

1 **Social Customer Relationship Management: A Customer Perspective.**

2 **1.0 Introduction**

3 The availability of many social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and online
4 review sites such as Trip Advisor has led to the emergence of a new concept known as social
5 customer relationship management (SCRM) or CRM 2.0. This is defined as a business strategy of
6 engaging customers through social media with the goal of building trust and brand loyalty
7 (Greenberg, 2010; Li et al., 2020; Rita & Moro, 2018), SCRM provides traditional customer
8 relationship management for online customers by shifting the focus from a transactional outlook
9 to one that centers on customer experiences (Dewnarain et al., 2019a; Sigala, 2018; Touni et al.,
10 2020; Zhang et al., 2019). Migrating from customer relationship management to SCRM
11 necessitates a new mindset which starts from considering customers as co-creators of brand
12 experiences. Not treating customers as agents of relations somehow violates the core ethos of a
13 service dominant logic which dictates that value creation should stem from an exchange between
14 key stakeholders involved in the service process (Diffley et al., 2018; Fan et al., 2020).

15 In the past, customers' personal details were registered on a database upon check-out from the
16 hotel (CRM system) and subsequently used by marketers to reconnect with existing customers to
17 build a one- to- one relationship. In the 21st century, hotel customers are tech savvy, the focus has
18 shifted to co-creation, customization as well as digital innovation (Dewnarain et al., 2019a; Hu &
19 Yang, 2020; Zhang et al., 2019). The interaction between hotels and social customers starts during
20 the pre-purchase phase and evolves throughout the purchase cycle as customers interact with the
21 brand at various touchpoints. Although a lot of research is available on customer engagement on

22 social media platforms, further examination of its antecedents and outcomes is required (Dolan et
23 al., 2017; Touni et al., 2020; Li et al. 2020)

24 The main objective of this study is to explore the role of CRM and social media technologies on
25 customer engagement. Using a SCRM approach prompts tourism and hospitality firms to tap into
26 the affordances of social networking sites and other forms of communication technologies in order
27 to create more personalized customer experiences (Hollebeek et al., 2019). Through data mining,
28 hotel firms can develop a thorough understanding of their customers and accordingly, introduce
29 touchpoints aimed at enhancing the level interactions to build strong relationships, rather than
30 glorifying one-off sales channels with a short-term focus (Chathoth et al., 2016; Dewnarain et al.,
31 2019a).

32 Consequently, it is important to investigate how social media technologies can be effectively used
33 by hotel managers to engage and build lasting relationships with both actual and future customers.
34 A recent research conducted by Kim and Baker (2020) demonstrates that customers observe the
35 interactional effect between hotels and its existing customers during service recovery before
36 deciding on a specific brand. The tie strength which is defined as the relationship between a firm
37 and the customer often affects behavioral outcomes is another gap identified by Li, Teng and Chen
38 (2020). Past studies note that the link between customer engagement and brand loyalty remains
39 unclear in the hospitality industry (Harrigan et al, 2017; Li et al., 2020). More research is also
40 being called for on whether customer brand engagement can trigger positive emotions that may
41 lead to behavioral engagement in the form of positive word of mouth (Flavian et al.,2019; Santini
42 et al.,2020).

43 **There is** enhanced focus on reviewing the process of customer relationship management from an
44 organizational culture perspective (Curry & Kkolou, 2004; Iriana & Buttle, 2006; Rahimi &
45 Gunlu, 2016). However, as argued by Reinartz (2004), CRM consists of 3 main processes and
46 involves establishing a relationship with customers, maintaining a relationship with the customer
47 and ending the relationship with the customer. Therefore, for an organization to gain insights on
48 whether CRM strategies in place are working, it is crucial to investigate CRM from customers'
49 perspectives. Aldahaini and Ali (2018) further highlight from the dearth of CRM studies from the
50 customer side (with the exceptions of Yadav & Singh, 2018 and Talón-Ballesteros et al., 2018).
51 **Our main research question in this study is to explore customer perceptions on how hotels are**
52 **engaging and building relationships with them on social media platforms. Many hotel companies**
53 **have electronic or social customer relationship strategies in place, but their effectiveness is often**
54 **unclear. In this study we develop and test a SCRMM model to explain how the effective**
55 **implementation of a SCRMM strategy can lead to brand advocacy and loyalty in the hospitality**
56 **industry.**

57 **To answer our research question,** data was collected from 373 customers residing in three-star,
58 four star and five-star hotels, from the Island of Mauritius. Self-completed survey questionnaires
59 were distributed at the departure lounge at Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam International airport. With
60 a population of approximately 1.2 million inhabitants, the island of Mauritius situated off the
61 Eastern African coast and close to Madagascar receives around 1.4 million tourists on a yearly
62 basis (Statistics Mauritius, 2020). The Mauritian economy is heavily reliant on its tourism sector
63 which roughly employs around 40, 000 people in full direct employment (Mauritius Tourism,
64 2020). With evolving changes in consumer behavior, new products are being constantly introduced
65 as part of the innovation strategy. As demand for authentic experiences continues to grow, the

66 market has equally witnessed the emergence of new hospitality products with a focus on
67 connecting tourists with local people and aligning with the sustainable development goals
68 (Sowamber, Ramkissoon, & Mavondo, 2018). With growing competition from neighboring Indian
69 Ocean islands (for e.g Reunion, Seychelles, Maldives) and given the wide portfolio of both global
70 and local brands available in the marketplace, Mauritius was deemed a relevant context to study
71 SCRM practices.

