

Assessing the Readiness of Small to Medium Enterprises in Hospitality Industry to adopt Digital Media Technology



Meta AI

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Table of Contents

v	Acknowledgements
vi	Book Synopsis
viii	Abbreviations
ix	List of Appendices
1	Chapter I: Background to the Study
14	Chapter 2: Literature Review
46	Chapter 3: Research Methodology
60	Chapter 4: Data Analysis, Presentation and Analysis of Findings
78	Chapter 5: Conclusion and Future Direction
85	References
111	Appendices

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Book Synosis

The present study has critically explored on the hospitality industry mainly focusing on SME'S technology readiness to adopt digital media for consumer engagement. The main objective of the study was to assess employee personality traits that influence the adoption of digital media by SME's in the hospitality sector. In addition, it sought to determine the relationship between employees' innovativeness towards social media and consumer brand identification. It also sought to determine the relationship between employee optimism towards social media and brand absorption by consumers. Last but not least, it sought to determine the nexus between employee innovativeness towards social media and consumer interaction with a brand. The study adopted a deductive approach and quantitative methods were utilised through the use of questionnaires. Concerning the first research objective, the study found a positive relationship between employees' innovativeness towards social media and consumer brand identification. As far as the second objective was concerned, the study has revealed that employee optimism towards social media and brand absorption by consumers was not significant. Lastly, with regards to the third objective, the study found out there was a positive relationship between innovativeness towards social media and consumer interaction with a brand. Thus, it was concluded from these findings that digital media play an important role in information dissemination to consumers. Based on the findings and study conclusions, the researcher recommended that there is need for SME's to recruit brand and digital managers and government should establish technological hubs to train these SME's in the tourism industry. The study recommends that the SME's should harness data mining and build on databases, take advantage of daily and direct communication and employees have to put their energy in driving positive word of mouth among social media users. Employees should be trained on effective social media utilisation. SME's should promote energetic torch bearers to encourage more positive comments and likes and leading to purchase behaviour. The government needs to closely work with stakeholders in the tourism and the telecommunication industry on

areas like network coverage and connectivity and also influence the telecoms industry so that they can charge affordable roaming fees and design business strategy packages for travellers with suitable fees and promotions.

Abbreviations

CE	-	Consumer Engagement
CEM	-	Consumer Engagement Model
CRM	-	Consumer Readiness model
DM	-	Digital Media
GDP	-	Gross Domestic Product
ICT	-	Information Communication Technology
IT	-	Information Technology
POTRAZ	-	Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority
RBZ	-	Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe
SM	-	Social Media
SME	-	Small to Medium Enterprises
TRI	-	Technology Readiness Index
USD	-	United states Dollars
ZIMRA	-	Zimbabwe Revenue Authority
ZIMSTAT	-	Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency
ZTA	-	Zimbabwe Tourism Authority

List of Appendices

Appendix 1 Questionnaire for SME Employees

Appendix 2 Raw Data Sets

Appendix 3 Optimism in relation to innovativeness and technology

Appendix 4 Employee experience in relation to innovativeness

Appendix 5 Age and gender in relation to absorption of technology

Chapter I: Background to the Study

Technology readiness is, arguably, a key impetus for success in the hospitality industry (Kim & Law, 2015). Coupled with its adoption by organisations and their online engagement with consumers, technology is said to have given traction to the tourism sector performance (Mizrachi & Sellitto, 2015; Adeola & Evans, 2019). Individual personality is at the centre of one's readiness to use technology (Walezuch, Lemmink & Streukens, 2007). Individuals differ in their disposition towards adopting technology (Rogers, 1995). Parasuraman (2000: 308) conceives technology readiness as the people's desire to accept and utilise new technology for achieving intentions both at home and the workplace. On the other hand, according to Chaffy and Ellis-Chadwick (2016), digital media relates to the usage of digital technology platforms in communicating and delivering interactive services. These include email links, blogs, websites and social media among others. Consumer engagement is explained by the Marketing Science Institute (2010:4) as client's behavioural attitude towards a particular company's product beyond purchase that is a cause from motivational pushes involving: verbal communication and interaction, recommendations, peer to peer interactions, blogging, authoring reviews and other like engagements. Overall, there is no doubt that the adoption of digital media propels the level of consumer engagement. This, in turn, has managerial implications for hospitality firms, where user generated content has to be managed as organisations interact with their consumers to retain those (Willems *et al.*, 2019).

Zimbabwe has witnessed a sprout in Small to Medium Enterprises businesses (SME's) (be it formal or informal) over the years. It is as a result of the continued collapse of micro and macroeconomic fundamentals. Since the early 2000's when the country embarked on the fast track land reform, major companies closed or were rendered unprofitable due to lack of local and external financial support for capacity utilisation. Thus, emergence of SME's is, in a way, a survival

strategy seen as an empowered, entrepreneurial streak or as a sign of the absence of jobs in big companies. Consequently, this survival tactic led to innovativeness in the country's economic crisis.

Dahnil *et al.* (2014) argue that in developing countries SME's are thus a crucial contributor to economic development of a nation as they help to reduce unemployment rate. Contextually, SMEs in the tourism sector are very useful to their clients due to their quick and direct access to the owners of the business thus allowing quick decision-making and less hierarchical barriers. The millennium generation is highly fast and impatient as a result of Information Communication Technologies (ICT's) which have brought information to client's finger tips.

Li, Robinson and Oriade (2017); Harrigan *et al.* (2018) assert that today's consumer is more advanced than the service provider, constantly engaging other consumers through digital media technology as they seek to make the right consumption choices. Hence, the ability to demand services-quality based on the power of information, that is, ability to quickly compare firms in the same industry. Remarkably, SME's have worked in places close to their clients' i.e. in home industries or as back yard formations.

Consequently, because of their nature, SMEs allow simple structural and operational setups. This has led to several people starting their operations with minimum to no qualifications or experience at all. Nevertheless, this status quo results in professional deficiencies when coming up with business strategies which will resonate with market dynamics through innovation. Nobre and Silva (2014) argue how both advocate that digital social marketing strategy has been embraced by big corporates but not yet adopted well by SME's. Social network marketing has fast replaced traditional marketing (Dahnil, *et al.*, 2014).

In addition, the major setback is that ICT adoption in developing countries is generally low (Adeola and Evans, 2019). Furthermore, when

compared to large hospitality firms, SMEs in the hospitality sector tend to lag behind in the adoption of technology (Abou-Shouk, Megicks and Lim, 2013; Styvén and Wallström, 2019). However, Technology has transformed the hospitality sector enabling consumers to co-create through engagement with service providers (So, King, Sparks and Wang, 2016). Due to the fragmentation and information orientated nature of tourism; online platforms are inevitable (Styvén and Wallström, 2019).

A study conducted in the (USA) United States of America has shown that digital marketing, which is a form of social media being more realistic, TripAdvisor, drive consumer engagement tremendously (Harrigan, Evers, Miles & Daly, 2018). Online surveys were conducted and targeted US respondents only. Furthermore, Dijkmans, Kerkhof and Beukeboom (2015) revealed in their US study that social media and consumer engagement have a positive correlation. To support that, Willems, Brengman and Van Kerrebroeck have (2019) put forth the idea that online consumer engagement increases conversion rate through interaction.

Regionally, Matikiti *et al.* (2016) empirically examined the use of digital media technology marketing in Zimbabwean and South African accommodation establishments. Their findings reveal that the establishments were familiar with Facebook, TripAdvisor and LinkedIn as digital media technology platforms. But, what is surprising is that half of the Zimbabwean samples were hotels. This is a mind-boggling observation which implies that small establishments in Zimbabwe by 2016 when this study was conducted were not using digital media technology to engage customers.

Zimbabwe has fairly encouraging internet penetration rates compared to the region (internetworldstats.com) which, according to Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (POTRAZ) (2019), stood at 51.9%. This implies that slightly more than half the population of

Zimbabwe is internet literate and the hospitality sector is not excluded from this analysis. Furthermore, the mobile penetration rate has taken a 3.1% leap from 84.6% in 2018 (techzim.co.zw).

The figures are an indication that the population of Zimbabwe, hospitality sector included, has the potential to use digital media. The Zimbabwe hospitality sector is constitutive of large and small players that, according to Zimbabwe Tourism Industry (ZTA), registered tourism facilities database (2019) fall within different categories. SMEs seem to fall within the categories of bed and breakfast, lodges and guesthouses.

Conversely, what is worrisome is the adoption of digital media by SMEs in the hospitality sector. They neither update their digital media technology accounts regularly; nor do they have interactive websites for engagement. That has been supported by Matikiti *et al.* (2016) who, in their research, found that hospitality establishments in Zimbabwe only updated customers on content changes, but did not provide personalised responses.

Approximately 40% of guesthouses, lodges and bed and breakfast facilities are registered under tourism watchdog which is the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA). ZTA registered tourism facilities database 2019 is present on the TripAdvisor platform. This can be taken as a general indication of their willingness to invest in online presence, more specifically digital media.

TripAdvisor is a global travel website where consumers can review, book and compare tourism and hospitality products (tripadvisor.com). In principle, it performs the functions of digital media technology by enabling consumers to engage and generate user content. However, employees in the hospitality sector are said to have low ICT skills (Tsokota, Von Solms and van Greunen, 2017) and lack expertise in digital media technology marketing (Matikiti *et al.*, 2016) which can be

problematic on the quality of service delivered since much of their work is supported by ICT (Walczych *et al.*, 2007). This study, therefore, seeks to establish the SMEs in the hospitality industry's readiness to adopt digital media technology for consumer engagement or if employee personality traits have an influence on their adoption of technology and engagement with consumers.

SME's in general are lagging behind digital media technology (Styvén and Wallström, 2019). It therefore suffices to say the same for SMEs in Zimbabwe's hospitality sector, where approximately 40% are registered on one of the most recognised travel website TripAdvisor where tourists and potential tourists interact. A few of tourism facilities registered by ZTA have interactive websites and some do not update their digital media technology pages nor respond to customer enquiries. The problem is lack of digital media adoption by SMEs in the Zimbabwe hospitality sector that then hinders the level of engagement with consumers. This problem is fuelled by low ICT skills (Tsokota, Von Solms *et al.*, 2017) and also lack of expertise in social media marketing (Matikiti *et al.*, 2016) which brings a problem to quality of service delivered as most of the work is supported by ICT (Walczych *et al.*, 2007)

Employee personality traits play a pivotal role in shaping the digital media technology in a tourist centred company. As such the present study was seeking to assess if employee personality traits have an influence on digital media technology adoption and consumer engagement by SMEs in the hospitality industry.

The study's purpose is to examine the preparedness of the SMEs readiness in adopting digital media for consumer engagement. The specific research objectives are:

- 1) To determine the link between employees' innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer brand identification.

- 2) To examine the nexus between employee optimism towards digital media technology and brand absorption by consumers.
- 3) To analyse if employee innovativeness towards digital media technology influences consumer interaction with a brand.

The following are the study hypothesis:

- 1) H1: There is a positive relationship between employee innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer brand identification.
- 2) H2: There is a positive relationship between employee optimism towards digital media technology and brand absorption by consumers.
- 3) H3: There is a positive relationship between employee innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer interaction with a brand

The period of sourcing literature was within five years of investigation. Thus from 2015 to April 2020. It is of paramount importance to use the most recently available information to counter the effects of outdatedness. Technology moves with a speed of lighting hence the need to use the most recent data or information.

The study was limited to SME's registered facilities in the tourism industry which encompassed lodges, guest houses and bed and breakfast facilities in Victoria Falls under Matabeleland north province in Zimbabwe. Victoria Falls is one of the well-known Seven Wonders of the World and as such, this feature is a major tourist attraction site in the province and many small tourism businesses have set bases in that side of the country. Henceforth, this research was focused on SME's in the tourism sector in this province particularly examining employees' appetite to embrace digital media technology. Study participants included ICT and marketing employees and managers of SMEs involved in decision making.

Literature review's primary purpose was to explore previous work research and fresh information emanating from the use of numerous primary and secondary data sources. This goal was achieved by looking at primary literature sources from recent on-line articles. Technology is rapidly fast and hence it was prudent to consider the most recent articles. Journal articles found online captured the latest developments in the field of technology coupled with its relatively easy access and fast response.

Online platforms provide a pool of journals to compare and contrast information. The study also made use of expert knowledge through the adoption and use of semi-structured interviews. Secondary yet current literature material such as text books, conference papers, e-books and journals were made use of. The SME's secondary data were drawn from literature sources of less than five years old with the exception of only seminal work in the field of tourism and destination marketing.

The only primary data gathering method used was the utilisation of questionnaires to understand the operations prevailing in the industry and their perspectives regarding digital media technology use. Study participants included employees and managers of SME who are involved in decision making. The study took a quantitative approach guided by the positivist philosophy. The survey instrument was adapted from Parasuraman (2000) and So *et al.* (2012).

A series of theoretical perspectives has been adopted and made use of to investigate customer engagement (CE), that included relationship marketing (Vivek *et al.*, 2014), S-D logic (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016), stimulus and organism response theory by (Choi and Kandampully, 2018; Islam and Rahman, 2017b), also social identity theory and social exchange theory by (Hollebeek 2011b; Rather, 2018a) and finally congruity theory by (Islam *et al.*, 2018), just to mention a few. However, according to Pitt (2017), challenges facing researchers is to find a robust theoretical

framework that enables proper classification of customer and brand engagement through social media (content), or quantifies it for further analysis. Hart proposes a theory of word choice and verbal tone that provides such a framework (Hart, 1984a; 1984b). It offers researchers robust ways of studying the text in a document by focusing on divine power of word choice and verbal tone.

Hart's framework put forward that text generated by customers while engaging with a brand in social media can be gathered and then classified and analysed. The theory is actually discarded from other studies in linguistic theory done by several other social thinkers and so in that sense Hart's work integrates these into a comprehensive theory. Hart postulates that the five most pertinent themes in an article or document can, provide valuable insight into the nature of that piece of text or document if properly analysed.

In the present study, the researcher adopts Service-dominant logic (S-D logic) to map customer engagement (CE), because of its wide application and concentration on consumers or brand interaction and value that is crucial for tourism companies (So *et al.*, 2014). Service-Dominant logic informed consumer engagement views clients as proactive contributors to their own personal service experience, compounded by contributing in brand related platforms, such as social media discussions, helping other consumers, or co-innovating services with a company that renders a form of service alliance and personalisation (Grisseemann and Stokburger-Sauer, 2012; Im and Qu, 2017).

This study is also guided by the technology readiness index, a theory developed by Parasuraman (2000). Accordingly, the theory asserts that technology readiness is influenced by individual personality attributes such as (discomfort, optimism, insecurity innovativeness, etc.). These personality traits positively influence one's use of technology at their disposal (Walczuch *et al.*, 2007). Additionally, the Customer Engagement

Model (CEM) developed by King and Sparks (2012) is pertinent for this study. The model states that customers exude psychological and behavioural traits as they interact with a brand. The two aforementioned theories are deemed apt for present study as they were empirically tested in the tourism sector amongst other study settings.

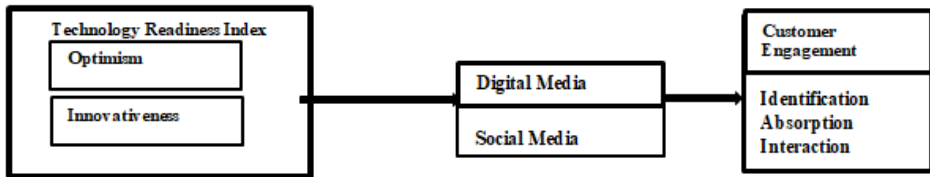


Figure 1.1: Conceptual Framework (Parasuraman, 2000 and So *et al.*, 2012)

Assumptions of the study are:

- The outright assumptions orienting the study are that:
- Resources to undertake the research were available to ensure completion of the study;
- The selected sample size was a true replica of the population representation;
- Participants of all questionnaires were highly ethical in their responses;
- There was no information asymmetry from the participants and the interviewer.

