Article

Understanding Customer Experience for Sustainable Innovation: An Integration of Conscious and Unconscious Perspectives of Theme Hotel Guests

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Abstract: Psychological and neuroscientific research reveals that individuals perceive the external world through two distinct systems: the conscious rational system and the unconscious experiential system. This paper examines the formation of customer experiences in theme hotels from both conscious and unconscious perspectives, aiming to foster innovation and sustainable development in the hospitality industry by enhancing the emotional connection between customers and theme hotels. Employing a dual-perspective framework, the study utilizes semi-structured in-depth interviews to investigate the conscious perspective and the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) for the unconscious perspective. This paper selected five mid-to-high-end theme hotels located in first-tier cities in China and interviewed 20 guests who had stayed at these hotels. Findings indicate that while both perspectives initiate from the same triggering process, they differ significantly in their modes of information processing and experiential manifestations. Key differences between the two perspectives are evident in three main areas: the malleability of memory, the complexity of emotions, and the directionality of behavior. These insights not only broaden the theoretical understanding of customer experience but also contribute to the sustainable growth of the hotel sector by proposing innovative approaches to enhance customer experience.

Keywords: customer experience; conscious; unconscious; network of associations; ZMET; theme hotels

1. Introduction

Previous studies have commonly described customer experience as a complex, multidimensional, and uncertain concept [1–3]. Academics and practitioners alike have sought to define and understand this elusive construct over the past few decades. Earlier studies characterized customer experience either as a product attribute or as an independent product [4,5]. However, more recent research converges on defining it as a subjective response triggered by interactions between customers and external stimuli [6–8], manifested by different levels such as the sensorial, affective, cognitive, and behavioral [2,3]. This contemporary definition has garnered broad acceptance among leading research institutes, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between subjective perceptions and external factors. According to this view, the customer's mind functions similarly to a central nervous system, processing a myriad of thoughts and feelings stimulated by the external environment to produce varied experiential outcomes.

Psychologists and neuroscientists have identified two parallel and interactive modes of information processing within human cognition: the conscious, rational system and the unconscious, experiential system [9,10]. Evidence from daily life supports the view that humans engage with reality in two fundamentally different ways: one through an unconscious, automatic, and perceptual mode, and the other through a conscious, analytical, and rational mode [11]. To fully comprehend customer experience, it is imperative to

appreciate both perspectives, as they each contribute uniquely to how experiences are formed and perceived.

During the past two decades, an increasing number of scholars have applied the unconscious research findings in psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience to customer research, focusing mainly on areas such as decision-making [12,13], affective and behavioral responses [14,15], and post-choice satisfaction [16,17]. In contrast, the unconscious research findings in the field of customer experience remain almost absent, which can be attributed to two reasons. First, customer experience is a complex phenomenon involving multiple interacting components, making it difficult to define it even at the conscious level, let alone the unconscious level [18]. Second, there are many controversies in interpreting the unconscious mind under the hermeneutic paradigm, such as whether the textual analysis of unconscious content can be considered reliable, or whether researchers' interpretations can justify the boundary between conscious and unconscious thinking. However, none of these uncertainties should restrict attempts to integrate the long-neglected perspective of the unconscious into the current understanding of consumer experience. This study proposes to take a pioneering step in this meaningful direction.

This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the formation process of hotel customer experience from both conscious and unconscious perspectives. The hotel industry, and theme hotels specifically, present a fertile ground for investigating this underexplored area. Theme hotels, characterized by unique and often immersive environments [19–21], are particularly well-suited to studies of customer experience due to their ability to evoke strong, memorable responses from guests [22]. To sum up, this study seeks to enhance the theoretical and practical understanding of hotel customer experience to support sustainable development through innovations at the product, process, and management levels.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Customer Experience from the Conscious Perspective

In the early 1980s, the market landscape underwent significant transformations due to increasing commercialization and homogenization of competition, shifting from a focus on selling products and services to selling experiences. This shift heralded the advent of the experience economy [5]. As customer experience is a complex phenomenon involving intricate interactions between the subject (customer) and object (product or service of the company) [23,24], its formation process cannot be easily summarized into a succinct and operationally acceptable management framework [18]. Although many studies conceptualize customer experience from different perspectives, several commonly shared characteristics can still be found. First, customer experience consists of an individual's subjective and personal responses manifested at, for example, the physical, emotional, sensorial, cognitive, relational, and spiritual levels [2,3,8]. Second, multi-dimensional responses are stimulated by the interactions between customers and external touchpoints offered by the company [25,26], based on specific situations or sociodemographic characteristics [18]. Third, customer experience is a continuous and accumulating process starting with pre-consumption expectations, followed by on-the-spot experience, and finally resulting in post-consumption evaluation [24].

The subjectivity of customer experience based on the above interpretations implies that the experience is felt at the conscious level when the customers are actively aware of the stimuli they interacted with and can verbally report the responses that those stimuli triggered [27]. The absence of an unconscious perspective is evident in most customer experience research to date, where explicit research techniques such as surveys and interviews are commonly employed to gather customers' thoughts and feelings about their experiences. However, the major issue is that these consciously articulated thoughts and feelings do not always represent the true, deep intentions of customers and can often be distorted or even contradictory [11,28,29]. This suggests that what customers express consciously is frequently influenced by their unconscious thought processes. Consequently, researchers must explore the unconscious channels to uncover hidden meanings and genuine demands.

As an important branch of customer experience, customer experience in the hospitality industry has been widely approached by many scholars in the past three decades. In the early stages, the focus has been placed on theoretical foundations and conceptualizations of customer experience [30], such as the experiential values of the service and the underlying needs and motivations of hotel guests [31,32]. Later, the research focus shifted towards developing customer experience scales [33,34] and exploring the constituting dimensions and influencing factors of customer experience [23,24]. More recently, research has been centered around exploring emerging trends in customer experience, such as the impact of new technologies [35], the effects of a global pandemic [36], and the shift towards more interactive and personalized experiences [37]. The focus has been on understanding how these factors influence customer behavior, satisfaction, and loyalty in the rapidly changing landscape of the hospitality and tourism industry.

