



Experiencing Pizza Hut: The Role of Experiential Marketing in Shaping Customer Satisfaction in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Ever-changing client requirements need invaluable and lasting impressions to retain loyal consumers and acquire new client bases. Experiential Marketing is a tool used to attract consumers into interactive brand experiences. Although experiential marketing boosts the restaurant industry, the use of experiential marketing has not been thoroughly documented in prior studies, and a limited number of studies have been undertaken in culturally diverse Sri Lanka. However, no research study has been conducted for well-established brands like Pizza Hut. This study aims to address that empirical and contextual gap by investigating the influence of experiential marketing on customer satisfaction in the Sri Lankan restaurant industry, focusing on Pizza Hut. Researchers have utilised five experiential marketing aspects, sense, feel, think, act, and relate, to analyse the consumer experience. The first presented by Schmitt, Strategic Experiential Modules (SEM), are the source of sense, feel, think, act, and relate, and the module was not altered. The study employs a deductive approach and convenience sampling method; 305 respondents were selected from the population to participate in the survey. Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire with 5-point Likert scales, and hypotheses were evaluated using a regression model in SPSS. Overall, the study's findings suggest that experiential marketing significantly impacts customer satisfaction, thus confirming the objectives of the research study. Managers in the hospitality and restaurant industry can utilise the findings of this study to gain valuable customer insights and develop effective marketing strategies.

Keywords: *Customer Satisfaction, Experiential Marketing, Pizza Hut, Restaurant Industry, Strategic Experiential Modules*



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

According to Jinyong (2003), experiential marketing represents the evolution and strategic integration of various established marketing approaches—sense, feel, think, act, and relate marketing. It has recently gained prominence as a marketing strategy due to its capacity to enable organisations to create a synergistic effect through systematically integrating these elements, frequently resulting in favourable business outcomes.

Experiential marketing has become an increasingly fundamental strategy for differentiation among consumer brands in competitive industries (Schmitt, 2010). While experiential marketing techniques requiring customer participation may differ in emphasis and methodology across industries, the core philosophy can be applied universally, whether in education, hospitality and restaurant, manufacturing, or information technology (Jinyong, 2003).

The culinary industry was chosen for the discussion of the concept as it has the opportunity and capacity to expand since both food and drinks are the fundamental necessities for humankind, which will always find the chance to evolve through time and cuisines (Yanti Febrini et al., 2019). Regarding the restaurant sector in Sri Lanka, the industry has been rapidly growing, being one of the best tourist destinations in the world, making the country and industry an Eden for studies (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2023).

In addition, more and more local restaurants and chains have emerged, and global restaurant chains have entered the Sri Lankan market (Nirmani et al., 2017). Currently, Sri Lanka is not only home to local restaurant brands but also to multinational brands like Pizza Hut, KFC, McDonald's, and Domino's Pizza (Patabandige & Yapa, 2016).

Since its founding in 1958, Pizza Hut has grown to be a well-known brand in the restaurant sector, with more than 18,000 locations currently operating in 116 countries (Mendis et al., 2022). Pizza Hut launched its first restaurant in Sri Lanka in 1993 as the first multinational restaurant brand to enter the Sri Lankan market and has expanded since to over a hundred



locations across the island, which makes Pizza Hut more reachable and affordable to all Sri Lankans while maintaining the same taste throughout the island (Devendra, 2023). Pizza Hut stands out from other eateries in terms of accessibility, affordability, and uniqueness, prompting the researcher to explore how experiential marketing influences customer satisfaction (Udurawana, 2014).

1.2. Problem Identification

Restaurants are not only places where customers tend to satisfy one of the basic needs of humans, hunger, but also places where consumers experience excitement, gratification, satisfaction, and peace of mind, which not every customer feels when consuming foods and beverages from a restaurant (Ha & Jang, 2010). A unique experience that restaurants give to their customers is an important strategy to provide customers a memorable dining experience while retaining customers (Jang et al., 2011). This experiential method emphasises developing holistic experiences that appeal to consumers' senses, emotions, minds, and interpersonal connections in addition to their utilitarian product features (Smilansky, 2017). Furthermore, research shows that experiential marketing can positively influence consumer perceptions, satisfaction, and loyalty (Bilgihan, 2016; C. Wu & Liang, 2009).

