

Theatrical Lab as a Method for Consumer Experience Research: A Conceptual Framework

1. Introduction

While experiential and immersive marketing have redefined brand engagement (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999) through staged interactions and emotional exchanges, the psychological mechanisms underlying consumer actions and reactions often remain a ‘black box’ that is difficult to observe and replicate. Current scholarship largely relies on retrospective self-reports and professional intuition, limiting researchers’ ability to establish causal links between specific touchpoint designs and consumer responses (Verhoef et al., 2009). This raises a central question: how can experiential marketing be studied in a way that retains the richness of live, optimized interactions while providing the control and repeatability required for causal inference? A more active and systematic approach is needed to decode the mechanisms that enable successful engagements.

By bringing together theatrical semiotics and behavioral simulation, this paper develops a conceptual framework that situates immersive brand encounters as scripted performances that can be systematically staged, rehearsed, and analyzed in a laboratory environment. I argue that a framework built on Stanislavski’s Method Acting, Standardized Patient (SP) methodology, and systematic interactive scripts can deconstruct the internal dynamics of consumer psychology in immersive practices and generate a predictive “playbook” for brand experience design.

Such a framework not only advances Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model-based experiential marketing research by modeling live interaction rather than static stimuli, but also offers practitioners a structured way to test and refine the symbolic elements that drive authentic

engagement and value creation, bridging the gap between intuition and evidence-based marketing value creation.

2. Theoretical Background

In the contemporary field of Consumer Behavior (CB), brands are no longer merely functional vessels but an assembly of experiences. Although the S-O-R model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) has been widely applied in consumer research (Jacoby, 2002), providing a robust foundation for understanding how environmental variables influence internal states, existing scholarship relies heavily on retrospective measurements, passive observation, and self-report questionnaires (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999) when experiential marketing is employed. Consequently, it remains difficult to isolate single interventions or capture both dynamic affective and cognitive shifts under uncontrolled field settings. In its current application, the S-O-R model lacks inherent predictive power when designing complex, event-based marketing strategies.

Moreover, "Stimulus" has traditionally been treated as a set of static environmental cues, such as lighting or music. In the context of experiential marketing, I argue that the primary stimuli should be treated as interpersonal brand rituals—active, live interactions between staff, the vibe, and consumers within immersive settings. This shift requires more granular control than static surveys can provide. The critical questions remain: How can researchers capture the flow of affective shifts and dynamic exchanges in real-time? Furthermore, once the "intangibles" of a successful experience are identified, how can we codify these experiences to ensure replicability?

Consumer experiences are inherently performative (Goffman, 1959; Schechner, 1988), where symbolic frameworks guide audience interpretation and value creation. Hence, the theatrical approaches and ritual elements found in the entertainment and creative sectors may provide the

answer. I observe that the dynamics of brand touchpoints share a high degree of structural similarity with character interactions on stage, where shows are built upon rigorous rehearsals under professional direction. To move beyond empirical intuition, we need tools to operationalize these theatrical elements—scripts, roles, and interactive rituals—to precisely observe how they influence variables such as trust, intimacy, and willingness to pay.

3. Methodological Framework: The Experiential Marketing Lab, Method Acting, and Standardized Patient Methodology

In order to operationalize the structural similarity between experiential marketing and theatre techniques, this research proceeds through an integrated three-phase framework.

3.1 Phase I: Staging the Controlled Environment

It begins by staging controlled laboratory environments to create repetitive touchpoint encounters, allowing for the examination of isolated variables that affect consumer perceptions. These variables, adapted from theatrical elements—such as dialogue, props, lighting, scents, music, and costume (Bitner, 1992)—form the brand rituals on "stage." The director-experimenter observes, documents, and analyzes the nuances of the interactive flow between the brand and its constituency, then strategically directs the interaction into favorable, actionable decision cues and brand rituals, forming the affective generative playbook for touchpoint encounters.

The data collected from these stagings are used to measure the variables that influence individual narrative shifts—the internal psychological transitions of the consumer—as well as how collective narratives, such as social atmosphere or cultural frameworks, serve as an external support system to guide audience interpretation (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Deacon, 1997).

3.2 Phase II: Character Construction with Method Acting for Consumer and Staff Roles

This leads to the second phase: developing consumer characters using Stanislavski's Method Acting. This technique systematically constructs complex consumer profiles—or "character dossiers"—to identify the character's "authentic being"—the genuine psychological state where behaviors emerge from organic impulses rather than mechanical reactions—along with their super-objectives, given circumstances, and past history. By delving into their sociocultural contexts, motivations, and emotional states, researchers can better target consumer identity (Belk, 1988) and enable judgment prediction.

