

ASSESSMENT OF CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT AND CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT BEHAVIOUR IN HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY IN SOUTH EASTERN NIGERIA POST COVID-19: A MODERATED MEDIATION

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Abstract: The hospitality industry in Southeast Nigeria faced significant challenges following the COVID-19 pandemic, with customer engagement behaviour (CEB) and customer relationship management (CRM) emerging as critical areas requiring attention. This study investigates CRM and their impact on CEB within the region's hospitality sector post-pandemic. Drawing on a robust theoretical framework, the study explores four antecedents of CEB—enthusiasm, attention, involvement, and absorption—and their effects on two key outcomes: electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) and behavioural intentions to loyalty (BIL). The mediating role of CEB and the moderating impact of CRM on these relationships are examined. A cross-sectional survey research design was adopted and the study was based on a captive sample 527 respondents. Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed to analyse the data. Results reveal that while all CEB antecedents significantly influence e-WOM, only three positively affect BIL. Additionally, CRM demonstrates a substantial moderating effect, enhancing the variance explained for CEB and BIL. Findings highlight that CRM's integration with digital tools and customer-centric strategies is essential for fostering stronger engagement, loyalty, and advocacy in the post-pandemic era. This study contributes to literature by addressing gaps in understanding the intersection of CRM and CEB, particularly in the hospitality industry of an emerging market like Nigeria. It offers practical recommendations for hospitality operators, emphasizing digital transformation, personalized customer experiences, and trust-building measures to adapt to the changing consumer behaviour landscape. These findings serve as a strategic blueprint for leveraging CRM and CEB to drive recovery and growth in the hospitality sector, ultimately contributing to sustainable competitive advantage and economic development in Southeast Nigeria.

Keywords: Customer Engagement Behaviour (CEB); Customer Relationship Management (CRM); Hospitality Industry; Southeast Nigeria; COVID-19 Pandemic; Post-Pandemic Recovery.

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1. Introduction:

Customer engagement behaviour (CEB) has emerged as a vital competitive tool for long-term success (Kumar & Pansari, 2016), with engaged customers often proving more profitable than others. Barari et al. (2020) identify two key pathways to engagement behaviour formation: relationship-oriented and firm-initiated or promoted pathways. However, while many studies explore CEB across various sectors, few incorporate customer relationship marketing (CRM) in their models. The limited studies that do (e.g., Basari et al., 2020; Salem, 2021) often focus narrowly on relationship marketing (RM) constructs, neglecting the more contemporary CRM frameworks. Harmeling et al. (2017) also note gaps in understanding the interplay between organic and promoted pathways, and how firm-initiated activities influence CEB. Moreover, advancements in technology, such as augmented and artificial reality, alongside the rise of social media, have diversified customer–firm relationships (Steinhoff et al., 2019) and customer engagement models (Wirtz et al., 2019). CRM, defined by Gummesson (2008) as RM's practical application through human action and information technology, highlights the importance of enhancing customer loyalty and profitability through innovative and strategic differentiation (Basari et al., 2020). Pansari and Kumar (2016) argue that as relationships deepen emotionally, organizations must evolve from relationship marketing to fully engaging customers. Żymkowska (2019) identifies three research streams in CEB: (1) Van Doorn et al. (2010), focusing on behavioural manifestations beyond

purchase driven by motivational factors; (2) Kumar et al. (2010), extending the definition to include transactional and non-transactional interactions; and (3) Brodie et al. (2011), emphasizing attitudinal and multidimensional aspects.

This study examines CRM and CEB within the post-COVID-19 hospitality industry in Southeastern Nigeria. The pandemic disrupted customer behaviour, with Nigeria's hospitality sector GDP declining from 6.06% in 2018 to 4.3% in 2020, leading to revenue loss, unemployment, and underperformance. Mintz (2021) notes a shift from hedonic to utilitarian consumption, underscoring the need for post-COVID-19 strategies to re-engage customers, especially in the hospitality sector, where consumption is largely hedonic. The general objective is to assess CRM and to CEB in Southeastern Nigeria's hospitality industry post-COVID-19, addressing gaps such as inadequate integration of digital technologies and responsiveness to behavioural changes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Hospitality Industry

The hospitality industry encompasses hotels, tourism agencies, event centres, restaurants, and bars. It combines tangible and intangible attributes to deliver service experiences, with a strong emphasis on human interaction (Chan & Mackenzie, 2013). In Nigeria, the hospitality sector, a major contributor to GDP and employment, accounted for 6.06% of GDP in 2018 but dropped to 4.3% in 2020 due to the pandemic (CBN, 2020). Globally, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2019) estimated \$910 billion in lost exports and over 100 million jobs at risk during the pandemic, with Africa disproportionately affected.

Despite the downturn, the sector remains significant. Challenges such as safety and security, low product differentiation, and rising customer expectations emphasize the importance of CRM and CEB frameworks to deliver personalized, high-quality experiences. Chan and Mackenzie (2013) highlight five characteristics critical to the sector: product-service duality, two-way communication, relationship building, cultural diversity, and labour-intensive operations. Operators must prioritize CRM and CEB to foster direct and continuous customer involvement in creating brand experiences and managing brand communities. Manfreda and King (2018) assert that the industry's maturity, characterized by heightened competition and low differentiation, necessitates superior customer experience management. CRM and CEB provide a pathway to sustained competitive advantage, enabling the hospitality industry to recover and thrive in a post-pandemic era.

2.2. Customer Engagement Behaviour (CEB)

Marketing scholars mostly describe the concept of CEB from three perspectives. One, the behavioural viewpoint proposes that it is a non-transactional behaviour of the customer to the brand and is manifested through positive word-of-mouth among others. Two, the psychological stance believes that CEB is the customer's emotional and cognitive reactions toward a brand. (Naumann et al., 2020) believed that CEB is a psychological process that encourages new customers to generate loyalty and old customers to maintain loyalty. Mollen and Wilson (2010) believe that CEB is the cognitive and emotional commitment with a brand. The dimensions of CEB carry the following characteristics (Johnston, 2018): cognitive engagement describes an involvement in attention, processing, or thinking skills to develop understanding or knowledge. Customers as humans can know (have knowledge) either based on experience or based on reasoning (Spender, 1996) while understanding relates to comprehension. While also compared to motivation and self-regulation, cognitive engagement is defined by Johnston (2018) as a person's involvement in attention and processing to evoke knowledge and understanding concerning a product or an idea. Affective engagement entails positive and negative emotional reactions, like pleasure, fear, anger, support, and association and is often displayed as recognition of belonging, or emotional reactions (Johnston, 2018). Behavioural engagement embodies concepts of participation, collaboration, action, and involvement, as well as intended and unintended actions that may be caused by, or result from, cognitive or affective engagement (Johnston, 2018). CEB has become an integral component of debates on consumer-brand connections in academic studies, and likewise in practice. Weitzl and Einwiller (2018) define it as a composite, multifaceted relational construct that entails a consumer's state, that occurs by virtue of interactive consumer experiences with