The study exhibited the listed limitations:

- Parts of those interviewed were unwilling to give information. They felt that it was going to lead them to discrimination. To mitigate this, the researcher indicated that questionnaires were primarily for educational purposes only of which confidentiality was guaranteed;
- There was lack of extended willingness from the group of selected participants of the questionnaires as they had other

work schedules. The researcher had to persuade and agree to meet the respondents outside their normal work schedules;

- The researcher had a challenge with questionnaires which had incomplete information and some came late in some instances. To mitigate the limitations, the researcher issued out a large number of questionnaires which gave back enough completed questionnaires which aided the researcher to design a satisfactory analysis from the questionnaires;
- The researcher lacked requisite research skills such as coding and data analyzation. The quantitative study required a labour-intensive examination process which included categorisation, recoding, etc. (Elo and Kyngas, 2008). The qualitative research also required well skilled researchers to get the target data from the group of participants. Further diverse conclusions were to be deduced basing on the similar information which relied on the personal characteristics of the researcher (Maxwell, 2005). To mitigate this obstacle, the researcher had to seek the services of a statistician which countered the deficiency.

The selection of study considered that very few studies have been undertaken focusing on the tourism sector technology adoption. The research might help increase knowledge in this field and also looking at employee personal traits and /or attitudes might bring out a contrast in their attitudes and this can help provide more knowledge in this area of study. The tourism and hospitality sector is highly information intensive and dynamic (Buhalis and Sinarta, 2019). Tourism technology adoption by SME's in developing countries is lagging behind than that of established entities. This study can therefore be a point of reference to policy makers in view of the national ICT policy to enact legislation and policies to support SME's to invest in ICT enabled services. Digital media, such as websites, email links, digital media technology etc. are important tools of trade if hospitality firms are to attract and retain their

consumers (Willems *et al.*, 2019). The tourism and hospitality sector is highly fragmented therefore its success is fuelled by investing in related technologies (Styvén and Wallström, 2019).

Given the reasonable internet penetration rate in Zimbabwe, it is important to understand the extent to which SME's employees and their managers (Cheng and Cho, 2011; Theodosiou and Katsikea, 2012) are ready to adopt available technologies which are available at low cost (Myat, Sharkasi and Rajasekera, 2019; Styvén and Wallström, 2019). The study also adds to the body of knowledge by combining the TRI (Parasuraman, 2000) with CEM (King & Sparks, 2012) whereas literature addresses these concepts separately as observed by Harrigan *et al.*, (2018). Given the potential contribution attributed to the combination of ICT and Consumer Engagement, this study thus makes a contribution theoretically by determining whether technology readiness personalities results in consumer engagement. The Conceptual framework in figure 1 above summarises the proposed relationships.

The hospitality sector is highly fragmented; therefore, its success is fuelled by investing in related technologies (Styven & Wallstrom, 2019). Given the reasonable internet penetration rate in Zimbabwe, it is important to understand the extent to which SME employees and managers are ready to adopt available technologies, Cheng & Cho, 2011). The study could benefit the tourism sector in terms of its recruitment practices as there is a powerful correlation between employee personality traits and technology readiness and therefore there is need for them to recruit the best persons possible especially for jobs that involve interacting with clients.

The study might also help the ZTA and other companies and organisations that have specific roles that require technological interfaces with clients to design better recruitment and training

programmes enabling them to achieve and select the best possible candidates. The research might also help SME's and other companies and organisations to understand consumers such as how consumer spending habits are influenced by those consumers attitude towards smart tourism and hence marketing departments can design better marketing drives and campaigns that are effective.

Box 1.1: Definition of key terms

The following are the key terms used in the study

Small to Medium Enterprises: In Zimbabwe, ZIMRA classifies SMEs as businesses that employ between 5-40 people with annual turnover and assets from as low as \$50,000 to \$2 million (Financial Tribune, 2018). According to SME Association of Zimbabwe (2018), SMEs are those with a turnover less than US\$240, 000.00 or assets less than US\$100,000.00 and turnover and assets above the thresholds for small enterprises, but less than US\$1 million each.

Hospitality Industry: It is a broad category of fields within the service industry that includes lodging, food and drink service, event planning, theme parks and transportation. It also includes bars, hotels, restaurants that offer people food, drink, or a place to sleep (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Digital Media Technology: Focuses on enabling technologies for digital media systems, including technologies for analysing media, generating interactive media, processing and coding, optimising wired and wireless transfer and distributing digital 3D contents.

Consumer Engagement: It is the ongoing interactions between company and customer, offered by the company, chosen by the customer.

Chapter 2 concentrated on literature review that was available in the canon of scholarship both in theory and practice, thereby carefully highlighting the gap in the research. This chapter attempted to address the research questions both empirically and theoretically as indicative by the objective of the study.

Chapter 3 provides the research methodology that articulated the arguments for and the description of the design, the techniques and

methods which were used for data collection for the research. It explained the meaning of the research design, data collection, sampling technic and the procedural analysis. The process included the study of the population, sampling size and also sampling techniques which were used.

Chapter 4 provides an analysis of data collected through self-administered questionnaires including interviews which were deduced from the research objectives. The chapter has data presentation on the staff and facts derived from the research results carried out from questionnaires.

Chapter 5 is constitutive of the summary of results, the research-based inferences and recommendations.

The chapter has sought to explicate the problem of technology adoption in the hospitality sector, with specific focus on SMEs. A brief review of literature highlighted the knowledge gap which this study has strove to fill and empirical evidence has shown that there was need to investigate the personality factors affecting technology adoption as these have managerial implications on technology investment decisions. A conceptual framework guiding the study was developed from theory. This section was followed by objectives of the study and hypothesis. Assumptions, delimitations and limitations also formed part of this proposal.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides the most essential aspects of the research. It debates literature from related research work while it dwells on what the knowledge base has in common and also highlights the gap in the canon of scholarship. The chapter exhaustively examined the results of former related research giving some scrutiny of that reviewed literature and recognises the significance of the SME's in the tourism sector in Zimbabwe.

According to Vithal and Jansen (2014), literature review helps by giving originality to the study, test the theories, apply theory, then design and conduct the study. The present study reviewed academic and professional publications regarding hospitality industry readiness to adopt digital media technology for consumer engagement.

Digital technological adoption is fast being implemented by the organisations to react positively to consumers preferences while on the same vein, improve consumer side operations. It augments those desires of customers and corporates while on the same note, helping propel both sales and efficiencies through reduction of costs. Information density is easily passed on because of digital technology (Watson *et al.*, 2006). Corporates are heavily reliant on digital technology use to increase the quality of information availed to their stakeholders (Foroudi *et al.*, 2016).

In simple terms, technology innovation is taken as the deployment of a service or product with enhanced capability appearances in a way to disseminate fresh or upgraded services to the consumer (Oh and Teo, 2010; Gorla *et al.*, 2010). Best quality information conveyed through the best channel or format has a big effect on consumer behaviours and marketing (Oh and Teo, 2010). Information density comprises of integrated promotions which, among other issues, involve consistency

on branding to support consumers. It also talks to the product and pricing history which guarantees reliability on product portfolio and pricing through retail outlets. Finally, it allows for information dissemination which is the collation of consumers' on-line purchases which are held by retailers which helps provide customized information and services (Oh and Teo, 2010).

Service convenience is the customer's desire in preserving time and effort. Bin and Teo (2010) allege that the processes of integrated information access and customer service" plays a crucial role in benefiting service convenience. Information access via on-line stores enables the customer to acquire pertinent information that relates to product availability and location (Ray *et al.*, 2005; Tallon, 2010). On the same note, order fulfilment allows tearless order management to the customer by giving product availability, seamless and fast purchase resulting in instant delivery (Porter, 1980). Integrated customer service provides best customer treatment and support while at the same time online products purchases can be exchanged or surrendered back to the shop (Banker *et al.*, 2006).

Digital technological adoption acts a crucial role in virtually most corporates. (Setia *et al.*, 2013) It has also enabled partnership across firms; provide information storage and analysis which has greatly improved client service deliverables (Ray *et al.*, 2005). It has had a huge influence on client service delivery (Ray *et al.*, 2005). Further this has enhanced management services convenience (Pavlou and El Sawy, 2006).

Gretzel (2011) contends that undoubtedly smart tourism is a brainchild of ICT. Similarly, Sigala, Koo, Xiang and Gretzel (2015) argued that smart tourism is taken to be a rational development from yester year tourism and e-tourism, showcasing the extensive use of ICT. To put things into perspective, smart tourism is an ICT integrated tourism

platform, such as artificial intelligence (AI). (IoT) the Internet of Things and cloud computing (Wang *et al.*, 2016).

However, another author Li *et al.* (2017) observe how smart tourism is the recipient of ever-present traveling information flow by travellers with specific personal requests through any form of medium. Therefore, according to Li. (2017), Kim and Kim, 2017) checking up with the dynamics in technology is the ultimate concern of tourism entities, including travellers.

Thus, Rudas and Fodor (2008) argued that smart tourism is expected to comprehend, gain from experience, absorb and retain knowledge and respond quickly and positively to new situations. Accordingly, employees' personality traits are central in the automation of digital media technology. Essentially, the goal is to give all tourism stakeholders adequate and correct information, improved direction supports greater mobility and finally exciting tourism experiences (Sigala and Chalkiti, 2014).

Currently, attempts have been done to make use of Augmented Reality (AR) and Big Data technology for smart tourism. According to Del Vecchio, Mele, Ndou and Secundo (2018) all this is used to assist in establishing tourism brands, support travel making decisions and supporting participation by tourists

Digital media technology is there to support travellers by predicting the user's preferences depending on several issues and suggesting possibilities with respect to the consumption preferences which among other things will include points of entertainment, dining & recreational facilities, interactive services and enhanced travellers' site experiences. By offering this rich information, it revives and reinforces traveller

experiences and also build personalised image and a strong social network image.

As things currently stand, the (IoT) Internet of Things has the ability to fast turn into a new norm as infrastructural technology, thus by (Atzori *et al.*, 2010). Of late this has been observed as a primary cornerstone for services that are to be offered by smart tourism towns (Guo *et al.*, 2014; Perera *et al.*, 2014). The general idea of the Internet of Things is the prevalent appearance among us of a varied number of things such as (RFID) thus Radio-Frequency-Identification tags, actuators, mobile devices, sensors etc. All these can interact with each other and cooperate with their neighbouring facets to achieve the same purpose (Want *et al.*, 2015).

All these gadgets are joined to the internet which resultantly closes the opening between the actual world and the digital sphere. As such the internet of things enables the creation of diverse spheres which are able to cast a wide range and different forms of data making use of participatory sensing systems (Gutiérrez, *et al.*, 2013). Significantly the eruption of the IoT provides a change of service delivery which has leapfrogged from the contemporary image of always on services which is typical of the web era, to a new norm which is always responsive situated services that is moulded and constructed to answer to a particular need while at the same time accounting for the user's context.

These innovations controlled by the internet of things have major implications on tourism growth due to the fact that tourism involves passage through period smart environment which grows to be cognisance of and be able to address, the tourist's personal needs in a convincing and yet subtle way. A good example is of sensors installed in tourist attractions which enable tourism corporates to track their client's locations and spending patterns to provide them with personalised and location-based services.

We have smart watches which are wearable technologies which compile data making use of their sensors and cameras. Furthermore, they also interface with the network and more so the internet of things while supporting higher levels of connectivity without much interference with the experience. Both digital and online marketing technology are to be appreciated in the context of Web 2.0 & Web 3.0 technology and the Internet of Things (IoT) that are all similar ideas in that this all relates to web technology which is ubiquitous and linked to nearly everything and smartly integrated.

There is a series of powers which have emerged relating to either cloud, mobile and social information which are relevant to the present technological business landscape. For enhanced social cohesion and product or service value, clients are eager to engage in marketing activities much more. With the foregoing, organisations need to concentrate on improved and enhanced advanced ways to reach their stakeholders (Gartner, 2015).

Nowadays it is easy for tourists to gather and access information from the internet, WhatsApp and short message services (SMS), portable gadgets, devices you can wear such as smart watches, or other various tour information platforms (Chen and Shang, 2014). Acquiring multi faceted information enables a tourist to prepare both mentally and physically before arriving at the intended tourist destination. The primary purpose of using the concept of smart tourism is to provide total tourist satisfaction while helping to manage resources efficiently and effectively.

Smart tourism involves a marketing platform that is recognised by an efficient and inclusive flow of information exchange among stakeholders which are tourists themselves and the respective tourism entities (Li, Hu, Huang, Duan, 2017). However, it has been noted that there is little research undertaken about smart tourism basing from various academic and practical discussions on hand (Brandt, Bendler, Neumann, 2017). On

the same vein tourist behaviours concerning smart tourism has not been adequately explored. In addition, not much has been researched on users' perception about the negative effects of smart devices utilization during travel.

Sensitive and confidential information that include payment and location status, can be easily leaked during the use of a smart device in a foreign territory (Huang, Goo, Nam, Yoo, 2017). Furthermore, unsolicited records such as digital footprints are easily recorded and stored depending on service usage Gretzel *et al.* (2015). As travellers become increasingly reliant on their smart gadgets, they can pretty much predict their travel expedition hence no more surprises which takes away the travel enjoyment. There will be not any surprises in the travel experience.

Technology innovation is described as the implementation of better systems which achieve latest requirements, new or current market needs (Maranville, 1992). Technology innovation, which includes digital media, is able to avail economic growth through an adoption and mixture of current products (Garcia and Calantone, 2002). Contrastingly, it may encompass repeated refinements and upgrades of current services and products.

We have an example where digital media has brought about the birth of a new involving public domain where everyone can interact and have an alliance in content co-creation (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016). The instant marriage in real time between the public and the entity or institution is one of the prime features of the internet world. Online users are repeatedly being exposed to the organisation's innovative marketing package through the global diffusion of digital software packages such as blogs, WikiLeaks, webinars and electronic fora. These social networks help to facilitate the institutions' communicating with their customers (Camilleri, 2017).

Many large organisations websites have a high level of interaction with a capacity to pass on information and to build relationships among diverse stakeholders and the entities (Capriotti and Moreno, 2007). It must be noted that the use of the Internet has the potential to be unidirectional when it comes to information diffusion. On the foregoing, digital social media parameters enable easy communication as it is viewed as a two-way communication between the organisation and its customers. As such, internet arenas have pointed to a symmetric communication among the various participants thereby removing the usual unnecessary hierarchies (Castelló, Morsing and Schultz, 2013).

As an addition, social media lacks gatekeeping (Morsing and Schultz, 2006; Vorvoreanu, 2009). To that end, communication interaction is shifting the social philosophy (Harrigan and Miles, 2014). Both data and web exchanges have greatly improved the interaction between stakeholders and corporates. The Internet allows organisations to interact with online platform consumers and then take lead of the constructive publicity that emanates from the real time word of mouth marketing strategies (Camilleri, 2017).

It has been noticed that communication via the internet is spirited in comparison to traditional media (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016; Taiminen and Karjaluo, 2015). Digital media has the technological power to hasten communication systems (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) and increase straight interaction and participation among corporates and various stakeholders (Utz and Göritz, 2011). These reciprocal communications are mostly known as “viral” mainly because these ideas and opinions fast spread like veld fires through the social network verbally. These pathways are considered to be highly reliable sources of information (Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010).

It is critical to note that when small entities share their entrepreneurship and stakeholder engagement information with their online customers, those followers will, in turn, also share their passion for good reasons.

However, in contrast, there are several realistic causes why the communication features that are enabled by digital social media may not be applied efficiently and effectively by the corporate' marketing teams (Tiago and Veríssimo 2014).

As a result, the tourism SME owner-managed entities are encouraged to bring themselves to speed into the digital media arena to raise the impact on their communication status. There is a chance for them to make use of interactive digital technology which can widen the frequency, outreach and effect of their messages (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The SME top echelons are at a better status to increase the efficiency and impact of their responsible entrepreneurship activities as a result of digital media adoption. They however, should choose on what message content to disseminate, where to communicate it, how to communicate and when to communicate to reach out to the desired consumers.

As a matter of fact, the internet is rapidly growing at an alarming speed of technology adoption. It is the online communication that has fully changed the internet arena through innovation and highly scalable social media networks and product recommendation ideologies. There has been a sudden emergence of user constructed content in newsgroups, social media. Crowd pulling has also proffered numerous windows for researchers and experts alike to pay attention carefully to clients, employees, investors, suppliers, regulatory authorities and the media to mention a few.

