

An Assessment of Consumer Relationship Management Problems and Barriers to Customer Engagement Behaviour in the Hospitality Industry in Post Covid-19 Southeastern Nigeria: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract: The hospitality industry in Southeast Nigeria has faced significant challenges in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in terms of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and customer engagement. This paper explores the problems and barriers to effective CRM and customer engagement behaviour in this region's hospitality sector. While CRM and customer engagement are important tools in managing customers, some problems and barriers inhibit the effective utilisation of the tools. Drawing on current literature, industry reports, and empirical data, the study identifies key issues such as technological limitations, staff training deficits, cultural factors, and the evolving expectations of post-pandemic consumers. Recommendations are provided to address these challenges, emphasizing the need for strategic investment in technology, enhanced staff training programmes, and culturally sensitive engagement strategies.

Key-words: Hospitality industry; COVID-19; Customer Relationship Management (CRM); Customer engagement; Technological limitations; Staff training deficits; Cultural factors.

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1. Introduction

The hospitality industry in South Eastern Nigeria, encompassing hotels, restaurants, and leisure services, significantly contributes to the region's economy through job creation and revenue generation. However, the industry has been profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought about extensive travel restrictions, lockdowns, and a dramatic reduction in tourism and hospitality activities (UNWTO, 2021). These disruptions necessitated a reassessment and restructuring of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) strategies to address the evolving consumer behaviours and expectations in the post-pandemic landscape. CRM in the hospitality industry involves the strategic management of interactions with current and potential customers, utilizing data-driven insights to enhance service delivery, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. Effective CRM systems enable businesses to personalize customer experiences, manage customer data efficiently, and maintain long-term relationships (Chen & Popovich, 2003). The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered consumer behaviour, especially in the hospitality sector.

There has been a marked shift towards digital engagement, with consumers increasingly expecting contactless services, online reservations, and digital communication (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Additionally, concerns about health and safety have become paramount, with customers

prioritizing hygiene and sanitation practices when choosing hospitality services (Gursoy et al., 2020). These changes in consumer preferences require hospitality businesses to adapt their CRM strategies to meet new demands. According to the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) (2020) the hospitality sector which accounted for 6.06% of Nigeria's GDP in 2018 nosedived to 5.15% and 4.3% of GDP in 2019 and 2020 respectively, a situation attributed rightly to the COVID-19 pandemic. Available literature (Mintz, 2021) shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has catastrophic consequences on various sectors with consumption strategies shifting from hedonic to utilitarian. Mintz (2021) avers that as many customers have switched from hedonic to utilitarian consumption, marketers require post-COVID-19 strategies to win back consumers to hedonic consumption, especially for hospitality services the consumption of which is mainly hedonic.

Despite the critical importance of CRM, hospitality businesses in Southeast Nigeria face several challenges in its implementation. Technological limitations are a significant barrier, as many establishments lack advanced CRM systems and the infrastructure needed to support them. This technological gap hampers the ability to gather and analyse customer data effectively, thereby limiting personalized service delivery (Conoscenti et al., 2016). Moreover, staff training deficits pose another substantial challenge. Effective CRM relies not only on technology but also on skilled personnel who can interact with customers proficiently and use CRM tools efficiently. However, many employees in the region's hospitality sector lack adequate training in areas like social media/interactive web 2.0 or intelligent web 4.0, leading to suboptimal customer service and engagement (Harrigan et al., 2017).

Cultural factors also play a crucial role in CRM and customer engagement in South Eastern Nigeria. Cultural norms and values influence how customers interact with hospitality services and their expectations of service quality. Understanding and incorporating these cultural nuances into CRM strategies is vital for creating meaningful and satisfying customer experiences (Leung et al., 2013). Failure to align CRM practices with local cultural expectations can result in disengagement and negative customer experiences.

The post-pandemic era has ushered in new consumer expectations that hospitality businesses must address to remain competitive. There is an increasing demand for transparency regarding health and safety measures, with customers seeking assurance that establishments are adhering to high standards of hygiene (Gursoy et al., 2020). Additionally, the preference for digital and contactless interactions has necessitated the adoption of technology-driven solutions in customer service and engagement.

