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Published online: 29 Aug 2025.

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Understanding Frontline Employees' Knowledge Management in Key Aspects of Customer Relationship Management: Insights from Contemporary Hotels

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between knowledge management (KM) and customer relationship management (CRM) is vital to business success, yet their intersection remains underexplored. This study investigates how KM processes are integrated into the core dimensions of CRM. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research draws on rich data collected from purposefully selected employees of three- to five-star hotels in Accra, Ghana. The study identifies four essential KM processes: knowledge accumulation, formation, retention and implementation. Findings reveal that KM is deeply embedded in more than three key functional dimensions of CRM, with this integration being both pervasive and instrumental in enhancing CRM practices. Based on these insights, theoretical and practical implications are discussed to help industry professionals optimize the integration of KM and CRM.

Introduction

The global nature of the hospitality industry underscores the importance of knowledge in achieving and sustaining competitive advantage (Hallin & Marnburg, 2008; Yiu & Law, 2014). Knowledge is widely recognized as a critical resource (Grant, 1996) but its value depends on effective management. Knowledge management (KM) plays a crucial role in enhancing international competitiveness, particularly in customer-centric firms, and supports the development of a knowledge-driven economy (Cooper, 2018; Hu & Olivieri, 2021; Rahimi et al., 2017; Yiu & Law, 2014). Leveraging

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

knowledge-based resources and processes allows firms to deepen customer understanding and engagement, both vital in the highly competitive hospitality market.

Research has increasingly examined KM's impact on customer relationship management (CRM) (García-Almeida & Yu, 2015; Garrido-Moreno et al., 2014; Gebert et al., 2003; Migdadi, 2021). In the hospitality and tourism context, KM (Liu et al., 2022; McLeod et al., 2024; Nieves et al., 2016) and CRM (Lo et al., 2010; Rahimi & Kozak, 2017) have largely been studied independently. Only limited research has explored their integration (Chalkiti & Sigala, 2008; Sigala, 2005, 2018; Sigala & Chalkiti, 2014, 2015) despite growing interest in their convergence (Gebert et al., 2003).

Although scholarly attention to KM and CRM is increasing, the specific mechanisms through which KM processes align with CRM practices remained underexplored. The dynamic hospitality landscape, driven by globalization, competition, and evolving customer expectations, intensifies the need for better integration of KM into CRM strategies. However, KM practices in many hospitality firms remain informal and unstructured, making alignment difficult (Cooper, 2018). Cooper (2018) highlights the sector's slow adoption of KM, calling for deeper understanding of KM's role in innovation and its integration with core business functions. Recent bibliometric studies also stress the fragmented nature of research at the KM–CRM intersection in hospitality (Abdollahi et al., 2023; Gürlek & Koseoglu, 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, the knowledge-based theory of the firm suggests that knowledge generation and integration in business organizations are complex processes, as knowledge is embedded in individuals and shaped by context (Grant, 1996). Consequently, how firms perceive and implement KM and its alignment with CRM can vary significantly. A more nuanced understanding of this relationship is needed to guide firms in effectively leveraging knowledge to improve customer relationships.

Grounded in KM process theory and CRM value chain framework, this study aims to explore how hotels integrate KM processes within CRM initiatives. Specifically, it pursues two objectives: 1) to identify the critical elements of CRM, and 2) to examine how each domain of the KM process is integrated with those critical elements of CRM. This study contributes to the literature in three ways: First, it addresses a critical gap by empirically investigating the integration of KM and CRM with a particular focus on their applications within the hospitality industry, where existing studies remain limited and largely conceptual. Second, it extends the application of the knowledge-based view by linking KM processes to CRM outcomes, offering a more nuanced understanding of strategic knowledge use in customer-centric firms. Third, it provides a practical framework for hotel managers in aligning KM and CRM initiatives more effectively, with

implications for enhancing customer engagement and achieving competitive advantage.

Literature Review

Knowledge Management Theory

KM is a foundational concept in organizational management, emphasizing how knowledge is used to drive innovation, performance, and competitiveness (Grant, 1996). It encompasses intellectual capital, people and processes, technology, and innovation (Heisig, 2009). KM is commonly defined as the generation, sharing and management of knowledge through people, culture, ICT, and social processes (Wiig, 1997). Knowledge itself is conceptualized as a "justified true belief" (Nonaka, 1994) and exists at the individual, group, and organizational levels (Hallin & Marnburg, 2008; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). While individual and group knowledge are personal and relational, organizational knowledge stems from collective memory and shared experiences (Jashapara, 2007).

This study adopts Cooper's (2015, 2018) process-oriented view of KM, which frames it as a cycle of knowledge creation, generation, storage, and application for innovation. Cooper emphasizes that KM promotes a culture of learning and sharing, where collective intelligence and tacit knowledge are central to building sustainable and competitive organizations. Given the tacit and often informal nature of knowledge in hospitality settings (Cooper, 2018), organizations struggle to identify and apply new knowledge effectively (Bock et al., 2005).

Studies on KM identify many processes, including knowledge acquisition, creation, storage, and application (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). In terms of the category of analysis, Bouncken (2002) categorizes knowledge into task-related knowledge, task-specific knowledge, guest-related knowledge, and transactive knowledge. Organizational learning theories emphasize that the extent to which an enterprise effectively utilizes its knowledge resources is a key determinant of KM capability (Tseng, 2015). Despite these insights, KM research has mostly been fragmented (Shaw & Williams, 2025), making it challenging to establish conclusive outcomes and calling for further research.

Researchers have proposed various KM enhancement strategies in hospitality, such as knowledge transfer (Situmorang & Japutra, 2024), open innovations (Zhang et al., 2022), and knowledge creation (Rao et al., 2023). However, the practical application of KM in hospitality and tourism remains limited (Fauzi, 2022; Novotny et al., 2024). Scholars highlight the lack of empirical studies (Hallin & Marnburg, 2008; Koseoglu et al., 2022)

and limited integration of KM into broader managerial practices (Gürlek & Koseoglu, 2023). Although KM theory offers a basis for organizational learning and innovation, its impact on value creation in customer management remains underexplored.

Customer Relationship Management Value Chain

This study draws upon the CRM primary stages as outlined by Buttle (2004). Buttle (2004) definition of the primary CRM stages emerged as a strategy to understand and retain profitable relationships with customers. CRM value chain comprises two main parts: five primary stages (customer portfolio analysis, customer intimacy, network development, value proposition development, and customer lifecycle management) and supporting conditions (leadership and organizational culture, data and IT, people and processes) (Buttle, 2004).