The existing body of literature has primarily concentrated on the conscious thoughts, behaviors, and evaluations of customers, often neglecting the significant influence of unconscious factors on customer perception and decision-making. This oversight highlights a crucial research gap: the necessity for a deeper examination of the unconscious dimensions of hotel customer experience. Unconscious elements, including implicit biases, emotional responses, and non-verbal cues, can profoundly shape customer experiences and outcomes, yet they remain underexplored in current scholarship.

This study therefore aims to encompass the unconscious mind as a crucial and indispensable medium in researching customer experience, rather than relying solely on explicit research methods. Ignoring this gap is both apparent and perilous, underscoring the responsibility of this study to address this deficiency and contribute to the theoretical advancement of the customer experience field.

2.2. Sustainable Innovation and Hotel Customer Experience

The hospitality industry is perpetually in flux, driven by the necessity to align with shifting customer expectations and environmental mandates. Sustainable innovation, which encompasses economic, environmental, and social aspects [38], is pivotal for the enduring success of hospitality enterprises. In recent years, as sustainability has garnered increasing significance among hospitality consumers, the scholarly focus has pivoted towards examining the interplay between the three principal facets of sustainable innovation: customer satisfaction, loyalty, and behavior [39].

For instance, with respect to the environmental dimension, research has demonstrated that environmental-friendly initiatives by hospitality firms positively impact consumer satisfaction [40,41]. With a growing number of consumers demanding eco-friendly practices, such activities not only enhance the company's reputation but also positively affect consumer loyalty [42]. Concerning the social dimension, studies indicate that it exerts a favorable influence on both customer satisfaction and loyalty [43,44]. However, while the economic dimension is closely associated with improved customer satisfaction, it does not show a significant correlation with customer loyalty [44]. Beyond customer satisfaction and loyalty, customer willingness to pay premium prices is also positively associated with practices of economic sustainability. However, its link with the environmental and social dimensions is indirect [39].

The existing literature offers valuable insights into the relationship between sustainable innovation and specific facets of customer experience, particularly focusing on customer satisfaction and loyalty. However, it fails to address the broader and more holistic relationship between sustainable innovation and customer experience as an integrated whole. Additionally, most studies predominantly examine the conscious aspects of customer responses to sustainable practices, largely overlooking the unconscious factors that also shape customer perceptions and behaviors. The reliance on self-reported data is a common methodological limitation, as it may not accurately capture unconscious influences. This creates a research gap that emphasizes the need for an integrated approach combining both conscious and unconscious perspectives. Understanding these dual perspectives could

offer a more comprehensive understanding of customer experiences and, as a result, more effectively inform sustainable innovation strategies in the hospitality industry.

2.3. Studies of the Unconscious Mind

Several disciplines have converged on the recognition of the unconscious mind, affirming that "thought originates from outside consciousness" [22]. The bulk of the information people assimilate from their external environment and physiological responses is processed within this unconscious, intricate framework, ultimately influencing conscious thought [29,45]. The Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory (CEST) model introduced by Epstein [46] offers a robust theoretical foundation for this study. According to CEST, human information processing operates through two parallel and interactive systems: an unconscious system driven by intuition, emotion, and imagination, and a conscious system grounded in logic, reasoning, and objectivity. This theory successfully integrates elements of unconscious thought from both psychoanalysis and cognitive science, broadening its applicability from traditional psychiatric analysis to everyday behavior and providing insights into the complex and often contradictory nature of human actions by emphasizing the role of emotion within the unconscious system.

Although unconscious research has not yet considered customer experience, its findings in other areas of consumer research can serve as a reference for this study. First, customer decisions are often the result of unconscious mental reactions because conscious processing alone cannot manage the overwhelming amount of information customers encounter daily [12]. Second, the unconscious mind affects not only the decision but also the quality of the decision. For example, unconscious decision-makers make better choices than conscious ones [13] and achieve higher post-choice satisfaction [16]. Third, environmental cues presented as elements of the five senses also have an unconscious effect on customer behavioral performance [14], satisfaction level [17], value perception, and repeat purchase intention [15]. Martin and Morich [14] criticize existing models of consumer behavior, which are predominantly based on conscious thought processes, for not adequately capturing the dynamic and integrative nature of human behavior that often involves both conscious and unconscious processes. They argue that academic conservatism and adherence to traditional methodologies hinder the adoption of more holistic models.

In hotel management, Zaltman, Olson, and Forr [22] have been at the forefront in advocating the incorporation of unconscious thought processes to better understand customer decision-making and experiences. They propose a novel approach, termed New Marketing Science (NMS), which contrasts with the traditional Old Marketing Science (OMS). NMS seeks to uncover and interpret customers' unconscious thoughts and emotions through implicit research techniques, providing deeper insights into consumer psychology [22]. Despite the theoretical advancements presented by NMS, there remains a lack of empirical research in this area, highlighting a significant gap that this study aims to address.

3. Research Design

A research paradigm is defined by Guba and Lincoln [47] as a belief system guiding the research process. The research design of this study is based on the hermeneutic paradigm, which essentially considers the study of the unconscious to be a human science trying to constructively understand the human mind [48]. This constructive understanding of the human mind is more in line with the textual interpretation underpinning the hermeneutic paradigm than with the quantitative experiment supported by a positivist stance [49]. Accordingly, our ontological and epistemological view is that the unconscious is a constructive being that can be understood by interpreting the myriad meanings embedded in the unconscious narratives.

Since it is not possible to isolate what is known from who knows it, the best approach to qualitative research is to acknowledge the researcher's voice, given that the personal stance, experience, and background of the researcher can benefit the research process if leveraged properly [50]. For example, the first author has long been interested in studying

psychology and is good at qualitative interview techniques; thus, a sensibility to capture the subtle variations in language was nurtured, which contributed to the construction of meanings throughout the research process. As an integral part of the research process, the authors kept reflecting on how their personal values, beliefs, and biases could shape the research process by following the reflexive methodology structure proposed by [51] to ensure credibility and validity.

3.1. Theme Hotel as Research Context

To explore customer experience from the unconscious perspective, the theme hotel was chosen as the research context based on two considerations. First, a hotel customer's experience, especially the experience of a theme hotel, incorporates both utilitarian and hedonic values [52] and covers both the physical environment, such as the facilities and amenities, the multi-sensory design, and the ambiance, and human interactions, such as the service quality of employees and the socialization with other guests [8,53]. Thus, the hotel guest experience typically represents a composite customer experience by sharing similar dimensions. The framework proposed in this study can therefore be applied to the hospitality industry and to a wide range of customer experience in mass consumption.

