Explaining the CRM Strategy as a Determinant of Customer Loyalty, Positive Image and Repurchase Intention of Hotels in Thailand: A Strategic Marketing Perceptive

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This study is among the very few papers focused on issues related to customer relationship management, customer loyalty, positive word of mouth and repurchase intention. The study aims to examine the direct impact that CRM strategy, customer trust and perceived price have on the elements of customer quality, positive word of mouth and repurchase intentions of consumers. The mediating impact of customer loyalty in the relationship between these elements, including the implementation of CRM strategies, will also be investigated. Finally, analysis will be conducted into the sequential mediation of customer loyalty and positive word of mouth in the relationship between CRM strategy, customer trust, perceived price and repurchase intention. The study employs a survey-based methodology to achieve its objectives, with 199 questionnaires collected for analysis. The total valid response rate of these surveys was 54%, which is considered sufficient for the current study. The authors have used the smart PLS Structural Equation Modelling (also known as the second-generation approach), to check the relationship between constructs in the research. The findings of this study have provided support to the hypothesised results, which strengthens its validity for policymakers, researchers and marketing personnel in better understanding and conceptualising the issues related to CRM.

Key words: *CRM, loyalty, repurchase intention, Thailand.*

Introduction

It is vital for service providers in the hospitality industry to remain competitive in the current market (Mee-ngoen, Thongrawd, & Jermsittiparsert, 2019). Customer retention is therefore essential to maintain this competitive edge, as current customers of many hospitality service providers are not price sensitive. Further, current customers are aware of the services provided and so do not require further advertising or media for communication purposes (Gómez, et al., 2006). This critical phenomenon suggests the subsequent importance of repurchase intention (RPI) (Chienwattanasook & Jermsittiparsert, 2019), which is key for gaining competitive advantage in the service sector. Service providers allocate a large number of resources for the development and sustainability of customer RPI for this reason (Saleem et al., 2017; Carter, et.al 2017). The hotel industry in Thailand is facing immense competition due to a number of new market players, which has increased the difficulty involved in retaining customers. Moreover, as hotels and similar service providers cannot offer tangible products to customers, their provided services and experiences must be effectively developed to build revisit intention among customers.

The intention of the customers to repurchase a product or re-use a service is dependent upon the obtained value of that product or service. Future intention to purchase a product again thus correlates directly with customer satisfaction. A customer's overall evaluation and decision regarding future intention to repurchase is therefore based on the obtained value in past usage of the product or service (Olaru, Purchase, & Peterson, 2008).

Customer loyalty refers to the attitude of the customer regarding an organisation and the services it provides. Loyalty is the outcome of purchase intention which then affects customer behaviour. This sense of loyalty can more likely be earned in the service industry as a result of positive experiences or enjoyable services provided. Many of these organisations implement customer-oriented strategies so they can develop such loyalty in their customers (Khadka & Maharjan, 2017). Prior studies have focused on this idea of loyalty as customers are the main stakeholders of hospitality organisations. The profitability of these businesses is dependent upon returning customers as revenue can increase through repurchasing while marketing costs can be reduced. Attracting new customers requires additional advertising compared to pre-existing clients who are already aware of the services offered, thus marketing costs decrease when RPI is maintained. Loyal customers are also likely to share positive feelings with other customers, thus providing effective communication and marketing by word of mouth (Ferguson, Paulin, & Leiriao, 2007).

Word of mouth (WOM) is the social behaviour in which non-commercial information is shared by a consumer to a potential new customer. WOM effectively shares knowledge to the receiver from the sender while also reinforcing the positive review in the sender's mind, thus motivating

re-purchase in the future. WOM is mentioned by scholars as one of the most influential sources of information in the market due to its powerful impact on customer behaviour and perception (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). WOM can be both positive and negative, with positive WOM indicating the current customers' commitment to the organisation. Past studies show that quality of provided services and consumer loyalty are linked to WOM and thus secure customer retention. A number of studies have also shown commitment and loyalty to be resultant from the positive perceptions generated through WOM (Bahri-Ammari, 2012).

