

# The Roles Of Social Media In Crm In B2B Context

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**Abstract: Aim:** *The purpose of this study is to identify the roles played by social media in B2B relationships and to ascertain the impacts and influences of digital platforms on CRM.*

**Methodology:** *A qualitative research method was adopted, using semi-structured through online interview via Skype with 6 participants from Nepal and Sri Lanka. Content analysis method was used as basis for analyzing the interviews transcribed.*

**Result & Conclusions:** *Digital platforms have significantly improved CRM processes. Social media does not fully develop B2B relationships but likely to initiate the process of development.*

**Suggestions for future research:** *Ascertaining and validating the relational value created by social media in a B2B relationship and determining the mathematical correlation between the performance of firms and the use social media.*

**Contribution of the study:** *Identifying the potentials and threats presented by digital platforms, including social media and further exploring the current roles played by social media in building B2B relationships.*

**Keywords:** *CRM, Digital platforms, Social media, B2B.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Considering the unstable environments businesses operate in, coupled with the insurgence of globalization of businesses, it is imperative the quality of business relationships of firms is not taken lightly. Krizanova et al, 2018, identifies that, one of the most important factors for attaining and sustaining business success is by effectively managing and maintaining a close relationship with customers through Customer Relationship Management (CRM) practices. Subsequently, they point out a positive relationship between CRM practices and the performance of a firm. Therefore, CRM can be seen as an interactive process meant to obtain an optimal balance, corporate investment, and customer satisfaction by creating a long-lasting, mutually beneficial and valuable relationships. By this, CRM can also be said to include employees, business processes, information systems, communications systems, and all other business stakeholders. CRM can, therefore, be said to be made up of interrelated and complementary elements such as people, processes, technologies, and content.

In this digital age, Information technology can be said to have a great impact on the success of businesses and gives firms the competitive advantage required for growth. This is particularly true because of the influence these digital technologies have on industries, business environments, processes, models of operations and marketing communication of firms (Foltean et al 2018). Digitization may be said to have opened new avenues which were nonexistent, for firms to attract and sustain new customers and subsequently cultivating these customer relationships. Thus, digitization has improved the Business-to-Business (B2B) relationships together with Business to Customer (B2C) relationships of firms and industries in general (Iankova et al. 2019). One critical aspect of digitization of these relationships is the outcomes attained, from the use of social media in businesses. With the insurgence of social media with regards to managing relationships and marketing strategies of firms, the survival, reputation, and performance of these institutions stand to be affected. (Foltean et al 2018)

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, Pp. 61), Social media is best described as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”. By this, they meant social media included, social networking sites, collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds. As further explained by Kietzmann et al. (2011), social media can be described in accordance with the purposes it serves, thus its functionalities. Thus, social media described by virtue of identity, presence, sharing, relationships, groups, conversation and reputation. Practically, social media can basically be seen as platforms through which people communicate. The starring role of social media in businesses has grown over the years. It has been identified to improve the creation, sustainability of business relationships and as well enhanced the value creation for parties of a relationship (Gáti et al. 2018)

The role, contribution and value of social media to firms in the context of B2C have been to a large extent, adequately explored. However, the same cannot be said when it comes to inputs of social media in the B2B context. One of the major hindrances to this the lack of knowledge and ability of executives of firms to fully develop, adopt and integrate social media technology in the firm’s business processes (Foltean et al. 2018). Furthermore, it has identified that research on the role of social media in the context of B2B is in its embryonic stage. As such, there is little or no guidance on how managers of corporations could fully utilize social media in a B2B context (Itani et al. 2017). The paper seeks to contribute to this empirical shortfall by seeking to find answers to the following questions;

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- ✓ What are the impacts and influences of digital platforms in CRM?
- ✓ What are the roles of social media in CRM in B2B context?

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study seeks to identify the roles played by social media in B2B relationships. In addition, this study seeks to ascertain the impacts and influences of digital platforms on CRM. This will provide businesses, particularly startup businesses to appreciate the need to introduce these platforms when their potentials or usages are known. Furthermore, it will provide businesses the edge to optimize the benefits of using these platforms whiles mitigating possible challenges.

