

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-Ballesteró 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 using a social capital seeker perspective. Do we really need this which may raise new**
57 **questions?**

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

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

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

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

86 **2.0 Theoretical background and hypotheses development**

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

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

107 ***2.1 CRM and the hotel industry***

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

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

124

125 ***2.2 Social Media Technologies***

126 Social media (SM) has been defined as ‘a group of internet-based applications that build on the
127 ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allows the creation and exchange
128 of user-generated content’ (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). The emergence of social media

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

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

146

147 **2.3 CRM and customer engagement**

148 Customer engagement alludes to ways in which customers can contribute to a company’s bottom
149 line through processes other than purchases (Harmeling et al., 2017, Santini et al., 2020).
150 Irrespective of whether they are guided or unguided by the firm, engaged customers actively

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

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

162

163 ***2.4 Customer engagement and social media***

164 Following an increase in social media technology and its potential for higher level of interactions,
165 industry practitioners are seeking for new approaches to meet customer expectations in an effective
166 way (Maecker, et al., 2016; Pappu & Quester, 2016). With its capability to facilitate relationships,
167 social media can immensely help firms to deliver on the promise of the marketing concept, market
168 orientation as well as relationship marketing by providing tools to increase customer satisfaction
169 and build customer engagement that goes beyond purchase and brand loyalty (Potra et al., 2016;
170 Ramkissoon & Mavondo, 2016). As part of building the customer engagement process, Sashi
171 (2012, p.260) developed a seven-stage customer engagement cycle and the components are as

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

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

180

181 ***2.5 Customer engagement and Positive Word of Mouth (PWOM)***

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

195 social customers are seeking for online reviews prior to finalizing purchases (Ramkissoon, 2018).
196 The premise of this study is to focus both on psychological and behavioral perspectives to have a
197 deeper understanding of how customer interaction on social media channels can lead to superior
198 firm performance. Hypothesis 4 is proposed.

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

201

202 **2.6 Brand loyalty and customer engagement**

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

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

218

219

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 **2.8 Social media and PWOM**

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

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

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

255

256 *****Insert Figure 1 here**

257

258 **3.0 Methodology**

259 *3.1 Survey Instrument & Questionnaire structure*

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

278 All items in the questionnaire were measured using a 7- point Likert scale (Krosnick & Presser,
279 2010).

280

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 **4.0 Discussion of findings**

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

377

378 Hypothesis 2 confirmed that customer engagement increases with an increase in the use of social
379 media enabled CRM activities (H2: $\beta = .326$, $t = 4.944$, $p < 0.001$). Findings from previous CRM
380 studies (e.g. Payne & Frow, 2005) portray a number of CRM projects that have failed in the past
381 because they were limited in scope. Following check out, customer data would be stored in a
382 system and would be consequently used to send out promotional messages to customers from time
383 to time. The social capital seeker has a completely different DNA when it comes to interacting
384 with service providers as they are looking for creative engagement (Potra et al., 2016). As
385 discussed earlier, engagement is defined as a “holistic psychological state in which one is
386 cognitively and emotionally energized to socially behave in ways that exemplify the positive
387 manners in which group members prefer to think of themselves” (Ray et al., 2014, p. 531). To be
388 able to achieve higher levels of engagement (Sashi, 2012), practitioners will have to shift their
389 focus from the traditional notion of CRM to social media enabled CRM activities which promote
390 creative engagement. Besides, our findings also correspond to the ninth premise of service-
391 dominant logic by Vargo & Lusch (2016) which states that a service-oriented view is intrinsically
392 beneficiary focused and relational. Hence, the very foundation of relationships is customer
393 engagement. This depicts that hoteliers cannot afford to carry on with one-way communication in
394 the form of brand advertising. Therefore, social media-enabled CRM can lead to highly engaged
395 customers who in turn demonstrate superior level of contributions and responsiveness to marketing
396 communication activities. Moreover, as stated by Malthouse et al. (2013) and Kumar and Pansari
397 (2012) engaged customers provide longer lasting relationships in the form of increased
398 recommendation, brand advocacy and retention rates.

399 H3 examined if the level of customer engagement will increase with an increase in the use of
400 social media technologies. H3 is supported ($\beta = .433$, $t = 5.346$, $p < 0.001$). As stated by Sashi (2012,

401 p. 260), “customer engagement is turning on customers by building emotional bonds in relational
402 exchanges with them.” Even though trust remains an important factor in relational exchanges
403 (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012), the interactive nature of web 2.0 tends to blur the role of integrity
404 of sellers by increasing the contribution of content from customers in the process of value creation.
405 These findings demonstrate that social customers are risk-takers who are constantly seeking for
406 novel experiences. Hence, the possibility for marketers to interact with potential and existing
407 customers on social media channels such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube or even Trip Advisor
408 can generate tremendous opportunities for customer acquisition (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2016).