Second, the theme hotel was chosen as the context of this study because of its high experience-oriented nature. In an experience economy, the best way to add experience elements is thematization [54]. Moreover, for the first time, theme hotels have broken the traditional competition on price and quality and are marching toward a higher level of cultural competition. Experience in a theme hotel is generally the result of multiple factors, such as thematic atmosphere, design, service, and activities [19–21]. The abundance of experience elements in a theme hotel can create a relatively immersive atmosphere, which contributes to the goal of this study.

For this study, we selected five theme hotels located in four first-tier cities in China, which are Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen (Table 1). The selection of these hotels was based on three primary considerations. Firstly, the varied themes of these hotels are expected to provide diverse experiences for guests, thereby enriching the breadth and depth of the data collected. Secondly, these establishments are among the most renowned themed hotels in China, managed by experienced hospitality or tourism real estate groups. Their sophisticated thematic designs, mature management practices, and stable customer bases are representative of the advanced level of domestic-themed hotels, providing a solid basis for reliable data. Thirdly, all the selected hotels are rated between 4 and 5 stars, minimizing the risk of extreme variability in guest experiences due to differences in hotel quality and improving data credibility.

Table 1. Display of subject hotels.

Subject Hotel	Location	Hotel Diamonds *	Theme
Aman Summer Palace Hotel	Beijing Summer Palace	5	Ancient Culture
Guangzhou Chimelong Hotel	Guangzhou Suburban	5	Wild Animals
The Mahayana OCT Hotel	Shenzhen OCT East	5	Buddhism
Shanghai Disneyland Hotel	Shanghai Disney Resort	5	Cartoons
Shenzhen Fashion Design Hotel	Shenzhen Grand Theatre	4	Arts

* Hotel diamonds: This rating is retrieved from https://ctrip.com/ (one of the largest online travel agencies in mainland China, and accessed on 25 December 2023).

3.2. Sample Selection

In terms of participant recruitment, the study employed a snowball sampling method to interview 20 guests who had stayed at these hotels. The sample was initially built by approaching people who had stayed in the subject hotels and were willing to share their experiences with the first author. These individuals also provided referrals for participation in this research. Since the interviews of this study are quite demanding and time-consuming,

participants were offered an incentive to show appreciation for their generous devotion and support.

To facilitate a comparison between conscious and unconscious experiences, data collection was organized into two groups: one group (10 participants) explored the conscious experiences of customers (Table 2, C stands for conscious), and the other (10 participants) examined the unconscious experiences (Table 2, UC stands for unconscious). Ideally, conducting two interviews with the same participant would be preferable for comparing the two perspectives, as it would control for variables such as social demographics, personality, and objectives. However, to avoid the bias that the first interview might impose on the subsequent one, each participant in this dual-perspective setup was paired with a companion (e.g., a partner, relative, or friend) with whom they were traveling. This approach assumes that travelers with shared experiences, due to similar preferences, goals, and cultural backgrounds, will have comparable hotel experiences. Therefore, one of the two companions was randomly selected for the interview from the conscious perspective, and the other from the unconscious perspective, to maximize the reliability of the comparative results.

Table 2. Participant profiles.

Participants	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Relationship
C01	woman	45	Bachelor	Piano teacher	Couple
UC01	man	47	Bachelor	Building engineer	
C02	man	31	Bachelor	Programmer	Couple
UC02	woman	27	Master	Graphic designer	
C03	man	30	Bachelor	Game planner	Couple
UC03	woman	32	Bachelor	Government staff	
C04	woman	34	Master	Journalist	Couple
UC04	man	35	master	Financial analyst	
C05	woman	26	Bachelor	Lawyer	Friends
UC05	woman	28	Master	High school teacher	
C06	man	41	Bachelor	Government staff	Couple
UC06	woman	38	Bachelor	Doctor	
C07	woman	57	Master	Professor	Couple
UC07	man	60	PhD	Professor	
C08	woman	55	Bachelor	Civil servant	Mother and Daughter
UC08	woman	26	Master	Media worker	
C09	woman	36	Bachelor	Housewife	Couple
UC09	man	36	Bachelor	Company executive	
C10	woman	28	PhD	Lectorate	Friends
UC10	woman	32	PhD	Assistant professor	

The sample size of this study may raise questions about its generalizability. However, the primary objective is not to achieve broad generalization but rather to explore the phenomenon of customer experience from a more holistic perspective, encompassing both the well-studied conscious mind and the often-overlooked unconscious. Although each data-gathering method involved only ten participants, the interviews adhered strictly to the Hutter-Hennink Qualitative Research Cycle (HH-QRC) [55], iterating between data collection and analysis until no new information emerged. For the semi-structured interviews, sufficient data saturation was achieved by the eighth respondent. Meanwhile, the ZMET interviews, by virtue of their depth and variety, reached saturation with the fifth participant. This rigorous approach ensures that the findings, while not broadly generalizable, provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the customer experience in the context studied.

Another crucial aspect to highlight is the educational background of the sample population, which is influenced by three factors. First, the ZMET method involves complex steps and requires rich textual responses, necessitating a certain cognitive and communication ability. Therefore, participants were limited to ages 18–65 to avoid comprehension issues.

Second, the high-end and culturally refined subject hotels in the study typically attract middle-class or higher guests with higher education levels. Third, using the snowball sampling method resulted in participants referring others with similar demographics, further ensuring a well-educated sample. Using a well-educated participant pool was beneficial for the ZMET method, as these participants can better articulate their thoughts, leading to richer data and more nuanced interpretations of customer experiences.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

This study aims to understand the formation of customer experience by comparing two distinct perspectives under the hermeneutic paradigm. Accordingly, two qualitative research methods were employed to gather and analyze data effectively. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese and recorded with the consent of the participants. The interview data were transcribed verbatim. This study not only recorded the wording but also the cases of verbal slips, forgotten words, jokes, and random movements of participants during the interviews, because such deviations of everyday behavior are manifestations of unconscious thoughts and impulses [56]. Furthermore, the data were directly analyzed using Chinese transcriptions and then translated back to English. As the participants expressed their thoughts and feelings under the Chinese mental frame, the original language was used to ensure the accuracy of data.