a specific brand. It comprises of psychological and behavioural engagement factors conveying a definite intensity level at a particular time (Weitzl & Einwiller, 2018). Psychological engagement denotes a consumer's captivating, inherent motivation to invest cognitive, emotional, and intentional resources in the interaction with a brand, while behavioural engagement reflects specific interactive, brand-related behaviours (Weitzl & Einwiller (2018). In bestowing the term brand dialogue behaviours, Maslowska et al., (2016) acknowledge the increasing role of engagement behaviours beyond that of actual purchase. Within a service setting particularly, prior frameworks have recognized the role of the customer in enhancing the entire experience, yet typically centre wholly on the period of the service encounter. The CEB concept regards users as being guided by own personal intentions and motivations, in lieu of those initiating from the firm (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). One additional note on (*van Doorn, et al. 2010*) definition that it explicitly pertains to CEB behaviours, yet the authors proceed to suggest that these behaviours may also be targeted to an expanded network of actors than other current and potential customers. *van Doorn, et al. (2010)* clearly acknowledge the capacity for not only current customers, but consumers in general, to generate these engagement behaviours with either the brand directly or other consumers. Kumar (2014) acknowledge *van Doorn, et al. (2010)* view yet argue that such a conceptualisation is incomplete while actual purchases remain omitted. Such a stance would further exemplify the requirement for a more holistic view of engagement, such as throughout the entire process in tourism or restaurant.

From a comprehensive perspective, CEB can be regarded as a multidimensional concept and includes multiple aspects of cognition, emotion, and behaviour. Vivek et al., (2014) follow the expanded relationship metaphor and service-dominant logic, and conceptualized a three-dimensional perspective of CEB, that include: conscious attention, enthused participation, and social connection. Mollen and Wilson (2010) suggest that online CEB includes three dimensions: active cognitive processing, instrumental value, and experience value. Hollebeek et al., (2016) suggest that customer brand fit consists of three dimensions: cognitive processing, affection, and behaviour. Moreover, the object of CEB can be products, brands, or activities (Qui et al., 2021). Therefore, different types of CEB can be distinguished according to the objects of that engagement (Qui et al., 2021). Important to the conceptualization of CEB is to provide the unique characteristics that differentiate it from other related concepts and constructs. CEB appears to be a related concept, though is theoretically different from many similar other marketing concepts (Bowden, 2009; *van Doorn, 2009*). There has been a clear difference between engagement and other, more well-known customer management and relational constructs (Bowden, 2009; *Brodie, et al., 2011*; Mollen & Wilson, 2011; Vivek et al., 2012). CEB and involvement seem similar on the basis of customer values and needs that motivate people toward a particular object, like a brand (Hollebeek, 2011). Vivek et al., (2012) propose that involvement differs from CEB because involvement is a psychological concept that doesn't study behaviours and argued that involvement may be an antecedent of the behavioural domain of CEB. Mollen and Wilson (2010) differentiated involvement from engagement, noting that involvement involves a more passive allocation of mental resources. In contrast, engagement represents an active, dynamic connection with the consumption object. They further explained that engagement requires not only the attainment of instrumental value, driven by utility and relevance, but also a certain degree of emotional connection. This emotional bond is fostered through gratifying and rewarding experiences.

The term engagement in a business-related context originally referred to employee engagement (EE), which seems to enjoy a consistent conceptualization and operationalization. However, the conceptualization of CEB, which is still in its infancy, lacks consensus So et al. (2014). Buttle and Maklan (2019) maintain that this is not unusual for an emerging construct; indeed, competing claims have been made for CRM itself. Interestingly, the stability of the EE construct may provide insight for CEB, which is an evolving concept in the customer management field, where it has been drawn from organizational behaviour (cf. employee engagement) Vivek et al., (2012). There were scant discussions of CEB prior to 2005, but thereafter, there have been emergence of numerous research findings that have been abridged into various literature reviews (in Buttle & Maklan, 2019). There is no unified agreement about what CEB is, how to define it, how to measure it, or what consequences it has for any business (France et al., 2019). In the organizational behaviour writings, EE denotes *'the simultaneous*

employment and expression of a person's preferred self in task behaviours that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence, and active, full role performances' (Kahn, 1990, p. 700). EE seems to exist as a motivational construct embracing attention and absorption (Rothbard, 2001) and might involve an identification component (Demerouti & Bakker, 2008).

Consistent with this emphasis on the psychological elements, engagement is *a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication and absorption* (Schaufeli et al., 2002) suggesting that EE is a persistent and pervasive affective, cognitive state (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). These definitions indicate that EE conceptualizations focus on psychological aspects. In contrast, So, et al. (2014) note that marketing scholars have conceptualized CEB to include a strong behavioural focus stressing that such interests abound in the literature domains of both academics (Bijmolt, 2010; van Doorn, 2010; Verhoef et al., 2010) as well as practitioners (Shevlin, 2007). In seeking to establish a conceptual understanding of CEB, researchers have argued that the knowledge of EE is applicable to CEB (Patterson et al., 2006). Feelings of passion, energy, and enthusiasm characterize both EE and CEB (Hollebeek, 2011; Patterson, 2006). However, the focus of those feelings differs (workplace vs. consumer brand). In addition, in building on the EE literature, the conceptualization of CEB tends to go beyond an attitudinal perspective, reflecting both psychological and behavioural dimensions (Patterson et al., 2006). Buttle and Maklan (2019) maintain that CRM practitioners often use tools such as campaign management to build CEB.

As (Brodie et al., 2011) discussion proposes that CEB might entail that equal attention be lent to the psychological facets of engagement along with behavioural participation, it shows that there persists a diversity of opinions as regards the conceptualization of the concept. For example, some researchers consider CEB to be a behavioural construct (i.e., interaction) emanating from a range of motivational drivers. (Bijmolt, 2010; van Doorn, 2010; Verhoef, et al. 2010), whereas others propose CEB to be a multidimensional construct comprising both psychological and behavioural aspects (Brodie, et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2009; 2011; and Patterson et al., 2006), Vivek, 2009). Support for the adoption of a multidimensional approach is evidenced in the conceptualization of composite loyalty (i.e., behavioural and attitudinal), which suggests that behavioural measures alone may lack a conceptual basis (in So, et al. 2014) and provide insufficient insight into the factors underlying repeat behaviour. So et al. (2014) argue that this is also correct in describing the conceptual domain of CEB, whereby involvement in the activities of the phenomenon does not guarantee a truly engaged customer. For example, involvement in a brand conversation conference or gathering may emanate from issues like the need for product information or reduction of perceived risks (Brodie, et al., 2011) rather than from being attached or engaged with the brand. So et al. (2014) maintain that the truly involved customer must have an enduring psychological attachment with the brand in addition to behavioural involvement or engagement, adding that while a behavioural approach may provide an indication of customers' involvement level in CEB activities, a multidimensional approach will express the full complexity of CEB.