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

423 rarely address the outcomes of SCRM. Our findings establish PWOM and brand loyalty as two
424 critical **performance outcomes and indicators** of the success of a SCRM strategy.

425

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

440

441 **5.0 Research contributions**

442 ***5.1 Theoretical implications***

443 Contrasting findings of Li et al. (2020) which depict that customer engagement does not directly
444 influence brand loyalty, our study recognizes customer engagement as a critical success factor for
445 the hospitality industry contributing to call for further research to investigate the role of customer
446 engagement on tourism social media brands (e.g. Harrigan et al. 2017; Touni et al. 2020). A
447 positive relationship was established between customer engagement and PWOM as well as with
448 brand loyalty. Moreover, the use of social media technologies and CRM as antecedent factors of
449 CE was also established. As opposed to the traditional view that the use of social media influences
450 the generation of positive word of mouth (Gharib et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019), the findings
451 from this study do not support this proposition. This calls for further research as often travelers
452 post a comment on social media to vent out their anger or when they are dissatisfied with a service
453 (Dewnarain et al., 2019b; Li et al., 2020). In the same vein, Flavian et al. (2020) recommend a
454 more thorough investigation by looking at both psychological and behavioral engagement in order
455 to better understand the relationship between emotions and what people post on social media
456 platforms.

457 SCRM is a nascent field for research which is garnering attention from academic scholars and
458 practitioners alike (Dewnarain et al., 2019a; Harrigan et al., 2017, Malthouse et al., 2013). It
459 challenges the traditional view of CRM whereby customers would often take a backseat and would
460 have very little or zero say in how service was put together and delivered to them. Social customers
461 who are commonly referred to as social capital seekers are active participants in the process of
462 service design (Kumar et al., 2019). The willingness of customers to interact with hotel brand and
463 to contribute on social media platforms is opening new avenues for innovation (Busser et al.,
464 2019). Customer brand engagement on digital platforms will undeniably unfold a number of
465 opportunities for hotel companies to establish social bonds, customizable bonds, financial bonds

466 as well as structural bonds with both existing and new customers (Zeithaml et al., 2018). Hence,
467 this paper contributes to hospitality marketing theories as well as consumer behavior concepts as
468 it has a central focus on how customers are adopting social media technologies to interact with
469 hotel firms. It has also established important relationships between key variables such as CRM,
470 social media, customer engagement, positive word of mouth and brand loyalty which are important
471 factors being studied in service marketing literature.

472 ***5.2 Managerial implications***

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

482 Moving forward, data obtained from negative reviews or online content can be mined and rapid
483 business solutions can be created, implemented and communicated to customers within a shorter
484 turn around period. Thus, the integration of social media platforms with CRM strategy will
485 undeniably produce a massive amount of data or rather actionable insights which managers can
486 use to create a sustainable competitive advantage faster than their competitors (Baumgartner et al.,
487 2016; Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014; Rahimi, 2017). Showing a high level of concern and

488 addressing problems identified by customers even after check out and most importantly,
489 communicating it to the community online can put a hotel organization at a competitive advantage
490 and can also help to reduce the churn rate which is a significant key performance indicator (KPI)
491 for hotel firms (Harrigan et al., 2018; Ramkissoon & Mavondo 2016). Moreover, hospitality
492 marketers need to consider the right customer factors such as use of social media tools before and
493 after visit which are discussed in this research, to determine customer lifetime value. Adopting a
494 consumer-oriented management strategy does not warranty brand loyalty anymore. It is rather
495 customers' perception of firm competence in relationship management which is essential to
496 achieve PWOM and brand loyalty.

497 **6.0 Conclusion**

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

506 ***6.1 Limitations and future research directions***

507 This study is limited in scope as it did not tap into the role of customer engagement as a [mediating](#)
508 [factor](#). It is interesting to note that the relationship between SM and PWOM is not significant in

509 this investigation. However, there is a strong relationship between customer engagement and
510 PWOM. Therefore, future research can benefit from testing the influence of customer engagement
511 variable as a mediator. Moreover, this study has tested the proposed conceptual model only from
512 customers' perspectives. In future, researchers can further probe into the evolving function of
513 social customer relationship by evaluating the proposed model from an organizational perspective
514 and more particularly, employees who are directly involved in service delivery. Finally, the whole
515 purchase process was explored in the questionnaire which made it quite lengthy. As a result
516 questions to probe the demographic profiles of customers were finally excluded. This is a
517 limitation since because potential moderators cannot be examined.

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