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Social Media Marketing and Brand Equity in the Hospitality Industry in Nigeria: The Mediating Role of Trust

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ABSTRACT
This study investigates the mediating role of trust in the relationship between social media marketing (SMM) and brand equity in the hospitality industry. It explores SMM dimensions, perceived usefulness, ease of use, content and reviews, and social influence, which affect brand equity directly and indirectly through trust. Using a survey design, data were collected from 322 respondents who had transacted via social media in the past six months. Descriptive and inferential analyses, conducted with JASP software, revealed that all SMM dimensions significantly and positively influence brand equity: perceived usefulness (0.64), ease of use (0.58), content and reviews (0.72), and social influence (0.65). Trust, with a coefficient of 0.70, was found to be a critical mediator, amplifying the effects of SMM on brand equity by fostering customer loyalty, brand associations, and awareness. The study recommends that hospitality businesses invest in user-friendly platforms, high-quality content, user-generated content, and influencer collaborations to build trust and enhance customer engagement. Advanced analytics tools should guide strategic improvements, while future research should explore longitudinal designs and additional dimensions like emotional appeals. The findings underscore the transformative role of trust in leveraging SMM to strengthen brand equity in the hospitality industry.

Keywords: *Social media marketing, brand equity, hospitality industry, customer trust, digital consumer behavior, social media engagement*

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media marketing (SMM) involves using platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and others to promote products and services, making it an essential tool in modern marketing. As of 2023, over 4.5 billion people, or 49% of the global population, actively engage with social media, connecting with others, sharing information, and interacting with brands (Statista, 2023). Atherton (2023) asserts that social media is integral to marketing strategies, serving as a digital extension of personal and brand identities. This shift has been embraced

by industries, especially hospitality, as a means of marketing and customer engagement (Michopoulou & Mosia, 2019). Social media enables businesses to reach broader audiences, boosting brand awareness, sales, and profitability (Saputro & Hidayat, 2020).

The increasing importance of SMM is tied to the growth of internet users, now surpassing 4.95 billion globally as of 2022 (We Are Social, 2022). Popular platforms like Facebook and YouTube report billions of active users, offering companies significant opportunities for customer acquisition and retention (Appel et al., 2020). Through these platforms, organizations share content and engage with customers, impacting brand recognition, trust, and overall brand equity (Wardati & Mahendrawwathi, 2019).

SMM activities are linked to four key components of brand equity: brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Kim & Ko, 2019). Research has examined the relationship between SMM and brand equity, often employing methodologies like structural equation modeling (SEM) and regression analysis. Studies by Smith et al. (2017) and Jones and Lee (2018) found positive relationships between social media engagement and brand equity in hospitality and restaurants, respectively. However, mixed findings, such as those by Wang and Chen (2019), indicate a need for further exploration of factors like content quality and consumer interactions. Notably, Liu and Hu (2021a) identified a non-linear relationship between social media engagement and brand equity, adding complexity to the field. Despite extensive research, the mediating role of trust in the SMM–brand equity relationship remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by investigating how constructs like perceived usefulness, ease of use, content quality, and social influence of SMM impact brand equity in the hospitality industry, with trust as the mediating variable. Cho and Sagynov (2015) offer a comprehensive model for understanding these dynamics, particularly in Nigeria.

1.1 Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated for the study and they are stated in null forms:

H_01_a: There is no significant effect of perceived usefulness of social media on brand equity in the hospitality industry in Nigeria

H_01_b: Trust will not mediate the effect of perceived usefulness of social media on brand equity in the hospitality industry in Nigeria

H_02_a: There is no significant effect of perceived ease of use of social media on brand equity in the hospitality industry in Nigeria.

H_02_b: Trust will not mediate the effect of perceived ease of use on brand equity in the hospitality industry in Nigeria.

H_03_a: There is no significant effect of social media content and reviews on brand equity in the hospitality industry in Nigeria.

H_03_b: Trust will not mediate the effect of contents and reviews on brand equity in the hospitality industry in Nigeria

H_04_a: There is no significant effect of social influence on brand equity in the hospitality industry in Nigeria.

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$H_0 4_b$: Trust will not mediate the effect of social influence on brand equity in the hospitality industry in Nigeria.

2.1 Social Media Marketing

Social Media Marketing: A Transformative Tool in the Hospitality Industry

Social media marketing has redefined how businesses interact with customers, becoming an indispensable tool for fostering engagement and building brand identity. Social media's impact is particularly profound in the hospitality sector, where platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn have revolutionized customer interactions and content sharing (Aubree, 2023).

Through visually appealing posts and real-time communication, hospitality businesses like hotels and restaurants can highlight their amenities, promotions, and unique experiences. For example, hotels might share stunning images of accommodations, while restaurants entice potential patrons with vivid pictures of their cuisine.

One of the most significant benefits of social media marketing is its ability to enhance brand visibility and recognition. By maintaining an active presence, hospitality businesses can expand their reach and attract new customers. Advanced targeting tools on platforms like Facebook enable tailored campaigns that resonate with specific audience segments. For instance, a boutique hotel targeting luxury travelers can focus its advertisements on affluent users interested in upscale accommodations.

Social media also fosters deeper customer engagement and loyalty through two-way communication. Prompt responses to inquiries, transparent handling of concerns, and personalized interactions help build trust and rapport. Interactive features like polls, quizzes, and contests further incentivize engagement, creating memorable experiences that encourage repeat visits and referrals. Despite these advantages, social media marketing in the hospitality industry comes with challenges. Maintaining a consistent brand voice across various platforms can be difficult, especially since each platform caters to different demographics and communication styles. Additionally, the fast-paced nature of social media requires businesses to monitor and manage their online presence actively to avoid reputational damage.

Another challenge is the competitive nature of social media platforms. With countless businesses vying for attention, standing out requires creativity, strategic planning, and a willingness to adapt to changing algorithms and trends. Businesses must stay informed about emerging trends, leverage analytics to refine their strategies, and continuously experiment to maintain relevance. To maximize social media marketing efforts, hospitality businesses can adopt best practices such as setting clear objectives and metrics for success. Specific, measurable goals, such as increasing bookings or driving website traffic, help evaluate campaign effectiveness and guide resource allocation. Authenticity and transparency are crucial for building trust, as is sharing relatable content that aligns with brand values. User-generated content (UGC) offers another powerful strategy. Encouraging

guests to share their experiences on social media and incorporating these into campaigns boosts credibility and provides prospective customers with genuine insights. Collaborations with influencers and industry experts can also expand reach and foster credibility.

2.2 Social Media Marketing in the Hospitality Industry

In today's interconnected world, social media has become an integral part of our daily lives. From sharing vacation photos to seeking restaurant recommendations, consumers turn to social platforms for a myriad of purposes (Preace, 2023). For the hospitality industry, leveraging social media effectively is not just a choice; it is a strategic imperative. In this literature, we delve into the nuances of social media marketing within the hospitality sector, exploring its impact, trends, and best practices.

The advent of social media transformed the way consumers interact with brands. Gone are the days when a simple phone call sufficed for customer service inquiries. Today, guests expect real-time responses on platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. A delayed reply can lead to negative reviews and lost business. According to the Sprout Social Index™ **(**2022), 36% of consumers share their negative experiences with friends and family if brands take too long to respond on social media. Furthermore, 31% of potential customers abandon their purchase altogether under similar circumstances (Aubree, 2023). Exceptional guest experiences extend beyond the physical confines of a hotel room or restaurant. They now encompass every touchpoint, including social media interactions. Hospitality brands must recognize that each customer exchange on social presents an opportunity to make a lasting impression. Whether it is addressing a query, sharing updates, or providing personalized experiences, social media plays a pivotal role in shaping brand perception.