3.3.1. Semi-Structured In-Depth Interview

For examining the conscious perspective, semi-structured in-depth interviews, a traditional explicit research method, were utilized. The interview questions were crafted based on the thematic insights derived from the literature review (See Supplementary Materials). Interviews were conducted within two weeks of the participants leaving the sample hotel, each lasting approximately 30 min to 1 h. Data analysis followed the "three-stage coding" process of grounded theory, as outlined by Saldaña [57]: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Initially, similar incidents or phenomena were coded and grouped through constant comparison to develop categories and their properties. Once these categories were identified through open coding, they were further elaborated with their specific properties and dimensions. Subsequently, axial coding was employed to identify relationships between categories and subcategories, linking them at the level of properties and dimensions and merging them into distinct themes. Finally, in the selective coding phase, we identified a central or core category that connected directly to all subsidiary categories derived from the axial coding.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews are a widely respected qualitative method that combines the flexibility of unstructured interviewing with the consistency of structured interviewing. Content validity is achieved through a well-developed interview guide based on solid theoretical and empirical foundations. Construct validity is enhanced by iterative questioning to clarify responses accurately. To ensure better inter-rater reliability, two researchers collaborated in coding and analyzing the data. Consistent questioning across all participants was maintained using an interview guide, while extensive training and piloting helped to standardize the interviewing process and reduce interviewer variability.

3.3.2. ZMET for the Unconscious Perspective

To capture the unconscious perspective, the study employed the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), a covert research method designed to delve into how unconscious thoughts influence cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns by interpreting the deep meanings behind participants' use of metaphors [29]. The core principles of ZMET— metaphor, imagery, and narrative storytelling—are instrumental in bringing participants' deep-seated feelings and thoughts to the surface. Coulter and Zaltman [58] proposed an image schema model (Figure 1) to illustrate how an unconscious cognitive process maps the physiology of sensory perception onto abstract thinking. In bottom-up processing, sensory perceptions are converted into images, which are subsequently translated into

metaphors that describe these images. These metaphors are then mapped onto abstract thoughts and/or specific concepts. In top-down processing, stored concepts and abstract thoughts in our memory shape our images and metaphors (image schemas), which in turn influence both what sensory stimuli we perceive and how we perceive them.
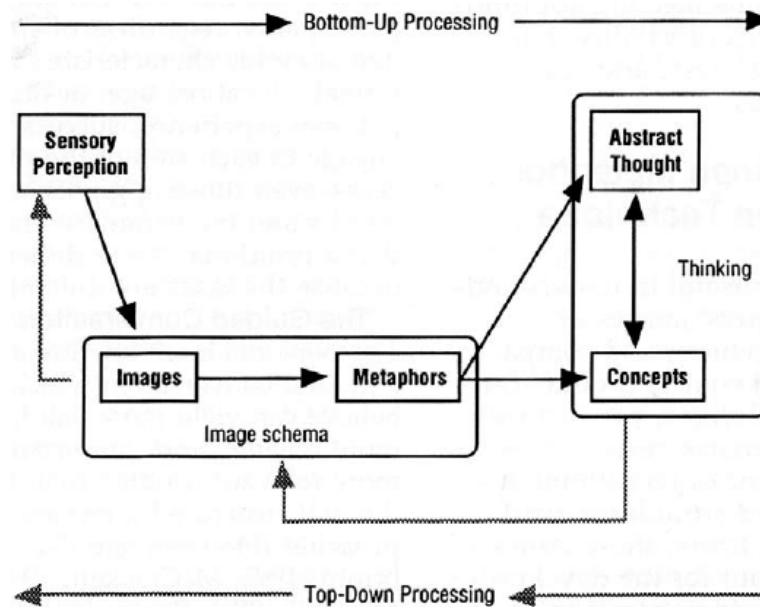

Figure 1. Image schema model. Source: Coulter and Zaltman (1995).

Participants were contacted before the interviews and given one to two weeks to collect six to eight pictures symbolizing their thoughts and feelings about their hotel experience. ZMET considers it unnecessary to have more than eight pictures as they merely serve as entry points to the thinking process [29]. Participants were allowed to collect pictures from any source, such as online social media, movies, and books, but were not allowed to bring pictures directly illustrating the hotel, such as photos of the hotel. Participants were instructed to choose images based on intuitive resonance with their feelings, without logical analysis of the reasons for their choices. These images served as metaphorical, not literal, representations of their experiences and were not directly related to the hotel itself. Such pre-interview contacts with participants through face-to-face meetings or the Internet helped the first author to build a rapport with them. After the preparation stage, an interview of 1.5–2 h on average was scheduled with each participant, during which the first author followed the steps of the ZMET data-collection process, including storytelling, missed images, sorting tasks, construct elicitation, most-representing image, opposite image, sensory images, mental maps, summary image, and vignette [58] (See Supplementary Materials). The specific characteristics of ZMET added fun to the interview process and encouraged the participants to talk richly and deeply.

Data coding for ZMET followed a unique analytic flow. After completing all the interviews, this study meticulously reviewed each transcript to extract key themes and constructs. The multiple constructs elicited during the interviews served as the foundational elements for subsequent data coding, focusing on paired-construct relationships. These relationships were not limited to causal associations as traditionally applied in the ZMET method, but also included affiliation relationships, as adopted in this study. The coding results for each participant's transcript were used to create individual mental maps, illustrating the connections among essential constructs related to the research topic. Once the mental models for all participants were completed, a comprehensive consensus map was generated to encapsulate at least 80 percent of the constructs mentioned by each participant [58]. The primary objective of the consensus map is to identify the "three mosts": the most prevalent thoughts among most participants, reflecting the most common reasoning

chains. The creation of the consensus map adhered to two stringent criteria, as outlined by Zaltman and Coulter [58]. First, the frequency with which individual constructs were mentioned by participants was considered. Constructs that were frequently cited were deemed more significant and thus were incorporated into the consensus map. Second, the frequency with which relationships between constructs were mentioned was considered. This criterion ensured that only those relationships that were consistently recognized by multiple participants were included. By focusing on the most common constructs and their interrelationships, the study was able to provide a comprehensive analysis for understanding the collective mindset of its participants.