According to Buttle (2004), the *customer portfolio analysis* identifies the potential economic contributions of every customer through revenue generation estimations by the firm. *Customer intimacy* is composed of dealing with customers who have been filtered by a firm as most valuable to provide greater value to this class of customers compared to competitors. *Network development* refers to connecting with other parties (e.g., employees, suppliers, partners) to co-create and deliver value to customers. *Value propositions* are developed once a firm has identified the preferred customer(s) to serve, tailor-made products, services or customized offers based on customer(s) expectations. *Managing customers' life cycle* involves managing the customer "journey" from being a potential customer to becoming an actual customer and then an advocate for the firm. Padilla-Meléndez and Garrido-Moreno (2014) found that CRM has become a key strategy for personalizing the customer experience and improving customer satisfaction and retention, particularly in hotels.

CRM is widely viewed as a key business strategy to deliver value profitably (Buttle & Maklan, 2019; Wu, 2010), and is recognized for its role in optimizing data, communication, and marketing activities (Jain & Jain, 2006; Lo et al., 2010). Lo et al. (2010), using Buttle's model, found "evaluation and control" to be an additional CRM stage in Hong Kong hotels, while "network development" was less applicable. These findings support the idea that CRM frameworks are dynamic and must adapt to local and industry-specific contexts (Presutti & Mawhinney, 2013).

Despite CRM's widespread adoption, a standardized implementation framework remains elusive (Sigala, 2005), and little attention has been given to how CRM dimensions might be integrated with KM processes (Lo et al., 2010). In hospitality and tourism scholarship, CRM is typically

associated with collecting and analyzing customer data to improve customer satisfaction, retention and revenue (Lo et al., 2010). However, empirical studies on how KM processes can support CRM goals in hospitality settings remain scarce, highlighting the need for further investigation.

Knowledge Management and Customer Relationship Management

Research across sectors such as marketing (Herman et al., 2020), banking (Heydari et al., 2021; Krasnikov et al., 2009; Ryals & Payne, 2001), and telecommunications (Gazi et al., 2024) has shown that KM enhances CRM by improving data access, process efficiency, and knowledge sharing. These studies indicate that KM serves as a framework that enhances the sharing and utilization of information by improving accessibility, providing a structured environment, and streamlining processes. Collectively, these improvements reduce learning cycles and enhance organizational efficiency (Herman et al., 2020). Additionally, KM has been shown to build effective CRM systems (Gazi et al., 2024), helping organizations tackle challenges such as intense competition and the need to attract and retain customers (Heydari et al., 2021). By addressing customer needs and preferences (Herman et al., 2020) and enabling rapid responses to evolving market conditions, KM and CRM together allow organizations to adapt more effectively (Salameh et al., 2020). Supporting this, Diffley et al. (2018) found that Social CRM strategies in Irish hotels significantly enhanced service innovation, which in turn improved customer-linking capabilities and overall customer and financial performance. Their findings emphasize CRM's growing role as a strategic capability, contributing not only to relationship management but also to service innovation and competitive advantage, an evolution that increasingly intersects with knowledge-driven processes within hospitality firms.

In the hospitality sector, however, the integration of KM and CRM remains in its early stages and has been inadequately studied. Previous research has suggested this integration (Migdadi, 2021; Padilla-Meléndez & Garrido-Moreno, 2014; Sofi et al., 2024; Valeria & Baggio, 2021; Yiu & Law, 2014). For example, Yiu and Law (2014) and Valeria and Baggio (2021) describe KM as a strategic resource for gaining competitive advantage, while Tseng (2015) notes significant interest and ongoing efforts to successfully integrate KM and CRM. Furthermore, several studies suggest that for CRM to sustain a firm's profitable customer relationships through satisfaction, loyalty, and personalization, the application of KM is crucial (Sofi et al., 2024; Yoo & Bai, 2013). Cooper (2018) and Hoang et al. (2024) further note that competitive advantage depends not just on possessing knowledge, but on its interpretation and strategic use. While existing literature sheds light on the complexities of

knowledge generation within the hospitality sector, the rise of the information age has drastically altered the competitive landscape, pushing hoteliers to develop competitive advantages rooted in effective KM practices (Yiu & Law, 2014).

Sigala (2005) posits that effective CRM implementation requires the effective management and alignment of three critical managerial processes: knowledge management, information communication technology, and both internal and external relationship management. However, many CRM models remain narrowly focused on customer orientation and technology (Gonzalez-Serrano et al., 2021; Mohammad et al., 2013; Padilla-Meléndez & Garrido-Moreno, 2014; Rahimi & Kozak, 2017; Rahimi et al., 2017; Sigala, 2005, Sigala, 2018), often neglecting the knowledge foundations of relationship-building. This divergence underscores the need to integrate KM with CRM to create a holistic customer strategy.

Khodakarami and Chan (2014) contend that while hotels gather substantial customer data through CRM systems, this data is rarely converted into actionable knowledge. Similarly, knowledge creation and sharing in the hospitality industry, particularly among frontline employees, remain insufficiently addressed (Rao et al., 2023). Tacit knowledge held by employees is often informal and unstructured, further complicating efforts to formalize and integrate KM (Cooper, 2018; Kim & Lee, 2013; Rao et al., 2021).

Building on these insights, the present study extends the foundational work of Sigala (2005, 2018), Lo et al. (2010), and Cooper (2018) by empirically examining how KM processes are embedded in CRM dimensions using Buttle's (2004) framework. Unlike previous studies that have treated KM and CRM as separate domains or conceptualized their integration abstractly, this research operationalizes both constructs and explores their alignment through qualitative inquiry.

By providing an empirically grounded analysis, this study contributes to the development of an integrated KM-CRM framework tailored to the hospitality context. While previous studies have acknowledged the potential synergy between KM and CRM, few have systematically examined their intersection in the hospitality context using a structured theoretical lens. This study extends the literature by offering an empirically grounded perspective on how hotels operationalize KM to enhance CRM effectiveness, contributing to a more coherent understanding of KM-CRM integration and providing actionable insights for both scholars and practitioners in service-focused industries.