The status quo is that digital media enhances the effectiveness and efficiency of the entities engagement capacities with stakeholders. Recent researches exhibit that the businesses implementation of online engagement is neither automatic nor easy (Tiago and Veríssimo, 2014). The dialogue characteristics which are web based enabled such as blogs and other social media are at times very difficult to implement (Etter, 2013).

Latest research has debated on the communication aspects of internet-based stakeholder engagement (Moreno and Capriotti, 2009). However, very limited factual research has managed to measure the companies owner-managers stand point on communicating on ethical, commercial and social responsibility aspects through the platform provided by digital technology

According to Dimopoulou and Moustakis (2014), Technology readiness is conceptualised as a person's mental willingness or readiness to accept the advent of new technologies. On the other hand, Parasuraman (2000:308) considers technology-readiness construct as people's willingness or propensity to accept and make use of new technologies in achieving goals both at home life and work life. However, according to Walczuch *et al.* (2007), it is silent on a person's skills and knowledge in the use of technology but rather the acceptance of it.

Technology Readiness Index has been adopted to understand the state of technology adoption by tourists and also explain the adoption behaviour of new ICT services in the tourism industry (Victorino *et al.*, 2009). TRI is used to enhance the effectiveness of lodges or hotel client profiling for purposes of market segmentation, since it was found to be a very useful tool for segmentation. In addition, it aided supervisors to design segments which have unique characteristics towards demographic attitudes and technological usage formats that enables it to give products and services according to the preferences and tastes of diverse groups on their comfort with technology use (Victorino, Karniouchina, Verma (2009). It was also observed that tourism guests with a high level of TRI score were still young and on most occasions frequent upscale hotels.

Thus, with reference to Parasuraman (2000) individuals exhibit either positive or negative personality feelings towards technology. Consequently, Parasuraman and Colby (2001) argued that Technology Readiness Index (TRI) is a statistical tool which enables the classification

of individuals, at the same time measuring one's propensity to adopt new technologies. In essence, Optimism and innovativeness are regarded as motivators of technology acceptance whilst insecurity and discomfort are inhibitors.

Empirically, Karahanna *et al.* (1999) found that much innovative people are early adopters and exhibit less complex beliefs about new technology. As such, innovators have a correct impression of the usefulness of technology (Walczuch *et al.*, 2007). In addition, optimists do not worry much about the possibility of negative outcomes as they perceive technology to be more useful and relatively easy to use. Accordingly, motivators of TRI have empirically shown that they are positively related to the adoption and use of technology (Walczuch *et al.*, 2007). Essentially, if employees are optimistic and innovative, they are most likely to engage consumers more, than when they have discomfort and insecurity towards new technology use.

Of late research has increased as a result of the birth of innovation technologies in the form of mobile applications and Augmented Reality for tourism industry. For example, Chung *et al.* (2015) have made use of the Technology Readiness Index model to examine the readiness of the mind for the easy use of Augmented Reality in historical sites and to find out whether augmented reality does for sure aid in motivating travellers to visit a specific destination. However, most of the available researches have taken Technology Readiness as an individual trait but without fully debating other personal factors all together. On that vein, the importance of Technology Readiness has been accepted, but being limited only to a debate on the differences in influence in relation to individual characteristics.

Divinagracia (2012) argues that the use of digital media as a communication platform for tourists has significantly grown over the years. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2016) argued that digital media comprise of communication tools such as the web, email, mobile and

interactive TV. Similarly, search engine marketing, digital media technology and display advertising are such digital media communication channels organisations can use to promote their products and services.

Hence, it is worth noting that digital spheres together with digital media technology have changed the ways in which clients communicate and engage with brands mainly tourists when accessing tourist related information (Xiang, Magnini and Fesenmaier, 2015). To a greater extent, when making purchasing decision, a tourist relies mostly on various digital media as information sources (Živković, Gajić and Muharemović, 2013).

It is of primary importance for organisations in the tourism sector to assess social media and act fast and positively from an internet reputation management position. Neuhofer *et al.* (2014:342) strongly advocate that the tourism enterprise must recognise that the personal customer attention has become the focal point of their services and they should align themselves along those lines.

Wang and Qualls (2007:562) observe how tourism organisations have to look for information which scrutinizes and evaluate the expected outcomes and or benefits of adopting the specific innovation. That study further explains that the hospitality sector organisation's decision to absorb latest technology solely depends on its perceived view of digital technology.

The adoption appetite mainly rely on the organisation's analysis and measure of the advantages that technology will bring to the organisation and is mostly adopted in several dimensions which among others include, market share, efficiency cost savings, productivity and customer service. Besides the perceived usefulness, ease of use and technology, companies in the travel domain are equally interested in the gymnastics of the total chain of the technology adoption sequence. Chathoth

(2007:405) agrees that value emanates from improved service and enhanced staff morale through putting in place information technology services for full tourism services.

Baltzan (2009:200) explains some of the positive benefits of digital marketing by organisations which involve global expansion reach, new markets creation costs reduction and improved operations and effectiveness. Kiang *et al.* (2000:386) focuses on benefits for corporates in relation to three channels anchored on functions performed. The first one is a communication channel which relates information switch between sellers and buyers. The second is a transaction channel which relates to sales modalities and movements.

Tikkanen *et al.* (2009:1374) also buttress the notion that success for virtual world marketing involves value that is perceived by customers, greater interactive applications and finally customer management. Leung and Law (2013:34) advise that it is control which remains more crucial as compared to efficiency increase when discussing about the use of information technology.

However, in spite of numerous well-articulated advantages of digital technologies, organisations will still experience barriers to them in one way or the other. The existence of some of these barriers to technological adoption blocks the entity's readiness to technology adoption. A variety of these setbacks will be deliberated next, but they fall within the previous three model frameworks (Fuchs *et al.*, 2010:168; Fuchs *et al.*, 2014:816).

Digital media technology has in a profound manner transformed how travellers search, produce and disseminate information about their experiences, tourism providers and destinations (Sotiriadis, 2017). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) indicate that digital media technology comprises a set of internet-based systems founded on Web 2.0 ideologies which facilitate the creation and switching of user generated content.

Furthermore, Mangold and Faulds (2009:358) have defined digital media technology as “a wide range of online, word of mouth platforms and social networking websites”. Digital media technology is said to persuade users’ opinion (The Economist, 2007) especially in decision-making and tourism planning (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Travellers become co producers, co-marketers, co-designers and co-consumers of the tourism expedition, through engaging on digital media technology platforms (Sigala, *et al*, 2012).

Mohammed *et al.* (cited by Gay *et al.*, 2007:06) explain Internet marketing in operation as a system involved in the use of internet activities to build and keep customer relationships through an interchange of products and services to address the intentions of both players. As such, it is not just about marketing but rather also the format in which companies present and showcase their products on-line through different internet mediums. It is also about creating stakeholder satisfaction via their technological capacities. Neuhofer *et al.* (2014:341) also observe how marketing is combined into the full, intensive and emotive customer experience.

Hamill (2005:1) clearly outlines that the world of digital communication has the positive effect of information reduction which help on devices convergence thus devices such as cameras in phones. These accommodate easy and cheap storage of information which is easy to transmit and reproduce at a later stage. Mobile technology allows users to carry the mobile devices in the form of phones, tablets and GPS to receive and transmit digital information.

Kasavana (2011) states that when mobile information is transmitted through digital text messaging and shared between or among users, it is called viral marketing, “Mobile marketing information is split into alerts, coupons, calls to action, chat sessions, contests, polling, voting and peer-to-peer gifting” Kasavana (2013).

Reino *et al.* (2013:418) made a study which confirmed ICT adoption barriers in respect of both firms and their respective stakeholders. This ranged from availability of the requisite technology, costs, security concerns technical knowledge base and actual training. There is also lack of business strategy to align it with technological systems. There is also an issue relating to small tourism players failing to link the necessary ICT applications into integration and maintenance of old and or new systems. Cobanoglu *et al.* (2007:21) assumed that information technology consumption is very slow due to insufficient technology education on managers themselves.

An observation by Watson (cited by Leung and Law, 2013:27) explains that SMEs first look at the return on investment for such types of technology which is one of the main factors that stops them from fully investing just for data consolidation and interfacing with their customers. Leung and Law (2013:27) further buttress that lack of ICT knowledge by SMEs in the tourism sector is one of the major inhibiting factors for its adoption. They also noted circumstances surrounding hotel managers who report to owner managers with very limited technical knowhow who do not see or understand the importance of technology adoption and hence is never followed up or fully. As a result these managers are never given adequate budget for implementing these.

There is an article from Lodging Technology Study (2016) which advises that growing customer quest for advanced digital technology in the tourism landscape is now surpassing budget constraints which proved to be the biggest challenge in 2015.

In addition, Leung and Law (2013:32) study on Electronic Data Interchange adoption says it is influenced by top management's support and the overall company contextual position. The study also deduced that it is those managers with strong IT knowledge who are likely to

invest in the system which then calls for the importance of hi-tech systems to cater for client's needs.

Wang and Qualls (2007:571) argue how technology adoption by hospitality industry is hampered by the information availability which renders influence on public perceptions about it and how the hospitality sector process everything.

On the other hand, O'Connor (2008:71) advises that those interviewed outlined that barriers to IT implementation in the hospitality sector involved lack of adequate technical people, not showing a business case, no vendor companies for support, a general resistance to change, no standards parameters, no infrastructure and high costs implications.

Consumer engagement is described as 'customers' behavioural attitude toward a brand or company over and above purchases only which emanates from inspirational forces that among other things include verbal communication, referrals, customer-to-customer engagements blogging, written reviews and other such activities" (Marketing Science Institute, 2010:4). To the contrary, So *et al.* (2012) take consumer engagement as the customer's personal attachment with a product as exhibited by their behavioural responses outside of the purchase scenario it be cognitive or otherwise.

Generally, it is comprehensively defined by five dimensions which are the enthusiasm, the attention, the absorption, the interaction and finally the identification. Consequently, those people who feel more absorbed are most likely to fall in love, have trust and have quality relationships with the company , thus the higher the engagement the higher the trust in the relationship (Yoo and Bai, 2013; So *et al.*, 2016).

In addition, the industry has been changed by the growing use of new technological systems which involve digital media and sharing economy-based platforms like Airbnb. Enabled by the above

technologies, clients in the tourism industry can positively co-create and mould their own tourism experiences, as supported by Vargo and Lusch's (2016, 2004) and (Chen, Drennan andrews and Hollebeek, 2018). As a result, in a growing competing atmosphere, travel players should see the relevance of coming up with clear destination pictures to assist consolidate their clients' engagement with them and build trust in their destinations that helps them to increase their customer base.

Customer engagement is a term used to refer to a consumers' interaction and experience with a brand (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). This term is fast gathering pace in the tourism language (Dewnarain, Ramkissoon and Mavondo, 2018). Most other similar concepts provide information into specific customer based dynamics whereas customer engagement focuses on the customer's emotional, cognitive and behaviour investments during their association with particular tourism brands (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016).

As a result, consumer engagement tends to form a favourable addition to the traveller's total brand experience which significantly contributes to the firm's performance (Taheri *et al.*, 2014). We note that former research has grossly adopted observational research to understand the tourist consumer's engagement (Falk and Storksdieck, 2005). The above studies have focused mainly on the period of time customers take in a particular tourist facility, as compared to their level of emotional, brand-behaviour - related response and cognitive status during interactions which results in failure to fully capture modern consumers' increasing brand-related participation (Kumar *et al.*, 2017).

Over the past years, consumer engagement studies have been done with greater service on online focus as observed by Nordfält. (2017) and Hollebeek and Andreassen. (2018). Written and published work tried to address customer engagement in virtual brand communities that included mobile phone service providers.

In the hotel and tourism business we look at research studies which address Customer Engagement with online business reviews, social media interactions, heritage places and airline brands among others.

Regardless of these existing insights the purpose of tourism consumer engagement process and its specific conceptual relationships remain unexplored. To correct this gap, we study consumer engagement's denoting principles in the tourism industry. Particularly, we investigate the part of destination authenticity and destination affiliation in pushing CE and establishing its overall effect on customer trust, interaction and brand absorption.

Several thoughts have been studied as customer engagement antecedents in current research, involving customer engagement, atmosphere, self-brand image and value congruity (Islam *et al.*, 2018). However, fun enough, regardless of these studies, not much is known concerning the use of place authenticity and attachment in driving consumer engagement yet they are central to tourism industry. In light of these, this study seeks to empirically test consumer engagement's relationship with these constructs and examine its essence in the building of consumer trust, co-creation and brand acceptance, thereby aiding to insight into the concept's participation in enhancing Tourism Company's performance.

Destination authenticity talks to the level to which the client has a real and true experience in a tourist facility (Loureiro and Sarmento, 2018). Place attachment refers to that notion which signals a person's emotional bond with a geographic location which also has claimed previous tourism-based attention (Bjork and Weidenfeld, 2016). Unfortunately destination authenticity's relationship with place authenticity still remains vague (Ram *et al.*, 2016).

With the foregoing, it is noted that there is little research that tries to address the relationship that exist between customer-perceived place attachment and place authenticity. Therefore this study tries to offer a new investigation on place authenticity and customer engagement. We are of the view that customer engagement is the person's personal emotional, cognitive and behavioural cultivation in tourism brand interactions (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016).

Chathoth *et al.* (2016) also says we have the poorly understood tourism-based customer co-creation that talks to the consumer who has jointly created value with others. Despite this assertion, there is scope for further developmental insight into this alleged concept which is expected to help give a clear and better understanding of tourism based interactions which will facilitate tourism experience mechanisms (Bailey and Williams, 2011). From an S-D logic stand point, new consumers perform as proactive contributors to their own personal service experiences which will be recognised by their brand related investments that resultantly affect their co-creation.

It should be noted that tourism require a clear understanding the format in which customer interactions are optimized to create positive consumer-based results which are for instance , loyalty (Imand Qu, 2017). Consumer brand loyalty embraces the level at which tourism travellers continue to buy the brand and spread positive brand image which is important for tourism managers (Rather, 2017).

However, it relatively appears not much attention has been accorded to travellers' tourism brand loyalty (Su *et al.*, 2014), yet it is of paramount concern in an increasingly competitive tourism environment where customers are becoming very mobile and fickle as they now have several options of other destinations to choose from. Coupled with modest customer switching costs, it is quite evident that today's tourism

managers need an enhanced understanding of client's loyalty development and work on that.

In addition, the information difference between tourism providers and consumers leaves trust as a crucial element for tourism customer relationship management given that tourism is highly intangible in nature, as has been explored in this study. This research provides new insight through identifying the consequences of customer place authenticity and attachment on the creation of customer engagement and its effect on tourism customer trust, co creation and brand loyalty. It has been examined and noted that fostering customer engagement is likely to foster improved customer referrals and retention which contribute to high company performance.

Rogers (2002) underscore the fact that innovation is the extent to which an entity's level of adoption is relatively faster in grasping fresh ideas compared to other members of a social set up. Midgley and Dowling (1978) also describe it as the zeal of a person to try out any new information technology. Looking at the two definitions above it is now necessary to examine the acceptance level of smart gadgets in the tourism industry and analyse it. If the acceptance level and adaptation to smart devices is high, then, innovativeness can be said to be positively connected with perceived brand identification.

Innovation is positively related with the assumed benefits of smart devices for tourism industry. Kwon and Chidambaram (2001), contend that some people have a fear of new smart devices and technology and hence do not like to use them for travel purposes. There is also the issue of personal security and privacy which are some of the barriers that inhibit people from using smart devices for travel purposes.

Nordin (2003), observe how a competitive driving force in tourism and other industries is innovation. Today there is a drive towards new products to gain competitive advantage and attract new customers in tourism business of

which this drive is innovation. Since the dawn of the new millennium, researchers have begun to increasingly deliberate on innovation in tourism (KlauseggerorSalzgeber 2004, OttenbacherorGnoth 2005).

All the above works vary in their research aims and their purposes of investigation. You find out that some are concerned on the big hotel industry and or destinations whereas others are more interested on small and medium sized tourism enterprises.