The validity and reliability of ZMET are fundamental to ensuring robust and meaningful results. In terms of validity, ZMET exhibits strong ecological validity by engaging participants in naturalistic settings where they select images and generate meaningful narratives, mirroring real-world decision-making processes. Construct validity is evident through its consistent ability to uncover deep, often unconscious, themes and constructs that are theoretically sound and empirically observable [29], providing solid evidence that the technique truly captures the constructs it aims to investigate. Furthermore, the technique's multi-step process—including individual interviews, storytelling, and consensus mapping—ensures comprehensive content validity by capturing a wide array of relevant content facets [58]. In terms of reliability, ZMET employs triangulation by using multiple data sources and analytical techniques, such as image selection, narrative construction, and mental mapping, to cross-verify findings [58], enhancing their robustness and reliability. Additionally, ZMET's structured protocol allows for a degree of replicability, where following the same methodological steps in different contexts or sample groups yields consistent insights.

Despite these strengths, it is crucial to acknowledge that the subjective nature of interpreting visual and narrative data can introduce researcher bias. To mitigate this, practices such as maintaining a reflexive journal, returning the findings or interpretations to the participants for validation, and using peer debriefing were employed to further bolster the reliability and validity of ZMET findings.

4. Results of Comparing Conscious and Unconscious Perspectives

4.1. Consistent Triggers, Divergent Processing Modes

The analysis reveals that experiences derived from both the conscious and unconscious perspectives are initially triggered in the same manner. These experiences originate from external stimuli provided by the hotel, such as the physical environment, interpersonal interactions, and activities, which are first captured by the sensory systems of the participants as initial input. An individual's interaction with the world, anchored in specific goals, does not arise spontaneously nor solely from imagination but from tangible interactions.

The key distinction between the two perspectives lies in how they process the information received by the sensory system. Essentially, these perspectives function as two distinct information processors, each following its own pathway to transform the input into experiences of varying content and form.

From the conscious perspective, data analysis indicates that participants typically exhibit a direct, focused, and explicit response to interactions with external stimuli. Participants are fully aware of their reactions and can identify the stimuli that prompted these reactions. Conversely, the unconscious perspective operates as an indirect, divergent, and metaphorical system. The stimuli triggering this system and the system's responses are not immediately perceptible to participants; these only surface during ZMET interviews through photo-elicitation, metaphor-elicitation, and storytelling techniques. Unlike the conscious responses, which are directly triggered by external stimuli, the unconscious responses originate from a network of free associations. This network is automatically activated by the sensory system's integration of received information into images deep in the unconsciousness. This process aligns with the bottom-up information processing described by the "image schema model" (Figure 1) of Coulter and Zaltman [58]: sensory

perceptions are initially fragmented, shaped into images, expressed metaphorically, and ultimately crystallized into abstract thoughts and concepts.

Due to space constraints, this paper will focus on the experiences of a couple (C01 and UC01) who stayed at the Amman Summer Palace Hotel's teahouse, to illustrate the nuanced differences and similarities between conscious and unconscious perspectives.

C01, who participated in the conscious interview, shared a vivid account of her time in the hotel teahouse: "The environment was serene and inviting, with sunlight warmly filtering through an intricately carved wooden window. The details were meticulously crafted, creating an atmosphere that was utterly relaxing. . . There were people playing the guzheng, the tea was aromatic, and the scent of wood pervaded the air, as all the furniture was wooden. We spent the afternoon there, sipping tea, enjoying snacks, and idly passing the time".

This description highlights how C01's experience was initially sparked by various sensory stimuli within the teahouse, leading to distinct cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. Cognitively, C01 perceived and cataloged various elements, such as visual (sunlight, ornate wooden windows, furnishings), auditory (music from the guzheng), olfactory (aroma of tea and wood), tactile (the warmth of the sunlight), and gustatory (taste of the snacks). These sensory inputs were not only individually discernible but also collectively contributed to her conscious perception of the environment. Emotionally, C01 expressed feelings of tranquility and comfort, using phrases such as "very quiet and comfortable" and "completely relaxed" to describe the positive emotions elicited by the teahouse setting. Behaviorally, her actions, such as spending the afternoon in a leisurely manner, were influenced by the comforting and relaxed environment.

Conversely, UC01, who shared the teahouse with C01, participated in a ZMET interview where he used a scene from the film The Last Emperor (Figure 2) as a metaphor to describe his experience: "I chose this picture because it captured the 'right feeling'. . . identical to what I felt then. If you've seen this movie, you might recall this scene. A vast golden silk curtain. . . the stark contrast between gold and black. The large swathes of yellow used here are striking. The toddler in this photo (Figure 2) is Puyi. As he drew back the huge yellow curtain to face a sea of somber adults and receive their bows, his surreal life began". This metaphorical depiction reflects an unconscious response to the teahouse ambiance, emphasizing how deeper, less overtly conscious associations influence one's perception of an environment.

Figure 2. ZMET picture of UC01: screenshot of the movie *The Last Emperor*.

During UC01's narration, the interviewer observed that the symbol of the "huge yellow (gold)" appeared repeatedly, suggesting its special significance to the participant.

To uncover the deeper meanings behind this symbol, the interviewer utilized probing questions from the ZMET technique, such as "Why did this huge yellow attract your attention and impress you?" and "Does this yellow color have any symbolic significance to you?"

UC01 elaborated: "...I remember a man suddenly pushed the door open and went out. I was instantly seized by an indescribable feeling, which I couldn't articulate at that moment. When the door of the teahouse is closed, the room is dark, possibly to recreate an era when there was no electricity, relying only on natural light during the day. But when the door opened, a burst of sunshine flooded in, and my entire vision was engulfed in yellow. It is this sensation that resonated with me..."

"You see this picture, notice the light? This light might represent morning sunshine in the movie, but to me, it felt more like the afterglow of the sunset. Notice how the yellow here isn't bright but a pale white. The child in the photo (Figure 2) doesn't know much yet. He might still believe there are novel and exciting things waiting for him, unaware that he is nearing the end of his empire".

As the interview deepened, the symbolic significance of the "huge yellow" became apparent: it represented the "afterglow of the sunset", signifying the decline of an empire and the tragic fate of its last ruler. By comparing the responses of UC01 and C01, it becomes evident that while C01 offers specific descriptions of various external stimuli, UC01's approach is to synthesize the sensory information into a broad, ambiguous image deep within his consciousness. Such elements may include sunlight, wooden doors, and antique decorations. This synthesized image then triggers a network of associations in UC01's mind, branching out to related objects and ultimately manifesting metaphorically in his chosen image for the interview. For UC01, this metaphorical representation is captured in a screenshot from the film The Last Emperor, where a vast yellow curtain dominates the scene.