Methodology

Research Paradigm and Design

This study adopted an interpretive research paradigm (Denzi & Lincoln, 2011), and employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the integration of KM and CRM. Given the limited research on the topic, an in-depth, context-sensitive method was essential. The interpretive approach enabled the researchers to understand participants' lived experiences and insights, offering a deeper view of how KM processes interact with CRM in the hospitality sector.

Study Context

This research focused on three- to-five-star full-service hotels in Accra, Ghana's largest city and a major hospitality hub. Initial guidance from the Ghana Tourism Authority (GTA) (Ghana Tourism Authority, 2018, 2019) on hotel classifications informed the selection process. After the first five interviews, data pointed to three- to- five-star hotels as particularly suitable due to their comprehensive service offerings and active engagement in both KM and CRM (Patton, 2015). These hotels reflect the two dominant models in the hotel industry – chain-affiliated and independently operated – and offer extensive customer–employee interactions that generate knowledge relevant to CRM processes (Chathoth, 2007). Full-service hotels were selected as they facilitate diverse and frequent customer interactions, which is essential for knowledge generation; and they actively update organizational knowledge within CRM practices. This context enabled a focused exploration of KM – CRM integration in an information-rich environment.

Given that Ghana's cultural background embodies characteristics of both collectivist and individualistic societies, reflecting aspects of both Eastern and Western cultures, the findings of this study hold significant relevance across various contexts. Furthermore, since organizations in the hospitality sector are predominantly governed by standardized global industry policies and regulations, we assert that the context of this study is representative of hotels worldwide. Consequently, the findings illuminate potential pathways for the broader hotel industry to strategically develop integration practices for KM and CRM.

Sampling and Participants

A combination of purposeful and snowball sampling was used (Creswell, 2014), particularly appropriate during the COVID-19 pandemic, when access was limited. Initial participants were recruited from two full-service hotels

known for engaging in KM practices. These participants helped identify further informants based on their involvement in KM and CRM activities (Kutaula et al., 2022; Lages et al., 2020). Snowball sampling then expanded the pool across additional hotels (Noy, 2008).

Inclusion criteria required participants to: 1) Work in departments with direct customer interaction; 2) Participate in knowledge-sharing or decision-making related to customer service; and 3) Have at least one year of experience in the hotel industry. A total of 33 interviews were conducted, including 14 with frontline managers and 19 with frontline employees, providing diverse perspectives across roles and organizational levels (Saunders et al., 2019).

Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

This study used semi-structured in-depth interviews as data collection instrument. An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility to explore emerging themes in greater depth. The guide comprised three main sections. The first focused on participants' perceptions of KM and CRM practices in their hotels. The second explored the processes involved in implementing KM within the context of CRM, while the third examined participants' direct experience with KM and CRM procedures and their views on effective practices. Participants' demographic and professional background information, such as age, gender, department, years of experience, and current role, was collected to contextualize the findings. To protect confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms (see Table 1).

The interview guide included ten core open-ended questions, developed based on the study's conceptual framework and prior literature on KM and CRM (e.g., Buttle, 2004; Cooper, 2018; Sigala, 2005). These questions were designed to elicit detailed narratives on KM and CRM practices at the departmental and organizational levels. Probes and follow-up questions were used to encourage elaboration and clarification, depending on participants' responses. Thus, while the core questions remained consistent, the interview format was partially adaptive, allowing the interviewer to explore unanticipated insights that emerged during the conversations. To enhance the clarity and relevance of the questions, the interview guide was pilot-tested with four hotel operational manager/supervisor and rank-and-file employees of a four-star hotel who met the study's inclusion criteria but were not part of the final sample. Feedback from the pilot helped refine the wording and flow of the questions. The final guide was used throughout all interviews to promote comparability while accommodating contextual variations.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face in English by the lead researcher. Sessions began with an explanation of the study, confidentiality assurances,

Table 1. List of research participants (*n* = 33).

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Hotel Department	Total years of work in hotel industry	Current duty
A1	50–55	F	Front Office	31	Manager
A2	30–35	M	Sales and Marketing	9	Manager
A3	40–45	M	Food and Beverage	23	Manager
A4	30–35	F	Front Office	8	Staff
A5	36–40	F	Sales and Marketing	12	Executive
A6	30–35	M	Food and Beverage	13	Staff
B1	36–40	F	Front Office	6	Manager
B2	50–55	F	Sales and Marketing	18	Manager
B3	40–45	M	Food and Beverage	19	Manager
B4	30–35	F	Front Office	7	Staff
B5	50–55	F	Sales and Marketing	20	Executive
B6	40–45	M	Food and Beverage	18	Staff
C1	30–35	F	Front Office	10	Manager
C2	30–35	F	Sales and Marketing	10	Manager
C3	50–55	F	Food and Beverage	11	Manager
C4	40–45	F	Front Office	15	Staff
C5	30–35	F	Sales and Marketing	5	Executive
C6	36–40	F	Food and Beverage	14	Staff
D1	30–35	M	Front Office	8	Manager
D2	40–45	F	Sales and Marketing	16	Manager
D3	36–40	M	Food and Beverage	14	Manager
D4	36–40	F	Front Office	6	Staff
D5	30–35	F	Sales and Marketing	4	Staff
D6	35–40	M	Food and Beverage	15	Supervisor
E1	30–35	F	Front Office	4	Supervisor
E2	40–45	M	Sales and Marketing	18	Manager
E3	30–35	F	Food and Beverage	6	Supervisor
E4	20–25	M	Front Office	2	Staff
E5	35–40	F	Sales and Marketing	5	Staff
E6	50–55	M	Food and Beverage	11	Staff
F1	20–25	M	Front Office	4	staff
F2	30–35	F	Sales and Marketing	7	Co-ordinator
F3	30–35	F	Food and Beverage/ Events	10	Manager

and consent to record the conversation. Participants were asked the core questions in sequence, followed by tailored prompts based on their answers. Each interview ended with an open invitation for additional comments. Interviews lasted 30 and 60 minutes, and all participants agreed to audio recording. The adaptive format allowed for the emergence of unanticipated insights and richer storytelling (Adams, 2015; Buscatto, 2018).