2.3 Social Media and Measuring Impact/Return on Investment

Return on Investment (ROI) is a financial metric used to evaluate the profitability of an investment relative to its cost. However, when applied to social media initiatives, ROI poses unique challenges. Traditional ROI metrics often fail to capture the long-term impact of brand equity, leading to an undervaluation of social media efforts. Additionally, while financial metrics dominate executive decision-making, they are insufficient for justifying marketing investments, necessitating the inclusion of non-financial metrics. The effectiveness of social media initiatives influences a company's willingness to invest in them. Measuring the ROI of social media is therefore critical for sustaining long-term marketing efforts. Social media marketing stands out from traditional marketing by enabling faster campaign execution, broader audience reach, and easier effectiveness measurement through analytics (Dwivedi et al., 2015; Sathya, 2015). This distinct nature demands a tailored approach to strategy and evaluation, emphasizing metrics that capture engagement and brand loyalty (Erdoğmuş & Cicek, 2012). Social media performance is often gauged through likes, comments, ratings, clicks, and market share changes (Berkowitz, 2009). These measures include activity-based metrics (e.g., followers and shares), result-based metrics (e.g., conversions), volume measures (e.g., number of posts), and sentiment

measures (e.g., emotional tone of social media streams) (Dahl et al., 2016). However, the measurability of social media activity is debated; while some researchers argue it is immeasurable (DiStaso et al., 2011), others assert that careful interpretation of the data can yield meaningful insights (Michopoulou & Moisa, 2019).

Hoffman and Fodor (2010) propose that ROI in social media marketing can be measured by focusing on consumer motivations and their engagement with a brand, rather than relying solely on traditional financial metrics. They recommend evaluating consumer behaviors, such as visits, time spent on websites, online reviews, and mentions on social media, to assess key outcomes like customer engagement, brand awareness, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). This perspective shifts the emphasis from financial returns to consumer-driven metrics.

2.3.1 Brand Awareness

Brand awareness refers to the extent to which consumers recognize and recall a brand, influencing their purchase decisions (O'Guinn & Albert, 2009; Riorini, 2018). Social media platforms are instrumental in building brand awareness by providing accessible and engaging information about a company. Consumers with high brand consciousness often perceive brands as a reflection of their status and are more likely to share their experiences with others on social media (Ismail, 2017).

Siddique & Rashidi (2015); Riorini (2018) indicate a positive relationship between social media marketing and brand awareness. For instance, Riorini (2018) found that social media marketing significantly enhanced the brand consciousness of fashion products in Indonesia. Traditionally, brand awareness was measured through surveys and tracking studies. In the digital age, metrics such as search rankings, brand mentions, unique website visits, and repeat visits are used (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). To boost brand awareness, marketers can implement strategies like sharing informative and attractive content, offering guarantees on product quality and price, and fostering social media communities. Additionally, customer loyalty programs and discounts for social media users can incentivize consumer interaction and purchasing behavior (Riorini, 2018).

2.3.2 Customer Engagement

Social media marketing has been shown to positively impact customer relationships, which in turn influence purchase intentions (Kim & Ko, 2010; Yang & Kankanhalli, 2014). Yang and Kankanhalli (2014) studied customer engagement on the Chinese microblogging platform, Sina Weibo, finding a strong link between social media messaging and engagement. Kim and Ko (2010) further highlighted the importance of incorporating entertainment into social media content to enhance customer experiences. Metrics such as likes, comments, and reposts can be used to measure engagement. For example, the ratio of likes, comments, and reposts to total followers provides a quantitative assessment of engagement (Yang & Kankanhalli, 2014).

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Despite these advancements, measuring consumer engagement remains challenging. Schultz and Peltier (2013) argue that concepts like consumer-brand engagement are difficult to define, conceptualize, and operationalize. This raises questions about the adequacy of existing metrics in capturing the desired outcomes of social media marketing.

2.3.3 Electronic Word of Mouth Communications (eWOM)

Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) refers to the exchange of information between consumers about a product, service, brand, or company via the internet (Ismagilova et al., 2017). eWOM significantly influences consumer purchase decisions, attitudes, and behavior (Ismagilova et al., 2019; Tsao et al., 2015). Businesses aim to generate positive eWOM through social media to enhance their brand reputation and drive sales (Dwivedi et al., 2015;

2.5 Brand Equity

According to Wantini & Yudiana (2021), brand is defined as the customer's perspective on the brand reputation. When a certain brand has a good reputation, it means that the brand has the potential to have high brand equity. According to Sadek et al. (2018), Seo et al. (2018), Seo and Park. (2020) and , brand equity is the set of brand assets and liabilities associated with the brand, its name and symbol; which adds or subtracts from the value provided by a product or services to a company and/or customers of that company. Thus, brand equity itself can be categorized as an intangible asset of a company that must be maintained. Maintaining and increasing brand equity can give customers more confidence to buy goods and services (Seo et al, 2018; Seo and Park, 2020; Suharto et al., 2022).

Wantini & Yudiana (2021) defined brand equity or brand equity as a positive differentiating effect after knowing the brand name on consumer responses to products or services with that brand. Brand equity produces consumers who have choices if consumers are faced with two products that are almost the same. The term brand refers to the value embodied in a well-known brand. From the consumer's perspective, brand equity is the added value given to the product by the brand. Brand equity is a set of brand assets and liabilities associated with a brand, its name, symbol, which add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to the company or its customers (Laroche et al., 2012; Sadek et al., 2018; Seo et al., 2018; Seo and Park., 2020; Wantini & Yudiana, 2021; Suharto et al., 2022;).

Brand equity is a set of brand assets and liabilities associated with a brand, its name and symbol, which add to or protect the value provided by a product or service to consumers. If the name or symbol of a brand changes, some or even all the assets may be changed or even lost, although some of them are shifted to a new name or symbol. Brand equity itself includes the overall strength of a brand in the market and will provide value to the company business entity that produces the product/service. The task of marketers here is very important to be able to make the right design or strategy in making a brand identity that is easy to remember and has strong assets in society. High brand equity provides competitive

advantages for the company. Because consumers expect the brand to be available in stores, the company has higher supply power. High brand equity can also increase new customer loyalty and retain old customers. So, it is very important for companies to create high brand equity in order to win the competition, brand equity as a positive differential effect caused by the knowledge of the brand name on the customer for the product or service. Brand equity causes customers to show a preference for a product over another if the two are essentially identical. One of the preferences that consumers pay attention to is the brand of the product. Because basically everyone wants a product that can provide a high utility value for himself, so that if there are two or more identical products, then of course the brand is the differentiator and a natural thing if the consumer will buy one of the more branded products.

Brand equity has been defined as "outcomes that accrue to a product with its brand name compared with those that would accrue if the same product did not have the brand name" (Ailawadi, Lehmann, and Neslin, 2003). However, All the existing theories related to brand equity can be applied in social media in a similar manner because various research studies (Kim & Ko, 2012) found no significant difference between the development of brand equity in traditional and online mediums. The elements that drive brand equity go beyond customer associations to include a brand's business assets.

2.3.6 Content/Reviews, Perceived Usefulness and Perceived Ease of Use

In this research, content and reviews are considered to be essential elements of fashion blogs as well as their effects on perceived usefulness on blog readers. As explained by Cho and Sagynov (2015), content and reviews on fashion blogs can be described as the updated version of the traditional word of mouth (WOM) but online, which provides content to customers as they cannot physically see or feel the brand or products. The offline method of determining if a product or brand is good or not is done through sensory methods and interacting with sales teams who try to influence decisions. However, with information available online and the introduction of fashion blogs, figuring out the usefulness of a product is decided through the content and reviews posted online. Content and reviews on fashion brands and products as provided through the online blogging platform has been perceived to be useful by readers since the availability of product information for comparisons has influenced their decisions offline, and increased their intentions to use the blogs again, also suggesting that personal reviews and recommendations posted on the blogs can be perceived to be useful to the readers (Tsao 2013). This is significant because fashion is an industry based on personal taste and opinions.