72 This study has important implications for hotel firms as it can assist in creating superior customer
73 engagement which is fundamental for survival in this digital era of social customers. Firstly, it
74 brings interesting theoretical contributions to the hospitality and marketing communication
75 literature. **While SCRM is an emerging topic in the hospitality sector, the present study establishes
76 and tests a model which validates that the integration of social media technologies with CRM
77 activities can deliver higher customer brand engagement, positive word of mouth (PWOM) and
78 brand loyalty.**

79 From a practical perspective, this paper serves as a guide to hotel managers for the effective
80 implementation of a SCRM strategy aimed at establishing structural bonds with customers to
81 generate brand loyalty (Dewnarain, 2018; Harrigan et al., 2018). The outcomes are important
82 antecedents for economic and financial business outcomes. Finally, using a structural equation
83 modelling, we test a robust SCRM model which can be used by hospitality industry managers to
84 implement an effective SCRM strategy and benefit from real-time behavioral understanding.

85

86

87 **2.0 Theoretical background and hypotheses development**

88 Drawing on previous research by Dewnarain et al., (2019a; 2019b) on SCRM, this study explores
89 SCRM from the customer side to test the effectiveness strategies implemented. It is underpinned
90 by the resource-based view theory which suggests that resources which are scarce and non-imitable
91 are best positioned to achieve sustainable competitive advantages (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014;
92 Harrigan et al, 2017). Since hospitality customers have taken a more active role in service design
93 and delivery, hoteliers can now use first-hand information on social media platforms during the
94 pre-purchase stage in order to develop more psychologically engaging experiences (Flavian et al.,
95 2019; Harrigan et al., 2020; Yoon & Lee, 2017). Thus, SCRM is operationalized by using
96 traditional CRM and social media technologies as two antecedent factors (see Aldahaini & Bin
97 Ali, 2018, Jacewicz & Cho, 2015; Malthouse et al., 2013). The social CRM powerhouse model by
98 Malthouse et al. (2013) was used to establish the foundation of the conceptual framework as well
99 as a previous paper titled: - *Strategic drivers, anticipated and unanticipated outcomes of customer*
100 *engagement* by Hollebeek, Conduit and Brodie (2016), sustain the theoretically underpinnings.

101 Furthermore, as stated by Gomez, Lopez and Molina (2019), research on the customer brand
102 engagement construct during all the stages of the customer journey is still in an infancy stage and
103 there is a pressing need to scientifically test the role of this construct in achieving organizational
104 goals. This study further addresses this gap by proposing a model which tests the influence of
105 customer brand engagement on social media platforms to achieve positive word of mouth
106 (PWOM) and brand loyalty. Key variables used to design the conceptual framework are defined
107 next, and the role of social media in managing customer relationships is further explored.

108

109 **2.1 CRM and the hotel industry**

110 While CRM is often referred to as information or technology-enabled relationship marketing,
111 many authors mentioned that CRM “is a philosophically related offspring of relationship
112 marketing” (Ryals & Payne, 2001, p. 3). Mohammed and Rashid (2012, p. 221), in a more
113 comprehensive way, define CRM “as a business strategy which also integrates technology in order
114 to create superior relational outcomes in the hotel industry”. While earlier research in CRM have
115 explained the reasons behind CRM project failures (Jayachandran et al., 2005; Trainor, 2012),
116 emerging CRM research is probing the role of social technologies in achieving success (Chan et
117 al., 2018; Dewnarain et al., 2019b; Rahimi, 2017).

118 It is only in the 1990s that CRM has gained popularity as a marketing strategy that enhances
119 profitability and customer retention in the hospitality industry (Kotler et al., 2002; Rahimi, 2017).
120 Wu and Lu (2012) argue that when CRM projects are successfully implemented in hotels, there is
121 a significant impact on the company’s bottom line and customer lifetime value alike. Customer
122 relationship management is an iterative process where firms have to review their objectives
123 regularly to ensure CRM success either in the form of increased profitability, higher level of
124 customer satisfaction, new customer acquisition, brand loyalty or positive word of mouth
125 (Tillmanns et al., 2017).

126

127 **2.2 Social Media Technologies**

128 Social media (SM) has been defined as ‘a group of internet-based applications that build on the
129 ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allows the creation and exchange

130 of user-generated content' (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). The emergence of social media
131 technologies has caused a paradigmatic shift in the way hospitality businesses operate ranging
132 from customer services, sales and marketing to human resource management and finance (Aral et
133 al., 2013; Guha et al., 2018). The rise in social media platforms has important implications for the
134 hospitality sector (Diffley et al., 2017). Tourists are now empowered, and they can explicitly share
135 their "qualitative experiences as well as level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction in line with tangible
136 attributes concerning a destination" (Gonzales-Rodriguez et al., 2016, p. 19) which can in turn
137 influence the travel purchase decisions of future customers (Chanchaichujit et al., 2018; 2020).
138 Hotel firms can capitalize on user-generated content available online to develop social and
139 structural bonds with both existing and potential customers (Dewnarain et al., 2019a). Operating
140 in a highly competitive environment is a major challenge that hotel firms are being confronted
141 with. The interactive nature of social media that promotes real-time interactions with customers
142 can undeniably create a competitive edge for proactive service providers (Chathoth et al., 2016).
143 However, as pointed out by Babin and Harris (2018), the use of social media may not always have
144 a positive effect on CRM processes either because of contradictory information or poor
145 interpretation of customer expectations. Based on the above discussion, hypothesis 1 is proposed.

146 *H1: Use of social media technologies has a positive effect on CRM processes in the hotel*
147 *industry*

148

149 ***2.3 CRM and customer engagement***

150 Customer engagement alludes to ways in which customers can contribute to a company's bottom
151 line through processes other than purchases (Harmeling et al., 2017, Santini et al., 2020).

