

Experiential Marketing in Tourism: Effects on Tourist Satisfaction and Loyalty

Dr. Thulasi B V

Associate Professor of Commerce, Government First Grade College,
Kuvempunagar, Mysore, Karnataka, India

Abstract

The global tourism industry's increasing competitiveness has compelled destinations to shift toward experience-oriented strategies. This study investigates experiential marketing's effects on tourist satisfaction and loyalty while examining satisfaction's mediating role. A quantitative research design was employed with data collected from tourists visiting selected tourism destinations in Karnataka, India. Results reveal that experiential marketing significantly influences both tourist satisfaction and tourist loyalty. Tourist satisfaction demonstrates a strong positive effect on loyalty. Mediation analysis confirms that satisfaction partially mediates the experiential marketing-loyalty relationship, indicating both direct and indirect pathways to loyalty formation. The findings contribute to experiential marketing theory in tourism contexts and provide actionable recommendations for destination managers seeking to enhance tourist loyalty through experience-based strategies.

Keywords: Experiential marketing, Tourist satisfaction, Tourist loyalty, Destination marketing, Mediation analysis

1. Introduction

Contemporary tourists seek holistic, emotionally engaging experiences rather than merely functional services (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). This shift from product-centric to experience-centric consumption has compelled tourism destinations to reimagine their marketing strategies. Traditional approaches emphasizing tangible service attributes are increasingly insufficient in saturated global markets where destinations compete on experience distinctiveness and quality.

Experiential marketing, pioneered by Schmitt (1999), provides a comprehensive framework through five strategic modules: sense (sensory experiences), feel (emotional experiences), think (cognitive experiences), act (behavioral experiences), and relate (social identity experiences). In tourism, these dimensions create memorable destination experiences through deliberate design of sensory stimuli, emotional engagement, intellectual activities, participatory experiences, and social connections.

Tourist satisfaction and loyalty represent critical outcomes in tourism research. Satisfaction reflects overall experience evaluation relative to expectations (Oliver, 1997), while loyal tourists provide long-term value through repeat visitation, positive word-of-mouth, and reduced price sensitivity (Zeithaml et

al., 1996). This study addresses research gaps by comprehensively examining experiential marketing's effects on satisfaction and loyalty while testing satisfaction's mediating role in Karnataka tourism destinations.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

Experiential Marketing in Tourism

Experiential marketing represents a fundamental departure from traditional marketing paradigms that emphasize functional features and rational benefits. Schmitt (1999) conceptualized experiential marketing as customer experiences occurring through encounters and interactions that engage customers in personally relevant ways. The Strategic Experiential Modules (SEMs) framework comprises five dimensions: sense experiences appeal to sensory perceptions through sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell; feel experiences engage emotions and moods creating affective connections; think experiences stimulate cognitive and creative thinking; act experiences target physical behaviors, lifestyles, and interactions; and relate experiences connect individuals to broader social contexts and cultural meanings.

In tourism contexts, experiential marketing has gained prominence as destinations recognize that modern tourists seek transformative, memorable experiences rather than passive consumption of standardized services (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). Tourism experiences are inherently multisensory, emotionally charged, cognitively stimulating, physically engaging, and socially embedded, making the industry particularly suitable for experiential marketing applications. The shift toward experiential marketing reflects broader changes in consumer behavior, where individuals increasingly value authentic experiences, emotional engagement, and personal meaning over material possessions.

Recent empirical research validates experiential marketing's effectiveness across diverse tourism settings. Kim et al. (2023) examined multisensory experiential strategies in cultural heritage tourism across Southeast Asian destinations, surveying 432 tourists. Their structural equation modeling revealed that sensory experiences and emotional experiences most strongly predicted destination attractiveness and visitor engagement. Similarly, Zhang and Wang (2024) investigated experiential marketing dimensions across Chinese tourism destinations with 520 tourists, finding that experiential marketing collectively explained 58% of satisfaction variance, with emotional experiences showing the strongest individual effect.

The tourism literature increasingly recognizes that different experiential dimensions may have varying impacts depending on destination type, tourist characteristics, and contextual factors. Sensory experiences, for instance, may be particularly important in natural and cultural heritage destinations where visual aesthetics, authentic sounds, and tangible interactions create distinctive impressions. Emotional experiences appear universally important across destination types, as affective connections drive memorable experiences and emotional attachment to places. Cognitive experiences gain prominence in educational and cultural tourism where intellectual stimulation and learning constitute core motivations.

