact that events associated with a brand's TOMA are diminished. A "recalled brand is a mental reproduction of some target item previously experienced or learned (Bagozzi et al., 1983). Accordingly, EM can make the brand available at the top of the mind of the customer, or it can pull up the brand to the top of the rank.

METHODOLOGY

Researchers adopted the interpretivist philosophy by assuming that reality is subjective, multiple and socially constructed. Accordingly. Researchers opted for a multiple case study approach, hoping to gain insights from industry professionals within the hotel industry regarding their use of EM strategies. Aligning with Yin's recommendation to use multiple case studies to gain broader insights, in-depth investigation was necessary to fulfill the research objectives (Yin, 2018). The overall multiple case research is regarded as being stronger since several cases are more potent (Herriott & Firestone, 1983). The use of multiples case studies makes it possible to compare practices in various contexts more directly in terms of their differences and similarities (David & Silverman, 2000). Additionally, it results in broader conclusions (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

Purposive sampling was used to select the case studies in the study, which involves selecting participants with in-depth knowledge and availability of extensive data to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research topic and its main phenomena. Accordingly, the researchers focused

on four top star hotels in the Central Province, resulting in a multiple case study containing four different scenarios to align with the purpose of the study.

In the data collection multiple data sources were used to generate an in-depth understanding of case studies (Eranda, 2021). Accordingly, secondary data was collected from magazines, reports, journal articles, literature, books, company documentaries, internet protocols, websites and existing case studies. To collect primary data, the researcher conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews and observations aimed at uncovering the respondents' experiences, knowledge, feelings, perspectives and issues related to experience marketing strategies. Data analysis was conducted using the steps of coding, categorizing, synthesizing and theorizing using the NVIVO.

Quality assurance in qualitative research includes reliability, transferability, and trustworthiness. Reliability proved by using multiple data sources such as interviews, observations, and documents, or by involving multiple researchers for data verification. To establish credibility, the researchers spent considerable time familiarizing themselves with the selected star hotels through engagement and visits, while using both primary and secondary data collection methods. Transferability is achieved through purposive sampling of participants based on rich descriptions of the research context and specific criteria aligned with the research objectives. Credibility is ensured by following and publishing a step-by-step procedure for data collection, analysis and interpretation.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in this section based on the two objectives of the study. Accordingly, the findings relating to the first objective of identifying the existing EM strategies implemented by top star hotels are presented in two themes below.

Improve current service offerings

Hotels focus on creating an amazing experience beyond simple accommodation, using EM to personalize services and incorporate alternative leisure activities. This approach enhances the overall experience and encourages interaction throughout the stay, resulting in star hotels continually refining and expanding their service offerings.

Excerpt 1 contended some of the unique experiences that hotels have blended with a service offering of dining experiences for customers.

Excerpt 1:

"The hotel boasts a natural cave, primarily priced for foreign customers, offering a unique cave dining experience. Illuminated by wooden torches, a local villager plays the flute while guests dine, serving a seven-course menu at a rate of \$200 per person. This cave was also Jeffrey Bawa's dining experience with a table that he designed the hotel architecture for, providing a special and royal experience to guests, complete with a 'Perahara' and a dressed-up 'Nilame' suit to keep the unique culture in to experience."

This highlights the inclusion of unique experiences into core elements in service offerings such as dining. This not only covers the cooking but also the unique ambiance, the way the food is presented, the background music, the attire of the staff and the variety of menu options. To create a unique and culturally rich experience, hotels deliberately enhance these basic characteristics. As hotels want to differentiate themselves by simply offering a meal, this strategy fits well with EM tactics. The hotel enhances the dining experience by attending to every little detail, including the setting, manner of service, music, and attire. This is an example of how hotels are progressively

improving service offerings to provide a more upscale and culturally rich experience, especially in core areas such as dining. This approach is consistent with successful EM practices.

In excerpt 2, respondent shared in his interview about the unique dining experiences that they are offering to customers and how they have injected this experience into their core service offerings.

Excerpt 2:

“That is the only place we have. I mean, no other hotel doesn't. Have this type of fine dining experience. That was our railway carriage. We have brought it here, and we have not changed any main aspects of it. It's the original structure, the original seating style, and all. So it's a fine dining experience. So that is one of the unique features of our tea factory. The thing is, start the carriage with those sounds when customers dine in. It gives another level of experience, and the hotel has the highest railway carriage in Sri Lanka.”