152 Irrespective of whether they are guided or unguided by the firm, engaged customers actively
153 contribute to a range of marketing functions which include processes such as product innovation,
154 marketing communication and even customer acquisition and retention (Malthouse et al., 2013;
155 Romero, 2017). Highly involved customers are often referred to as pseudo marketers who are of
156 much bigger influence and more effective as compared to their counterparts who are community
157 managers. Brodie et al. (2011) and Rahimi and Gunlu (2016) have emphasized the need for further
158 research on antecedents of customer engagement as well as customer engagement behaviors which
159 are directly related to return on marketing investments. Similarly, when it comes to the hospitality
160 industry, there is a lack of empirical research on the customer engagement phenomenon and key
161 antecedents such as customer relationship and social media technologies (Romero, 2017; Sigala,
162 2018). Hypothesis 2 is proposed.

163 *Hypothesis 2: The use of social media enabled CRM activities will increase customer engagement.*

164

165 ***2.4 Customer engagement and social media***

166 Following an increase in social media technology and its potential for higher level of interactions,
167 industry practitioners are seeking for new approaches to meet customer expectations in an effective
168 way (Maecker, et al., 2016; Pappu & Quester, 2016). With its capability to facilitate relationships,
169 social media can immensely help firms to deliver on the promise of the marketing concept, market
170 orientation as well as relationship marketing by providing tools to increase customer satisfaction
171 and build customer engagement that goes beyond purchase and brand loyalty (Potra et al., 2016;
172 Ramkissoon & Mavondo, 2016). As part of building the customer engagement process, Sashi

173 (2012, p.260) developed a seven-stage customer engagement cycle and the components are as
174 follows: - ‘connection, interaction, satisfaction, retention, commitment, advocacy and
175 engagement.’ Depending on the nature of the product or service and level of familiarity with the
176 brand, customers progress through the various stages. The main benefit of customer engagement
177 lies in the fact that when a problem crops up in relationships, customers are willing to discuss
178 rather than venting out their anger in social spaces thus creating value for hotel firms (Garrido-
179 Moreno et al., 2018). Drawing from the above perspectives, hypothesis 3 is proposed.

180 *H3: The level of customer engagement will rise with an increase in the use social media*
181 *technologies*

182

183 ***2.5 Customer engagement and Positive Word of Mouth (PWOM)***

184 Customer engagement refers to ways in which customers can contribute to a company’s bottom
185 line through mechanisms other than purchases such as product innovation, marketing
186 communication and even customer acquisition and retention (Harmeling et al., 2017; Malthouse
187 et al., 2013). Customer engagement can either be studied from a psychological perspective,
188 including cognitive, emotional and behavioral elements (Brodie et al., 2011; Ramkissoon, Smith
189 & Weiler, 2013) or it can be examined from a behavioral perspective (So et al., 2016). Customer
190 engagement behavioral element oversees all brand activities that go beyond purchases such as
191 innovation or co-creation of value (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2014). In hospitality research, customer
192 engagement may follow both approaches (Romero, 2017; So et al., 2016). Abubakar and Mavondo
193 (2014) highlighted that a positive brand image and high perceived service value altogether derived
194 from the high-quality relationship established between service provider and customer, influence
195 customers’ intention to engage in positive word of mouth. Even if social media technologies are

196 often used by customers to express their dissatisfaction (Maecker et al., 2016), more and more
197 social customers are seeking for online reviews prior to finalizing purchases (Ramkissoon, 2018).
198 The premise of this study is to focus both on psychological and behavioral perspectives to have a
199 deeper understanding of how customer interaction on social media channels can lead to superior
200 firm performance. Hypothesis 4 is proposed.

201 *H4: Customer engagement on social media platforms is positively associated with positive word*
202 *of mouth*

203

204 ***2.6 Brand loyalty and customer engagement***

205 The extent to which a customer engages in a repeated purchase of a specific product or service in
206 future is known as brand loyalty (Ou & Verhoef, 2017). Customers who are committed to the
207 brand demonstrate a long-term pattern of repurchasing from the same hotel or chain. Loyal
208 customers continuously book from the same hotel brand as the specific brand becomes their first
209 choice and they will rarely switch to competitors given their high level of trust in the brand
210 (Jasinkas et al., 2016; Nunkoo et al., 2012). Customer loyalty can be divided into both attitudinal
211 and behavioral loyalty. When there is an attitudinal bonding, the customer repurchases the same
212 brand every time the need for the product or service arises (Jensen & Hansen, 2006; Saleem et al.,
213 2018). Unlike attitudinal loyalty which is a combination of both functional and emotional
214 attributes, behavioral loyalty goes one step further by integrating sensitivity to interpersonal
215 exchanges during transactions (Saleem et al., 2018). Past studies (e.g., Romiro, 2017; Ong et al.,
216 2018) highlighted the need to further study brand loyalty stemming from customer engagement.
217 Hypothesis 5 is proposed.

218 *Hypothesis 5: There is a positive relationship between customer engagement on social media*
219 *platforms and brand loyalty in the hotel industry.*

220 **2.7 Brand loyalty and PWOM**

221 Considered as an important customer engagement behavior, WOM is defined as a form of direct
222 communication whereby the ‘customer communicates a positive experience, an evaluation or a
223 recommendation related to either services or products, to another customer (Romero, 2017, p.569).
224 As argued by Dewnarain et al. (2019b), social customers are no longer passive recipients of
225 information emitted by hotel entities. They are highly involved and engaged in the purchase
226 decision-making process and this in turn underscores the increasingly important role played by
227 brand advocates (**who have previously consumed the service**) in spreading positive word of mouth.
228 Whenever there is service failure, unlike new customers, loyal customers tend to have a more open
229 mind to service recovery. **Consequently, if hotel guests are satisfied with proposed solutions and**
230 **their overall hotel experience, this creates an opportunity for brand loyalty.** In the digital era, the
231 overall reputation of a brand is highly reliant on online ratings and particularly, the quality of
232 content posted by existing hotel guests. The overall sentiment conveyed to potential customers in
233 **the form of positive or negative comments** may form the intention of customers to buy from a
234 brand; this calls for a deeper understanding of the link between brand loyalty and PWOM (Hwang
235 et al., 2019). Thus, hypothesis 6 is proposed.

