



Mediating Role of Customer Satisfaction on The Relationship between Customer Engagement Practices and Customer Loyalty in Hotels in South East Nigeria

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Abstract *This study examines the mediating role of customer satisfaction on the relationship existing between customer engagement practices on customer loyalty in hotels in South East, Nigeria. Specific objectives were to; examine the mediating role of customer satisfaction on the relationship existing between social media marketing (Facebook and Instagram) and customer loyalty in the hospitality industry; examine the mediating role of customer satisfaction on the relationship existing between short messages services (SMS) and customer loyalty in the hospitality industry. Survey research design was adopted for the study. The target population comprised customers who had used the services of the selected hotels at least once. A sample size of 396 customers was chosen from the population. Questionnaire was the instrument for data collection. A two-shaped structural equation modeling procedure was applied to test the hypotheses. The results show that at 5% level of significance, customer satisfaction has a statistically significant mediating role on the relationship existing between social media marketing (Facebook and Instagram) and customer loyalty, given that $\beta_1 = 0.035$; $p = 0.015$, $\beta_1 = 0.78$; $p = 0.000$, and the mediating role of customer satisfaction is statistically significant at 5% level of significance on the relationship between short messages services and customer loyalty, given that $\beta_1 = 0.521$; $p = 0.000$. The study concludes that; customer satisfaction play a mediating role on the relationship existing between social media marketing, and short message services, The study recommends that; to influence customers' attitude and thoughts; hotel marketing managers should have up-to-date information about the new advancements and developments related to social network websites; Hotel marketing managers should also, ensure that short messages services alerts are persistently sent to relevant customers to enhance their loyalty.*

Keywords: Customer Engagement, Loyalty, Satisfaction, Social Media, Short Messages Services

INTRODUCTION

Initially in Sub - Saharan Africa society, the movement of people away from their ancestral homes were highly restricted due to inter-tribal wars, poor road network linking villages, towns and nations; lack of efficient means of transportation, lack of accommodation, shelters, food, efficient information technology and economies as well as political integration between or among nations. Few individuals that travel away

from their places of permanent residence take shelter in their friends, relatives or public houses like churches and schools (Ejionueme & Nebo, 2021). However, with recent improvements in road infrastructures, transportation means, information technology explosion among nations and trade liberalization policies; the pattern of movement of people changed. Now more people are willing to travel within or outside the country of their origin for reasons such as industrial tours, excursions, medical treatments, conferences,

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pilgrimages, sightseeing, adventures, business trips, or catching fun with loved ones, friends, and relatives, among others. This massive explosion in the movement of people away from their homes gives rise to the need for hospitality services and tourism products more than ever before. This is evident in the huge investment made by government and private organizations in hotels, restaurants, airlines, ships, railways, buses, travel agencies, airport taxi, federal and state tourism boards and attraction sites businesses.

Among all the hospitality firms in Nigeria, hotels appear to be growing in geometrical progression giving the rapid increase in the number of hotels at every nook and crannies of the country. Looking around, one sees a number of hotels situated everywhere struggling to provide food, shelter, accommodation, entertainment, and leisure for guests. Impliedly, competition is now extensive in the hotel industry in Nigeria (Ejionueme & Nebo, 2021). Hotels are now faced with the problem of unoccupied rooms and high overhead costs (Statista, 2020). This problem creates the need for a new concept in business often regarded by many researchers as “customer engagement”.

Customer involvement has been promoted as a strategy to mitigate the fluctuations of competitiveness in the hotel business (Kumar, Venkatesan & Reinartz, 2013). Customer engagement, as an emerging corporate concept, seeks to establish an emotional connection with customers, fostering loyalty, encouraging repeat purchases, and ultimately transforming them into brand ambassadors (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Scholars have identified that this involvement fosters persistent distinctiveness, cost reduction (Thomas, 2011), sales growth (Neff, 2007 as quoted in Hollebeek, 2012), profitability (Voyles, 2007), and a superior competitive edge (Sedley, 2008). Customer involvement is regarded as an extension of the relationship-marketing domain (So, King, Sparks & Wang 2016; Van Tonder & Petzer, 2018). Customer engagement encompasses the communicative interactions between commercial organisations and their clientele (O’Brien, Jarvis & Soutar, 2015). The text discusses the initiatives undertaken by organisations to motivate consumers to engage by offering feedback, recommendations, and expressing concerns. Customer engagement is a component of marketing strategy aimed at fostering a close relationship between customers and organisations, which may subsequently enhance brand image and brand equity (Sahoo & Pillai, 2017). Ruzanna, Baharin, and Nayan (2020) assert that organizations prioritising client interaction derive their value from the consumers’ viewpoints.

The customer engagement process encompasses a variety of methodologies, including social media marketing, email marketing, short message services (SMS), event marketing, content marketing, press conferences, press

interviews, stakeholder engagement, mobile marketing campaigns, loyalty programs, and in-person interactions, among others. For the purposes of this study, the following two customer engagement practices were employed as foundational elements: social media marketing and short message services (SMS). The rationale behind selecting these customer engagement practices arises from their frequent appearance in numerous previous studies and their widespread application by hotels in the region.

In the year 2000, the emergence of social media marketing marked the introduction of a groundbreaking technique (Leung, Bai & Erdem, 2017). This serves as an essential instrument for facilitating user communication. Consequently, communication between organisations and the public, as well as between organisations and customers, is significantly dependent on this technology. The extensive engagement of individuals globally with social media platforms like Facebook underscores the significance of these applications as pivotal catalysts for business growth. Social media represents a form of digital technology employed for the purpose of communication with both individuals and the broader public sphere. With the consent of consumers, a business employs a social media tool to engage with its clients through social media platforms (Leung, Bai & Erdem, 2017).