Data Analysis

This study used thematic data analysis technique to analyze the data after the interviewer transcribed the audio-recorded interviews verbatim and entered the data into NVivo 12 software. First, the lead author scrutinized the data meticulously, examining each word, line, and sentence to identify preliminary codes. Through repeated iterations of coding and further familiarization, the analyst used an open-ended approach to generate codes and identify the relationship between codes. To streamline the analysis, data irrelevant to the study's primary aim were excluded. At this stage, the analyst consciously set

aside personal biases as much as possible, allowing the data to speak for itself to preserve the original meanings expressed by the informants throughout the analysis process.

Second, after finishing the first round of open coding and recoding process, the authors reviewed the initial codes from the data to reduce redundancy, merging and refining the codes into more meaningful categories. These categories were then grouped and assigned focused codes, which included both abstract and theory-based perspectives. Both literature-derived themes and those emerging directly from participants' insights informed the coding process. This process ultimately led to the identification of key themes and the mapping of associated concepts, providing a structured and insightful understanding of the data. Through a process of comparison among the data, respondents, and categories, and further merging modification, the number of focused codes was ultimately condensed.

Third, the analyst constantly compared, redefined, merged and categorized initial codes into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We ensured meaningful interpretation by systematically linking participants' responses to the research aim and situated within the broader context of the existing literature, enabling the development of well-rounded conclusions. Finally, we described each theme in detail, supported with storytelling, memoing, and relevant literature.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Trustworthiness was ensured by applying Frost and Frost's (2021) ten criteria for high-quality qualitative research in hospitality and tourism. These criteria include consideration of philosophical foundations, a thorough justification of the chosen methodological approach, a transparent sampling strategy, a well-defined data analysis procedure, and amplification of the participants' voices. To establish credibility, the research employed several strategies: (a) the researchers collaboratively reviewed the final themes and interpretations, ensuring that participants' exact words were retained during coding; (b) participants' confirmation of transcripts accuracy ensure validity; and (c) rich, detailed descriptions were used to provide contextual depth. These measures supported validity and reliability, ensuring the study's findings are grounded, coherent, and trustworthy (Guba, 1990).

Results and Discussion

This study identified five themes: (1) CRM dimensions, and four core KM processes which include (2) knowledge accumulation, (3) knowledge formation, (4) knowledge retention, and (5) knowledge implementation. Together, these themes demonstrate how KM processes are embedded in CRM practices in hotels.

Defining Elements of Customer Relationship Management

Participants were generally familiar with the conceptual and technical definitions of CRM, often describing it as a structured, strategic approach to sustaining relationships between hotels and customers. For instance, while both A1 and D2 view it as a management process in sustaining relationship, D2 further indicated CRM as systematic approach that involves taking specific steps necessary to sustaining relationship between customer and hotelier. Consistent with prior research (Lewis, 2004; Lo et al., 2010), our data revealed that participants believed CRM influences their customers' decision to continue patronizing the hotels and improve their hotels' performance.

Drawing on Buttle (2004) CRM model, we categorized the following descriptors into key dimensions domain: Prospecting (observing, profiling, searching, scouting for clients, gathering data, process), customer portfolio analysis (evaluating, economic value, examining, selling), customer intimacy (understanding customers identity, interaction, listening, patriotism, history), network development (external support and partnership), value proposition development (loyalty rewards, products, discounts, service), and manage the customer lifecycle (handling and managing existing and new customers or clients, information technology, property management systems).

Prospecting

Given that prospecting refers to the process of identifying, profiling and attracting customers who are likely to bring value to the business, we categorized themes such as scouting for clients, gathering data, processing, profiling under this element of CRM. Identifying and attracting potential customers through various marketing strategies constitute the first prime dimension of CRM practice, which enable hotels to understand their customers' expectations and preferences. Most informants agreed that prospecting is an inherent experiential activity, which first help them gain insights into what constitutes an excellent service experience before the actual service delivery. "We begin by prospecting" was a phrase used by 18 participants who valued prospecting and initiated conversations to understand who their clients were and what they wanted. Then, they onboarded them, provided services, gathered feedback, and applied the feedback to improve relationship with customers. F3 and D6 underlined the importance of prospecting in targeting customers, acquiring customers, establishing relationships with them, maintaining current customers and attracting more potential customers. F3 stated,

> In my hotel, we first learn about and reach out to people, that is suspects, who may not yet know the hotel […] We search online for customers utilizing the hotel websites, social media and the internet. Also, we do cold calling or physical visits to offices and public places of convenience […] This helps to identify customers, segment markets, and target them based on the distinct values and benefits they seek.

Customer Portfolio Analysis

As customer portfolio analysis is important in evaluating and prioritizing customers (Lo et al., 2010), this study included descriptors such as evaluating customers under this main domain of CRM. Participants indicated that their hotels evaluate customers based on various criteria including customer's purchasing power and how much they can afford. For example, E5's hotel uses purchasing power, "the customers in our hotel are segregated based on their purchasing power so that we can better target and offer special packages to those customers who do more purchases of our services." Similarly, A2's hotel uses customer's ability to afford their products, "because the hotel is sustained by the level of its revenue generation, customers who come to our hotel are grouped based on how much they can afford for our products." Doing so help hoteliers to identify customer spending patterns, frequency of visits, which customer segments are most profitable, and overall lifetime value. In addition, it can help them to prioritize their marketing efforts and tailor services to meet the specific needs of high-value customers, allocate resources more effectively, enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty while maximizing revenue.

Customer Intimacy

In line with prior studies that reported effective customer intimacy strategies can foster deeper connections and enhance customer loyalty (Buttle & Maklan, 2019), this study confirms that hotels make efforts in creating a more engaging and responsive environment that encourages long-term relationship with customers, which usually is called customer intimacy. Accounts from C5 elaborated our statement,

> [...] our hotel encourages us to relate well with customers. So, we regularly identify and group them according to their preferences and behaviours. For example, when we observe or identify sophisticated customers, we make sure we handle them well. And some of them keep patronizing us and telling us how other hotels have been unable to meet their needs.

Network Development

Unlike other elements of CRM, we found difference among participants with regard to the importance of network development. While eight participants indicated that various network development help to build strong relationships with customers, six participants reflected opposite view suggesting that network development is not important in their CRM. The latter view was also observed in the study of Lo et al. (2010), revealing that the network development is not practicable in some hotels, such as Hong Kong. Accounts from A2 and D3 supports that some hotels do not rely on networking and partnership in managing customer relationship. In their own words, while A2 said, "we do not depend on any external party to come teach us what and how to manage our relationship with our customers, yes, we try to know and do it by

ourselves" D3 stated, "I feel that the customers who come to us need something personal and I must give it to them without waiting for some other people to teach me how to do it." The response from E2 supports the notion that network development is vital for CRM; "as a manager, I belong to different networks and our hotel receive some guidance on customer relationship management from these networks alongside government agencies."