Most tourism researches are not linked to a theoretical innovation approach, such as the entrepreneurial approach, the strategic or the Research and design approach, or even use a conceptual procedure. As of now some conceptual works have been made for services (GallouijorWeinstein 1997) and for manufacturing (Storey 2000) but till now there is no conceptual discussion that has been linked to tourism.

Innovativeness of an individual is reflected in their willingness to experiment with new IT, thus it is a trait which describes and individual (Walczuch *et al.*, 2007). Customer brand identification is “the level to which the customers or clients see their own self-image as overlapping with the brand’s image” (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006:49). Today’s consumers have turned ‘smart’, thus they increasingly make use of smart technologies to make bookings, navigate their way around a destination and access travel information (Dorcic *et al.*, 2019).

Further, ICT such as online platforms and digital media technology have transformed the global market consequently, availing new opportunities for consumer engagement through feedback and other useful information (Zhang *et al.*, 2015). Increasingly, many tourism organisations have adopted digital media technology, by way of storytelling. This is said to promote engagement, eventually triggering passionate interaction (Tiago, Couto, Faria and Borges-Tiago, 2018). It can be noted, however, that the success of digital media technology and

consumer engagement is greatly contingent on service provider's location (Minghetti and Buhalis, 2010).

As such, developed countries are early adopters of digital media technology and associated technologies and hence perform far much better than competitors (Baghirov *et al.*, 2019). It is worth noting that digital media technology platforms enable consumers to interact with a brand, express themselves, share and build content about companies' products and services in different ways (Camarero and San José, 2011).

Results from a study by Cheung and to (2016) revealed that attitude towards innovation on digital media technology in hospitality services have a significant influence on co-creation intention thus hotel guests tend to adopt such new services developed through co-creation. In light of this, Ainin, Parveen, Moghavvemi, Jaafar and Mohd Shuib. (2015) assert that corporate brand profiles on digital media technology need to be managed to captivate consumer interest at the same time persuading them to build content and exchange information with others. In the context of financial services, Dootson, Beatson and Drennan (2016) argue how adoption of digital media technology for such services will enhance customer relationships through improving their experiences.

Furthermore, as a result of the growing importance of digital media technology to organisations in the interaction with consumers (Van Birgelen, Aksoy, Kunz and Huang (2013) assert that there is a need to continue investigating how consumers derive value. This will help organisations determine appropriate circumstances to exploit as they strive to enhance service delivery through meaningful engagement with customers (Lariviere *et al.*, 2013).

Broadly, digital media technology by way of two-way interaction provides a ground for real-time dialogue between organisations and customers, thus encouraging long-term relationships which lead to brand identification (Farshid *et al.*, 2011; Laroche, Habibi, Richard and

Sankaranarayanan, 2012). According to Smith *et al.* (2012) digital media technology such as Facebook provides an opportunity for marketers to collaborate with consumers, thus enabling business-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer brand conversations. In turn, the brand is visible and has sentimental value to the customer as they identify with it (Smith *et al.*, 2012).

Technology has fast transformed tourism experiences. However, despite that, research has greatly concentrated on tourist's attitudes and technology adoption as compared to their tourism experiences. The present study focuses on the role played by technology readiness (TR) as a personality trait in moulding travellers' satisfaction availed by travel technologies, in the service sector which includes tourism in the developed economies.

The largest productive industry in any economy is now the provision of services. There is tremendous demand for efficiency in provision of services that is influencing competitiveness be it either in the domestic or international markets. It has been seen that tourism plays a major role in the services sector for economic growth and employment creation in so many countries. As a result (Carvalho and Costa 2011) suggest that innovation in the tourism industry calls for increased competitiveness.

Gronroos. (1990)'s services management theory need to be applied when you look at services in the tourism industry which revolves around social behaviour which has a bearing on individual interaction between the consumer and the respective service provider. There is a high level of competition in the tourism field. (Hall and William, 2008) contend that tourism players need to innovate if they are to keep abreast of the competition. However, the challenge is of copycats since innovation in this industry is difficult to conceal and can be easily replicated as they are highly visible as observed (Hjalager, 2002).

Pivčević and Praničević (2012) came up with empirical evidence which support the position that a greater number of hotels always tend to copy or duplicate innovations from their competitors. The tourism landscape is characterised by some particularities which are similar right through. However, the percentage of tourism consumers has increased and so tourism consumption is equally growing hence these players have to exercise extreme caution because the tourist playground is now very dynamic.

Carvalho and Costa. (2011) advise that today's tourism consumers are more informed and have a sense of independence which enable them to organise their holiday packages. They have become sustainably conscious and demand that the tourism industry be managed in the same sustainable manner in sync with environmental, social and economic dictates.

Schumpeter (1961) gave classifications of inventions and innovations in the form of product or service innovation, managerial innovation, supply chain innovation, process innovation, communications innovation and institutional innovations. As such Hjalager (2011) took these definitions straight into the tourism industry. These are diverse types of tourism innovations which can be concealed simply because tourism is complex and has an interdisciplinary nature.

Scheier and Carver. (1998) describe optimism as where one believes will get a good experience as compared to the negative aspects of life. Employee optimism towards technology is a state in which one is open to new technology, while paying less attention to negative events (Walczuch *et al.*, 2007). An optimist is the one who takes on the new challenges of making use of smart gadgets when traveling and make wise use of those gadgets. He or she considers smart gadgets to be more convenient that offers the user wider mobility while traveling. This point

to a more constructive attitude, behaviour and feeling towards smart gadgets.

As such optimists perceive these smart gadgets as beneficial and most convenient tools to be used by travellers which give no need to be apprehensive about technology. Optimism is affirmatively connected with the assumed benefits of smart gadgets when travelling. Brand absorption occurs when a consumer engages with a brand thus having strong engrossment and effortless concentration and intrinsic enjoyment (So *et al.*, 2012). By being open to new technologies, such as digital media technology, small businesses can spread word of mouth and construct social relationships with customers (Durst and Edvardsson, 2012).

In the hotel industry, Zhu and Morosan (2014) argue how interactive mobile technologies have the potential to invoke consumer curiosity thus immersing them in the experience. This results in brand absorption as consumers develop positive attitudes and behaviours (Zhu and Morosan, 2014). In the context of airports, social media technology adoption is increasingly becoming a crucial component in the captivation of customers' interest thus creating brand awareness (McMullen, 2013).

Arguably, digital media technology has facilitated easy access for consumers as they strive to communicate and gather information about an organisation (Pansari and Kumar, 2017). As a result, organisations have begun to take advantage of digital media technology as it enables segmentation and focusing on consumer needs (Pansari and Kumar, 2017). Consequently, quality relationships are formed as consumers are immersed with the brand through their continued connection to the organisation (Kumar, 2013).

Eid and El-Gohary (2013) argue that an organisation should be geared to invest in the technology and work towards developing a robust e - marketing strategy. In turn, this can enable the fostering of both a two-

way and three-way communication platform between customers and the organisation which in turn help to build strong CRM playground thereby enhancing customer loyalty (Mazzarol, 2015). This will ultimately encourage consumer brand absorption. Interestingly, the proliferation of digital media technology, such as Facebook and Twitter, has created a myriad of opportunities for marketers (Wright, 2016).

Effectiveness of such digital media technology platforms lies in their ability to enable automatic segmentation of the market. Through employee optimism to use digital media technology platforms, consumers are able to participate and customize their social network pages as they streamline information they receive through personalisation of preferences and information, thus segmenting consumers for marketers. Wright *et al.* (2016) therefore encourage marketers to maintain open the lines of communication with customers to enable value co-creation. Being intangible by nature, the tourism product has seen marketers appreciating and adopting digital media technology as fundamental consumer engagement platforms (Harrigan, Evers, Miles and Daly, 2017). Ultimately, positive engagement on digital media technology results in positive experiences that in turn influence brand loyalty or absorption (Bruhn, Schnebelen and Schafer, 2014; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016).

Interaction entails online and offline sharing and exchange of information regarding experiences with the brand So *et al.* (2012). Akin to this, empirical evidence shows that the more a customer participates on an organisation's digital media technology site, the more their visit, participation and interaction with the organisation's brands (Rishika, Kumar, Janakiraman and Bezawada, 2013).

In addition, Wattanacharoensil and Schuckert (2015) assert that provision of feedback through digital media technology provides consumers a sense of engagement with products and the organisation itself. In the context of airport, use of digital media technology as a

marketing tool has shown to have implications for intense interaction between marketers and users, turning customers into social advocates. Such interactions are said to have the capability to encourage and intensify loyalty to the brand (Guen, 2013).

Rosenberg and Nathan (1982) put forth that interaction with customers can be considered an antecedent to innovation. Thus it takes innovative employees to be able for consumers to interact with the brand. In addition, Helal (2019) observes that marketers have since embraced the significance of engaging consumers ahead of the escalation of digital social platforms which encourage interaction.

In the same vein, Tuten and Solomon (2013) agree that digital media technology marketing enhances consumer interactions with brands greatly. Furthermore, Kietzmann, Silvestre, McCarthy and Pitt (2012) identify various motives behind the use of digital media technology. Such motives include establishment identities, engaging in interactions which results in exchanging content and development of relationships among other things.

Kietzmann *et al.* (2012) further observe how marketers need to be innovative enough as they design digital media technology channels while stakeholders are encouraged by some or all of the above motivates when joining or subscribing to a particular digital media technology platform. According to Mangold and Faulds (2009) organisations can innovate by instituting financed online communications which enable consumers to exchange information on certain interests in the firm's offering.

This in turn enables interaction through engagement (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). After collecting data on digital media technology, organisations can nurture consumer interactions via online reviews, or recommendation programmes (Broekemier, Chau and Seshadri, 2015).

Furthermore, Araújo and Zilber (2016) add that if an organisation has a Facebook account, it can foster interaction with its consumers.

Lifestyle tracking of potential, current and future customers in the tourism industry can be done through social media feedback. This is done through tracking those followers who share their personal experiences through digital media which can be checked in on position based social media applications. This could be through their twitter platforms, Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook and others where holiday photos and experiences are likely to be shared. This is all shared on real-time.

Tourists also decide on which holiday places to visit by making use of rating platforms such as TripAdvisor and Booking.com which are used to share holiday experiences. TripAdvisor allows people to discuss globally as the facility provides a review of holiday destinations across the world. The platform provides room for unbiased reviews and comments by other travellers and other expert advisors which facilitates interaction in the tourism industry. It must however, be noted that (Schuckert *et al.* (2016:270) advises that their empirical study found that this feedback is not hundred percent reliable.

The hospitality organisations are also able to do lifestyle tracking of their potential consumers by determining consumer destination desires and target marketing by means of social media platforms in the form of Flickr and Pinterest. Flickr has the capacity to geo-tag pictures and all the stated social media platforms which provides a good indication of tourists shared tastes and preferences.

Potential and future clients can be observed or identified by checking those visiting attractions which are close to tourism centres. It has been discovered that the sub consciousness human mind is controlled by images which have a bigger impact than written messages and

descriptions. As such images and pictures make them greatly ideal marketing tools in the travel industry (Serusi and Pal, 2012).

Guerrero-Solé and Fernández-Cavia (2014:228) argue how Twitter has caused the emergency of new possibilities in travel communication. Faster publication of promotional material and other information of attraction to tourists which include news, weather, events and attractions make it an ideal platform for on-line marketing. Its simplicity and conversational nature has made it more popular.

Bulencea and Egger (2014:469) argue how Facebook is another search tool to be used by tourists when searching information. There is Graph Search on Facebook which is a new product that provides public information and shares it with certain users of Facebook. It is the latest revision Facebooks search feature. It interfaces with the Facebook database and thereby helps users to find and connect people to destinations. It provides personalised search results in real time depending on the individual's graph. It provides better search results and tries hard to mimic the human mind. It acts just and google engine.

Twitter Inc. also provides a latest platform named Periscope. This is a live streaming application giving room to video conversations through the use of smart devices. This is ideal in the hospitality industry as it creates consumers audiences which enhance online visibility. Specials are easily broadcasted to ensure community engagement as these graphical contents are more appealing than plain texts.

In the hospitality industry, Periscope has some applications such as broadcasting the head chef cooking a great meal, the scenic view through your hotel at sunrise, events close to the hotel, Guided tours and many more.

Conclusively, organisational digital media technologies have inevitably become channels for engagement, feedback and comments etc. (Patroni

et al., 2015). In turn, products are promoted, new ideas are developed and relationships are maintained (Patroni *et al.*, 2015). Thus, if employees are innovative, they tend to interact with customers in search of new ideas which lead to innovation and customer interactivity with the brand.

Seemingly, digital media technology is under-researched in tourism studies regardless of its increased usage by travellers (Lu, Ze and Law, 2018). Previous studies have empirically tested how consumers behave online and their perceptions of digital media technology (Kang and Schuett, 2013; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010) including how post-trip experience is shaped by digital media technology (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2017).

However, it is quite conspicuous that research in tourism has focused on a consumer perspective of digital media technology adoption (Ying *et al.*, 2018). An inquiry however, needs to be made on digital media technology adoption by tourism employees and how its adoption influences consumer engagement. Law *et al.* (2016:743) advises that social media acts a crucial role in digital marketing and travellers decision-making priorities.

While Engagement and interactivity is affecting consumer behaviours it must also be noted that it equally affects strategic and operational management. Fotis *et al.* (2011) advises that social media has an impact on the travellers' planning process which makes it more trusted than normal web sites. This is called virtual socialisation. Those responsible for social media platforms designs need to include features and enable status seeking which provides organisations room to capitalize on customer lifestyle activities.

Scholars (Mariani, Buhalis, Longhi and Vitouladiti, 2014; Myat, Sharkasi and Rajasekera, 2019; Styvén and Wallström, 2019) put forth that digital

media are a cost effective way of destination promotion and attraction. Additionally, digital media technology has transformed demand in travel and tourism (Myat, Sharkasi and Rajasekera, 2019). According to Harrigan *et al.*, (2018), a study conducted in the United States (US) has shown that digital media in the form of digital media technology and more specifically TripAdvisor drive consumer engagement tremendously.

Furthermore, Dijkmans, Kerkhof and Beukeboom (2015) revealed in their US study that digital media technology and consumer engagement have a positive correlation. In support of this, Willems *et al.* (2019) put forth that online consumer engagement increases conversion rate through interactions. Following the above discussion, there is no doubt that adoption of digital media propels the level of engagement with consumers, This in turn has managerial implications for hospitality firms, where user generated content has to be managed as organisations interact with their consumers to retain consumers (Willems *et al.*, 2019).

O'Connor (2008:65) made a study which picked that there was no proper communication infrastructure to support the functionality of desired systems which has created a huge challenge in the management of information technology in the hospitality industry. However, this issue is said to be emanating from suppliers who do not give adequate services at either a regional or a global perspective as compared to just the lack of requisite infrastructure in a particular country. As such lack of relevant infrastructure for communication purposes in certain countries is a big problem. However, Parker (2016) indicates that African countries are very ready and eager to adopt and make use of new technologies. The greatest challenge for CIOs in chain hotels comes from data consolidation and interfacing when we discuss of information technology adoption.

O'Connor (2008:66) further explains that this data interfacing and data consolidation are very expensive when it comes to different local

markets that have different vendors providing different products for the same cause. This all is in relation to uniformity requirements and particular country regulations and guidelines.

However, Afolayan and Harpe (2015:144) both look at these issues with the South African Small to medium enterprises in mind. For them to adequately adopt new technology, these businesses require serious research and design to gather relevant information from trustworthy sources through consulting experts in technological advancement and business operations. They can also seek guidance from colleagues and peers whom they are in industry together that will be most willing to share current developments.

SMEs will benefit from an 'information shop'. This is where they can have access to current information about technology. As such the relevant information should be transmitted through this information shop to a wide range of Small to medium enterprises in a well net-woven environment. O'Connor (2008:66) also writes on management vendor issue challenges. These are channel management and budget problems. Channel management problems focus on the use of diverse distribution channels when marketing in different markets which could be countries or regions.

