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How Can Scents Influence the Way Customers Perceive Hotel Brands? Analysis on the Importance of Scents as part of Branding in the Hotel Industry

By Marine Hakobyan, Laia Martinez Miracle and Andrea Navarrete Lindez

Abstract

Purpose: Scent marketing has long been here; discussed in various literature and used by many brands all over the world. Yet, there is not sufficient research done on how scents affect customer perceptions of brands in the hotel industry. This paper intends to examine how scents influence the way customers perceive hotel brands, along with analysing the importance of using scents in order to develop a strong brand identity.

Methodology: This paper adopts both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, focusing on primary research. An online questionnaire is used to collect data from hotel guests around the world regarding scents as part of their customer experiences and how scents affect customer perceptions of the hotel brands. Furthermore, interviews are conducted with previous customers of the W Barcelona hotel in Spain, Santhiya Koh Yao Yai Resort & Spa in Thailand, and Sun Palace Resort in Mexico for the respective case studies. The aim of the case study interviews is to dive deeper into the effects of scents on customer perceptions of the hotel brands. Secondary data from the hotels' web pages is also used for the case studies.

Findings: The findings of this paper show the positive impact of scents on the way consumers perceive hotel brands, in terms of enhanced brand experiences and associations that result in higher brand recall and loyalty. Thus, the importance of integrating scents into Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism framework under the *physique* dimension for brands in the hotel industry is also found.

Originality/Value: This paper supports and complements the previous research available on scent marketing as part of branding, yet it brings its unique primary data as a basis of support. Then, the paper is the first of its kind to combine scent marketing and Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism framework for application in building a strong brand identity. Moreover, a new definition of scent marketing is proposed on the basis of the research findings.

Keywords: Scent marketing, hotels, sensory marketing, scent branding, brand image, brand loyalty, brand recall, brand associations and experiences, brand identity, brand identity prism, Santhiya Koh Yao Yai Resort & Spa hotel, W Barcelona hotel, Sun Palace hotel.

Paper Type: Research paper

Introduction

The use of scent marketing has been rapidly developing all over the world as a way to create memorable and enjoyable customer experiences (Scenting International, 2017). Interestingly, people can, on average, recognise around 1 trillion different odours, while being able to remember them with great capacity (Bushdid, Magnasco, Vosshall, & Keller, 2014). The human sense of smell affects 75% of daily emotions and has a very powerful link to memory (Peng, 2015). We remember smells with around 65% accuracy after a year, whereas our visual recall is around 50% after three months (Oxford University study, cited in Peng, 2015). Smells stay with the brain as part of our memory, which directly translates into the fact that emotional attachments are formed through smells. Thus, scents have the power to create positive attitudes towards sales environments while increasing the chances of purchase and positively affecting customers' memory of brands (Grybó-Kabocik, 2018).

Given the scientifically proven reasons, it has been a long time since the hotel industry in particular uses scent marketing as part of its operations. However, there is not sufficient research conducted on how scents affect customer perceptions of brands in the hotel industry. This is the reason why this paper aims to dig deeper into scents' role in customers' minds towards recognizing, perceiving, and valuing hotel brands, and also to analyse the importance of using scents in the hotel industry for developing a strong brand identity.

A literature review is carried out on scent marketing, emotional reactions to scents, brand experiences & associations, brand recall, brand loyalty, and brand identity, which can be found in the following sections

of this paper. Later on, primary data is collected through an online questionnaire in order to generally study the effects of scents on customer perceptions of the many hotel brands around the world. Further, three case studies of specific international hotels using scent marketing are introduced. Those hotels are the W Barcelona hotel in Spain, Santhiya Koh Yao Yai Resort & Spa in Thailand, and Sun Palace Resort in Mexico. Our study on the latter hotels is backed by and focused on in-depth interviews carried out with a previous guest of each hotel. The paper then suggests if the Brand Identity Prism framework by Kapferer (2012, pp. 158-164) should incorporate scent as part of its *physique* dimension. A new definition of scent marketing is also proposed based on the research findings. In the end, the limitations, further research implications, and contributions of this paper are discussed.

Literature Review

Scent Marketing

Scent marketing is defined as the use of a strategically chosen fragrance diffused at customer points of contact in order to create a pleasant experience (ScentAir, n.d.). While Air Aroma (n.d.) goes beyond and presents scent marketing as a form of art that mixes a brand's identity, marketing communications and target audience to create a scent that strongly builds on those aspects of the brand (Air Aroma, n.d.).

It is a part of sensory branding that comprises the use of the five senses of the body: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustative, and tactile (Scenting International, 2017). The smell is the most powerful and emotional of all the senses as it is the sense that is linked the most closely to memory (Orvis, 2016). By using scents, brands are able to connect with consumers on a deeper emotional level,

resulting in a more memorable experience (Air Aroma, n. d.). In addition, scents form associative recognition by which customers can easily recall brands as a result of experiencing those scents (Scenting International, 2017).