According to Sehani & Hettiarachchy (2022), most research on the impact of experiential marketing has been done in Western and industrialised countries. Understanding the effects of experiential marketing on customers in developing nations such as Sri Lanka, other than Western ones, is inadequate. This is a challenge for firms operating in various international marketplaces because research from Western contexts may not be universally applicable (Amin & Tarun, 2019). Furthermore, experiential marketing in the hospitality and tourism industry, comprising the restaurant industry, is scarce in literature, even when experience is considered a significant benefit for these industries (Pham & Huang, 2015; Williams, 2006).

On the academic front, most prior research has focused solely on other countries and industries, resulting in a considerable knowledge gap regarding how consumers in the Sri Lankan restaurant industry respond to experiential strategies, and the study makes a substantial effort to address the shortage of empirical data on the efficiency of experiential



marketing in the island nation, Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan restaurants (Liyanapathirana & Nishadi, 2020; Thundeniya & Gunawardhana, 2025). Moreover, not only a knowledge gap, but also there is a significant gap in the literature in the hospitality and tourism sector, including eateries (Amin & Tarun, 2019; Pham & Huang, 2015; Williams, 2006). The influence of experiential marketing has been broadly discussed in the literature with customer repurchase intention, brand equity building, customer revisit intention, and customer loyalty, but the impact of experiential marketing on customer satisfaction is rarely discussed, indicating a significant gap in the literature (Ellitan, 2022; Mukiira et al., 2017; Salomão & Santos, 2022; Sehani & Hettiarachchy, 2022).

The restaurant industry traditionally relies on conventional marketing, but experiential marketing offers unique potential (Amin & Tarun, 2019). From an applied perspective, the study provides significant insights that allow Sri Lankan Pizza Hut restaurants to enhance experience activities strategically based on empirically identified local factors of consumer satisfaction (Widowati & Tsabita, 2017). This study aims to assist restaurant managers and decision-makers in Sri Lanka, including Pizza Hut, in identifying critical aspects of experiential marketing and understanding how they influence customer satisfaction (Amin & Tarun, 2019).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Experiential Marketing

Experiential marketing refers to the ability of a commodity to transfer psychological encounters to the clients and the capability of the commodity to hold the consumer's mind through consumption (Fatmawati et al., 2017). By providing people with memorable, satisfying experiences, experiential marketing engages their thoughts and emotions (Araci et al., 2017).

According to some studies, there are significant factors in experiential marketing that businesses create to provide encounters for their clients, including escapades, surroundings, and vibe (Yuan & Wu, 2008). Thus, to stay ahead in the business landscape and outperform



competitors, creating and providing unforgettable, unique, yet practical experiences for consumers is essential for businesses (Ismail et al., 2011).

Experiential marketing enhances customer satisfaction by creating positive experiences, and research shows a strong link between its components and customer satisfaction, which is influenced by sensory marketing, emotional marketing, cognitive marketing, behavioural marketing, and relational marketing (M. Wu & Tseng, 2014). Even though there is literature on various countries and industries, it is crucial to examine how experiential marketing strategies impact clients in a different market, such as the restaurant industry in Sri Lanka including Pizza Hut, because consumers' perceptions of restaurant attributes and their propensity for loyalty and satisfaction are greatly influenced by where they live and how they interact with brands (Seock & Lin, 2011).

A framework for experiential marketing was developed by Schmitt (1999), who combined traditional marketing concepts with new ideas. The Strategic Experiential Modules (SEM) framework consists of five elements: Sense, Feel, Think, Act, and Relate. The SEM model can be better discussed through the five elements mentioned as described below (Schmitt, 2010).

2.2. Sense Marketing

According to Maghnati et al. (2012), sensory experience refers to customers' perceptions and impressions about products or services based on sensory interactions.

Nigam (2012) identified that sensory experiences encompass a product or encounter's sensory and tangible elements, appealing to the five senses: sight, sound, scent, taste, and touch. Organisations aim to enhance beauty, excitement, and satisfaction by incorporating these elements into their products and services. This unique sensory approach helps the organisations stand out in the market and allows them to forge connections with their customers (McCole, 2004).

According to M. Wu & Tseng (2014), “sense” is a significant predictor of customer satisfaction. Based on the discussions above, the following hypothesis has been developed.



H₁: Sense has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction.

2.3. Feel Marketing

Feel marketing is positive or negative feelings toward a company's product or service that will influence the extent to which it is consumed (Nigam, 2012). Rytel (2010) defined emotional marketing as a substantive shift in marketing management based on the design of emotional ties between the company and the consumer as the key motivator of customers' purchasing decisions.

