



Impact of Experiential Marketing on Destination Image towards Sri Lankan Tourism with the mediating effect of Destination Trust

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to determine “whether the foreign tourists will perceive Sri Lanka as one the best destinations in the world with the experiential marketing and destination trust.” This study employed a quantitative research design to conduct the research. The population of this study was the people who recently visited Sri Lanka. The convenience sampling method was used to select the study sample, and 212 respondents were selected accordingly. Through conducting an online survey, data was gathered using a structured questionnaire to measure the study's main concepts. The results state that; “there is a significant relationship between experiential marketing and destination image and destination trust mediates the relationship.”. The research's main limitations where this questionnaire was distributed on the online platform only where there was a high possibility of neglecting the questionnaire. As suggestions for further research, the researcher suggests focusing on how high-end tourists perceive Sri Lanka as a destination, the pitfalls of Sri Lankan tourism, and reasons for lesser arrivals of high-end tourists to Sri Lanka. Following relevant precautions to avoid the virus in upcoming times and letting them feel secure is essential. This research study identified that destination trust is the most significant factor with the highest coefficient value. By engaging in numerous marketing and promotional activities to attract global high-end visitors, and positioning the island as the world's most trusted destination.

Keywords: *Destination Image, Destination Trust, Experiential Marketing, Sri Lankan Tourism*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is considered as one of the best foreign income gainers all over the world. Internationally, the total contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from travel and tourism industry to the world economy was USD 9.25 trillion, while the direct contribution was amounted to 2.9 trillion USD in 2019 (Statista, 2020). The total contribution was calculated based on the income generated by industries that deal directly with tourists, including hotels, travel agents, airlines and other passenger transport services as well as the activities of restaurant and leisure industries that deal directly with tourists. In 2019 tourism had accounted for 9.8% of global GDP, and 1 in 11 jobs worldwide were in the travel and tourism sector. The travelers or tourists who seek different experience by traveling becomes therefore utmost important to a country to boost their economy. Hence understanding traveler behavior in each and every step in the travel planning process is a major objective of strategic tourism planning.

Sri Lanka has always been a tourist destination. In the past, due to its strategic location, Sri Lanka attracted many merchants and explorers. Its uniqueness and size earned it the name 'Taprobane' and 'The Pearl of the Indian Ocean'. Today, Sri Lanka offers leisure and business travelers a spectrum of attractions. The commercial cities, Colombo and Kandy offer business travelers an array of business opportunities and trade options. The sandy white beaches and attractive underwater life that surrounds the island gives its visitors a chance to unwind and relax in a warm and comfortable setting. The beautiful rain forests, mountain ranges, and scenic plantations can be visited within a few hours (approx. 4-5 hours travel time), and travelers can also visit the wildlife sanctuaries that are located in this small miracle. The Sri Lankan

Government together with the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) is committed to the development and growth of the local tourism industry. The country's Board of Investment (BOI) offers potential foreign investors lucrative incentives to start up with tourism establishments. According to the SLTDA (Sri Lanka Tourism development authority) 2017 annual report 2.1 million international tourists have arrived in Sri Lanka in 2017. And they brought US\$ 3924 Mn to the country. As a percentage, it is a 4.5 % direct contribution to country's GDP.

Competition between tourist destinations is getting tougher, thus every tourist destination needs to create a favorable impression in the minds of tourists. One of them is by packing good tourism products/services to offer emotional experience and feelings of the tourists in order to meet their satisfaction. In recent years, the experience economy is emerging, so all of service industries will be a key industry bringing the most benefit for the world economy. Among these service industries, travel and tourism is a vitally important part of the world economy today. It is the largest and fastest-growing sector, with more than 80 million people travelling every year and a strong predicated growth rate. Travel and tourism is the world's number one employer and represents more than 10% of global spending. The travel and tourism sector continue the momentum of the last few years. Sri Lanka has a high growth rate of hospitality industry and is a developing country, so Sri Lanka has a large potential of developing tourism industry. In addition, the experience economy extremely attaches special importance to customer experience.

The sustainability of tourist destinations is very important. Therefore, creating unique and satisfying travel experiences are vital for tourist destination. Moreover, many information-sources tell different starting points, perceptions and experiences by the tourists when considering Sri Lanka as a tourist destination (Syahyahya, 2018).