Brands can use scent marketing as a way of communicating to their existing and potential customers in order for them to create a connection between the brand and its scent (Sullivan, 2021). Although having a signature scent is still an unusual approach for brands, it can allow distinctiveness to the brand and categorise it as unique (The Scent Company Journal, 2021). Scent marketing is used to create a memorable and enjoyable customer experience, while, at the same time, increasing the brand's value and promoting long-term customer loyalty (Scenting International, 2017).

Emotional Reactions to Scents

The perception of scents consists not only of the feelings and sensations associated with particular scents, but they also conjure up and connote affective experiences. It has been proven that scents can evoke strong emotional reactions and that they can indicate a deeper connection with brands (Fox, 2021). There is a powerful relationship between scents and memories (Spectrio, 2019). Scents can trigger remembrance of emotional memories and psychological, physiological states (Kadohisa, 2013). In general terms, scents have a positive effect on customers' experiences by developing their brand memory, enhancing their attitudes towards the brand, having a more optimistic evaluation of the product or service, and thus having a higher probability of repeating their purchase (Grybś-Kabocik, 2018).

Brand Experiences & Associations

According to Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello (2009), brand experience is defined as the sum of sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses triggered by brand stimuli such as brand's identity and design, packaging, communications and environment where brands are marketed and sold. Many different cues of brands, such as colours, tunes, characters and narratives create brand experiences (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). Brand experiences happen, both directly and indirectly, in many different settings. Consumers directly experience a brand when searching for, shopping for, buying and consuming brands. Whereas an indirect brand experience can occur when consumers are exposed to any marketing communication by a brand, both online and offline (Brakus et al. 2009). As Brakus et al. (2009, p. 65) state, "brand experience has a behavioural impact; it affects consumer satisfaction and loyalty directly and indirectly through brand personality." Thus, it is of utmost importance for brand managers to bond with consumers by creating holistic brand experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

Based on brand experiences, brand-related associations are formed through more elaborative information processing and inference making (Keller, 1993). According to Keller (1993), brand associations, other than being attributes of the product or service itself, are also attributes connected to the purchase and consumption of the product or service, such as price, information and user imagery among other things. Brand associations help customers process information about a brand and can affect customer buying decisions (Aaker, 1992).

Brand Recall

According to Keller (1993), brand recall is associated with the consumer's ability to retrieve a brand under various circumstances, when given some related probe as a cue. In simpler words, brand recall is the process of customers' identification and/or differentiation of one brand, product or service from another (Farrukh, Arif & Memon, 2016). It is common that customers link a particular scent to a memory so that when experiencing the same scent again in another situation, they automatically recall those memories (Spectrio, 2019).

Brand recall is an aspect of brand awareness where the information held in the consumer memory is key for identifying a brand (Prashar & Sharma, 2013). Thus, it is of vital importance for brands to be more memorable than their competitors (Baumann, Hamin & Chong, 2015). In order to build a successful brand, attention should be driven towards using significant and useful signals that would leave a mark in the consumers' minds and make the brand more recalled for a long period of time (Pidhurska, 2020).

Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty can be defined as the customer's unquestionable attachment towards a brand (Oliver, 1999), which is expressed through positive attitudes and emotional ties towards the brand (Tepeci, 1999), as well as a behavioural element in terms of repeated purchases over time (Oliver, 1999). It measures consumers' likelihood of changing to another brand, particularly when a modification is implemented by the brand or when there are competitors with superior characteristics (Aaker, 1991).

According to Oliver (1999, p. 33), loyalty is not always a product of satisfaction, but it is

the result of "perceived product superiority, personal fortitude, social bonding, and their synergistic effects". Whereas Kapferer (2012) considers that brand loyalty is achieved through establishing a personalised relationship with the client and by giving no reason to the customer to switch to another brand.

Above all, brand loyalty is a strategic asset (Aaker, 1991) since it provides the grounds for a "stable market share, high profitability and a long-term positive cash-flow" (Melin, 2002, p. 115). It also serves as an entry barrier to competitors, reduces marketing costs and has the potential to lead to customer willingness for paying a higher price (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Kotler & Keller, 2012). Aaker (1991) considers that brand loyalty is the heart of brand equity, given that high brand loyalty ensures future sales.

Brand Identity

Brand identity can be defined as the set of brand associations that embodies the aim of the brand, its meaning and its uniqueness (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2012). According to Melin (2002), the purpose of brand identity is to provide an emotional added value to the brand. Brand identity embraces the brand's tangible and intangible attributes (Kapferer, 2012): the brand's name, roots, design, purpose and promise, and personality (Kapferer, 2012; Melin, 2002).