Text message advertisements represent a remarkably economical strategy within the realm of marketing. Short message services advertising targets each consumer on a personal level, presenting a distinctive chance for direct engagement with the audience (Welukar & Harichandan, 2011). The utilisation of SMS advertising proves advantageous as it facilitates the transmission of messages to both smartphones and basic mobile devices, thereby allowing advertisers to engage with a diverse array of consumers (Varley, 2014). Similarly, short message services exhibit a rapid response time, with a maximum duration of 90 seconds, as users typically have their mobile phones in close proximity at all times (Varley, 2014). There is a contention that short message services possess significant potential for fostering customer loyalty (Warc, 2016).

Previous studies (Saunila, Ukko & Rantala, 2019) suggest that fostering customer engagement enhances customer loyalty, which can subsequently be transformed into profit. A greater number of loyal customers translates to increased profitability, as each customer contributes their lifetime value to the banking sector (Izarul, Syed & Nayan, 2020). As noted by Nur, Wan, Tajuddin, and Nayan (2020), a significant 40% of customers remain loyal to a brand following their satisfaction. Parihar and Dawra (2020) noted that a significant 80% of customers continue to support their preferred brands, even in the face of appealing promotions, services, or products presented by rivals.

In a cutthroat industry as suggested by Ejionueme and Nebo (2021) such as the hotel industry, managers are expected to do anything possible within the ambit of the law to lure customers to their business. Customer engagement is a potent tool researcher's advocate for the creation of loyal customers, repeat purchases, improved sales, market shares and profitability and a sustainable competitive edge in a highly competitive business (Wang & Fesenmeiser, 2004). Igbal (2011) asserts that engaged customers cooperate, collaborate, buy, and advocate for a brand to family members and friends. There is substantial evidence in previous research that a strong relationship with an engaged customer results in higher customer retention, positive referral, and a heightened inclination towards repeat purchases (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner & Gremler, 2002; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal & Evans, 2006).

However, in the Nigerian hotel industry, customer engagement appears to be a new business concept not well - understood by managers and hotel employees. Almost everyone can tell some bad experiences they have had with hotel services in Nigeria. Some managers and employees appear uncaring, unreliable, disrespectful, arrogant, unfriendly, and incompetent (Okeke, 2016). The inability of most hotels to implement this new concept of business has been traced to a lack of knowledge about the concept, lack of financial resources to implement the concept, inexperienced staff to manage customer base, poorly trained staff, poor staff motivations, poor technology and poor management (Olowokudejo, 2009; Adeola & Ezenwafor, 2016). The absence of customer engagement may result in negative impacts such as customer disloyalty, dissatisfaction, high customer turnover, loss of sales, market shares, liquidation and generally poor business performance (Okeke, 2016).

To navigate this challenging scenario, it is essential to identify the primary factors influencing customer engagement practices that can improve and maintain organisational performance, particularly within the hotel sector in Nigeria, where there is a notable lack of research pertaining to this concept in a marketing framework. Notably, while the significance of engaged customers in the tourism and hospitality sector is widely acknowledged, there exists a paucity of studies addressing customer engagement within Nigeria. Examples include investigations into customer engagement as an indicator of loyalty in the Nigerian hospitality sector (Mohammad, Rahman & Normalin, 2019), the influence of customer engagement on performance in the Nigerian telecommunications industry (Agbonasevbaasfe, 2019), the relationship between customer engagement and loyalty, as well as the application of social exchange theory (Mohammad & Ali, 2022), and a framework for evaluating brand loyalty behaviour in Nigeria's hotel industry (Amue, 2017), among others. In a similar vein, the imperative to explore the impact of customer engagement practices on

fostering client loyalty is increasingly pressing in Nigeria, particularly given the uniform nature of services provided by the majority of hotels (Gbenga & Osotimehin, 2015). The fierce rivalry prevalent in the industry complicates the ability of customers (guests) to discern meaningful distinctions among rival offerings (Banki, Mohammed, Ismail, Musa Haruna & Musa, 2016).

Thus, considering the intensity and severity of rivalry present in the hospitality sector, along with the perspectives of numerous scholars who assert that a key strategy for survival lies in adopting the principle of customer loyalty (Kandampully, Zhang & Tingting, 2015; Kim & Kim, 2016). It has become essential for the hotel industry, notably those that operate in South East Nigeria, to embrace customer engagement with both willingness and enthusiasm. This study aims to investigate the mediating influence of customer satisfaction on the connection between customer engagement practices, including social media marketing (specifically Facebook and Instagram) and short message service (SMS), and customer loyalty within the hotel service sector in South East Nigeria.

CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

The notion of engagement has been applied across various domains, leading to a multitude of terms such as student engagement (Fredricks, Phyllis & Alison, 2004), customer engagement (Hollebeek, 2012), brand engagement (Hollebeek, 2011), employee engagement (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001), consumer engagement (Brodie, Ilić, Jurić & Hollebeek, 2013), media engagement (Habibi, Laroche & Richard, 2014), and civic engagement (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003). Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric and Ilic (2011) conceptualised customer engagement as a multifaceted term that is influenced by specific contexts and stakeholders, encompassing various cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions.