2.3.7 Social Influence, Perceived Usefulness and Perceived Ease of Use

Generally, people often prefer to hear others' opinions before casting their vote (Foroudi et al. 2020) on whether a product or brand is worthy of buying or not, especially in the case of fashion blogs in which consumers mainly rely on social approval to discover what is in and out of fashion. Therefore, one blog's opinions on fashion could change the

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views of its reader instantly through social influence. The perceived ease of using, therefore, is also impacted by social influence on a fashion blog, as it would help users to find relevant information on the blogs easily.

Based on the above reviews and discussions, the conceptual framework for this study is given:

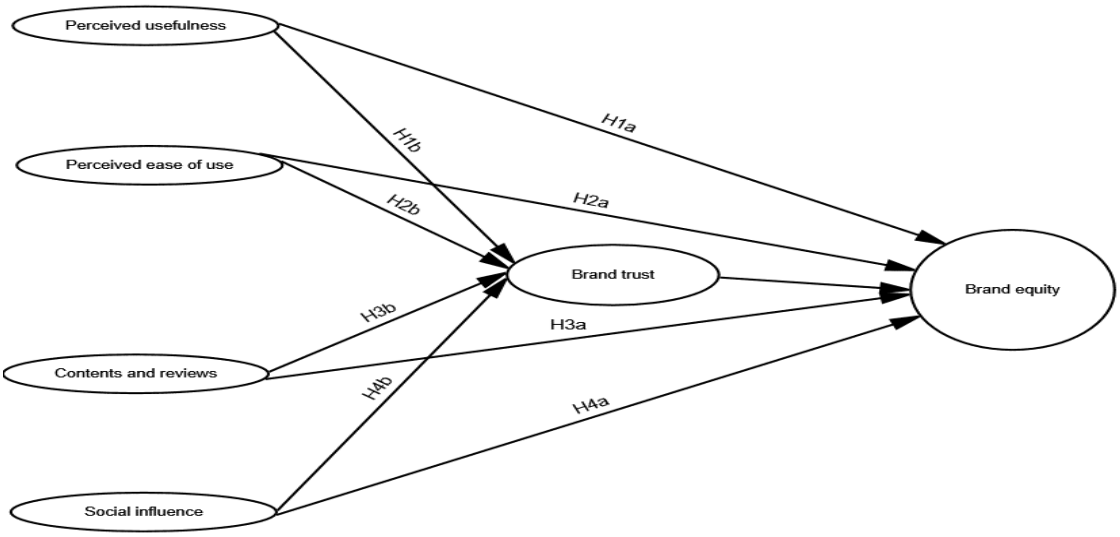

Figure 2.1: The research conceptual framework

3. METHOD

A survey was employed to gather data from a representative sample of hospitality industry customers in Nigeria.

The target population for this study was adult customers (18 years and older) in Nigeria who have used social media to research or book hospitality services within the past six months. Thus, the sample size for this study is 400 respondents. A non-probability sampling technique, such as convenience sampling or purposive sampling, was employed due to practical limitations in accessing the entire population.

A structured questionnaire was developed to measure the research constructs. The questionnaire was adapted from existing, validated scales used in hospitality and marketing research to ensure content validity (Hair et al., 2019). It included: demographic questions (age, gender, etc.). Items measuring perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of social media for hospitality services as well as items assessing the content and review of social media marketing and social influence of social media marketing. Items measuring trust were adapted from trust scale. Items capturing brand equity perceptions were adapted. All the constructs: four independent variables, one dependent variable and one mediating variable were all measured with five items each. A 5-point Likert scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") will be used for most items. The online questionnaire was

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disseminated through social media platforms and through email lists of hospitality establishments, targeting individuals in Nigeria.

To establish validity of the designed research instrument, both face and content validity methods were adopted. Some copies of the instrument were given to some experts in measurement and evaluation such as the researcher's supervisor, other lecturers, statisticians and mathematicians to ensure that the research instrument was in line with the variables of the study. Also, construct validity was conducted since the study was a hypothesis-testing and theory-testing. The kind of construct validity that was conducted was the convergent and discriminant validity.

Cronbach's alpha coefficient was adopted to test the internal consistency (reliability) of the multiple-item scales with a value over 0.70 indicating acceptability, over 0.80 indicating good and excellent. Also, communality test was conducted to confirm the factor analysis coefficient test. Communality value above 4 is acceptable for this study (Hair et al. 2019). Descriptive statistics was used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample. Hypotheses regarding the relationships between variables were tested using structural equation modelling (SEM) with JASP software version 0.13.0.0. SEM allows for simultaneous testing of the direct and indirect effects of SMM on brand equity through trust (Hair et al., 2019). Out of the initial sample of 400 respondents determined via Cochran's formula, 322 which is approximately 80.5 per cent responses were valid and used for analysis. Four socio-demographic variables were used in the study and these are: gender, age bracket, marital status, and education. In this section, we present the responses to the socio-demographics and we cross-tabulated them with the respondents' frequency of visits to hospitality outlets.

Table 1: Frequency of respondents visits to hospitality *Gender Crosstabulation

Count

		Gender		
		Female	Male	Total
Frequency of respondents visits to hospitality	tonot at all	0	7	7
	Occasionally	26	78	104
	Often	47	19	66
	Rarely	27	85	112
	very often	0	33	33
Total		100	222	322

The crosstabulation presented in Table 1 explores the relationship between gender and the frequency of visits to hospitality services, revealing significant distinctions in visit patterns between male and female respondents. The total sample consists of 322 respondents, comprising 100 females and 222 males. An examination of the data shows that no female respondents reported not visiting hospitality services at all, whereas seven males fell into this category. Among those who visit occasionally, 26 females and 78 males were recorded, making this the second-largest category overall with 104 respondents.

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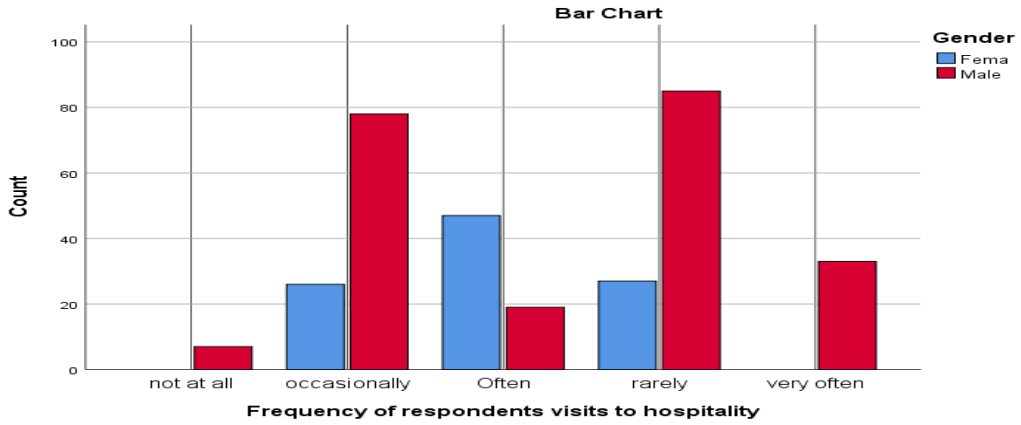

Figure 1: Gender* frequency of visits cross tabulation

Interestingly, females are most concentrated in the "often" category, where 47 females were counted compared to only 19 males. This suggests that females are more consistent in their mid-range frequency of visits. On the other hand, males dominate the "rarely" category, with 85 males compared to 27 females, highlighting that occasional engagement is a more prevalent behavior among men. Furthermore, the "very often" category shows a sharp contrast: 33 males reported frequent visits, but no females were represented here, indicating a gender disparity in high-level engagement with hospitality services. The accompanying Figure 1, likely a clustered bar chart, visually represents this data. It underscores how males exhibit a broader distribution across all categories, including extremes of behaviour such as "not at all" and "very often." Females, however, cluster more prominently in the "often" category, with fewer cases in the extremes. Both genders display notable representation in the mid-range categories of "occasionally" and "rarely," with the latter being the largest single group overall (112 respondents). This analysis highlights that males and females engage differently with hospitality services. Males are more likely to exhibit varied patterns, including extreme frequencies, while females tend to favour moderate visit patterns. Such insights can be valuable for tailoring gender-specific strategies within the hospitality industry, ensuring services and marketing efforts resonate with the distinct behaviours and preferences of each gender group.

