

Research Article

Employees' Customer Service and Customer Relationship Management Perspectives in the Digital Era: A Case Study of Tour Companies in Fort Portal City, Uganda

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Abstract

Customer service management and customer relationship management are key practices that contribute to the overall customer experience and sustainable competitive differentiation. This study undertaken in Fort Portal City located in Western Uganda, examined tour company employee's knowledge of customer service management (CSM) and views on customer relationship management (CRM). Using a structured questionnaire, data was collected and subjected to a Likert scale analysis and a chi square analysis in R studio to determine the relationship between respondents' sex (male, female) and their views on how CRM and CSM enhance tour companies' business performance. Results of chi-square tests revealed a significant relationship between gender and the view that tour companies prioritized application of digital technologies in CRM. Results further reveal that employees have limited understanding of customer service and customer relationship management practices especially the use of digital platforms in their business operations. This gap in knowledge curtails tour companies' business performance and service delivery. There's need for them to equip their employees with knowledge and technology for customer service and customer relationship management to enhance their service delivery and business performance. In addition, they need to adopt the framework for mainstreaming CSM and CRM in their businesses for long-term sustainability and a functional relationship leading to customer satisfaction and value.

Keywords

Tour Company, Digital Technology Platforms, Knowledge, Customer Service Management, Customer Relationship Management, Framework, Uganda

1. Introduction

Customer service management (CSM) and customer relationship management (CRM) are practices that contribute to the overall customer experience and sustainable competitive differentiation [12]. CSM and CRM must be aligned with every aspect of a company to enable it function with the customer service mindset thereby ensuring superior customer

experience [45]. For a long time, researchers in customer management have demonstrated the business importance of company-customer relationships, developed models for understanding customer behavior and response to marketing, and elaborated the customer behavior-company's performance nexus [62]. Customer service management policies are

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crucial in maintaining positive company-customer relationships and attaining business success. Well-structured customer service policies ensure that an organization meets customer expectations, aligns its operations with strategic goals, and fosters a customer-centric culture [1]. Furthermore, policies are crucial for meeting and exceeding customer expectations, fostering brand loyalty, and ultimately driving sales. At the same time, scholars have proposed strategies to optimize CRM. Considering that CRM plays a crucial role in building long-term relationships between companies and customers, it is imperative for companies to implement effective CRM strategies, in order to gain an in depth understanding of the needs and preferences of consumers, provide personalized service and improve customer satisfaction and loyalty [31, 78].

Companies often build and develop relationships with customers in order to know them better [55]. In addition, companies need to understand customers' requirements and preferences to serve them better [87]. As a result, it is fundamental for companies to build and develop long-term customer relationships. Given that companies and businesses work in a competitive environment, it is imperative for them to compete and excel by building and developing long-lasting relationships with customers [51]. To achieve this, companies need to strive for customer equity through customer relationship management (CRM). Customer equity is the sum of discounted customer lifetime values of the company's current and potential customers [36]. The concept recognizes customers as the primary source of both current and future cash-flows and thus as one of the firm's most valuable assets. Companies are able to build long-lasting customer relationships through creation of superior customer value and satisfaction [26]. In the globalization and digital era, companies need to build and develop customer relationships which are mutually beneficial.

Digital technologies are vital in tourism business and they are rapidly spreading across different sectors of the economy. Over the past three decades, investments in digital technologies have driven increase in GDP growth [59]. As a result, the technology has become pivotal in business innovation and gained traction in tourism literature and discourse. The advent of the Internet and other advanced information technologies have created a global network of robust digital technology infrastructure that supports businesses and service provision [70]. A thorough understanding of information technologies and the its impacts on business strategy is, therefore, vital to achieving business success. Several scholars have investigated the use of information technologies in business management. However, few studies have systematically analyzed the opportunities that the technologies offer in the tourism sector thus leaving fundamental questions unanswered. For instance, how can actors such as tour companies in the tourism sector integrate digital technologies that build relationships with customers and impact business growth and sustainability? To answer this question, the seminal works of [63]

developed the Customer Relationship Change Spectrum (CRCS) as a framework to manage information technologies in businesses. It is evident in literature that customers play critical roles in business success [53]. In line with this, [69] developed a framework of Customer Service Life Cycle (CSLC) to guide business managers in utilizing information technology to enhance customer service. Although it is not explicitly examined in this study, CSLC elucidates the processes involving choice and purchase of a product, using it, and maintaining brand loyalty [35]. The dimensions of CSLC are information search, negotiation, acquisition and ownership of a product. CSLC provides new opportunities to meet customers' personalized needs and optimize resources which are akin to the functions of tour companies [96]. Therefore, understanding CSLC in the context of this study is crucial to optimize business performance and retain competitiveness of tour companies using a customer-centric approach [65].

CSM and CRM form the backdrop of this study, which investigated the extent to which tour companies use digital technology to enhance business performance taking Fort Portal City in western Uganda, as a case study. Therefore, tour companies need to be part of the digital transformation wave, fully grasp and harness opportunities to enhance businesses in the tourism sector. However, there are concerns that require further academic enquiry in order to understand the role of digital technology in enhancing CSM in tourism and hospitality industry. This study responds to these concerns by investigating the role of CSM and CRM practices in tour business performance in light of the growing application of digital technology in the knowledge-based economy that includes the fast-growing tourism sector.

It is evident from literature that few studies have explored the nexus between CSM, CRM and tour company business performance in view of the evolving digital technology era. For instance, [58] examined how CRM can create customer-centric culture in organizations while [59] developed a conceptual framework that reveals the value of digital technology and the ability of organizations to use them. They observed that digital technologies drive business development as they provide incentives for their developers and the user companies. In a related study, [67] investigated how companies use digital technologies to impact marketing by reshaping the traditional process of value creation and building relationships with customers for value co-creation. More importantly, they noted that companies tend to be more 'digitalized' than being 'digitally transformed'. [89] assessed how digitalization affects customer satisfaction and reported that customers do not perceive digital technologies equally and positively as tools that can lead to increased satisfaction. They highlighted the need to test customer satisfaction when implementing digital technology-based innovations in business.