Customer engagement is recognised as a profound connection between a company and its clientele, emphasising interaction and active participation from customers. Customer engagement is regarded as an extension of the relationship-marketing domain (Brodie et al., 2013; So, King, Sparks & Wang, 2016; Asperen, Rooij & Dijkmans, 2018; Vivek, Beatty & Morgan, 2012). Customer engagement is characterised as a strategy for creating, cultivating, and enhancing customer relationships (Brodie et al., 2013), potentially resulting in the establishment of robust connections between a firm and its clientele (Habibi, Laroche & Richard, 2014). Engaging customers is regarded as a crucial strategy for establishing a lasting competitive edge (Brodie et al., 2013; Islam, Rahman & Hollebeek, 2019; Van Doorn et al., 2010). Furthermore, the engagement of customers holds the capacity to enhance client fulfilment, foster devotion, and improve overall firm

performance (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek, 2011; Islam & Rahman, 2019; So et al., 2014). Customer engagement refers to the comprehensive process through which individuals motivate and assist one another in participation, enabling each member to achieve their personal goals (Nambisan & Baron, 2007). Van Doorn, Lemon, Mittal, Nass, Pick Pirner, and Verhoef (2010) assert that customer engagement may also be conceptualised as a relationship between the customer and the firm, focussing on the behavioural dimensions of this interaction. Van Doorn et al. (2010) posited that customer engagement encompasses the concept of co-creation, wherein customers may opt to utilise voice—communication behaviours intended to articulate their experiences—or exit, which refers to actions designed to either restrict or enhance their relationship with the brand.

This idea of customer engagement has been examined through various lenses in the existing literature. Mollen and Wilson (2010) see it as “the cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand. Moreover, Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić and Ilic (2011) express customer engagement as an interaction with a brand articulated via their emotional, behavioral, and cognitive interactive experience with the brand. While some scholars have described customer engagement from a one-dimensional perspective (Ángeles Oviedo-García et al., 2014; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Van Doorn et al., 2010), many others have looked at it from multidimensional perspectives including cognitive, emotional, and behavioral” (Brodie et al., 2013; Dwivedi, 2015; Hollebeek, 2011; Islam et al., 2019).

Customer engagement is an emotional relationship between the company and its customers, based on involvement and participation opinions shared by the customers (Vivek, Beatty & Morgan, 2012). Furthermore, customer engagement is defined as the power of the customer’s involvement and connection with the company’s products and activities (Shiri, Sharom & Morgan, 2014). While Sashi (2012) added that the company can achieve a successful customer engagement through building emotional ties in dealing with their customers. Sashi (2012) stated that customer engagement refers to conducting experiences that help companies to create stronger and sustainable long-term relations between the company and its customers. Beckers, Sander, Hans Risselada and Verhoef (2014) classified the customer engagement levels introduced within the scope of literature into three classifications. The first is customer-to-customer connection regarding the company or its brand, the second is involving customer in a co-creation collaboration activity regarding the development required for launching new product, and finally, listening to customer’s feedback which represents their actual needs.

Customers can engage with companies in several ways through media. In those days, customer engagement was a one-way traffic (companies marketing to customers). However, the

advent of internet has redirected the organization of customer engagement from company-to-customer, to customer-to-customer, and customer-to company. Activities which could be considered facets of customer engagement include (e.g. visiting a company website, sharing it with others, creating content about a company or product, engaging in social networks of people with shared interests, writing or calling companies and viewing print). Shiri, Vivek, Sharon, Beatty, Robert and Morgan (2014) see customer engagement as an intensity of an individual’s participation in and connection with an organization’s offering and/ or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiate. O’Brien, Jarvis and Soutar (2015) see customer engagement as the communication activities between the business organizations and their customer.

Customer engagement is also about the effort made by organizations to encourage customers to interact (Mohd-Ramly & Omar, 2017) by providing feedback, suggestion and raise their concerns to the organizations (Hapsari, Clemes & Dean, 2017). Customer engagement is also part of marketing strategy to build close relationship between customers and organizations that later may nurture brand image and brand equity (Sahoo & Pillai, 2017). Ruzanna, Baharin and Nayan (2020) assert that business that focused on customer engagement is actually creating their value from the customer perspective. The Marketing Science Institute (MSI, 2010) view customer engagement as “customers’ behavioral manifestation toward a brand or firm beyond purchase, which results from motivational drivers including: word-of-mouth activity, recommendations, customer-to-customer interactions, blogging, writing reviews, and other similar activities” (MSI, 2010). Such a focus is evident in the literature streams of both academics (Bijmolt, Leeflang, Block, Eisenbeiss, Hardie, Lemmens & Saffert, 2010; van Doorn, Lemom, Mittal, Nass, Pirner & Verhoef, 2010; Verhoef, Reinartz & Krafft, 2010) and practitioners (Shevlin, 2007).

SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING (FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM)

Social media is an environment that provides a set of tools available to both individuals and organizations, enabling information dissemination, sharing, and creating content to facilitate conversation guided toward completion of both strategic and social goals that may eventually lead to consumption (Plume, 2017). Igyuve and Agbele (2017) described social media as specialized websites (such as Facebook, Twitter, Mobofree, Eskimi, MySpace, Badoo, etc.) and applications (such as Whatsapp, Instagram, Blackberry Messenger BBM, Skype, etc.) used for communicating and establishing forms of relationship between/amongst people of similar interest. According to Pinto and Yagnik, (2017)

social media marketing consists of tools, platforms and applications that enable customers connect and communicate with each other. Yazdanparast, Joseph and Muniz (2016) define social media marketing as the process that empowers promotion of websites, products, and services via online social channels. It involves marketing related activities such as blogging, sharing photos and posts online. Today social media becomes fast advancing and most solid medium to connect and stay informed about products and services (Rishi & Sharma, 2017). Social media marketing is a part of internet marketing. A platform can be used by anyone who has an internet connection. Social media marketing can be easily characterized as a term used to portray the act of increasing website traffic or brand awareness, using social media networking sites. Social media marketing mainly focuses on designing a content that is unique and helps in attracting the attention of the users. It should also persuade the viewers to share it with others. This type of marketing is driven by eWoM – electronic word of mouth, which means it results in earned media instead of paid media (Atshaya & Rungta, 2016).