This study aims to review extant literature provide an assessment of the CRM problems and barriers to customer engagement behaviour in the hospitality industry in South Eastern Nigeria post-COVID-19. By examining the technological, training, cultural, and behavioural challenges faced by the sector, the study offers actionable recommendations for enhancing CRM practices and improving customer engagement. The findings of this study will be valuable for hospitality managers, policymakers, and stakeholders looking to navigate the post-pandemic landscape effectively. The paper is organised as follows: introduction; impact of covid-19 on the hospitality industry; customer relationship management (CRM) in the hospitality industry; challenges of CRM in the hospitality; barriers to customer engagement in the hospitality industry; overcoming

barriers to customer engagement; the importance of web development in hospitality and; conclusion and recommendations.

2. Impact of COVID-19 on the Hospitality Industry

Global Impact: The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound and unprecedented impact on the global hospitality industry. Travel restrictions, lockdown measures, and social distancing protocols led to a dramatic decline in tourism and travel activities, which are the lifeblood of the hospitality sector. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), international tourist arrivals fell by 74% in 2020 compared to the previous year, resulting in a loss of over \$1 trillion in export revenues from tourism (UNWTO, 2021). This downturn forced many hotels, restaurants, and other hospitality businesses to close temporarily or permanently. The pandemic accelerated several trends within the industry. There was a significant shift towards digital and contactless services as businesses sought to reassure customers about safety and hygiene. The adoption of technology became crucial, with many establishments implementing online check-ins, digital menus, and enhanced sanitation protocols to meet new consumer expectations (McKinsey & Company, 2021). Additionally, the industry saw a shift in consumer preferences towards domestic and local travel, as international travel restrictions remained stringent (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2021).

Economic and Employment Impact: Economically, the hospitality industry was one of the hardest-hit sectors. The loss of revenue led to widespread job cuts and furloughs. The ripple effect extended to related industries, including airlines, travel agencies, and food suppliers, exacerbating the economic downturn globally. The industry's recovery has been uneven, with regions and sectors recovering at different rates. Factors influencing recovery include the pace of vaccination rollouts, government support measures, and the extent to which businesses could adapt to new operating environments. For instance, luxury and high-end hotels with the resources to implement stringent safety measures and leverage technology have generally fared better than smaller, budget establishments (Deloitte, 2021).

Impact on Customer Behaviour: Consumer behaviour in the hospitality sector has shifted significantly due to the pandemic. There is now a heightened awareness of health and safety, with guests prioritizing hygiene and sanitation more than ever before. Contactless technologies, such as mobile check-ins and digital room keys, have become standard in many hotels; as there is an increased demand for flexible booking policies, as consumers remain wary of potential travel disruptions (Gursoy et al., 2021). Mintz (2021) avers that as many customers have switched from a hedonic to utilitarian consumption

Impact on the Hospitality Industry: The hospitality industry in South Eastern Nigeria has not been immune to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The region, known for its vibrant culture and tourist attractions, experienced a significant decline in tourist arrivals and hospitality activities. Findings from Oruonye and Ahmed (2020) study reveal that the outbreak and spread of covid-19 disease led to rapid shutdowns which greatly affected the tourism industry. They further report that industries in the tourism sector such as airlines, hotels, entertainment, and hospitality industries are facing declining demand and patronage with travel crashes and

cancellations expected to continue. The impact mirrored global trends, with substantial revenue losses and business closures.

Economic and Employment Impact: The economic impact in South Eastern Nigeria was severe, with many hospitality businesses facing financial difficulties. The reduction in tourism and travel led to decreased occupancy rates in hotels, a decline in restaurant patronage, and a drop in revenue for ancillary services such as tour operations and event management. The hospitality sector, a significant employer in the region, saw widespread job losses, affecting thousands of workers and their families. Oruonye and Ahmed (2020) study show that COVID-19 worsened the unemployment situation in the country and resulted in a loss of substantial revenue to the government with increases in the incidence of poverty among others.

3. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) in the Hospitality Industry

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) in the hospitality industry is a strategic approach to managing interactions with current and potential customers. It involves the use of technology to organize, automate, and synchronize sales, marketing, customer service, and technical support. Effective CRM strategies in hospitality aim to enhance guest satisfaction, loyalty, and ultimately, profitability by understanding and anticipating customer needs.

The Role of CRM in the Hospitality Industry: CRM systems collect and analyse data from various customer touchpoints, including reservations, check-ins, service requests, feedback, and social media interactions. This data-driven approach enables hospitality businesses to personalize guest experiences, tailor marketing efforts, and provide consistent and efficient service (Sigala, 2018). The following CRM tools are important in the hospitality sector:

1. **Personalization:** Personalization is a key benefit of CRM. By understanding individual preferences and behaviours, hotels and other hospitality businesses can offer tailored services, such as customized room settings, personalized welcome messages, and targeted promotions. Scupola and Nicolajsen (2013) found that personalization and prompt responses to customer inquiries are crucial factors in successful digital engagement. This level of personalization can significantly enhance the guest experience, fostering loyalty and encouraging repeat visits.

2. **Improved Service Delivery:** CRM systems streamline service delivery by automating routine tasks and providing staff with comprehensive customer profiles. This ensures that staff can respond promptly to guest needs and preferences, enhancing overall service quality. For example, a CRM system can alert staff to special occasions, such as birthdays or anniversaries, allowing them to provide personalized surprises and delights.

3. **Enhanced Marketing Efforts:** CRM enables more effective and targeted marketing campaigns. By analysing customer data, businesses can segment their audience and design marketing initiatives that resonate with specific groups. This targeted approach increases the effectiveness of marketing efforts and improves return on investment. In a study on the impact of CRM and organizational culture on mass customization capability and firm performance, Ullah and Narain (2020) found that the extent of effort employed by the firms to implement CRM and the development of a learning-oriented organizational culture positively affects firm performance.

4. **Building Long-Term Relationships:** CRM is instrumental in building long-term relationships with customers. By maintaining detailed records of customer interactions and preferences, businesses can engage in meaningful follow-ups, such as post-stay surveys and personalized offers.

This continuous engagement helps to build trust and loyalty, which are crucial for sustained business success.

4. Challenges of CRM in Hospitality

Despite its benefits, the implementation of CRM in the hospitality industry is fraught with challenges. These challenges can be broadly categorized into technological, organizational, and cultural.

Technological Challenges:

1. Integration Issues: One of the primary technological challenges is the integration of CRM systems with existing property management systems (PMS) and other operational software. Incompatibility between systems can lead to data silos, where information is not shared effectively across different departments, hindering a unified view of the customer. The small-scale nature of the hospitality industry is a big challenge. Nigeria Economic Summit Group (NESG) (2021) outlined the challenges affecting the Nigeria tourism and hospitality industries including the absence of comprehensive databases of operators nor clear, identifiable sector value chains to properly reposition the industries as viable business sectors of the economy.

2. Data Management: Effective CRM relies on the collection and analysis of vast amounts of data. Managing this data, ensuring its accuracy, and protecting it from breaches are significant challenges. Moreover, compliance with data privacy regulations, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), adds a layer of complexity.

3. Technological Adaptation: The rapid pace of technological advancement means that CRM systems must be regularly updated to incorporate new features and capabilities. This requires ongoing investment and adaptation, which can be a financial strain, particularly for smaller hospitality businesses. The adaptation of these technologies has been uneven due to varying levels of access to capital and technological infrastructure (Chaffey, 2015).

Organizational Challenges:

1. Staff Training and Adoption: Successful CRM implementation requires staff at all levels to be trained in using CRM tools and understanding their benefits. Resistance to change and a lack of commitment from staff can undermine CRM efforts. Comprehensive training programmes and a clear communication strategy are essential to overcome these barriers.