It is clear from the aforementioned studies that research efforts have mainly focused on application of digital technologies in marketing and businesses development without explicit investigation of the role of the technologies in en-

hancing CSM and CRM by tour companies as key players in the tourism sector. Our study adds to this extant literature by exploring the role of digital technology in attaining the nexus between CSM, CRM and tour company business performance. Accordingly, this research specifically focused on tour companies in Fort Portal city in western Uganda as a case study. In addition, the study makes a 'neglect spotting' contribution to the tourism literature. Although we recognize that considerable research exists on CSM and CRM, we are also cognizant that studies that examine the role of digital technology in enhancing the intricate interrelationships between CSM, CRM and business performance by tour companies in developing countries are scarce. Existing academic research on CSM and CRM have mostly been undertaken in the developed countries leaving a dearth of knowledge in developing countries including Uganda. The present study answers the following questions: How do respondents perceive the application of digital technology in enhancing CSM in tour operations? How do respondents perceive digital technology application in enhancing CRM in tour operations from a gender perspective? Which framework can guide CSM and CRM practices in tour operations?

1.1. An overview of CSM and CRM

The history of CSM dates back thousands of years, evolving alongside trade and commerce. From the earliest forms of trade in 3000 BC to today's digital customer support, the evolution of CSM has been shaped by innovation, technology, and consumer expectations [92]. CSM was set in motion in the 1760s after the industrial revolution, marking the beginning of what is now referred to as the customer service management revolution. The invention of the telephone by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876, created a new CSM landscape, where new service innovations were built on digital platforms and value co-creation [92]. [27] argue that to move CSM forward, managers must navigate the complexities and turbulence in the new service landscape while simultaneously ensuring service provision. [37] drew on decades of experience to explain how CSM is a customer-focused practice.

CSM is a process that involves building strong business-customer relationships beyond sales [18]. It facilitates business operations and improves provision of customer support. CSM entails equipping support agents with the tools, knowledge and skills to answer customers' queries promptly. It also involves cultivating a business culture that values customer satisfaction and provides feedback to drive continuous improvement [18]. Furthermore, it is the integration of experiences involving customers and customer service. It involves development of effective strategies and techniques while harnessing the benefits of digital technology to offer quality service to customers thus increasing customer satisfaction, retention and repeat business. Digital technology is crucial in enhancing customer service and transforming the way in which businesses engage with customers [57]. The

integration of digital technology in CSM has shifted customers' expectations and empowered organizations to deliver efficient services. Furthermore, application of digital technology in CSM broadens understanding of customers' needs and enables businesses to respond to changes in customer behavior and preferences [57]. In this regard, adoption of digital technology-assisted CSM can ease management of customers' expectations and expedite service delivery. In view of this, there is need for companies to equip employees with knowledge of CSM. If practiced properly, CSM offers a plethora of advantages to businesses to acquire, nurture and retain customers. Rather than leaving customer service to chance, businesses need to adopt CSM practice to increase customers awareness of products and services and foster loyalty thereby making companies competitive in the marketplace.

On the other hand, CRM practice emerged in the 1970s [13] and has since evolved as a tool for managing customers. It has become a valuable tool for information management, sales promotion and marketing through customer interaction [34]. In addition, CRM has evolved into a technology-enabled business management tool that leverages customers' knowledge thereby strengthening profitable relationships [2, 98]. In many respects, CRM contributes to efficient business management as it is technology-aided to support customer relations [5, 15]. The practice helps a business to profile customers and contribute to customer satisfaction [94]. CRM is also customer-centric business strategy that combines sales, marketing, and customer care [56, 90]. On top of that, it contributes to customer loyalty and retention which are key elements for a business to be stay competitive in the market place.

According to [75], companies continue to grapple with the challenges of maintaining and retaining customers. Customer-perceived value, corporate image, and service quality influence customer satisfaction and retention. It is important, however, to note that customer satisfaction does not necessarily influence customer retention. In fact, and as already noted above, CRM empowers companies to meet customer satisfaction and make them loyal. Other factors that influence customer satisfaction include customer-perceived value (CPV) which refers to the trade-off between the benefits of product and service offering and the sacrifices perceived by the customer [10]. CPV is a valuable metric for companies to be successful in businesses, because it enhances customer satisfaction, loyalty and retention leading to long-term profitability [72].

Increasingly there are studies that have been undertaken to expand the understanding of CRM in tourism [22, 66]. These studies highlight key drivers such as technological advancements, information management, and personalized service quality in shaping customer satisfaction and loyalty. However, much of the existing literature is focusing primarily on hotels, restaurants, or niche attractions, while the role of tour company's is shaping customer experience has received compar-

actively limited attention. Correspondingly, although recent studies emphasize the growing influence of digitalization in tourism customer experiences [4, 8], they remain too broad, often analyzing the companies as general business entities. There is limited understanding of how tour company employee's undertake CSM and the extent to which this is moderated by their digital technology knowledge and competencies. Furthermore, most studies on CRM in tourism are geographically concentrated in the developed economies such as America and Europe, with little empirical evidence developing regions in Africa and emerging economies such as in Uganda.

1.2. Theoretical Consideration

This study is underpinned by three interconnected theories that lead to long-term company-customer relationship and business sustainability namely Customer Service Management Theory (CSMT), Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Relationship Marketing Theory (RMT). CSM is underpinned by the customer service management theory that evolved from the Nordic school of thought that incorporates marketing perspectives and the North American school of thought that views CSM from the operations management perspective [20]. The theory states that the customer is a co-creator of value and emphasizes the importance of establishing functional relationships between a service provider and a customer [20]. The theory also intreats the concept of service quality which depends on employee interactions with the customer and leads to increased satisfaction. The theory has also been applied by scholars in organizational management research that examined service value creation from a network perspective rather than a dyadic relationship. As such, the theory elucidates the relationships between internal and external processes in a company that influence customers, employees and the market [20]. The theory is immensely relevant to our study because it encapsulates service quality that tour operators need to provide and accentuates value creation to satisfy customers' needs. It also underlines the value of creating a dyadic long-term relationship between tour companies and customers that enable companies to deliver quality service.

Debnath et.al. reviewed 196 articles on theories related to CRM as part of the effort to define research areas for future application [19]. They reported 96 theories that include the Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Relationship Marketing Theory (RMT). We have used these theories to underpin our study and elucidate the CRM concept. SET states that humans in social situations choose behaviors that maximize their likelihood of meeting self-interests in those situations [19]. As such, SET is relevant to our study because tour operators would prefer to use the approach that suits their business performance in line with their knowledge and skills. In this regard, choice of approach is a behavioral instinct that is aligned to the tour operators' business. On the other hand, RMT states that key drivers influence outcomes of a company

and enable understanding of the causal relationship between the drivers of business and outcomes [19]. In relation to this study, the RMT implies that tour operators need to identify the factors that influence customers choice of their products and services in order to package them to meet the needs and expectations. This is an important element of the theory because tour businesses operate in a competitive market where it is critical to attract and retain customers.