In line with the above, Buttle and Maklan (2019) identify two main schools of thought on CEB. The first sees CEB as a two- dimensional construct with a behavioural and an emotional component. Extremely involved customers devote substantial share- of- wallet to the brand with which they are involved and are also emotionally dedicated to it. This school of thought makes CEB hard to differentiate from the customer loyalty construct, described as having a behavioural and attitudinal component. The second school sees CEB as a multi- dimensional construct in which an attached customer is not just a buyer of a firm's products but is involved in co- creation of value for the brand in many other indirect ways (Pansari & Kumar (2018). The focal point of this school is on the brand owners' activities to promote customers' indirect involvement with the brand. The main aim is to convert the customer into an additional, unpaid marketer, working in the brand's interests. Whereas direct involvement means buying, indirect involvement could manifest in many different non-transactional activities (Vivek et al. 2014). CEB has continued to attract increasing attention from both practitioners and academics (Brodie, et al., 2011) in part owing to the growth of the information technology and the social media as essential tools for customer communication and cooperation.

Specifically, the online environment has created a range of new media channels for the hospitality firms to enhance connections and relationships with customers far-off the service encounter (So et al., 2014). In a bid involve their customers via interactivity beyond purchase, tourism brands establish their presence on social network sites like Facebook and Twitter in addition to online interaction panels. As a medium of exchange, the Internet enables hospitality business operators and consumers to spread and disseminate information, opinions, and experiences, not just from business to customer but also from customer to customer (Litvin et al., 2008). These discussions highlight the importance of involving customers to build loyalty after the transaction, especially in the highly competitive environment of the hospitality industry. The importance of non-transactional customer discussions is detailed in literature. For instance, online user-generated evaluations and assessments can influence the number of online bookings in a hotel (Ye, Law & Gu, 2009) as well as intentions to book and perceptions of trust in the hotel (Sparks & Browning, 2009). In an off-line environment, opinion or advice from existing customers influences the consumer's purchase decisions (Crotts, 2009). Collectively, such interactions form the behavioural manifestation of CEB (van Doorn et al. 2010; Verhoef, et al. 2010). Additionally, hospitality organizations can leverage CEB behaviours to attract and retain more customers and gain additional insight into their business (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004). From a consumer perspective, the benefits for engaging in CEB activities include financial gains or incentives as well as emotional fulfilment, such as enjoyment and positive affect (van Doorn, et al. 2010). CEB is emerging as a construct that may enhance loyalty and purchase decisions e.g. (Hollebeek, 2009; Patterson et al., 2006) through a strong, enduring psychological connection accompanied by interactive brand experiences beyond purchase. CEB with a brand influences important aspects of consumer brand knowledge, brand perceptions, and brand attitudes, and hence brand loyalty (Sprott et al., 2009).

Buttle and Maklan (2019) identify four forms of CEB: behavioural, social, cognitive and emotional. (i). **Behavioural:** the engaged customer acts favourably towards the brand, for example by taking part in brand research or passing on positive word-of-mouth thereby creating customer referral value or CRV. (ii) **Social:** the involved customer connects with the brands and other customers in social media channels, through creating, viewing or sharing online content, taking part in crowd-sourced customer service, blogging, recording assessments or complains, sharing brand-use information on Instagram, or joining a Twitter interaction among others. According to Buttle and Maklan (2019) these two types of engagement are stimulated by allowing the intra-personal characteristics of the customer: 1. Cognitive: the engaged customer is knowledgeable about the brand like, the brand's values, price-point, advantage of the product relative to competitors, status or country of origin. 2. Emotional: The involved customer has a powerful liking for and devotion to the brand. It is also imperative to note that engagement cannot be dichotomised, that is, customers cannot just be separated into engaged and disengaged segments. Rather, customers are always changing with rest to their level of engagement. Some customers will be mostly engaged in all the forms; while others may not even realise what brands they have bought. Buttle and Maklan (2019) state that managers and marketers should be concerned with the role of CEB in building and sustaining relationships with customers stressing that engagement is only possible when a relationship is entrenched on the basis of trust and commitment.

According to So et al. (2014) CEB study relies on five distinct dimensions of identification, enthusiasm, attention, absorption, and interaction, which reflect the psychological and behavioural aspects, defined as a customers' personal connection to a brand as manifested in cognitive, affective, and behavioural actions outside of the purchase situation. Behavioural manifestations include participation in activities, such as customer-to-customer interactions, blogging, writing reviews, as well as other similar activities that are centred on the brand. Recent reviews of the conceptual foundation and relationship of CEB provide useful guidance on potential antecedents and consequences of CEB. Other possible antecedents of CEB include involvement, interactivity, rapport, commitment, trust, brand attachment, and brand performance perceptions (Hollebeek, 2011; van Doorn et al. 2010). Consequences of CEB include cocreated value, brand experience, satisfaction, trust, commitment, customer value, brand loyalty, customer equity, firm reputation, brand recognition, and financial outcomes (Hollebeek, 2011; van Doorn et al. 2010). In addition, such a psychological connection may depend on various situational factors (Funk & James, 2001) such as age, computer experience, and degree of socialization. It does

appear that engagement and involvement are correspondingly hinged on consumer needs/values stimulating the individual toward a specific object, such as a brand (Hollebeek, 2009). In line with marketing literature, involvement most often concerns the perceived personal importance and significance of the product or brand (see So, et al 2014). However, engagement requires more than the exercise of cognition and entails an active relationship with the brand, and the intention to act makes CEB distinct from involvement's more passive allocation of mental resources Mollen and Wilson (2010). Nevertheless, the emergence of specific customer brand engagement levels requires some level of involvement with a focal brand (Hollebeek, 2011). These characteristics make the multi-faceted concept of CEB conceptually distinct from involvement. Additionally, Hollebeek, (2009) provide extensive reviews of how CEB is different from other similar constructs, such as commitment, satisfaction, cocreation, and brand loyalty.