The above respondent emphasized the hotel's unique approach to service delivery, transforming it into experiential marketing. They describe it as providing an authentic train carriage dining experience with real sounds and movements, enhancing the overall guest experience.

In addition to combining experiences with their main offerings, the hotels provide experiences through exclusive leisure activities, one-of-a-kind tour visits, special event management on behalf of the organizations, and distinctive entertainment facilities. As a result of their use of experience marketing, they also regularly receive client involvement for these items.

According to the Excerpt 3 from documentary video, hotel offers a special extra experience that sets them apart from the competition.

Excerpt 03:

“We will deck you out in local attire - saree, sarong and provide you with a basket to collect your leaves. Then we will take you out to our organic tea fields and show you which leaves to pluck. You’ll find that it takes a bit of practice to make sure the leaves end up in your basket rather than on the floor. Partake in a hands-on experience amidst the lush 25-acre organic tea plantation and witness how the factory produces its signature organic black and green teas.

Here, they perfectly celebrate a unique entertainment experience, an additional offering beyond their core services. Embracing Sri Lanka's tea culture, they offer visitors the opportunity to engage in the entire tea-making process. This includes picking tea leaves dressed in traditional tea picker clothing, using a bucket to collect leaves and going through the operations of a small tea factory. Guests even get to taste the teas they have personally made. This represents a rare and special experience that goes beyond the usual hotel services. It demonstrates a commitment to offering guests something extraordinary, creating lasting memories during their stay.

Personalization plays a significant role in EM practices, under the theme of improving current service offerings for greater experiences. Hotels try to tailor experiences within their service offerings based on customer types.

Enriching customer touchpoints through experiences

The experience marketing campaign of a hotel relies on every interaction with clients, from information searches to check-outs. These interactions, including information searches and reservations, impact the overall mood and recurring theme of the customer experience. The use of EM can improve these touchpoints, ensuring a more positive and memorable experience for both current and prospective customers.

The field note from respondent emphasizes how the hotel can provide exceptional experiences using these touchpoints. It demonstrates how the hotel constantly enthralls guests and makes each

encounter unforgettable. This reflects the hotel's dedication to offering remarkable and unique experiences, underscoring the importance of strategically improving touchpoints in the customer journey and ultimately bolstering the effectiveness of their EM initiatives (refer excerpt 04).

Excerpt 04:

“Upon entering from the reception to the main lobby, the architecture showcases the building's integration with the natural rock, preserving its original state. Inside the hotel, the rock is left untouched. Inside the rooms, some balconies are covered with trees and leaves, aligning strongly with Jeffrey Bawa's concept of harmonizing with the environment without causing harm. Following Bawa's idea, the entire hotel is covered by green leaves, creating a sense of a hidden place for guests, blending into the surrounding environment.”

According to excerpt 04 the customers were able to sense the hotel's distinctive appearance and vibe as soon as they arrived, as the establishment was themed on natural culture. Draw attention to the fact that the natural rock is exactly as it is and that the first thing guests see when they enter the main lobby embodies the experience the hotel wants to emphasize and has already provided. It also says that natural leaves covering the balconies of the apartments provide a special sensation of being a part of the surroundings. It shows how the hotels merely pass on their executive marketing initiatives through even the customer touchpoints of the hotel.

The excerpt 5 field note explains the theme-based experience that maintenance consists of across the service throughout all customer touchpoints to deliver the experience as EM practices.

Excerpt 05:

"The hotel's interior resembles a tea factory, with clam styles and accessories incorporating tea items. Employees' dress codes match tea farmers', and guests are welcomed with a tea tradition aligned with Tamil tea culture in Sri Lanka."

The hotel interprets its identity around the theme of Sri Lankan tea culture, maintaining a consistent tea experience across all customer touchpoints. Even small details, such as greetings by employees dressed as Tamil tea farmers even the smallest details, such as greetings, are orchestrated with employees appearing as Tamil tea farmers, welcoming guests akin to a kovil, align with the theme, creating a unique and immersive journey for customers.

Further, according to excerpt 6 from interview, the welcome drink was a flavored cup of tea.

Excerpt 06:

"After that, did you receive the welcome tea? Yes. So that is one of the uniqueness. It's a specially brewed special recipe that we have made according to a special recipe, a welcome tea. So, everything is tea. We don't serve coffee in our rooms. Also, we give tea."