Facebook

Facebook is a social media platform that facilities the users for global interaction and helps people to share their thoughts, experiences and ideas with other people. According to (Brown, 2012) Facebook is a web-based network which brings people from various backgrounds together in a virtual platform. Kahraman (2010) defines Facebook as an online platform that helps to share your ideas, experiences and communicates with each other. Facebook around the world is used as an advertising platform where businesses use it to reach their prospective customers. It allows businesses to target specific customers and promote their product and services to them with help of an effective advertisement. Advertisement on Facebook is a useful strategy to attract customers. It is considered as an important source of business presentation (Rehman et al., 2014). Facebook enables brands to build a direct relation with their customers, while marketers emphasize on generating Facebook customers. Facebook encourages new business set ups where advertisement on Facebook is cheaper compared to advertising on Google and YouTube (Dudharejia, 2017). Businesses can use Facebook live to provide a behind the scene experience to their customers, show them previews of the new products or updates and promote their events online and this helps businesses to get instant feedback from their customers (Dudharejia, 2017). Facebook enables marketers to effectively sell their products in a personalized way to their customers. Marketers can customize their advertisement to target a specific group of people in a cost effective way than marketing via a traditional method.

Instagram

Instagram is one type of social media application, designed especially for visual content (Wally & Koshy, 2014) and smartphones (Ting, Ming, Run & Choo, 2015) and available for free in the application stores. Instagram allows users to take photos and videos, use embedded filters to enhance pictures, and instantly share content with an audience of friends or a wider audience of all Instagram users. When posting a photo, users can also choose to share it on Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter. While users can view photos on a desktop PC, Instagram is designed mostly for mobile use since the only way to create content is through the app on a mobile device (Wallis, 2014). It offers users the opportunity to discover, share, tag, use hashtags, comments and love visual content in the form of images, videos, and gifs. It is designed especially for visual content to capture photos, videos with creative filters and share it with their friends or make it public for Instagram users (Wally et al., 2014). Instagram is distinctive compared to Facebook. It requires users to post a picture or video when posting content. Secondly, Instagram provides users with unique filters to enrich their photos. It is common for users to keep their Instagram profiles up to date and enables users to “follow”, “like”, “comment” and “share” on random people’s photos. These unique features of Instagram enable users’ usage and experiences to be different compared to other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Short Message Services (SMS)

Text messaging is defined as the exchange of brief messages through technology use (Tilley, 2009). Texting is also known as short messaging services (SMS) (PEW Internet and American Life Project, 2012). That encompasses texting, short message service (SMS), and use of the social networking service Twitter over a cellular telephone network, and messages that sent to both individuals and groups. The term SMS is used interchangeably with texting, sending text messages, and text messaging (Fendelman, 2012). Text messaging often makes use of textual shortcuts because users are restricted to 160 characters (hence the name “short messaging system”). Some cell phones have full keyboards for faster texting, while others require multiple taps of a number key to achieve a particular letter (Fendelman, 2012). There are many benefits to texting as a means of communication between friends and family. First, texting has become a way to maintain friendships among adolescents and contributes to their sense of well-being. Second, texting allows users ample time to read, write, and edit messages while affording more informal, relaxed, and private forms of communication (Durkin et al., 2010; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). Third, texting allows

adolescents to stay connected with their parents or guardians at all times. Therefore, texting and instant messaging can be a way for parents to keep track of their adolescents (Osit, 2008; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008).

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is identified as one of the most examined constructs in marketing literature (Deyalage & Kulathunga, 2019) that play a major role in competitive environment because of its ability to retain the existing customer and to introduce new customer (Tandon, Kiran & Sah, 2017; To, Du Kim, Bui & Pham., 2020; Trans, 2020). Customer satisfaction is defined as a feeling that appears on the results of a purchase evaluation which is a comparison between actual perception and expectation (Vasic, Kilibarda & Kaurin, 2019). This can be satisfaction or dissatisfaction. In experience context, customer satisfaction has been considered as a cumulative experience of a customer based on his/her all previous experience with a good or service arisen from post assessment of consumption experience (Pandey, Tripathi, Jain & Roy, 2020). In general, customer satisfaction is a feeling of pleasure or disappointment someone who appears after comparing the performance of the product results obtained with the expected performance. If performance is below expectations, then the customer becomes dissatisfied. If performance meets expectations, then the customer becomes very satisfied or happy (Nurmalina, 2019). Customer satisfaction with a product or service is actually something that is difficult to obtain if the service company or industry does not really understand what customers expect. For products or services with the same quality, can provide different levels of satisfaction for different customers. Therefore, a company must always pay attention to the quality of products and services provided to customers (Subashini & Gopalsamy, 2016).