Aaker (1996) distinguishes between the core identity and the extended identity. The core identity includes the key values and attributes which constitute the essence of the brand and is subject to remain constant over time (Aaker, 1996). The emphasis of these core values can vary, but they are always present despite changes in the brand's positioning (Kapferer, 2012). In contrast, the extended identity may change over time as the brand

expands to new markets or products while consisting of brand identity characteristics that complement the brand's heart (Aaker, 1996). Respecting the key values of the brand through time is considered to be of great importance (Kapferer, 2012; Melin, 2002). It is crucial for achieving consistency in brand identity, which can lead to sustainable advantages (Aaker, 1996).

Kapferer (2012) has developed the Brand Identity Prism framework, which represents six dimensions of brand identity: *physique*, *personality*, *culture*, *relationship*, *reflection* and *self-image*. The *physique* dimension is formed by the tangible features and qualities that characterize the brand, such as the logo and product design. The brands' means of communication builds brand character, which can be represented by human traits and constitute the *personality* facet of the framework. *Physique* and *personality* are placed from the sender's side. The most important dimension of brand identity is *culture*, which is the sum of ideals and values that drive the organization both internally and externally. The *relationship* facet is the brands' way of conduct with stakeholders reflected by how the brand behaves, connects to customers and delivers its promise. At the bottom of the prism *self-image* and *reflection* are placed, as part of the receiver's side. While *self-image* identifies how the customers see themselves when consuming the brand's products or service, the *reflection* looks at how others perceive a customer of a certain brand.

As part of the framework, brand essence is placed in the middle, represented by the brand promise and core values. Overall, the Brand Identity Prism, shown in Figure 1, illustrates the interrelation between all these assets and how important they all are to form a coherent brand identity (Kapferer, 2012).

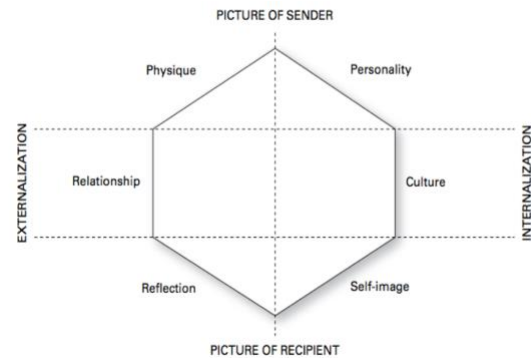


Figure 1. Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism

Methodology

Research Design

This research entails a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches, mainly focused on data collection from primary sources. The purpose of this research is to study the influence of scents on the way customers perceive hotel brands, and how scents can be an integral part of the hotel branding process. Both the qualitative and quantitative approaches are chosen for a more comprehensive insight into the topic under examination. The qualitative research method is used under the scope of three case studies and as a partial part of the online questionnaire through open-ended questions, while the quantitative method is the focus of the online questionnaire, used to collect numerical data on the topic. Thus, both a general and case-based strategy is used for primary data collection in order to better support the study findings.

Empirical Data Collection

Firstly, quantitative data was collected through an online questionnaire generally targeted towards people having experienced scents at different hotels around the world. The questionnaire included 12 questions on the topic, three out of which were open-ended

in order to provide, for example, the specific names of the hotels the respondents stayed in and gain more insight into the participants' chain of thoughts.

Secondly, three case studies were held, which entail in-depth interviews with previous customers of the W Barcelona Hotel in Spain, Santhiya Koh Yao Yai Resort & Spa in Thailand, and Sun Palace Resort in Mexico for the respective case studies. The selected hotels are luxury hotels located in different points of the world and do not belong to the same hotel group. Moreover, the W Barcelona Hotel in Barcelona is part of a bigger hotel group, the Marriott group, whereas the other two case study hotels are local brands in Mexico and Thailand respectively. The previous points made are important to mention for the sake of the credibility of the case studies and of the decision to choose the hotel brands in subject. Data from the hotels' web pages was also used to retrieve and provide short background information about the hotels as part of the case studies. During the in-depth interviews, a predefined list of questions was used to discover the interviewees' experiences and reflections towards the hotel brands influenced by their scents. It should be noted that the scent marketing term was not the focus of the interviews, but rather the concept of scents was freely discussed. The interviews were carried out individually over Zoom and lasted on average 30-45 minutes. They were held in English in order to avoid lost meanings as a result of translation.

Sample Selection & Size

The responses to the questionnaire were collected through postings in Facebook and LinkedIn groups targeted around travel enthusiasts, world travellers, hotel lovers, luxury hotels, expats, and the like. Thus, the respondents were of varying nationalities

providing insights about hotels all over the world. Some responses from the authors' vicinity were also collected through this questionnaire.

Then, the people for the case study interviews were chosen from the authors' vicinity, as the authors asked around their friends and acquaintances to find people who stayed in any hotel where they experienced a distinctive scent and remembered it. The requirements for the interviews were that they should have stayed in the hotels as guests for at least a day, for at least one occasion and remembered the scents precisely. It is important to mention that in order to avoid any bias when responding to the questions of the interviews and online questionnaire, interviewees and respondents were made sure not to be part of the authors' immediate circle of friends and acquaintances.