In particular, the welcome drink is a specially brewed tea emphasizing the hotel's commitment to the tea theme. This comprehensive approach ensures that every touchpoint, from greetings to amenities, reflects the ambiance of a tea factory. The hotel's unique tea-centric strategy leverages customer touchpoints to create a memorable and cohesive brand experience, demonstrating the effectiveness of its EM initiatives.

The hotel's dedication to maintaining theme-based experiences throughout all touchpoints showcases the effectiveness of its EM initiatives in creating a memorable and cohesive brand experience. Moving to another aspect, when discussing the enrichment of customer touchpoints through experiences, hotel customers' focus on using touchpoints before consuming the hotel

service. This means that they provide a unique experience to customers during the hotel search or booking stage (refer excerpt 7).

Excerpt 07:

“Website improvements: in the process of enhancing website experiences, 5 new language options, implementation of a Chabot to assist with online direct bookings, etc.”

It refers to the fact that the hotel has invested more in website development to deliver a unique online experience to customers via selecting language options, personal Chabot assistants to guide customers when referencing the hotel website smoothly, and more facilities for online booking and reservations. It can be interpreted that the hotel is careful to address the customer's engagement point even before they consume their hotel services before visiting the property. They are trying to deliver the experience via their website by enriching customer's thought-provoking experiences. Also, with the Chabot option, they bring customers to the next level of personalization of their offerings, even before they get into the hotel premises.

On the other hand, excerpt 8 highlights the importance of webpage.

Excerpt 08:

“Our website offers a unique and immersive 360-degree virtual tour, allowing potential guests to explore the hotel's opulent spaces from the comfort of their devices.”

As mentioned above, the hotel has gone beyond the focus of touchpoints in physical visits, taking another step in optimizing that experience for customers, allowing them to engage with a virtual 360-degree hotel tour that customers can experience before they visit the hotel physically. Here they have incorporated their experiences into their website with impressive web experience as an example of marketing initiatives.

The summary of findings relating to identifying the existing EM strategies implemented by Star Hotels is presented in table 1.

Table 1 - The existing experiential marketing practices in star hotels

Theme	Meaning	Evidence
01 Improve current service offerings	To deliver experiential marketing practices hotels use service offerings by adopting offerings additional experiences and personalization	<i>"The hotel boasts a natural cave, primarily priced for foreign customers, offering a unique cave dining experience"</i> <i>"No other hotel doesn't. Have this type of fine dining experience. That was our railway carriage. So it's a fine dining experience. The thing is, start the carriage with those sounds when customers dine in"</i> <i>"We will deck you out in local attire - saree for the ladies, sarong for the gentlemen - and provide you with a basket to collect your leaves. Then we will take you out to our organic tea fields and show you which leaves to pluck."</i>
02 Enriching customer touch points through experiences	Enhance blending consistent experiences into customer touch points as experiential marketing initiatives	<i>"Upon entering from the reception to the main lobby, the architecture showcases the building's integration with the natural rock, preserving its original state. Inside the hotel, the rock is left untouched."</i> <i>"You'll notice that it's decorated in a variety of clam styles that incorporate accessories and tea items. Each and every icon and symbol of the hotel represent tea. Even the dress code of the employees matched that of the tea farmers."</i> <i>"our website offers a unique and immersive 360-degree virtual tour, allowing potential guests to explore the hotel's opulent spaces from the comfort of their devices."</i>

The findings relating to the second objective of the study which is to investigate how experiential marketing can be effectively used as a tool to raise awareness of top minds in the high-star hotel sector is presented below.

Experiential Marketing as a Tool for Top-of-the-Mind Awareness

As the result of analysis generated through the coding process, the findings generated two themes with respect to the 2nd objective of exploring the viability of EM as a tool of TOMA in top star hotels are presented from here onwards.

Building mind share through memory

Top-of-mind awareness reflects a brand's ranking in customers' minds. EM builds this by creating unique, memorable experiences, and differentiating hotels from competitors. Hotels enhance mindshare with delightful, shareable moments, consistent touchpoints, and effective promotions and follow-ups.

Excerpt 09 from interview transcript elaborates on how the hotel's uniqueness approached customers' minds.