**II. LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

**A. CONCEPT OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

Kaplan & Haenlein, (2010) differentiated social media from User Generated Content and Web 2.0. They identified Web 2.0 as a platform where users are collaboratively able to

continuously modify contents and applications. Subsequently, all the ways by which people used social media were referred to as User Generated Content. As such, they identified social media as internet-based applications that are developed on the technological ideals and concepts of Web 2.0 and User Generated Content. They further categories social media into the blogs, collaborative projects, social networking sites, content communities, virtual social worlds, and virtual game worlds. These categories were developed based on their level of social presence or media richness medium and self-presentation or self-disclosure concepts. Blogs, social network sites and virtual social worlds were deemed to have high self-presentation/self-disclosure whereas collaborative projects, content communities, a virtual game world were deemed to have low self-presentation. However, with reference to social presence/media richness, blogs, and collaborative projects were deemed to be high, social networking sites and content communities were deemed to be medium whereas virtual social worlds and virtual games were deemed to be low. Details of which have been presented in a form of a diagram.

		Social presence/ Media richness		
		Low	Medium	High
Self-presentation/ Self-disclosure	High	Blogs	Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life)
	Low	Collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia)	Content communities (e.g., YouTube)	Virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft)

(Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 62)

*Figure 1: Classification of Social Media by social presence/media richness and self- presentation/self-disclosure*

The critical of collaborative projects is the ability of end-users to jointly and simultaneously create content. Blogs represent the personal web pages that are usually managed by individual people which provides room for interaction with others via comments added. The content community mainly seeks to ensure that the sharing of media content between users is made possible. Applications that link users to each other, enable access to individual personally created profiles and at the same time allows instant messaging among users is called social networking sites. Virtual game worlds platforms demonstrate a three-dimensional environment such that users tend to interact as though they were physically interacting between themselves. Virtual social worlds are similar to virtual games worlds except these allows for an unlimited self-presentation strategy and as well allow users to exhibits behaviors as though they were been monitored in a real-life setting.

Kietzmann et al (2011, p. 241), explained that “Social media employ mobile and web- based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content”. They further identified seven functional building blocks of social media to include: identity, conversation, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. Social media sites were identified to have struck a balance among these building blocks, though each had a focus on one of the building blocks more than the other.

Firms were by this, entreated to analyze these seven building blocks in order to ascertain how their social media activities differ with regards to their function and impact. By so doing these firms could develop appropriate social media

strategies for respective communities. These can be said to be critical since they have the potential to affect the survival, reputation, and performance of businesses. Furthermore, It is also important for businesses, to consider the target group and the message to be conveyed prior to selecting any medium they deem to be appropriate, for tasks yet to be undertaken. It is also essential that all activities executed across these social media platforms are adequately aligned with each other. This will help reduce any risk of sharing ambiguous and contradictory messages across these different platforms. This in effect will improve the effectiveness of communication among businesses and their stakeholders in markets.

Social media can, therefore, be described as a vital element required by businesses for the success and sustainability of businesses in this era. This is particularly true because customers have been identified to have evolved from being passive participants to been active participants in the market as a result of social media (Moncrief et al 2015). Thus, customers can be labeled as having gained more power relative to marketers of firms. Practically, there is a potential for various stages involved in the sales cycle of companies to be affected by the entity's adoption of social media (Moncrief et al 2015). This as such raises important concerns for firms, products and brands and consequently, poses new challenges to CRM.

## B. IMPACTS AND INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS

The influx of digital platforms can be said to have entirely changed interactions between people. These platforms have created new opportunities as well as challenges in the management of customer relationships (Moncrief et al 2015). These platforms have provided mediums for developing and maintaining customer relationships and as well create value through interactions (Moncrief et al 2015) It is therefore important for businesses to understand how these digital platforms affect business relationships so that appropriate steps can be taken to optimize their benefits.

These digital platforms have been identified to have changed business environments and models. It is therefore critical for CRM processes of businesses to adapt to these changes in business environments and models. With reference to customer relationships, these changes can be said to have provided firms with novel means of reaching, interacting and customizing business communications with stakeholders. The nature of the content created and shared through these mediums by firms have impacts on the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of their customers, thereby making the customers active participants in these marketing exchanges (Foltean et al 2018). The increase in the use of these digital platforms has transitioned the contact between businesses and their customers from the conventional Web 1.0 model to an extremely interactive Web 2.0 world (Hanna et al 2011).

There is however the risk that businesses may be involved in the trending of 'fake news' on these digital platforms, particularly with social media. There has been a phenomenal criticism of the spreading of misinformation by social media. Failure to decipher between truth and deceptions on these platforms can pose dire consequences to businesses. A study

from the healthcare context identified a possible threat for public health as misinformation and misrepresentation of health news in social media. It was further revealed postings on social media relating to common diseases in 40% cases included falsehoods but were however shared 451,272 times between 2012-2017 (Sivarajah et al 2018).