Customer relationship management (CRM) refers to the management-based strategy which integrates marketing with information technology. CRM is widely used to manage the interactions between an organisation and its customers. CRM uses technology to organise and automate various business processes (Chowhan & Saxena, 2011). The main objective of the organisation is to retain its current customers and to attract the new clients, though retention of existing clients is particularly important for cost reduction. In the form of CRM, organisations can implement strategies within every unit of their business. Effective strategies create synergy between every process and individual involved in the organisation, which increases profit and reduces operational costs. Implementation of CRM in organisations is vital in keeping up with the globalisation and intense competition, particularly within the service and hospitality industry (Zamil, 2011).

The development of long-lasting relationships with customers is also a key factor in strengthening an organisation's competitive advantage. There are a number of constituents upon which the relationship of organisation and customer are dependent, including brand name and image, quality of services offered and organisational performance. As a result of these constituents, trust is developed in the mind of the customers which impact their behavioural intentions (Nguyen, Leclerc, & LeBlanc, 2013). Trust therefore has major impact upon the relationship between business and customers, though this concept is rarely studied in the context of service marketing. The willingness of the customers to be engaged in future transactions is considered as the formation of trust in relationship marketing. Trust reflects the confidence of the customer in the seller, and it is therefore important to minimise risks associated with using products or services to better develop this sense of trust (Saleem et al., 2017).

Service price and quality play key roles in shaping consumer behaviour. Price is the form of monetary sacrifice which is signalled in the product quality and has a significant impact upon the purchase decision of the customer. Pricing is a very important tool for the survival and profitability of a company. Researchers have defined pricing as the method which is adopted by an organisation to set the product or service price (Setiawan & Achyar, 2013). In the hotel industry, a number of important cost factors should be considered when setting the price for room bookings, including ad cost, marketing cost, manpower cost, floor space and cost of sale. Hotels can also charge a different set of prices through the customers, though if these prices

are perceived as unfair by a customer, hotel sales will be negatively affected. Scholars have mentioned that perceived price (PP) has a significant impact upon the satisfaction, perception and behaviour of the customer (Bassey, 2014).

On the basis of the above discussion, this study aims to examine the impact that PP, customer trust and CRM strategy have on customer loyalty, WOM and RPI.

Literature Review

RPI is a critical element for the survival of any business. Marketers have therefore given a lot of attention to this concept along with the factors that create it. RPI is the willingness of a customer to use or purchase a service again in the future. It is important to mention that most products available for purchase have the potential to be purchased again. Customers prefer to repurchase products in the future if the first experiences with those products were positive or enjoyable (Hennig-Thurau, 2004). Scholars have used the term retention when describing product repurchasing claim it to be an essential component of relationship management with customers. Following RPI is the actual purchase or behaviour of the customers. There are two kinds of repurchase, namely referral and repurchase. Referral is the intention to be engaged in recommendations and WOM, whereas repurchase refers to the intention to rebuy (Ibzan, Balarabe, & Jakada, 2016).

Previous literature defines loyalty as a customer's commitment to rebuy or reuse a company's services or products in the future. Scholars view customer loyalty (CL) as the strength of the relationship between an organisation and its customers. Despite the importance of customer satisfaction, a satisfied customer may not necessarily also be a loyal customer. Technological breakthroughs in the current competitive market have made customer loyalty very difficult to maintain, as customers a constantly presented with a wide variety of product and brand options to switch and choose from (Griffin & Herres, 2002). Scholars suggest that to earn sufficient profit, customer retention and loyalty are critical components for an organisation. The cost of acquiring new customers is much higher than that of retaining existing clients, and loyal customers will encourage others to use a product and thereby increase a company's overall revenue (Khadka & Maharjan, 2017).

WOM is defined as the informal communication between customers regarding product information and consumer experiences with that product. Scholars have also defined WOM as the interpersonal communication among customers regarding the assessment of a product or service. Positive WOM is essential for an organisation to manifest for this reason as it functions as a key source of information and potential customer-building strategy (Ng, David, & Dagger, 2011). Positive WOM therefore assists in developing loyalty and RPI among customers and can create sustainable competitive advantage for an organisation. Positive WOM directly

impacts purchase and repurchase intention, trust, satisfaction and loyalty, and can ensure the long-term commitment of a customer with the product and company (Pandir & Enginkaya, 2018).