According to [33], relationship marketing refers to a strategy that cultivates deep and meaningful relationships with customers to ensure long-term satisfaction and brand loyalty. Thus, the theory focuses on building long-term customer relationships that enhance customer satisfaction. Furthermore, the theory supports how to create a strong company-customer relationship that can contribute to sustainable business [39]. In this regard, application of relationship marketing in tour company business helps establish long-term relationship between customers and the company. The theory also offers fundamental insights into the relationships between tour companies and customers. The theory posits that satisfied customers can market a tour company to potential customers which in turn contribute to satisfactory business performance and sustainability. As noted by [38], relationship marketing is anchored on customer care and empathy. Thus, it is imperative for managers to prioritize and establish company-customer relationships for the company's success.

The foundations of both theories are evident in social science literature. Originating in the 1920s in social psychology, SET is applicable to a number of disciplines [3] including tourism. The term 'exchange' is applicable beyond social psychology. Over time, scholars have applied the theory in a large body of research to elucidate social behavior [21] - a common dimension in tourism business. Although SET was initially applied to elaborate the principle of cost-benefit analysis in social relations, the theory has been extended to explain social behaviour in dyadic and network relations [21]. Some scholars have applied it to explain utilitarian and sociological perspectives on relationships established within social networks which is a typical phenomenon in tourism business [9]. The theory posits that behaviour results from anticipation rather than perception of actual gains. Thus, SET articulates the utilitarian function of social relations and their contingency on other actors. For instance, the relationship between tour companies and customers which influences customers' decisions to pay for products and services offered by tour companies.

Thus far, SET deepens understanding of tour operator's knowledge and attitudes towards CSM and CRM practices. The theory is predicated on the fact that people weigh the potential benefits and risks of their social relationships before making a business decision. This implies that tour operators need to analyze *a priori* the benefits and risks faced by their businesses including the effects of weak company-customer relationships that cause a down turn in business performance. In relation to this paper, it can be summed up that CSM and

CRM are technology aided knowledge-centered practices that tour operators need to apply in their day-to-day businesses operations to enhance performance and minimize risks. Both practices lead to establishment of long-term company-customer relationships in tandem with the tenets of SET theory. According to [23], CRM in particular leads to customer loyalty and propagates robust connections with companies. Thus, SET underpins the establishment and sustenance of long-term company-customer relationships that yield mutual benefits.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Area

The study was undertaken in Kabarole district (00° 15' N - 10° 00' N and 300° 00' E - 300° 40' E) in western Uganda [61]. The district borders Bundibugyo and Ntoroko district in the west, Kibaale district to the north, Kasese district to the south and Kamwenge and Kyenjojo districts to the east [42] (Figure 1). It has a total land area of 1814.44 km² [61]. The altitude varies from 915 to 3,556 meter above sea level. The annual rainfall

ranges from 1200 mm to 1500 mm and the mean temperatures range from 18 °C to 30 °C. According to [50], tourism in Kabarole district has grown over the years with improvement in infrastructure. The growth has increased employment opportunities, improved living standards and contributed to natural resources conservation and cultural heritage preservation.

On top of the entrepreneurship opportunities offered by tourism to the local people in the district, there are several social, economic and environmental dimensions of tourism that can be harnessed to improve livelihoods and alleviate poverty. For instance, the district is endowed with vast natural and cultural heritage resources that can be harnessed for tourism development including Fort Portal as a Tourism City, the Toro Royal Tombs, the Rwenzori mountains, volcanic hills, geological formations, Crater lakes and National parks (Kibale National Park and Rwenzori Mountains National Park). About 20% of the households derive their livelihoods from employment income and revenues from tourism and hospitality related enterprises [40]. According to the Kabarole District Local Government Development Plan 2020/21-2024/25, local communities need to be empowered to engage in tourism related enterprises for their livelihoods.