According to Liyanapathirana & Nishadi (2020), feel refers to customers' emotional reactions to a company's brand, often shaped by their experiences at the point of consumption, indicating that friendly service from the sales organisation can significantly enhance customer satisfaction. Thus, the hypothesis below originated.

H₂: Feel has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction.

2.4. Think Marketing

Think marketing appeals to the intellect, inspiring creativity and motivating consumers to solve problems and create meaningful experiences while promoting harmony and peace (Schmitt, 2010).

The primary purpose of think marketing is to develop consumer intelligence and satisfy the consumer with creativity (Indrawati & Fatharani, 2016). Consumer intelligence relies on cognitive processes that facilitate creative perception, interaction, and management of experiences, thereby enhancing these cognitive abilities among consumers (LaSalle, 2003).

Furthermore, consumer experiences significantly influence the cognitive processes related to the brand and the products offered by that brand (Gentile et al., 2007). According to Fatmawati et al. (2017), think marketing has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction. Considering the above arguments, the hypothesis below is formulated.

H₃: Think has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction.

2.5. Act Marketing

Act marketing is familiar with designing experiences related to an individual's element, influenced by how the consumer interacts, either secretly or collaboratively with others, and with group members. The goal is to change behaviours and relationship patterns over an extended period to support the chosen products or services (Nigam, 2012).

However, behaviours and styles of living can be modified by presenting various kinds of desires, applying inspiration and affection (Gentile et al., 2007). In the words of Sehani & Hettiarachchy (2022), marketers focus on consumers' behaviours and actions to show customers different ways of living and interacting globally. They consider customers' physical traits, lifestyles, and attitudes when creating these experiences and social interactions.

According to Indrawati & Fatharani (2016), act marketing has a significant impact on customer satisfaction. Thus, the following hypothesis is derived.

H₄: Act has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction.

2.6. Relate Marketing

Relate marketing seeks to forge a connection between individuals and external entities (Fatmawati et al., 2017). Consumers can specifically build connections with social entities through buying and using products and services (Maghnati et al., 2012). In their study, Chang & Wang (2011) emphasise the importance of consumers associating their experiences with social categories and larger social structures through consumption. This process is not only about obtaining specific goods and services but is also one of the most important ways to gain social acceptance and build social identity (Nigam, 2012).

Relate marketing has a significant impact on customer satisfaction (Indrawati & Fatharani, 2016; M. Wu & Tseng, 2014). However, M. Wu & Tseng (2014) defined relate dimension as the least important element among the elements in the SEM model. Considering the above arguments, the following hypothesis is formulated.



H₅: Relate has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a deductive approach to examine and prove an existing theory. Primary data was obtained via a structured questionnaire. The study population included customers who dined at Pizza Hut restaurants in Sri Lanka.

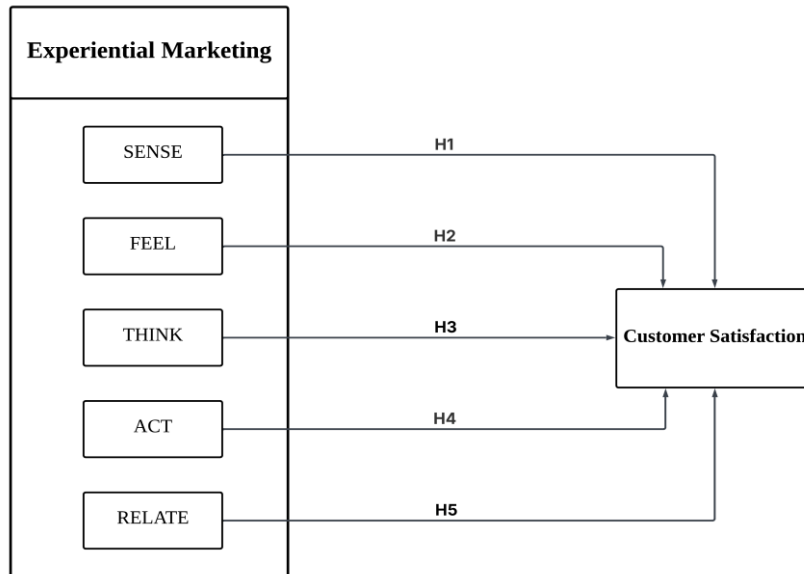
With a 95% confidence level, the sample size of 305 customers was chosen from the target population using the convenience sampling method by the researcher, who based his selection on the judgment of "customers who dined in Pizza Hut restaurants". Since Pizza Hut operates over a hundred locations, collecting data from every customer is not feasible. Therefore, a sample size of 305 respondents was selected for convenience and efficiency in data collection. This sample is intended to provide insights that can be generalised to the broader target population.