2.3 CEB and Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

Over the years, marketers have employed various tools in managing their customers and these range from: transaction marketing, customer loyalty and loyalty management, relationship marketing, customer relationship management and of recent CEB. CRM as a tool is very beneficial for business firms in building and expanding their relationships with their customers. In a review and classification of CRM researches from 2000 to 2020 Mena and Sahu (2021) show that though CRM is prominent within service industries, it has become a potent tool in all industries from manufacturing to tourism and hospitality; from education to logistics and telecommunications among others; as the number of published research articles concerning other sectors is increasing compared to that of service industries. CRM is the strategic process of selecting customers that a firm can most profitably serve and shaping interactions and management of technology between a company and these customers; the ultimate goal is to optimize the current and potential value of customers for the company (Kumar & Reinartz, 2018). Thus, CRM can be described as a business and marketing relationship strategy based on and supported by methods and technology. The most complete definition is by (Grabner & Moedritscher, 2002) who considered CRM *to be a business philosophy that is fully customer oriented, including through using information technology, analysing and monitoring customer relationships*. Chen and Popovick (2003) suggest that a CRM model should mix the three proportions of people, process and technology inside the context of an enterprise-wide, customer-driven, technology integrated and cross-functional organization (Chen & Popovick 2003). Through these combinations, the organization can choose particular technologies to improve its knowledge of customers and performance as well as enhance customer relationships. From this perspective, Bozbay (2021) defines CRM as a global procedure that allows a lasting and profitable relationship between the organization and customers. While CRM definitions vary, they can be grouped into three types – technology centred, customer life cycle-centred, and strategy-centred explained as below (Tamosiuniene & Jasilioniene, 2007). Technology-centred definitions establish the link between technology and CRM. It is not surprising that an involvement in CRM technologies has been made, and the conversation has drawn CRM into the technological and practical mechanics (Tamosiuniene & Jasilioniene, 2007). CRM is a technology solution that expands to separate databases and sales force automation tools to integrate sales and marketing functions to reach targeted efforts. On the technology perspective, Buttle and Maklan (2019) maintain that IT companies have tended to use the term CRM to describe the software tools that are used to support the marketing, selling and service functions of businesses. CRM is a tool used in one-to-one customer communications, sales, service, call centres or marketing departments. In fact, as we have already noted, it is one of the modern tools for customer management and when used properly with the CEB, will offer strong competitive advantage to firms. CRM is not just a tool for departments. It is for every department within the entire organization. According to Bozbay, (2021), if CRM strategy is well applied within the whole organisation, all the organisations' departments like marketing, human resources, R & D, finance and information technology will succeed in maximizing healthy and profitable relationships with customers. CRM is customer-oriented, technology-integrated and cross-functional strategy that facilitates customer personalization, simplicity and convenience in interactions (Chen & Popovick 2003) and is significantly a marketing strategy that firms employ to improve customer value. It is also a set of concepts that must be blended and harmonised together with an organization's overall business strategies (Dutot, 2013). Interestingly, CRM ballooned to a major transformation from a strategy that

relied only on the customer transaction to accommodate customer connections (Shokohyar et al., 2017). Currently, marketers can extract initial information about customers that organizations can use to realize greater success in carrying value to the customer Vivek, Beatty & Morgan (2012). Previous research has done a great deal of modelling on the use of technologies and their impact on CRM, but with the advent of social media, more marketers realize that technologies are already great enabling factors for CRM (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014). Therefore, CRM has a new name called social CRM (Dewnarain et al., 2019; Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014). In this study, CRM is used as a moderating variable between antecedents and outcomes of CEB.

2.4 CEB and Social CRM (s-CRM)

Social CRM is a postulation much like the CRM however embodies and integrates social methods, capabilities and operations that function through the communication between organizations and customers as well as the customers and their peers, families and friends (Greenberg, 2010). Additionally, the presence of these novel methods, procedures and technologies facilitates interactions with customers (Zablah et al., 2004) to build long-term relationships with improved performance (Coltman, 2007). Social CRM therefore focuses on CEB through communicating, bi-directional relationships with customers where they are ready to participate in the marketing activities and the product offerings through interactions in social media (Dewnarain et al., 2019; Rodriguez, Peterson & Krishnan 2012). Mobile devices and social media have changed the relationship between organizations with the customers pushing them to reach and create strategies to manage the relationship with customers beyond just financial transactions (Hollebeek, 2013). Statista (2022) blog, reports among others that as at January, 2022, Facebook has 2.91Billion active users while WhatsApp has 2.4Billion active users. This makes Facebook the single largest community in the world. These social media communities share information, ritual and concern for each member. Any business organization can ignore these communities at its own peril. Business organizations rely on these large communities to build online brand communities to relate and engage customers for profit. Accordingly, business and marketing practitioners need to understand how to promote and maintain online communities for profitable CEB. In his seminal book, *Marketing 2.0: bridging the gap between seller and buyer through social media marketing*, Borges (2009): *encourage small and medium (SMB) CEOs and their marketing and sales managers to embrace social web as three things: a culture, a mindset and as a platform...the social web allows any business of any size in any location to reach the people they desire to reach and build strong relationship with them* (p. 4). According to Bozbay, (2021), a study showed that extremely engaged customers pay 23% more, which increases profitability and share of wallet; the Convero survey found that 74% of managers plan to make their involvements on CEB in the following years (Dewnarain et al., 2019). The social media channels enable business firms and organizations to involve with customers under their own circumstances, at work, play or at any time they want, and through their own preferred media Bozbay, (2021). Marketers appreciate and help customers to buy more, assist them in using the brand, make them more knowledgeable about the brand and handle the customers' complaints. Through the product cycle, the firm can utilise social media to enhance its speed in the market, to assist in designing innovative products based on the customers' desires and aspirations, to boost early sales quicker in order to nurture their prices, and to know the features and functions that appeal more to the customers Bozbay, (2021). Firms also use the social media for the optimisation of the costs of sales, service and marketing expenditures by involving customers and handling transactions through replacing the traditional media by the new media channels and by listening to the voice of customers to minimise the cost of failure (Stone & Woodcock, 2013). From a strategic point of view, experts describe engagement as: allow businesses to cultivate in-depth, more thoughtful and sustainable discussions between the organization and its customers or external stakeholders (Sashi, 2012). As soon as customers connect through the brand, the amount of time spent sharing information through different media is likely to be enhanced over the internet either in form of comments on other user posts or through content creation. By verifying customer purchases over certain period, buyers can be monitored easily, possibly to contribute to the development of the products by generating ideas. The number of stories generated or even shared by the customer and a satisfaction assessment could as well be done online. Thus, this can lead managers to provide reasonable understandings of organization performance Kumar (2014). Social media is reengineering the business processes and methods by facilitating the two-way

communication strategy between the organizations and the customers; as it can develop many new challenges and opportunities. Sharing resources and gaining understanding are the prerequisites for the long-term sustainability of the organizations (Hristov & Ramkissoon, 2016). Online communications can generate huge knowledge and lead to the creation and growth of customer value (Dewnarain et al., 2019; and Wu & Lu, 2012). Woodcock and Green (2011) noted that social CRM avails full support to customer life cycle strategy and customer management strategy (CMS) that will enhance sales by minimising costs, spreading and enhancing involvement and awareness. According to Bozbay (2021) social CRM can engender many benefits to firms by following a four-step procedure – involving/engaging customers and prospects, attracting new customers, recalling customers and increasing customer value. Thus, social CRM supports the entire CMS and customer life cycle and therefore should lead to enhanced sales through improving engagement and awareness, and improve customer value and minimise costs (Dutot, 2013). CRM philosophy helps to understand the main components in customer management such as attracting customers, maintaining loyalty and retaining them; and the newest component in managing customers is CEB, defined as a kind of mind generated by customers interacting with the brand in a specific service relationship and creating an experience (Qui et al., 2021). Because it relies majorly on utilising social media for communication and interaction, CEB is also referred to as social customer relationship management (s-CRM). Greenberg (2010) maintain that understanding the customer the right way applies to social CRM as it is focused on CEB, and recognising that the customer controls the conversation, stressing that when it comes to how you engage customers, the primary strategy remains what it has always been, and that's the people, whether in 21st century or not. He adds that the kind of culture that disseminates *throughout a company is a key determinant in the effort to make that CE fruitful, to the point of creating a customer relationship that is both delightful and extraordinary*, (pp 93-94). CEB is a dynamic and cyclical process and has different performances in different situations (Qui, Chen & Lee, 2021).