Additionally, customer satisfaction can be defined as the customer feeling based on the overall service delivered by a service provider compared to the customer expectations (Mohd-Any, Mutum, Ghazali & Mohamed-Zulkifli, 2019). It means that the service delivered must be meeting the customer expectations. Customer will feel happy if the overall service delivered meet or surpass the customer expectations. Service delivery below the expectations will result to frustration and dissatisfaction. In the view of Hamzah, and Shamsudin (2020) satisfaction is the measurement used by customer to evaluate their overall customer experiences. The expectations however could be perceived by customer and it is very subjective from one group of customers to another. There is market segment that put high expectations but there are also some who put lower based on their actual needs, wants and demand (Eid, Al Zaabi, Alzahmi & Elsantil, 2019). The challenge to the service provider is to understand what actually that customer's needs and their expectations

from the services delivered (Sallaudin Hassan & Shamsudin, 2019).

Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty has been widely studied by many researchers but there is no common consensus about the conceptualization of customer loyalty. Customer loyalty is a behavioral intention of buyers to maintain relationships with service providers (Sindwani & Goel, 2015). The customer's willingness to use the company's products and services repeatedly over a long period and recommend the company's products and services to the surrounding environment. Customer loyalty is often associated with the customer's willingness to repeatedly buy goods or services that are accompanied by psychological ties and hold fast to the good of the company that supplies the goods and services (Ismail & Yunan, 2015). Customer loyalty is an important element of the company. Customers influence the success of the company's profitability with the highest loyalty. Loyal customers are more attractive to companies because they tend to be fewer prices sensitive and tend to repurchase company products (Sandada & Matibiri, 2016). Ibok (2015) assert that customer loyalty is an unrelenting commitment to repurchase a brand continuously regardless of available substitute of the brand.

Customer loyalty implies the intrinsic decision made by customers to consistently purchase a particular product from their preferred brands regardless of the availability of substitute (Ogwo & Igwe, 2012). Yusuf (2014) opined that one of the determinants of sustainability of a business entity is the long run repurchase intentions of its customers, which hinges on the level of brand loyalty of the customers. Customer loyalty leads to increase in the profitability through recommendation of the product to their kin and kindred (Abiodun, 2014). Loyalty, from an attitudinal standpoint, implies a specific desire to continue a relationship with suppliers and providers (Reza & Rehman, 2012). This means that a customer is loyal to a brand or firm if they have a positive and preferential attitude towards it. Whereas behavioral loyalty is when a customer repeatedly buys from the same company, (Reza & Rehman, 2012) thus the customer is faithful to the company. Singh and Khan, (2012) defined customer loyalty as the willingness of any given customer to purchase the company's goods or services over competitive ones available in the marketplace. Customer loyalty is the customer attitude and behavior to prefer one brand over all competitor ones, whether? Due to satisfaction with the product or services (Magatef & Tomalieh, 2015). Loyalty in terms of behavior can be described as the present behavior towards the product of interest (Wolter, Bock, Smith & Cronin, 2017). Pribanus (2016) see customer loyalty as a deeply held commitment to rebuy or patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing

repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing despite situational influences and marketing efforts were having the potential to cause switching behavior.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed survey research design. The study was carried out in hotels in South East, Nigeria, particularly in the metropolises of the state capitals of the five states that comprise South East. The choice of the metropolises of the state capitals of the five states stemmed from the fact that they have booming hotel industry. The choice of these selected hotels from the metropolises within the five states in South East, Nigeria stemmed from the fact that they are among the best and popular hotels to visit and for easy access to information. The States include Anambra State, Abia State, Enugu State, Ebonyi State, and Imo State. The selected hotels include; Hotel Mote Carlo, and NUE-Crest Hotels and Suites in Enugu metropolis, BON Hotels and Best Western Meloch Hotel, Awka metropolis, Hotel Decency Grand Resort and Benidoa Hotel, Aba metropolis, Orison Hotel lounge & Restaurants Owerri and Golden Tulip Grand Palazzo Hotel & Suites, Owerri metropolis, and Clevero Hotel Ltd, Abakaliki and New Haven Hotels Ltd. The target population for this research was limited to customers or guests who had used the services of these selected hotels in the selected metropolises at least once. Customers who are above the age of 18 years were regarded as adults and can offer the data sought in the study. The population of the study is estimated at 45,191 customers or guests. A sample of 396 was determined from the population using Yamane's formula. Questionnaire was used as the instrument for data collection in this study. The questionnaire was divided into two broad sections A and B. Section A contains bio-data of the respondents while section B contains data relating to customer engagement practices such as, social media marketing (such as Facebook and Instagram), e-mail marketing, short message services (SMS), and the dependent variable is customer loyalty and was proxied by, customer retention, customer repurchase intention, word of mouth, and

customer positive reviews. The questions were constructed using 5-point Likert scale ranging from ranging from 1 strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree. The scale adopted for this study was based on the previous works of Al-Sharif (2017); Mesfin, (2021); Lumumba and Aila (2022); Tesfaye (2019), and Akunja, (2020). Proper modifications were made to suit the current research content and scope. The questionnaire consists of two parts; first part consists of pre-coded questionnaire regarding the demographic information like age, gender, education, marital status, and occupation of respondents. The second part consists of customer engagement scale which was followed by customer loyalty, and customer satisfaction scale respectively. Customer engagements were measured with the scale operationalized by Al-Sharif (2017) Mesfin, (2021), Lumumba and Aila (2022), Tesfaye (2019). Customer engagement scale contains 9 (nine statements containing two dimensions namely; social media marketing (5) statements and short message services (SMS) (4) statements. Customer Loyalty and customer satisfaction scales were taken from the work of Akunja, (2020) and it contain (4) and (5) statements respectively. All the constructs were measured using 5 five Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree).