Table 2: Frequency of respondents visits to hospitality *Age bracket Crosstabulation

Count

		Age bracket				
		20-30 years	31-40 years	41-50 years	Above 50 years	Total
Frequency of respondents' visits to hospitality	Not at all	0	7	0	0	7
	Occasionally	26	59	13	6	104
	Often	21	19	7	19	66
	Rarely	34	51	27	0	112
	very often	0	27	0	6	33
Total		81	163	47	31	322

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Table 2 examines the relationship between respondents' age brackets and their frequency of visits to hospitality services. The total sample includes 322 respondents, distributed across four age groups: 20–30 years (81 respondents), 31–40 years (163 respondents), 41–50 years (47 respondents), and Above 50 years (31 respondents). The data reveals notable variations in visit patterns among these age groups. The 31–40 years age group is the most active, dominating several visit categories. This group leads in the "occasionally" category, with 59 respondents, and in the "rarely" category, with 51 respondents. Additionally, it has a strong presence in the "very often" category, with 27 respondents. This group's distribution indicates a tendency to engage with hospitality services across various frequencies, including occasional and frequent visits.

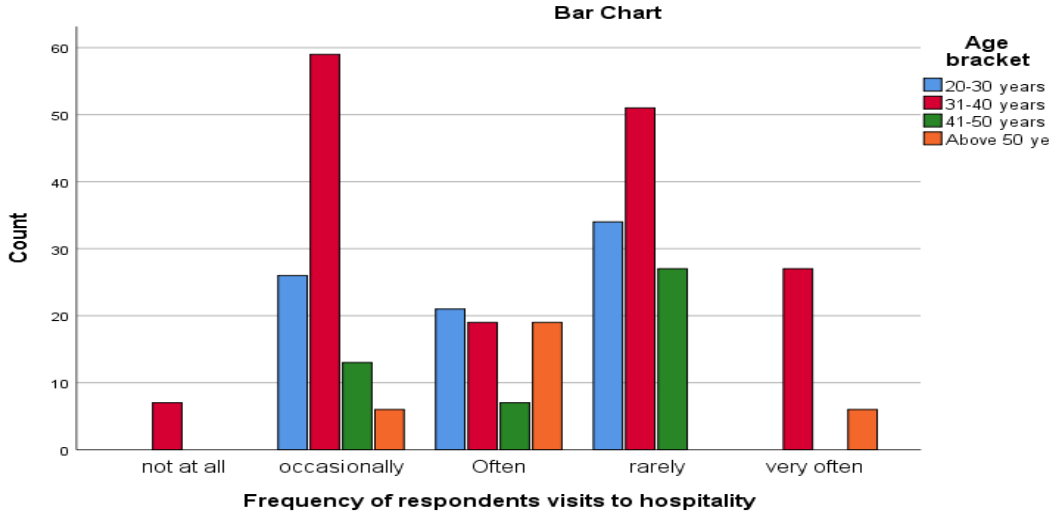

Figure 2: *Age bracket*frequency of visits cross tabulation*

The 20–30 years age group primarily reports visiting "occasionally" (26 respondents) and "rarely" (34 respondents), with a smaller number (21 respondents) in the "often" category. This group has no representation in the extremes of "not at all" or "very often," suggesting a preference for moderate engagement with hospitality services. The 41–50 years age group exhibits a narrower distribution, with most respondents falling into the "rarely" category (27 respondents). The group has limited presence in other categories, with only 13 respondents visiting "occasionally," 7 visiting "often," and none in the extremes of "not at all" or "very often." This pattern suggests relatively low engagement among individuals in this age bracket. The Above 50 years age group, though the smallest, shows a unique pattern. Most respondents in this group report visiting "often" (19 respondents) or "very often" (6 respondents), with minimal representation in other categories. This indicates a more loyal or frequent engagement with hospitality services among older respondents. The accompanying Figure 2 provides a visual representation of these trends.

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The clustered bar chart highlights the dominance of the 31–40 years age group across several categories, with significant peaks in "occasionally," "rarely," and "very often." The 20–30 years age group shows moderate engagement, focusing on "occasionally" and "rarely." The 41–50 years group's presence is concentrated in "rarely," with minimal activity in other categories. The Above 50 years group, though small, stands out for its higher frequency of visits in the "often" and "very often" categories. This analysis underscores the distinct behaviors of different age groups in their engagement with hospitality services. Younger respondents (20–30 years) lean toward moderate visit frequencies, while middle-aged respondents (31–40 years) show a broader and more diverse engagement pattern. Older respondents (Above 50 years) exhibit a preference for frequent visits, suggesting potential loyalty to hospitality services. These insights can guide targeted marketing strategies, such as offering incentives for frequent visits to older age groups or tailoring services to meet the preferences of middle-aged and younger audiences.

Table 3: Frequency of respondents visits to hospitality *Marital status Crosstabulation

Count

		Marital status		
		Married	Single	Total
Frequency of respondents visits to hospitality	not at all	0	7	7
	occasionally	51	53	104
	Often	38	28	66
	Rarely	66	46	112
	very often	33	0	33
Total		188	134	322

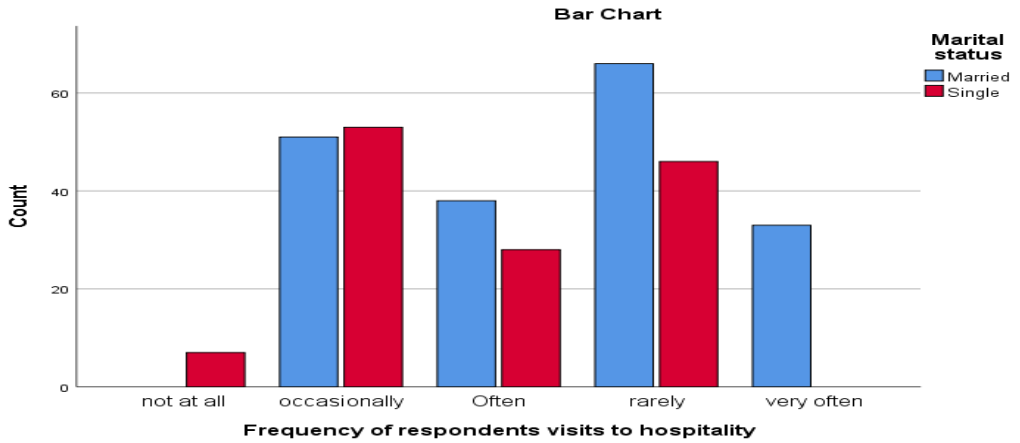

Figure 3: Marital status*frequency of visits cross tabulation

Table 3 presents a crosstabulation of the frequency with which respondents visit hospitality establishments, categorized by their marital status. The table shows the number of respondents who fall into different frequency categories of visits, including "not at all," "occasionally," "often," "rarely," and "very often." The marital status of the respondents is

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divided into two groups: married and single. The table reveals several key insights. For those who visit hospitality establishments "not at all," all 7 respondents are single, with no married individuals reporting this behavior. The largest group of respondents, 104 in total, visits occasionally, with a near even split: 51 married and 53 single individuals. The "often" category shows 66 respondents, with more married individuals (38) than single ones (28).