In customer journey analysis, firms rely on customers interactions and how they interact with multiple touch points, from consideration, search, and purchase to post purchase, consumption, and future engagement or repurchase. The main aim of such analyses is to define this journey and appreciate the customers' options and preferences for the touch points in multiple purchase phases (Verhoef, Reinartz & Krafft, 2010). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) state the increasing focus on customer experience arises because customers now interact with firms through myriad touch points in multiple channels and media, social and offline media, resulting in more complex customer journeys. Van Hagen and Brona (2013) recommend measuring customer experience and determining how strong the emotional level in various customer journey phases in different groups of passengers so that the customer experience of each customer journey phase is known. Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) state that the experience customers acquire through participation and engagement on the internet has the implication to be captured more firmly than the experience from other traditional media, hence it can be said that the quality of user experience on a website affects the overall feeling and trust associated with brands which could be deepened and firmed more strongly than experience through other media (Mulyono & Situmorang, 2018). As customers interact with products and services, they share their experience on social media which affect relationships and engagement with the firm. Existing CRM frameworks often fail to account for regional infrastructural and cultural variables, which are critical for effective customer engagement in Southeast Nigeria's hospitality industry.

2.5 CEB and Customer Loyalty

Loyalty is the end result of CEB in the hospitality sector especially with COVID-19 when there were noticeable declines in revenue. Loyalty is also very essential post COVID-19 as business operators in the sector try to win back customer trust and confidence. According to Boohene and Agyapong (2011) loyalty as a concept has its base from the consumer behaviour theory and is something that consumers may portray to brands, services or activities. Customer loyalty is the normal willingness of customer to maintain their relations with a particular firm or service/product (Kim & Yoon, 2004). Loyalty refers to the submissiveness of a customer to continue patronizing a company's product and services over a long time and on a persistent and rather exclusive basis, and willingly endorsing and advocating the firm's products to friends and associates (Wirtz & Loveloch, 2018). Customer loyalty results from a

firm creating a benefit for customers so that they will maintain progressively repeat purchases with the organization (Anderson & Jacobsen, 2000). Oliver (1999) defines customer loyalty as a deeply held commitment to rebuy a preferred product or service consistently in the future, causing repetitive same brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts. Leong et al., (2017) note that the economic growth noticed in the tourism and hospitality industry and competition in the industry has led to discovering consumer loyalty as a key success factor. Reichheld (1996) pointed out loyalty behaviour affects business growth and companies get to profit from price premium, referrals, increase purchases and higher balances, reduced operating cost and customer acquisition cost. According to *Srinivasan et al.*, (2002) loyalty in online behaviour is attitudes that are beneficial to the customer and his dedication to online companies that engender repeat purchase behaviour. A truly loyal customer is a dedicated customer that is connected with the retailer and may not be easily bothered by more and perceived interesting alternatives (Shankar et al., 2003). In general, customer loyalty is the final purpose that firms implement CRM and CEB.

Researchers have recognized various vital concepts of the CRM which are potentially linked to CEB (Hapsari et al., 2017; van Doorn et al. 2010; Vivek, 2009). These constructs include satisfaction, brand trust, commitment, and service quality, all of which are essential to the development of loyal relationships (Harris & Goode, 2004). Nevertheless, very scant empirical confirmation exists to provide a clear understanding of the relationship between CEB components and behavioural intentions towards loyalty (BIL). Such information is fundamental to both researchers and marketing practitioners, going by companies' growing interest in CE strategies and in view of the significant amount of academic interest availed to this emerging phenomenon as a serious determinant of loyalty. Interestingly, CEB can support important and profound marketing metrics like share of wallet, loyalty, cross-selling, and word of mouth (Vivek, Beatty & Morgan, 2012). CEB influences behavioural intentions of loyalty significantly in the hospitality and tourism brands of hotels and airlines (Rather & Sharma, 2016); but further empirical investigation of this relationship in different contexts has been suggested (Brodie et al., 2013). The outcomes of CEB in this present study includes e-WOM and behavioural intentions to loyalty (BIL).

2.6 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for Customer Engagement Behaviour (CEB) is rooted in relationship marketing, particularly Morgan and Hunt's commitment-trust theory (Pansari & Kumar, 2018). Initially, relationship marketing emphasized fostering long-term loyalty and patronage, but CEB has evolved to address dynamic consumer needs and preferences, emphasizing interactivity and customer experience (Vivek et al., 2012). CEB creates meaningful connections between customers and firms, driving viral marketing and advocacy through referrals (Brodie et al., 2011). However, its dimensionality remains inconsistent in the literature (Dessart et al., 2015). Studies highlight the role of involvement, enthusiasm, attention, and absorption as antecedents of CEB. Involvement reflects the personal relevance of a product, influencing cognitive and behavioural responses (Coulter et al., 2003). Enthusiasm represents intrinsic excitement toward a brand, while attention reflects the focus and concentration customers dedicate to engagement objects (So et al., 2014). Absorption entails deep immersion, where time distortion and enjoyment occur during interactions (Patterson et al., 2006). Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM), facilitated by social media, plays a critical role in influencing customer attitudes and behaviours due to its perceived trustworthiness over organizational messages (Chu & Kim, 2011; Serra-Cantalops et al., 2018). Satisfied customers often generate positive e-WOM, enhancing brand favourability (Chen, 2014). Behavioural intentions, such as repurchase and loyalty, are significant outcomes of CEB (Rather, 2018). CEB strengthens trust, satisfaction, and loyalty, with mediating roles in these relationships (Dwivedi, 2015; Rather, 2018). This study examines the impacts of CEB antecedents (involvement, enthusiasm, attention, absorption) on outcomes like e-WOM and behavioural loyalty intentions (BIL). It also investigates the mediating role of CEB and the moderating effect of CRM on these relationships within the hospitality industry.