Consequently, a self-administered questionnaire was made available to the sample responders online using Google Forms. Customers in this survey were asked to answer on a five-point Likert scale, where one represented "strongly disagree" and five represented "strongly agree." The data analysis was done using the SPSS software suite.

3.2. Conceptual Framework

Building on a comprehensive literature review, the following conceptual framework provides a graphical depiction of the impact of experiential marketing on customer satisfaction. This framework was then subjected to empirical analysis using collected data. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the impact of experiential marketing on customer satisfaction.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



The conceptual framework is developed based on “Experiential Marketing” by Schmitt (1999). The study's independent variable is experiential marketing, which consists of five sub-variables: sense, feel, think, act, and relate. The dependent variable is customer satisfaction.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 1: Gender Distribution of Survey Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	125	41%
Female	180	59%

Source: Survey Data (2023)

As demonstrated in Table 1, the majority of the respondents were females, claiming 59%, while the percentage of male respondents was 41%.



Table 2: Age Distribution of Survey Respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage	Age	Frequency	Percentage
Below 25	165	54.1%	Between 46 – 55	21	6.9%
Between 25 – 35	81	26.6%	Above 55	9	3%
Between 36 – 45	29	9.2%			

Source: Survey Data (2023)

According to Table 2, Most respondents are from the “Below 25” age group, claiming 54.1% of total respondents, while the “Between 25 – 35” age group follows the “Below 25” age group, representing 26.6%. The percentage of the “Between 36 - 45” age group is less than half that of the “Between 25 - 35” age group, claiming 9.2%. Age groups “Between 45 -55” and “Above 55” represent the fewest respondents, 6.9% and 3%, respectively.

Table 3: Regional Representation of Survey Respondents

Province	Frequency	Percentage	Province	Frequency	Percentage
Central	36	11.8%	Southern	113	37.0%
Eastern	11	3.6%	Uva	13	4.3%
Northwestern	12	3.9%	Western	88	28.9%
Northern	9	3.0%	Sabaragamuwa	23	7.5%

Source: Survey Data (2023)

Most respondents are from the Southern Province, representing 37% of the total respondents, while the Western Province follows the Southern Province, with 28.9%. Western Province is followed by Central Province, Sabaragamuwa Province, Uva Province, Northwestern Province, and Eastern Province, with 11.8%, 7.5%, 4.3%, 3.9%, and 3.6%, respectively. The lowest number of respondents is from the Northern Province, which accounts for 3% (see Table 3).

4.2. Factor Analysis

Table 4: Factor Loadings for Constructs of SMEs and Customer Satisfaction

Variance	Items	Factor Loading
Sense	SE1	.821
	SE2	.886
	SE3	.781

Feel	FE1	.775
	FE2	.688
	FE3	.679
	FE4	.807
Think	TH1	.827
	TH2	.797
Act	AC1	.768
	AC2	.803
	AC3	.601
Relate	RE1	.865
	RE2	.868
	RE3	.831
Customer Satisfaction	CS1	.639
	CS2	.689
	CS3	.744
	CS4	.759

Source: Survey Data (2023)

According to Table 4, all the items indicated that factor loading estimates were higher than 0.6.

Table 5: KMO and Barlett's Test of Sphericity

KMO	Barlett's Test of Sphericity
0.883	0.0000

Source: Survey Data (2023)

Sampling adequacy of data used in factor analysis can be determined through KMO and Barlett's test. The KMO value indicated in Table 5 is 0.883, greater than 0.5, and the 0.0000 value of Barlett's Test is lower than 0.05, which ultimately means that factor analysis is suitable with the data set (see Table 5).

4.3. Convergent Validity

All average variance extracted (AVE) values are greater than 0.5 and between 0.503 and 0.731 according to Table 6. Furthermore, Composite Reliability (CR) values exceed 0.7, indicating the established validity of the constructs.