Discussion and Analysis of the Online Questionnaire

The main purpose of this questionnaire is to conduct generalised research in order to support the previous research done on the topic through this unique primary research, as well as to support the findings of the case-study interviews discussed in the next section of this paper. Overall, 70 responses were collected from the online questionnaire, out of which 35.7% were answered by men, and 64.3% by women.

Out of the 70 responses, some of the hotels that were mentioned are the NH Hotels, Silken Saaj, Meliá, Sheraton, Ritz Carlton, Four Seasons, Cheval Blanc Randheli Maldives and Crown Plaza. The most repeated hotel brands were the Hilton Luxury Resort Hotel (7 times), Ritz Carlton Hotel (4 times) and the Marriot Hotel (3 times).

A multiple-choice-selection question was asked for the respondents to describe the scents they experienced during their stays in those hotels, where the scents were categorised following the Fragrance Wheel by Serras (2019). 60% of the respondents (42 people) described the scents of the hotels where they stayed as fresh, while 34.3% of the respondents (24 people) opted for woody. In addition, 31.4% of the respondents (22 people) thought of the scents as being floral, whereas 17.1% (12 people) chose oriental.

Yet, the same multiple-choice question had an “other” option to choose from and specify, to which the answers elegant and luxurious were brought up a few times.

Then, a question was asked to discover the respondents’ emotions evoked by the scents experienced in the hotels they stayed in, to which a great number of emotions were mentioned. The full list of emotions along with the specified numbers of mentions for each can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Full list of emotions evoked by hotel scents mentioned in the online questionnaire

Relaxed – 13	Energetic – 2	Special – 1
Comfortable or Cosy – 13	Premium – 1	Foreign – 1
Clean – 9	Stay Forever – 1	Awake – 1
Calm – 7	Good Mood – 1	In The Moment – 1
Home – 7	Special Place – 1	Refined – 1
Happy – 6	Garden – 1	Sensual – 1
Fresh – 5	Excited – 1	Motivated – 1
Peaceful – 5	Welcome – 1	Unique – 1
Pleasant – 5	Tropical – 1	Casual – 1
Luxurious – 4	Chill – 1	Playful – 1
Elegant – 3	Summer Mood – 1	Nostalgic – 1
Nature – 3	Transported – 1	Want To Come Back – 1
Security – 3	Aromatherapeutic – 1	Lucky To Be There – 1
Sophisticated – 3	Intrigued – 1	Warm – 1
Harmony – 2	Hedonistic – 1	New – 1
Enjoying Holidays – 2	Atmospheric – 1	Free – 1

The top 5 emotions mentioned out of all the varying emotions are *relaxation* (13 times), *comfort* (13 times), *cleanness* (9 times), *calmness* (7 times) and *happiness* (6 times). One of the female respondents who specified *calmness* and *relaxation* as the emotions evoked by the scents, stated: “*I think it is important for the guests to feel this calmness and relaxation, as they often arrive in a hurry or in tiring conditions, so the scent could help them calm down the rush.*” This is a point well brought up, which underlines the ability of scents to put the guests in a specific psychological and physiological state, and by doing so fully elevate their experience (Kadohisa, 2013).

Furthermore, one of the male respondents mentioned that the scent made him want to go back, which is an emotion connected to the scent indicating its power to affect repeated purchase and consequently brand loyalty (Grybś-Kabocik, 2018). It is important to note that the majority of those emotions mentioned by the respondents are positive: only 1 respondent out of the 70 in total mentioned *foreignness* as a negative emotion.

Thus, it can be reaffirmed that hotels engaged in scent marketing can create a positive effect on customer experiences which in turn can influence the way they remember and perceive hotel brands (Grybś-Kabocik, 2018).

When an open-ended question was asked on what personality the respondents would give to the hotels based on the scents experienced there, multiple answers were given, most of which closely related to the scent-type descriptions and emotions presented above. See Table 2 below depicting the most repeated hotel brands along with personalities endowed to them by the respondents as part of their answers.

To add, when asked about whether the scents made a good impression of the hotels, 88.6% of respondents said “Yes,” while 10% said “Maybe.” Only 1.4% answered “No,” which represents the answer of one person.

Moreover, a question was asked about whether the scents changed the respondents’ perception of the hotels and how this perception changed.

Table 2. Personalities endowed to the hotel brands (most repeated) in the online questionnaire

Hilton Luxor Hotel	Old, Premium, Businessy, Luxurious, Woody, Welcoming, Elegant, Fancy
Silken Saaj	Elegant
Marriott Hotel	Professional, Old School, Rich, Elegant, Classy, Luxurious
Ritz Carlton Hotel	Elegant, Luxurious, Floral, Cool
Holiday Inn Hotel	Comfortable
Westin Hotel	Revitalizing, Relaxing
W Hotel	Elegant, Modern
Four Seasons Hotel	Elegant, Luxurious

To this, 74.63% of the respondents answered “Yes,” 23.88% “No” and 1.49% “Sometimes.” Most of the positive answers explained that the change in the perception of the hotel was towards a cleaner and more luxurious environment. The respondents specified:

“Yes, because the smell of a place gives insight and a feeling about the environment and how clean it is, and therefore, how much the hotel cares about your experience.”