2. Resource Allocation and Optimisation: Implementing and maintaining a CRM system requires significant resources, including time, money, and personnel. Smaller businesses may struggle to allocate these resources, particularly in the wake of financial losses due to the pandemic. Training existing staff on digital skills and using cost-effective marketing tools can help businesses maximize their resources. Leveraging free or low-cost social media management tools can streamline content creation and scheduling.

3. Alignment with Business Strategy: For CRM to be effective, it must be integrated into the overall business strategy. This requires a clear vision and commitment from top management to ensure that CRM initiatives align with broader business goals and objectives.

Cultural Challenges:

1. Guest Privacy Concerns: Balancing personalization with privacy is a critical challenge. Guests are increasingly concerned about how their data is collected, stored, and used. Transparency and

compliance with data protection regulations are essential to building trust and ensuring that guests feel comfortable sharing their information. Torricoa and Frank (2017) show that the relative importance of perceived usage benefits is enhanced by the desire for personalization, compared with physical performance, in customer evaluations of products and services.

2. Cultural Sensitivity: In regions like South Eastern Nigeria, cultural factors significantly influence guest expectations and interactions. Understanding and respecting these cultural nuances is crucial for providing personalized and culturally appropriate service. This requires ongoing education and awareness among staff. In a study on the influence of culture on customer engagement and recommendation intentions, Wolfgang (2020) report that uncertainty avoidance exerts a context-dependent influence on negative sentiment.

5. Barriers to Customer Engagement in the Hospitality Industry

Customer engagement is critical for fostering loyalty and driving business growth in the hospitality industry. However, several barriers can impede effective customer engagement. These barriers can be technological, organizational, cultural, and economic.

1. Technological Barriers:

i. Limited Access to Advanced Technologies: Financial constraints and limited access to capital can hinder the adoption of advanced CRM technologies. Many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the hospitality sector may lack the resources to invest in sophisticated CRM systems, resulting in a reliance on outdated or manual processes. **ii. Internet Connectivity Issues:** Reliable internet connectivity is essential for the effective implementation of digital CRM solutions. However, in many parts of South Eastern Nigeria, internet infrastructure is still underdeveloped, leading to connectivity issues that can disrupt online engagement and data management. Overall, the NESG (2021) states that *the Nigerian tourism and hospitality sectors have not fully adopted mainstream best practices in technological innovations and digital transformation initiatives that are making these sectors smarter at the global level* (p.2).

Economic Barriers:

1. Economic Instability: Economic instability and fluctuations in disposable income impact consumer spending on travel and hospitality services. During economic downturns, customers reduce their travel frequency or opt for budget-friendly options, making it challenging for hospitality businesses to maintain consistent engagement. McKinsey (2020) reports that sectors were affected to different degrees during COVID-19 and pointed out that some sectors, like aviation, tourism, and hospitality, lost demand.

2. Cost of Engagement Initiatives: Implementing effective customer engagement initiatives often involves significant costs, including investment in technology, marketing, and staff training. For many SMEs in South Eastern Nigeria, these costs can be prohibitive, limiting their ability to engage customers effectively.

Overall, other issues that affect the hospitality industry in Nigeria and Southeast, in particular, are **i. Lack of Skilled Workforce:** The tourism and hospitality sector in Nigeria often faces a shortage of skilled professionals. Olabinjo et al. (2020) identified key challenges affecting the hotel industry including rising labour costs, high levels of labour turnover, and skill labour shortages among others. Innerhofer et al. (2022) study on antecedents of labour shortage in the rural hospitality industry showed that a relationship between the shortage of professional workers and a variety of

factors was found, including professional, digital, social, and green skills, industry-intrinsic characteristics and symbolic image attributes of the industry. Inadequate training and development programs can result in an ill-equipped workforce to deliver excellent customer service and build lasting relationships with guests. **ii Competition:** The tourism and hospitality industry in Nigeria is becoming increasingly competitive, with both domestic and international players vying for market share. Maintaining customer loyalty and satisfaction in such a competitive landscape requires continuous innovation and differentiation in service offerings. **iii. Trust Issues:** Trust is a fundamental component of successful customer relationships. However, the pandemic has eroded trust in the hospitality sector due to concerns about safety and hygiene. Consumers may hesitate to engage with hotels, restaurants, and other establishments without assurance of stringent health protocols. Alboqami (2020) reported that perceived website trust has a strong influence on guests' intention to book hotels online. Restoring trust requires transparent communication and visible adherence to safety guidelines.