3. Methodology

This study utilised cross-sectional survey research design. This study shall be conducted in the area of hospitality sector in Southeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The sample size for this study shall comprise of 1000 participants in all. A size of 200 participants was sampled from each of the states. We randomly selected hospitality industry customers who have no mental problem or psychiatric referrals. Stratified multi-stage random sampling technique shall be used to sample participants from the hospitality Industry in South eastern geopolitical zone. Participants for this study shall comprise of 1000 customers found in hospitality industries in Anambra, Enugu, Abia, Imo and Ebonyi states in southeast Nigeria. The participants shall comprise of 500 males and 500 females within an age range of 18-80 years. In each select state, the participants comprise 100 males and 100 females. The research shall utilise standardised, valid, and reliable questionnaire as the instrument for primary data collection. Three of the core variables: enthusiasm, customer attention and absorption developed by So, et al., (2014) were utilised. These variables have shown construct reliability of 0.95, 0.95 and 0.97 respectively in So, et al. (2014). So et al. used seven-point Likert scale to measure the constructs. One core variable, involvement was adopted from the scale/work of Coulter et al., (2003) and was measured with nine (9) items and it showed a Cronbach alpha reliability of 0.92. Electronic word of mouth taken from Konttinen et al. (2022) was measured with four items; and it showed average variance extracted of 0.674. The second variable is behavioural intentions to loyalty was also taken from So, et al. (2014). It was measured with four items and it showed a construct reliability of 0.93. Another variable, customer relationship management was adopted from Dazagbyilo et al. (2021) and was measured with six (6) items. The mediating variable in our study is customer engagement behaviour (CEB) and was taken from the Sprott et al., (2009) and was measured with eight (8) items and it showed ($\alpha = .94$) and intertemporal reliability (ranging between .62 and .78) (Sprott et al. 2009). All the constructs used in our study we measured on a five-point Likert scale of strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree.

A number of ethical issues were taken into account, including seeking the informed consent of all participants/respondents and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected in the course of the investigation were used only for academic purposes and the respondents were well assured of this. The respondents were assured that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions and that any respondent is free to answer or otherwise. All personal data were kept strictly confidential. The collated copies of the questionnaire were edited to check for correctness and accuracy of the information supplied after which data entry will follow using Excel and SPSS spreadsheet. Multivariate statistics tool specifically partial least squares structural equation modelling will be used with the aid of PLS-SEM software.

4. Analysis

A total of 527 copies of the questionnaire were and found usable and this represent 52.7% response rate which is acceptable. In analysing our data, we relied on partial least squares structural equations (PLS-SEM) modelling and like other SEM tools, the analysis follows two procedures: the measurement model and the structural model. the measurement model involves the item loadings, reliability and internal consistencies and the discriminant validity measures. All these are necessary because unreliable and non-valid items cannot be used to assess the structural model.

Table 1: Psychometric Properties of the Construct

Items	Loadings	Mean	SD	t-values	p-values	AVE	CA	CR
INV1	0.727	3.8286	1.07019	15.114	<0.001	0.521	0.846	0.883
INV2	0.658	4.0429	1.24890	13.555	<0.001			
INV3	0.745	4.2714	.82791	15.534	<0.001			
INV4	0.782	3.8286	.94204	16.392	<0.001			
INV5	0.761	4.0286	.82877	15.896	<0.001			
INV6	0.660	4.3143	.68848	13.582	<0.001			
INV9	0.709	4.2143	.86135	14.711	<0.001			

ENT1	0.703	4.1571	.92150	14.566	<0.001	0.595	0.825	0.879
ENT3	0.691	4.2000	.74940	14.295	<0.001			
ENT4	0.844	4.1857	.76253	17.845	<0.001			
ENT5	0.907	4.2143	.77372	19.347	<0.001			
ENT6	0.685	4.6857	.80370	14.167	<0.001			
ATT1	0.754	2.9857	.93473	15.741	<0.001	0.613	0.839	0.887
ATT2	0.863	3.3714	.96011	18.301	<0.001			
ATT3	0.872	3.3286	.98297	18.506	<0.001			
ATT4	0.734	3.2714	.84503	15.284	<0.001			
ATT6	0.673	4.0429	.78371	13.890	<0.001			
ABS1	0.621	3.8429	.69041	12.713	<0.001	0.495	0.743	0.830
ABS2	0.715	3.7286	1.00031	14.850	<0.001			
ABS3	0.735	3.8000	.99569	15.291	<0.001			
ABS4	0.753	3.8571	.76240	15.713	<0.001			
ABS6	0.686	3.9429	.86123	14.189	<0.001			
CE2	0.860	3.4429	.84018	18.242	<0.001	0.623	0.877	0.908
CE3	0.654	3.7429	.85789	13.453	<0.001			
CE5	0.735	3.3571	.79460	15.299	<0.001			
CE6	0.857	3.5857	.88756	18.156	<0.001			
CE7	0.770	3.5000	.89170	16.105	<0.001			
CE8	0.839	3.4714	.92283	17.737	<0.001			
CRM1	0.766	3.2857	.98909	16.029	<0.001	0.589	0.762	0.849
CRM2	0.867	3.8571	.66181	18.389	<0.001			
CRM3	0.618	3.6714	.73241	12.646	<0.001			
CRM4	0.796	3.8000	.71014	16.727	<0.001			
e- WOM1	0.684	3.7286	.82791	14.130	<0.001	0.517	0.570	0.756
e- WOM2	0.636	3.5857	.99415	13.043	<0.001			
e- WOM3	0.673	3.4429	1.02457	13.888	<0.001			
e- WOM4	0.650	3.4429	.96702	13.360	<0.001			
BIL1	0.872	3.7857	.75498	18.517	<0.001	0.772	0.901	0.931
BIL2	0.811	3.8571	.81683	17.064	<0.001			
BIL3	0.915	3.9286	.66258	19.548	<0.001			
BIL4	0.913	3.9000	.75984	19.507	<0.001			

Note: AVE = Average Variance Extracted, CA = Cronbach's Alpha, CR = Composite Reliability.

Table 1 contains information on the psychometric properties showing information on the items and their means, standard deviations (SD), p-values, average variance extracted (AVE), Cronbach alpha (CA) and construct reliability (CR). This research involved eight constructs: involvement (INV), enthusiasm (ENT), attention (ATT), absorption (ABS) as IVs; e-WOM and behavioural intention to loyalty (BIL) as DVs; CE (CE) as the mediating variable; and CRM as the moderating variable. The means and the SDs show that the respondents are in agreement with the dimensions of the model. INV was measured with 9 items, ENT and ABS with 6 items each, CE with 8 items, CRM with 6 items while the 2 DVs were measure with 4 items each. Items that loaded below 0.6 were removed while those that loaded above were retained (Table 1). Removing the items that loaded poorly enhanced the R square values to 0.55 for CE; 0.66 at e-WOM; and 0.59 at BIL (fig. 2) which justified the removal of the items. The remaining items have t-values above 1.96 and p-values well below the 0.01 margin of error which is a justification for their retention. The three tools: AVE, CA, and CR are diagnostic measures of reliability and the thresholds are: 0.5, 0.6 and 0.7 respectively. The information in table 1 show that apart from ABS with extracted variance of 0.495 and e-WOM with Cronbach' alpha of 0.570, our constructs are

above the acceptable thresholds which implies that our scale has internal consistency and merit further analysis. The next is the discriminant validity analysis.