1.1. Research Gap

While a number of studies have examined the effects of the experiential marketing on revisit intention towards tourism industry, most did not measure the impact of experiential image on destination image towards Sri Lankan Tourism that could lead to strong positioning. When it comes to Sri Lankan context literature on experiential marketing, there are not many supportive studies for the Sri Lankan people to get a clear understanding of the destination image of the tourists towards the experiential marketing elements since those are conducted based on the foreign countries. So there is a clear gap. Conducting research taken tourists as the population is really important to reduce this gap. So, this research will contribute to filling that gap, and this may provide a base for the future studies.

1.2. Problem Statement

Nowadays countries around the world tries to use different kinds of marketing, promotional, advertising tools to reach the target market and most importantly, to build up a strong brand identity in the consumers' mind. Out of these marketing tools, countries are able to use direct or indirect communications or both to reach its target market. Thus one of this indirect tool was recognized in this study, i.e. experiential marketing to look in to how countries could be benefited from having customers who would have a strong destination image towards the country. Even though there are plenty of things which could impact for destination image, in this study, experiential marketing is identified to see the impact. The sustainability of tourist destinations is very important. Therefore, creating unique and satisfying travel experiences are vital for tourist destination. Moreover, many information sources tell different starting points, perceptions and experiences by the tourists when considering Sri Lanka as a tourist destination (Syahyahya, 2018).

Looking to these facts, the problems can be formulated as follows: To which extent the experiential marketing in Sri Lankan Tourism could impact to have a strong

destination image in tourists' minds examining the destination brand trust as the mediator?

1.3. Research Objectives

In this section, the answers to the above questions are used as research objectives in order to find the solution for the main problem.

- 01) To examine the current experiential marketing practice in Sri Lankan Tourism.
- 02) To investigate the destination image of Sri Lankan Tourism.
- 03) To examine relationship between experiential marketing and destination image of Sri Lankan Tourism.
- 04) To investigate the mediating effect of destination trust on the relationship.
- 05) Make recommendations for future researches.

1.4. Significance of the Study

In terms of survival and the sustainability of destination, the service provider and destination management need to improve the level of service that can achieve a favorable impression or memorable experience through experiential marketing. So involving in a good experiential marketing campaign will increase the added value for the destination to become one of the best. So that tourists will not compel to visit other tourism destinations.

But when we examine those changes in depth, we can identify that most of those improvements have been made by not considering the destination image of Sri Lanka. Therefore the researcher suggests that the importance of this research is very high to examine the impact of experiential marketing to have an indirect promotional method like Word-of-mouth through the tourists. Ultimately this research could be beneficial to Sri Lankan Tourism in raising future strategies.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section comprises, review of the published and unpublished empirical studies from secondary sources in the area within the scope of interest to the researcher. The literature survey has helped the researcher to include all the relevant variables in the study, developed the theoretical framework and hypothesis for testing. The literature review has been done based on the specific issues concern to the researcher and the factors identified in the background of the study.

2.1. Destination Image

Destination image is defined as the perceptions, feelings and the expressions of the tourists towards a visited place based on various factors. In today's competitive environment, creating and managing an appropriate destination image has become essential for effective tourism product positioning. In this context, destination loyalty and satisfaction have become an important part of destination marketing and management due increased competition. Different people may experience different feelings for one particular destination. A diversity of approaches from across various disciplines has been applied in the review of destination image.

The concept called Tourist Destination Image (TDI) was presented by Hunt, (1975) for the first time. Many authors agree that the TDI research line emerged from Hunt's work of 1971 (Gallarza et al., 2002).

Destination image is the visual or mental impression of a place, a product or an experience held by the general public". Such impression draws a lasting effect on the individuals as they perceived the visualization of the place or the product in question (Milman & Pizam, 1995).

From a promotional perspective, destination image is a feeling projected of the place (Khalid & Roslin, 2016). have extended the understanding of destination image as a place of interest that have full character and that evolves into one unique entity (Frías

et al., 2008). Among the fields that have looked at destination image include those in geography, sociology, semiotics and marketing particularly in the area of tourist behavior (Gallarza et al., 2002).