On standardization and vendor issues O'Connor's (2008:66) advises that his respondents indicated that they were very disappointed with the level of Information technology vendor service and support, mainly in a local context. Big hotels which require standardised solutions are not happy because of different implementation packages and ancillary teams in different regions, even though it may be for a similar problem.

Information technology vendors do not give adequate support as they fail to provide tailor made solutions which are able to assist business through a competitive advantage in the business arena. You find out that alternative solutions provide are of using the same technology

which becomes a one size fits all. However, some of O'Connor's respondents during his study gave an indication that there were too few vendors, while some believed there were quite many. However, the majority were of the opinion that vendors were very busy with very limited capacity.

A theoretical foundation of the study was furnished in this chapter and thereafter the chapter went on to critically evaluate the literature to adequately respond to the research objectives. It should be noted that a two-pronged approach was adopted where seminal research on one hand and extant research on the other, was acknowledged in the review. The focus mainly cantered on innovativeness and optimism which have the potential to influence customer engagement in the form of brand identification, absorption and interaction. The preceding chapter will now tabulate the methodology route that was used in conducting the research.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Chapter three presents the research method adopted for the study. The guiding positivist philosophy is explained and this forms the basis of the research approach and strategy. A cross-sectional study was undertaken through a survey of hospitality SMEs. The choice of survey as a study strategy is informed by the research hypothesis making the study quantitative. In addition, the population, sampling and research instruments were presented. The chapter also acted as a precursor to data analysis; therefore, the analysis tools and techniques were explained in this chapter that concludes with an ethics statement and summary. The truth and the authenticity is independence and freedom from the viewer and observer perspective which means the truth is very objective hence it's called positivism.

In this study, the researcher adopted a value free approach aligned to this philosophy by conducting a survey to confirm or not whether the theory adopted in the study was conceivable in explaining the phenomenon under examination through empirical evidence. In essence, it shall be obtained in this study whether or not employee technology readiness to adopt digital media is linked to online consumer engagement.

The research was causal in nature as it seeks to answer the question of whether a causal link exists between employee technology readiness and consumer engagement. As such, inquiry involved measurement and analysis of causal relationships (hypotheses testing) where mode of enquiry was deductive based on testing prior theories (Al-Masroori, 2006).

Research approach for present study was deductive in nature because it was informed by theory. Therefore, choice of method was quantitative. A cross-sectional study was conducted through a survey. The survey research design entailed data collection from a sample of employees and

management of hospitality SMEs and measuring technology readiness variables individually and using quantitative methods to analyse the data.

Table 3:1 (Primary Data, 2020)

Study Units	Number of Chosen Respondents	
	Owner /Managers	Employees
	Population 12	Population 20
Owner / Managers	18	30
Marketing/ PR		
TOTAL	30	50

The target population groups for this study were hospitality SME owners / managers in Victoria Falls as these are involved in decision making as is highlighted on table 3.1. Victoria Falls is the main tourism attraction in Zimbabwe (ZTA, 2017); as such the researcher saw it feasible to use it as the research setting as it is the first port of call for many international tourists. The nature of the study required that data be collected from this population groups and the total number of hospitality SMEs in Victoria Falls amounts to 35.

It was assumed that at-least three individuals are responsible for making technology decisions at each of these organisations. These individuals or managers were drawn from the information technology (IT) and marketing departments. The owners of the business were also included in the study. Ultimately, the target population was approximately 80.

A database of registered hospitality SMEs in Victoria Falls was used to identify respondents. Respondents constituted the IT and marketing managers and owners of the SME.

Table 3.2: Sample Size (Primary Data, 2020)

Study Units	Number of Chosen Respondents			
	Owner Managers		Employees	
	Population	Sample	Population	Sample
Owner Managers – Director (s)	12	10	20	13
Marketing/ PR	18	15	30	17
TOTAL	30	25	50	30

When you choose a quantity or number of observations which you want to include in a statistical sample this is called sample size determination. When making an empirical study for the ultimate goal of drawing up an inference about a particular sample or population, then the most important feature to be considered is a sample size. For one to design a correct sample size, it has to be based on the correct sub groups of the total population in question and then have a proportional allocation of these subgroups which then provides a correct and realistic representation of the total population in question.

In doing quantitative research it is of paramount importance to take at least a 30% or more sample size of the population. However, in contrast to this, in qualitative research, you look for data but there comes a time when you continue getting the same data or information which becomes somehow redundant or repetitive. This is a point of saturation where the same information is what you keep collecting or gathering. On that point you then need to stop further information collection and start analysing what you have already collected. Saunders *et al.* (2017) observe how qualitative research uses this term called saturation to stop further data collection and start analysing what you have. Getting to reach saturation has a very positive impact on the quality of the research you conduct. As alluded to by Fusch and Ness (2015). Table 1 above summarised the number of managers and employees who were chosen as respondents for the study.

The instrument that was used in this study for the survey was adopted from Parasuraman (2000) and So *et al.* (2012). Parasuraman (2000) developed the technology readiness index to determine the motivators and inhibitors in technology adoption in consumers. However, scholars (Walczuch *et al.*, 2007) also feel that the same index should be used on service employees as they equally adopt technologies as do customers. So *et al.* (2012) developed and tested an instrument to measure online consumer engagement with tourism brands.

The adopted measurement scales, have already been tested in prior studies, however, a pilot study was done to determine appropriateness of instrument in the underlying research setting. The researcher saw the adoption of the survey instrument fit for present study which was deductive in nature and was also based on theory from which the measurement scale was developed. Table 3.3 below is a summary of the instruments administered across respondents.

Table 3.3: Respondents and Instrument administration (Primary Data, 2020)

Respondent	Instrument administration
SME owners	Questionnaires through email
IT and Marketing managers	Self-administered questionnaires

The present study relied on primary data sources and also secondary data sources. Secondary data were obtained and gathered from ZTA write-ups and its website, POTRAZ website and that of techzim, empirical evidence from secondary sources was accessed from refereed academic journal articles. Primary data sources were the actual collection of primary empirical data from research subjects through the use of a survey instrument generated for this study.

Questionnaires were sent to all owners via email per company. This enabled them to respond in their comfort zones. Email addresses were provided in the ZTA database. Phone calls were made to SME owners in

advance prior to emails being sent and thereafter follow-up after a week of emailing research instruments. Follow-ups were made weekly until 3rd week and the research window was closed.

Regarding IT and marketing managers, the questionnaires were self-administered and the same follow-up process was done as that of the owners. Questionnaires have the element of objectivity therefore are impartial, as such, there was no interference from the researcher during data collection.

Either primary data or secondary data can be gathered for the purposes of getting the required information in a study study. The use of questionnaires was used as a tool for gathering primary data. Since the procedure for collecting data entailed gaining access to both respondents, the researcher sought authority in writing from the university and from ZTA. Because the outcome of this research required highly technical experts' know-how, the researcher used the Delphi Technique as it enables numerous ways to researchers than the conventional method of research with a single questionnaire.

The essential components of this method involved the process of communication by a group of technocrats (who did not necessarily have to be in one roof simultaneously) and essential feedback. The Delphi method is always visible through a process of group communication which has proved to be very effective in enabling a set of group individuals to jointly deal with a complex situation. It has been established that whenever one needs to base his ideas, plans or policies on an informed judgement, he needs to use the Delphi method.

The Delphi method is quite handy where respondents are not gathered at one place of which these respondents are expert and practitioners who are presumed to have the requisite knowledge and expertise on the matter at hand. The issue of time, distance or proximity to gather all these people at one place or in one room to form a panel is practically

not possible. The experts are not able to be physically at the same location at the same time. The researcher then uses a set of questionnaires which are sent to these technocrats on the issues at hand. As a result on this study, the researcher adopted the Delphi method to design answers on those complex issues of which absolute information was not present.

Usually time and cost issues inhibit frequent group meetings and as such the Delphi method is an ideal method of collecting data. Besides just getting and using analytical techniques which are very precise, the research benefits from subjective judgements on a collective system. The method also allows individuals to greatly contribute to the interrogation of a broad and ambiguous situation representing various backgrounds in respect of expertise and experience. Also more individuals are a necessity than can only interact facially. Moreover we need a heterogeneous group of participants to maintain uniformity to get valid results.

There was an identification of two scenarios by Linstone (1978) regarding the appropriate application and use of the Delphi method. The first is that there is no exact or absolute analytical technique on which a problem can find itself in. As such the solution is likely to come from subjective judgements emanating from collective opinions. The second scenario is that it is always very difficult to bring individuals who would like to debate on a similar project into one place where they can have direct physical or face-to-face discussions because of geographical locations, time and expenses involved. With the foregoing, current research satisfies all of the above requirements.

It should be accepted that there were some limitation in the collection of primary data as a result of time and other resource constraints. To try and deal with this, emails in batches of ten were sent to various selected respondents. These were followed up through telephone calls especially

those which had not yet been responded to after the 7th day which was a way of trying to persuade them to complete the questionnaires.

For anonymity purposes, the questionnaires had to be coded before sending. All returned questionnaires had to be edited and submitted in a summary format for the purposes of coming up with a correct construction of the second questionnaire with a correct format to get the correct responses as per the ratings by the respondents. While this process required repetition for up to 4 times, for purposes of this academic study, the researcher employed a mini version of the Delphi otherwise known as a mini-Delphi and repeated the process only twice. The results of Questionnaire Two and the final questionnaire were arranged and given as the final statement of group consensus. This final version is what was analysed.

Secondary information is that data which is already in existence, collected or written by academics and researchers which are readily available in different publications. Documented information about technological readiness to adopt digital media for consumer engagement was obtained from the sampled tourism agents. Secondary data were harvested from sampled tourism industry players.

It was of importance to look into primary data later after having exhausted secondary data or when it showed 'diminishing returns'. Most of this information is publicly available and its advantage is that it is public information which can be accessed and collected for an insignificant cost without having to undergo any bureaucratic procedures. More so, the researcher reviewed documents.

In Education and evaluation research most researchers use questionnaires as a tool for data collection. Questionnaires are good sources for information gathering about behaviours, attitudes, knowledge and facts over a particular research in context. When having a group of people whom you want to question on a specific topic with

closely defined alternatives then the best instrument to use is the questionnaire.

Surveys of a descriptive or explanatory nature for the purposes of gathering information on opinions and attitudes of people are usually done using questionnaires. For the purposes of this study, emails were used to administer these questionnaires which were followed up through telephone calls. Telephone calls were to ensure that fully completed questionnaires were completed and returned on time.

The questionnaires were a tool for information collection about the relationship between employee innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer brand identification, the relationship between employee optimism towards digital media technology and brand absorption by consumers and the relationship between employee innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer interaction with their brand.

It is through the questionnaire that the researcher established the technological readiness. As normal questionnaires always have their advantages. There was no difference to this research. It enabled collection of huge volumes of data from a wider target group in sequence at a very low cost. The researcher “twinned” the questionnaire by means of telephone follow-up phone calls which positively aided to the response rate for a conventional questionnaire. The validity and reliability of the data collected was not affected so much by the use of questionnaires. Collected data can be scientifically and objectively analysed with much ease through the use of reliable software (SPSS). Data collected from this method was used to test the hypothesis.

It must however, be noted that besides the above advantages, questionnaires also have their disadvantages. It must be clearly understood that it certainly is not an adequate and comprehensive instrument to gather all information. The reliability of the collected data

hinges on the direct function of a combination of both the reliability and in-depth knowledge of the respondents. This will compromise to a certain extent the validity of the study findings. Different respondents are most likely to interpret and respond differently to some questions.

As a way forward, the research addressed these shortcomings of the questionnaire by identifying the most highly skilled and influential respondents. No questions were left ambiguous and the respondents were advised and knew that they could contact the researcher any time to clarify any ambiguous questions. However, despite the current evaluation of the questionnaire advantages and disadvantages, it is still considered to be the best data gathering instrument in a study study.

The following stages were developed for the questionnaire; reliability testing, running alpha revisions and testing the instrument. First of all, the objectives, the research questions and hypothesis of the study were to be determined. This involved examining the audience and their background and also not forgetting their experiences. Thereafter questions or statements were generated from the literature that was reviewed for questionnaire formulation. This led to the identification of several variables. At this stage, the emphasis was mainly on measurement of scales of which the appropriate one was the bipolar Likert scales.

The total responses or answers on several Likert items are what are referred to as the Likert Scale. A Likert item is a statement which a respondent is expected to evaluate through providing a quantitative value on a subjective or objective dimension that has a level of agreement or disagreement being the dimension most commonly used. The Likert scales made use of in this study showed the necessary attributes of similarity and balance which had the following responses: (i) strongly disagree (ii) disagree (iii) neither agrees nor disagrees (iv) agree (v) strongly agree. Ultimately, the study figured out the reliability

and validity of the questionnaire in relation to measuring the systematic or built-in error in its measurement as according to (Norland, 1990).

The research instrument was designed in line with the research questions and objectives as articulated in Chapter I. The questionnaires were critical as they assisted in the study with pertinent primary data that had to be sifted with the main agenda of coming up with accurate results and proper recommendations. Due diligence was also adopted to avoid over loaded or double-barrelled questions. The questionnaires were both closed and open-ended questions. The use of closed questions was to give a guided view where it was noted that there were very few possible answers and it was also meant to keep the focus of the research in line with set objectives.

Closed questions at times have a problem of not getting adequately answered. So where it was felt not enough information has been explained the respondents had to justify their answers to the questionnaires. There were also open-ended questionnaires which were used. These got the respondents to give a wider option of giving various possible responses as compared to being confirmed without much explanation as was the case with closed questionnaires. A graphic rating scale technique was another method that was used to get the general responses on the influence and effect of technology in the tourism industry. Therefore, there was room for aggregation of scores from those interviewed which enabled the investigation to look into crucial issues which were picked up as drivers of investment policies.

The questionnaire was taken as a satisfactory instrument by those interviewed as it proved to be a convenient tool which enabled them to clearly state their views mainly as result of open-ended questionnaires which proved that they understood the questions very well. On that vein the research instrument is therefore taken to have satisfied the requirements of validity and reliability.

Enough time was availed to respondents through the questionnaires as they completed these during their spare free time hence they were not rushed into responding without giving a proper thought. They had no pressure to respond immediately. This gave room for receiving feedback which was more accurate and truthful. More so, the researcher managed to reach and cover a huge number of respondents at a lesser cost and in a short space of time. The only problem is that this technic would not give much room for further probing on unclear issues as there was no room for the use of either verbal cues or non-verbal cues which are always good when further explaining a point.

It must also be noted that there were some respondents who had a negative feeling towards providing the information since the information was considered confidential. Nevertheless, the researcher assured that the information received from them was not for disclosure to external parties and that it was meant for the purpose of the study only.

TRI is a relatively new index and has not been widely tested especially on employees (Walczuch *et al.*, 2007) therefore a pilot study was undertaken to ascertain scale suitability in the study context. The pilot was conducted at the researcher's convenience in Harare where other hospitality SMEs resides. Harare is also one of the tourism cities in Zimbabwe (ZTA, 2017), though not as active as Victoria Falls. Since this study sought to test the relationship between two separate models, convergent and discriminant validity tests were conducted.

This was followed by a Pearson correlation test and Cohen's effect which helped determine the effect strength between the constructs of TRI and those of customer engagement. To gain consistency internally, determination was enabled through the Cronbach's coefficient alpha whose acceptable values are 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978). If the value is less, it then means the instrument is not reliable therefore an exploratory factor analysis may need to be done.

Three different experiments were used to get the research's validity. These were the constructive validity, internal validity and external validity. When constructive validity is mentioned, it refers to practical measurements establishment when one is looking for harmony or synergy between his theoretical framework and the specific measurement procedures or systems.

For the purposes of ensuring validity of the research, the external validity of the thesis by the researcher was enhanced through desktop work which made use of various books and internet-based sources of evidence which also included varied data collecting methods from literature sources and further investigation.

The validity was also enhanced by employing the mini-Delphi techniques rather than employing the ordinary questionnaire data gathering technique. To enhance validity of data it was put through the Explanatory Factor Analysis. The idea of doing a factor analysis with this regard was to ensure grouping of similar variables into dimensions that are sometimes referred to as identification of latent. Factor analysis was of great significance in the present study to test theory with regards to verifying and operationalizing the scale construction.