Despite the challenges likely to be posed by these digital platforms, they are of enormous benefit to businesses. These platforms can be said to have evolved to become customer-centric platforms that is making it possible for organizations to partake in interactions among their customers' network. Broadly speaking these platforms can be used to build networks and customer relationships in a better way (Ogilvie et al 2018). Furthermore, these platforms have essentially converted the internet from being a platform solely for exchange of information to a platform for influence (Hanna et al 2011) One can deduce that these digital platforms have the potential to influence business processes and as well improve customer relationships depending on how an entity is capable of harnessing their full benefits while minimizing the threats they pose.

## C. ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE B2B CONTEXT

Social media has been identified as a tool with many prospects of complementing CRM processes and as well as useful in focusing on specific portfolios of customers in the market. They have been identified to be useful in finding opportunities and identifying individuals who represent decision-makers and buyers in an organization. As such it has been identified as a key necessary to initiate a business's relationship processes with other firms. (Itani et al 2017).

Relationships are established by social media as a result of people transmitting and sharing content among themselves. Content sharing in social media can be likened to the concept of reciprocity, where a building of relationships among individuals with matched behaviors is deemed possible over a period of time (Quinton & Wilson, 2016). From a general perspective, content shared tend to have potential value to the originator, distributor and the recipient. Ideas are communicated to others by the originator of the content, which are consequently redistributed by the distributor when perceived to be of interest to others in a network and finally, deemed to be useful to recipients who may in effect increase the network size of the originator's contact networks (Quinton & Wilson, 2016). However, in a highly business environment, content sharing may be detrimental to the originators if not carefully assessed. This may be said to be true for some industries in that, sharing of the content may present opportunities to recipients and competitors which may in effect derail the originator's business intellectual properties benefits.

It is also important to note that social media provide platforms not only for marketing purposes but also essential for attaining operational and managerial objectives by gathering useful user intelligence (Sivarajah et al 2019). The dominant use of social media has resulted in businesses seeking to gain insights and understanding from throngs in order to meet business expectations. This demands the use of appropriate tools and skills to analyze data collected by

businesses. The analyzed data subsequently enable these businesses to take timely and important business decisions. Lipiäinen (2014), identified social media to be generally used to create awareness, familiarity and attract new customers in a B2B context, rather than improving customer relationship that is already in existence. Personal contacts were identified as best for creating quality leads in the B2B context than the use of social media.

#### D. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research makes use of a three stages relationship development model as developed by Panga et al 2018. They posit that relationships could be developed when business stakeholders engage in dialogic communication. Consequently, they identify three stages by which this could be done. These stages included, initiating/experimenting, intensification and finally integrating/bonding.

By initiating, each stakeholder gets to know each other as a result of a favorable topic or topic of interest been pursued by the other. At this point, an opportunity is created for one to present the best of what he/she has in order to achieve a relational goal such as trust, persuasion and the likes. It further stipulates that further question-asking by a partner leads to further disclosures by the other. This in effect leads to further affections in that each of the partners gets to know themselves more. However, it is the early stages of relationship development in businesses. Taking a cue from this, social media should be able to offer this opportunity for businesses to get to know themselves in order to create the required level of affection for both parties to further develop their relationship. it should be possible for social media platforms to offer all these privileges in a B2B context.

The intensification stage mainly involves the deeper exchanging of ideas between the parties who initiated the relationship. This time, the exchanges tend to be a two way more specific exchanges which result in immediacy between parties. In effect, there is a mutual contribution to the main purpose for which the relationship was initiated between both parties. At this stage, more time is spent on communicating between both parties which inevitably develops the interpersonal relationship. As part of this research, it will be ascertained if communication to this depth between businesses are made on social media platforms. This should subsequently lead to the final stage of this relationship development process.

Finally, at the bonding/integrated stage, both parties tend to be committed and close to each other while future conversations to are expected in such regard. At this stage, deeper immediacy, affection, and trust are developed between parties. Furthermore, both parties can be deemed to be close, as such, this where skillful negotiation of agreements is deemed to be particularly important.