236 *H6: Brand loyalty is an antecedent for positive word of mouth*

237

238

239 **2.8 Social media and PWOM**

240 With time and changing lifestyles of consumers, social media are quickly substituting the role
241 played by traditional word of mouth which was based on offline recommendations from family
242 members and friends (Nguyen et al., 2019). In the digital era, social capital seekers are mainly
243 influenced by the posts and reviews made by other peers on social media community groups. The
244 final purchase decision is often based on opinions of social media users rather than friends and
245 family (Gharib et al., 2019). Consequently, marketing efforts must be directed on channels where
246 customers invest their time. As the power of social media continues to grow in the form of social
247 commerce, it is imperative to investigate whether there is a direct relationship between the use of
248 social media platforms and PWOM (Dewnarain et al., 2019a). There is a possibility of negative
249 referrals on social media platforms which may negatively distract from PWOM. However,
250 consistent with Dewnarain et al. 2019 (a), we state the hypothesis as positive. Hence, hypothesis
251 7 is proposed.

252 *H7: The use of social media technologies is positively associated to the generation of positive*
253 *word of mouth*

254 Based on the above discussion, figure one below illustrates the various relationships established
255 and the interplay between the key variables.

256

257 *****Insert Figure 1 here**

258

259 **3.0 Methodology**

260 *3.1 Survey Instrument & Questionnaire structure*

261 **The main aim of our study is to develop and test a SCRM model to explain how the effective**
262 **implementation of a SCRM strategy can lead to brand advocacy and loyalty in the hospitality**
263 **industry, from a customer perspective.** A survey questionnaire was designed to investigate
264 SCRM processes discussed in the literature review. The use of a survey instrument is sustained
265 by previous research (Aldaihani & Bin Ali, 2018; Harrigan et al., 2017) who pointed out the
266 need to scientifically test SCRM in the service sector. The survey instrument consisted of five
267 distinct sections as shown in appendix 1. The purpose of the first section was to generate
268 customer insights on organizational culture readiness to achieve its communication goals.
269 Section 2 looks at customers' motivation to go for social media engagement and this section was
270 further divided into 5 subsections namely, - seeking information, giving information, self-status
271 seeking, social interaction and relaxing entertainment. Section 3 elicits information on pre-
272 booking, during stay and post-purchase decision-making process. Finally, section 4 and 5 focus
273 on relationship behavioral outcomes in the form PWOM and brand loyalty. It is vital to design
274 questionnaires in alignment with best practices so as to curtail response errors (Krosnick &
275 Presser, 2010). The scale development was guided by the research question and the research
276 objectives. The constructs used in this study were adopted from well-established studies with
277 scales that have exhibited strong reliability and validity (Harrigan et al., 2017; Jamali et al.,
278 2013; Khan, 2017; So et al., 2016). This is further illustrated in Table 1 in the appendix section.
279 All items in the questionnaire were measured using a 7- point Likert scale (Krosnick & Presser,
280 2010).

281 **3.2 Sample**

282 SCRM is often limitedly defined as a process through which social media channels are used to
283 deliver on CRM strategy (Aldaihani & Bin Ali, 2018). However, through this research, the authors
284 attempt to address the crucial role played by social customers who are highly involved in the
285 SCRM process to ensure that relational outcomes in the form PWOM and brand loyalty are
286 achieved. Therefore, a total of 373 customers were surveyed. A-priori sample size calculator for
287 structural equation modelling was used to calculate the sample size (Soper, 2018); the parameter
288 values had an anticipated effect size of .30, a desired statistical power level of .80 and a p-value
289 threshold of .01 based on Wolf et al. (2013) recommendations. The calculated results for customers
290 suggested a minimum sample size of 226 for model structure. While 382 participants had initially
291 completed the questionnaire, only 373 cases were retained for further analyses following data
292 cleansing. This is a representative sample of the population and hence, the results will be
293 generalizable.

294

295 **3.3 Study setting and data collection**

296 According to a report published by the Mauritius Tourism Promotion Authority (MTPA) in 2019,
297 there are currently 114 hotels in Mauritius. Hotels are constantly under review when it comes to
298 classification and rating (MTPA, 2019). Therefore, data was only collected from customers
299 residing in 3-star, 4- star and 5- star hotels classified by the MTPA as they account for 93% of
300 hotels in Mauritius.

301 Data was mainly collected from the departure lounge of the Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam
302 International airport in November 2018. The main tourism markets for Mauritius are from Europe
303 and hence, the departure time of the major carriers were tracked in order to increase efficiency of
304 the process of data collection. Hard copies of the questionnaire were printed and distributed in the
305 departure lounge after permission was obtained from the CEO of Airport of Mauritius. Participants
306 had to go through a selection process prior to completing a self-administered survey questionnaire.
307 Researchers had to first ensure that the tourists were residing at one of the 3- star, 4- star or 5- star
308 hotel property during their stay on the paradise island; the second criterion was that participants
309 should be users of social media platforms. The latter was crucial since we were studying the
310 behavior of social customers and how they were interacting with hotel firms.

311

312 ***3.4 Method of analysis & fit of the proposed model***

313 Structural equation modelling was employed to test the hypothesized relationships (see figure 1).
314 The proposed relationships and the properties of the measurement model were estimated using
315 AMOS version 22. The measurement model was generated employing a confirmatory factor
316 analysis (CFA) approach. Once the acceptable values were obtained for both the individual
317 measures and composite measures based on indicators of reliability and validity, the scores for
318 composite reliability and average variance extracted were calculated. The values for discriminant
319 validity and convergent validity were also estimated and finally, the structural model was
320 empirically tested using a number of fitness indices which are discussed in the next section.