Excerpt 09:

“Well, in terms of uniqueness, I think we have captured more than 90% of. If you take just a hotel, it's a different element. But here it's a factory converted to a hotel. So definitely we have. That's only because of the experience and the uniqueness that we have. And also, location matters. When the guests come to the Nuwara Eliya, they first think about the hotel our brand in under their considerable set of choices. But it's different if you want a unique experience. So I believe that that is one of the uniqueness of anyone visiting here. And next time you will have that top-of-mind thing.”

The uniqueness of their offer ensures that more than 90% are rooted in the minds of visitors. Looking ahead, this explains that this exclusivity will ensure a prominent place in the visitor's memory, suggesting that one visit will imprint their brand firmly in the spotlight. Further explores

how they engage customers through EM practices, particularly through their unique tea-themed activities. This belief has effectively embedded their brand in the minds and memories of consumers, emphasizing the power of unique experiences to create a lasting impression.

Excerpt 10 from interview transcript explains about unique positioning of the hotel.

Excerpt 10:

‘So, we have positioned this as a themed hotel. I believe that only another one or two, maybe one hotel in this type of context in Sri Lanka. So, this is the theme hotel if not one of the factory hotels in the world. So, if you can Google it. And there are no less than ten factory hotels in the world. So we are a factory hotel. Themed factory hotel.

Accordingly, with the unique positioning and unique experiences that the hotel provides, they ensure that they differ from the competitors and that there are not many competitors that challenge them with the unique experiences that they have. With that, it demonstrates that the hotel brand is uniquely positioned in customers' minds with its uniqueness, and customers make a ranking for the hotel in their minds compared to other hotels in a considerable set of choices.

Similarly, hotels maintain memorable symbols, elements, and icons to place in customers' minds (Refer excerpts 11 and 12).

Excerpt 11

“Every icon and symbol of the hotel represents the tea. Even the dress code of the employees was matched with tea farmers”.

Excerpt 12

“I think design—any design—will always believe that. And definitely, the unique kind of

experiences services culture, and activities make us more memorable to them”.

The use of memorable symbols and icons in a hotel's design can enhance brand memory and create a unique identity. By recalling each experience and removing the hotel name, the hotel can better integrate touchpoints. Each touchpoint, symbol, or element should be unique to create a lasting memory, as incoherence can confuse consumers. Focusing on the experience is crucial to maintain customer satisfaction (refer excerpt 13).

Excerpt 13:

“From the moment you enter from the main gate, the guest has to feel that you have entered heritage property number one. Then you have entered a heritage event. The appearance, the language we use offerings, even the smell, right? There's a special fragrance that we use also. To give that mental imagination that you have entered heritage.”

Accordingly, even subtle elements like the hotel's consistent scent play an important role in recalling customers. Maintaining consistency across all touchpoints creates a memorable experience, leaving a lasting impression on customers. By emphasizing and elevating the culture and theme of tea, the hotel aims to provide a unique and unforgettable experience. This strategy is designed to foster a strong and positive memory to ensure consumers repeatedly associate the distinctive scent and overall environment with their brand.

Excerpt 14 explains the effect of a consistent atmosphere as follows.

Excerpt 14:

“This is achieved through a meticulous integration of various elements, ranging from the physical ambiance of the property to the personalized service delivered by our well-trained staff. We

consider the customer journey at every touchpoint, employing strategies such as EM to not only meet but exceed guest expectations. Drawing inspiration from successful global practices while keeping a keen eye on local nuances. Through experiential marketing, we ensure that every aspect of a guest's journey, from booking to check-out, is designed to leave a lasting positive impression”.

In addition, to create a lasting positive impression in the minds of the customers, the hotel uses various elements and emphasizes on maintaining a consistent atmosphere throughout the customer's stay. By using experienced marketing strategies, the hotel aims to not only meet customer expectations but also ensure an enjoyable experience. Careful consideration of the physical surroundings and the inclusion of unique elements contribute to an overall memorable stay and reinforce the hotel's commitment to making a positive and lasting impact on every guest.

Hotels are focusing on enhancing customer experiences through promotion campaigns and building customer mind share. They provide opportunities for customers to learn, observe, and absorb memorable experiences, influencing their thinking process by sharing valuable knowledge and experiences that may not have been known in their lives.

Fostering human emotions with awareness

Hotels utilize EM practices to create emotional connections with customers, affecting human emotions and fostering emotional bonds. They provide real-life experiences, authenticity, and environmental initiatives to increase interaction and emotional connection with the brand, ultimately enhancing customer experience.