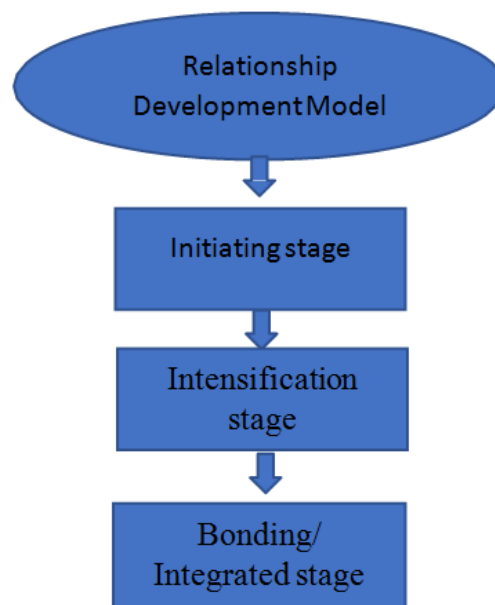


Figure 2: Stages of relationship development model

### III. METHODOLOGY

Generally, research works are done through three research approaches; qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. The results of these methods are varied according to the strategies used in the research. We have chosen qualitative method for this research because it narrows the study to one idea or concept to be better explored or understood. Also, it is more likely to allow a flexible means of gathering and recording evidence. Personal opinions, feelings, and experiences of the research participants are required for this study. These details exonerate our demand for qualitative research design to be used for the study (Denzin, 1989).

#### A. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHOD

It is believed that a qualitative approach provides in-depth and detailed information that helps to enhance the understanding of the faculty's organizational structure and procedures. According to Creswell (2008), there are four types of qualitative research methods, observations, interviews, documents, and audio-visual materials. The most commonly used technique in qualitative method interviews. Considering the need for the qualitative method of research, it is important, that the perceptions of participants are carefully analyzed thorough the interviews conducted.

#### B. SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

We are conducting our study in one of the Multinational companies, Tech One Global Pvt Ltd., providing software solutions to different sectors like Banks, Governments, Corporations, etc. It is Sri Lankan based company with 7 subsidiaries in different countries including; Nepal, Bangladesh, Maldives, Philippines, Singapore, Bhutan, and Brunei. For over a decade, they are mainly into B2B relationships by providing different software application and

consultancy to their customers. They are one of the leaders in digital transformations and their mission is to inspire, motivate, and empower organizations through digital transformations. Participants were selected from different departments of the company from Sri Lanka and Nepal, based on individuals perceived to provide reliable and best information to this research (Kuper et al. 2008). The purpose of selecting appropriate participants was to identify and attain the required responses against the chosen research questions and gaps. The selection of random participant may provide irrelevant outcomes that might not fulfill the main purpose of this study. All the participants are males and the majority of them are heads of departments of the company. Details of the participants are given in below table 1.

SN	Employee Position	Age	Gender	Country	Company	No of years in Company
1	Assistant General Manager	39	Male	Sri Lanka	Tech One Global	3
2	Head of Technical Department	38	Male	Sri Lanka	Tech One Global	10
3	Head – Sales and Operations	31	Male	Nepal	Tech One Global	7
4	Project Manager	36	Male	Nepal	Tech One Global	5
5	Head – BPO Operations	32	Male	Nepal	Tech One Global	4
6	Sales Executive	28	Male	Nepal	Tech One Global	5

Table 1: Detail of Participants

#### C. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Request for an appointment for interview date and time were sent through emails with official letters and interview questionnaires to all the participants. The nature of data was based on direct responses to questions as well as the discussion generated responses. Interviews were taken online via Skype, which lasted between 20 to 30 minutes. Interviews were recorded and extensive notes were taken after obtaining informed consent from the participants. During the interview, only questions related to the research topic and gap with few follow up questions were asked in order to avoid irrelevant responses.

#### D. DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Mainly, there are three interviews types; structured, semi-structured and unstructured. This study was conducted on an inductive approach, using semi-structured in-depth interviews as its method, to explore the impacts and influences of digital platforms in CRM and the role of social media in B2B. The well-constructed semi-structured questionnaires were used as interview guides which limited the scope of the participant's responses and in effect gave fewer chances for biases in their responses. Additional and follow up questions were raised during the interviews. The order of questions varied depending on the flow of the conversation. The questionnaires were related to the impact and role of digital platforms and social media on CRM. A brief summary of the main topic and research gap were provided before the session to the participants. We further transcribed the interviews and

analyzed them with the use of content analysis. Content analysis is the systematic process of 'coding and identifying themes or patterns' for 'describing the meaning of qualitative data' (Cho & Lee, 2014, p. 3).