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The data collected was presented using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics include the use of tables. Inferential statistics used Structural Equation Model. As suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), a two-stage Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) procedure was applied to test the hypothesized model structure. In the first step, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the reliability and validity of the measurement model and second step, full structural model was estimated to assess overall model fit and the hypothesized relationships with the help of standardized regression coefficients (b) and p-values.

Table 1: Validity and Reliability Test Result

Latent Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Social Media Marketing	0.789	0.774	0.785	0.684
Short Message Service	0.772	0.921	0.884	0.689
Customer Satisfaction	0.701	0.774	0.865	0.544
Customer Loyalty	0.821	0.881	0.827	0.621

Source: Researcher Computation, 2023.

DATA SCREENING AND ANALYSIS

Data were examined using the Smart PLS 4.0 program and structural equation modeling (SEM). Before doing the

analysis, a number of tests, including the multicollinearity test, reliability test, and validity test were applied. To conduct the tests, Smart PLS 4.0 was used.

Multicollinearity

We looked at the variance inflation factor (VIF) for each variable in the CFA and regression findings to check for multicollinearity of customer engagement practices on customer loyalty mediated by customer satisfaction; in hospitality industry in South east, Nigeria. The results show no multicollinearity issue in the current study because all the cut off values are well below 10 (Hair Black, Babin & Anderson, 2010). Thus, the initial screening tests confirm that there are no potential issues with data that may pose threat to the validity and reliability of the model.

Results on Reliability and Validity of Measures

Assessing factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), Cronbach's alpha (α), and average variance extracted (AVE).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

The component structure was established, items with standardized factor loading below the suggested threshold were removed, and the measurement constructs' reliability and validity were evaluated using CFA in Smart PLS 4.0. First, the study assessed the measuring model to check the constructs' validity and reliability. The study established convergent and discriminant validity, which supported the measurement model's validity. Average variance extracted (AVE) was used to evaluate convergent validity. The study backs up the recommendation made by Hair et al. (2010) for AVE values above 0.05. If the AVE is more than 0.05, the variance of the relevant concept is greater than the variance of the error term. Similar to how the AVE values for the constructs are higher than the values of the squared correlation of the constructs, the discriminant validity of the constructs is also supported (Hair et al., 2010). All items and constructions have Cronbach alpha values more than 0.7, as recommended by (Peterson, 1994). Thus, satisfying the minimum criteria for fitness of measures giving credibility to the results of this study.

Table 2: Validity and Reliability Test

Latent Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (rho_a)	Composite Reliability (rho_c)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Customer Loyalty	0.721	0.736	0.763	0.459
Customer Satisfaction	0.782	0.783	0.852	0.536
Social Media Marketing	0.708	0.734	0.812	0.521
Short Messages Service	0.859	0.869	0.904	0.702

Source: Result from Smart PLS 4.0.

Discriminant Validity

For the purpose of this study, Fornell Lacker was used to assess discriminant validity.

Table 3: Fornell Lacker

	CL	CS	SMM	SMS
CL	0.678			
CS	0.655	0.732		
HIS	0.529	0.521		
SMM	0.34	0.336	0.721	
SMS	0.438	0.491	0.162	0.838

CL = Customer Loyalty, CS = Customer Service, SMM = Social Media Marketing, CM = Short Message Services.

Result of confirmatory factor analysis shown in Table 3 supports the empirical evidence of the uniqueness of most of the variables. It is pertinent to state that the above table

does not indicate discriminant validity problems according to HTMT0.9 criterion. This implies that the HTMT criterion did not detects collinearity problem among latent construct. Table 3 shows the relationships among the study variable as it regards each study research questions, obviously the result suggests a strong and positive relationship for all the research questions.

Structural Models

Structural models were used to examine a variety of hypotheses. Bootstrapping is advised to produce accurate and trustworthy results because this research's theoretical framework contains multiple independent variables. This study tested the hypotheses with bootstrapping 5000 at 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for a two-tailed significance p-value. Standard errors are estimated by testing for bootstrapping using resampling from the observed sample. According to Cameron and Trivedi (2010), the main assumption is that a subsample obtained

through bootstrapping from the observed sample (i.e., the original sample of the study) has the same relationship to the observed sample as the observed sample has with the entire population.

In Smart-PLS, to observe the effects of independent variables on the dependent variable, normally two steps followed are measurement model and structural model. Some of the criteria, such as construct validity and reliability already discussed above. In addition to that in the structural modelling equation R square also shown for the predictive ability of independent variables on the dependent variables.

The value of R-Squared for the models based on the objective are (0.306, 0.191) indicates that 3% variation in customer loyalty, is caused by the relationship between social media marketing given customer satisfaction as the mediating variable, and 19.1% variation in customer loyalty is caused by the relationship between short messages services given customer satisfaction as the mediating variable. The model fit was tested for the two models using SRMR value, which is 0.018 and 0.003 respectively. This means that the model is a good fit.