Practitioners have mentioned a number of definitions of customer relationship management (CRM) from various perspectives. There are four dimensions of CRM discussed in the literature upon which the definition of CRM is dependent. Scholars have defined CRM as a comprehensive strategy aimed at acquiring and retaining customers. Others have discussed CRM as a marketing technique that integrates business activities, processes and technologies with an organisation's customers. Gaining the knowledge of the supplier and service provider is a critical component of CRM (Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2001), as this can fulfil the demands of customers through providing them with appropriate services and products. Customer engagement is also essential to a successful CRM and can simultaneously attract more customers for increased revenue (Hosseini, 2013). Marketing studies define the four stages of CRM as customer development, orientation, attraction and identification, the objectives of which are to attract more customers (Meyer & Maltin, 2010; Zamil, 2011).

The concept of trust within the marketing industry has been given reasonable attention in last decade and has been analysed by a number of scholars at different levels. These different levels are related to social interaction and include inter-organisation, intergroup and interpersonal organisations. In the field of marketing, the main function of trust is for businesses to develop and maintain good relationships with customers regarding the services and goods provided. Trust is defined by the scholars as the reliability level and exchange between parties in a relationship. In context of marketing, trust is linked with customer expectations and an organisation's ability to fulfil their obligations (Nguyen et al., 2013).

In past literature, price is expressed in the form of a product's nominal value which is charged to a customer by an organisation. The nominal value being charged is then paid by the customer to receive a product or use a service. In addition to the face value of a product, price is also used as a point of reference and remains in the customer's mind. The amount being charged for a product can also depend upon the social class of a customer (Kotler & Armstrong, 1996; Setiawan & Achyar, 2013).

PP refers to a customer's perception of a product's price and the sacrifice that must be made by the customer in terms of costs, effort, search cost and time. This perception is formed by the objective monetary price that is of low level and PP that is non-monetary. The actual price of a product is known as the objective monetary price, whereas encoded price refers to the PP. Customers often remember product prices as either expensive or cheap, thus classifying the products in this way. From the customer's perspective of the customer, more meaning therefore exists in the PP of a product (Wang & Chen, 2016).

Relationships of the present study

Repurchase intention and WOM

A number of empirical studies have been conducted on the impact of WOM on RPI. Scholars have suggested that RPI can be generated as a result of positive WOM. Positive information regarding a product or service will be spread by those customers whose expectation are met by the satisfactory or high performance of a good or service. This positive information is beneficial to both new and existing customers, with the latter developing intentions to repurchase those products in future (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014; Leonnard, Comm, & Thung, 2017). From this discussion, the following hypothesis can therefore be made:

H: There is a significant relationship between RPI and positive WOM.

Customer loyalty and positive WOM

In the field of marketing, WOM is the sharing of information regarding a product or service. Despite prior literature surrounding the concept of WOM, there exist very few studies that examine the impact of customer loyalty on WOM, particularly within the service sector (Alhulail, Dick, & Abareshi, 2018; Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2008). On the basis of this argument, it is hypothesised that:

H: There is a significant relationship between CL and positive WOM.

A number of empirical studies have also proven the relationship between WOM and RPI, which leads to the next hypothesis:

H: Positive WOM mediates the relationship of CL and re-purchase.

CRM strategy and CL

A number of researchers have focused on the relationship between strategic CRM and customer loyalty (CL). In Sweden, scholars conducted a study in a technologically advanced and state-owned enterprise regarding the implementation of CRM. The results of the study revealed that CRM strategy can assist organisation in using technology and HR to form better relationships with customers and to provide customers with better product value (Mailangkay & Juwono, 2015). A number of firms therefore focus on deploying CRM strategies to attract new customers and maintain good relationships with existing customers. All of these activities play key roles in the development of customer loyalty and the achievement of an organisation's

success. Scholars assert that the association between CL and CRM reflects customer satisfaction of the service being provided. As a result, customers will purchase that service or product again and will spread positive WOM regarding their experiences. This fosters long-term relationships between an organisation and its customers, as well as cost-effectively attracting new customers through influential WOM. It can therefore be concluded that customer is critical for organisational profit (Mang'unyi & Khabala, 2017), and the following can be hypothesised:

H: CRM strategy and CL are significantly related.

Customer trust and customer loyalty

When customers perceive a service as reliable, a sense of trust is generated through their behaviours, thoughts and feelings regarding that service. This trust is developed when customers believe that an organisation is working in their favour. Past studies have found that trust has a significant relationship with CL (Akbar & Parvez, 2009). Scholars have mentioned that customers who display loyalty to a service provider are essentially placing trust in that organisation., and that trust can function as a predictor of CL (Leninkumar, 2017). It is therefore proposed that:

H: There is a significant relationship between customer trust and CL.