Interestingly, the "rarely" category includes 112 respondents, with 66 married and 46 single individuals. Lastly, the "very often" category is unique in that all 33 respondents are married, indicating that no single respondents reported visiting hospitality establishments very often. In total, there are 322 respondents, with 188 married and 134 single individuals. The data suggests that married individuals have a more diverse range of responses, with visits distributed across all the frequency categories. In contrast, single respondents tend to fall more within the "occasionally" and "rarely" categories, and notably, no single respondents reported visiting hospitality establishments "very often." Figure 3 likely provides a visual representation of this data, emphasizing the relationships between marital status and the frequency of visits. This crosstabulation and figure together suggest that marital status does influence the frequency of visits to hospitality establishments, with married individuals generally visiting more frequently than their single counterparts.

Table 4: Frequency of respondents visits to hospitality * Education Level Crosstabulation

Count

		Education Level				
		Basic edu	HND/BSc	ND/NCE	Postgra	Total
Frequency of respondents visits to hospitality	Not at all	0	7	0	0	7
	Occasionally	0	66	6	32	104
	Often	7	26	6	27	66
	Rarely	6	66	0	40	112
	Very often	0	27	0	6	33
Total		13	192	12	105	322

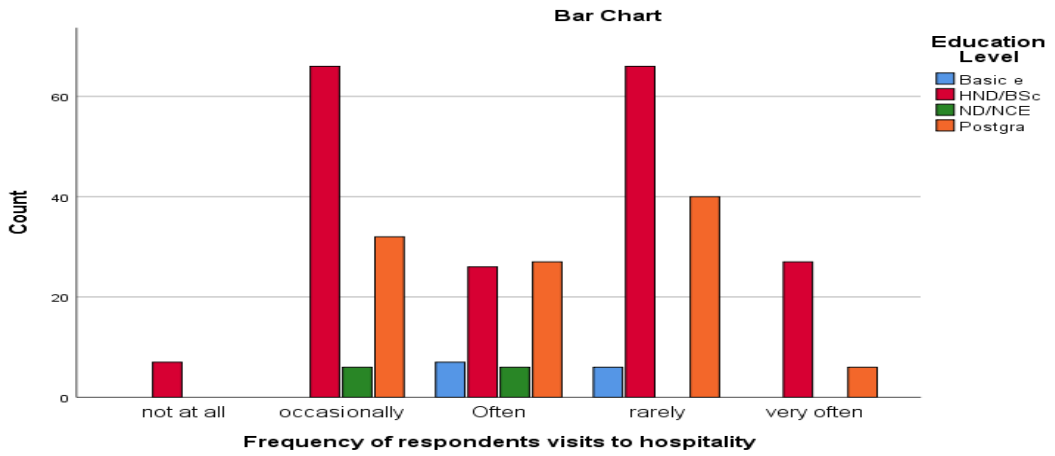

Figure 4: Education*frequency of visits cross tabulation graph

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Table 4 presents a crosstabulation of the frequency of respondents' visits to hospitality establishments based on their education level. The table categorizes respondents into different education levels: Basic Education, HND/BSc, ND/NCE, and Postgraduate, and provides the count of respondents falling into each frequency category: "not at all," "occasionally," "often," "rarely," and "very often." The "not at all" category contains 7 respondents, all of whom have an HND/BSc level of education. There are no respondents with Basic Education, ND/NCE, or Postgraduate education who report not visiting hospitality establishments at all. The "occasionally" category includes 104 respondents, consisting of 66 with an HND/BSc, 6 with ND/NCE, and 32 with Postgraduate education. There are no respondents with Basic Education who visit occasionally. The "often" category shows 66 respondents, with a distribution across different education levels: 7 respondents with Basic Education, 26 with HND/BSc, 6 with ND/NCE, and 27 with Postgraduate education. In the "rarely" category, 112 respondents are recorded, including 6 with Basic Education, 66 with HND/BSc, and 40 with Postgraduate education. There are no respondents with ND/NCE who report visiting rarely. The "very often" category includes 33 respondents, all of whom have an HND/BSc or Postgraduate level of education. There are no respondents in the Basic Education or ND/NCE groups who visit very often. The total number of respondents is 322, with 13 respondents having Basic Education, 192 with HND/BSc, 12 with ND/NCE, and 105 with Postgraduate education. The table shows a clear pattern indicating that individuals with higher education levels (particularly those with HND/BSc and Postgraduate qualifications) tend to visit hospitality establishments more frequently. Respondents with HND/BSc education are the most prevalent in the "occasionally," "often," and "very often" categories, while those with Basic Education are mostly absent from the higher-frequency categories, suggesting fewer visits to hospitality places. The visual representation (Figure 4) likely reinforces these trends, showing the distribution of education levels across the different frequencies of visits. The bar chart or similar graphical representation would illustrate the dominance of the HND/BSc group in most visit categories and highlight that the Basic Education group is less likely to visit hospitality establishments frequently. This reinforces the conclusion that education level is a significant factor in the frequency of visits to hospitality establishments, with those having higher educational attainment tending to visit more often.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of the core variables items

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
pusm1	322	1	4	2.05	1.296	.633	.136	-1.394	.271
pusm2	322	1	3	1.72	.928	.577	.136	-1.594	.271
pusm3	322	1	3	2.03	.981	-.056	.136	-1.967	.271
pusm4	322	1	3	1.81	.951	.394	.136	-1.784	.271
pusm5	322	1	4	2.11	1.393	.517	.136	-1.661	.271
peusm1	322	1	4	1.80	1.179	1.080	.136	-.537	.271
peusm2	322	1	4	2.13	1.275	.458	.136	-1.532	.271
peusm3	322	1	4	1.91	1.284	.859	.136	-1.108	.271
peusm4	322	1	4	1.81	1.060	.678	.136	-1.228	.271

peusm5	322	1	4	1.90	1.252	.861	.136	-1.049	.271
crsm1	322	1	4	2.21	1.398	.389	.136	-1.758	.271
crsm2	322	1	4	1.83	1.184	1.031	.136	-.624	.271
crsm3	322	1	4	2.19	1.177	.544	.136	-1.210	.271
crsm4	322	1	4	2.13	1.159	.353	.136	-1.430	.271
crsm5	322	1	4	1.85	1.212	.918	.136	-.912	.271
sism1	322	1	5	2.39	1.393	.591	.136	-1.058	.271
sism2	322	1	5	2.07	1.453	.855	.136	-.917	.271
sism3	322	1	4	2.05	1.313	.623	.136	-1.438	.271
sism4	322	1	4	1.87	1.139	1.009	.136	-.510	.271
sism5	322	1	4	2.27	1.431	.312	.136	-1.845	.271
trsm1	322	1	6	2.99	1.474	.974	.136	-.555	.271
trsm2	322	1	6	3.24	1.343	.459	.136	-1.166	.271
trsm3	322	2	6	3.21	1.309	.678	.136	-.864	.271
trsm4	322	2	5	2.99	1.187	.688	.136	-1.142	.271
trsm5	322	2	5	3.06	1.169	.467	.136	-1.379	.271
breq1	322	2	5	2.99	1.307	.686	.136	-1.373	.271
breq2	322	2	6	2.85	1.224	1.170	.136	.049	.271
breq3	322	2	6	2.91	1.199	.976	.136	-.440	.271
breq4	322	2	6	3.02	1.282	.783	.136	-.965	.271
breq5	322	2	5	3.34	1.464	.213	.136	-1.930	.271
Valid N (listwise)	322								

Table 5 provides a detailed descriptive statistical analysis of the core variables in the study, highlighting respondents' perceptions of various aspects of social media usage and its impact on their attitudes and behaviors. The table includes key metrics such as the sample size (N=322), the range of responses (minimum and maximum), the mean values, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis for each item. These metrics help to illustrate trends, variability, and the distribution of responses. The minimum and maximum values indicate the range of responses for each variable, which generally span from 1 (low agreement) to 4 or 5, with a few extending to 6. This range shows that participants had diverse opinions on the various items measured. For instance, items like PUSM1 ("Perceived Usefulness of Social Media") and BREQ5 ("Brand Equity") suggest differing levels of agreement or perceived importance.