2.2. Experiential marketing (EM)

Experiential marketing (EM) is all about involving customers through two-way communication. Organizations are using experiential marketing to build up a strong customer-brand connection and therefore increase loyalty, word-of-mouth and brand awareness. However, despite the growing adoption of EM, there is still not much research on the topic, especially regarding their effects on customer's perception. Understanding the change of customer's emotions and thoughts towards a brand, after going through a brand experience, is especially relevant for firms that intend to use EM events as part of their communication platform.

The concept of Experiential Marketing (EM) is developed from traditional marketing concept. EM concept develops various concepts and techniques involving consumers' experience. The purpose of this concept is to create a holistic experience from consumers through their participation as well as activities from which they are motivated to buy and consume products/services and tell to others (Syahyahya, 2018).

Experiential marketing is the process of identifying and satisfying needs and desires of the customers, involving them through two-way communications that attach brand personalities to life and adding value to the customers. It's an integrated process, always engaging target audiences in relevant communications that add value. The experiential marketing campaign is built around a big idea that should engage two-way communication between the brand and the target audience, therefore presenting a live brand experience at its core (Smilansky, 2009). Thus, with experimental marketing there will be a strong relationship between the brand and its consumers, since experience can create an emotional relationship between them (Gentile et al., 2007).

Schmitt, (1999) divides experiential marketing into 5 dimensions: sensory (sense), affective (feel), creative cognitive (think), physical/behavior and lifestyle (act) and social-identity (relate Strategic Experiential Modules (SEMs) SEMs are strategic experiential modules that managers can use to create different types of customer experiences for their customers. The experiential modules to be managed in Experiential Marketing include sensory experiences (SENSE), affective experiences (FEEL), creative cognitive experiences (THINK), physical experiences, behaviors and lifestyles (ACT), and social-identity experiences that result from relating to a reference group or culture (RELATE).

There are previous studies done regarding this area and this study is similar to the several previous researches, it has some differences. For instance, Wanninayake (2020) examined experiential marketing for destination loyalty (Reference to tourists' cultural destinations in Sri Lanka). Kanwel et al. (2019) examined the influence of destination image on tourist loyalty and intention to visit, testing a multiple mediation approach. Ishara & Gayathree (2020) investigated the role of experiential marketing in retaining the customers of the hospitality industry in Sri Lanka. Scott et al., (2009) examined the marketing of hospitality and leisure experiences. However, there are some differences between the previous investigations and the present study. Fernando et al., (2018) revealed that there is a significant impact of consumer brand experience on brand loyalty. Le et al., (2019) reviewed tourist imagery processing research, this review provides a useful guide to understanding how to apply experiential marketing in managing tourist experiences and influencing tourist behavior. It offers tourism marketers alternative suggestions to promote destinations and tourism products. A general framework is developed to explain tourist behavior from a mental processing perspective. The study was applying experiential marketing in selling tourism dreams.

In 2006, a study was conducted on “attractions to experiential marketing: The contributions of events to new Tourism”. However, developing a strong image and a brand for a destination takes more time and for events to contribute significantly to

this effort, they have highlighted an approach called strategic event development approach, consistent with the important goals related to the destination image. (The et al., 2006). Matos et al., (2012) has found that among the several strategic marketing implications which can be created based on destination image construct, impacts and influences the tourists' perception and expectations, before, during and after the experience at the destination, as well as satisfaction through the study on revisiting the destination image construct through a conceptual model. Jiang et al., (2017) has conducted study on Authenticity: The link between destination image and place attachment and the findings of this study highlights a significant and positive correlation between destination image and existential authenticity, with destination image as the antecedent.

2.3. Destination Trust

Destination trust is specified generally as the confidence and certainty acquired by a tourist toward a product or service providers in the tourism sites/places as a relation exchange between two parties (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). It is widely observed that trust plays a major role in determining tourist satisfaction and loyalty with a tourist destination (Marinao Artigas et al., 2017). Due to the simultaneous nature of production and consumption of tourism products, destination marketers must ensure delivery of promised service during advertisement and