For example, the "super-objective" of a customer character is translated into the ultimate goal achieved through the purchase: "What is the fundamental purpose of acquiring this product or service?" This objective may be a functional solution to a problem or, more emotionally, the establishment of identity recognition through brand values manufactured within the social narrative. By identifying specific consumer segments using these dossiers, the researcher can control the Organism variable by providing the customer with a consistent psychological "inner realism." It is through this operationalization that the Organism—so often treated as a static black box in consumer research—can finally be explored as a dynamic and evolving entity infused with a human narrative.

3.3 Phase III: Standardized Patient Methodology for Repeatability and Causal Inference

The final phase of this framework adapts the SP methodology from medical education (Barrows, 1993) to achieve a state of dual-standardization. Recognizing that individual consumers are inherently non-standardizable, this framework focuses on the standardization of customer personas based on behavior and psychographic segmentation—such as Early Adopters, Brand Loyalists, or Indecisive Switchers. The “standardized consumers” are then reintroduced to the

lab stage, where the director-experimenter utilizes "standardized staff" to structure rehearsals, fixing the script, staff tone, and tempo of the interaction. In this process, these standardized consumers employ the previously categorized dossiers to perform improvisation within a defined psychological boundary. By treating the lab as a stage where variables are designed rather than found, researchers can operationalize specific theatrical elements—such as greeting protocols, physical proximity, or symbolic props—as binary or categorical independent variables. This precise control allows for the isolation of specific touchpoint interventions, such as the presence or absence of a "closing ritual," to establish causal inference and ensure that the Stimulus remains consistent across multiple sessions.

3.4 Measurement and Data: Narrative Coding with Critical Incident Technique (CIT)

To capture these high-fidelity interactions, the study employs a measurement system that converts qualitative theatrical flow into structured quantitative data. Following each encounter, the researcher interviews both actors—the consumer and the staff—and reviews the entire process to deconstruct every detail, from interactive farewell gestures to scripted phrases. Utilizing Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Technique (CIT), which has been extensively applied in service research (Gremler, 2004), these moments-of-shift in emotional valence and symbolic interpretation are coded to transform narrative transitions into structured datasets. This systematic coding creates a bridge to future AI-generative modeling (Davenport et al., 2020), resulting in optimized brand archetypes and dynamic scripts that allow marketing strategists to attain predictable outcomes in experience management and drive systemic value optimization.

4. Implications and Future Directions

The integration of theatrical semiotics and behavioral simulation proposed in this paper transforms immersive brand encounters from intuitive interactions into well-designed, manageable, and scripted performances. Within a laboratory setting, this framework provides a structured lens to decode and quantify previously intangible and difficult-to-measure interpersonal dynamics. By moving beyond theoretical abstraction, it offers a predictive guideline that codifies the nuances of brand experience design into a replicable, evidence-based discipline.

However, one might ask: Is such a theatrical approach truly feasible in a world increasingly dominated by digital clicks and algorithmic predictions? While much of contemporary S-O-R research relies on online data and virtual interactions, the true essence of experiential marketing—whether occurring before or after digital encounters—lies in the tangible, human-to-human connection. This is evident in how physical books signal an identity as a cultural enthusiast to one's fellow commuters on a crowded subway, or how Trader Joe's \$2.99 canvas tote bags are reportedly resold overseas for premium prices—not for the bag itself, but as a subtle yet prized status symbol representing the owner's access to American everyday life. These meanings are elevated by the brand's human-centered in-store rituals, proving that the human touch—manifested through interpersonal gestures, greeting phrases, and symbolic artifacts—remains the irreplaceable core of brand value. This sentiment is echoed in Starbucks CEO Brian Niccol's "Back to Starbucks" vision, which emphasizes returning to the core coffeehouse experience as a physical community hub with genuine human connection.

This research framework argues that precisely because we are moving toward an automated future, the ability to systematically study and replicate the nuances of real-world interactions is

more critical than ever. While laboratory settings inevitably raise questions of external validity (Calder et al., 1981), this framework contends that by staging the "theatre of consumption" in a controlled environment, we do not merely simulate reality; we instead refine the very rituals that make brand encounters meaningful in an increasingly digitized world.

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