In excerpt 15 from company video and interview transcript highlights a major finding that affects human emotions while raising awareness about the hotel (refer excerpts 15 and 16).

Excerpt 15:

"Deep in the heart of central Sri Lanka, there is a hotel that will never be allowed to close by the local community. This is the story of Jeffery Valver's heritage. In our previous vlog, we delved into the lives and private estates of renowned Sri Lankans."

Excerpt 16:

"And you will be gifted with Deshamani Jeffry Bawa's book. We use the table by Deshamani Jeffry Bawa that is used to design the hotel. He designed the hotel. So, it's unique, and so we use that table to serve the meal. Bawa's concept of harmonizing with the environment without causing harm. Following Bawa's idea, the entire hotel is covered by green leaves, creating a sense of a hidden place for guests and blending into the surrounding environment."

Storytelling is a technique that gets attached and feels the emotion of something making it closer to human life and making humans hear easily. According to respondent 01, the hotel was not only a building, it also arose with a great heritage history and a wonderful story related to the village and surrounding hotel architecture. The interview transcript emphasizes the hotel's dedication to Jeffry Bawa's great history and concepts, valuing and respecting this history through exceptional dining experiences, such as Jeffery Bawa's dinner, which allows customers to pass on the story. It refers to the hotel making alive the history and a story behind the hotels and incorporating this great story with added value into the experiences that they are providing to customers that make them feel the values and culture of the hotel, and it sort of tells through the experiences that they are providing. Excerpts 17 refers to focusing on the real-life connection and authenticity in line with experiences.

Excerpt 17

"All hotel menus have incorporated local ingredients, providing guests with more authentic local options. Incorporating local ingredients into our menus and offering new and authentic food and beverages with local ingredients. And offering unique propositions for an authentic customer experience."

The hotel is investing more and adapting its service offerings to provide true authenticity. They actively incorporate local culture, aiming for consumers to feel a close connection between the brand and their daily routines, childhood memories and emotional responses that are sometimes missed with urbanization. By doing so, the hotel strives to create familiarity and resonance with guests' lives. This strategy goes beyond service delivery, it aims to connect with customers' memories and emotions and create a personal connection. Through the thoughtful inclusion of local culture, the hotel strives not only to provide accommodation but also to be a meaningful part of the guest experience, adding significance and connection to their stay. Excerpt 18 further refers to authenticity along with experiences.

Excerpt 18:

"All the guests were welcomed with the tea tradition, mostly aligned with tea culture in Sri Lanka, by a bell boy who appeared with tea culture. Guests can experience the tea culture and the local villagers' lifestyle with the tour of Kovil."

Here also what the hotel expresses having more real-life connections with customers through their experiences in their customer journey to let them feel the authenticity of the event that is unique to Sri Lankan culture that they have never experienced that was a direct way to easily address customer hearts with experiences. Another best explanation is done with the excerpt 19.

Excerpt 19:

Embark on an hour's journey by 'tuk tuk' to witness the authentic sights in the village and learn the art of Sri Lankan cooking. That is the art of sealing the experience at a hotel. It is the way they position our hotel in the minds of our customers. We treat our customers as normal village people.

Accordingly, one of the experiences of sharing hotels is to tour the village in ordinary tuk-tuks and treat them like the people of the village. This experience transforms customers by beautifying their already adopted lifestyles and taking them into local life with cultural authenticity, promoting the simplicity of their lifestyle and ultimately maintaining the status of the hotel. It is a unique experience and will generate a strong impression and lasting bond with the hotel brand. Moreover, the two themes are summarized in Table 2 with their meaning and evidence for each theme.