If the study's operational level gets to a point where it is repeated getting the same results then it is called Reliability. A reliable questionnaire is where mostly 23 other independent researchers get consistent results from the same research repeated at various times but of course under same environment. This random error measurement is what is referred to as Reliability. The reliability of the questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's Alpha with an acceptable value alpha of 0.7 thereby rendering the questionnaire reliable (Cronbach, 1959)

An excel and the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) v.16 was used to analyse, code and capture the data which was collected. In respect of investment attitude, relevant information was produced

through thematic analysis. Existing literature was used to design strong argument themes by the researcher. For the particular purposes of this study, ideal patterns and themes were deduced which were in line with the questions which related to the actual life experiences as inferred from the interviews.

SPSS was used to analyse data after cleaning it using Microsoft Excel. Presentation was presented making use of tables and graphs. Given the small sample size and that the study sought to establish relationships between employee technology readiness and consumer engagement, non-parametric analysis was done. Quantitative data obtained through questionnaires was analysed using SPSS version 16. An SPSS template of data were formulated. The SPSS version 16 was able to test the reliability of the quantitative instrument using Cronbach's Alpha and proved to be reliable.

Factor analysis at this stage was done to verify and operationalize the scale construction. Validity and reliability issues were to be addressed first. Thereafter there was the capturing of data which was screened to remove all possible errors. After the careful screening of data, it was now analysed. Frequency tables were used to present quantitative data while the table bars and line graphs were used for presenting descriptive statistics. The central hypothesis of the study was addressed through computation using Pearson's correlation coefficient. The hypothesis was to determine whether there is a relationship between employee innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer brand identification.

There was a clearance authority from the Midlands State University to undertake the research study. The researcher also sought clearance from ZTA, the regulating authority for the tourism sector under study. It should be noted that confidentiality was maintained during the period of this study.

Before any start of the interviews, the respondents were advised of the purpose of this research which was purely for academic purposes and nothing else. It was further explained that the participation was purely on a voluntary basis and it was up to an individual respondent to withdraw any time if he or she felt otherwise. It was also made clear that the participants could get access of the research findings soon after if they so wished to have access and for free as well. All the above ethical considerations were observed throughout the interviews and any information which could potentially lead to respondents being revealed their identities was discarded. As such the researcher was under an obligation to protect the rights of the participants.

This was a preparatory chapter for the next chapter which analysed data, presented and discussed findings. The research philosophy was outlined together with the design, population and sampling. Due to the size of SMEs in the hospitality sector, a census was deemed apt to fulfil the requirements of a quantitative survey where not less than 30 observations were made. Data analysis was done on SPSS and validity of constructs was done.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis, Presentation and Analysis of Findings

This chapter summarises and discusses major issues emanating from the research findings on readiness of SME's to adopt digital media for consumer engagement in the hospitality sector. In the process, descriptive statistics were analysed ranging from age structure, work experience and literacy or expertise. Semi-structured questionnaires were employed as data collection instruments. The study made use of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS v.16) and Excel as analysis tools. The study undertook the research objectives through digging for answers to the following hypotheses:

- H₁: There is a positive relationship between employee innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer brand identification;
- H₂: There is a positive relationship between employee optimism towards digital media technology and brand absorption by consumers;
- H₃: There is a positive relationship between employee innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer interaction with a brand.

Table 4.1: Semi-structured questionnaire response rate (Primary data, 2020)

Study unit	Sample	Response	Response rate
SME's	30	26	92.86%

Sample of 30 semi-structured questionnaires was used, valid cases for the distributed semi-structured questionnaires recorded a 92.86% response rate out of the 26 returned thus implying results are usable and can be generalised given that the minimum acceptable response rate is 70% (---).

Table 4.2: Questionnaire reliability (Primary data, 2020)

Item	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Employee innovativeness	0.714	9
Employee optimism	0.755	10
Overall	0.727	19

Cronbach's alpha is a measurement tool of internal consistency or is a coefficient of reliability, that is, how closely related are a set of items are as a group. The study utilised the Cronbach's Alpha test for reliability. The benchmark of the alpha test is 0.7. Factors and dynamics influencing and facilitating investment in alternative investments produced 0.714 and 0.755 respectively. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher is considered "acceptable". Overall, reliability of questionnaires was 0.727 as annotated in Table 4.2 suggested that the items had significantly high internal consistency.

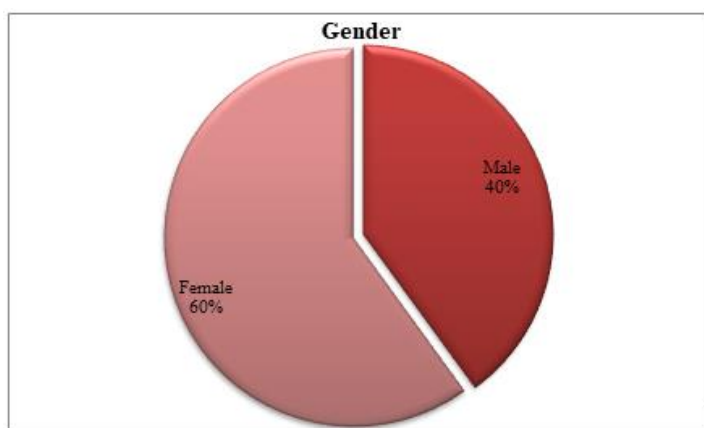


Figure 4.1: Gender of respondents (Primary data)

Figure 4.1 above depict that of the total sample of people who responded to the questionnaires, 60% were females and 40% were male. This shows that the study was somewhat balanced given that world population statistics according to United Nations Population data, women constitute 52% of the world's population. More so, it shows that women penetration into positions of influence has improved. This will ensure a

balanced reporting of the findings in respect of each objective and its variables.

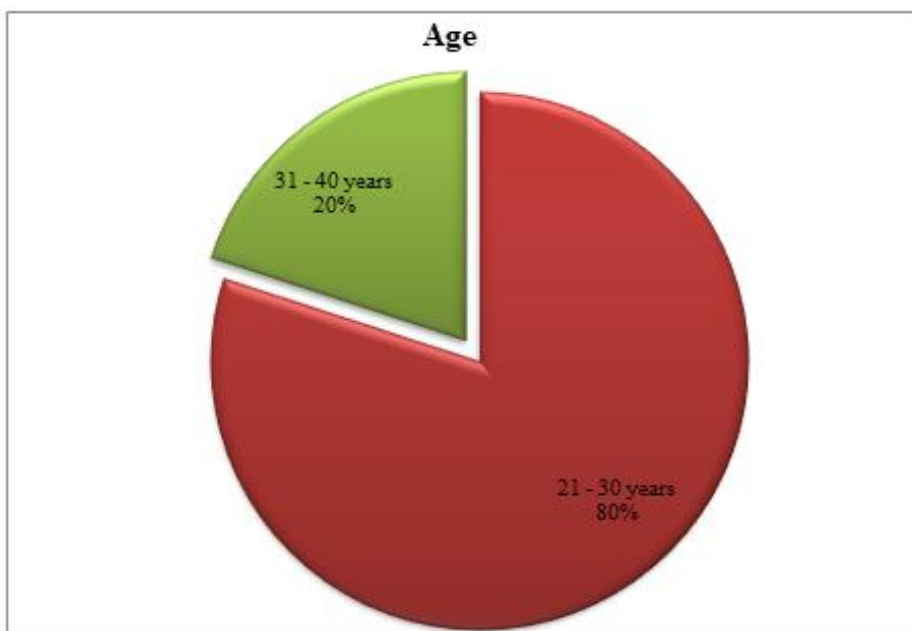


Figure 4.2: Age of respondents (Primary data, 2020)

Figure 4.2 shows the ages of participants who took time to respond to the questionnaires. It shows that people questioned were highly skewed on the 21-30 years age range and they accounted for 80% and the balance of 20% constituted the 31-40 years age group. The analysis could be that we have a meagre 20% responding because they maybe the proprietors or a manager of the lodges, hotel, motels, restaurants and other tourist place. The greater percentage of 80% may constitute the operatives or officers who use technology on a regular basis to ensure the sustenance of the tourism sector business in the SME's sector. Zimbabwe is a fairly young population and it is normal to see most young people in many institutions and also most companies are now favouring young blood as they are technologically savvy and are able to handle change management.

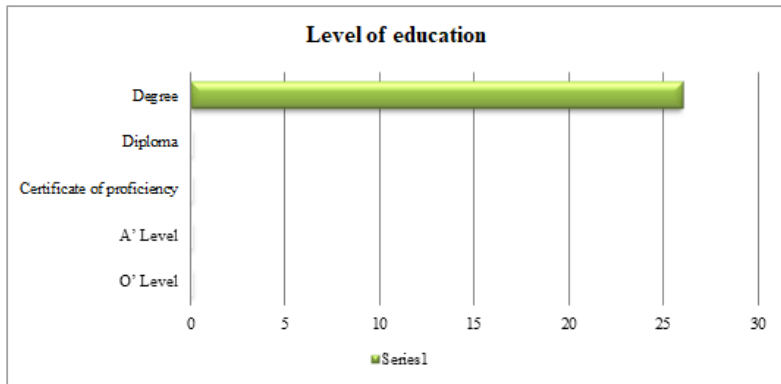


Figure 4.3: Level of education of respondents (Primary data, 2020)

The above pictorial representation shows the level of education of the respondents and it is unfortunate or fortunate enough that all of the respondents cited that they have a degree. This is helpful in the sense that anyone with a degree appreciates the essence of a study study. More so, the people are level headed thus may avoid bias and distorted data and or information. This is crucial because the researcher then compared like for like, however, it is disadvantageous in that the research will lack flair of other qualification or no qualification to bring a critical analysis because these degreed people may respond according to what the researcher wants to conceal information due to ghost shopper and competition. As such they have mastered the art of responding to walk-ins and information seekers.

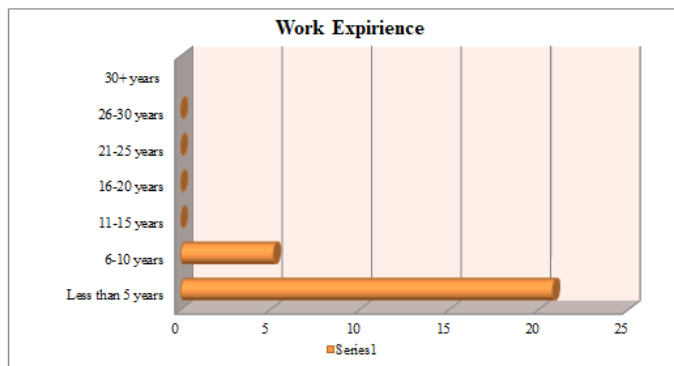


Figure 4.4: Number of years working in current position of respondents (Primary Data, 2020)

The analysis presented or illustrated on Figure 4.4 graphic illustration show that of the people questioned. The majority (constituting 80%) has less than 5 years working experience. However, they are supported by 20% of the sampled people who had 6-10 years' work experience.

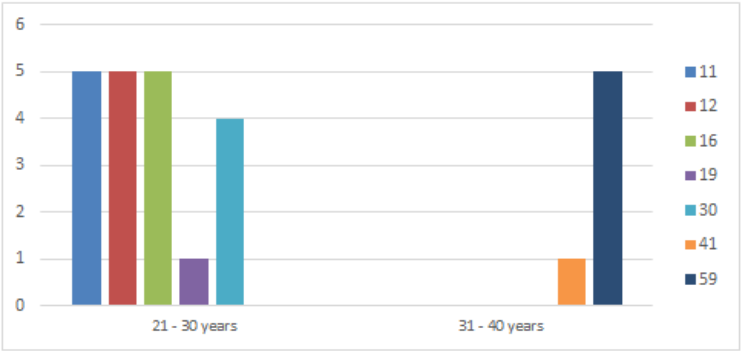


Figure 4.5: Optimism in relation to innovativeness and technology (Primary Data, 2020)

Findings revealed that the younger the person the more optimist they become. As such, from the illustration more young people are seen to be innovative in terms of technological readiness. Consequently, there is a positive nexus between optimism and innovativeness. It is incumbent upon the senior executives to let loose on these young people for them to explore and implement simple applications or technologies which may enhance clients or consumers experiences and influence their buying behaviours.

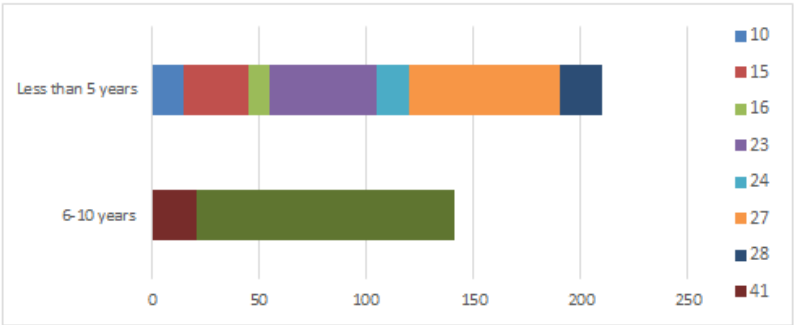


Figure 4.6: Employee experience in relation to innovativeness (Primary Data, 2020)

The above figure suggests that people with fewer years on experience are more innovative than their peers. This is reinforced by the last reading which showed that young people are more innovative technologically than will be their colleagues. On the other hand, it could be also that the research sample had a greater number of young people constituting about 80% thus results are heavily skewed towards young minds. Those with more experience have average appreciation and innovation ideas to technologically enhance customer experiences.

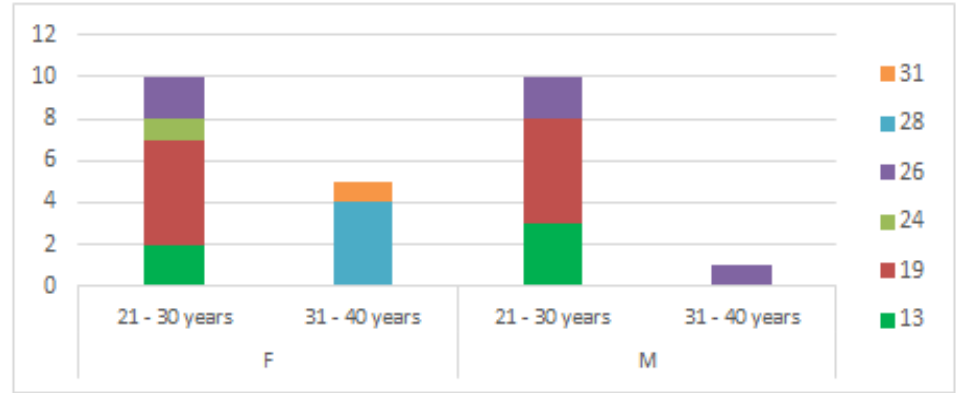


Figure 4.7: Age and gender in relation to absorption of technology. (Primary Data, 2020)

The above caption shows that as much as more females were interviewed, the survey showed that both male and females around the 20 - 30 years of age tend to either strongly agree or just agree with absorption of technology compared to the older age males of 31-40 who tend to be neutral while the females of that age group tend to disagree with that fact. The succeeding analysis presented findings on the research variables.

Table 4.3: Innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer brand identification (Primary Data, 2020).

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances

	<i>INN</i>	<i>ID</i>
Mean	24.576923	13.615385
Variance	148.17385	22.246154
Observations	26	26
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	32	
t Stat	4.2815193	
P(T<=t) one-tail	7.891E-05	
t Critical one-tail	1.6938887	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.0001578	
t Critical two-tail	2.0369333	

	<i>Column 1</i>	<i>Column 2</i>
Column 1	1	
Column 2	0.8595	1

Table 4.3 analysed the relationship between innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer brand identification and it shows that the result was significant at $p < .05$. This also highlights the strong correlation between the two variables. In other words, consumers are drawn to a product or service which resembles creativity and innovativeness. This is because with the advent of the internet of things, there is now information symmetry and consumers are more enlightened on their spending patterns on products and the exact pricing they should be charged out of that transaction.