“It solidified my perception of the hotel to be correct, as it even resonated class and quality of living. I perceived it as luxurious and extravagant.”

These answers provided by the respondents prove the argument of Sullivan (2021) on customers creating a connection between the brand and its scents and endowing the brand with superior attributes.

Additionally, the following question was asked to analyse the correlation between scents and brand recall - When you smell a similar scent(s) elsewhere, do you instantly remember the name of the hotel(s) and your time spent there simply by the scent(s)?.” 55.7% of the respondents answered “Yes” to this question, while 28.6% said “Maybe” and 15.7% said “No.” The majority responding positively to this question reassures how customers link scent experiences to memory and automatically recall those memories when subject to experience the same scent (Spectrio, 2019).

Finally, the respondents were asked if they would go back to the same hotel because of the scents they experienced there, to which 54.3% responded “Yes,” while 20% said “No” and 25.7% responded “Maybe”. This result shows how scents create positive attitudes and emotional ties towards the

brand (Tepeci, 1999), which can be expressed through a behavioural element in terms of repeated purchases over time (Oliver, 1999).

Discussion and Analysis of the Case Studies

In this part of the paper, three case studies of specific international hotels using scent marketing are presented. As mentioned in the Methodology section of this paper, the case studies are supported by secondary data collected from the case study companies’ web pages and in-depth interviews carried out with a previous guest of each hotel, in order to dive deeper into the effects of scents on customer perceptions of the hotel brands. The interviews entailed a predefined list of questions to ask to the respondents, which were designed to discover the interviewees’ experiences and reflections towards the hotel brands affected by their scents, within the scope of the literature review previously presented in this paper. According to the literature review of this paper, one can read about the previous studies on how scent marketing can affect customer perceptions of a brand. The uniqueness of the analysis that follows is in the way of showing, through primary qualitative data, the effects of scents on customer experiences in hotels and their perceptions of hotel brands. The primary purpose here is to provide an addition to the already existing literature, concerned about the importance of integrating scents as part of the branding process.

Santhiya Koh Yao Yai Resort & Spa Hotel

Santhiya Koh Yao Yai Resort & Spa (2021) is an eco-luxury resort on the island called Koh Yao Yai, located in the middle of Phang Nga Bay - roughly halfway between Phuket and Krabi, Thailand. The interviewee of the case study, who spent his honeymoon in this

hotel in 2018, is an Armenian man named Edgar, aged 31.

As mentioned in the literature review, emotional reactions to scents according to Fox (2021) is defined as the feelings and associations formed with particular scents which also evoke and connote emotive experiences. To dive deeper into this area with the interviewee, he was first asked whether he liked the scent experienced in Santhiya and whether he felt his mood change because of the scent there, to which he answered very positively. He stated that he liked it very much and absolutely felt his mood change because of the scent, as it created an atmosphere that was pleasant to him. Also, he mentioned that the scent added to his overall sensory experience, which made him even happier and fresher as a result.

To the question “Did you have a more pleasant stay in the hotel thanks to the scent?,” Edgar replied:

“Yes, for sure! Since all of the aspects of the environment and the smell were in sync together, I felt more comfortable. And I really felt the cleanness of the hotel through the scent, so it made me feel even more comfortable there. It is like trusting them that they are paying attention to every detail for you, which is indeed very pleasant to acknowledge.”

When asked what feelings the scent evoked in him, his answer was:

“Tropical and comforting! It was more connecting me to nature because the whole hotel was on a tropical island and the décor included lots of woody elements, so the smell was very in sync with the environment, and I really felt more in sync with nature - and oh

so calm. Feeling like part of nature made me feel very calm. It was as if I was energized.”

Emotional reactions to scents in a hotel can form strong associations towards the hotel brand, thus the likelihood of brand recalling through scents rises (Grybś-Kabocik, 2018). When asked “Would you recall the hotel name when experiencing the same scent anywhere else at any time?,” Edgar assured that he would never forget such a unique, Asian-style, and tropical scent, or let alone mix it with anything else.

Then, with the purpose of analysing Edgar’s scent experience in the hotel and its associations to the Santhiya hotel brand, the questions on how the scent added to the experience of the beach, what kind of atmosphere it created and how the environment connected to the scent were asked. To these questions Edgar replied:

“The scent created an atmosphere that connected the outside tropical and beach environment to the inside of the hotel. The atmosphere was tropical, islandy, and Asian! It was as if the scent was created for that island specifically. The scent itself felt as if it was part of nature.”