Table 6: Convergent Validity: Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) Values

	AVE	Composite Reliability
Sense	0.690	0.869
Feel	0.547	0.827
Think	0.660	0.795
Act	0.532	0.771
Relate	0.731	0.891
Customer Satisfaction	0.503	0.801

Source: Survey Data (2023)

4.4. Discriminant Validity

Table 7: Discriminant Validity: AVE Square Roots and Inter-Construct Correlations

	Sense	Feel	Think	Act	Relate
Sense	.831				
Feel	.553	.740			
Think	.305	.384	.812		
Act	.405	.620	.368	.729	
Relate	.386	.421	.627	.379	.855

Source: Survey Data (2023)

The diagonals in Table 7 display the square root of the AVE, while the off-diagonals represent the correlations between the constructs. The square root of each AVE is greater than the correlation between any two latent variables. Thus, it is possible to conclude that the researcher achieved discriminant validity to this extent.

4.5. Reliability Analysis

Table 8: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Sense	0.865	3
Feel	0.866	4
Think	0.864	2
Act	0.813	3
Relate	0.946	3
Customer Satisfaction	0.913	4

Source: Survey Data (2023)

The figures in Table 8, varying between 0.813 and 0.946, are higher than the threshold level of 0.7 and indicate good reliability.

4.6. Regression Analysis

Customer satisfaction and the independent variables have a medium positive correlation, as indicated by the R-value of 0.815, demonstrating the independent variables' linear solid link with the dependent variable (see Table 09).

Table 9: Regression model summary

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
.815	.665	.659	.36383

Source: Survey Data (2023)

The independent variables in the suggested predictive model can account for 65.9% of the variation in customer satisfaction, according to the adjusted R-squared value of 0.659. Based on the collection of explanatory factors it contains, this indicates that the model explains more than half of the variability observed in satisfaction levels. Considering this, the model's ability to forecast factors influencing customer satisfaction is comparatively strong. However, 34.1% of the variation remains unexplained, suggesting that crucial factors other than those covered by the current variable set affect satisfaction (see Table 9).

Table 10: ANOVA Table

	Regression	Residual	Total
Sum of Square	78.430	39.579	118.009
df	5	299	304
Mean Square	15.686	.132	
F	118.500		
Sig	0.0000		

Source: Survey Data (2023)

The computed p-value is 0.000, indicated in Table 10, which is much less than the significance level of 0.05. This suggests substantial statistical evidence for a strong relationship between the dataset's independent variables and customer satisfaction, and this study's regression model is fit and appropriate.

Table 11: Regression Coefficients

	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.412	.165		2.497	.273
Sense	.077	.038	.084	2.035	.043
Feel	.269	.049	.261	5.461	.000
Think	.064	.035	.079	1.799	.073
Act	.250	.037	.297	6.803	.000
Relate	.274	.037	.336	7.444	.000
Hypothesis	Variable	β Value	β Value Sign	Sig	Conclusion
H ₁	Sense	0.084	Positive	0.043	Accepted
H ₂	Feel	0.261	Positive	0.0000	Accepted
H ₃	Think	0.079	Positive	0.73	Rejected
H ₄	Act	0.297	Positive	0.0000	Accepted
H ₅	Relate	0.336	Positive	0.0000	Accepted

Source: Survey Data (2023)

Multiple regression equation can be formed as,

$$\text{Customer Satisfaction (Y)} = 0.412 + 0.077(\text{Sense}) + 0.269(\text{Feel}) + 0.064(\text{Think}) + 0.250(\text{Act}) + 0.274(\text{Relate})$$

4.7. Hypothesis Testing

Table 12: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Source: Survey Data (2023)

H1: Sense has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction.

Table 12 shows that the sense dimension has a p-value of 0.043, below the significance threshold of 0.05. Therefore, sense marketing significantly enhances client satisfaction. The β value of +0.084 suggests a positive correlation between the variables. Consequently, supporting the first hypothesis (H1), the conclusion can be made that sense has a significant effect on consumer satisfaction. This result proves that the sensory elements of Pizza Hut, such as ambience, interior and exterior decoration, and food presentation, positively and

significantly affect customer satisfaction. This aligns with Schmitt's (1999) Strategic Experiential Modules (SEMs) emphasising how simulation through senses can improve client satisfaction.