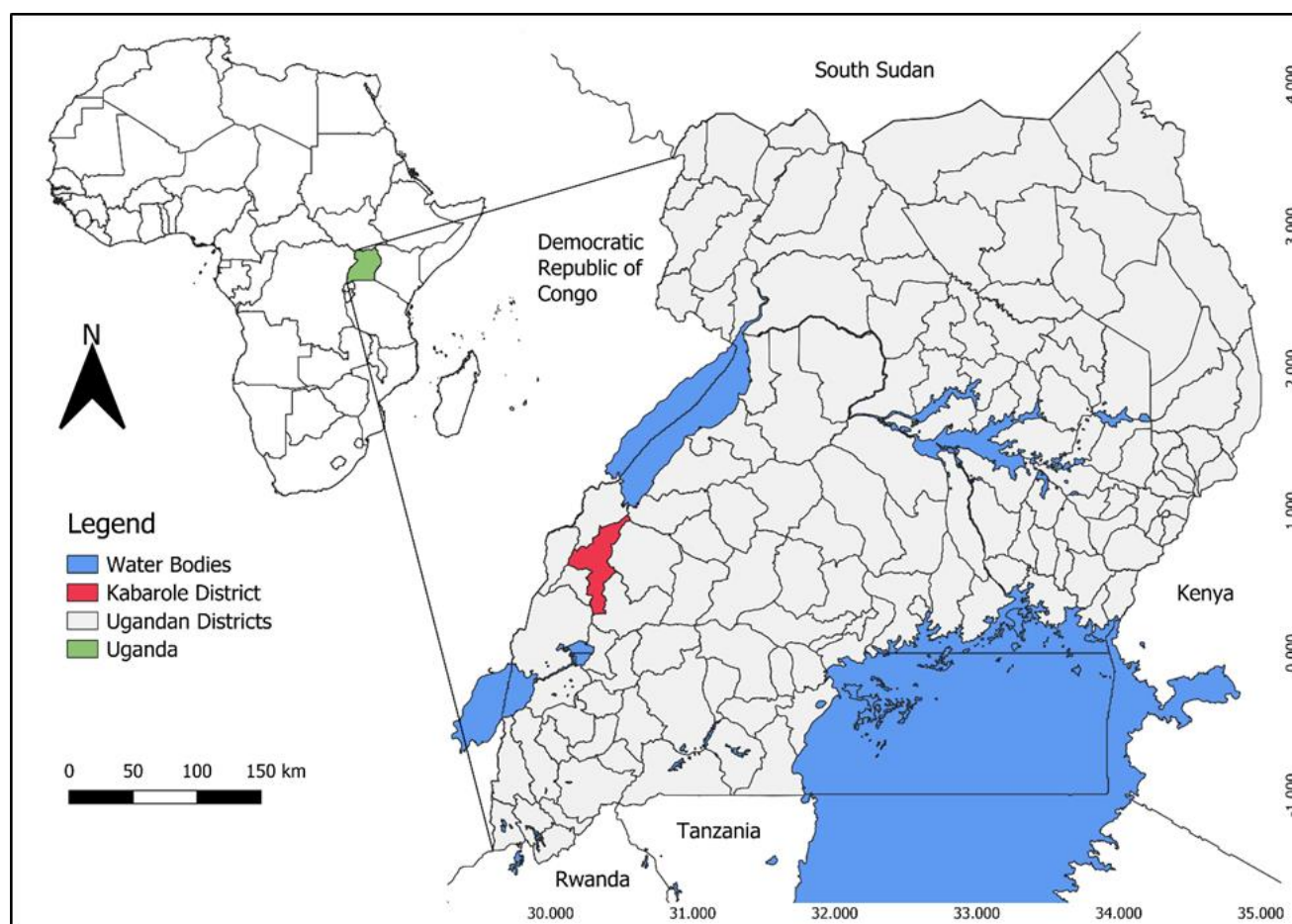


Figure 1. Location of Kabarole district in Uganda.

2.2. Research Design

The study adopted a phenomenological exploratory research design [11, 17] with a mixed methods approach [49]. Exploratory research design is suitable for investigating an undefined problem [64] and utilizes least amount of scientific method and rigor [85]. We adopted a mixed methods approach because it overcomes the weakness that are inherent in the use of single methods, combines the strength of different methods and offers multiple ways of exploring research questions [88]. Furthermore, it enables the integration of qualitative and quantitative data to elucidate a phenomenon and give a fuller picture [16]. Lastly, it provides stronger inferences than those derived from the use of single research approaches [88].

2.3. Data Collection Tool

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of 11 closed and open-ended questions divided into three sections. Five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 [43, 46] was used to assess the respondents' views on customer service management by tour companies. The Likert scale is a widely used and reliable tool that measures attitudes, perceptions, and opinions in social science research [48]. Respondents were asked to indicate their views on 12 predetermined statements on CRM and 15 statements on CSM by choosing strongly agreed (5), agreed (4), neutral (3), disagreed (2) and strongly disagreed (1). In addition, respondents were asked to indicate true, false or don't know to five predetermined statements to gauge how CRM practices enhance the tour companies' business performance.

2.4. Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Given the nature of the study which was qualitative and targeted the tour companies only, a sample of 30 tour companies that were functional in Kabarole district was purposively selected and the CEO or the representative was interviewed. Although the sample size is relatively small, [86] explained that choosing a suitable sample size in qualitative research is often debatable and can present practical uncertainty [30]. A similar argument has also been advanced [79] who affirmed that sample size determination can be a major concern in qualitative social science research. Scholars who have used small sample sizes draw their confidence from the arguments by [47, 68, 73] that "there are no consensus and clear rules on the exact size of a sample to guide researchers in qualitative studies". Furthermore, [54] posits that adherence to credibility, confirmability and transferability override concerns about small sample size in qualitative research. Credibility and reliability of research are in sync with internal validity of a quantitative study. In addition, confirmability is aligned with objectiveness while transferability is aligned with universality. In all these arguments, reliability is singled out as the most vital standard of qualitative research because it can be confirmed by the Cronbach alpha of

reliability coefficient. The Cronbach alpha value for this study was 0.755 which indicates high reliability. It is against this reliability value and the forgone views that this study's sample size of 30 can be deemed as suitable and further affirmed by literature that small sample sizes (<32) can be applicable in qualitative research that is aimed at deepening the understanding of a phenomenon. In phenomenological, a sample size of 20 to 25 is acceptable [17].

2.5. Reliability of the Questionnaire

Cronbach alpha coefficient of reliability was computed and a value of 0.755 was obtained. The general rule, according to [80, 81], is that an alpha value of 0.6-0.7 indicates an acceptable level of reliability of the questionnaire and 0.8 or greater indicates a high coherence and internal consistency in the questions administered. It is evident from literature that reliability of a questionnaire is closely associated with its validity because a questionnaire cannot be valid unless it is reliable [82] although the reliability of a questionnaire does not depend on its validity [60]. Scholars have suggested different acceptable values of Cronbach alpha, ranging from 0.70 to 0.95 based on the argument that an alpha value that is less than 0.7 could be due to few questions in the questionnaire, poor inter-relatedness between the questions or heterogeneous constructs, whereas an alpha value that is close to 0.95 suggests that some questions were redundant and sought the same information in different ways. In this regard, [77] recommends a maximum alpha value of 0.90.

2.6. Data Analysis

The completed questionnaire copies were edited, responses coded and entered in SPSS version 26 to create a data file that was used to generate statistical summary. Likert-scale data were used to generate divergent stacked graphs in R statistical programme. In addition, data were subjected to chi-square test [71] to determine the relationship between respondents' sex (male, female) and their views on how CRM and CSM enhance tour companies' business performance.

3. Results

3.1. Respondents Profile

Out of the 30 respondents (owners of tour companies and employees) that were interviewed, 76.7% were male and 23.3% were females. Therefore, the tour operations business in Fort Portal city is dominated by the males compared to the females. In terms of age bracket, majority of the respondents were youth (70%) followed by those in the age bracket 31-40 (23.3%) while the age brackets 41-50 and 50 years and above were the fewest (2.3%) (Figure 2). This implies that majority of the people engaged in tour operations are the youth.

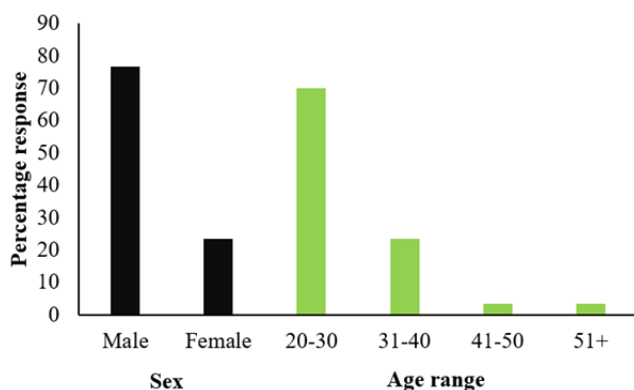


Figure 2. Sex and Age range of the respondents.