Table 2: Fornell-Larcker Discriminant Validity Analysis

	INV	ENT	ATT	ABS	CE	CRM	e-WOM	BIL
INV	0.722							
ENT	0.539	0.771						
ATT	0.422	0.278	0.783					
ABS	0.468	0.451	0.660	0.704				
CE	0.252	0.343	0.511	0.505	0.789			
CRM	0.291	0.282	0.512	0.534	0.757	0.767		
e-WOM	0.306	0.218	0.630	0.571	0.551	0.528	0.661	
BIL	0.565	0.447	0.482	0.571	0.461	0.541	0.239	0.879

Discriminant validity is one item of construct validity that relates to the degree to which two constructs are distinctive; as every construct in analysis must be proved to have discriminant validity from all other scales. Discriminant validity shows the extent to which summated scales are distinct. The correlation must be low less than 0.7 to show that the constructs are distinct. High correlation between IV and DV have no problem but for IVs is indicative of collinearity. Table 2 show high correlation of 0.757 between CRM and CE but these are the moderating and mediating variables respectively hence they are retained. Moreover, the full collinearity variance inflation factors (FCVIFs): INV=1.982, ENT=1.694, ATT=3.143, ABS=2.541, CE=3.140, CRM=2.816, e-WOM=2.092 and BIL=2.292 are all within acceptable range (3.3 - 5.0) and thus no construct need to be removed. Discriminant validity also implies that the diagonal correlations must be higher than all the others below it. All other correlations between the constructs are well within range showing that our scale has discriminant validity. The mediation model of the study showing the four IVs, the mediator as CE and the two DVs. This is the first structural analysis before the moderation since our study is a moderated mediation. As shown in the figure, the coefficient of determination R square at CE is 0.55, which implies that 55% of the variances in CE are accounted for by the four IVs. The R square at e-WOM is 0.65 which implies that 65% of the variances in e-WOM are accounted for by the Four IVs plus the CE. Similarly, the R square at BIL is 0.59 and this implies that 59% of the variances in BIL are accounted for by the four IVS and the CE. Except for three effects/paths: INV→CE, ENT→BIL and ATT→BIL, all the other eleven effects/paths are statistically significant. We proceed to the moderated mediation model.

The moderated mediation model of our study showing the four IVs, the Mediator, the two DVs and the moderator. With the inclusion of the moderator variable in the model, the R square at CE improved from 0.55 to 0.59, that of e-WOM decreased from 0.65 to 0.58 while that at BIL improved significantly from 0.59 to 0.77. This on the average show R square increase of 0.05 or 25% increase on the total variances explained. The implication of this is that the addition of the moderating variable to our model is justified as it enhanced variances explained. We proceed to test and validate our hypotheses using the effects/paths in the moderated mediation model.

Table 3: Assessing the structural model

S/No	Paths (DIRECT EFFECTS)	B	SE	Effect sizes	p-values	Decision
1.	INV→CE	0.097	0.053	0.030	0.033	Supported
2.	ENT→CE	0.178	0.052	0.085	<0.001	Supported
3.	ATT→CE	0.487	0.050	0.352	<0.001	Supported
4.	ABS→CE	0.095	0.053	0.054	0.037	Supported

5.	INV→e-WOM	-	0.052		<0.001	Supported
		0.174		0.055		
6.	ENT→e-WOM	0.259	0.051	0.077	<0.001	Supported
7.	ATT→e-WOM	0.214	0.052	0.135	<0.001	Supported
8.	ABS→e-WOM	0.327	0.051	0.194	<0.001	Supported
9.	INV→BIL	0.110	0.053	0.062	0.019	Supported
10.	ENT→BIL	0.106	0.053	0.059	0.022	Supported
11.	ATT→BIL	-	0.053		0.415	Not
		0.011		0.006		Supported
12.	ABS→BIL	0.420	0.050	0.276	<0.001	Supported
13.	CE→e-WOM	0.455	0.050	0.263	<0.001	Supported
14.	CE→BIL	0.201	0.052	0.110	<0.001	Supported
INDRECT EFFECTS						
15.	INV→CE→e-WOM	0.044	0.038	0.014	0.012	Supported
16.	INV→CE→BIL	0.019	0.038		0.303	Not
				0.011		Supported
17.	ENT→CE→e-WOM	0.081	0.037	0.024	0.015	Supported
18.	ENT→CE→BIL	0.036	0.038		0.171	Not
				0.020		Supported
19.	ATT→CE→e-WOM	0.222	0.037	0.140	<0.001	Supported
20.	ATT→CE→BIL	0.098	0.037	0.052	0.005	Supported
21.	ABS→CE→e-WOM	0.043	0.038		0.126	Not
				0.026		Supported
22.	ABS→CE→BIL	0.019	0.038		0.307	Not
				0.012		Supported
MODERATED MEDIATION/MODERATED INDIRECT EFFECTS						
23.	CRM*INV→CE→e-WOM	0.091	0.037		0.008	Supported
				0.023		
24.	CRM*INV→CE→BIL	0.040	0.038		0.143	Not
				0.018		Supported
25.	CRM*ENT→CE→e-WOM	0.092	0.037		0.007	Supported
				0.022		
26.	CRM*ENT→CE→BIL	-	0.038		0.141	Not
		0.040		0.018		Supported
27.	CRM*ATT→CE→e-WOM	0.091	0.037		0.008	Supported
				0.004		
28.	CRM*ATT→CE→BIL	-0.040	0.038		0.143	Not
				0.015		Supported
29.	CRM*ABS→CE→e-WOM	-	0.038		0.477	Not
		0.002		0.000		Supported
30.	CRM*ABS→CE→BIL	-	0.038		0.490	Not
		0.001		0.000		Supported

Table 3 presents an analysis of direct and indirect effects in a theoretical model exploring the relationships between various constructs. These relationships are assessed based on coefficients (β), standard errors (SE), effect sizes, and p-values, with decisions indicating whether the effects are statistically significant. **Direct Effects:** The direct effects reveal several significant relationships. For instance, involvement (INV) positively influences customer engagement (CE) with a coefficient of 0.097 and a p-value of 0.033, indicating a moderate effect size of 0.030. Similarly, attitude (ATT) has the strongest direct effect on CE, with a coefficient of 0.487 and a substantial effect size of 0.352 ($p < 0.001$). This highlights the critical role of attitude in driving customer engagement. Absenteeism (ABS) also positively affects CE, though its impact is modest ($\beta = 0.095$, $p = 0.037$). In contrast, the effect of involvement (INV) on electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) is negative, with a coefficient of -0.174 and a p-value of less than 0.001. This unexpected result may suggest potential

tradeoffs where involvement focuses more on other priorities than fostering online advocacy. On the other hand, CE strongly predicts e-WOM ($\beta = 0.455, p < 0.001$), indicating that higher engagement significantly enhances electronic word-of-mouth. Regarding brand loyalty (BIL), involvement (INV) and absenteeism (ABS) positively influence BIL with coefficients of 0.110 ($p = 0.019$) and 0.420 ($p < 0.001$), respectively. However, attitude (ATT) does not significantly affect BIL ($p = 0.415$), suggesting that other factors might mediate this relationship.