321

322 **3.5 Measurement model**

323 Hair et al. (2010, p.634) define reliability as a measure to which ‘a set of indicators of a latent
324 construct’ is internally consistent in their measurements. The Cronbach alpha of all the constructs
325 meet the minimum requirement of 0.7 (Nunally, 1978) ranging from 0.770 to 0.932 which suggests
326 a high reliability score for each construct. Additionally, the average variance extracted (AVE) for
327 all factors meet the minimum requirement of convergent validity which is 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker,
328 1981). Since the square root of AVE are greater than the correlations among the latent variables
329 there is evidence that the discriminant validity of the constructs was established (Hair et al., 2010).

330 Following the confirmatory factor analysis, acceptable psychometric properties were obtained in
331 the measurement model (Table 2 below). A good threshold value for Chi square/df is less than 3,
332 a GFI value close to or above .9 is acceptable, a CFI value >.95 is great and a RMSEA < .05 or
333 <.08 is acceptable (Bayram., 2013; Hu & Bentler, 1999). The CMIN value obtained was 176.61
334 to 80 DF and the ratio of CMIN to DF came to 2.21 which indicates a good model fit. Moreover,
335 a CFI value of .973, a GFI value of .940 and a RMSEA value of .057 were considered acceptable.

336

337 ******Insert Table 2 here**

338

339 **3.6 Structural model**

340 Results generated from running the final structural model test supported the conclusion that the
341 model was acceptable. The CMIN value was 196.21 to 83 DF and the ratio of CMIN to DF came

342 to 2.36. Moreover, a CFI value of .968, a GFI value of .933 and a RMSEA value of .061 were
343 obtained. When it comes to the ratio of Chi-Square to degree of freedom, researchers (e.g., Marsh
344 & Hocevar, 1985; McIver & Carmines, 1981) advocate using ratios as low as 2 or as high as 5 to
345 indicate an acceptable model fit. As shown in table 2 and suggested by Hu and Bentler (1990), all
346 the values obtained are consistent with the requirement for an acceptable model fit. The values of
347 the structural model are shown in Table 3 and the path coefficients of the model are shown in
348 Figure 2 below.

349

350 *****Insert Figure 2 here**

351

352 ***3.7 Hypothesis testing***

353 The confirmatory factor analysis and path analysis depict that the overall model fit of this study
354 was good. The first 6 hypotheses were supported while hypothesis 7 was rejected. The
355 standardized path coefficients between variables with corresponding standardized error, critical
356 ratio and corresponding statistical significance are reported in Table 3.

357

358 *****Insert Table 3 here**

359

360

361 4.0 Discussion of findings

362 Hypothesis 1 is supported ($\beta = .385$, $t = 5.927$, $p < 0.001$), this indicates that the use of social media
363 technologies has a positive effect on CRM processes in the hotel industry. It shows how the
364 integration of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube with CRM systems
365 can generate significant amount of knowledge which can lead to service innovation (Diffley et al.,
366 2017). This **relationship supports the** knowledge management concept which is defined as “a
367 systematic and integrative process of coordinating organization-wide activities of acquiring,
368 creating, storing, sharing, developing, and deploying knowledge, value information, and expertise
369 by individuals and groups in pursuit of organizational goals” (Rastogi 2000 cited in Qi & Chau
370 2016, p.2). Even though enterprise social media usage is more informal, personal and voluntary,
371 knowledge creation and sharing that takes place can contribute to considerable organizational
372 learning. This finding aligns with Castronovo and Huang (2012) and Mohammad and Rashid
373 (2012) **who note that** knowledge management is an integral component element of an effective
374 CRM strategy. Customer knowledge retrieved from CRM database can help hotels understand,
375 segment and better target their customers through efficient allocation of resources to create
376 customer value, design customer-centric strategies, and increase customer loyalty and overall firm
377 profitability.

378

379 Hypothesis 2 confirmed that customer engagement increases with an increase in the use of social
380 media enabled CRM activities (H2: $\beta = .326$, $t = 4.944$, $p < 0.001$). Findings from previous CRM
381 studies (e.g., Payne & Frow, 2005) portray a number of CRM projects that have failed in the past
382 because they were limited in scope. Following check out, customer data would be stored in a

383 system and would be consequently used to send out promotional messages to customers from time
384 to time. The social capital seeker has a completely different DNA when it comes to interacting
385 with service providers as they are looking for creative engagement (Potra et al., 2016). As
386 discussed earlier, engagement is defined as a “holistic psychological state in which one is
387 cognitively and emotionally energized to socially behave in ways that exemplify the positive
388 manners in which group members prefer to think of themselves” (Ray et al., 2014, p. 531). To be
389 able to achieve higher levels of engagement (Sashi, 2012), practitioners will have to shift their
390 focus from the traditional notion of CRM to social media enabled CRM activities which promote
391 creative engagement. Besides, our findings also correspond to the ninth premise of service-
392 dominant logic by Vargo & Lusch (2016) which states that a service-oriented view is intrinsically
393 beneficiary focused and relational. Hence, the very foundation of relationships is customer
394 engagement. This depicts that hoteliers cannot afford to carry on with one-way communication in
395 the form of brand advertising. Therefore, social media-enabled CRM can lead to highly engaged
396 customers who in turn demonstrate superior level of contributions and responsiveness to marketing
397 communication activities. Moreover, as stated by Malthouse et al. (2013) and Kumar and Pansari
398 (2012) engaged customers provide longer lasting relationships in the form of increased
399 recommendation, brand advocacy and retention rates.