With regard to education, 36.7% were diploma holders, 33.3% had certificates, 23.3% were degree holders and 6.7% had attained a secondary level of education (Figure 3). Half of the respondents had worked for 1-3 years, 20%, had worked for 7-10 years while one respondent had worked for more than ten years (Figure 4).

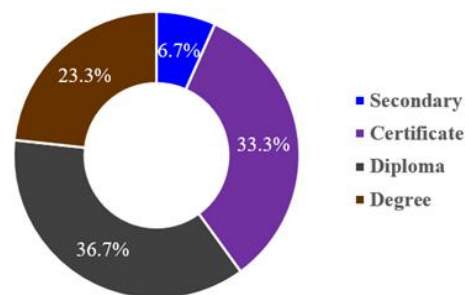


Figure 3. Respondents' education level.

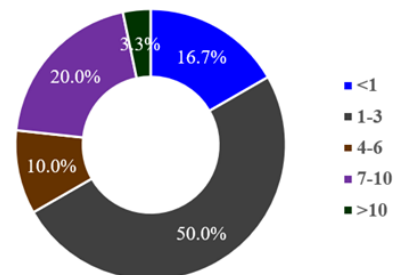


Figure 4. Number of years worked in tour company.

3.2. Digital Technology Application in Enhancing Customer Service Management in Tour Operations

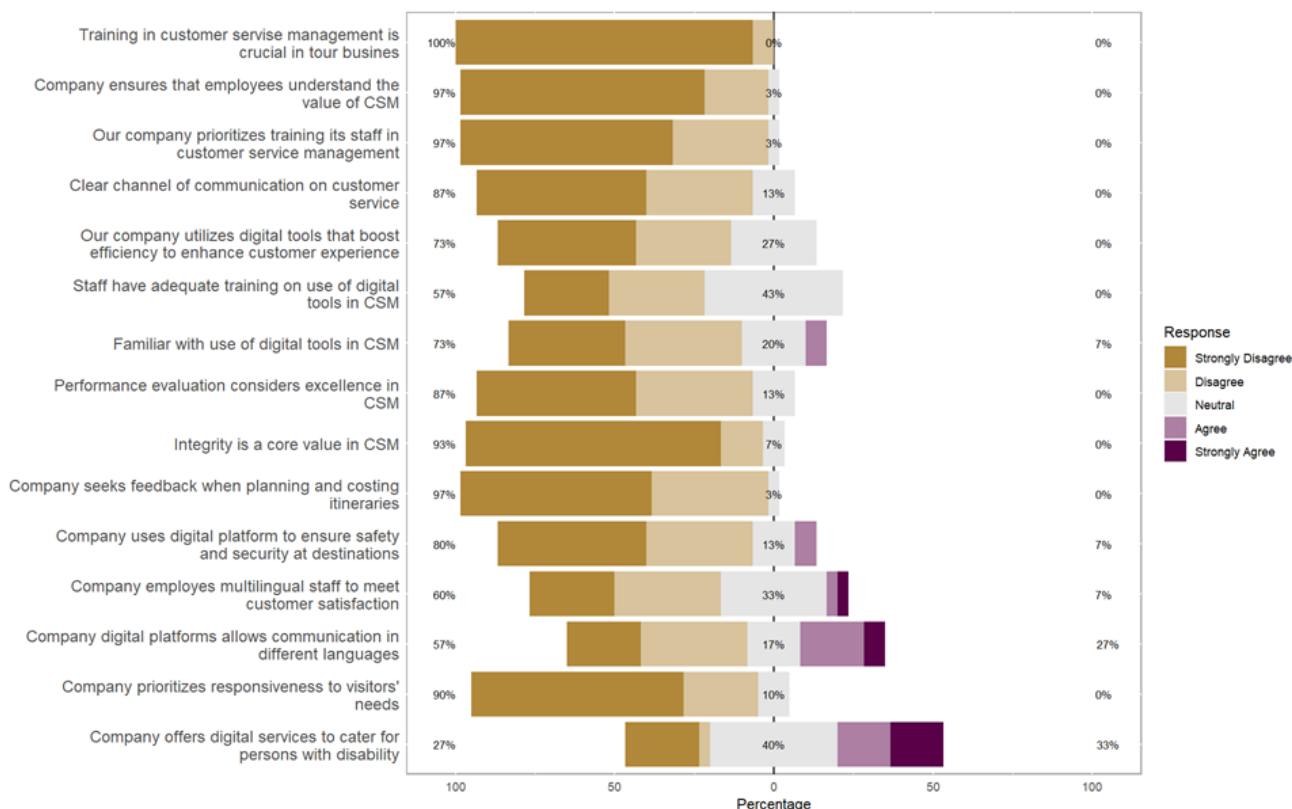


Figure 5. Respondents' views on digital technology application and related variables in CSM practice.

In order to assess the tour operators' understanding of CSM practice, respondents rated 15 pre-determined statements focused on digital technology and related variables that enhance service delivery. Out of these, the respondents disagreed with 11 statements (Figure 5). In addition, all the respondents disagreed with the statement that *training in customer service management is critical in tour business*. Thirty three percent of the respondents agreed with the statement that their companies offer digital services to cater for persons with disability. Similarly, 27% of the respondents agreed that their companies *utilize digital platforms (website) where information can be translated to different languages*. The respondents also agreed with the following statements: company's reliance on digital platform to gather information to ensure customers safety and security at destinations (7%) and employment of multilingual staff to enhance customer satisfaction (7%).

3.3. Gendered Views on Digital Technology Application in Customer Relationship Management

Tour operations face competitive markets that can diminish customers' brand loyalty. As a result, it is imperative for tour companies to invest in approaches that increases the competitive advantage and optimize customer relationship management as well as brand loyalty. Results presented in Figure 5 indicate varying responses to pre-determined statements regarding their knowledge of customer relationship management in tour operations. Between 90% and 100% of the respondents disagreed with all the statements presented in Figure 6.