Thus it is of paramount importance to actively and regularly innovate to attract consumers to a company. Nowadays, technology products are now relatively cheap with hosting fees of a simple website very manageable. From the foregoing, we therefore conclude that the interconnection between employee innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer brand identification is very significant

since the Pearson co-efficient is very high at 0.8595, thus it implies that the relationship between these variables was positive.

This follows that adoption of digital media technology tools like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, B2B applications among other have a far reach in terms of brand identification. Big data presented by digital media technology have reaching results because digital media technology is cheap and unregulated hence most companies either big or small are in one way or the other on those platforms. Thus the SME's need to adopt the go to market strategies using these digital media technology platforms to enhance customer experiences and help them make informed decisions before parting with their cash. This is on the background that there is a strong relationship between the two variables and the connection is very significant.

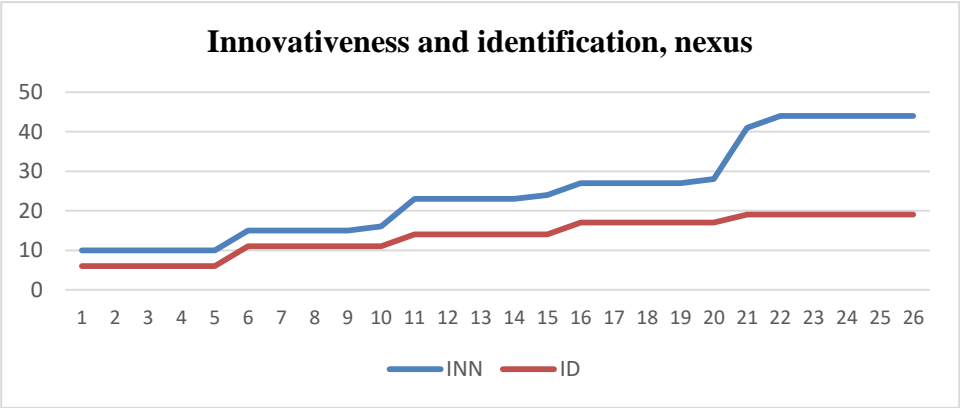


Figure 4.8: Nexus between innovativeness and brand identification (Primary Data, 2020)

The above pictorial representation brings to light the fact that innovativeness and brand identification work hand in hand to reach a common goal of enhancing the brand. Thus there is a causal nexus that if the employees are innovative it then follows that the brand is easily

identifiable. The above captioned pictorial representation proves that there is coherence between the two variables and how they work. To this end, questionnaires proved that digital media is the fastest internet trend. It is gaining popularity among users or contextually from clients and customers.

As a result in trying to keep abreast with the technological advancement, innovativeness should lead to evolution of brands for identification. The other point that was revealed is the snow bolling effect of social media platforms. They are a beacon for raising brands, thus digital managers confessed that they wish everyone to talk and discuss on the internet concerning their brand. They are aware that digital media is the best system to spread the brand name. Several them came up with examples on how this can occur for example on Facebook applications such as Like or Share buttons and also re-Tweet alternatives are some of the best methods for enabling a brand's message or name known very quickly. It will just spread like wildfires.

In the wake of economic turmoil and upheaval, SMEs tourism managers revealed that they had to implore on their staff to be innovative in adding value to their brands. The benefit of digital media is that it is the best cost effective way of communicating with their customers and other stakeholders which increases their visibility in this VUCA world. Thus, the SME's seem to find social media extremely cheap when it comes to brand awareness. Digital media enable their brand and products to well-known at a cheaper cost. Looking at it differently, if your competitor is already visible on the digital platform, then there is something good about it and it's also high time to get into the same platform. This will give great advantage as people will be able to compare you from the same means or mode.

Table 4.4: Employee optimism towards digital media technology and brand absorption by consumers (Primary Data, 2020)

OPTVsAB

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances

	<i>Variable 1</i>	<i>Variable 2</i>
Mean	25.76923077	21.23076923
Variance	335.4646154	31.54461538
Observations	26	26
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	30	
t Stat	1.207971922	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.118247412	
t Critical one-tail	1.697260887	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.236494824	
t Critical two-tail	2.042272456	

	<i>Column 1</i>	<i>Column 2</i>
Column 1	1	
Column 2	0.866880061	1

When analysing employee optimism towards digital media technology and brand absorption by consumers, we observed t value of 1.6972 and the p value of .2364 which result resembled insignificance at $p < .05$. However, the Pearson co-efficient was very high at 0.8669. We therefore conclude that the inter-connection between employee optimism towards digital media technology and brand absorption by consumers was not significant, thus it implied that the relationship between these variables was negative.

Employees were not optimistic that if digital media technology was introduced and managed well, it would encourage brand absorption by consumers. However, people spend most of their time on digital media

technology while browsing the internet and if properly implemented digital media technology in this modern day and age has positive effects to a business. Nevertheless, most firms concur that Facebook is a platform that is mostly used as a social media network by them and their competitors or rival firms.

In respect of the activities that organisations have on their digital media, most managers responded that the most prevalent and critical activities were coming up with competitions and giving out prizes, in the form of coupons, discounts and gift products and interacting daily with their users. Day to day interaction involves simple messages such as “Good morning,” “enjoy your week”. It even relates to asking the stakeholders how they are going to spend their weekend etc.

Another significant activity noted was the introduction of new products or services. Some SME’s in the hospitality industry announce new products outlining detailed information that may relate to price, characteristics and distribution points. Through fan pages, some interviewed employees indicated that they provide advice and information for their everyday activities. This is considered to be more than just communication as users receive knowledge and tips on everyday life experiences.

However, some participants believe that employee optimism towards digital media technology and brand absorption by consumers is affected by direct complaints coming through social media. Managers stated that digital media actually improve customer service in relation to the customers’ requests. Complaint management is not a pre-planned activity, but since social media are a 24-hour direct user platform, it then is inevitable to avoid handling such circumstances. Thus, it is necessary that it be a regular principle of these companies about customers’

comments and complaints that they orderly answer to every comment or question. Hence, there is need for a culture change among the employees. In any case organisations can only know how their customers feel as a result of social media and get correct on their shortcomings thereby enhancing their brand.

Tourism SMEs managers in the hospitality industry based in Vic falls were optimistic in favour of digital media technology and brand absorption by consumers given the underlying facts. Most of the managers who were interviewed agreed that interacting with customers via digital media channels greatly enhance personal relationships which get to be built between the organisation and the users. Social media enables the firm to properly interact on a daily basis with its stakeholders which enables everyone to have a sense of belonging and togetherness. The communication becomes much more personalised hence strengthening the relationship as per individual customer's preferences and tastes.

Through this study, it has been realised that social media is the most convenient form of communication with customers or clients. Customers find it easy to send or post their feelings about a particular service or product. Also on the same vein, companies can quickly respond to customers concerns and the information is fast spread across the globe.

New visitors to the platform and can quickly join the communication and share experiences with those that already had first-hand experience with the product or service. Most managers who were interviewed in Vic falls confirmed that they often see brand related chats among customers and stakeholders who go to an extent or asking to share experiences privately about a particular brand or service. This therefore means there is much interaction outside the brand's fan page. It

therefore follows that social media platforms like the Facebook page is a great space for customer's socialization which help promote a brand if it is viewed from a positive position.

Moreover, the managers' optimism of brand absorption led them to observe how customers may most likely become familiar and also like the brand as a result of social media. The snow bolting effect of social media enables a brand to be quickly known as it is discussed by several people. This can also be done through several competitions which include gift prizes and or discounts. A well run fan page enables the whole world to know about a particular brand and firms take advantage of this to spread their word and increase their visibility and brand image.

In addition, through digital media platforms, firms expect to grab the attention of a wider network. Social media has enabled the world to become a global village. Social media enables a specific brand to target a certain group of people with relative easy. Most digital media platforms enable access to certain demographics of their targeted market hence social media strategy is crafted according to that demographic

Companies and managers who were interviewed agreed that they are optimistic to be able to engage with their target market through social media. As indicated already, digital media is one of the best forms of consumer engagement throughout and at very low costs. Stakeholders can relate and discuss about favourite brand as if they talk to a friend and get responses instantly this direct way of interaction creates a sense of engagement and belonging between people and brand. As a result brand loyalty is earned. This also has the potential to increase sales. Further there is also the acquisition of new customers which are expected benefits obtained from social media use.

Table 4.5: Employee innovations towards digital media technology and consumer interaction with a brand (Primary Data, 2020).

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances

	<i>Variable 1</i>	<i>Variable 2</i>
Mean	24.57692308	17.88461538
Variance	148.1738462	48.98615385
Observations	26	26
Hypothesized	Mean	
Difference	0	
Df	40	
t Stat	2.43026241	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.009833728	
t Critical one-tail	1.683851013	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.019667456	
t Critical two-tail	2.02107539	

	<i>Column 1</i>	<i>Column 2</i>
Column 1	1	
Column 2	0.92714892	1

These variables tried to analyse the link between employee innovations towards digital media technology and consumer interaction with a brand. It was observed that the result was significant at $p < .05$. Hence the study concluded that there was a significant positive relationship between employee innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer interaction with a brand since the Pearson co-efficient was very high at 0.92714.

Usually, where the target group is comprised of younger generation, the brand is most likely to be on social media. Technological brands are some of those which are likely to be on social media. Companies decide to be on social media depending on the external and internal factors which also determine the relevant social media to be on, in relation to their specific campaign. For example Facebook fan page is more ideal for

a company that wishes to have a full interactive process with its customers.

Media organisations are most likely to choose on a twitter platform. These could be newspapers or online portals and TV channels as these spread short messages. YouTube channels are more likely to be adopted by brands that have more to do with visual messaging. It was however, discovered that most of the SMEs would rather prefer to use either or a combination of most of these platforms depending on strategy to be used for each service or product. So there is a choice on the correct and relevant media platform.

H₁: There is a positive relationship between employee innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer brand identification.

The study findings revealed that there is a positive correlation between employee innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer brand identification. As such, it is of paramount importance to actively and regularly innovate to attract consumers to a company. The same results were found by Law *et al.* (2016:743) who empirically found that digital media plays a crucial role in on-line marketing and tourists' decision-making.

H₂: There is a positive relationship between employee optimism towards digital media technology and brand absorption by consumers.

In contrast to the hypothesis, the research found out that there was an inverse nexus between employee optimism towards digital media technology and brand absorption by consumers, it implies that the relationship between these variables was negative. The foregoing was supported by a study by O'Connor (2008:65) who found that a greater problem in managing hospitality IT "is the lack of a correct communications system that support intended systems functionality".

The research, however, observed that the problem has more to do with suppliers who are unable to offer adequate services at global or regional

basis as compared to mere lack of infrastructure. However, lack of communication infrastructure in specific countries may also be a problem. But Parker (2016) is of the view that African countries are both ready and eager to adopt new technologies.

Consolidation of data and interfacing are found to be a huge challenge for CIO's in chain hotels when dealing with information technology adoption (O'Connor, 2008:66).

H₃: There is a positive relationship between employee innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer interaction with a brand.

The research found out that there was a significant positive relationship between employee innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer interaction with a brand. This study's findings were similar to those of Dijkmans *et al.* (2015) which was revealed in their US study that digital media technology and consumer engagements have a positive correlation. In support of this, Willems, Brengman and Van Kerrebroeck. (2019) put forth that online consumer engagement increases conversion rate through interactions.

There are opportunities which have come to the forefront through the customer engagement notion which are the interactive notions of web 2.0 technologies which change the way customers and service providers relate on a day to day basis. Practitioners and experts alike have recognised its crucial role in exploiting social media in an effort to build social media relations which creates a strong bond thereby improving business performance as articulated by (Sashi, 2012).

Word of mouth has also been observed to be quite powerful in information dissemination of which several experts fully concur. A company can become better known through the use of various social media platforms which are better forms of customer persuasion (Kumar *et al.*, 2007). Digital media behaves like a big gossip when it comes to viral dissemination of information. (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012).

These social media systems are amplifiers, piggy backing on client's word-of-mouth at the same time blending with information which is highly noticeable as compared to other forms of online advertising. Anyway, organisations should be aware of the fact that similar mechanisms can negatively distribute outrage, disgruntlement and scorn just as equally rapidly. Monitoring of customer to customer dialogue or conversations results in market intelligence and provides room for a company or organisation to increase positive messages, correct misconceptions and prevent serious potential current or future damage to the organisation's brand or image. Of course it must be noted that the ultimate primary goal or aim is to increase sales. This could be done by having new customer acquisition, retention of existing customers and or an uptake in consumption, or cross-selling. Following the above discussion, there is no doubt that it can be safely pronounced that adoption of digital media propels the level of engagement with consumers.

This then also proves the presence of social media benefits that appear to be ignored so far in the digital landscape (Colgate *et al.*, 2005). As a form of social interaction, consumers get feedback and personal experiences from those users who have already tested the system and made use of as envisaged by (Garretson, 2008). Some clients provide visible feedback on their experiences which could be either both negative and positive. This helps make an evaluation the organisation's complaint handling technique (Jin, 2012).

The current chapter concentrated on data presentation and analysis on the study of an assessment of hospitality SMEs technology readiness to adopt digital media for consumer engagement.

Looking at the data collected and analysis made thereafter, two sets of results emerge. On the one hand results tend to agree with the available researched empirical and theoretical literature obtained from different

schools of thought who tend to agree yet some tend to dispute. As such leaving these research findings on a standalone basis will not do any justice hence this study will design some recommendations. These will be used to justify the results. As a result the closing chapter to this study will deal with conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Future Direction

This chapter summarises the entire study and came up with recommendations on the scope of the study. It also gave recommendations which can be ideal for future research based on the results obtained and conclusions. If there could be a serious 'buy in' on the adoption of digital technology, the researcher believes the tourism industry customer base will greatly improve. The rest of the other preceding chapters had different objectives, but all linked towards the main goal of this study which was to devise credible solutions towards absorption of digital technologies and its readiness. The research objectives are hereby restated to deduce if these were achieved. The objectives of the research are restated with a view to determine achievement of the same. The research's contribution to the body of knowledge is also highlighted below:

- 1) To determine the link between employees innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer brand identification;
- 2) To examine the nexus between employee optimism towards digital media technology and brand absorption by consumers;
- 3) To analyse if employee innovativeness towards digital media technology influences consumer interaction with a brand.

Data collection instruments achieved a response rate of around 92.86% in comparison to the minimum acceptable of 70% for qualitative data. The overall objective of this research was to assess employee personality traits which influence the adoption of digital media by SME's in the hospitality sector. Factual and applied research methods were used to draw conclusions and were supported by the analysed results. Data were tested for sampling adequacy and sphericity using Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test respectively, a condition which has to be fulfilled before factor analysis is conducted and all the conditions were met. Most variables pointed to positive relationships between

assessing employee personality traits that enable the adoption of digital media by SME's in the hospitality sector. The results show that in relation to socio demographic analysis, the younger the person the more optimist they become with digitisation. In addition, the socio demographic analysis found that people with fewer years on work experience were more innovative than their peers. Lastly, both young male and females employees strongly agreed that absorption of technology compared to the older age males of 31-40 who were neutral while the females of that age group disagreed with that fact. Innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer brand identification was found to be significant, implying a strong correlation between the two variables. In other words, consumers are drawn to a product or service which resembles creativity and innovativeness. It was also found that there is no relationship between employee optimism towards digital media technology and brand absorption by consumers. Last but not least, there was a significant positive relationship between employee innovativeness towards digital media technology and consumer interaction. The following conclusions were made as per each research question.

Based on this study's findings, it can be concluded that employee innovativeness towards digital media technology enhances consumer brand identification. Digital media enables feedback from clients for improvement and even provide insight in what others in the same industry in the region and international markets are doing. Employees particularly those in ICT and marketing departments would take it upon themselves to continuously innovate on technology to promote brands through positive identifications. Digital media technology is very cheap to administer but cover a wide audience thus it has an effect of cutting advertising costs and improving on net revenues and reaching a wide audience.

In relation to this study's findings, it is worrisome to note that employees were pessimistic about digital media technology leading to

brand absorption by consumers. It could be that employees believe absorption of a brand is a function of many factors like their motivation, willingness of owners of the business to adopt technology and the general upkeep of the place. Digital media technology alone cannot really conclusively provide that brand will be adopted. It also includes issues to do with clientele service culture. Customers go to where they think they will be treated as important; hence the SME's sector total quality management initiatives should lead to consumers wanting to use their brands.