To conclude, Edgar was asked whether the scent changed his perception of the hotel, to which he responded positively. He mentions that except for the fact that the hotel was unique with its location, décor, services, etc., it was also very unique in terms of its scent. Thus, the scent among other things added to his perception of the hotel being very unique.

Given Edgar’s detailed responses to the interview questions, the overall results on the Santhiya Resort & Spa case study find a strong positive effect of the Santhiya scent on Edgar’s experiences in the hotel, his associations with and perceptions of the hotel brand and likelihood to recall the brand name

when subject to experience the same scent anywhere else. Edgar also stated during the interview: *“For me, good scents in hotels provide more comfort and satisfaction.”*, which proves the argument by Brakus et al. (2009) on scents affecting customer satisfaction.

Hotel Sun Palace Resort

The Sun Palace Resort is an ocean-front luxury hotel situated in Cancún, Mexico. The hotel is part of the Palace Resorts brand, which owns 10 luxury hotels and resorts in Mexico (Palace Resort, 2021). The interviewee for this case study is a North American woman named Ani, aged 38, who spent her honeymoon there in 2015 and two more times thereafter.

In order to follow up on the emotional reactions to scents previously developed in the literature review section, she was asked about changes in her mood and behaviour specifically influenced by the scent in the hotel, to which she responded that the scent made her feel as if she was on holiday. Afterwards, when asked if she had a more pleasant stay in the hotel because of the scent, Ani responded positively, stating that the scent immediately made her feel in a tropical area, feeling more relaxed, and prone to enjoy herself.

To the question “What feelings did the scent evoke in you?,” Ani replied:

“Basically, more relaxed. It takes your experience to a whole new level. I felt the scent to be a kick-start to enjoy the rest of my stay in the hotel. I felt relieved and happy. I felt that the hotel scent was used for me and the other guests to feel luxurious.”

In order to relate to brand loyalty within the research, Ani was asked if she would

consider going back to the hotel affected by its scent, to which she responded positively and informed that she had already returned twice because of her great experience. For her, the hotel scent represents a bonus that makes her have the right mindset to enjoy the rest of the experience.

When asked if she would recall the hotel name when experiencing the same or similar scent anywhere else, Ani answered affirmatively, considering the hotel’s scent to be very distinctive. *“I have never experienced this scent anywhere else except in the Sun Palace Hotel.”*

Moreover, the interview aimed to study the effect of scents on brand experiences and associations, which can be defined as the sensations, feelings, cognitions and behavioural responses triggered by brand stimuli (Brakus et al., 2009). Therefore, the interviewee was asked how the scent added to the experience of the beach and how the environment connected to the scent. To this, Ani responded that the scent and the environment blended very well as if a good thought-out combination. She also mentioned that the scent enhanced the tropical feeling in all the areas of the hotel and created a strong connection between the outside and inside areas.

Subsequently, Ani was asked from what point the scent started to be noticeable, to which Ani answered that she could already feel the scent when approaching the hotel premises. Experiencing the scent at such an early stage, Ani felt that her stay would be an enjoyable one. She stated: *“It was strong and caught me by surprise - like ooh I am on vacation! As the scent was very noticeable, it helped me change my mindset to a holiday one.”*

Lastly, when the interviewee was asked if the scent changed her perception of the hotel, the following answer was heard:

“I was pleasantly surprised, and my perception of the hotel changed to a more positive one. I felt that the hotel was taking an extra step to enhance my experience as a guest through the scent.”

Considering Ani’s responses, it can be concluded that there is a strong positive correlation between Ani’s brand experiences through scent and associations with the hotel brand. She highlighted: *“If I hadn’t experienced the scent, I wouldn’t have perceived the environment in the same way.”* The scent had a distinctive impact on the way the respondent experienced her stay, resulting in higher satisfaction, as argued by Brakus et al. (2009).

W Barcelona Hotel

W Barcelona is a luxury hotel located on the beachfront of the most famous beach of Barcelona. The hotel belongs to the W Barcelona hotel brand, owned by the Marriott group, which has more than 50 W hotels around the world (W Hotels, 2021). In order to carry out an experience analysis based on the scent of the hotel, a Senegalese man named Khadim, aged 23 was interviewed. He spent a weekend at this hotel with his partner in 2020.

To the questions aimed at analysing the impact of scent on the interviewee, he responded that the scent created a calming effect and a peaceful feeling, while also experiencing happiness. He expressed: *“The fresh smell set the pace, it made me feel that I was in the best place in the world”*.

As a way of evaluating the level of emotional attachment developed by Khadim towards

the W brand, he was asked if he would consider going back to the same hotel or to any W hotel around the world just because of his scent experience there. He expressed that the overall experience in the hotel was not as satisfying as he expected, but when thinking about the scent only, he would definitely choose the W Hotel brand as the scent alone had improved the quality of his stay.