In contrast to C01, who draws her experience primarily from a clear awareness of the "current environment", the essence and impact of UC01's experience are initially elusive to himself. This obscurity is evident as UC01 describes the initial experience as fleeting and indescribable, noting, "I was suddenly seized by an indefinable feeling, which I couldn't articulate at the time". However, through narrative storytelling with the image and continuous probing during the ZMET interview, these became clear. This aligns with the foundational logic of ZMET interviews, where images brought by participants serve as metaphors that enable the expression of abstract ideas and complex emotions in a potent, indirect manner. This process taps into the subconscious thoughts and feelings [59] and is supported by the metaphorical nature of human cognition and language, which is crucial for constructing, communicating, and interpreting unconscious thoughts and meanings [60].

In summary, this comparative analysis suggests that the trigger process for generating customer experiences is consistent across both conscious and unconscious perspectives—both are initiated by sensory stimulation from the external environment. Subsequently, the brain processes this sensory information in two distinct modes: the conscious "pilot mode" and the unconscious "auto-pilot mode". In the pilot mode, individuals directly engage with external stimuli, leading to multi-dimensional responses. In contrast, in the auto-pilot mode, disparate sensory information is synthesized into a comprehensive image, triggering extensive associations that are typically subconscious and automatic, making them difficult to perceive until visualized through appropriate images or metaphors.

4.2. Variability in Multidimensional Responses

The differences in how information is processed under conscious and unconscious perspectives lead to notably distinct experiences along similar dimensions. This paper will detail these differences across three key dimensions: memory, emotion, and behavior.

4.2.1. Memory Stability

One primary distinction between the two perspectives is in the malleability of memory. Findings from this study indicate that memory under conscious thinking tends to be stable and unchanging. Conversely, under unconscious thinking, participants may reshape or even create memories that did not actually occur.

For instance, UC08 recalled her entrance into the lobby of the Shanghai Disneyland Hotel as accompanied by enchanting music, which she described as transporting her into a fairy tale world. During the interview, she referred to a scene from Beauty and the Beast (Figure 3) to describe her experience: "...Bella and the lion descended the spiral staircase as the waltz music began. They danced beneath crystal chandeliers, with candles and smooth marble floors around them. At that moment, as the music climaxed, they hugged and kissed..."

Figure 3. ZMET picture of UC08: screenshot of the movie *Beauty and the Beast*.

However, when interviewing C08, UC08's travel companion, it was noted that the hotel lobby was actually very quiet. This contradiction was further confirmed after consulting with two other guests from the same hotel, establishing that there was indeed no background music playing in the lobby.

From this, we can infer that the music UC08 remembered hearing was a product of her imagination, not intentionally fabricated but rather spontaneously generated by the castle-like decor of the lobby triggering her brain's fairy tale-associated network. The imagined waltz music became a divergent node in this network, integrating itself into her memories of the hotel without her conscious awareness. This phenomenon aligns with findings by American psychologist Loftus [61,62], who demonstrated that memory can be reshaped or even recreated under certain influences. In UC08's case, it was not actual music that spurred her fairy tale fantasy; rather, the fantasy itself conjured the illusion of music.

4.2.2. Emotional Expression

A notable difference between the unconscious and conscious perspectives is the level of emotional complexity and uncertainty exhibited by participants in the unconscious interviews. During the sixth step of the ZMET interview, participants are asked to determine if any of their chosen pictures express a meaning opposite to their hotel experience. This step allows them to articulate complex or contradictory feelings that are not easily categorized as simply positive or negative. For instance, UC01 spoke of the "enjoyment of beautiful things" (positive-happiness) coupled with the "impermanence of life/short life" (negative-sadness). In contrast, his traveling companion, C01, consistently described his emotional state using unequivocally positive terms like "cozy", "carefree", and "fun".

Research findings suggest that complex emotional experiences from the unconscious perspective tend to be more memorable and impactful than straightforwardly happy experiences. Commonly, it is believed that contradictory emotions might overshadow the overall experience or negatively influence the final evaluation. Consequently, hotel managers often categorize guest satisfaction using a simple dichotomy of "happy" or "unhappy". However, it turns out that satisfied customers are not merely those who experience unambiguously positive emotions; rather, they sometimes undergo complex emotional journeys that enhance their satisfaction.

Consider the examples of UC10 and her control group counterpart, C10. UC10 used a picture of a tiger emerging from a shattered mirror (Figure 4) to describe her fear upon waking up in a glass-filled hotel room. When asked if this experience diminished her fondness for the room, she responded, "No, it's like watching a horror movie. You might feel a bit creeped out, but that doesn't mean the movie isn't good… It's a mixed feeling that's still somewhat thrilling in retrospect". On the other hand, C10 merely commented on the aesthetic aspect, noting "the glass ceiling of the room is quite cool", without attributing any emotional reaction to it or deeming it an unforgettable experience.

Figure 4. ZMET picture of UC10: a tiger breaking through glass.

It is important to note that the emotional states described are not wholly unconscious but align with what Berridge and Winkielman [63] term "partially unconscious emotions". Due to their complex and uncertain nature, individuals may not be immediately aware of these emotions or may be unable to aptly define them. However, as they revisit these emotional experiences, often prompted by further reflection or probing during interviews, they can come to recognize and articulate them. For instance, UC10 initially experienced what she described as a "strange" sensation between waking and sleeping, which she initially disregarded and fell asleep again. Yet, through a detailed discussion of her images and persistent inquiry by the interviewer, she gradually uncovered the deeper emotional significance of that initially unrecognized state.

4.2.3. Behavioral Response

Behavioral differences between participants interviewed under conscious and unconscious perspectives are stark, particularly in terms of directiveness and causality. Participants who are consciously aware of their experiences tend to exhibit behaviors with clear directionality, where the causal relationship between behavior and emotion is well-defined and specific behaviors are clearly linked to specific emotional drives. For example, C02 stated in his interview that due to his and his wife's strong fondness for the personal butler provided by the hotel, they engaged him as a tour guide, listened to him discuss the construction history of the royal garden, and wrote him a lengthy review on Ctrip. The

positive interpersonal emotions between guests and hotel staff invariably have a positive impact on their interactive behaviors.