Table 2: Experiential Marketing as a tool of Top of the Mind Awareness

Theme	Meaning	Evidence
01 Building mind share through Memory	To get the brand customers top of their minds hotels utilize experience to grab mind share of customers by addressing through memory of the customers.	<i>"I believe that it's more than 90% in the guest's mind. That's only because of the experience and the uniqueness that we have. And also location matters. When the guests come to the Nuwara Eliya, first he or she think about the hotel our brand in under their considerable set of choices. But it's different if you want a unique experience"</i> <i>"So we have positioned this as a themed hotel. I believe that only another one or two, maybe one hotel in this type of context in Sri Lanka. So this is the theme hotel if not one of the factory hotels in the world. So if you can Google it"</i> <i>"Every icon and symbol of the hotel represents the tea. Even the dress code of the employees was matched with tea farmers".</i>
02 Fostering human emotions awareness with	Hotels use experiential marketing practices to affect human emotions and through that place the brand in the customer mind	<i>"Deep in the heart of central Sri Lanka, there is a hotel that will never be allowed to close by the local community. This is the story of Jeffrey Valver's heritage, Kandelama. In our previous vlog, we delved into the lives and private estates of renowned Sri Lankans."</i> <i>"Embark on an hour's journey by 'tuk tuk' to witness the authentic sights in the village and learn the art of Sri Lankan cooking. That is the art of sealing the experience at a hotel. It is the way they position our hotel in the minds of our customers. We treat our customers as normal village people".</i> <i>"So this is a perfect example of just how well embedded into the wildlife and nature this property really is it's not only a hotel for people this hotel is a part of the environment."</i>

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

According to the findings, star hotels practice two main experiential marketing strategies: the enhancement of service offerings through additional experiences and personalization, and the enrichment of customer touchpoints with consistent experiential initiatives. Moreover, to achieve top-of-mind awareness, star hotels focus on creating memorable experiences and fostering emotional connections.

One of the themes that was generated is improving current service offerings for greater experiences. It has been discussed how the star hotels deliver the experiences through service offerings, like injecting experiences into the main service offerings and also personalizing experiences, though the service offerings further provide additional experiences as service offerings done by the hotels with the engagement of customers. Another theme that Enriching customer touchpoints through experiences

Every interaction a consumer has with a hotel is vital to improving the experience marketing campaign. Every touchpoint that occurs before, during, and following the use of hotel services has a big impact on the clients.

Experiential marketing is mostly used in the service industry, rejecting traditional marketing with “Features and benefits” and approaching marketing through experience creation (Maghnati et al., 2012). According to the literature in the service industry, there is a shift towards focusing on experience generation rather than the features and benefits of the offerings. With the findings, it can be more elaborated that hotels provide their service offerings with unique experiences and even incorporate experiences into their new product developments with other marketing strategies

aligned with conducting experiential marketing practices. Not only rely on providing additional benefits and facilities with service offerings.

Experiential marketing can be defined as the process of distributing and promoting a product by allowing customers to observe and participate in various events related to the concept of the product (Sehani & Hettiarachchy, 2022). Experiential marketing involves customer engagement with events related to offerings, but can also include unique entertainment facilities, alternative leisure activities, and tour visits around destinations, among other ways. Also, blending unique experiences into the main offerings can be considered. Apart from that, the findings ensure that every customer touchpoint can be used to enhance the experience through experiential marketing practices. On the other hand, it ensures the idea of Klepek & Martin (2014) that the experiential marketing approach is a holistic concept that consists of other marketing aspects that give opportunities for differentiation and be a topic for customers.

With experiential marketing strategies, hotels try to become more unique than their competitors in the market. According to Datta Experiential marketing builds enduring customer relationships by developing worthwhile customer perceptions, generating memories, and encouraging engagement and product and service trials (Datta & Veto, 2017).

The study emphasizes the importance of customer engagement in experiential marketing, but advises hotels to be cautious when targeting their target market and ensuring their uniqueness aligns with the target market's preferences, as this directly impacts customer engagement.

According to the respondents' 01 and 02 interview transcripts, they have specifically elaborated that they provide a unique experience to the customers who are seeking that uniqueness, but not all of them. *"Our concept is not luxurious. We call it intelligent luxury. So that's a different segment*

of tourism. So we are careful when projecting ourselves. Because if we get the wrong customer, they get it a different way." And *"it's different if you want a unique experience. Yes, we are here. But if you just want to go to a hotel, there are plenty of other options"*. The code of providing intelligent luxury was built up with this background. So, research findings implied that when utilizing experiential marketing strategies by hotels, they should have a proper understanding of the correct customer segment to get customer engagement throughout the journey.

It has been identified that technology plays a major role in experiential marketing practices at star hotels, as well as the literature highlighted. It goes beyond traditional marketing strategies that incorporate new technological applications like artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and virtual reality to become key drivers in incorporating tracking experiential marketing with technology like wearables, Near Field Communication (NFC) technology, Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology, Quick Response (QR) codes mobile event apps, facial recognition, and handheld scanners etc (Rust & Roland, 2020).