PP and CL

Prior research indicates that price perception (PP) is highly influential in the creation of customer loyalty (CL), thus indicating a significant relationship between these variables. Researchers found that price perception is a particularly important predictor of CL in the hotel industry (Han & Ryu, 2009), and that customers who are brand conscious are subsequently willing to pay more in return for a preferred product. Scholars also suggest price as an indicator of prestige; if a customer believes they are investing in a good quality product, loyalty to that product and brand will ensue. A positive relationship between CL and price perception has therefore been reported (Malik, Yaqoob, & Aslam, 2012), which leads to the following hypothesis:

H: There is a significant relationship between PP and CL.

Research framework
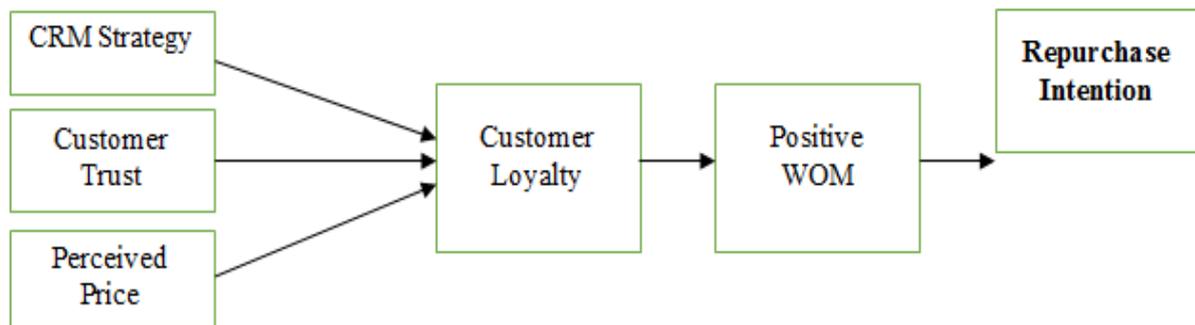
Methodology

A questionnaire survey method was employed for data collection in the current study. 400 questionnaires were distributed throughout different construction organisations, with reminders made through phone call and SMS to produce a higher response rate. Following distribution, 220 completed questionnaires were received with 21 of those surveys displaying insufficient or incomplete information. A subsequent total of 199 questionnaires were therefore used for further analysis. The total valid response rate was 54%, which is considered to be sufficient for the current study in line with the minimum response rate of 30% (Nardi, 2018). The smart PLS Structural Equation Modelling, or second generation approach, was then employed to check the relationship between constructs (Mitrega, Forkmann, Zaefarian, & Henneberg). SEM can be used as an alternate and effective approach due to its capabilities in simultaneously handling multiple regressions with multiple dependent variables. The SEM approach is also used by researchers in the field of behavioural science. In running the path-analytic modelling by using SEM in the data analysis, the latent variables could also be included. This study estimates through the use of other measures, and unobserved variables function as the constructs to be estimated over their indicators. The structural and measurement models were used within the SEM analysis for this study, with the adopted the measurement following Yap & Tan's (2012) proposed method.

Results

A recent study conducted by Hair, Sarstedt, Matthews & Ringle (2016) found that level of fitness is inappropriate for accurate measurements of validity. This past study further suggests that while using the stimulated data, valid models cannot be distinguished from invalid models within the PLS path model, meaning that the fit would not be suitable through this method. Hair et al. (2016) have therefore suggested a two-step process in which the inner and outer models can be assessed: the first step examines the measurement model while the second step assesses the structural model. Latent constructs are recognised in the measurement model or in the assigned unobserved measures. The association among unobserved constructs, independent and dependent variables is also combined in the structural model. Through this approach, the

current research can predict, define and estimate the extent of the relationship between latent constructs. Following this assessment, the internal consistency reliability, discriminant viand convergent validity and content validity can then be acquired.