The analysis proved that employee innovations when using digital media technology led to consumer interaction with a brand. Employees ought to generate interest of the brand by being creative. On regular days, they can give motivational quotes on their sites to generate interest. Some companies have created positions of digital marketers who constantly innovate to invite consumers to their brands.

It is therefore recommended that a variety of recommendations be adopted that are aimed at further improving SME's in the tourism industry. Recommendations with respect to each objective are as discussed below.

The study recommends that the SME's explore on data mining and build on database for local customers to inspire interest before going far and beyond Zimbabwe. This is possible to companies who sell these databases and those that have bulk SMS text options. The next step will be to create innovative digital media technology ads which if clients visit their pages will inspire interest. While concluding this study, the researcher observed that players in Victoria Falls do not have airbnb.com feature on their sites. This function is being used by many in the industry to attract significant numbers. Only Harare had a little bit of this feature but mainly being used by lodges, conference centres and restaurants. This feature enables consumers to pre-order online and assesses the suitability of a place before visiting it. Employees should

take up digital marketing as a matter of urgency to stay relevant in the modern market place.

The study recommends that SME's should scaffold on daily and direct communication offered by digital media. This complements the business efforts to market and retain customers by keeping users and potential clients close to the brand name. Consequently, there are opportunities to turn mere users into fans and a loyal customer of the brand. In addition, owner managers or business owners should complete digital technology by offering stimulus packages like special discounts and competitions. Also the fan page can always be used as a direct selling channel which has the potential of increasing sales. There are also those fans that mostly frequent the page who need to be recognised and rewarded somehow and further encouraged to be more active to receive maximal relationship benefits from the community.

In the spirit of innovations employees have to put their energy in driving positive word of mouth among social media users. Thus, customers should be given opportunity to interact with the brand, connect and interact in positive ways. This has an effect of influencing other users in all their social networks. Hence, customers validate or repudiate the brand experiences of others. As high social media are attracting internet users, organisations must look at broadening their visibility and presence on various social networks. Furthermore, when more organisations make use of active social media platforms, company managers need to rise up the occasion and consider what actions they need to take to keep their step ahead of others.

The study recommended that it is crucial to train employees in the SMEs tourism sector on social media use. It is important to foster optimism for these employees for the purposes of improving brand absorption by consumers. SMEs in the tourism sector will be helped to broaden their coverage through enhanced connection on the global sphere through

social media adoption. This leads to a strategic application of the best social media forms which enable brand awareness, image.

This will ultimately result in the tourism industry having a huge influx of tourism clients. The study also recommends that the firms should be open to new technologies. This enables them to spread “word of mouth” and build social bondage with customers. The tourism product has seen marketers appreciating and adopting digital media technology as fundamental consumer engagement platforms. The study also recommends that employee optimism can be driven by the owners of the tourist facilities

The study recommends that tourism SME’s should promote energetic torch bearers and “likers” on their fan pages, in such a format that will encourage more positive comments and likes and leading to purchase behaviour. This is because customer engagement is a key enabler for a brand’s digital media identity. This should also be complemented by probable linkage of digital media with other online and offline systems which have to be properly examined and chronologically managed. Such linkages or synergies may for example increase firms’ web site. Another factor is the development of KPIs which will provide organisations with the power to examine their performance through the social media platforms.

Moreover, the study recommends that companies should design their own content which adds value for social media brand page users thereby encouraging them to engage in transactional behaviours on the platform. The study also recommends that the SME’s should identify and monitor that which inspires digital media users to be a member of a brand’s fan page. This should include among other things, the content they like more and the benefits they perceive. This will help add value for the consumers which may even exceed their expectations.

SME's in the tourism sector need to develop and create digital applications which relate to tourism attraction sites, hotels and lodges and all other related services and products. These applications should also include integrated concepts of augmented reality, virtual reality and artificial intelligence. It is however, important that the application and user guide should be easily available on the official tourism websites. These applications have to include non-disclosure contracts, guarantees of confidentiality and other best practices in human computer interface design for tourists.

The country is now highly informalised and money is circulating in the informal sectors. It has been observed that India and Bangladesh, among other countries, have grown their economies through SME's. As such, they are a vital cob in the economic gains of a country. Zimbabwe is a destination of choice for tourist coming from Europe, America and the Asia because of the friendly weather patterns which are opposite of their normal conditions. Likewise, the country should realise positive gains in the tourism industry.

There should be technological hubs training players in the SME's sector to adequately use digital media technology. Universities and colleges should offer compulsory specific modules on digital technology to those students pursuing Tourism and hospitality fields. The government need to closely work with stakeholders in the tourism and the telecommunication industry on areas like network coverage and connectivity. There is need for government formulation policies and guidelines in relation to the use of smart gadgets which helps travellers to feel a sense of trust in their destination.

Smart tourism has the potential to activate tourism in the rural communities which can be a vital tool for new destination developments. There is need for government to create and establish emergency tourism stations which provide 24-hour help facilities, give feedback and respond to complaints immediately. The respective

tourism ministry has to design discounts and award points for regular travellers or those law-abiding travellers as soon as they submit their individual reviews on their experiences. These points or discounts could be accumulated for a certain period of time, thus encouraging the traveller to visit again. The government can also use the collected data to improve future planning in smart tourism services for greater customer attraction.

The government should also influence the telecoms industry so that they can charge affordable roaming fees and design business strategy packages for travellers with suitable fees and promotions. Moreover, it should be mandatory that the telecom industry should positively manage the privacy and security concerns of travellers and build trust through proper marketing strategies. That would allow travellers to feel safe and secure enough to use their smart devices wherever they travel. More so, POTRAZ should establish and promote similar charges for tourism services. This will limit price wars and encourage fair trade that will help promote and increase smart tourism systems. Also non-disclosure contracts between tourists and service providers must be ensured.

There is need for the extension of this research through the pursuit of studies which focus on the applicability and implementation of digitisation in the entire tourism industry to resuscitate the economy of Zimbabwe.

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1 QUESTIONNAIRE FOR SME EMPLOYEES

Dear respondent.

I am conducting a study on Hospitality SMEs Technology Readiness to Adopt Digital Media for Consumer Engagement. This instrument has two sections and you are required to answer all questions. All responses shall remain confidential and anonymous and will only be used for the purposes of this research.

SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHICS

Please *tick* the appropriate box to indicate your response

Gender

Male	<input type="checkbox"/>
Female	<input type="checkbox"/>

Age

Under 20 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
21 - 30 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
31 - 40 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
41 - 50 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
51 - 60 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
60+ years	<input type="checkbox"/>

Level of education

O' Level	<input type="checkbox"/>
A' Level	<input type="checkbox"/>
Certificate of proficiency	<input type="checkbox"/>
Diploma	<input type="checkbox"/>
Degree	<input type="checkbox"/>

Number of years working in current position

Less than 5 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
6-10 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
11-15 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
16-20 years	<input type="checkbox"/>

21-25 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
26-30 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
30+ years	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section B: Technology Readiness Index and Consumer Engagement

		Strongly Agree			Neither		Strongly Disagree	
	Question	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Technology Readiness Index (TRI)								
Optimism								
OPT1	Technology provides people more control over their daily lives							
OPT2	Products and services that use the newest technologies are much more convenient to use							
OPT3	You like the idea of doing business via computers because you are not limited to regular business hours							
OPT4	You prefer to use the most advanced technology available							
OPT5	You like computer programmes that allow you to tailor things to fit your own needs							
OPT6	Technology makes you more efficient in my occupation							
OPT7	You find new technologies to be mentally stimulating							
OPT8	Technology provides you more freedom of mobility							
OPT9	Learning about technology can be as rewarding as the technology itself							
OPT10	You feel confident that machines will follow through with what you instructed them to do							
Innovativeness								
INN1	Other people come to you for advice on new technologies							
INN2	It seems your friends are learning more about the newest technologies than you are							
INN3	In general, you are among the first in your circle of friends to acquire new technology when it appears							
INN4	You can usually figure out new high-tech products and services without help from others							
INN5	You keep up with the latest technological developments in your areas of interest							
INN6	You enjoy the challenge of figuring out high-tech gadgets							
INN7	You find you have fewer problems than other people in making technology work for you							
Customer Engagement								
Identification								
ID1	When someone criticizes this brand, consumers feel like it is a personal insult							
ID2	consumers are very interested in what others think about this brand							
ID3	When consumers talk about this brand, they usually say we rather than they							
ID4	This brand's successes are my consumers' success							
ID5	When someone praises this brand, consumers feel like it is a personal compliment							

Absorption								
AB1	When consumers are interacting with the brand, they forget everything else around me							
AB2	Time flies when consumers are interacting with the brand							
AB3	When consumers interacting with brand, they get carried away							
AB4	When interacting with the brand, it is difficult for consumers to detach themselves							
AB5	In their interaction with the brand, consumers are immersed							
AB6	When interacting with the brand intensely, consumers feel happy							
Interaction								
IT1	In general, consumers like to get involved in brand community discussions							
IT2	consumers who enjoy interacting with like-minded others in the brand community							
IT3	consumers like actively participating in brand community discussions							
IT4	In general, consumers thoroughly enjoy exchanging ideas with other people in the brand community							
IT5	consumers often participate in activities of the brand community							

Thank You

Appendix 2 Raw Data Sets

	OP T1	OP T2	OP T3	OP T4	OP T5	OP T6	OP T7	OP T8	OP T9	OPT 10	IN N1	IN N2	IN N3	IN N4	IN N5	IN N6	IN N7	ID 1	ID 2	ID 3	ID 4	ID 5	AB 1	AB 2	AB 3	AB 4	AB 5	AB 6	IT 1	IT 2	IT 3	IT 4	IT 5
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	1	1	3	1	2	1
2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	1	1	3	1	2	1
3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	1	1	3	1	2	1
4	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	1	1	3	1	2	1
5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	1	1	3	1	2	1
6	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	3	2	2	2	4	1	4	2	2	2	2	1	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2
7	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	3	2	2	2	4	1	4	2	2	2	2	1	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2
8	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	3	2	2	2	4	1	4	2	2	2	2	1	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2
9	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	3	2	2	2	4	1	4	2	2	2	2	1	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2
10	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	3	2	2	2	5	1	4	2	2	2	2	1	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2
11	2	1	1	1	1	3	2	1	1	3	3	3	3	4	3	5	2	5	2	2	3	2	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	5	3	3
12	2	1	1	1	1	3	2	1	1	3	3	3	3	4	3	5	2	5	2	2	3	2	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	5	3	3
13	2	1	1	1	1	3	2	1	1	3	3	3	3	4	3	5	2	5	2	2	3	2	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	5	3	3
14	2	1	1	1	1	3	2	1	1	3	3	3	3	4	3	5	2	5	2	2	3	2	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	5	3	3
15	2	1	1	1	1	3	2	1	1	3	3	3	3	4	3	6	2	5	2	2	3	2	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	5	3	3
16	2	1	1	1	1	5	3	1	1	3	3	3	3	4	5	6	3	5	3	3	3	3	6	5	4	3	3	3	5	3	5	4	4
17	2	2	1	2	3	5	3	6	3	3	3	3	3	4	5	6	3	5	3	3	3	3	6	5	4	4	4	3	5	5	5	4	4
18	2	2	1	2	3	5	3	6	3	3	3	3	3	4	5	6	3	5	3	3	3	3	6	5	4	4	4	3	5	5	5	4	4
19	2	2	1	2	3	5	3	6	3	3	3	3	3	4	5	6	3	5	3	3	3	3	6	5	4	4	4	3	5	5	5	4	4
20	2	2	1	2	3	5	3	6	3	3	3	3	3	4	5	7	3	5	3	3	3	3	6	5	4	4	4	3	5	5	5	4	4
21	6	2	1	2	3	7	6	6	3	5	5	3	7	6	6	7	7	5	3	3	5	3	6	5	4	4	4	3	6	5	5	4	7
22	6	5	5	7	7	7	6	6	5	5	5	6	7	6	6	7	7	5	3	3	5	3	6	5	4	5	4	4	6	5	5	4	7
23	6	5	5	7	7	7	6	6	5	5	5	6	7	6	6	7	7	5	3	3	5	3	6	5	4	5	4	4	6	5	5	4	7
24	6	5	5	7	7	7	6	6	5	5	5	6	7	6	6	7	7	5	3	3	5	3	6	5	4	5	4	4	6	5	5	4	7
25	6	5	5	7	7	7	6	6	5	5	5	6	7	6	6	7	7	5	3	3	5	3	6	5	4	5	4	4	6	5	5	4	7
26	6	5	5	7	7	7	6	6	5	5	5	6	7	6	6	7	7	5	3	3	5	3	6	5	7	5	4	4	6	5	5	4	7

Appendix 3 Optimism in relation to innovativeness and technology

Count of INN	Column Labels							Grand Total
Row Labels	11	12	16	19	30	41	59	
21 - 30 years	5	5	5	1	4			20
31 - 40 years						1	5	6
Grand Total	5	5	5	1	4	1	5	26

Appendix 4 Employee experience in relation to innovativeness

Sum of P	Column Labels								Grand	
Row Labels	10	15	16	23	24	27	28	41	44	Total
6-10 years								21	120	141
Less than 5 years	15	30	10	50	15	70	20			210
Grand Total	15	30	10	50	15	70	20	21	120	351

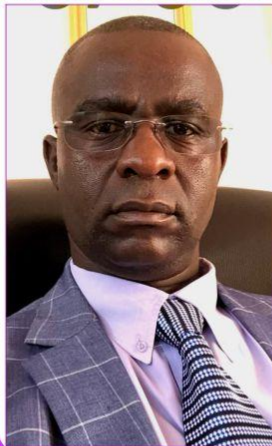
Appendix 5 Age and gender in relation to absorption of technology

Count of P	Column Labels						Grand Total
Row Labels	13	19	24	26	28	31	
F	2	5	1	2	4	1	15
21 - 30 years	2	5	1	2			10
31 - 40 years					4	1	5
M	3	5		3			11
21 - 30 years	3	5		2			10
31 - 40 years				1			1
Grand Total	5	10	1	5	4	1	26

Synopsis

The present study has critically explored on the hospitality industry mainly focusing on SME'S technology readiness to adopt digital media for consumer engagement. The main objective of the study was to assess employee personality traits that influence the adoption of digital media by SME's in the hospitality sector. In addition, it sought to determine the relationship between employees' innovativeness towards social media and consumer brand identification. It also sought to determine the relationship between employee optimism towards social media and brand absorption by consumers. Last but not least, it sought to determine the nexus between employee innovativeness towards social media and consumer interaction with a brand. As far as the second objective was concerned, the study has revealed that employee optimism towards social media and brand absorption by consumers was not significant. Lastly, with regards to the third objective, the study found out there was a positive relationship between innovativeness towards social media and consumer interaction with a brand. Thus, it was concluded from these findings that digital media play an important role in information dissemination to consumers. Based on the findings and study conclusions, the researcher recommended that there is need for SME's to recruit brand and digital managers and government should establish technological hubs to train these SME's in the tourism industry. Employees should be trained on effective social media utilisation. SME's should promote energetic torch bearers to encourage more positive comments and likes and leading to purchase behaviour. The government needs to closely work with stakeholders in the tourism and the telecommunication industry on areas like network coverage and connectivity and also influence the telecoms industry so that they can charge affordable roaming fees and design business strategy packages for travellers with suitable fees and promotions.

About the Author



Charles Ndondo is a Zimbabwean entrepreneur based in Harare Zimbabwe. He has over 20 years of experience in the Tourism & hospitality industry, freight industry and above all is an advocate for environmental sustainability focusing on climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies. He is inspired by the desire for success and community development. Charles is a holder of a master's degree in Business Administration and currently studying for a PhD in Business Administration Management. He holds several other qualifications in the freight & Forwarding industry, Institute of Personnel Management (Zimbabwe) CSR Network Zimbabwe, UZ-Training & Development Unit and is an Executive Member of Safari Operators Association of Zimbabwe (SOAZ).