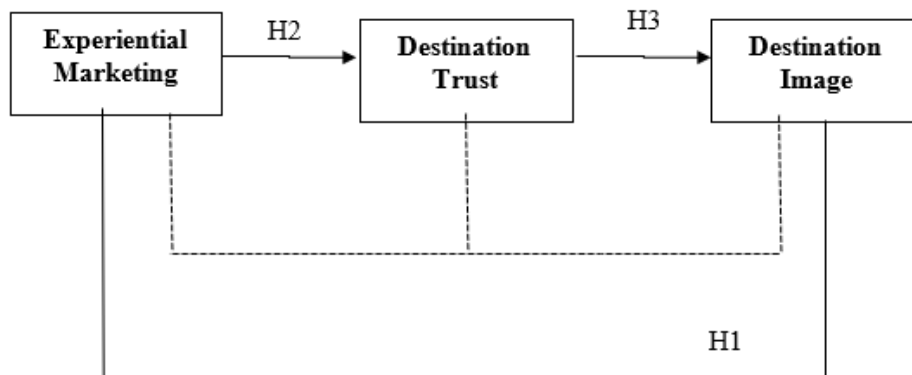
Dimension	Description
Tourism Example	Sensorial The stimulation affects the senses; sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell; arouses leisure, excitement, satisfaction or sense of beauty. Landscapes, architecture, music, food
Emotional	The stimulation affects moods, feelings or emotions. Theme Park rides, tours, events
Cognitive	The stimulation stimulates thinking or conscious mental processes, engages creativity or changes ideas. Museums, art galleries, tours, performances
Pragmatic	The destination teaches a pragmatic art; doing something; learning a skill or craft. Arts and crafts camps; archaeological digs
Lifestyle	Affirms the system of values and beliefs of the customer; consumption/use reinforces or manifests values/beliefs. 'Volunteerism'

volunteer tourism, charity tourism, ecotourism, social tourism Relational Socially oriented; use with other people or expression of social identity. Group tours, family gatherings, reunions, clubs, sport tourism 24 promotion. The integrity and transparency of service offerings of a destination results in the trust that tourist develops for such destinations (A. Mohammed Abubakar et al., 2017). Evidence from Oh (2002) provide support for trust as an antecedent of repeat visit. Yet while research across the tourism industry recognize that destination image and trust operates through WOM and eWOM to constitute travel intention (Abubakar Mohammed Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016). The details of this argument in respect to revisit intention remain underdeveloped.

The importance of trust has been examined extensively in the relationship marketing literature. In particular, Lau and Lee's study investigated the link between consumers' trust in a brand and their brand loyalty. Their empirical findings revealed a significant positive association between the two. Chaudhuri & Holbrook, (2001) also found a significant relationship between brand trust and behavioral and attitudinal loyalty. In tourism literature, Loureiro & Gonzalez, (2008) provided empirical evidence that tourists' trust has a positive influence on their loyalty toward rural lodging.

2.4. Conceptual Framework

Figure 01: Conceptual Framework



Source: Developed by the researcher

2.5. Research Hypotheses

Based on the above literature on experiential marketing, Hypothesis were designed for experiential marketing dimensions to test whether or not there is a significant relationship between experiential marketing and destination image, to determine whether or not there is significant relationship between experiential marketing and destination trust and to determine whether or not there is significant relationship between destination trust and destination image.

H1: There is a significant relationship between Experiential Marketing and Destination Image.

H2: There is a significant relationship between Experiential Marketing and Destination Trust.

H3: There is a significant relationship between Destination Trust and Destination Image.

H4: The Destination Trust mediates the relationship between Experiential Marketing and Destination Image.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the present study, a sample of 212 respondents who are foreign tourists visited Sri Lanka recent years and who have had experience in Sri Lanka was selected by using convenience sampling. A structured questionnaire was used for collecting primary data and a five-point Likert scale was used to get the consumer responses. The questionnaire was pre-tested and suitable modifications were incorporated before distributing online. The collected data were analyzed using various statistical tools like mean score, standard deviation and multiple linear regression. The hypothesis testing was done by mainly using Multiple regression which involves a single dependent variable and two or more independent variables (Malhotra and Dash, 2016)

3.1. Data Preparation for Analysis

The questionnaire was constructed with 42 questions where 12 were nominal and ordinal in order to get the demographic information and general information. Other 30 questions were formulated in Likert scale ranged from 1(Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). With the response rate of 72%, total responses were 216 where 4 were excluded due to its invalidity. Researchers test the normality of data before proceeding with parametric testing.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

The findings revealed that about 69% of the respondents were female, and about 45.3% were between 25-34 years' age group, and approximately 82% of the respondents were in between 20-34 years of age. A large majority (63%) of respondents were single. The findings also revealed that around 67% travelled as a pair or as group and the most visited places in their travel are Galle and Ella, Sri Lanka. There were around 61% of visitors who have visited Sri Lanka more than once and could be considered as re-visits. Leisure is the main purpose for visiting Sri Lanka.