Figure 1: Outer model
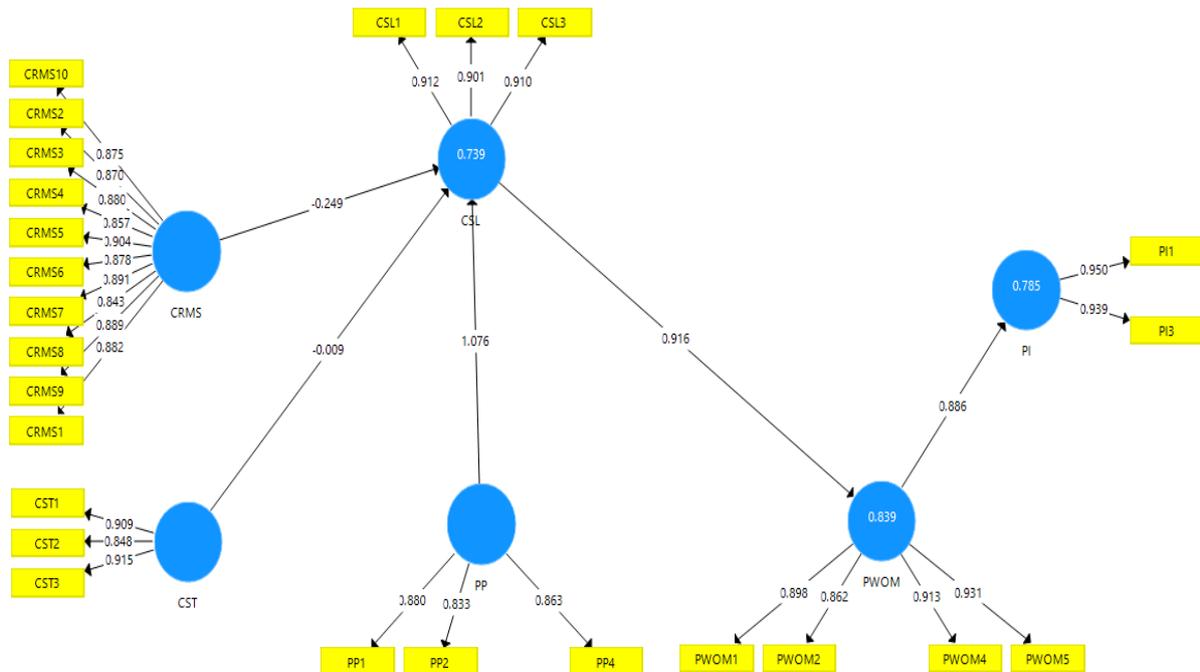
The outer loading estimation over the reliability of individual items was assessed for the measurement of each construct. Literature suggests that items with values between 0.4 and 0.70 must be considered. Following the suggestion of Gorgees & Hilal (2018) regarding issues of multicollinearity, items in the current study which produced values less than the standard of 0.70 were omitted. Items with similarities are less likely to produce results for the measurement of the constructs, meaning that if a set of items shared similarities then only one or two items could be accepted. Prior research therefore suggests that only one or two of the best indicators will suffice. At least two indicators should be used for the estimation of the model with latent variables in each latent. The degree of freedom increases in the estimation of the complicated model (Gorgees & Hilal, 2018), suggesting that the validity will be equal to single or multiple items.

Table 1: Outer loading

	CRMS	CSL	CST	PI	PP	PWOM
CRMS10	**0.875**					
CRMS2	**0.870**					

CRMS3	0.880					
CRMS4	0.857					
CRMS5	0.904					
CRMS6	0.878					
CRMS7	0.891					
CRMS8	0.843					
CRMS9	0.889					
CSL1		0.912				
CSL2		0.901				
CSL3		0.910				
CST1			0.909			
CST2			0.848			
CST3			0.915			
PI1				0.950		
PI3				0.939		
PP1					0.880	
PP2					0.833	
PP4					0.863	
PWOM1						0.898
PWOM2						0.862
PWOM4						0.913
PWOM5						0.931
CRMS1	0.882					

The theoretical and empirical measurement findings while using single-item measurements will be the same, which is supported by Hair et al. (2017) who suggest that single-item measures are sufficient for studies of this nature. The scholars also projected some constructs which can be measured over single-item indicators. The convergent validity is defined as "the degree at which the purpose latent constructs are characterised through the items which are related or similar to latent constructs." Following the suggestion of Gorgees & Hilal (2018), the estimation of latent construct convergent validity was conducted in this study using the AVE approach. The literature also states that the value of AVE for all latent constructs should be equal to or greater than 0.50 to achieve appropriate levels of convergent validity. The estimated value of AVE is reflected in the higher loadings, which are represented in Table 4.8 and ranges from 0.56-0.8771 as recommended by Hair et al. (2016). These results therefore indicate the existence of convergent validity between the constructs.