According to Udurawana (2014), environment of a restaurant is important in Sri Lanka as it affects how customers perceive its quality and status. Branded restaurants are perceived as trendier, cleaner, hygienic and more attractive for customers in urban settings. Furthermore, consumers evaluate their experience at restaurants by the atmosphere, scent in the air and consistency of branding to some extent. Even though sensory experiences are significant in affecting customer satisfaction, those experiences only surpass cognitive experiences as seen in Figure 2.

These findings align with the study done by Sehani & Hettiarachchy (2022), which highlights how the physical appearance of the place significantly improves customer satisfaction in the retail sector. Furthermore, the study conducted by Liyanapathirana & Nishadi (2020) identified a significant impact on customer satisfaction related to the sensory experience in Sri Lankan restaurants, which confirms the results of this study.

H2: Feel has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction.

The p-value of 0.0000 indicates a significant relationship between emotional experiences and customer satisfaction ($p < 0.05$). The β value for feel is +0.261, suggesting a positive effect between the two variables (see Table 12). This clearly shows that feel significantly enhances customer satisfaction. Therefore, the second hypothesis (H2) can be accepted.

Research by Liyanapathirana & Nishadi (2020) and by M. Wu & Tseng (2014) supports this conclusion, as both found that emotional experience is a crucial predictor of satisfaction in the food and service sectors. Schmitt (2010) identified that customers who feel emotionally connected to a brand are more likely to hold favourable views of it and remain loyal. This universal nature of emotional marketing is even valid for Sri Lanka, as per the results of this study.

In Sri Lanka, people look for warmth and emotional trust when they receive customer service (Patabandige & Yapa, 2016). In most cases, dining is an emotionally driven social experience and how friendly the staff are, how comfortable the place is and how relaxed it feels all influence how much customers admire and enjoy it. Reflecting the collectivist nature of Sri Lanka (Irfan, 2016), the study underscores the importance of emotional connection with customers for better customer satisfaction and loyalty.

H3: Think has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction.

The regression analysis shows that the "Think" dimension does not significantly affect customer satisfaction ($p = 0.073$; $\beta = 0.079$; see Table 12), which means H3 is rejected. Although the β value is positive, it is not statistically significant, suggesting that activities like encouraging customers to think or be creative do not significantly boost satisfaction in this restaurant setting.

While Liyanapathirana & Nishadi (2020) argue that "Think" experiences can increase customer satisfaction by sparking curiosity in the Sri Lankan restaurant sector; this result matches findings of M. Wu & Tseng (2014) which stated "Think" is the least important factor for customer satisfaction. Studies done in Indonesia (Fatmawati et al., 2017) and Vietnam (Pham & Huang, 2015), are contradictory to the findings of this study. Those studies concluded that cognitive experiences affect customer satisfaction in significant manner. However, this demonstrated that Sri Lanka and the restaurant sector have their unique touchpoints in SMEs.

According to Nirmani et al. (2017), customers in the Sri Lankan restaurant sector prioritise emotional comfort, sharing experiences, and familiarity rather than getting intellectually engaged. While most high-end restaurants try to tap into the intellectual dimension, most restaurants especially in the fast-food industry like Pizza Hut, centre their approach on making people feel comfortable, happy and dependable. Even though significantly not activated, Pizza Hut appeals to the intellectual dimension with a positive relationship between variables (see Figure 2).

Although customers do not necessarily seek intellectual stimulation or challenge when they visit restaurants, they do consider both affective and cognitive factors before recommending the establishment to others, which may be explained by the positive correlation between the two variables (Ha & Jang, 2010). Furthermore, the study's respondents, being predominantly young diners, mostly university students, support the idea that emotions, price, and brand loyalty are more important than cognitive input when it comes to satisfaction (Peng et al., 2015).

H4: Act has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction.

The beta value of act is +0.297, and a positive influence between variables can be observed. The act dimension revealed a p-value of 0.000, explaining a substantial impact between act and customer satisfaction as $p < 0.05$ (see Table 12). It is evident from this that the act significantly impacts customer satisfaction. As a result, it is possible to adopt the fourth hypothesis (H4).

This supports Schmitt's (2010) argument that customers are more satisfied when they can actively participate in experiences that reflect their lifestyles. Indrawati & Fatharani (2016) similarly found that "Act" significantly affected satisfaction, while Ellitan (2022) confirmed its relevance in encouraging repurchase behaviour.