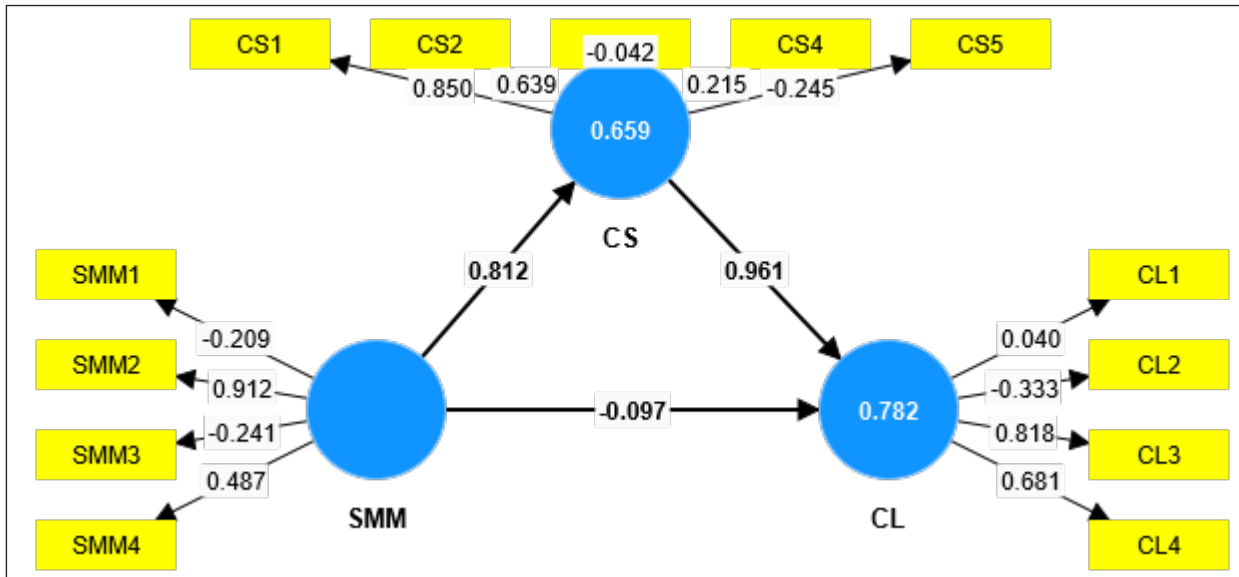


Fig. 1: The Mediating Role of Customer Satisfaction on the Relationship Existing between Social Media Marketing and Customer Loyalty

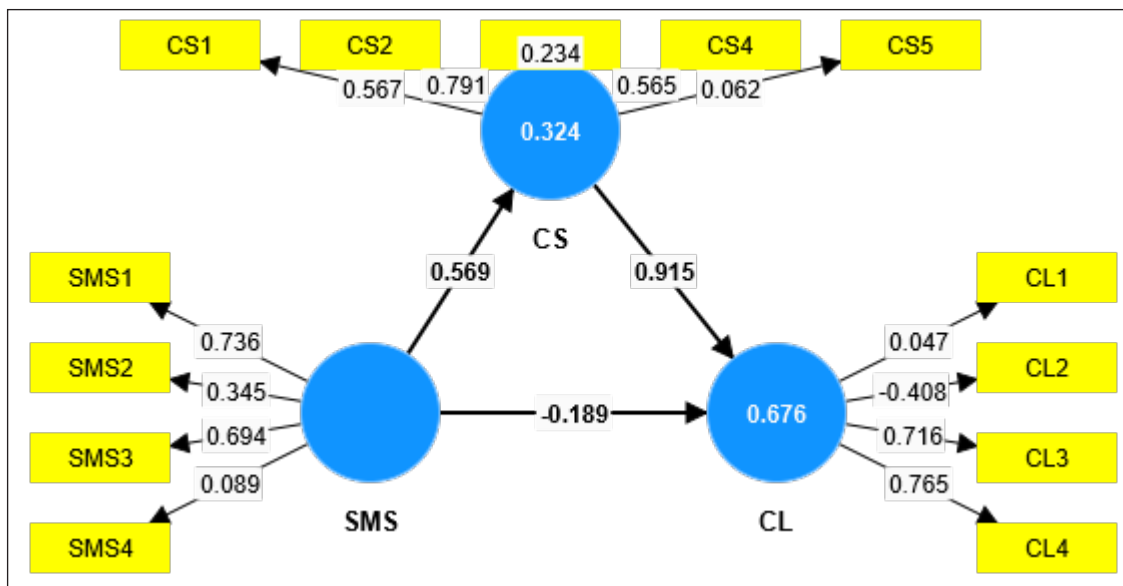


Fig. 2: The Mediating Role of Customer Satisfaction on the Relationship Existing between Short Message Services (SMS) marketing and Customer Loyalty

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis One

H_{01} : Customer satisfaction has no significant mediating role on the relationship existing between social media marketing

(Facebook and Instagram) and customer loyalty in the hospitality industry in South East, Nigeria.

H_1 : Customer satisfaction has a significant mediating role on the relationship existing between social media marketing (Facebook and Instagram) and customer loyalty in the hospitality industry in South East, Nigeria.

Table 4: The Specific Indirect Mediating Role of Customer Satisfaction on the Relationship Existing Between Social Media Marketing and Customer Loyalty in the Hospitality Industry

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values
SMM -> CS -> CL	0.78	0.776	0.078	10.014	0.000

The result as shown in Table 4 shows that the mediating role of customer satisfaction on the relationship existing between social media marketing and customer loyalty in the hospitality industry in South-east Nigeria is significant given that $\beta_1 = 0.78$; $p = 0.000$.

services (SMS) and customer loyalty in the hospitality industry in South East, Nigeria.

H_4 : Customer satisfaction has a significant mediating role on the relationship existing between short messages services (SMS) and customer loyalty in the hospitality industry in South East, Nigeria.