Value Proposition Development

Businesses seek to provide value for money by focusing on creating personalized services and delivering meaningful value to customers. In this study, hotels enhance the appeal of their offerings to customers as a means of generating value. All hotels have implemented loyalty programs through membership schemes that allow customers to access a range of financial service advantages, including discounts, promotions, and points redemptions. Moreover, majority hotels personalize their services to meet the specific needs of individual guests, ensuring a tailored experience that fosters customer satisfaction. For example, B1 explained that,

> [...] We all interact with guests, and our sole aim is to provide the best possible service to each customer. [...] We want to make sure that our customers are satisfied because satisfied customers will keep bringing us business. So, we always aim to provide above and beyond service which makes the customer feel valued.

These strategies were consistent with findings by Lei and Wang (2023), emphasizing personalization's impact on satisfaction and competitive differentiation.

Customer Lifecycle Management

Participants stressed the importance of managing customer touchpoints to ensure satisfaction throughout the journey. A Manager, D2, described

> Maintaining continuous interaction with customers at various touchpoints before, during, and after their visits is crucial for minimizing the expenses associated with acquiring new clients. So, in my hotel we do it, which has helped us keep our customer share.

Triggering KM Processes within CRM Dimensions

Leveraging knowledge as a strategic resource can help attract and boost guest patronage (Sigala, 2005). Our finding from the data indicated that KM processes enhance CRM dimensions, tackling hotels daily challenges to remain competitive (Table 2). For instance, eleven participants used a phrase "gathering knowledge from and about customers" to indicate that they embraced KM and show their commitment to applying it in CRM, suggesting that hotels create and manage knowledge. As such efforts were meant to achieve overall business success, they were acknowledged as manifestation of KM efforts by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995). Accounts from A5, B1, C1, and E4, further

Table 2. Knowledge management processes in CRM dimensions.

KM process	CRM dimensions					
	Prospecting	Customer portfolio analysis	Customer intimacy	Network development	Value proposition development	Managing customer lifecycle
Knowledge accumulation – How knowledge is acquired and embedded in each CRM dimension?	Hotels first acquire "know-about" knowledge of suspects and potential customer's behavior through environmental scanning, observing news from traditional media, and internet searches.	Through interactions with customers and customers databases analysis, hotels acquire customer knowledge/intelligence that aid customer segregation.	Gathering customer check-in information and reviews produce customer service and communication knowledge to bond or connect with customers.	External trainings (e.g., "genuis," consultants, service vendors) provide hotels with industry and customer service knowledge that enhance CRM practice.	Hotel products and service constitute value offerings. Hotels obtain technical and personalized service knowledge as well as knowledge of customer loyalty reward from customer experience.	Mystery shoppers, ReviewPro reports, and internal customer feedback evaluation produce data management, strategic understanding and service excellence knowledge to strengthen CRM.
Knowledge formation – How is knowledge formed and embedded in each CRM dimension?	Spotting patterns that indicate strong leads or identifying the ideal customer.	Insightful structuring and interpretation of data to classify customers.	Understanding what customers truly value, anticipating customer needs, and personalizing communication		Hotels form new knowledge about customers by gathering information from various sources, and by discussing and evaluating this information to create value.	Employees present proposals of new knowledge gathered to management discussion and evaluation, leading to a collective knowledge for CRM.
Knowledge retention – How knowledge is retained in each CRM dimension?	Tacit knowledge is stored in the minds of employees, and explicit knowledge stored in intranet.	Hotels record explicit knowledge in hotel's databases, documents and books.	Tacit knowledge is stored in the minds of employees, and explicit knowledge stored in databases.		Knowledge is documented in knowledge repository of property management system, and in the minds of employees.	Hotels store knowledge in standard operating procedures, repositories such as easy, ids, opera software databases, reservations book, and in the minds of employees.
Knowledge implementation – How knowledge is implemented in each CRM dimension?	All hotels apply the knowledge accumulated and formed to turn suspects into customers.	The knowledge generated enables profiling individual and corporate account information.	Use knowledge to create attachment or closeness with customer.	Apply shared knowledge from stakeholders to build, manage, and strengthen relationships with customers.	Knowledge is utilized to enhance products and service customization.	Knowledge is being written in hotel department's operational manuals to establish new procedures and facilitate more hotel knowledge recreation and training to retain customers.

demonstrates that hotels engage in KM processes to enhance their CRM dimensions. For example, C1 indicated that her hotel involve staff and teach them to acquire and maintain knowledge about the customers, and hotel facility in order to provide seamless services and products, "We gather all customer data, integrate it, and use it comprehensively, focusing on what can exceeds customer expectation, to better manage future customer interactions or enhance services for customers with similar expectations." This account demonstrates a positive effort toward generating and using knowledge.

Table 2 illustrates the key KM processes that align with the CRM dimensions. These processes and dimensions integration are discussed below.

Knowledge Accumulation

The first element of KM process is knowledge accumulation. As accounts from 27 respondents revealed, this element was found to be integrated into six prime dimensions of the CRM, and particularly in prospecting, customer intimacy, network development, value proposition, and management of the customer lifecycle.

Given that knowledge accumulation focuses on understanding customer behavior, preferences, and interests, it results in the development of a knowledge base, referred to as "knowledge about the customer," which captures potential customer requirements (Table 2. This understanding serves as a foundation for verifying customer needs, gaining the customer to the hotel and addressing their needs effectively.

In the prospecting, customer portfolio analysis, and customer intimacy dimensions of CRM, majority of the hotels gather and analyze customer data from various sources, such as previous interactions, preferences and feedback, to create targeted marketing strategies and personalized offers. As such, KM accumulation helps in building brand awareness and attracting potential guests by aligning services with their expectations. Online resources such as websites and review platforms constitute customer-based knowledge sources (Fuchs et al., 2024). For example, D4 believed that,

> In our contemporary business environment, there are various sources outside of my hotel we access more information and knowledge about and for customers. We obtain knowledge from sources like TikTok, WhatsApp, TV, Instagram, and Facebook. The interesting thing is that many people like to share their profile on some online platforms, and that is easy for us to learn about them.