Table 2: Reliability

|	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
CRMS	0.967	0.968	0.971	0.769
CSL	0.894	0.894	0.934	0.824
CST	0.870	0.876	0.921	0.795
PI	0.879	0.885	0.943	0.892
PP	0.826	0.856	0.894	0.737
PWOM	0.923	0.924	0.945	0.813

Discriminate validity refers to the level of difference from one latent construct to another, which was measured in this study through AVE. The relationship between unobserved constructs were comparable with the squared value of AVE, the value of which also qualified as satisfactory with a range of 0.56-0.87. The DV was then estimated by following the recommended process. Gorgees & Hilal (2018) suggest that the acceptable value for AVE must be equal to or greater than 0.50. The squared value of AVE must then be greater than the correlation value between latent constructs in order to achieve discriminant validity, as presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Validity

	CRMS	CSL	CST	PI	PP	PWOM
CRMS	0.877					
CSL	0.785	0.908				
CST	0.707	0.774	0.891			
PI	0.780	0.865	0.694	0.905		
PP	0.776	0.851	0.844	0.805	0.859	
PWOM	0.786	0.716	0.720	0.806	0.832	0.901

Following the determination of the measurement model, the current study conducted an evaluation of the structural model.

Figure 2. Inner model
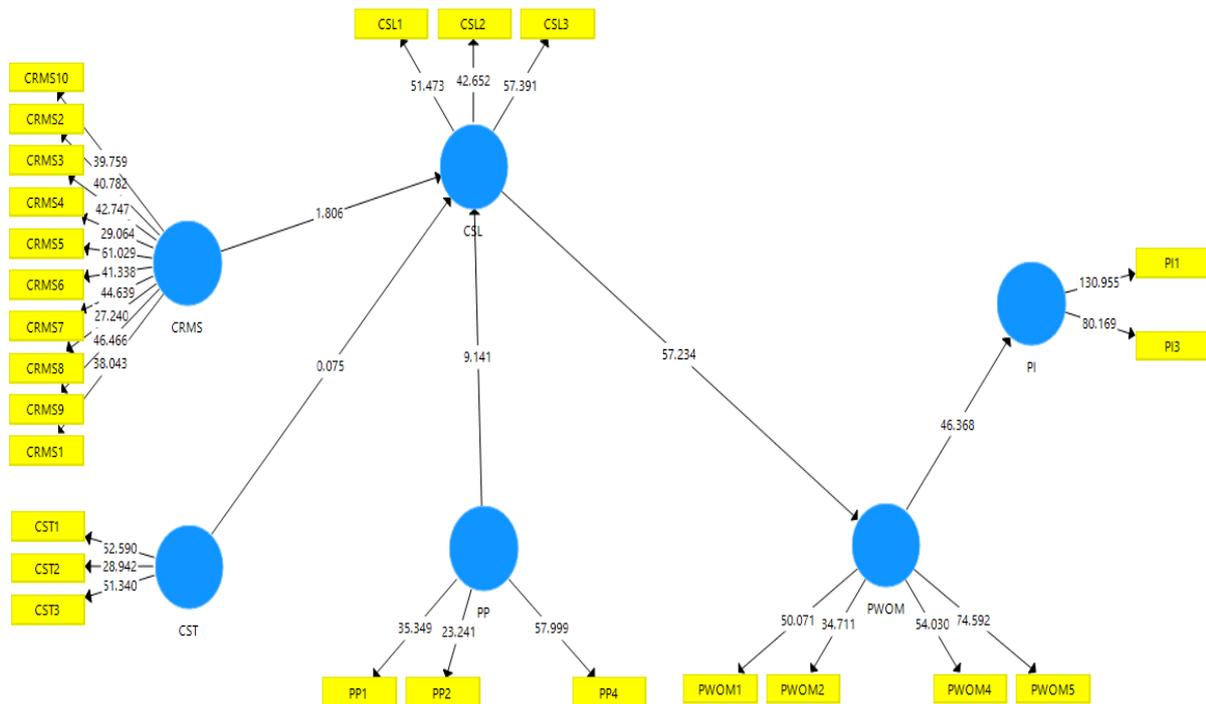
The bootstrapping procedure was applied to assess the coefficient significance by taking a sample of 5000 and 195 cases. Basheer, Hussain, Hussan & Javed (2015) demonstrate structural model dependence and reliance of association in the assumed model. The PLS structural model involves earlier directional association among variables, t-vales and path coefficients. The standardised beta coefficient, which is estimated in the regression analysis, is similar to the PLS approach. The hypothesis was tested in the current study to check the correlation between variables.