6. Overcoming Barriers to Customer Engagement

To overcome the barriers to customer engagement in the hospitality industry, particularly in the context of South Eastern Nigeria, businesses can adopt several strategies:

1. Leveraging Technology: Investing in affordable and scalable CRM solutions that can grow with the business is crucial. Cloud-based CRM platforms, for instance, offer cost-effective solutions with flexible payment options. Improving internet infrastructure and leveraging mobile technologies can also enhance digital engagement capabilities. Vernuccio et al. (2015) study findings indicate that social CRM significantly enhances customer engagement and loyalty and that businesses that integrate social media into their CRM strategies are better positioned to understand and meet customer needs.

2. Fostering Cultural Competence: Prioritizing cultural sensitivity and competence through staff training and community engagement is essential. Understanding local customs, traditions, and customer preferences can help businesses provide more personalized and culturally appropriate services.

3. Economic Adaptation: Adopting flexible pricing strategies and exploring partnerships with other businesses can help mitigate the impact of economic instability. Additionally, seeking government support and leveraging available financial aid programmes can provide much-needed resources for engagement initiatives.

7. The Importance of Web Development in Hospitality

In the digital age, a robust online presence is critical for customer engagement in the hospitality industry. A well-designed website serves as the primary touchpoint for customers, providing essential information, enabling reservations, and enhancing the overall user experience. Wolfgang (2020) reports that highly engaged customers generally provide more positive reviews.

The Evolution of Web Development: From Web 1.0 to Web 4.0

The evolution of web technologies from Web 1.0 to Web 4.0 has significantly impacted the hospitality industry, particularly in enhancing customer engagement and service delivery. Web 1.0 simply refers to the implementation and dissemination of the World Wide Web and the emergence of online commerce during the 1990s (Palmatier & Steinhoff, 2019). Starting with desktop computers, Internet technology today spread to a multitude of electronic devices, like laptops, tablets, smartphones, smart televisions, electrical appliances, wearables or the Internet of Things.

For companies, Palmatier and Steinhoff (2019) state the spread of Internet technology also revolutionized the way of doing business, particularly by multiplying the channels they could use. While Web 1.0 is often referred to as the *read-only web*, Web 2.0 advanced to become a *read-and-write web*, enabling bilateral communication (Palmatier & Steinhoff, 2019). The Web 2.0 is thus referred to as the interactive web.

Web 2.0: The Social/Interactive Media Web: Web 2.0, characterized by the emergence of social media and is referred to as the interactive web introduced user-generated content and social networking, allowing businesses to interact with customers in new ways. The global number of social media users stood at 5.07 billion with a 62.2 per cent penetration rate while Nigeria has a penetration rate of 17.0 per cent (Statista, 2024). It enabled the rise of platforms like TripAdvisor, where customers could share reviews and experiences. This era emphasized user engagement and the importance of an interactive online presence (O'Reilly, 2005). Social media platforms have become indispensable tools for customer engagement in the hospitality industry. They enable real-time interaction, feedback collection, and personalized marketing, fostering stronger relationships with customers. Social Media Engagement has the following benefits: i. **Real-Time Interaction:** social media platforms allow businesses to engage with customers in real time, addressing inquiries, resolving issues, and providing instant updates. This immediate communication helps build trust and rapport with customers. ii. **Personalized Marketing:** social media analytics provide insights into customer preferences and behaviours, enabling businesses to create targeted marketing campaigns. Personalized content and promotions can drive engagement and encourage repeat business. Web 2.0 enables customers to use social media platforms to create, share, and discuss content (Kemp et al. 2020). iii. **Reputation Management:** social media offers a platform for customers to share their experiences and reviews. By actively managing their online reputation and responding to feedback, businesses can build a positive brand image and attract new customers. In their study on whether social media marketing can improve customer relationship capabilities and firm performance using the dynamic capability framework, Wang and Kim (2017) confirmed a new form of CRM capabilities – social CRM. By using the resource-based view and dynamic capabilities theoretical frameworks, Wang and Kim (2017) demonstrated that social media usage plays a moderating role by amplifying the positive impact of social CRM capabilities on firm performance.