Some of the hotels directly go through giving personalized experiences with Web Experiences, as mentioned earlier. On the other hand, there was a contradictory point found among some of the respondents that they do not allow more to display technology implementation in their hotel permission to be in line with the sustainability concept that they are following. It may negatively affect the hotel if too many technological implementations express the wrong idea to customers about their theme and brand image. On the other hand, there was another finding: with the limited urbanization and the unique culture and habits of customers, implementing some technological application to hotel experiences may confuse the customers and be ineffective for the hotel. Accordingly, the discussion on the research question of what are the existing experiential marketing practices done by star hotels can be elaborated.

How EM can be used as a tool of top-mind awareness, two categories have been developed according to the codes of interview transcripts and other secondary data sources. Therefore, this consists of two themes: building mindshare through memory and fostering human emotions with awareness. The in-depth references and the findings added value to how the experiences that hotels were providing acted as top-of-the-mind awareness tools.

As in Carlson's (2017) study of engagement marketing, he hypothesized that the experience that comes from engagement between the brand and customer reinforces and enriches the client's mental representation of the fundamental offering. It can stimulate feelings of psychological ownership of the brand, product, or service (Dyne & Pierce, 2004).

According to Carlson and Linn, engaging in activities with the brand affects consumers' mental representations and evokes emotions. Research findings support the idea that hotels use a variety of strategies to create mindshare and create lasting emotional bonds with customers. Researchers identify and verify how hotels use EM to establish their brand position in the minds of consumers, aim to stay at the forefront of consumer awareness and create lasting relationships through meaningful experiences.

A study demonstrated that concepts recalled together form interconnected networks, or hypergraphs, in the brain. These networks capture higher-order associations between multiple concepts simultaneously, reflecting how consumers mentally represent and link product-related information (Citraro, et al., 2023). The research found that these associative structures are enriched with psycholinguistic features, enhancing the understanding of how consumers process and retain brand-related information. The study reveals that customers' experiences, including surprises and shareable moments, directly impact their minds. It also highlights the connection between insight and human emotion, and how emotional attachment is formed through thoughts. The core

offering's experiences include memories of product performance and brand associations, such as reputation and character.

In research findings, it was found that memorable symbol elements were associated with the experiences offered by the hotels that directly addressed customer memory. Further, it has been considered that the consistency throughout the touchpoint, including the symbols, icons, designs, and branding associations, should also be carefully maintained; if not, the message placed in the customer's mind would be confused and not repeated.

According to the study impact of dominance and relatedness on brand extensions (Herr et al., 1996) events, activities, news, and societal trends are examples of outside influences on top-of-the-mind awareness. The study describes the importance of the experiences emphasized in advertisements and highlights the role of influencers in spreading the word about these experiences. The strategy aims to understand clients' minds through first-hand experiences shared through multiple media, user-generated content, and shared moments, fostering a deeper connection between the brand and its audience.

A recalled brand is a mental reproduction of some target item previously experienced or learned (Bagozzi & Silk, 1983) Was more assured by the findings of how customers were educated through a variety of experiences that hotels were providing to learn and observe, making sense that building awareness while giving rare experiences in customers' lives. EM can indirectly influence consumers' emotional side by appealing to their minds through storytelling, authenticity, and engagement with local culture, establishing emotional connections, and fostering human connection.

Hotels use experiential marketing strategies that emphasize authenticity, local culture engagement, and environmental initiatives to connect with customers' lifestyles and values. These strategies indirectly embed the brand in consumers' hearts, fostering a positive emotional connection.

Moreover, in literature, the TOMA of a brand can be considered to be included in the evoke set of the customer and can be led by habitual purchasing or habitual engagement between the brand and the customer (Pauly & Selvakumar, 2018). It is related to the daily consumption of products like grocery goods. That makes us habitually engage with the same brand, but in the service sector, especially in the hospitality sector, this habitually can happen but takes more time. Considering all these explanations and findings, it can be concluded that hotels or services also try to place their brand and get their brand in front of customers, evoke set choices, and explain how they do it with EM initiatives.