400 H3 examined if the level of customer engagement will increase with an increase in the use of social
401 media technologies. H3 is supported ($\beta = .433$, $t = 5.346$, $p < 0.001$). As stated by Sashi (2012, p.
402 260), “customer engagement is turning on customers by building emotional bonds in relational
403 exchanges with them.” Even though trust remains an important factor in relational exchanges
404 (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012), the interactive nature of web 2.0 tends to blur the role of integrity
405 of sellers by increasing the contribution of content from customers in the process of value creation.

406 These findings demonstrate that social customers are risk-takers who are constantly seeking for
407 novel experiences. Hence, the possibility for marketers to interact with potential and existing
408 customers on social media channels such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube or even Trip Advisor
409 can generate tremendous opportunities for customer acquisition (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016).

410 H4 tests the relationship between customer engagement on social media platforms and positive
411 word of mouth and is supported ($\beta = .151$, $t = 2.944$, $p < 0.01$). H5 is also supported and it confirms
412 that there is a positive relationship between customer engagement on social media platforms and
413 brand loyalty in the hotel industry (H5: $\beta = .619$, $t = 8.575$, $p < 0.001$). When satisfied customers
414 share their positive experiences on social networking sites (Ramkissoon, 2020), brand advocacy
415 which is the very foundation for engagement is developed. According to Di Gangi and Wasko
416 (2016), social media and user generated content have transformed the traditional business model
417 to one where value is obtained from user engagement with the business and not from the one-way
418 delivery of products and services. Furthermore, customer interactions with other peers on social
419 media platforms may increase transparency and enable mass social acquaintances and provide a
420 more rounded picture to the customers prior to purchasing the service (Chanchaichujit et al., 2018;
421 2020). Therefore, customer engagement can directly influence PWOM and brand loyalty (So et
422 al., 2016). Most studies focus on predictors of SCRM or the environmental factors essential for
423 the smooth implementation of SCRM strategy (Ahani et al., 2017; Galib, 2014). However, they
424 rarely address the outcomes of SCRM. Our findings establish PWOM and brand loyalty as two
425 critical **performance outcomes and indicators** of the success of a SCRM strategy.

426

427 **Furthermore**, H6 confirms that there is a significant relationship between brand loyalty and
428 positive word of mouth on social media platforms (H6: $\beta = .719$, $t = 15.795$, $p < 0.001$). Loyal
429 customers are most likely to spread positive word of mouth which in turn consolidates revisit
430 intention of customers (Abubakar & Mavondo, 2014; Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011), and also,
431 catalyzes the purchase behavior of new customers (Hwang et al., 2019). Brand loyal customers are
432 perceived as fans online and they often garner huge number of followers as they increase the level
433 of trust in the product. In the case of the hospitality industry, they tend to decrease the level of risk
434 attached to intangibility which is one of the core characteristics of service (Dewnarain et al.,
435 2019a). Finally, results from SEM indicated that the use of social media does not positively
436 influence the generation of positive word of mouth. Therefore, hypothesis 7 was not supported
437 (H7: $\beta = -.071$, $t = -1.664$, $p > 0.05$). **This probably reflects not all reviews by customers will be**
438 **positive and supportive of the hotel. This further suggests a need for more investigation in**
439 **future studies.**

440 **5.0 Research contributions**

441 **5.1 Theoretical implications**

442 Contrasting findings of Li et al. (2020) which depict that customer engagement does not directly
443 influence brand loyalty, our study recognizes customer engagement as a critical success factor for
444 the hospitality industry contributing to call for further research to investigate the role of customer
445 engagement on tourism social media brands (e.g. Harrigan et al. 2017; Touni et al. 2020). A
446 positive relationship was established between customer engagement and PWOM as well as with
447 brand loyalty. Moreover, the use of social media technologies and CRM as antecedent factors of
448 **customer engagement** was also established. As opposed to the traditional view that the use of

449 social media influences the generation of positive word of mouth (Gharib et al., 2019; Nguyen et
450 al., 2019), the findings from this study do not support this proposition. This calls for further
451 research as often travelers post a comment on social media to vent out their anger or when they
452 are dissatisfied with a service (Dewnarain et al., 2019b; Li et al., 2020). In the same vein, Flavian
453 et al. (2020) recommend a more thorough investigation by looking at both psychological and
454 behavioral engagement in order to better understand the relationship between emotions and what
455 people post on social media platforms.

456 SCRM is a nascent field for research which is garnering attention from academic scholars and
457 practitioners alike (Dewnarain et al., 2019a; Harrigan et al., 2017, Malthouse et al., 2013). It
458 challenges the traditional view of CRM whereby customers would often take a backseat and would
459 have very little or zero say in how service was put together and delivered to them. Social customers
460 who are commonly referred to as social capital seekers are active participants in the process of
461 service design (Kumar et al., 2019). The willingness of customers to interact with hotel brand and
462 to contribute on social media platforms is opening new avenues for innovation (Busser et al.,
463 2019). Customer brand engagement on digital platforms will undeniably unfold a number of
464 opportunities for hotel companies to establish social bonds, customizable bonds, financial bonds
465 as well as structural bonds with both existing and new customers (Zeithaml et al., 2018). Hence,
466 this paper contributes to hospitality marketing theories as well as consumer behavior concepts as
467 it has a central focus on how customers are adopting social media technologies to interact with
468 hotel firms. It has also established important relationships between key variables such as CRM,
469 social media, customer engagement, positive word of mouth and brand loyalty which are important
470 factors being studied in service marketing literature.

471 *5.2 Managerial implications*

472 Given the high level of accountability attached to social media marketing, findings from this paper
473 prompts hospitality managers to invest more resources on consumer generated media as social
474 customers rely heavily on recommendations and reviews from online peers prior to finalizing their
475 purchase decision-making process. Starting from the first touchpoint of customer brand interaction
476 until the actual purchase and post purchase, every action can be tracked, measured and monitored
477 in the digital world (Belch & Belch, 2018; Chaffey & Smith, 2017). Viewed from another
478 perspective, this will promote direct sales in the form of increased number of bookings through
479 the hotel owned and earned media channels. This implies paying less commission to both online
480 and offline travel agencies.