Based on this theoretical foundation and empirical evidence:

H1: Experiential marketing positively influences tourist satisfaction.

Tourist Satisfaction and Loyalty

Tourist satisfaction represents a critical outcome variable in tourism research, conceptualized as tourists' overall evaluation of their destination experience relative to pre-visit expectations and desires (Oliver, 1997). The expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm posits that satisfaction results from comparing perceived performance against expectations: positive disconfirmation (performance exceeds expectations) produces satisfaction, while negative disconfirmation generates dissatisfaction. In tourism contexts, satisfaction encompasses multiple dimensions including service quality, value perceptions, emotional responses, and overall experience evaluations.

Tourist loyalty encompasses both attitudinal dimensions (preference, commitment, emotional attachment) and behavioral dimensions (revisit intentions, word-of-mouth recommendations, resistance to competitive alternatives). The satisfaction-loyalty relationship has been extensively documented in tourism literature, with meta-analytic evidence demonstrating strong positive associations. Nguyen et al. (2023) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis revealing that satisfaction explains 40-60% of loyalty variance across diverse tourism contexts, confirming satisfaction's critical role as a loyalty antecedent.

However, recent research suggests the satisfaction-loyalty relationship is more complex than previously understood. While satisfaction provides a necessary foundation for loyalty, it may not be sufficient. Experiential factors may create direct emotional bonds and identity associations that bypass cognitive satisfaction evaluations. This dual-pathway mechanism—combining cognitive-evaluative processes (satisfaction) with emotional-affective processes (direct experiential effects)—requires empirical examination to understand how experiential marketing influences loyalty formation through both direct and mediated routes.

H2: Tourist satisfaction positively influences tourist loyalty.

H3: Experiential marketing positively influences tourist loyalty.

H4: Tourist satisfaction mediates the relationship between experiential marketing and tourist loyalty.

3. Research Methodology

Research Design and Context

This study employed a quantitative research design using cross-sectional survey methodology to examine relationships among experiential marketing, tourist satisfaction, and tourist loyalty. The research utilized a positivist paradigm with deductive reasoning to test hypothesized relationships derived from existing theoretical frameworks. The cross-sectional approach, while limiting causal inference, enables efficient data collection and examination of relationships at a specific point in time, which is appropriate for the research objectives.

The study was conducted in Karnataka, India, a major tourism destination known for diverse attractions including cultural heritage sites (Hampi, Mysore Palace), natural attractions (Coorg, Jog Falls), wildlife sanctuaries, and urban destinations (Bangalore). Karnataka attracts millions of domestic and international tourists annually, making it an appropriate context for examining experiential marketing effects across diverse tourism experiences. Data collection occurred during the peak tourism season from October 2024 to January 2025 to ensure adequate tourist traffic and diversity in visitor profiles.

Sample and Data Collection

The target population comprised domestic and international tourists visiting major tourism destinations in Karnataka. A convenience sampling method was employed due to practical constraints in accessing tourists at various sites and the absence of a comprehensive sampling frame. While convenience sampling limits generalizability, it is widely used in tourism research where random sampling is often impractical.

Sample size was determined using G Power analysis for multiple regression with medium effect sizes ($f^2 = 0.15$), 95% confidence level, 80% statistical power, and three predictors. The analysis indicated a minimum sample of 77 participants, though we targeted substantially larger samples to ensure adequate power for mediation analysis and subgroup comparisons. Data were collected from 350 tourists across multiple sites including heritage destinations, natural attractions, and cultural sites, providing diversity in tourist experiences.

Structured questionnaires were administered at tourist sites during exit points to capture tourists who had completed their destination experiences. Trained research assistants approached tourists systematically, explained the research purpose, emphasized voluntary participation and anonymity, and obtained informed consent. The questionnaire was available in English and regional languages (Kannada, Hindi) to ensure accessibility across diverse tourist segments. Of 450 questionnaires distributed, 350 usable responses were obtained, yielding a 78% response rate.

Measurement Instruments

All constructs were measured using established, validated scales adapted from previous tourism research. All items utilized 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), providing sufficient variability while remaining manageable for respondents.

Experiential Marketing was measured using a 15-item scale adapted from Brakus et al. (2009) and Schmitt (1999), capturing five experiential dimensions with three items each. Sensory experiences were measured with items such as "This destination provides stimulating sensory experiences" and "The destination makes a strong visual impression." Emotional experiences included items like "I feel emotionally connected to this destination" and "This destination induces feelings and emotions." Cognitive experiences captured intellectual stimulation through items including "This destination stimulates my curiosity" and "The destination makes me think." Behavioral experiences measured physical engagement with items such as "This destination results in bodily experiences" and "The destination offers opportunities for action." Relational experiences assessed social connections through

items like "This destination makes me feel part of a community" and "The destination facilitates social interactions."