According to Dassanayake (2023), in Sri Lanka's urban culture, eating at well-known fast-food chains is linked to personal identity and social standing, particularly among younger individuals. Patrons view Pizza Hut as a symbol of convenience, modernity, and trendiness, aligning with their daily habits and self-presentation. These lifestyle-focused experiences clarify the successful impact of act marketing and highlight its strategic importance in boosting satisfaction within Sri Lanka's restaurant landscape (Ha & Jang, 2010).

H5: Relate has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction.

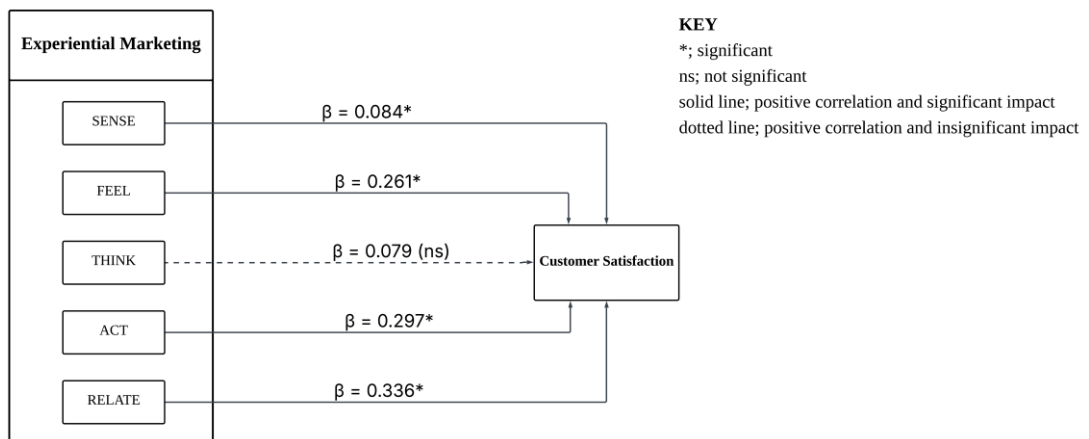
Among all the factors, Relate had the strongest positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction ($p = 0.000$; $\beta = 0.336$; see Table 12), proving the fifth hypothesis. This finding supports Schmitt's (1999) model, which suggests that Relate plays a crucial role in connecting

customers to broader community systems such as communities, roles and cultures attached to the brand. Results also harmonise with studies of Yeh et al. (2019), Amin & Tarun (2019) and M. Wu & Tseng (2014), all of which indicate that social belonging and identity expression through brand affiliation greatly enhance satisfaction, especially in culturally communal societies.

According to Nirmani et al. (2017), for Sri Lankans, dining out is more than necessary; it is an opportunity for families, couples, students and professionals to gather, celebrate milestones and interact with others. Moreover, restaurants that create a friendly atmosphere help people feel that they belong. Things such as Pizza Hut's popular brand, large family-friendly tables, dedicated group dining areas, celebration offers for birthdays and other celebrations and dependability bring people together at their restaurants.

The Relate dimension highlights that customer satisfaction in Sri Lanka's restaurant industry relies more on relational depth than single transactions. In collectivist cultures, social bonding, group dynamics, and emotional connections significantly shape brand perceptions (Irfan, 2016; Ismail et al., 2011).

Figure 1: Analytical Model of SEM Dimensions and Customer Satisfaction





The actual regression results from this study are reflected in the analytical model shown in Figure 3, which shows both significant and non-significant connections between customer satisfaction and the experiential marketing dimensions. This model provides a concise visual representation of the empirical results, highlighting the relative importance of each construct and aiding in the contextualization of the previously described statistical results.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The impact of experiential marketing on customers in Sri Lanka's restaurant industry was investigated in this study, focusing on Pizza Hut patrons, while testing Schmitt's Strategic Experiential Modules (SEMs) in action. The evidence confirms that consumer experiences are key to customer satisfaction, mostly in service-based environments. Four out of the five SEM dimensions, Relate, Act, Feel and Sense, were discovered to make a positive, significant impact * that a connection to the brand matters more than the type of service provided. The dimension of Act, highlighting how a person's lifestyle and actions are important, was ranked second in influence ($\beta = 0.297$).

Though the Think aspect was not statistically significant, it showed a positive beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.079$) and appears to have potential benefits. Instead of seeing this as a mistake by cognitive marketing, we should consider it a chance to get better. The restaurant industry in countries like Sri Lanka is moving from manufacturing and selling food to telling its story, offering new ideas and involving the public in creating that story. The interactive features and promotional options on Pizza Hut's digital menu and app form the basis for creating cognitive experiences. In reality, though, the Think dimension is still not fully developed because people are not actively encouraged to be curious, think, or solve problems.