481 Moving forward, data obtained from negative reviews or online content can be mined and rapid
482 business solutions can be created, implemented and communicated to customers within a shorter
483 turn around period. Thus, the integration of social media platforms with CRM strategy will
484 undeniably produce a massive amount of data or rather actionable insights which managers can
485 use to create a sustainable competitive advantage faster than their competitors (Baumgartner et al.,
486 2016; Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014; Rahimi, 2017). Showing a high level of concern and
487 addressing problems identified by customers even after checking out and most importantly,
488 communicating it to the community online can put a hotel organization at a competitive advantage
489 and can also help to reduce the churn rate which is a significant key performance indicator (KPI)
490 for hotel firms (Harrigan et al., 2018; Ramkissoon & Mavondo 2016). Moreover, hospitality
491 marketers need to consider the right customer factors such as use of social media tools before and
492 after visit which are discussed in this research, to determine customer lifetime value. Adopting a

493 consumer-oriented management strategy does not warranty brand loyalty anymore. It is rather
494 customers' perception of firm competence in relationship management which is essential to
495 achieve PWOM and brand loyalty.

496 **6.0 Conclusion**

497 This research study has developed and tested a robust SCRM model that can be used by a number
498 of service-based firms to achieve business goals. The high model fit indices generated demonstrate
499 that this model can be applied for new customer acquisition and repeat customers alike. It further
500 identifies customer engagement as a critical factor that will influence the overall SCRM process
501 and will yield a better customer relationship performance in the form of positive word of mouth
502 and customer brand loyalty for hotels in Mauritius. The proposed structural model may help
503 Mauritian hotels to attract more tourists and to come up with a sustainable customer-centric
504 relationship management strategy.

505 ***6.1 Limitations and future research directions***

506 This study is limited in scope as it did not tap into the role of customer engagement as a mediating
507 factor. It is interesting to note that the relationship between SM and PWOM is not significant in
508 this investigation. However, there is a strong relationship between customer engagement and
509 PWOM. Therefore, future research can benefit from testing the influence of customer engagement
510 variable as a mediator. Moreover, this study has tested the proposed conceptual model only from
511 customers' perspectives. In future, researchers can further probe into the evolving function of
512 social customer relationship by evaluating the proposed model from an organizational perspective
513 and more particularly, employees who are directly involved in service delivery. Finally, the whole

514 purchase process was explored in the questionnaire which made it quite lengthy. As a result
515 questions to probe the demographic profiles of customers were finally excluded. This is a
516 limitation since because potential moderators cannot be examined.

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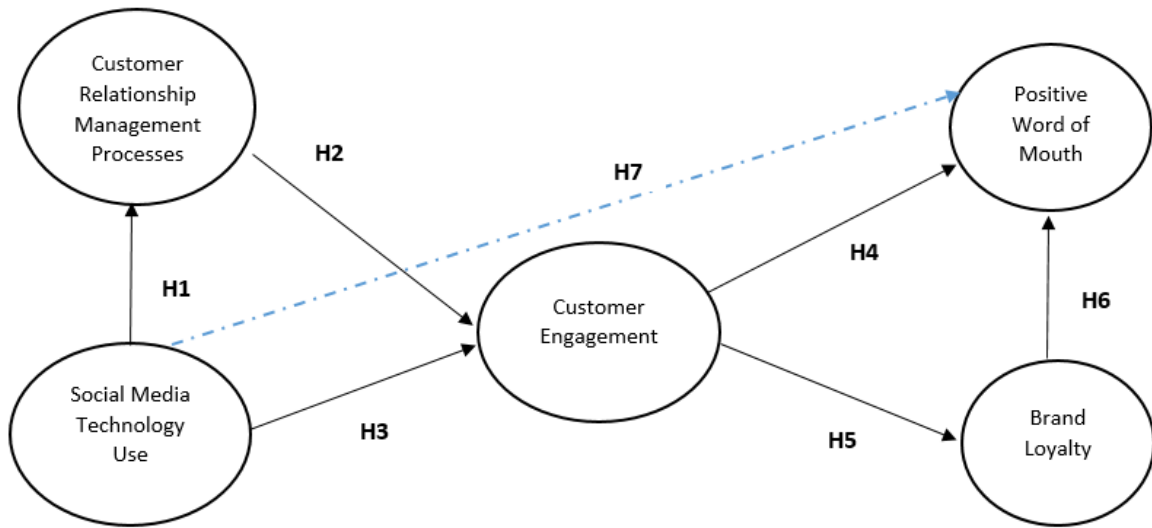