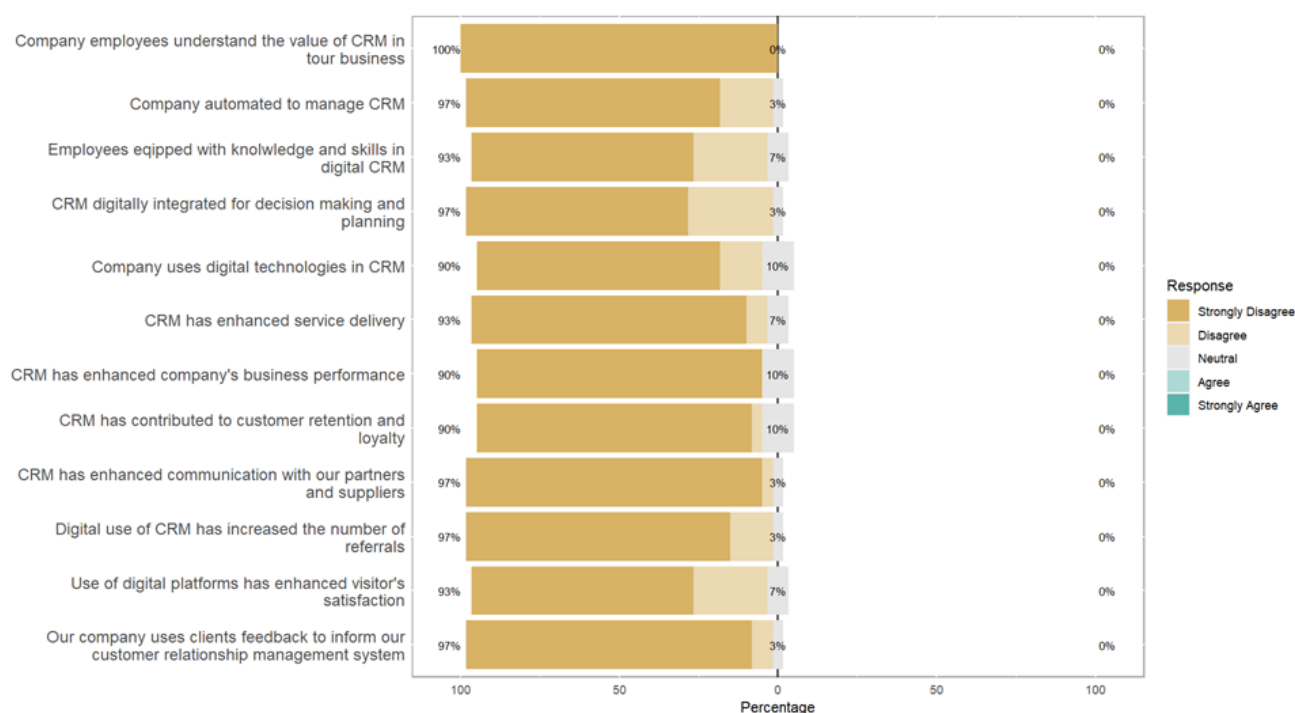


Figure 6. Respondents' knowledge of digital technology application in customer service management in tour operations.

Table 1. Chi-square test of gender-based views on tour companies use of digital technology tools in CSM and CRM to enhance business performance.

Statement	Sex	True		False		Don't know		χ^2	p-value
		n	%	n	%	N	%		
Company prioritizes application of digital technologies in customer service and relationship management	Male	20	66.7	1	3.3	2	6.7	7.498	0.024*
	Female	3	10.0	3	10.0	1	3.3		
Tour company's application of customer service and relationship management has contributed to customer	Male	19	63.3	1	3.3	3	10.0	1.405	0.495
	Female	7	23.3	0	0.0	0	0.0		

Statement	Sex	True		False		Don't know		χ^2	p-value
		n	%	n	%	N	%		
retention and loyalty									
Customer service and relationship management has helped tour company to keep in constant communication with partners and suppliers	Male	21	70.0	1	3.3	1	3.3	0.652	0.722
	Female	7	23.3	0	0.0	0	0.0		
Use of digital platforms has enabled tour company to meet customers' expectations	Male	17	56.7	4	13.3	2	6.7	2.316	0.314
	Female	4	13.3	3	10.0	0	0.0		
Tour company uses customers' feedback to inform customer service and relationship management system	Male	20	66.7	2	6.7	1	3.3	1.014	0.602
	Female	7	23.3	0	0.0	0	0.0		

*Significant at $p \leq 0.05$

Considering that CRM is a function of how male and female employees relate with customers, the results presented in this section has a gender perspective. Chi-square test revealed a significant relationship between gender and tour companies' prioritized application of digital technologies ($\chi^2 = 7.498$, $p = 0.024$) (Table 1). Gender did not significantly influence respondents' views on the contribution of CRM to customer retention and loyalty, communication with our partners and suppliers meeting customers' expectations, and strategy development informed by feedback obtained from customers.

Majority (93.3%) of the respondents stated that CRM has helped tour companies to communicate constantly with customers, partners and suppliers while 90% mentioned that tour companies used customer's feedback to inform CRM strategies development and implementation (Figure 7). Furthermore, 86.7% stated that CRM has contributed to customer retention and loyalty, 76.7% indicated that tour companies prioritized application of digital technologies in CRM and 70% mentioned that tour companies used digital platforms to analyze and meet customers' expectations.