Table 4: Direct relationships

	(O)	(M)	(STDEV)	(|O/STDEV|)	P Values
CRMS -> CSL	0.249	0.237	0.138	1.806	**0.036**
CRMS -> PI	0.202	0.194	0.114	1.769	**0.039**
CRMS -> PWOM	0.228	0.218	0.128	1.785	**0.037**
CSL -> PI	0.811	0.811	0.027	29.838	**0.000**
CSL -> PWOM	0.916	0.916	0.016	57.234	**0.000**
CST -> CSL	0.009	0.001	0.120	0.075	**0.470**
CST -> PI	0.007	0.001	0.098	3.075	**0.000**
CST -> PWOM	0.008	0.001	0.110	2.125	**0.000**
PP -> CSL	1.076	1.060	0.118	9.141	**0.000**
PP -> PI	0.873	0.861	0.109	8.023	**0.000**
PP -> PWOM	0.986	0.971	0.115	8.606	**0.000**

PWOM -> PI	0.886	0.886	0.019	46.368	**0.000**

Table 5: Mediation

	(O)	**(M)**	**(STDEV)**	**(|O/STDEV|)**	**P Values**
CRMS -> CSL -> PWOM -> PI	0.202	0.194	0.114	1.769	**0.039**
CST -> CSL -> PWOM -> PI	0.007	0.001	0.098	3.245	**0.000**
CSL -> PWOM -> PI	0.811	0.811	0.027	29.838	**0.000**
PP -> CSL -> PWOM -> PI	0.873	0.861	0.109	8.023	**0.000**
CRMS -> CSL -> PWOM	0.228	0.218	0.128	3.785	**0.000**
CST -> CSL -> PWOM	0.008	0.001	0.110	2.075	**0.000**
PP -> CSL -> PWOM	0.986	0.971	0.115	8.606	**0.000**

In the PLS-SEM, changes in the dependent variable are due to the explanatory variables established for estimating the structural model. The R square value is also important in representing the coefficient of determination or accuracy of fit. Basheer et al. (2015) have suggested that the R square values represent the variations or changes in dependent variables due to the independent variables. The minimum accepted value of R square is 0.10. In the PLS method, an R-square value of 0.19 is considered weak, 0.33 is moderate and 0.67 is considerable. The R Square value, or the value of endogenous latent variables, is presented below in Table 6.

Table 6: R-square

	R Square
CSL	0.739
PI	0.785
PWOM	0.839

Conclusion

The marketing strategy that connects management, marketing and information and communication technology is termed as the CRM strategy. This strategy essentially links all players into tightly connected chain of stakeholders to benefit the customer as the most important element of an organisation. The use of information and communication technology differentiates this strategy from traditional marketing methods. The current paper, which is among the pioneering studies on CRM in the Thai hotel industry, aimed to examine the relationship between the customer and the organisation, involving CL, positive WOM and the RPI. The study employed a survey-based methodology to gather data and achieve its objectives.

A total of 199 questionnaires were accepted for analysis, producing a valid response rate of 54% from the initial population size. The smart PLS Structural Equation Modelling (also known as the second-generation approach) was used to check the relationship between constructs in the data. The findings of this study provide support to the previously discussed hypothesised results.

This study was instigated by the question of how CRM strategy, customer trust and PP can impact customer quality, positive WOM and the RPI. The obtained results support the hypotheses as CRM strategy, customer trust and PP display significant correlations with RPI among customer of Thai hotels. The mediating impact of CL was also examined in the correlation between CRM strategy, customer trust, PP, positive WOM and RPI. These results also show agreement with the hypotheses as CL appears to significantly mediate the relation between the aforementioned elements. Lastly, the sequential mediation of CL and positive WOM were examined in the relationship between CRM strategy, customer trust, PP and RPI, with results again supporting to the study's propositions.

This research is among very few studies which have examined the sequential mediation of CL, and the effect of positive WOM on CRM strategy, customer trust, PP and RPI. Another study with the incorporation of sensory stimulates on different industries, such as the Airline industry, is recommended to progress these ideas in the future.

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