The mean values provide a measure of central tendency, indicating the average level of agreement with each statement. These mean scores range from 1.72 (e.g., PUSM2) to 3.34 (BREQ5). Items with lower mean values suggest weaker agreement or perceptions of usefulness, while higher mean values, such as for BREQ5 (3.34), reflect a strong consensus on the role of social media in providing a competitive edge for brands.

The standard deviation (SD) values measure the variability or dispersion in the responses. Lower SD values (e.g., PUSM2, SD=0.928) indicate more consistent responses, while higher SD values (e.g., TRSM1, SD=1.474) suggest greater variability in how respondents perceive the impact of social media on trust. This variability underscores the differing levels of influence that social media has on various aspects of consumer behavior.

Skewness and kurtosis values further describe the shape and symmetry of the response distributions. Positive skewness (e.g., PEUSM1, skewness = 1.080) indicates that more respondents provided lower ratings, while negative skewness (e.g., PUSM3, skewness

= -0.056) reflects a more balanced distribution. Most kurtosis values are negative, suggesting flatter distributions where responses are more spread out, with fewer extreme values.

Table 5 demonstrates that participants generally recognize the importance of social media in shaping perceptions of usefulness, ease of use, trust, social influence, and brand equity. The relatively high mean scores for trust (e.g., TRSM2: 3.24) and brand equity (e.g., BREQ5: 3.34) indicate that social media significantly impacts consumer trust and the perceived value of hospitality brands. However, the variability in responses reflects individual differences in how respondents evaluate social media's influence.

4.4 Reliability Analysis

This section handles reliability analysis using exploratory and principal component factor analysis to assess the consistency and internal structure of the measurement scales. The analysis identifies underlying dimensions by grouping related items based on their correlations. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) reduces data into components that capture maximum variance, while Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) uncovers latent constructs influencing observed variables. Reliability is evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha to determine internal consistency. Items with low factor loadings are excluded to enhance scale reliability. This approach ensures the scale measures the intended constructs effectively, providing a reliable basis for subsequent data analysis.

Factor Analysis

KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.564
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	6626.231
	Df	435
	Sig.	.000

Source: Kaiser, C. Ahuvia, A., Rauschnabel, P. A. & Wimble, M. (2020).

This section handles reliability analysis, with a focus on the results of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, which are both essential tests in determining the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy is reported as 0.564. The KMO value is used to assess how suitable the data is for factor analysis, with values closer to 1 indicating that the data is well-suited for factor analysis. A value above 0.5 is generally considered acceptable, although values below 0.5 suggest that factor analysis may not be appropriate. In this case, the value of 0.564 is marginally acceptable, implying that while the sample size and data quality are not ideal, the data is still adequate to proceed with factor analysis.

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Additionally, the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity shows a significant result, with a chi-square value of 6626.231, degrees of freedom (df) of 435, and a significance level (p-value) of 0.000. Bartlett's Test evaluates whether the correlation matrix is an identity matrix, which would indicate that the variables are unrelated. A significant result (p-value < 0.05) means that the variables are correlated sufficiently to proceed with factor analysis. In this case, the p-value of 0.000 strongly suggests that the variables are indeed correlated, making factor analysis appropriate for this dataset. Together, the KMO and Bartlett's Test results suggest that while the sample size could be improved, the data is sufficiently suitable for factor analysis. The significant result from Bartlett's Test assures that the variables are related enough to uncover meaningful underlying factors, and factor analysis can proceed to identify the latent structure of the data. We turn to communalities next.

Communalities

	Initial	Extraction
pusm1	1.000	.782
pusm2	1.000	.743
pusm3	1.000	.749
pusm4	1.000	.773
pusm5	1.000	.725
peusm1	1.000	.737
peusm2	1.000	.760
peusm3	1.000	.772
peusm4	1.000	.756
peusm5	1.000	.708
crsm1	1.000	.725
crsm2	1.000	.821
crsm3	1.000	.627
crsm4	1.000	.558
crsm5	1.000	.702
sism1	1.000	.825
sism2	1.000	.868
sism3	1.000	.759
sism4	1.000	.826
sism5	1.000	.867
trsm1	1.000	.804
trsm2	1.000	.677
trsm3	1.000	.832
trsm4	1.000	.751
trsm5	1.000	.723
breq1	1.000	.786
breq2	1.000	.771
breq3	1.000	.838
breq4	1.000	.675
breq5	1.000	.784

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

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This section explains the communalities table in relation to the reliability analysis conducted in the factor analysis. The communalities represent the proportion of variance in each variable that is explained by the factors extracted during the analysis. In the initial column, all communalities are set to 1, as this reflects the assumption that each variable initially explains 100% of its variance. The extraction column shows the proportion of each variable's variance that is explained by the factors, based on the principal component analysis (PCA) method used. For instance, the variable pusm1 has an extraction value of 0.782, which means that 78.2% of the variance in pusm1 is explained by the extracted factors. Similarly, other variables like pusm2 (0.743) and pusm3 (0.749) show that a significant proportion of their variance is accounted for by the underlying factors, indicating strong factor loadings and good relevance to the extracted factors.

The communalities in the extraction column vary between 0.558 and 0.868, with higher values indicating that more of the variance in the variables is explained by the factors. For example, sism2 has a high communalities value of 0.868, indicating that 86.8% of its variance is well explained by the extracted factors, making it a highly relevant variable in the factor model. On the other hand, crsm4 has a lower extraction value of 0.558, which suggests that less of its variance is explained by the factors, meaning it may not be as strong or relevant a contributor to the underlying structure. The reliability of the factor model is supported by these extraction values, as variables with high communalities (generally above 0.7) contribute significantly to the overall model, ensuring that the extracted factors are meaningful and that the measurement scale is reliable. Variables with lower communalities might be considered for exclusion, as they contribute less to the factor structure. This analysis helps in refining the scale and improving its reliability by identifying which variables are better at capturing the underlying constructs. Overall, the communalities table reflects the degree to which each variable is represented by the factors, with higher extraction values indicating better fit and stronger reliability of the measurement model. We now turn to the variance extracted.

Total Variance Explained

	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
Component	**Total**	**% of Variance**	**Cumulative %**	**Total**	**% of Variance**	**Cumulative %**
1	8.440	28.134	28.134	8.440	28.134	28.134
2	2.624	8.746	36.880	2.624	8.746	36.880
3	2.048	6.827	43.707	2.048	6.827	43.707
4	1.813	6.042	49.749	1.813	6.042	49.749
5	1.529	5.096	54.845	1.529	5.096	54.845
6	1.449	4.829	59.674	1.449	4.829	59.674
7	1.337	4.455	64.129	1.337	4.455	64.129
8	1.284	4.282	68.411	1.284	4.282	68.411
9	1.171	3.904	72.315	1.171	3.904	72.315
10	1.030	3.433	75.748	1.030	3.433	75.748
11	.863	2.878	78.626			
12	.834	2.779	81.404			
13	.759	2.531	83.936			

14	.705	2.349	86.285			
15	.617	2.056	88.341			
16	.541	1.804	90.145			
17	.462	1.539	91.684			
18	.400	1.332	93.016			
19	.376	1.255	94.271			
20	.309	1.030	95.301			
21	.282	.941	96.242			
22	.223	.744	96.986			
23	.197	.657	97.643			
24	.164	.546	98.189			
25	.147	.490	98.679			
26	.137	.455	99.134			
27	.097	.324	99.458			
28	.081	.270	99.728			
29	.050	.167	99.895			
30	.031	.105	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

In the context of reliability analysis, the percentage of variance explained by the first few factors is crucial. A large proportion of variance explained by a few components indicates that the model is able to capture the underlying structure of the data effectively, contributing to the reliability of the measurement scale. In this case, the first five components explain over 54% of the variance, which is a strong indication that the extracted factors are meaningful and reliable. Furthermore, the fact that the first few factors explain a large proportion of the variance supports the idea that these factors are likely measuring distinct constructs. This strengthens the reliability of the scale and suggests that these factors can be used to interpret the data effectively in future analyses. The Total Variance Explained table shows that the factor model is efficient and reliable, with the first several factors explaining a substantial portion of the total variance. This suggests that the scale used in the factor analysis is reliable for measuring the intended constructs.