Web 3.0: The Semantic Web: Web 3.0 brought about the semantic web, characterized by improved data organization and machine understanding. For the hospitality industry, this meant more personalized customer experiences and enhanced data analytics capabilities. Businesses could better understand customer preferences and behaviours, leading to more targeted marketing and service offerings (Berners-Lee, 2001). According to Stackpole (2023), Web 3.0 is a new paradigm that makes it easier for new companies to compete with established ones if they can offer better user experience.

Web 4.0: The Intelligent Web: Web 4.0, often referred to as the *Intelligent Web*, integrates artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and the Internet of Things (IoT) to create a more intuitive and seamless user experience. In the hospitality industry, Web 4.0 technologies enable personalized guest experiences through predictive analytics, smart room features, and real-time customer service via chatbots and virtual assistants (Schwab, 2017).

Finally, Web 4.0 adds artificial intelligence and augmented reality as major technological advances. Machines and devices equipped with artificial intelligence can mimic the cognitive functions typically associated with human minds, such as learning and problem

solving. This level of technology not only enhances the guest experience but also improves operational efficiency (Palmatier & Steinhoff, 2019. p.28).

For hospitality businesses, the use of AI technologies could overhaul their service delivery methods; it can automate certain service provision processes, which may reduce the number of frontline employees, or even eliminate the need for customer-facing staff altogether. However, the major challenge is in the cost and skills required to operate such automation.

7.1 Benefits and Challenges of Web Development and Social Media Engagement

The first benefit of web development is enhanced user experience. A user-friendly website with intuitive navigation and appealing design enhances the customer experience. Scupola and Nicolajsen (2013) study concludes that businesses that actively engage with customers online experience higher levels of satisfaction and loyalty. Features such as online booking systems, virtual tours, and comprehensive information about services and amenities can attract and retain customers. Second is increased bookings and revenue. Giannakis-Bompolisa and Boutsouki (2014) recommend that the level of customer overall satisfaction and customer affective commitment, as well as the active social media presence, should be considered as significant determinants of a customer's willingness to get involved in a new type of relationship. An effective website facilitates online reservations and payments, increasing bookings and revenue. Integrating with CRM systems allows businesses to capture and analyse customer data, enabling personalized marketing and follow-up communications. Third is improved customer engagement. Websites that offer engaging content, such as blog posts, videos, and social media integration, can enhance customer engagement. Regular updates and interactive features keep customers informed and connected with the brand. The digital age thus far consists of four major steps: Web 1.0 (World Wide Web, e-commerce), Web 2.0 (social/interactive media), Web 3.0 (smartphones, mobile apps, Internet of Things, big data), and Web 4.0 (artificial intelligence, augmented reality). *Compared with relationships in the predigital age, customer-seller relationships in the digital age feature geographically distant relational partners, omnichannel interactions, a lack of time constraints, competition due to many alternatives, a high degree of anonymity, and a data-rich environment* (Palmatier & Steinhoff, 2019. p.38).

Despite the benefits, web development and social media engagement face several challenges in Nigeria, particularly in the South Eastern region. Firstly, there is the challenge of technological infrastructure. Inconsistent internet connectivity and limited access to advanced technologies hinder effective online presence and engagement. These infrastructure issues can lead to website downtime, slow loading times, and disrupted social media interactions.