Culturally, the findings reveal how experiential marketing connects with important social values. In Sri Lanka, dining is not a solitary or purely hedonic act—it is a collective ritual that affirms social bonds, family identity, and cultural belonging. The results here tell us that Sri Lankan customers highly value brands that deliver group-oriented, emotionally touching experiences. Those restaurants that do well in the collectivist context understand the details



of group dining; they create environments that are familiar, welcoming and comforting, so customers link them to important events, friends and their communities.

Likewise, the high β value in Act proves that modern consumers are changing their expectations, mainly for younger consumers. Today's restaurant-goer is no longer a passive recipient of service but an active participant in constructing the dining experience. Customisation, digital tools, engagement on social media and messaging that reflects customers' lifestyles are now vital for customer satisfaction. The implication for practitioners is clear: restaurants must design not only for taste and convenience, but for engagement, self-expression, and shareability. Satisfaction emerges from a brand's ability to reflect and reinforce the lived identities of its customers.

Even though Sense and Feel are the fundamentals for experiential value, they are now seen more as the basics than as elements that set a brand apart. Restaurant-goers' expectations are a clean environment, professionally cooked food and kind staff members. These things are important, but they are not enough on their own. A truly rewarding dining experience stands out by stimulating emotions, changing behaviour and engaging the mind where it is able to do so.

According to the findings, restaurant marketers in Sri Lanka should use a coordinated and culture-sensitive approach to designing experiences. Companies should promote the relate dimension by organizing community meals, offering special packages for families, building social sharing into loyalty schemes and writing campaign messages that are meaningful to the community. Likewise, adding features that allow users to interact such as creating their own meals, watching cooking demonstrations or playing ordering games, can improve Act. They turn customers into members of the community, raising their satisfaction by making the brand important to them. The Think dimension, although statistically non-significant, deserves greater experimentation. Restaurants that introduce knowledge-driven features, such as chef stories, food sourcing narratives, sustainability commitments, or interactive digital learning experiences, can elevate cognitive engagement. This approach is especially promising in more upscale or niche segments, where consumers may seek novelty and mental stimulation alongside taste and ambience.



This research provides new ways to understand experiential marketing in the context of restaurants. The Think dimension is an interesting area to explore. Even though the change was not statistically significant, its upward trend shows there might be more to explore, especially with extra attention given to content or design. In-depth interviews or observational studies are valuable ways to learn how people from various consumer groups react and think about the cognitive parts of restaurant experiences in Sri Lanka. They could help see if intellectual stimulation is being ignored by the market or if brands are not making enough use of it.

It would be interesting to study how different types of customers react to experiential strategies. Everyone experiences things differently. Things age, education level, income or why individual is dining out can influence one's expectations. For instance, younger people often choose places that let them participate and meet others, while older people usually prefer places where they feel emotionally comfortable. Looking at these differences allows marketers to improve their offerings for specific groups.

It is also useful to look at experiential marketing over a period of time. The research done so far usually measures satisfaction at a single time, but the customer experience keeps changing. Longitudinal studies could show how the links between experience and satisfaction change as brands grow, the market changes or customer's age. It could help explain how factors that customers experience can lead to lasting loyalty rather than only satisfying their immediate needs.

Looking at various kinds of restaurants would open up another valuable area for understanding. How customers experience fine dining is usually quite different from how they experience fast-casual or themed restaurants. Applying the SEM framework in different restaurant formats in Sri Lanka can help discover what influences satisfaction for customers and develop strategies that fit each location better.

Apart from the historical background and time period, looking at psychological traits can be very useful. Examining novelty-seeking, emotional reactions and value consciousness might explain the different reactions to the same experience among customers. As a result, these



factors can determine which parts of the experience have the greatest impact when applied in real life.

All in all, this exploratory study provides a basis for developing better and more flexible views of experiential marketing. It points out that providing satisfaction today means more than just meeting expectations; it's also about creating interactions that are personal, meaningful and connected to others. Brands in Sri Lanka's restaurant sector strive to make special memories, not just prepare food. Investing in experiences that connect with emotion, culture and participation allows companies to earn both customer satisfaction and lasting loyalty.



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