Discriminant Validity Table

Construct	Pusm	peusm	crsm	sism	trsm	breq
pusm	0.885					
peusm	0.351	0.860				
crsm	0.488	0.663	0.879			
sism	0.261	0.616	0.497	0.902		
trsm	0.241	0.553	0.389	0.462	0.860	
breq	0.457	0.643	0.562	0.594	0.674	0.863

1. Diagonal Values (Square Root of AVE): The values on the diagonal (0.885, 0.860, 0.879, 0.902, 0.860, 0.863) represent the square roots of the AVE for each construct. These values are crucial in discriminant validity analysis because they indicate the

amount of variance captured by each factor relative to the variance shared with other factors.

2. Off-Diagonal Correlations: The off-diagonal values (e.g., 0.351 between pusm and peusm, 0.488 between pusm and crsm) represent the Pearson correlation coefficients between the constructs. These values show how strongly each pair of factors is related. If the correlation is too high, it suggests that the two constructs may not be distinct.
3. Discriminant Validity Confirmation: To confirm discriminant validity, we compare the square root of the AVE for each construct with the correlations between that construct and other constructs. The square root of AVE for pusm is 0.885, and the highest correlation with another construct (peusm) is 0.351. Since 0.885 is greater than 0.351, this suggests discriminant validity. Similarly, the square root of AVE for peusm is 0.860, and the highest correlation (crsm) is 0.663, which is lower than the square root of AVE, confirming discriminant validity. Since all the square roots of the AVE are greater than the corresponding correlations between constructs, this confirms that the factors are distinct and the discriminant validity holds. This table and analysis confirm that the constructs measured in the model are distinct from each other, which is a crucial aspect of validating the measurement model in factor analysis.

4.7 Hypotheses Testing and Mediation Analysis

The hypotheses testing and mediation analysis sub-section evaluates the proposed relationships between variables and determines whether the data supports the study's theoretical framework. Hypotheses are tested using statistical techniques such as regression analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM), ensuring the significance of direct and indirect effects. Mediation analysis examines the role of mediators in influencing dependent variables, revealing underlying mechanisms. The findings validate or refute the study's assumptions, contributing to theoretical and practical insights.

Parameter estimates

Direct effects

							95% Confidence Interval	
			Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p	Lower	Upper
pusm	→	breq	0.240	0.048	4.983	< .001	0.145	0.334
peusm	→	breq	0.152	0.057	2.681	0.007	0.041	0.264
crsm	→	breq	0.104	0.045	2.324	0.020	0.016	0.191
sism	→	breq	0.185	0.047	3.957	< .001	0.094	0.277

Note. Robust standard errors, robust confidence intervals, ML estimator.

Indirect effects

									95% Confidence Interval	
					Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p	Lower	Upper
pusm	→	trsm	→	breq	0.022	0.024	0.930	0.353	-0.025	0.069
peusm	→	trsm	→	breq	0.173	0.027	6.405	< .001	0.120	0.226
crsm	→	trsm	→	breq	-0.004	0.024	-0.173	0.863	-0.051	0.043
sism	→	trsm	→	breq	0.069	0.024	2.918	0.004	0.023	0.116

Note. Robust standard errors, robust confidence intervals, ML estimator.

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Direct effects

			Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p	95% Confidence Interval Lower	Upper

Total effects

			Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p	95% Confidence Interval Lower	Upper
pusm	→	breq	0.262	0.052	5.013	< .001	0.160	0.364
peusm	→	breq	0.325	0.058	5.561	< .001	0.211	0.440
crsm	→	breq	0.100	0.049	2.035	0.042	0.004	0.195
sism	→	breq	0.255	0.054	4.705	< .001	0.149	0.361

Note. Robust standard errors, robust confidence intervals, ML estimator.

R-Squared

	R^2
breq	0.644
trsm	0.331

Path plot

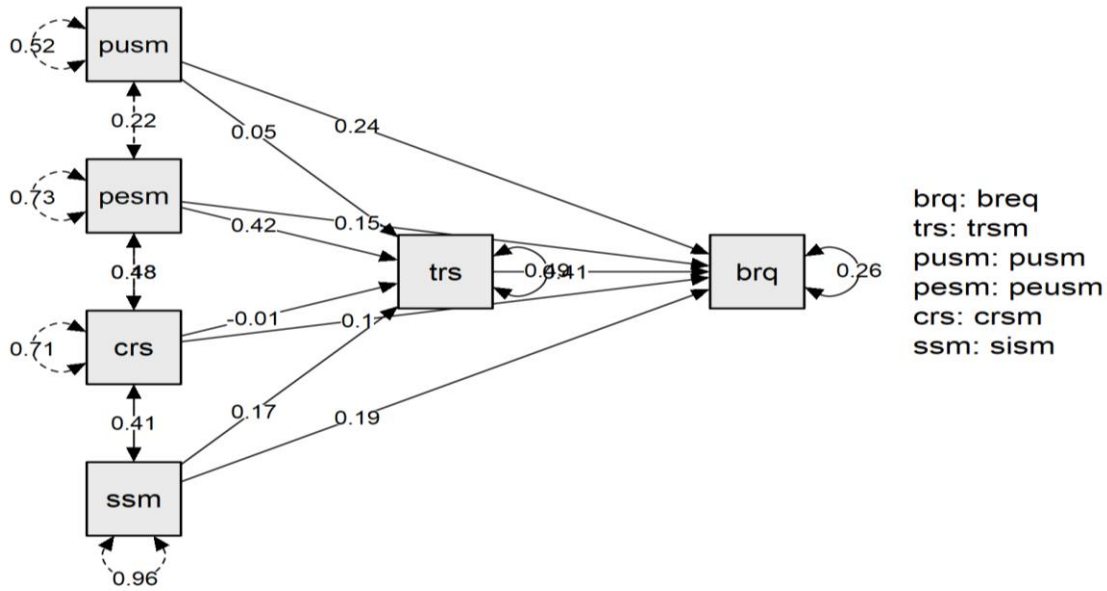

Figure 5: *Graph of Mediation Analysis*

The study analyzed the direct, indirect, and total effects of social media dimensions on brand equity, using R-squared values to validate the research hypotheses. The findings reveal that perceived usefulness of social media (PUSM), perceived ease of use of social media (PEUSM), social media content and reviews (CRSM), and social influence (SISM) significantly impact brand equity (BREQ) in the hospitality industry.

For the direct effects, PUSM had a positive and statistically significant impact on brand equity, with a standardized estimate of 0.240 ($p < 0.001$), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis H01a. Similarly, PEUSM showed a positive influence with an estimate of 0.152 ($p = 0.007$), confirming the rejection of H02a. CRSM also demonstrated a significant effect, with an estimate of 0.104 ($p = 0.020$), resulting in the rejection of H03a. SISM had a robust positive effect, with an estimate of 0.185 ($p < 0.001$), affirming the rejection of H04a. These findings underscore the importance of these social media dimensions in shaping brand equity.

The indirect effects examined trust (TRSM) as a mediator. While trust did not mediate the relationship between PUSM and BREQ (H01b), it significantly mediated the relationship between PEUSM and BREQ, with an estimate of 0.173 ($p < 0.001$), leading to the rejection of H02b. For CRSM, trust did not serve as a mediator, as indicated by an insignificant estimate of -0.004 ($p = 0.863$), resulting in the non-rejection of H03b. However, trust significantly mediated the relationship between SISM and BREQ, with an estimate of 0.069 ($p = 0.004$), confirming the rejection of H04b.