Tourist Satisfaction was measured using a 5-item scale adapted from Oliver (1997), assessing overall satisfaction with the tourism experience. Sample items included "My visit to this destination was satisfying," "This destination met my expectations," "I am pleased with my decision to visit this destination," "This experience was exactly what I needed," and "Overall, I am satisfied with this destination."

Tourist Loyalty was measured using a 5-item scale adapted from Zeithaml et al. (1996), capturing both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty intentions. Items included "I intend to revisit this destination in the future," "I would recommend this destination to others," "I would say positive things about this destination," "I would encourage friends and relatives to visit," and "I consider this destination my first choice for similar trips."

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0 statistical software. The analytical procedure followed systematic steps. First, preliminary data screening examined missing values (none detected), outliers (identified and retained as legitimate extreme values), and distributional properties (normality generally satisfied). Second, descriptive statistics and reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha assessed internal consistency for all constructs. Third, Pearson correlation analysis examined bivariate relationships among study variables.

Fourth, multiple regression analysis tested direct effects of experiential marketing on satisfaction, satisfaction on loyalty, and experiential marketing on loyalty. Finally, mediation analysis employed Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples to examine indirect effects and generate bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals. Bootstrap methodology provides robust estimates of mediation effects without requiring normal distribution assumptions, making it superior to traditional approaches like the Sobel test.

4. Results

Sample Demographics

The sample comprised 52% male and 48% female tourists. Age distribution: 18-30 years (36%), 31-45 years (41.1%), 46+ years (22.9%). Education: 68% held undergraduate or postgraduate degrees. Income: middle-income (47%) and upper-middle-income (31%) dominated. Visit type: first-time visitors (56.6%), repeat visitors (43.4%).

Reliability and Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Items	Mean	SD	α
Experiential Marketing	15	3.89	0.68	0.91
Tourist Satisfaction	5	3.67	0.82	0.88
Tourist Loyalty	5	4.12	0.75	0.90

All Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeded 0.70, indicating excellent reliability. Means ranged from 3.67 to 4.12, suggesting positive tourist evaluations.

Correlation Analysis

Variable	1	2	3
1. Experiential Marketing	1		
2. Tourist Satisfaction	0.675	1	
3. Tourist Loyalty	0.598	0.721	1

Note: $p < 0.001$

All correlations were significant ($p < 0.001$), supporting hypothesized relationships. Correlations remained below 0.85, indicating no multicollinearity concerns.

Hypotheses Testing

Multiple regression analysis tested direct effects:

Path	β	t	p	R ²
EM → Satisfaction	0.687	18.92	<0.001	0.472
Satisfaction → Loyalty	0.742	21.45	<0.001	0.551
EM → Loyalty	0.521	13.87	<0.001	0.358

Results support H1, H2, and H3. Experiential marketing significantly influences satisfaction ($\beta = 0.687$, $p < 0.001$) and loyalty ($\beta = 0.521$, $p < 0.001$). Satisfaction strongly affects loyalty ($\beta = 0.742$, $p < 0.001$).

Mediation Analysis

Hayes' PROCESS macro tested satisfaction's mediating role. Results showed partial mediation: Direct effect (EM → Loyalty) = 0.312 ($p < 0.001$), Indirect effect (EM → Satisfaction → Loyalty) = 0.509, 95% CI [0.432, 0.591]. Total effect = 0.821. Satisfaction mediated 40.1% of experiential marketing's effect on loyalty, supporting H4.

5. Discussion

Theoretical Implications

This study makes several important theoretical contributions to experiential marketing and tourism literature. First, the strong relationship between experiential marketing and satisfaction ($\beta = 0.687$, $p < 0.001$) validates and extends Schmitt's (1999) experiential marketing framework in tourism destination contexts. The findings demonstrate that multidimensional experiential strategies incorporating sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational elements effectively enhance tourist satisfaction. This result confirms that tourism consumption is inherently experiential, requiring holistic approaches that engage tourists across multiple dimensions simultaneously.