#### IV. RESULTS

This section takes into consideration an overview of key issues that arose during the period of interaction with the participants, with the quest of ensuring that the research gap is fulfilled. Transcribes of the interviews conducted were generated and subsequently analyzed based on the content analysis method. Codes were further allotted in detail of the transcribed interviews. Moreover, these codes were further divided into themes and subthemes based on our literature and theoretical framework. All of these further aided us in conducting an effective analysis.

##### A. IMPACTS AND INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS

All the participants mentioned that the company is using CRM software, Microsoft Dynamics CRM which helps them to track and keep their records in a proper manner. Digital platforms, especially this software application, helps them to centrally manage all customer data from contact, leads, and opportunities. As a Multinational Company (MNC), all staff, as well as the management team, could have visibility on the day to day activities happening in the business by using this system. Also, other digital platforms like websites, social media, email, etc. help to attract customers, track the customer and increase reach to customers globally. These digital platforms are also means of customer satisfaction, customer feedback and establishing a good relationship with them.

Digital platforms have made it easy for them to provide excellent service to the customers and helped them to develop sales infrastructures and maintain healthy relationships with customers as well as staff. One of the participants mentioned that it has made easy to maintain the processes in CRM and have given a platform to see the state of the whole business cycle at a glance. Also, it gives opportunities to covers wide varieties of the customer and more customers can be reached through these digital technologies. In addition, one participant focused on more time saving and easy to record and extract data through digital platforms. Most of the participants stated that digital platforms are basically helping them to track customers, improve on work and targets, profitability and knowledge about the market.

##### B. TRANSFORMATIONS DUE TO DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Internet technology or digital platforms allows them to gain knowledge about customer requirements and customer behavior. It helps to centrally keep all the leads so creating a zero dependency on the staff. One participant compared digital marketing with previous non-digital marketing. He stated that the organizations earlier needed to go door to door or hire the salespeople who will visit the customers. But due to digital

marketing, it has been easy to connect with the customers instantly and as well identifies the status of opportunities. For instance, concept papers and proposals could be shared through the emails and further communication could be continued through many other digital platforms. Digital platforms provide visibility for the staff, especially for salespeople to track the history and they can get any historical information to strategize and plan for further action. Almost all participants stated that these digital platforms have brought lots of transformation to their business and made easy their day to day activities.

#### C. POTENTIAL OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES TO IMPROVE CRM

Most of the participants emphasized the potential of digital technologies as a result of they been enabled to connect with their customers easily and faster through communications platforms. They can connect with them through emails and different social media platforms to share documents and information, and get their feedback as well. Digital technologies create platforms to interact with the customer, conduct marketing activities and collect information about different markets. It has changed their business processes vastly compared to a few years ago when they were not involved in these digital technologies that much. One participant stated that it has great potential and impact on building customer relationship but still customers don't trust 100% on building the relationship through digital platforms. Still, a 10% or 15% chance exists that, they must go there personally, meet the customer and build the networks and relationships. Overall, all participants agreed that digital technologies have great potential to improve customer relationships and change business processes.

#### D. ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE B2B CONTEXT

Mainly, Tech One Global is conducting marketing campaigns, sales promotion, information of their company and products, and invitations for different events. They are sharing different information such as product video, service videos, raffles, through social media platforms as well as getting customer's feedback and comments. Also, they are getting different information from social media which are sometimes useful for them in terms of, tender notice, a requirement of customers, customer's information, etc. They are doing digital marketing through different social media like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. which helps them to improve sales and as well give the knowledge of products to customers or other vendors.

##### a. SOCIAL MEDIA BUILDING NETWORKS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Most of the participants stated that social media is contributing to building networks with stakeholders but only at the initial stage of the relationship, such as attracting customers, creating awareness, lead generations, sharing information regarding the product and company, quick and informal communication, etc. But one of the participants does

not find any use of social media for building networks with stakeholders from a B2B perspective. He stated that social media only provides an idea about what the company is about and doing rather than building networks and trust. They need to build up these relationships and networks with face to face discussion.

##### b. PROS AND CONS OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA

There are mainly two pros of using social media discussed by the participants. That is, it helps to reach a large number of people and there is transparency and easy to access so that it could be seen by everyone who is using social media. There are different things that the company can share like company profile, detail knowledge sharing of product details or software, invitations for events, schemes, offers knowledge, etc. through social media rather than going for a door to door campaigns.