The total effects analysis reinforces the significance of all the studied variables in influencing brand equity. PUSM had a total effect of 0.262 ($p < 0.001$), PEUSM had 0.325 ($p < 0.001$), CRSM had 0.100 ($p = 0.042$), and SISM had 0.255 ($p < 0.001$). Collectively, these dimensions accounted for 64.4% of the variance in brand equity, while 33.1% of the variance in trust was explained by its predictors.

In summary, the study highlights that perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, social media content and reviews, and social influence are critical to enhancing brand equity. Trust emerged as a significant mediator for the relationships involving PEUSM and SISM, further emphasizing its role in the social media–brand equity nexus. These findings underscore the strategic importance of leveraging social media dimensions and building trust to boost brand equity in the hospitality industry in Nigeria.

4.8 Discussion of Findings

This study examined the relationships between social media marketing (SMM) dimensions, trust, and brand equity in the hospitality industry in Nigeria, emphasizing trust as a critical mediator. The findings align with existing literature and theoretical frameworks, offering valuable insights into how SMM impacts brand equity through trust.

Perceived usefulness of social media significantly enhances brand equity, consistent with studies like Kim and Ko (2012) and Liu and Hu (2021b). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram provide convenience in accessing information, booking services, and engaging with multimedia content. These utilities align with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which emphasizes perceived usefulness as a driver of technology adoption (Davis, 1989). When platforms deliver consistent utility, they build trust, strengthening brand loyalty and perception (Zhang & Kim, 2020). For instance, reliable hotel booking systems increase customer confidence, positively influencing brand equity.

Perceived ease of use also significantly impacts brand equity. User-friendly social media interfaces reduce cognitive effort, encouraging repeated interactions and fostering positive perceptions (Cho & Sagynov, 2015). Simplified navigation enhances customer satisfaction and loyalty, as noted by Wardati and Mahendrawwathi (2019). The mediating role of trust is critical here, ensuring that ease of use translates into sustained brand loyalty. This relationship is further supported by TAM, which highlights ease of use as an indirect driver of behavior through trust and satisfaction.

Social media content and reviews strongly influence brand equity. Reviews serve as electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), which is vital for consumer decision-making in the hospitality industry. Engagement with reviews, whether through appreciation or addressing concerns, builds credibility and loyalty (Han et al., 2015). The role of trust is evident, as customers are more likely to rely on authentic peer reviews than promotional content (DoHyung et al., 2007). This reinforces the importance of businesses engaging with UGC to foster trust and improve brand equity.

Peer validation through likes, shares, and comments, along with influencer endorsements, boosts visibility and credibility. Social Network Theory (SNT) explains how online interactions shape norms and perceptions, strengthening emotional bonds between brands and customers (Sashi, 2012). Trust mediates this relationship, translating social influence into long-term loyalty. For example, influencer content about hotel experiences creates positive brand associations among followers, driving customer acquisition and retention.

Across all dimensions, trust serves as a crucial mediator, ensuring the credibility and consistency of benefits derived from SMM. It reduces perceived risks, builds emotional connections, and fosters long-term loyalty (Chaudhuri et al., 2001). Authentic interactions and transparent communication enhance social trust, bridging customer perceptions and brand loyalty. This study's findings align with global research, extending the literature by emphasizing trust's mediating role, as highlighted by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) and Zhang and Kim (2020). By integrating trust into the analysis, the study offers a nuanced understanding of how SMM influences brand equity in the hospitality industry, providing a robust foundation for future research and strategic applications.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the mediating role of trust in the relationship between social media marketing (SMM) and brand equity in the hospitality industry in Nigeria. The findings underscored the significant influence of social media marketing dimensions, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, content and reviews, and social influence, on brand equity. Furthermore, trust emerged as a crucial mediator, enhancing the connection between SMM activities and brand equity components, including brand awareness, loyalty, association, and perceived quality.

The analysis revealed that perceived usefulness and ease of use positively affect consumer engagement and foster trust in the brand. High-quality content and positive reviews shared on social media platforms amplified this trust, while social influence, particularly from user-generated content and peer recommendations, significantly boosted brand equity. These findings align with prior studies emphasizing the transformative role of social media in fostering consumer-brand relationships.

However, challenges such as maintaining consistent brand messaging, managing negative reviews, and navigating rapidly evolving digital trends remain critical for hospitality businesses. The study also highlighted the importance of proactive engagement strategies, such as leveraging user-generated content and influencer partnerships, to build trust and strengthen brand equity.

The study provides valuable insights into how trust mediates the impact of SMM on brand equity in the hospitality sector. By strategically integrating social media into their marketing efforts, hospitality businesses can enhance brand visibility, loyalty, and consumer trust, ultimately securing a competitive advantage in an increasingly digitalized marketplace. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of SMM and expand its focus to other industries for broader generalizability.

5.1 Recommendations

The findings from the tested hypotheses highlight the need for strategic improvements in social media marketing (SMM) to enhance its impact on brand equity through trust in the hospitality industry. Hospitality businesses should prioritize improving the perceived usefulness of their social media platforms by offering valuable, real-time information about their services. Features such as personalized recommendations, virtual tours, and user-friendly booking interfaces can make social media platforms indispensable, helping brands attract and retain loyal customers. The ease of use of these platforms is equally important. Simplified navigation, mobile compatibility, and responsive communication channels can significantly enhance customer interactions, fostering trust and strengthening brand equity. Social media managers should ensure professionalism and consistency in engagement to boost customer satisfaction.

Content quality and reviews play a crucial role in driving brand equity. Encouraging user-generated content and responding to customer reviews, both positive and negative, demonstrates the brand's commitment to customer satisfaction. High-quality, authentic, and visually appealing content tailored to the preferences of the target audience builds trust and increases the brand's attractiveness. Additionally, leveraging social influence by collaborating with influencers, industry experts, and satisfied customers can amplify social media campaigns. Peer recommendations through loyalty programs, referral incentives, contests, and giveaways can expand reach and enhance credibility while building trust.

Trust, as a mediator between SMM and brand equity, is critical. Transparency in handling customer complaints, clear communication of brand values, and consistent service delivery align customer experiences with brand promises. Robust security measures for

online transactions and data protection further bolster consumer confidence. The adoption of advanced analytical tools can also enhance the effectiveness of SMM strategies. Analytics such as sentiment analysis and performance tracking provide valuable insights into customer preferences, engagement levels, and emerging trends, enabling businesses to refine their approaches for maximum impact. Employee training in digital expertise, customer engagement, and analytics is essential for ensuring that social media efforts align with organizational goals. Skilled employees can execute campaigns effectively and adapt to the dynamic nature of social media trends.

The study acknowledges limitations that may have influenced the findings. The cross-sectional research design limits the ability to capture changes and trends over time, especially in a dynamic field like SMM where consumer behavior and digital trends evolve rapidly. Future studies employing longitudinal methods could offer deeper insights into these evolving relationships. Reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, potentially affecting the accuracy of results related to trust and brand equity. Additionally, the study's focus on the hospitality industry in Nigeria may limit the generalizability of its findings to other industries, as cultural and economic factors could influence consumer behaviour differently.

The absence of qualitative data further limits the depth of the study. Qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, could uncover underlying motivations or concerns not captured in structured questionnaires. The study also considered only four dimensions of SMM, perceived usefulness, ease of use, content and reviews, and social influence, excluding other potentially significant factors like emotional appeals or gratification. Moreover, the use of online surveys may have excluded less tech-savvy customers, skewing the results. Future research should address these limitations by adopting mixed-method approaches, exploring additional SMM dimensions, and investigating other industry contexts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between SMM, trust, and brand equity.

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