Our data revealed that participants' hotels accumulate and use knowledge for various purposes, including effectively catering to the needs and preferences of customers (C1, A5), aiding pre-purchase relationship management (B1), and understanding customers and managing their behavior (E5). To demonstrate the role of knowledge accumulation in meeting customer needs, A5 stated, "We listen to and observe our customers'

expressions and collect feedback as knowledge, which we implement to satisfy them and other customers." B1 expressed how knowledge accumulation aids in repurchase relationship management: "We generate and use knowledge that has a positive impact on CRM. We learn a lot, and it helps us manage our relationships with customers more effectively." E4's account indicates that knowledge accumulation helps in understanding customers: "Generating and using knowledge in CRM in hotels uniquely enhances our ability to personalize guest experiences, leading to increased customer satisfaction and loyalty."

Knowledge accumulation was also used in the network development and value proposition development dimensions in the form of collaborating with both internal and external stakeholders to enhance customer satisfaction. While internal stakeholders encompass customers, employees and hotel management, external stakeholders include government agencies, such as the GTA, digital marketers, consultants like Lobster Ink, Genius hospitality and Loophotel. The provision of professional knowledge services to hotels from these stakeholders through service offerings online and offline training help hotels accumulate knowledge, which allows them to enhance the customer experience by providing tailored services. For example, F2 explained,

> Some guests do ask us to help them make a choice [...] this is where we implement the knowledge we have. So, this is where the twist comes in. Because we have understanding of a guest's preferences, it can enable staff to offer personalized recommendations or special amenities, thereby increasing the guest's satisfaction and encouraging immediate or short-term purchasing.

As for its integration in value creation, the data revealed that hotels employ different tactics to offer value to customers. Staff unconsciously and consciously pick up some understanding and information based on the experiences of colleagues' day-to-day activities results shared, reflecting information deduction. The sharing of knowledge and information among employees in the organization led A6 to witness that her hotel was successful in creating value, "we succeed in providing value to our customers because they become happy and some of them even appreciate us for the service offered." F2 and A6 indicated that internal and external knowledge acquisition enable them to have a better understanding of guests' preferences, leading to value creation. It is crucial for hotels to extract relational and guest-related knowledge as it has the tendency to improve their relationships with guests (Bouncken, 2002).

The data from participants also reflected that information accumulated from check-in, online reviews, tour operators, our own observations, and various other sources has been used to follow up with guests through personalized communication, such as thank you e-mails or feedback request, to manage the customer lifecycle. For instance, C6 indicated that their hotels use personal observation and experience sharing among staff in helping them to

manage customer relationship. C6, opined that "we analyze customer data and pick up what their needs are, and provide what people want." C5 believed that other organizations collaborate with her hotel to enhance their working knowledge on CRM:

> Sometimes, the Quality and Standards Team of the Ghana Tourism Authority conducts inspections of our hotel, observes our customer service, and provides both oral and written feedback on our service deficiencies and weaknesses. We gain valuable knowledge from this feedback, as it informs us on how to improve customer handling, product management, and safety.

As reflected in the response of A1, the utilization of online learning platforms: "Genius" and "Lobster Ink," as learning tools for employees to accumulate knowledge help them to stay updated with knowledge trends in the hotel sector. In her words, A1 expressed,

> My hotel has a "Genius" online learning tool that contains bits and pieces of best practices information from hotels all over the world. All hotel staff members are required to use it to learn about new developments and trends in the hospitality industry. To assess a staff member's learning and understanding, they must pass an online exam at the end of the learning session.

These findings further support García-Almeida and Yu (2015) and Hameed et al. (2021) suggestions that knowledge generation is significant for CRM success. Hotel knowledge use complies with the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This adherence guarantees the privacy (in the case of D4) and confidentiality (in the case of C2) of customer information. Knowledge accumulation reinforces the relationship and provides valuable insights for future improvements in service delivery and customer experience (Nieves et al., 2014), and provide evidence of how hotels can acquire knowledge from external and internal sources (Nieves & Diaz-Meneses, 2018) for transforming CRM.

Knowledge Formation

Knowledge formation, the second phase of the KM process, focuses on generating new insights. It involves understanding the content, significance, purpose and meaning of the acquired knowledge. It's thus a process manifested as sense-making from customers' feedback, and individual and online research to form knowledge. Our data revealed that knowledge formed is applied across the dimensions of CRM, except network development.

Since hotel managers often need continuous dialogue and evaluation between tacit and explicit knowledge (Xia et al., 2022) to create organizational knowledge, this study identified two groups of knowledge sources that hotels use to implement CRM. The first group, consisting of most participants, derives insights and experiences from customers, colleagues, and discussions at staff meetings to guide their task execution. For example, while A6 indicated

that insights gained from guest complaints helped his hotel create an understanding of emerging trends, C2 found ideas about which services to develop based on what he heard from colleagues during staff meetings. In his response, A6 stated, "Guest complaints and feedback are invaluable as they provide critical insights into emerging trends." C2 added, "In my hotel, we do have frequent meetings. In our meetings, we all share what we have been hearing people say." A3 demonstrated his hotel's knowledge formation in enhancing customer intimacy, value propositions, and managing the customer lifecycle. As better service performance results from interactions between employees and customers (Xie et al., 2019), A3 indicated that connecting with customers can help form knowledge from their feedback by sharing his practical experience in dealing with Muslim guests.

> Through interactions and observations, we conceived the idea of offering a dawn meal for Ramadan, known as Suur. We evaluated this idea by sharing it with Muslim guests who checked in. We found that it resonated with them because they need to eat at dawn before beginning their fast. The Muslim guests welcomed the idea, which allowed us to develop this knowledge of the dawn meal for Ramadan and apply it in managing our relationships with guests.

The second group, consisting of participants such as E2 and B5, indicated that knowledge sourced from social media, hotel websites, and online travel agencies can refine service offerings and better manage the customer experience. E2 stated, "[…] comments from social media and online travel agencies like Expedia, Booking.com, and TripAdvisor with regard to the hotel's services are a form of knowledge that helps refine the service offerings." B5 further expressed, "We collect information from various sources, including ReviewPro and hotel websites. We then filter, discuss, and evaluate it. The outcome becomes working knowledge that staff use to serve customers, which helps us better manage the customer experience."