Brand recall is another literature review component of this paper, to which a correlation is made by analysing the interviewee’s ability to recall the hotel brand by experiencing the same or a similar scent under different circumstances. When asked if he would recall the hotel brand name when experiencing the same scent anywhere else, he replied:

“Yes, definitely. Actually, I asked for a bag for keeping my swimsuit and when I arrived home, the swimsuit had the same scent of the hotel. I remember how that scent, when opening the bag, made me re-experience the same feeling I had during my stay. Also, the hotel gave me some candles with the hotel scent. Now whenever I use them, I can instantly recall the hotel brand and my experience there.”

Considering Khadim’s response, it can be determined that the hotel has successfully left a mark in the consumer’s mind, which allows him to recall the hotel brand name after a while (Pidhurska, 2020).

With the aim of analysing the interconnectedness of the scent to the overall environment and experience at the W Barcelona hotel, the interviewee was asked if there was a correlation between the scent and the maritime hotel environment due to its closeness to the sea. He answered: *“The scent made me realise that I was in a luxury hotel, but I would not consider it to be fully*

correlated with the ocean environment, although the rooms had astonishing views to the Mediterranean.”

To conclude, Khadim stated that he had an average experience at the W Barcelona hotel, but the scent there alone had such a positive impact on his overall experience at the hotel, that he would consider going back to the hotel because of the scent only. It is a fact worth mentioning as the other case study interviewees had an overall great experience at their respective hotels and considered the scent as an added value during their stays, rather than a complete stand-alone value. Overall, the scent experience at the W Barcelona hotel made the interviewee evaluate his experience at the hotel in a more favourable way and created a reason for future repeated purchases (Oliver, 1999).

Discussion and Conclusion

How relevant is scent for hotel customers?

The purpose of this paper is to further examine the influence of scents on customers' perceptions of hotel brands, along with analysing the importance of using scents as part of creating a strong brand identity. In order to do this, emotional reactions to scents, brand experiences & associations, brand recall and brand loyalty are taken as part of a framework, all presented in the Literature Review section of the paper.

When studying emotional reactions to scents as part of the above-mentioned framework, it is found that hotel guests develop strong emotional reactions based on the scents. The strongest and most repeated emotions throughout the two primary data collection methods are relaxation, comfort, cleanness, calmness and happiness. Moreover, emotions like wanting to stay forever, feeling lucky to be there, feeling like home, as part of nature

and being free are among the many that show a deeper customer connection with the hotel brands through scents.

The key findings when observing brand experiences and associations through scents include the fact that scent is perceived as part of the brand experience, having it merged into all aspects of the brand and elevating it in its own way. Scents and brand experiences are found to be interrelated, with the scent having a unique impact on the overall experience, which results in higher guest satisfaction. Additionally, scents are found to be the starting point of the brand experience, putting the guest in the right mindset to experience the rest of the brand facets. Having positive brand experiences through scents as the basis, positive associations are created towards hotel brands, which influence brand image perceptions directly.

Furthermore, as part of the examination on brand recall in correlation with hotel scents, it is found that the majority of the online questionnaire respondents and, in fact, all interviewees claimed to recall the hotel brands by experiencing the same hotel scents anywhere else, while also simultaneously recalling the emotions experienced during their stays in the respective hotels. Thus, a strong correlation between emotional reactions to scents and customers' memory is found, where hotel scents have the power to leave a signature mark in their customers' memories: a power strong enough to allow them to recall the hotel brands and their stay experiences over time.

When it comes to studying brand loyalty as part of the framework, a positive result is found in terms of having the majority of the respondents wanting to go back to the hotels affected by their scents. Yet, it is also discovered that scents can be seen as added values to the overall hotel experience rather

than an alone factor, but in both cases, they sure can affect decisions on repeat purchasing. It is also interesting to have found a correlation between hotel memories formed through scents and hotel brand loyalty. As one of the case study interviewees mentioned:

“I would love to go back to the Santhiya Koh Yao Yai Resort & Spa because of its scent, as I have so many great memories connected to the hotel and the scent there, I would really like to relive those moments by experiencing the same scent again.”

Overall, the findings that emerged from the framework show the importance of using scent marketing to influence customers’ perceptions of hotel brands, increase brand recall and loyalty. Thus, hotel brand managers need to make use of scents in order to bond with customers on the scentsory level as well and create holistic brand experiences that have the power to increase overall brand value through brand loyalty and repeat purchases.

The need for a new definition of scent marketing

As mentioned before, scent marketing has been discussed in various literature and definitions found of scent marketing vary from one author to another. Yet, they all do not incorporate all the important elements of scent marketing as found by this research. Thus, there has been found a need to propose a new definition of scent marketing as a result of the findings of this paper, which is as follows:

Scent marketing is the strategic use of scents at all customer points of contacts with the aim of creating unforgettable brand experiences in a pleasant environment that builds on the brand identity and positively influences the

brand image perceived by the customer, connecting the latter with the brand to an emotional level where brand experiences, associations, satisfaction, recall and, ultimately, loyalty are enhanced.

Should scents be included as part of Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism?