Figure 1: An Integrated Social CRM conceptual model

Source: Created by authors

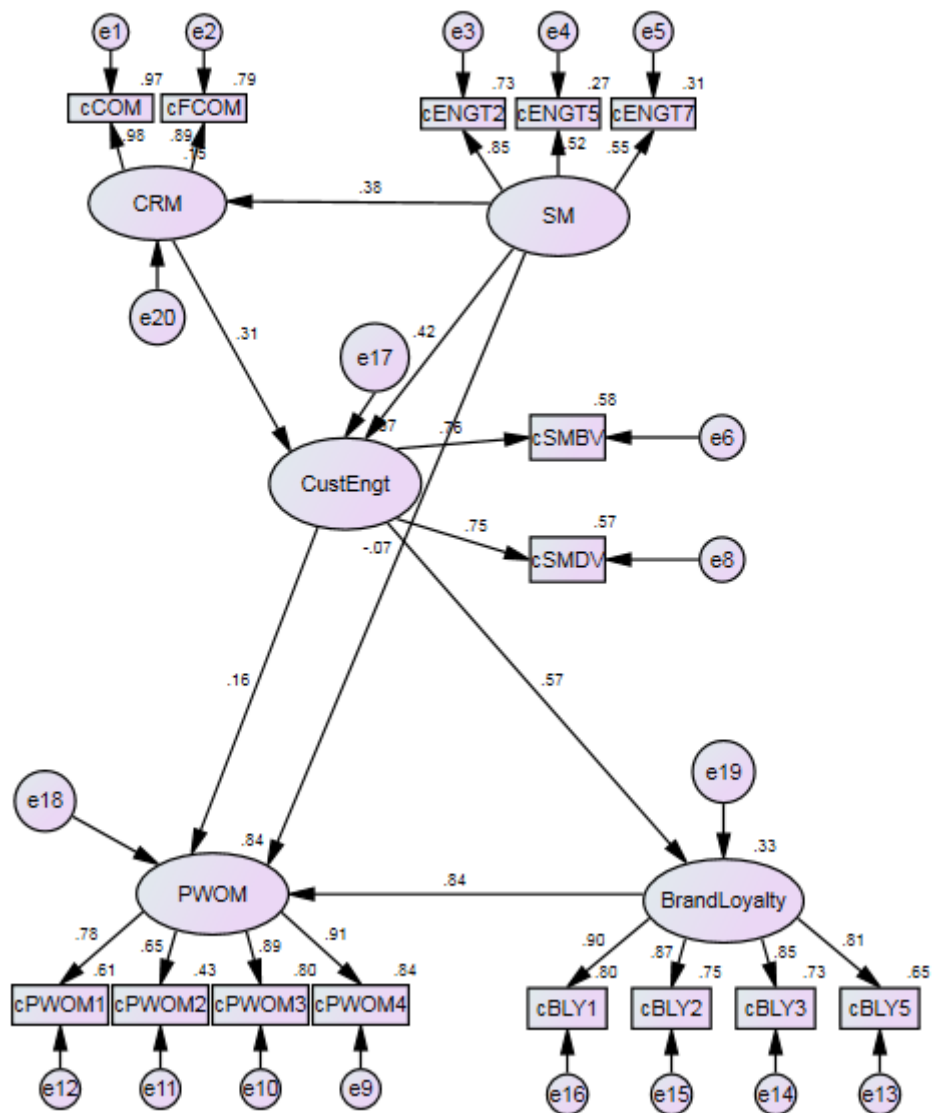


Figure 2: Structural model

CRM= Customer relationship management, SM= Social media, CustEngt= Customer

Engagement, PWOM= Positive word of mouth, Brandloyalty=Brand Loyalty

Hypotheses	β -value	SE (Standard error)	t-value	Supported or not supported
H1: Use of social media technologies has a positive effect on CRM processes in the hotel industry.	.385	.065	5.927 p<.001	Supported
H2: The use of social media enabled CRM activities will increase customer engagement.	.326	.066	4.944 p<.001	Supported
H3: The level of customer engagement will rise with an increase in the use social media technologies.	.433	.081	5.346 p<.001	Supported
H4: Customer engagement on social media platforms is positively associated with positive word of mouth.	.151	.051	2.944 p<.01	Supported

Hypothesis 5: There is a positive relationship between customer engagement on social media platforms and brand loyalty in the hotel industry.	.619	.072	8.575 p<.001	Supported
H6: Brand loyalty is an antecedent for positive word of mouth.	.719	.046	15.795 p<.001	Supported
H7: The use of social media technologies is positively associated to the generation of positive word of mouth.	-.071	.043	-1.664 p<0.05	Not Supported (using one-tailed t-test)

Table 1 is the *survey questionnaire*, and it is in appendix 1.

Table 2: Psychometric properties for the measurement and structural models

Measure	Recommended values	Measurement Model	Structural Model
CMIN	-	176.61	196.21
DF	-	80	83
CMIN/DF	<3	2.21	2.36
GFI	>0.9	.940	.933
adj. GFI		.909	.903
CFI	>0.9	.973	.968
RMSEA	<0.1	.057	.061

Table 3: Results of hypotheses testing

Hypotheses	β -value	SE (Standard error)	t-value	Supported or not supported
H1: Use of social media technologies has a positive effect on CRM processes in the hotel industry.	.385	.065	5.927 p<.001	Supported
H2: The use of social media enabled CRM activities will increase customer engagement.	.326	.066	4.944 p<.001	Supported
H3: The level of customer engagement will rise with an increase in the use social media technologies.	.433	.081	5.346 p<.001	Supported
H4: Customer engagement on social media platforms is positively associated with positive word of mouth.	.151	.051	2.944 p<.01	Supported
Hypothesis 5: There is a positive relationship between customer engagement on social media	.619	.072	8.575 p<.001	Supported

platforms and brand loyalty in the hotel industry.				
H6: Brand loyalty is an antecedent for positive word of mouth.	.719	.046	15.795 p<.001	Supported
H7: The use of social media technologies is positively associated to the generation of positive word of mouth.	-.071	.043	-1.664 p<0.05	Not Supported (using one-tailed t-test)

Table 4: Correlation Table with square root of AVE on the diagonal

	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	BL	CRM	SM	CE	PWOM
BL	0.920	0.793	0.719	0.928	0.891				
CRM	0.932	0.873	0.215	0.938	0.418	0.934			
SM	0.780	0.543	0.346	0.786	0.530	0.416	0.737		
CE	0.770	0.532	0.280	0.794	0.442	0.464	0.529	0.729	
PWOM	0.884	0.721	0.719	0.943	0.848	0.411	0.588	0.402	0.849

Note: CR= Composite Reliability; AVE= Average Variance Extracted; BL= Brand loyalty; CRM= customer relationship management, SM= social media, CE= Customer Engagement; PWOM= positive word of mouth.