These findings align with the evolving role of Social CRM in the hospitality industry. As Diffley et al. (2018) demonstrated, social CRM practices enhance service innovation and customer performance. The practices described by participants E2 and B5 illustrate how hotels actively engage in acquiring and transforming customer feedback from online channels into usable knowledge that informs service refinement. This process reflects a strategic application of social CRM, where customer data is not only monitored but also integrated into decision-making and daily operations. Such knowledge acquisition activities support CRM functions including prospecting, relationship building, and customer lifecycle management, highlighting the growing convergence of KM processes and CRM strategies in practice.

Knowledge Retention

The knowledge retention process focuses on preserving valuable knowledge to effectively manage and maintain relationships with existing customers within the hotel as well as attract new customers. It requires strategy, tool, and approach of retaining knowledge. In this study, the data obtained from the participants revealed that hotels in Accra use two knowledge retention methods: advanced and traditional.

Nearly all of the informants stated that their hotels utilized repositories to hold knowledge. The majority hotels are employing technology infrastructure such as computer systems, databases and property management systems, such as Opera, EasyPMS, IDS, ERP to document knowledge while largely knowledge resides in the mind of employees. The later demonstrates that although hotels have knowledge repositories for knowledge storage, some form of knowledge and skills such as "thinking and acting" regarding unfamiliar situations are stored in employees' minds. While B3 stated that he kept knowledge obtained from customers in the Opera system and from employees on the WhatsApp platform, C6 expressed, "We have a system called IDS-a property management system that stores all the information and client data. The IDS is a central software application that connects all the departments and provides access points to the information." C1 when talking about a standard practice in knowledge retention, revealed that,

> The knowledge we acquire and create is stored in centralized repositories. This becomes accessible to all staff members, who acquaint themselves with the appropriate knowledge to carry out their daily duties. For example, in my department we have map drive, that is a database, with records of potential corporate clients, market information, and the technical knowledge to executive, especially dealing with sophisticated clients. This map drive is available for the past few years and will remain available moving into the future.

These findings suggest that hotels leverage technology to mitigate knowledge loss when employees leave the organization and to enhance seamless understanding and access to knowledge. This aligns with what prior studies have revealed regarding the importance of information technology in facilitating interaction, knowledge generation, organization, communication, and consumption (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Sigala, 2018).

Nevertheless, many hotels still have traditional storage systems like physical logbooks to record information and knowledge. Some participants described that they also use training manuals, such as a prospecting e-guide, to assist hotels in referencing, prospecting, managing relationship with a broad range of potential customers. Managers codify gathered knowledge into documents and shared them with staff as knowledge booklet for self-reference. This makes it easy for new staff members to access the existing customer-specific knowledge, ensuring CRM consistency. F2

believed that, print out materials and handouts constitute knowledge to bring employees up to speedy:

> Our management always give us training handouts from which we learn and internalise the knowledge, refresh and enhance our memory for discharging our duties. But I feel this may not be so efficient as we barely have enough time to learn these materials as we are always busy attending to customers.

These findings show that in the 21st century, hotel knowledge storage continues to utilize both manual and technological methods despite advancements in technology. This approach reinforces efforts to mitigate knowledge loss, even in situations of staff turnover and technological or technical failure, ensuring that hotel employees retain access to critical information for managing the dimensions of CRM.

Knowledge Implementation

The knowledge implementation domain emerged from all participants. Knowledge implementation represents the final phase of the KM process. In this phase, employees leverage the available knowledge about the hotel's products, services, and processes to drive improvements. The ultimate goal is to enhance and maintain customer relationships, fostering customer loyalty and retention as a result. The knowledge accumulated and formed by hotels is utilized to train and mentor staff, enabling them to deliver seamless service that attempt to maximize customer satisfaction compared to competitors. This knowledge is leveraged to enhance hotels' understanding of their customers by encouraging proactive engagement, allowing them to identify even the slightest changes in customer behavior. Utilizing knowledge to gain competitive advantage is important because Grant (1996) indicated that the application of knowledge could help create a sense of competitive advantage. The informants generally preferred to generate knowledge and use it to strengthen their CRM. This adds to our understanding of the Knowledge-Based View Theory (KBVT), which states that competitive advantage lies in the application of knowledge.

The implementation of knowledge was evident in all participating hotels. The first example is that of E1's knowledge use. As E1 explained,

> Our hotel uses the knowledge we acquire to put in more of customer service because you can have a beautiful hotel, but if customers come and then your relationship with them is poor the guests will not come back. So, we use every available knowledge to teach our staff in a way that they practice and apply in customer relationship management.

Second, A2 stated that, "we use knowledge to segment and create value for each customer. The knowledge also helps us develop interactive strategies capabilities, leading to customer retention." When a hotel consistently generates and applies knowledge, it can understand and

divide its potential customers into groups, such as high producers, mid-range producers and small producers and identify their potential economic or spending potential and provide the appropriate services. Hence, hotel managers should often generate and share knowledge, which can help create value (Buttle, 2004; Lo et al., 2010), in order to enhance customer retention and attract potential customers. To evaluate staff knowledge, mystery guests programs were utilized to pinpoint deficiencies in employee expertise and service delivery.

In summary, the implementation of knowledge within the prime dimensions of CRM is a crucial factor driving hotels to adopt KM practices, as well as significant outcome of the KM processes in today's competitive business landscape. For instance, D1, a FO Manager expressed, "I'm able to use the data gathered to plot a graph to visualize collectively all those pieces of information that come in from customers. The visualization provides technical and customer knowledge to serve the customer better." Expressing it as a reason demonstrated the valuable insight derived from data to amend business strategies and enhance CRM. It was therefore concluded that knowledge implementation present employees with skills and judgments to meet the present and future relational needs of customers.

Conclusion and Implications

This study identifies six key CRM dimensions (prospecting, customer portfolio analysis, customer intimacy, network development, value proposition development, and customer lifecycle management) and examines how four KM processes integrate with them (knowledge accumulation, formation, retention, and implementation). These CRM dimensions represent the strategic and operational approaches hotels use to attract, manage, and retain customers. By mapping KM processes to these dimensions, the study reveals how knowledge practices enable and enhance CRM activities. This integration supports more informed decision-making, improves customer engagement, and strengthens the strategic capabilities of hotels, ultimately helping them maintain a competitive edge through more effective CRM implementation. Figure 1 summarizes the key findings of this study.

