

The Impact of Experiential Marketing on Purchase Intention: Mediating Role of E-Word of Mouth with Special Reference to Restaurants in the Colombo District

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This study was conducted to examine the impact of experiential marketing on purchase intention, with a particular focus on the mediating role of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) within the restaurant industry in the Colombo district of Sri Lanka. Experiential marketing, which involves creating memorable and engaging consumer experiences, has become a critical component in shaping consumer behavior, especially in industries such as restaurants, where customer perceptions and experiences directly influence purchasing decisions. The study explores how the five key dimensions of experiential marketing—sense, feel, think, act, and relate experiences—affect consumer behavior. Additionally, the research investigates how eWOM acts as a mediating factor that enhances the relationship between experiential marketing and purchase intention.

The study employs a quantitative research approach, gathering primary data from 344 respondents, out of an initial sample of 385, who have dined at restaurants in the Colombo district. After data cleaning, 327 valid responses were analyzed using SPSS 26. The results confirm that experiential marketing has a significant and positive impact on purchase intention. Among the five dimensions of experiential marketing, the sense, feel, think, and act experiences were found to play critical roles in shaping consumer purchase behavior. These dimensions—each targeting different aspects of the consumer's sensory, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses—are essential in influencing a consumer's decision to purchase. However, the study reveals that the relate experience dimension, which emphasizes creating connections between consumers and the brand or other customers, does not significantly impact purchase intention in this context.

The study also highlights the important mediating role of eWOM in the relationship between experiential marketing and purchase intention. The findings underscore how eWOM serves as a powerful tool for amplifying the effects of experiential marketing by spreading information about dining experiences. Positive online reviews, recommendations, and shared experiences significantly influence consumers' purchasing decisions, as eWOM increases awareness, builds trust, and encourages engagement. This highlights the importance of digital communication in restaurant marketing strategies, suggesting that eWOM is not only an extension of traditional word-of-mouth but also a vital mechanism for enhancing the marketing efforts of restaurant businesses.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. One of the key limitations is its geographic focus on the Colombo district, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other regions within Sri Lanka or internationally. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the research limits the ability to capture long-term trends or changes in consumer behavior over time. Future research could address these limitations by exploring similar dynamics in different cultural and industrial contexts and adopting longitudinal designs to better understand how consumer behaviors evolve over time, particularly in response to changing marketing strategies or external influences.

This research contributes both theoretically and practically to the fields of experiential marketing and eWOM. Theoretically, it enriches the literature by exploring the impact of experiential marketing on purchase intention and by clarifying the mediating role of eWOM within the Sri Lankan restaurant industry. From a practical perspective, the findings offer actionable insights for restaurant managers and marketers. The study emphasizes the importance of designing sensory, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral experiences that resonate with consumers, and it highlights the potential of eWOM as a tool to amplify these experiences and encourage greater customer engagement. The results suggest that restaurant marketers should invest in creating compelling and memorable experiences while leveraging digital platforms to encourage satisfied customers to share their experiences with others, thus further driving brand awareness and purchase intentions.

Keywords: *Experiential Marketing, Electronic Word of Mouth, Purchase Intention, Restaurants sector, Sri Lanka*