In contrast, behaviors exhibited by unconscious participants often appear random and lack clear directional or emotional motivations. For instance, participants might perform unconscious behavioral mimicry or be influenced by stereotypical characteristics of certain groups. Neuroscience research indicates that individuals automatically mimic observable behaviors of others, such as speech patterns, facial expressions, or gestures [64]. UC02, for example, mentioned that she found herself speaking softly and moving cautiously around the hotel, mirroring the behavior of their private butler, whose demeanor she described as "quite gentlemanly" and "strongly appealing". She did not recognize these behaviors until her husband, C02, pointed them out. It became clear during follow-up interviews that she had subconsciously adopted the butler's mannerisms, further immersing her in the hotel's classical cultural ambiance.

Furthermore, some participants in unconscious interviews displayed behaviors triggered by stereotypes. This type of behavior occurs when an individual encounters a stereotype of a specific group and unconsciously adopts characteristic behaviors of that group [14]. Stereotypes can manifest through various modalities such as imagery, language, and other tangible or intangible attributes. A notable example is UC06, who reported, "Even in private, I will subconsciously maintain a quiet and pious demeanor". This unconscious imitation was linked to the behavioral traits of monks, which she associated with the extensive use of goose yellow in the hotel's decor—like monk robes. Through synesthetic storytelling, UC06 was prompted to express her experience using other senses such as taste, touch, smell, color, or sound. The research revealed that her subconscious actions were influenced by an activated neural network associated with monks, leading her to mimic behaviors typical of this group.

Table 3 summarizes the major differences in customer experience between the two perspectives.

Table 3. Differences between conscious and unconscious perspectives.

Aspect	Conscious Perspective	Unconscious Perspective
Nature of Experience	Direct, focused, and self-evident.	Indirect, emanative, and metaphorical.
Participant Awareness	Noticeable to participants.	Unnoticeable to participants.
Perception of Environment	Environment perceived as a composition of separate stimuli.	Environment perceived as an integrated whole scene, often below conscious awareness.
Source of Experience	Directly derived from interactions with the external environment.	Derived from the automatic activation of an associative network.
Memory Stability	Post-event memories are fixed.	Post-event memories are malleable.
Emotional Expression	Typically clear-cut, either positive or negative.	Complex and hard to label.
Behavioral Response	Behavior is directional and purposeful.	Behavior includes unconscious mimicry and stereotype activation.

4.3. Towards an Integration

By comparing and analyzing the similarities and differences between the conscious and unconscious perspectives, this study seeks to elucidate the dual process of customer experience formation. As depicted in Figure 5, the external stimulus is received by the individual's perceptual system and processed through two parallel and interactive systems: the conscious and the unconscious. This dual-system approach is grounded in well-

established psychological theories [11,65,66] and aims to bridge the gap between cognitive psychology and sustainable innovation within the hospitality industry.
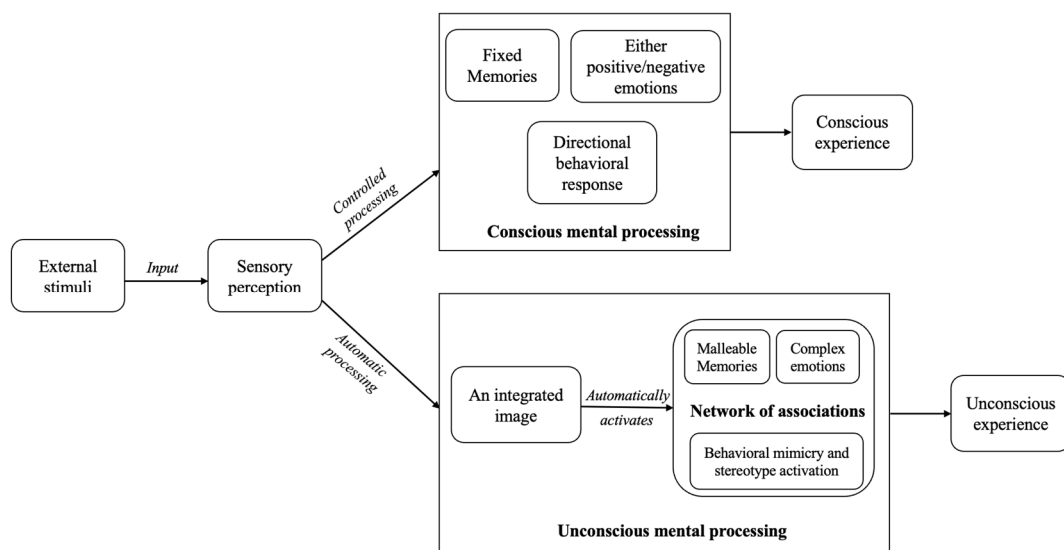

Figure 5. The formation process of customer experience in theme hotels from both conscious and unconscious perspectives.

The formation of experiences from the conscious perspective typically follows a direct stimulus-response pathway. Initially, external stimuli encountered by customers are processed by their sensory systems, resulting in sensory perceptions that directly trigger multidimensional responses. These responses, categorized as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral, form the core findings of the current study. The conscious system predominantly deals with fixed memories and straightforward emotional reactions, culminating in directional behavioral responses that can be strategically leveraged to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. Consequently, this process aligns with mainstream conceptualizations that regard customer experience as a subjective, multidimensional response triggered by interactions between customers and external stimuli [2,6,8,23].

In contrast, the formation of experiences from the unconscious perspective involves an indirect and metaphorical process. This process is characterized by the integration of stimuli into composite images that activate associative networks, often transcending immediate perception and engaging in deeper, more symbolic interpretations of experiences. Supported by theories of implicit cognition [67], this approach posits that much of human thinking, including emotional responses and memory formation, operates outside of conscious awareness. These associative networks also span cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Unlike the conscious perspective, the unconscious system is distinguished by malleable memories and complex emotions, which contribute to a rich tapestry of experiential associations. These associations subtly influence behaviors through mechanisms such as behavioral mimicry and stereotype activation. This unconscious mental processing is consistent with previous research on cognitive unconsciousness, which suggests that associative networks shape ongoing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors [58,68].