Moderating Role of CRM: Customer relationship management (CRM) moderates several key relationships. For example, CRM strengthens the effect of attitude on CE ($CRM_{ATT} \rightarrow CE: \beta = 0.200, p < 0.001$) and involvement on brand loyalty ($CRM_{INV} \rightarrow BIL: \beta = 0.282, p < 0.001$). These findings underscore the importance of leveraging CRM to enhance these connections. However, CRM does not significantly moderate the relationship between absenteeism and CE ($CRM_{ABS} \rightarrow CE: p = 0.464$) or between CRM-modified absenteeism and BIL ($p = 0.057$), indicating limitations in CRM's moderating role in these areas.

Indirect Effects: The indirect effects focus on mediation paths, where CE acts as a mediator between variables like INV, ATT, and ABS and outcomes such as e-WOM and BIL. Notable significant indirect effects include the path from involvement to e-WOM through CE ($INV \rightarrow CE \rightarrow e-WOM: \beta = 0.044, p = 0.012$). This demonstrates that while involvement does not directly enhance e-WOM, it can have an indirect positive impact when mediated by CE.

Attitude (ATT) also significantly influences e-WOM and BIL through CE. The indirect effect of ATT on e-WOM ($ATT \rightarrow CE \rightarrow e-WOM: \beta = 0.222, p < 0.001$) highlights its critical role in driving online advocacy. Similarly, the indirect effect on brand loyalty ($ATT \rightarrow CE \rightarrow BIL: \beta = 0.098, p = 0.005$) emphasizes the importance of CE in translating attitude into loyalty. Certain paths, however, are not supported. For instance, involvement does not significantly impact brand loyalty through CE ($INV \rightarrow CE \rightarrow BIL: p = 0.303$), nor does absenteeism ($ABS \rightarrow CE \rightarrow BIL: p = 0.307$). This suggests that CE may not always serve as an effective mediator for these variables.

5. Conclusions and Implications

The findings provide valuable insights into the relationships between the variables. Attitude (ATT) emerges as the strongest predictor of customer engagement (CE), with customer engagement itself being a critical driver of e-WOM and brand loyalty. CRM plays a pivotal moderating role, amplifying the effects of certain variables, such as involvement and attitude, on key outcomes. However, the analysis also highlights areas that require further exploration. For instance, the negative direct effect of involvement on e-WOM suggests potential trade-offs or challenges that may need to be addressed. Similarly, the insignificant effects in some moderation and mediation paths indicate limitations that could inform future research and strategy. In conclusion, the study underscores the importance of fostering customer engagement, leveraging CRM effectively, and prioritizing attitude-driven strategies to enhance both electronic word-of-mouth and brand loyalty. At the same time, addressing weaker links and exploring unanticipated findings will further optimize outcomes.

This study is on CE behaviour in the hospitality industry, a sector that was hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Vivek et al., (2012) believe that CE has hypothetical roots within the extended domain of relationship marketing that emphasize the notions of interactivity and customer experience. The imperative of researching and studying CE as noted in the literature is that it helps companies especially multinationals in designing new products and in engaging and managing old and new customers. Pansari and Kumar (2016) design a model which they tested and validated in the US and affirmed that companies around the world could benefit immensely from CE researches. In the present study which is on antecedents and consequences of CE in the hospitality sector, we reviewed literature from the CE and CRM noting as evidenced in the literature that engagement can only take place when relationship(s) have been established. Hence, we propose a conceptual model with involvement, enthusiasm, attention and absorption as IVs and antecedents; CE as mediator variable and outcomes: e-WOM and BIL as DVs, while CRM is a moderating construct. The import of this is based on the maxim that CE has roots

within the extended domain of relationship marketing that emphasize the notions of interactivity and customer experience (Vivek et al., 2012). The model also investigated the moderating effects of CRM on the direct and indirect effects of the antecedents on e-WOM as well as BIL. The implication of this is that the hospitality industry has some peculiar characteristics that include two-way communication and relationship building. The model was tested with WarpPLS version 7 and we collected from 350 respondents majorly from different southern of Nigeria. We first ran the analysis without the moderator and second with the CRM moderating variable. With the inclusion of the moderator variable in the model, the R square at CE improved from 0.55 to 0.59, that of e-WOM decreased from 0.65 to 0.58 while that at BIL improved significantly from 0.59 to 0.77. That is to say that R square increased by 4% at CE; decreased by 7% at the e-WOM and increased by 18% at BIL. This on the average show R square increase of 0.05 or 5% increase on the average of the variances explained. Some of the direct, direct-moderated, indirect and moderated indirect effects show noticeable increases in their coefficients while others show decrease but on the whole CRM moderate CE which mediate the antecedents and consequences CE. The implication of this is that the addition of the moderating variable to our model is justified as it enhanced variances explained. Mintz (2021) emphasizes the need for businesses to map out strategies to win back customers post COVID-19 as consumers have shifted their focus from a hedonic, enjoyment-focused to a utilitarian, goals-based consumption procedure. The implication of this is that in the process of managing customers, marketers need to urgently deploy new strategies to better engage their everyday exchanges with their consumers' new behaviour. Mintz (2021) proposed a COUNTER COVID framework for engaging firms must follow in addressing their customer's new behaviour: that marketers need to create emotional connections with their customers; firms should demonstrate their value to their customers; and should expand their digital footprints to better reach their customers. Firms in the hospitality sector should increase customer trial and retention, and engage more effective and efficient digital methods. To engage customers meaningfully, operators of hospitality sector businesses need to maintain strong websites and employ the various social media channels to build relationships with customers and at the time engage them in this post COVID-19 era giving the changing consumer behaviours occasioned by the pandemic. There is also the need to address the security concerns associated with deadly pandemic even as it has subsided. This work is limited to the hospitality sector and could be repeated in other sectors as it should serve as spring board for further studies in the emergent customer management phenomenon. This moderated mediation is contribution to the literature on engagement marketing and will spur other researchers in this important area of customer management as well as the hospitality sector.

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