It is difficult to generalize the findings of the case study approach in line with qualitative research since it does not exactly prove whether these selected 4-star hotels are similar to or different from other 4-star hotels in the central province. So there arises the problem of applying the findings to the large population, including all the star hotels in the central province. According to Hodgkinson & Hodgkinson (2001), since the sample size is small and the data are not numerical, there is no conclusion to establish the probability that the data are representative of the larger population. However, research focusing on the provincial context can somehow generalize because the hotels are categorized as star hotels and all are in the same geographical area.

Research is crucial to understanding how technology influences hotel culture and standards in experiential marketing. It's essential to stay updated with industry trends and target specific customer segments. This will help luxury hotels understand strategies to resonate with the right

audience, align their unique offerings with customer preferences, and contribute to the success of their marketing initiatives.

Future research is encouraged to expand the scope to include other provinces in Sri Lanka. While this study focuses on high-star hotels, there is an invitation for future research to explore experiential marketing initiatives in low-star hotels, restaurants, and resorts. In today's intense rivalry, hotels need to move beyond creating favorable experiences to developing emotional interactions with their customers. Furthermore, this interaction should be available throughout the entire customer journey to reinforce the hotel brand and strengthen the hotel's position in the minds of the customers.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explores how experiential marketing (EM) influences top-of-mind awareness (TOMA) in the top star hotel sector in Sri Lanka. By examining the emotional and intellectual dimensions of brand experiences, the research addresses the conceptual gap concerning the emotional mechanisms that link brand experiences to brand loyalty and decision-making processes. It also fills the empirical gap related to the application of EM in the Sri Lankan hospitality industry, where prior studies have largely overlooked its impact on TOMA.

The research explores EM practices in star hotels, highlighting the importance of curating unique and immersive guest experiences beyond accommodation. By personalizing and incorporating alternative leisure activities, hotels effectively implement EM strategies. The study emphasizes the importance of creating memorable experiences, tapping into human emotions, and fostering positive emotions through authenticity, real-life connections, and environmental initiatives. This approach makes the brand more relatable and memorable.

The implementation of the findings can explain that Hotels can enhance their guest experience by focusing on personalization, diversified leisure activities, strategic enrichment of touchpoints, cultural and local integration, and continuous refinement. Personalization involves tailoring services to individual guest preferences, fostering a unique and engaging experience. Diversified leisure activities include alternative facilities, encouraging extended stays, and creating an immersive environment. Strategic enrichment of touchpoints throughout the customer journey, from pre-booking to post-stay interactions, ensures positive experiences. Cultural and local integration infuses unique elements into various touchpoints, offering a genuine sense of place and authenticity. Continuous refinement ensures hotels remain dynamic and responsive to guest preferences, solidifying their position as leaders in experiential marketing.

The history and theme behind the hotel can be deeply connected through immersive storytelling campaigns, creating nostalgia and curiosity. Consistent use of symbols, scents and themed decor reinforces brand identity and triggers memory recall, creating lasting emotional memories in the lobby, rooms and event spaces. Moreover, the creation of authentic experiences such as tuk-tuk rides and local rituals increases emotional connection. Personalized touches such as traditional greetings, locally inspired drinks and culturally themed room amenities create a sense of belonging and connection to the local environment. Furthermore, emphasizing sustainability and environmental awareness can also resonate with eco-conscious travelers. Highlighting eco-friendly practices, such as green architecture or community support initiatives, strengthens brand loyalty. Strategic storytelling in marketing can effectively communicate these experiences and values in collaboration with other organizations.

The limitations of this study include difficulty in generalizing findings due to the small sample size and qualitative nature of the multiple case study (4 high-end hotels), though focusing on hotels

within the same geographical area offers a limited level of generalizability. Additionally, there was potential for subjectivity and bias, which was addressed by documenting data transparently, maintaining reflexivity and using multiple sources to enhance validity and reliability.

In terms of further research, it is important to examine the role of technology in EM in the context of hotels for generating immersive experience for customers. Understanding how technology is helping to shape immersive experiences is essential to keeping up with industry trends. Furthermore, there is a need to investigate how top star hotels can effectively target and engage specific customer segments that align with their unique offerings. These explorations will shed light on the strategies of top star hotels which can be used to resonate with the right audiences, ensure their unique offerings align seamlessly with customer preferences and expectations, and ultimately contribute to the success of their EM initiatives. In addition, the future research of EM strategies influence on top-of-mind awareness needs to be conducted in multiple industries for fostering their competitiveness.

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