By comparing and analyzing these perspectives, this framework not only broadens the theoretical understanding of customer experience but also provides valuable insights for fostering sustainable innovation. For instance, the conscious system can be utilized to communicate clear, rational benefits of sustainable practices to guests, such as cost savings, environmental impact, and community support [69], thereby enhancing their satisfaction, loyalty, and willingness to invest in sustainable innovation options [41–43]. Meanwhile, the unconscious system's capacity for forming deeper symbolic connections can be instrumental in reinforcing sustainable behavior. For example, innovative storytelling and immersive experiences that align with the hotel's sustainability goals can create powerful associative

networks in guests' minds [70], fostering a lasting emotional attachment to the brand's green initiatives. By understanding the unconscious mechanisms that underlie behavior, hotels can design environments that subtly promote sustainable actions. This could include implementing visual cues and cultivating staff behaviors to enhance guests' propensity to engage in eco-friendly practices [71].

5. Conclusions

The first and foremost theoretical contribution of this study is the introduction of a comprehensive framework that expands the understanding of customer experience beyond traditional, conscious-based perspectives and multi-level responses triggered by interactions between objects and subjects. The proposed framework introduces a deeper cognitive dimension where memories, implicit emotions, and unconscious behaviors are intertwined within an image schema. It demonstrates that customer experience is far more complex than previously understood and its full scope remains largely unexplored. Notably, this framework does not aim to replace existing models but rather to add a crucial missing piece to the overall puzzle.

The second contribution lies in the comparison between conscious and unconscious perspectives, which provides a foundation for a more integrated framework for understanding customer experience formation. The two perspectives share a common triggering mechanism: the sensory systems' capture of external stimuli provided by the hotel, such as its physical environment, social interactions, and various activities. The critical distinction, however, lies in their approach to processing this sensory information. Conscious experiences typically follow a direct stimulus-response model, marked by a linear sequence from perception to reaction to recall. In contrast, unconscious experience formation is more indirect and metaphorical, integrating stimuli into a whole scene that activates associative networks where memories, emotions, and behaviors are intertwined deep in the mind.

The third contribution is the empirical validation of the dual-processing theories [2, 3,11,46], demonstrating that customers engage with experiences through two parallel information processing modes. The findings of this study show that individual memories, emotions, and behaviors coalesce through an integrated image to form a complex associative network. Under the unconscious system, customers tend to synthesize sensory inputs into cohesive mental scenes that activate associative networks, aligning with CEST's characterization of the unconscious as "holistic", "associative", and "encoding reality with concrete images, metaphors, and narratives" [11]. Conversely, findings related to the conscious perspective align with the rational system's traits of "analysis", "compilation", and "encoding reality with abstract symbols, words, and numbers" [11]. This empirical evidence enriches the existing literature by confirming that both processing systems play critical roles in forming customer experiences.

From a practical standpoint, exploring customer experiences from this dual perspective contributes to the sustainable development of the hospitality industry by proposing innovative approaches to understanding and enhancing customer experiences in theme hotels. To enhance customer experience by incorporating unconscious perspectives, hotel managers should focus on creating coherent and immersive environments. This involves not only the physical design aspects such as architecture, interior design, and amenities but also the consistency of these elements with the hotel's overall theme. For example, using tools such as the ZMET can help identify the symbolic elements that resonate deeply with customers. Managers should prioritize quality over quantity in the thematic elements to avoid overwhelming guests and causing aesthetic fatigue. For instance, focusing on a harmonious integration of colors, textures, and lighting that aligns with the hotel's theme can create a more engaging atmosphere. In terms of interpersonal interactions, it is crucial for service staff to embody the hotel's theme in their demeanor and behavior. Staff training programs should include not only customer service skills but also instructions on aligning staff temperament with the hotel's thematic essence. For example, in a classical-themed hotel, staff should exhibit elegance and mild manners, whereas, in a cartoon-themed ho-

tel, they should be cheerful and energetic. This alignment helps create a seamless and immersive experience for guests, reinforcing the hotel's brand and theme.

Promoting sustainable innovation within theme hotels involves aligning customer experience enhancements with environmentally friendly practices, making a significant connection between both unconscious and conscious perspectives. Integrating natural elements into hotel design, such as optimizing the use of sunlight for natural lighting and incorporating indigenous flora into landscaping, caters to guests' unconscious appreciation for nature and reduces energy consumption. Conscious efforts such as using eco-friendly materials and promoting waste reduction align with growing customer awareness and preference for sustainable practices. By marrying these sustainable innovations with immersive, thematically cohesive designs, hotels can create a holistic guest experience that not only satisfies conscious desires for luxury and comfort but also resonates with deeper, unconscious values and preferences for environmental stewardship. This dual approach can foster deeper emotional connections, enhance guest satisfaction, and build long-term loyalty, positioning the hotel as a leader in the sustainable hospitality industry.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study is not free from limitations. First, although ZMET is the most appropriate method to investigate the topic, it still has certain limitations, such as controversial and ambiguous interpretations of unconscious meanings under the hermeneutic paradigm. Future research should pay more attention to studying the unconscious in cognitive psychology and neuroscience and find other research methods to supplement the hermeneutic position with a positivist position. For example, future studies might be able to use some portable medical devices such as an electrode patch to track the unconscious brain activity of participants during their hotel stay. Second, although this research focuses exclusively on high-end theme hotels, it has achieved a level of abstraction that may allow its methods and findings to be conceptually applicable to similar contexts. Given that theme hotels are the most experience-intensive category within the hotel industry, and that high-end theme hotels invest significantly in creating unique experiences, the comparable contexts include high-end theme homestays, different scales of theme hotels, and other experience-driven and design-intensive accommodations such as boutique hotels and luxury resorts. Future research could extend the current research design to these contexts, further validating and expanding upon the findings. The third limitation of this study is its focus on educated participants, potentially skewing results by underrepresenting less educated guests. Future research should include a more diverse customer base to develop strategies that address all guests' needs and expectations.

In summary, this study shows that customer experience is far more complex than understood so far, and that its connotations are yet to be fully explored. As a first attempt in this direction, this study provides a feasible approach for future studies, along with some findings for reference. Much additional work is required before a more complete understanding of customer experience occurs.

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