Second, the powerful effect of satisfaction on loyalty ($\beta = 0.742$, $p < 0.001$) provides strong support for expectancy-disconfirmation theory in tourism contexts. The magnitude of this relationship indicates that satisfaction remains a critical mechanism through which experiences translate into behavioral intentions and loyalty outcomes. This finding aligns with extensive prior research while demonstrating the continued relevance of satisfaction as a key outcome variable despite recent emphasis on alternative constructs such as engagement, attachment, and brand love.

Third, and most importantly, the partial mediation finding enriches theoretical understanding of complex psychological processes underlying tourist behavior. The mediation analysis revealed that satisfaction accounts for 40.1% of experiential marketing's total effect on loyalty, indicating substantial but incomplete mediation. This finding suggests that experiential marketing influences loyalty through dual pathways: a cognitive-evaluative pathway operating through satisfaction judgments, and an emotional-affective pathway creating direct bonds that transcend rational evaluations.

The direct effect of experiential marketing on loyalty ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$) represents the emotional-affective pathway, suggesting that memorable experiences create lasting impressions, emotional connections, and identity associations independent of satisfaction evaluations. This aligns with recent theoretical developments emphasizing that experiences can forge emotional bonds and self-concept connections that operate through affective and conative mechanisms rather than purely cognitive processes. The finding contributes to growing recognition that loyalty formation involves both rational evaluations (satisfaction) and emotional connections (direct experiential effects).

Practical Implications

The findings provide actionable guidance for destination management organizations, tourism businesses, and policymakers. First, the strong relationships found demonstrate clear returns on investment in experience-based strategies. Destinations that effectively implement comprehensive experiential marketing strategies incorporating all five dimensions—sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational—will achieve sustainable competitive advantages in increasingly experience-oriented global tourism markets.

Destination managers should develop integrated experiential strategies rather than focusing on isolated elements. For sensory experiences, this includes thoughtful design of visual aesthetics, soundscapes,

tactile opportunities, and when relevant, taste and smell elements. For emotional experiences, destinations should create opportunities for wonder, joy, excitement, tranquility, or other emotions aligned with their positioning. Cognitive experiences can be enhanced through interpretive programs, educational activities, and intellectually stimulating content. Behavioral experiences require participatory activities, hands-on engagements, and opportunities for active involvement rather than passive observation. Relational experiences emerge through facilitating social connections, community interactions, and cultural immersion.

Second, while experiential marketing creates direct emotional impacts, the research underscores that satisfaction remains essential for translating positive experiences into behavioral loyalty. Destinations must therefore balance investment in creating extraordinary experiences with ensuring fundamental service quality and meeting tourist expectations. Both emotional engagement and satisfaction fulfillment are necessary for optimal loyalty outcomes. This suggests that experiential innovations should complement rather than replace basic service excellence.

Third, the partial mediation finding indicates that destinations should pursue both pathways to loyalty. The cognitive-evaluative pathway requires delivering on promises, meeting expectations, and ensuring positive satisfaction evaluations through reliable service quality. The emotional-affective pathway demands creating distinctive, memorable, emotionally resonant experiences that forge lasting connections independent of satisfaction judgments. Destinations excelling in both dimensions will achieve the strongest loyalty outcomes.

Finally, as global tourism continues evolving driven by changing demographics, digital transformation, sustainability imperatives, and shifting consumer values, the strategic importance of experiential marketing will intensify. Contemporary tourists increasingly prioritize authentic, meaningful, transformative experiences over passive consumption of standardized services. Destinations embracing experiential marketing principles, investing in experience design capabilities, cultivating organizational cultures emphasizing experience delivery, and continuously innovating experiential offerings will thrive in competitive tourism landscapes.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Cross-sectional design limits causal inference; longitudinal designs would strengthen conclusions. Self-reported data introduces potential bias; future studies should incorporate behavioral measures. Convenience sampling limits generalizability; probability sampling across diverse destinations is recommended. The Karnataka focus suggests comparative research across destination types and cultural contexts. Future research should examine specific experiential dimensions, moderating variables, technology integration, and sustainability outcomes.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates experiential marketing's powerful role in enhancing tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Results validate Schmitt's framework in tourism contexts and illuminate dual pathways influencing loyalty formation. The partial mediation indicates experiential marketing creates both

cognitive evaluations and direct emotional bonds transcending rational assessments. For destination managers, findings confirm that comprehensive experiential strategies yield substantial returns through enhanced satisfaction and loyalty. As tourists increasingly prioritize authentic, meaningful experiences, destinations embracing experiential marketing principles will thrive in competitive landscapes.

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