The second challenge is cost and resource constraints. Developing and maintaining a professional website and active social media presence requires financial investment and skilled personnel. Many SMEs in the hospitality sector may lack the necessary resources to implement and sustain these digital strategies. The third challenge is cultural and language barriers. Catering to Nigeria's diverse cultural and linguistic landscape is essential for effective engagement. Websites and social media content must be culturally sensitive and available in multiple languages to resonate with a broad audience. Kemp et al (2020) empirical study shows that effective use of the web in its various forms is positively associated with the promotion of consumer-generated content sharing which positively influences engagement and online reputation management.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a far-reaching impact on the global hospitality industry, with significant economic, employment, and behavioural consequences. In South Eastern Nigeria, the industry has faced similar challenges, compounded by local economic and infrastructural constraints. Moving forward, the industry's recovery depends on continued adaptation to new consumer behaviours, technological adoption, and supportive government policies. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for stakeholders aiming to navigate the post-pandemic landscape effectively.

CRM is a critical component of success in the hospitality industry, offering numerous benefits in terms of personalization, improved service delivery, and enhanced marketing efforts. The insights into digital customer engagement strategies provided by Scupola and Nicolajsen (2013) can help address the identified CRM issues in this context. However, the implementation and maintenance of effective CRM systems come with significant challenges, including technological, organizational, and cultural issues. By investing in integrated systems, prioritizing data quality, providing continuous training, aligning CRM with business strategy, emphasizing cultural competence, and ensuring transparency and compliance, hospitality businesses can overcome these challenges and leverage CRM to build long-term relationships with their guests.

Customer engagement is a critical component of success in the hospitality industry. However, various barriers, including technological, organizational, cultural, and economic challenges, can impede effective engagement. Wang and Kim (2017) study showed that social media usage plays a moderating role on the positive impact of social CRM capabilities on firm performance. By leveraging technology, enhancing staff training, fostering cultural competence, addressing privacy concerns, and adapting to economic conditions, hospitality businesses in Nigeria can overcome these barriers and build stronger, more meaningful relationships with their guests.

Addressing the CRM challenges and barriers to customer engagement in the hospitality industry is crucial for post-pandemic recovery and growth. By leveraging technology, fostering cultural competence, and adapting to economic conditions, hospitality businesses can enhance their CRM practices and improve customer engagement, ensuring long-term success in the evolving landscape.

Web development and social media engagement are essential for the success of the hospitality industry in Nigeria. These tools offer significant opportunities for enhancing customer engagement, building brand awareness, and driving business growth. However, challenges such as technological infrastructure, resource constraints, and cultural diversity must be addressed to maximize their potential. Utilizing cloud-based platforms and partnering with local internet service providers can improve technological infrastructure. These solutions offer scalable and cost-effective options for enhancing online presence and engagement.

By investing in technology, optimizing resources, and ensuring cultural sensitivity, Nigerian hospitality businesses can overcome these barriers and create meaningful, lasting connections with their customers.

The hospitality industry in South Eastern Nigeria faces several challenges in CRM and customer engagement post-COVID-19. Technological limitations, staff training deficits, cultural factors, and evolving consumer expectations are significant barriers that need to be addressed. NESG (2021) reports that Nigeria has all it takes to drive Tourism to its peak, given her rich natural and cultural resources. By investing in modern CRM systems, enhancing staff training, integrating cultural sensitivity, and adapting to new consumer demands, hospitality businesses can improve their CRM practices and foster better customer engagement. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to track the progress of these interventions and their impact on customer satisfaction and business performance. Further empirical studies should dwell on Technological Adoption and Integration (TAI), Data Management and Utilization (DMU), Customer Privacy Concerns (CPC), Employee Training and Engagement (ETE), Economic Constraints (EC), Health and Safety Concerns (HSC), Shift in Customer Preferences (SCP), and Digital Literacy and Accessibility (DLA) as independent variables; Customer Relationship Management Effectiveness (CRME), and Customer Engagement Behaviour (CEB) as dependent variables. Customer Trust (CT) and Customer Satisfaction (CS) should be used as mediating variables while Government and Private Sector Support (GPSS), and Organizational Agility (OA) could equally be used as moderating.

Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 have both introduced transformative changes to social media customer engagement, each with its own set of benefits and challenges. Web 2.0 has democratized content creation and enabled real-time interaction, but it also presents issues such as information overload and data privacy concerns. Web 2.0 advances are enabling consumers to share their opinions, experiences, and feedback regarding products and brands (Kemp et al. 2020). Web 3.0, with its focus on decentralization and semantic capabilities, promises enhanced personalization and data security, yet it poses challenges related to technological complexity and ethical considerations. Substantial transformations over the past few years have evolved towards Tourism 3.0, where consumers can easily connect to travel websites and interact by sharing their experiences (Santos & Silva, 2020). Web 4.0 or the intelligent web has further enhanced content as it integrates AI. Businesses must navigate these evolving landscapes carefully to harness the full potential of these technologies for customer engagement. While the evidence shows that these technologies enhance customer experiences and management, it has been argued that Web 2.0 may complicate challenges associated with negative e-WOM as businesses may perceive that pressures are mounting from customers, relegating them to concede to excessive demands from customers (Kemp et al. 2020). It is only necessary that hospitality businesses strike a balance and manage these challenges as social media has come to stay.

AI has profoundly impacted social media customer engagement, offering numerous benefits such as enhanced personalization, improved efficiency, and deeper customer insights. However, challenges related to data privacy, ethical considerations, and technological implementation must be addressed to fully realize AI's potential. As AI technologies continue to evolve, businesses must adopt ethical and transparent practices to maintain customer trust and ensure positive engagement outcomes. The future of AI-driven customer engagement in social media promises even more sophisticated and immersive interactions, driven by advancements in natural language processing (NLP), augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and a strong emphasis on ethical AI practices. Investing in these technologies is costly given that hospitality businesses in the zone are majorly micro to small-scale businesses.

In the evolving landscape of Web 4.0, the hospitality industry must continue to adapt to new technologies and consumer expectations. The integration of AI, machine learning, and IoT in Web 4.0 promises even greater advancements in customer engagement and service delivery. As the industry navigates these changes, staying at the forefront of digital innovation will be crucial for long-term success and competitiveness. Specifically, we proffer the following recommendations to address issues and challenges in CRM and customer engagement.

Addressing Technological Limitations: To overcome technological barriers, hospitality businesses in South Eastern Nigeria should invest in modern CRM systems that facilitate seamless customer interactions across multiple channels. Partnerships with technology providers can help in acquiring and implementing these systems. Additionally, leveraging mobile technology, which has high penetration in Nigeria, can enhance customer engagement.

Enhancing Staff Training: Implementing comprehensive training programmes for staff is essential to improve CRM effectiveness. Training should focus on both technical skills required to operate CRM systems and the soft skills necessary for effective customer interaction. The importance of improving working conditions, reducing manual operations, replacing them with digital technologies, realistic career planning, employer branding, identifying skill deficiencies, and providing specialized training cannot be overemphasised. However, the structure of the hospitality industry generally, and in Southeast Nigeria in particular, remains a significant challenge to realistic career planning among other issues. Collaboration with hospitality training institutes like the Nigerian Institute for Hospitality and Tourism (NIHOTOURS) can provide tailored programmes that address these needs.

Integrating Cultural Sensitivity: CRM strategies must be culturally sensitive to resonate with the local clientele. Understanding and incorporating local cultural practices and preferences into service delivery can significantly enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. Businesses should conduct regular cultural competence training for their staff and incorporate cultural insights into their CRM strategies.

Adapting to Evolving Consumer Expectations: To meet evolving consumer expectations, hospitality businesses must prioritize hygiene and safety in their operations. Transparent communication about health and safety measures can reassure customers and build trust. Additionally, enhancing digital engagement through user-friendly websites, social media interactions, and mobile apps can cater to the increasing demand for contactless services.

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