Taking into consideration the research results, as well as the literature review within this research paper, it can be concluded that scents are of vital importance for the branding process in the hotel industry. Thus, it should be an integral part of identifying and developing the brand identity for any hotel brand. That being said, part of the findings of this paper is to stress the importance of incorporating scents as part of Kapferer’s (2012) Brand Identity Prism, a framework widely used and respected by branding professionals around the world. More specifically this paper suggests including scents under the physique dimension of the Prism, where brand characteristics such as logo and product designs are represented. Kapferer’s (2012) physique dimension of the Prism is currently seen as the facet mainly carrying the tangible characteristics of a brand, while this paper proposes to add scents to it as an intangible characteristic, an important sensory element of a brand that cannot be undervalued.

Contributions

This paper supports and complements the previous research available on scent marketing as part of branding, yet it brings its own unique primary data through an online questionnaire and three case study interviews as a basis of support. Moreover, the paper is the first of its kind to combine scent marketing and Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism framework under the *physique* dimension for application in building a strong

brand identity. In addition, a new definition of scent marketing is presented based on the results of the findings of this research paper.

Limitations and Further Research

This study reinforces the findings of previous research on the importance of scent as part of branding. Based on those findings, a conclusion is made that scent should be incorporated into Kapferer's (2012) Brand Identity Prism as part of the physique dimension. Yet, for this conclusion to be fully valid, further research should be carried out to exclude the limitations found in this study. One of the most challenging limitations of this study is that scents can be difficult to measure independently as part of a broader brand experience. The latter is interconnected through different sensory elements. Secondly, the sample size of the online questionnaire in this study is small, which is a big limitation: the number of responses collected was 70. Given the specificity of the questionnaire and the short time frame for writing this paper, it has not been possible to get more responses. Thus, it is important to conduct further research on the topic involving larger samples. As a third limitation, the context of the hotel stay of the case study interviewees can affect the way a person is inclined to perceive experiences. Two of the three interviewees stayed in their respective hotels during their honeymoon, while the other one stayed in the W Barcelona hotel for a weekend getaway. Hence, this should be carefully accounted for in further research to be able to collect fully unbiased primary data to further test the findings of this paper. Lastly, given the focus of this paper on the hotel industry specifically, further research is needed to examine the application of scents as part of Kapferer's (2012) Brand Identity Prism to other industries, since there can be a potential for such a finding to be applied to brands in other, if not all industries.

Furthermore, the new definition of scent marketing presented is derived from this study on scents as part of hotel brands, thus further research is needed to find its applicability for any brand in any industry.

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Appendix I - Questions Included in the Online Questionnaire

How old are you?

- 18-25
- 26-35
- 36-50
- 51-64
- 65+

Which gender do you identify yourself with?

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to disclose

What is your nationality?

What is your level of education?

- High school degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- PhD

In which hotel(s) have you experienced and memorized a distinctive scent? Please, specify the hotel name(s).

Which of the following best describes the scent(s)? Choose as many as apply.

- Fresh
- Floral
- Woody
- Oriental
- Other (please, specify)

What emotions did the scent(s) evoke in you?

If you were to give a personality to the hotel(s) by the scent(s) you experienced, what would it be? Please, specify this for each hotel you stayed in. Example answer: Hilton - elegant, Marriott - creative

Did the scent(s) make a good impression of the hotel(s)?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Did the scent(s) affect your perceptions of the hotel(s) image? If yes, how?

When you smell a similar scent(s) elsewhere, do you instantly remember the name of the hotel(s) and your time spent there simply by the scent(s)?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Would you consider going back to the hotel(s) because of the scent(s) there?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Appendix II - Questions Included in the Case Study Interviews

1. How old are you?
2. When and in what circumstances did you stay in the hotel?
3. Were you aware about the purposeful use of scents in hotels?
4. Did you like it? Was it just enough, too much or too little?
5. Did you feel overwhelmed by the scent at any moment?
6. Did you feel your mood change because of the scent?
7. Did you have a more pleasant stay in the hotel thanks to the scent?
8. What feelings did the scent evoke in you?
9. Would you consider going back to the hotel affected by its scent?
10. Would you consider staying at the same hotel brand in a different destination because of the scent experience?
11. Would you expect to have the same scent experience in all hotels in different countries of the same brand?
12. Would you recall the hotel name when experiencing the same scent anywhere else at any time?
13. Would you recall the hotel name when experiencing a somehow similar scent anywhere else at any time?
14. Did you realize that scent is specifically being used to enhance/improve your stay in the hotel?
15. How did the scent add to the exterior environment?
16. What kind of atmosphere did the scent create?
17. How did the hotel environment connect to the scent and was it correlated?
18. As a result of the scent, what did you think of the hotel brand?
19. Did you notice the hotel scent already when you approached the premises of the hotel or when in the hotel?
20. If you noticed the hotel scent when you approached the premises, then what effect did it have on you?
21. Did the scent change your perception of the hotel brand?