Hypothesis Two

H_{04} : Customer satisfaction has no significant mediating role on the relationship existing between short messages

Table 5: The Specific Indirect Mediating Role of Customer Satisfaction on the Relationship Existing Between Short Messages Services and Customer Loyalty in the Hospitality Industry

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values
SMS -> CS -> CL	0.521	0.539	0.119	4.382	0.000

The result as shown in Table 5 shows that the mediating role of customer satisfaction on the relationship existing between short message services and customer loyalty in the hospitality industry in South-east Nigeria is significant given that $\beta_1 = 0.521$; $p = 0.000$.

by networking, communication, and community building. In this sense, social media can serve as a cost-effective way of increasing brand loyalty. The findings of this study proved that the mediating role of customer satisfaction is statistically significant at 5% level of significance to the relationship between social media marketing and customer loyalty in hospitality industry in southeast Nigeria, given that $\beta_1 = 0.78$; $p = 0.000$. This result comes in line with plenty of previous research. Meisyitah and Dwita (2021) on the influence of social media usage on loyalty with customer satisfaction and brand trust as mediation variables in Indonesia found that, (1) Social media usage has a positive and significant effect on customer satisfaction. (2) Social media usage has a positive and significant influence on brand trust. (3) Customer satisfaction on brand trust influence has a positive and significant influence. (4) Brand trust has a positive and significant relationship with customer loyalty. (5) Social media usage does not have a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty. (6) Social media usage has a positive and significant relationship to customer loyalty with customer satisfaction as mediation. (7) Social media

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Mediating Role of Customer Satisfaction on the Relationship Existing between Social Media Marketing (Facebook and Instagram) and Customer Loyalty in Selected Hotels

Social media marketing has been used to facilitate communications and interactions between customers and brands and is considered as the effective driver to influence the customers' buying behaviours and loyalty. Social media can, therefore, be said to help companies create brand loyalty

usage has a positive and significant relationship to customer loyalty with brand trust as mediation. It is also worth seeing that in his research their research by Faiz and Mohammad (2021) on the impact of social media on customers' loyalty toward the five stars hotels located in Jordan it also aimed at exploring the impact of satisfaction as a mediating variable on the relationship between social media and customers' loyalty from the perspectives of customers and marketing managers. The major findings of the study were as follows- social media has a statistically significant effect on customer's loyalty, and on satisfaction. Satisfaction as mediating variable has a statistically significant effect on the relationship between social media and customer's loyalty. Furthermore; marketing managers were found to be having positive beliefs that social media has an effect on customers' loyalty. But communication and motivation were found to be having no significant effect on customer's loyalty. It is noted that social media marketing is so prominent today because it is cost – effective, highly retentive as customers have access to them for a longer period than traditional marketing channels (Arshaya & Rungta, 2016).

Mediating Role of Customer Satisfaction on the Relationship Existing between Short Message Services and Customer Loyalty in Selected Hotels

Hypothesis two suggests that the mediating role of customer satisfaction is statistically significant at 5% level of significance to the relationship existing between short messages services and customer loyalty in selected hotels. The hypothesis is accepted as a result of the data analysis. Based on the structural equation-modeling test, the relationship between short messages services and customer loyalty is mediated by customer satisfaction. In the structural equation modeling, the results show that the mediating role of customer satisfaction is statistically significant at 5% level of significance on the relationship between short messages services and customer loyalty in selected hotels in Southeast, Nigeria, given that $\beta_1 = 0.521$; $p = 0.000$. The present result aligns with previous finding by Nurul, Norshima and Muhammed (2022) who found that all the SERVQUAL dimensions were significantly influenced by customer satisfaction, except reliability, security and usability. Meanwhile, analysis results for the mediating effects demonstrate that customer satisfaction mediates the relationship of SERVQUAL dimensions (assurance, personalization, and responsiveness and information quality) and customer loyalty intention. Even though the SERVQUAL dimensions tested in this study were significant, the effect on size is rather small. Nevertheless, all these factors are important to be considered for the improvement of MCA, especially everyone is moving forward to a digital

business environment and e-service is regarded to play an important role. Ganiyu (2016) in the Nigerian airline industry. Specifically reveal that perceived service quality is positively related to both passengers' satisfaction and loyalty. The relationship between passenger satisfaction and loyalty towards the airlines was also found to be positive. The mediating effect of customer satisfaction between perceived service quality and customer loyalty is also found to be positive and partially supported. It is also worth seeing that in their research by Anabilo, Ameyibor, Allan and Alomenu (2021) on the relationship between service quality (SQ) and CL, and the mediation role of CS and customer delight (CD) between them found that SQ had a significant positive effect on both CS and CD. Furthermore, both CS and CD effectively mediate the relationship between SQ and CL. However, CD had a more significant effect on CL compared to CS.

CONCLUSION

The aim of conducting this study was to examine the mediating role of customer satisfaction on the relationship existing between customer engagement practices and customer loyalty in selected hotels in South east, Nigeria. The findings revealed that results show that at 5% level of significance, customer satisfaction has a statistically significant mediating role on the relationship existing between social media marketing (Facebook and Instagram) and customer loyalty in selected hotels in Southeast, Nigeria. The results show that the mediating role of customer satisfaction is statistically significant at 5% level of significance on the relationship between short messages services and customer loyalty in selected hotels in Southeast, Nigeria. In the light of the study's results, the researchers of the present study advise hotel marketing managers to have up-to-date information about the new advancements and developments related to social network websites. Also, advice hotel managers to make use of the services provided through those websites, such as: publishing pictures, videos, and live videos. That is because such use shall directly affect customers' attitudes, and thoughts. In addition, Hotel marketing managers should ensure that short messages services alerts are persistently sent to relevant customers to enhance their loyalty.

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