Based on the collected data, the reliability was checked for the composite variables of independent and dependent variables of the study. According to George & Mallery (2003) the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient value has to be higher than 0.7 for the scale to be considered reliable. Here in this study-based data set the overall Cronbach alpha value shows below.

Table 01: Reliability

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha
Sensorial Experience	0.890
Affective Experience	0.859

Cognitive Experience	0.858
Behavioral Experience	0.864
Relational Experience	0.888
Destination Trust	0.940
Destination Image	0.888

As shown in Table 01, in the independent variable, Experiential Marketing, the highest reliability is for sensorial experience with the value of 0.890. In this research mediating variable, which is destination trust has eight items and Cronbach's alpha 0.924. The dependent variable is destination image has five items and Cronbach's alpha value is 0.888. It is above to standard rate which is 0.7. So, the scale that was used to measure all the variables are reliable.

4.1. Regression Analysis

In this study, researcher tested the impact and the relationship between three variables. Researcher has taken experiential marketing as the independent variable, destination image as the dependent variable as well as destination trust as the mediator variable. To test the developed hypothesis researcher is used macro process in SPSS and apply Hayes' model 4 for this mediator analysis.

Table 02: Model Summary of Experiential Marketing

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.753 ^a	.567	.565	.502

As seen in table 5.34 the Adjusted R square value is 0.565, which can be concluded that it is only 56.5 % of the variation destination image is explained by experiential marketing.

Table 03: Coefficient Analysis of Destination Image

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.665	.198		3.365	.001
AvgExpMarketing	.811	.049	.753	16.576	.000

The relationship between experiential marketing and destination image was significant since the p value, 0.000 which is below alpha value 0.05. It shows figure 5.35, that experiential marketing has a significant relationship with destination image. Standardized coefficient beta for experiential marketing was 0.753.

Table 04: Model Summary of Experiential Marketing

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.789 ^a	.622	.620	.443

As seen in table 5.36 the Adjusted R square value is 0.620, which can be concluded that it is only 62 % of the variation destination trust is explained by experiential marketing.

Table 05: Coefficient Analysis of Destination Trust

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.669	.174		3.832	.000
AvgExpMarketing	.803	.043	.789	18.589	.000

The relationship between experiential marketing and destination trust was significant since the p value, 0.000 which is below alpha value 0.05. It shows figure 5.37, that experiential marketing has a significant relationship with destination trust. Standardized coefficient beta for experiential marketing was 0.789.

Table 06: Model Summary of Destination Trust

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.775 ^a	.600	.598	.483

As seen in table 5.38 the Adjusted R square value is 0.598, which can be concluded that it is only 59.8% of the variation destination image is explained by destination trust.

Table 07: Coefficient Analysis of Destination Image

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.725	.181		3.995	.000
	AvgDT	.820	.046	.775	17.762	.000

The relationship between destination trust and destination image was significant since the p value, 0.000 which is below alpha value 0.05. It shows figure 5.39, that destination trust has a significant relationship with destination image. Standardized coefficient beta for experiential marketing was 0.775.

4.2. Mediation Analysis

Figure 02: Process Model

Written by Andrew F. Hayes, Ph.D.
www.afhayes.com
Documentation available in Hayes (2018).
www.guilford.com/p/hayes3

Model : 4
Y : AvgDI
X : AvgEMkt
M : AvgDT

Sample

Size: 212

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

AvgDT

Model Summary

	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1
df2	p				
	.7887	.6220	.1965	345.5330	1.0000
210.0000	.0000				

Model

	coeff	se	t	p
LLCI	ULCI			
constant	.6686	.1745	3.8320	.0002
.3246	1.0125			
AvgEMkt	.8028	.0432	18.5885	.0000
.7177	.8880			

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

AvgDI

Model Summary

	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1
df2	p				
	.8084	.6536	.2028	197.1317	2.0000
209.0000	.0000				

Model

	coeff	se	t	p
LLCI	ULCI			
constant	.3264	.1833	1.7802	.0765
-.0351	.6878			
AvgEMkt	.4042	.0714	5.6640	.0000
.2635	.5448			
AvgDT	.5071	.0701	7.2339	.0000
.3689	.6453			

***** DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y

```

Direct effect of X on Y
      Effect      se      t      p      LLCI
ULCI
      .4042      .0714      5.6640      .0000      .2635
.5448
  
```

```

Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:
      Effect      BootSE      BootLLCI      BootULCI
AvgDT      .4071      .0601      .2875      .5246
  
```

```

***** ANALYSIS NOTES AND ERRORS *****
  
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```

Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in
output:
95.0000
  
```

```

Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap
confidence intervals:
5000
  
```

Source: Survey Data 2020

According to Hayes' model 4, the result of hypothesis test shows the indirect effect of experiential marketing on destination image when destination trust takes as the mediator variable. As per the figure 510, the indirect effect value is 0.4071 and indirect effect is also significant as BootLLCI (0.2875) and BootULCI (0.5246) do not contain zero. It says that the destination trust mediates the relationship between experiential marketing and destination image.

Table 04: Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses	Result
H1: There is a significant relationship between Experiential Marketing and Destination Image.	Supported
H2: There is a significant relationship between Experiential Marketing and Destination Trust.	Supported
H3: There is a significant relationship between Destination Trust and Destination Image.	Supported
H4: The Destination Trust mediates the relationship between Experiential Marketing and Destination Image.	Supported

5. DISCUSSION

The research was based on impact of experiential marketing on destination image towards Sri Lankan tourism with the mediating effect of destination trust. Basically researcher has identified five dimensions of experiential marketing that influencing destination image through the previous studies done (literatures). Sensorial experience, Affective experience, Cognitive experience, Behavioral experience and relational experience are the aforesaid dimensions of independent variable. In order to measure the above dimensions, researcher has identified specific indicators for the each of dimension of experiential marketing. Indicators used to measure sensorial experience are engaging senses (sound, touch, taste and smell), interesting and attractive. Indicators used to measure affective experience are responding in an emotional manner, feel happiness and relax, feel comfortable and feel safe. Indicators used to measure cognitive experience are simulating curiosity, appeal creative thinking, intrigue and change the lifestyle. Indicators used to measure behavioral experience are share experience, take pictures and reflect lifestyle. Indicators used to measure relational experience are buy souvenirs, able to understand the nature of the citizens and sharing opinions and experiences with others. Those are the indicators used to measure independent variables. Dependent variable of the research was purchasing decision on homestays as an accommodation. To measure the dependent variable, destination image, five indicators were used and those are quality infrastructure and accommodations, accommodations are reasonably priced, tolerable climate, exciting travel destination, intention to revisit and recommend visiting in next vacation, recommendations, spreading positive word of mouth. 62 Conclusion was drawn accordingly to the research model developed for the study. The researcher has selected 212 respondents from the global travelers who have visited Sri Lanka. Researcher has distributed online questionnaire (link of the google form) to the foreign tourists through social media and several databases. After the data collected by the researcher, exploratory data analysis, demographic analysis, descriptive

analysis, correlation, regression analysis was done through SPSS statistical data analysis software.

5.1. Conclusion/ Implications

Destination image is very crucial part for a travel destination as it causes for revisit intention of travelers. Therefore, Sri Lankan tourism is focused on establishing and managing special experiences for travelers to make them be trusted towards Sri Lanka and bring them back to the island. Thus, to compete with the other destinations like specially Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam. On the other hand, tourism industry is struggling not only to present the functional dimension of the product to consumers but also to enrich it with the experiential dimension of the product. With this situation, usage of destinations, which can ensure the trust, can make a positive impact on destination image.

The general objective of the study is, to identify & investigate the relationship between the experiential marketing and destination image in the tourism industry in Sri Lanka with the mediating effect of destination trust. In order to reach the central research goal, there are five specific objectives were built.

One is, to examine the current experiential marketing practice in Sri Lankan Tourism. The Survey of Departing Foreign Tourists indicates that most international visitors to Sri Lanka are engaging in mainstream activities, which are broadly categorized as sun and beach, historical and cultural sites, an ancient and an exquisite heritage, and wildlife viewing lush greenery. Sri Lanka is a country blessed with all the resources that any ordinary traveler would need. Experience can be offered to visitors from different varieties as Sri Lanka is a country which inherits a vast diversity in all sides specially in the perspective of climate. When we consider the luxury experience, Sri Lanka may not have that luxury due to slow development in the industry. There are very few luxury properties which targets high end visitors. When it comes to the infrastructure facilities, they are in very low quality according to data collected from

the respondents. Transportation and the routes are not up to the standards which will cause for a downfall of the industry and ultimately it will affect in the destination image.