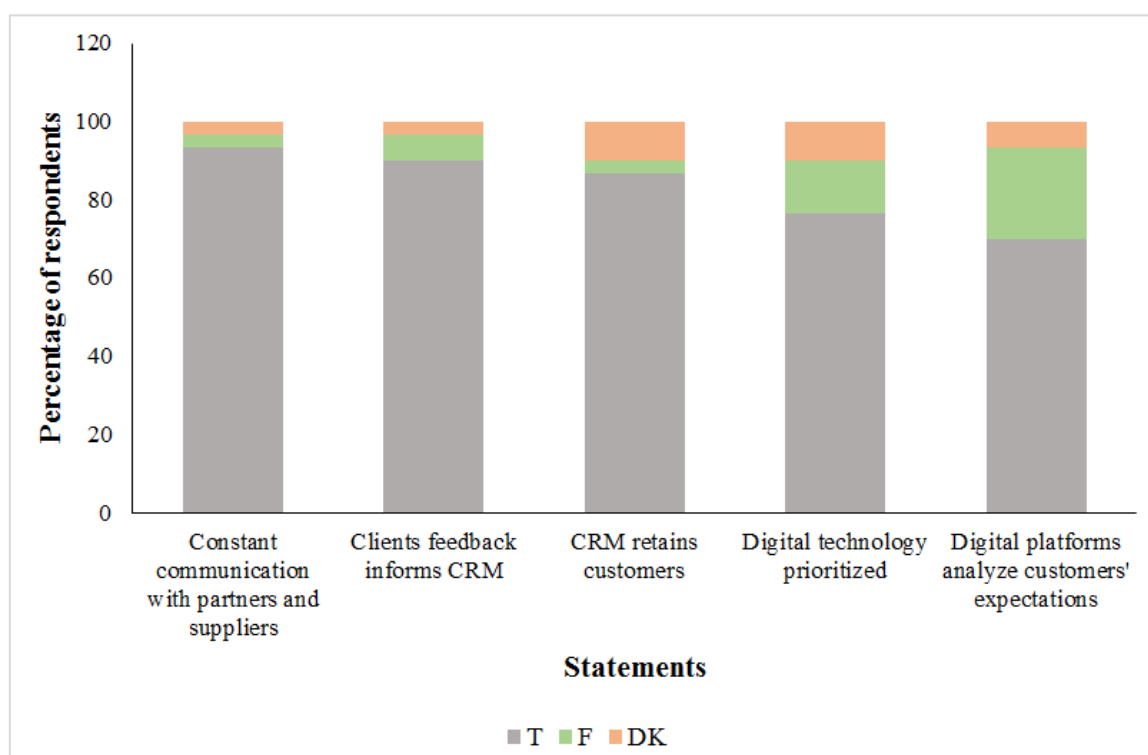


Figure 7. CRM practices that enhance tour companies' business performance. Responses to statements were T=true, F=false and DK=don't know.

Frame Work for CSM and CRM Practices in Tour Operations

The framework presented in Figure 8 shows the steps in the CSM and CRM practices in tour operations that lead to customer satisfaction, functional relationship and value. In CSM, collaboration and quality are key elements that influence service experience. Collaboration involves active interaction between tour companies and customers while quality of service delivery impacts on service experience. At the same time, service experience

leads to customer satisfaction and value. In CRM, efficiency in products and service delivery as well as customer feedback are critical pillars in the sustainability and improved tour business operations leading to long term relationships between tour companies and customers. However, the long-term relationship should be functional in order to generate value to the customer and the tour company. Similarly, when the customer values the tour company's products and services delivery, then a long-term functional relationship will be established.

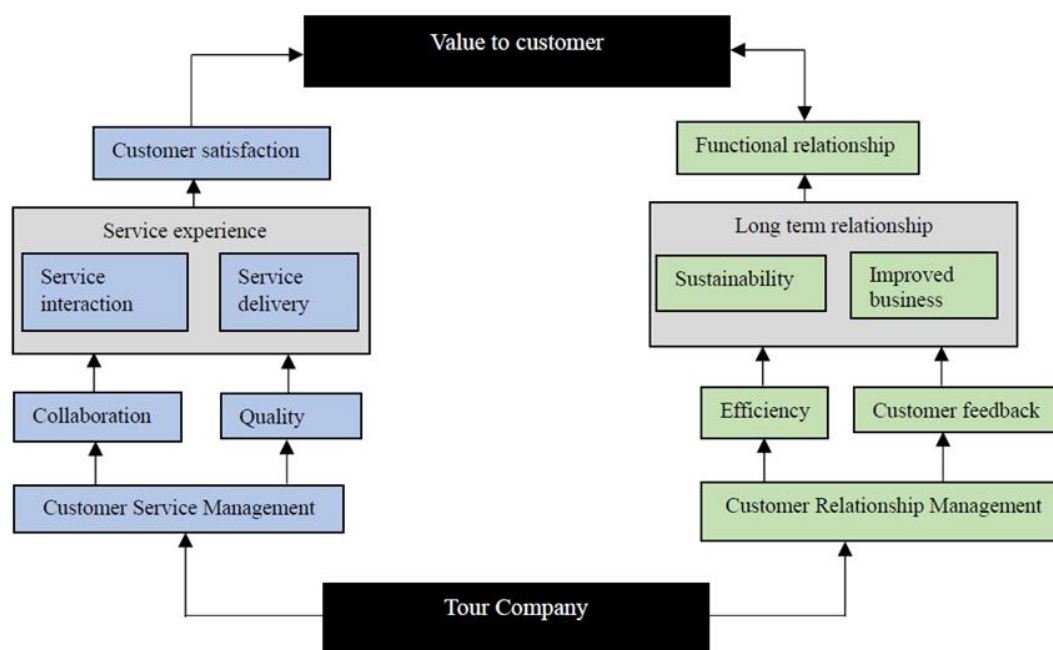


Figure 8. Frame work for CSM and CRM practices in tour operations. Source: Authors (2025).

4. Discussion

This study examined the strategies employed by tour companies to deliver satisfactory customer service and the CSM and CRM practices applied by tour companies to enhance their businesses. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the strategies and practices applied by tour companies, it was imperative to assess the tour operators' perspectives of the application of CSM and CRM practices. It is evident from literature that understanding perspectives is important in tourism because it influences how tourists and actors in the sector interact. Such interaction has a significant bearing on the performance of tourism enterprises including the services offered by the tour companies. Understanding respondents' perspectives is an important area in tourism research because it connects businesses to customers which influences their experiences and has a ripple effect on business sustainability [83].

This study also revealed respondents' positive attitudes

towards tour operators' use of digital platforms to share information. This is critical when tour companies deal with tourists whose safety and security at a destination is of paramount importance. Safety and security at a destination is critical because it influences tourists' purchasing behavior and choice of products and services. Tourism scholars have proposed various ways in which safety influences a destination image and should be included in the package by tour companies. Destination safety and security are important factors that influence the image as well as tourist's decision for travel especially when visiting places that are unfamiliar to them [91].

In the tourism sector, businesses that prioritize customer satisfaction and build strategies around customers tend to achieve higher profitability and brand loyalty. Satisfaction is a major outcome of marketing and usually it culminates in purchase and consumption of a good or service with post purchase phenomena such as attitude change, repeat purchase, and brand loyalty [29]. Tourists' satisfaction with tour companies' products and services is essential in business growth and can be complemented by effective customer service

management.

Effective CSM is crucial for tourism businesses, as it directly impacts customer satisfaction, loyalty, and business success. The goal of CSM is to build strong and long-term relationships with customers, leading to loyalty and retention [25]. Although in this study tour operators disagreed with the statement that training in CSM is critical in tour business, this view could be attributed to limited understanding of the practice. According to [41], CSM encompasses critical functions including capacity building of employees, establishment of service standards, handling customer inquiries and complaints, and meeting customer satisfaction. These attributes make it imperative to undertake research on CSM because it provides tour businesses with valuable insights into customer behavior, satisfaction, and needs as illustrated in the CSM and CRM framework. The findings of this research help companies improve their service delivery, build stronger customer relationships, and enhance business performance. Furthermore, the research deepens understanding of the multifaceted roles of customer support service including quality of service delivery that leads to customer satisfaction and value [74].