Theoretical Implications

This study offers four key theoretical contributions. First, grounded in KM process theory (Cooper, 2018; Grant, 1996; Shaw & Williams, 2009), it provides empirical insights into how KM processes are implemented in hotels, enriching our understanding of the theory's practical relevance. It also demonstrates how KM integrates with key CRM dimensions, offering evidence from an under-researched hospitality context.
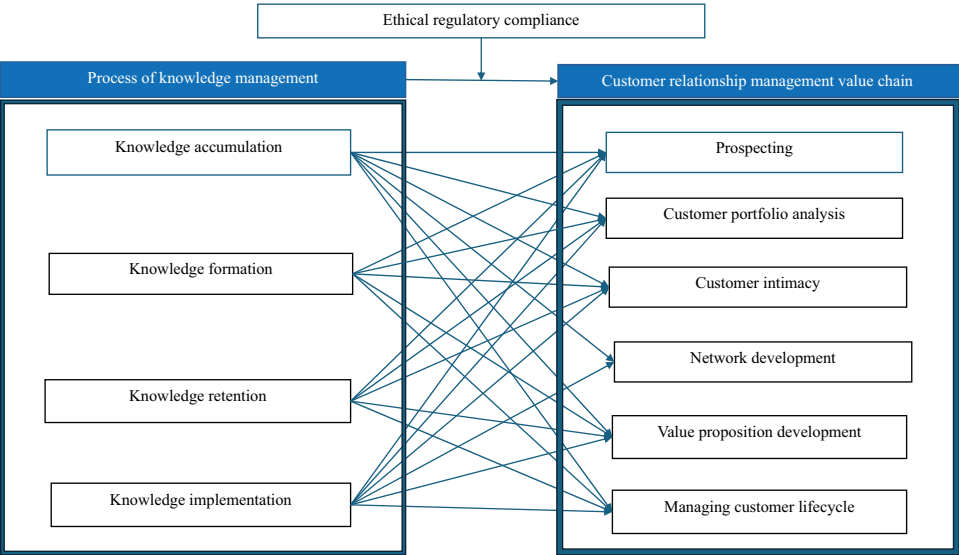
Figure 1. Diagrammatic representation of study's key findings (summary).

Second, the findings extend Buttle's (2004) CRM value chain framework by showing how KM elements align with CRM dimensions through real-world examples from hotels. Third, it addresses a gap in the literature by empirically examining the interplay between KM and CRM. Findings reveal that all KM processes align with at least four CRM domains, with two processes integrated across all six. Unlike previous studies, this research incorporates first-hand insights from both hotel managers and frontline staff. This qualitative case study reveals how knowledge is created, shared, and applied during CRM implementation. It highlights the critical role of KM in enhancing customer engagement and delivering consistent service experiences. These contributions advance both KM and CRM theories by illustrating how their integration supports strategic hotel operations and improves the customer journey.

Practical Implications

The study presents several significant practical implications for the hotel industry. First, as hotels actively engage with all CRM domains for strategic purposes, they should continue refining and expanding CRM practices. Second, the integration of KM processes into CRM has shown positive effects on customer engagement and organizational success. Therefore, hotels should prioritize comprehensive KM integration, particularly in areas where integration remains limited. Specifically, hotels should strengthen knowledge formulation during customer portfolio analysis and promote knowledge accumulation and knowledge formation within the prospecting phase. These enhancements will support more targeted marketing and personalized service delivery.

Hotel managers should also take ownership of KM by appointing individuals or teams to lead KM-CRM alignment. This can encourage knowledge creation, foster innovation, and enable better internal knowledge transfer. Additionally, hotels must reassess their knowledge retention and implementation strategies, especially within prospecting and portfolio analysis, to improve CRM effectiveness. Finally, acknowledging that knowledge accumulation is essential for CRM effectiveness, we suggest that hoteliers implement stakeholder engagement programs. These programs should invite contributions on knowledge activities aimed at enriching operational, professional, and technical knowledge. Furthermore, this study highlights the necessity of viewing customers, government agencies, hotel consultants, and other stakeholders as collaborative knowledge partners, rather than merely subjects of generic influence strategies. Notably, personal and business relationships-particularly those nurtured through social interactions-were seen as critical for attracting and retaining customers, underscoring their importance in business-to-business relationships. Consequently, hoteliers are encouraged to continually integrate KM processes into their CRM frameworks to optimize their overall impact.

Limitations and Future Research

This study recognizes several limitations that present significant opportunities for future research. Firstly, while the investigation is primarily concentrated on urban hotels in Ghana, there is ample opportunity to broaden and replicate the research to examine the perceptions and practices related to KM and CRM integration in rural hotel establishments and across various segments of the hospitality industry. Secondly, although this study delves into the KM processes of frontline staff and managers within the CRM framework of full-service hotels, future research should explore the key drivers and obstacles that influence the successful integration of KM and CRM. Understanding these factors could yield profound insights into what enables or hinders effective integration, thereby guiding the development of more impactful strategies for implementation and organizational alignment within the hospitality sector and beyond. Moreover, studies that encompass both upscale and budget hotels could unveil diverse perspectives on integration practices.

Thirdly, the relatively small sample size of 33 participants, alongside a focus on guest-contact staff, may not provide a holistic view of organizational dynamics. Including insights from various departments would enhance the understanding of KM-CRM interactions and their overall impact. Fourthly, cross-cultural studies offer a valuable avenue for comparing KM and CRM integration practices across different cultural contexts. Investigating how cultural values, organizational norms, and communication styles influence

the adoption, implementation, and effectiveness of KM-CRM integration could provide critical insights into these relationships.

Fifthly, while this qualitative study establishes a foundational understanding, future investigations might employ quantitative methods to validate and expand upon the proposed framework. Additionally, further exploration of KM-CRM integration within other sectors of the hospitality and tourism industry-including restaurants, resorts, travel agencies, and airlines-could assess the transferability and broader applicability of the findings. Such research endeavors would yield comparative insights and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how KM-CRM integration strategies operate across diverse service contexts. Finally, since this study focuses on various types of full-service hotels, extending the research to differentiate among distinct hotel categories could yield a more nuanced perspective on KM and CRM integration from the viewpoint of hotel employees. Despite the limitations outlined, this study contributes valuable insights to the understanding of KM and CRM integration in a relatively underexplored area.

Disclosure Statement

Funding

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