Next objective to investigate the destination image of Sri Lankan tourism. But suddenly no one was visiting Sri Lanka as a series of terrorist attacks targeting churches and luxury hotels in its capital city Colombo that left 250 people dead in April 2019. Thus, instantly official travel warnings drove many people to cancel trips and stay away. Tourism is an industry where can be extremely sensitive to terrorism or any kind of violent activities. Absence of terror or violence is almost a pre-condition required for the development of tourism destinations. But country promotes the fact Sri Lanka had just a decade earlier emerged from a bloody civil war between government forces and Tamil Tiger rebels in the island's north. The country has begun to reestablish itself as a prime destination. Currently the way people perceive travel and destinations has changed a lot, and that is not just due to the impact of Covid-19. Sri Lanka is trying to paint an attractive image and bring in international tourists once the Covid-19 pandemic has been dealt with.

Third objective of this research is to examine relationship between experiential marketing and destination image of Sri Lankan tourism. To identify this relationship, the researcher has tested the 1st hypothesis of the research as mentioned in the figure. The result states that “experiential marketing use has a significant positive impact on customer retention”.

Fourth objective is to investigate the mediating effect of destination trust on the relationship. To identify this relationship, the researcher has tested the 4th hypothesis of the research as mentioned in the above figure. The result states that the destination trust mediates the relationship between experiential marketing and destination image.

Fifth objective is to make recommendations for the industry. Researcher have made some recommendations to the industry. One of them is Sri Lanka should target high-

end visitors more as we have enough resources. To attract those high-end visitors there should be more infrastructures and facilities which are in high quality. For instance, there should be accommodations specially like luxury boutique hotels which can deliver a unique experience to the customers. High end visitors are arriving from western Europe countries like Belgium, Travel agents in Sri Lanka joining with accommodation owners should attempt to bring those high end customers to the island. The one of the reasons for this recommendation are that those customers tend to expend more money on the quality services as they always expect life standards. That is related to consumer behavior which explains their major differences of habits contrast with middle end and low-end visitors. For example, when it comes to the dinning habits, they order extra food and beverages from alacart menus.

From the theoretical point of view, this research makes essential contributions to the past studies of the tourism industry. Despite the fact this study is similar to the several previous researches, it has some differences. For instance, Wanninayake (2020) examined experiential marketing for destination loyalty (Reference to tourists' cultural destinations in Sri Lanka). Kanwel et al. (2019) examined the influence of destination image on tourist loyalty and intention to visit: Testing a multiple mediation approach. Ishara & Gayathree (2020) investigated the role of experiential marketing in retaining the customers of the hospitality industry in Sri Lanka. Scott et al., (2009) examined the marketing of hospitality and leisure experiences. However, there are some differences between the previous investigations and the present study. It is important to mention that no research was done, which examines experiential marketing, and destination image at the same time in Sri Lankan Tourism. Therefore, the present study would be considered as the first study.

From the managerial point of view, hospitality and welcoming of a destination, as well as memorable visual communication, comfort, and sight belong to one of the most important factors of the sense dimension to make customer satisfy and bring them back to the destination. Thus, good quality infrastructure, decent staff involving in transportation, are important contributors to destination trust. Tourists have

expected a comfortable experience on their journey, so researcher suggests to maintain quality infrastructures surrounding to tourist attractions, including clear roads to reach to destinations, enough parking spaces under given security, not interrupted electricity, pure and clean drinking water, standard shopping experience with bank facilities, quality food, and lodging with entertaining, internet facilities, security facilities for visitors. With Covid-19 pandemic, taking relevant precautions to avoid from the virus in upcoming time and letting them to feel secure, are the most important things when it comes to experiential marketing. It effects the destination trust as well. Therefore, Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), owners of accommodations, tourist guides and travel agents should analyze their current situation, continually plan how to improve these elements, to implement them and control afterward. And also, they should be attentive to this wonderful era as this time is very important to solving all the matters regarding Sri Lankan tourism without thinking this as a rest time

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