This study further revealed that tour company employees did not understand the practice and values of CSM. This could be due to their limited knowledge of CSM practice and values arising from lack of training. As already noted above, one of the crucial functions of CSM is capacity building which helps to equip tour company employees with the knowledge of CSM practice and values. Lack of such knowledge negatively affects tour companies' business performance and customer loyalty. Furthermore, it can also be due to employees' limited knowledge and skills in digital technology application which is critical in CSM practice. According to [93], CSM enhances provision of services that meet customer's expectations. For instance, CSM entails evaluation of customer's needs, establishment of service standards and training employees among others. In this regard, it is important for tour companies to equip their employees with the knowledge and skills in CSM practice in order to enhance business performance and sustainability.

Results of chi-square tests revealed a significant relationship between gender and the view that tour companies prioritized application of digital technologies in CRM. This implies that male and female respondents concurred that tour companies need to apply digital technologies in the CRM practice. CRM entails application of digital technology to manage customer data and long term-relationship in order to increase customer satisfaction and loyalty [84]. Although the study revealed no significant relationship between gendered views of respondents and the contribution of CRM to customer retention and loyalty, communication is vital to meet customers' expectations, and for strategy development. Furthermore, CRM is a strategic approach that provides superior value to tourism business, facilitates interactive and integrated communication with customers through channels such as social media, email, mobile applications and websites [57].

Lack of knowledge of CRM systems negatively affects business performance when companies view the practice from a narrowed technological perspective [6]. In such a case, CRM research becomes important because it unravels weaknesses in digital technology application which can curtail establishment of long-term company-customer relationships. There is need for tour companies to achieve increased customer loyalty, improve customer service and business performance. These elements depend on continuous customer feedback that help to improve tour company business performance and sustainability as illustrated in the CSM and CRM framework (Figure 8).

Furthermore, CRM research helps tour companies to establish and maintain long-term and functional relationships leading to customer satisfaction and value as illustrated in the framework. According to [24], tourism firms including tour operators rely on customer loyalty because it fosters long-term relationships and enhances business performance and profitability. In this study it was vital to examine the relationship between tour operators and their customers. Customers are crucial to tour operators as they are the reason for their existence, providing revenue and enabling the business to operate. Without customers, tour operators would not sell their products and services. The success of tour operators' businesses also depends on market research which broadens their knowledge of customers and guide strategic business decision-making [44]. This study was conducted in the context of market research in order to understand the role of CRM practice in tour comp's businesses. According to [95], customers' play a vital role in co-creating tourism experiences, hence they are a vital knowledge source in CRM research. In principle, knowledge solicited from customers about their interests, desires and experiences potentially increases tour companies' marketing innovation and business performance.

The study also revealed that majority of the respondents agreed that CRM has been applied in a number of ways to communicate with customers as a strategy to keep them updated and to sustain business through feedback which also enables understanding of customers' expectations. As noted by [32], tourism businesses involve managing and nurturing relationships with customers which can be best achieved through CRM which emphasizes interaction and communication with customers. In this study, it was noted that tour companies prioritized application of digital technologies in CRM to analyze customers' feedback with the view to meeting their expectations. This aspect is critical because it allows them to comprehend customer needs and expectations, identify areas for improvement and increase satisfaction and loyalty leading to improved business performance. As noted by [76], leveraging CRM systems enhances interactions with customers and enhances service delivery. Based on the discussion above, it is prudent for tour companies in Uganda to engage in CSM and CRM practices to maintain long-term relationships with customers as well as boost and sustain businesses.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The following conclusions can be drawn from this study:

The employees of tour companies studied in Fort Portal city in Western Uganda have limited knowledge of CSM and CRM practices that involves utilization of digital technology platforms. In view of this, tour companies need to train their employees and equip them with knowledge of CSM and CRM practices and skills for digital technology platforms utilization in order to enhance tour operation business. In this way, tour operation businesses will be sustainable based on long-term and functional relationship leading to customer satisfaction and value.

The limited knowledge in CSM and CRM has marred tour company employees' understanding and appreciation of digital technology application in enhancing tour operations business from a gender perspective. In this respect, tour companies should invest in the digital technologies accompanied by capacity building to utilize the technology platforms and improve service delivery and business performance.

A review of literature did not reveal availability of any framework to guide tour operators in mainstreaming CSM and CRM practices in their businesses. In this regard, tour operators in Uganda and elsewhere can adopt the framework presented in this paper to guide on how to incorporate CSM and CRM practices in their businesses.

This study has generated information that has added onto the existing literature and body of knowledge on CSM and CRM hitherto not available in Uganda. In addition, the results contribute to discussions on CSM and CRM as vital practices in tourism businesses. Future research should involve comparative analysis of larger sample sizes of tour companies in different regions of the country in order to reveal a more holistic picture of the CSM and CRM practices. In addition, there is a need to undertake a cost-benefit analysis of CSM and CRM practice by tour companies in order to guide investments in resources such as digital technology to enhance tour business performance.

6. Limitation to the Study

A major limitation to this study was the small sample size of 30 tour companies in Fort Portal City in western Uganda from which employees were interviewed. The small sample size narrowed the statistical analysis to non-parametric chi-square significance test statistic which permitted evaluation of dichotomous variables [23, 28] namely the tour companies male and female employees' views on CSM and CRM. The small sample size could have contributed to the non-significant chi-square test of associations between variables. Furthermore, the small sample size could not permit generalizability of the data on CSM and CRM to a broader context as they were collected from tour companies in one city only in western Uganda. Although small sample sizes can be

studied scientifically [52], scholars argue that it creates a methodological challenge which can render results imprecise, unreliable and misleading [14]. Furthermore, it constrains extrapolation [30] and compromises drawing of realistic conclusions [97]. In spite of the aforementioned methodological challenges, our results are indicative although the data should be interpreted with caution. We derive confidence in sharing our results from the assertion of [7] that in qualitative tourism research "a small sample size provides estimates of the near true value".

Abbreviations

CSLC	Customer Service Life Cycle
SET	Social Exchange Theory
RMT	Relationship Marketing Theory
CSMT	Customer Service Management Theory
CRCS	Customer Relationship Change Spectrum
CSM	Customer Service Management
CRM	Customer Relationship Management

Author Contributions

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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