In terms of cons, security threats and access by rivals or business competitors are the major ones. Also, there was the possibility of limited market coverage in that whoever was not on that social media platform, did not have knowledge and access to the shared information. Security threats in terms of misuse of data or information against the company, negative comments, and feedback, an encounter with fake customers, etc. might have a negative impact and affect the image of the company. An additional disadvantage of social media with regards to the transparency and easy access is that there was a risk of providing information and data to their rivals or competitors which might cause troubles for the company. If competitors get information about the company's products, they might come with the same ideas to the disadvantage of the company in question. Also, one participant gave more priority to humans rather than social media for maintaining relations and interactions with customers. He thinks most companies are losing human identity due to more dependency on these social media platforms.

##### c. RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CUSTOMERS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

After the initial stage of their connection and relationship through social media, most staff are visiting their customers personally. They will still be connected with them through social media but only for their personal relations like greetings, wishing on occasions, etc. rather than business relations. Most of the participants are not managing their relationship on social media and they think that through social media, managing the B2B relationship is not appropriate and useful for them. Only a few participants, especially sales team are maintaining their B2B relationship through for their sharing sales activities like, success stories, case studies, invitation for training and pocket events to customers of new products, sharing concept proposals and documents for the new product. Apart from these sales activities, activities such as like presentation of product, finalize the product or project, etc. are also undertaken. Moreover, they have to also meet the customer and maintain their relation further. Overall all participants stated that there is no much role of social media in maintaining a relationship with customers in the B2B context.

#### d. SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT ON CRM

Digital platforms provide the benefit of easy access to the customer and help in knowledge sharing and transferring. It also allows for low-cost publicity and mass knowledge transferable. It provides information about customers and markets to make the strategy of launching and selling products and services, which increases the credibility of the company in the market if more positive reviews and comments on social media are made. Thus, this might increase the sales leads and customer satisfaction. Few participants highlight the features of social media like, transparency and customers are well informed which will definitely increase customer satisfaction and improve customer relationship. But most of the participants shared that only customer issues and inquiries on social media can be monitored, but cannot control the customer's posting something wrong about the product or company. They provided importance to their CRM software solution through which they can track and control rather than social media. They said to some extent they can improve relations, customer feedback, and customer satisfaction through social media. Around 3% of total sales are allocated through social media in their business. Somehow, in the whole process, social media can be only a medium but does not satisfy or provide customer satisfaction, gain customer loyalty, retention, or improve customer relationship performance because it is only a medium. Basically, social media does not play any major role in managing B2B relationships, after the initial stage.

#### V. DISCUSSION

This research sought to ascertain the impacts and influences digital platforms in relation to customer relationship management. Furthermore, it sought to identify if social media had a role in developing the B2B relationship of firms. With regards to these, some relevant studies and frameworks were established as the basis by which our findings will be based on. As earlier identified, the influx of digitization in businesses necessitates that their impacts and influences were learned. Thakur (2019), recognized the need for increased customer engagement, particularly in these digital business environments since they had the possibility of been cocreators of products and communications. Consequently, the results of the study proved that these digital platforms aid in the attraction, follow up and retention of customers which in the long run helped to establish a good rapport between businesses and their customers. Services of businesses to their customers can be said to have improved since such evolution. Business processes could be viewed and attended immediately, which implies attending to more people within a shorter period, thus saving time and resources. In effect, the CRM processes have substantially been enhanced, made efficient and effective while improving the profitability of firms in general. These perspectives were supported by (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019) who further entreated managers of businesses to adequately utilize digital platforms and channels as a result of the flexibility they offer and their

ability to stimulate and develop, trust, relationship, and customer engagement.

Moreover, there has been a drastic increase in the use of digital-based services particularly in connecting suppliers to customers Ruggieri et al. (2018). The study revealed that digital systems have created an opportunity for businesses not to solely rely on an individual since all information required can be accessed. More so, the formal hurdle of moving from one person to another in-person to identify opportunities can be deemed to have ended as a result of the businesses been able to contact prospective customers by a click of a button. Furthermore, all previous transactions can easily be accessed in aid of future plans to be made unlike before. Ruggieri et al (2018) enumerates additional transformations in addition to the above to include the more effective and efficient use of resources as a result of the introduction of these digital platforms. They further posit that these platforms tend to have additional value creation capabilities.

The results of the study reiterate that the higher the rate by which businesses are able to contact their stakeholders. It further stipulates these digital technologies have drastically changed over the last decade. However, it was identified that though these technologies have adequate capabilities to improving relationships, some stakeholders of businesses had some level of doubt as to that effect. Despite such an assertion, it is indisputable that business relations and processes have been improved and changed for the better. These are backed by Barac et al. (2017), who explains that as a result of this evolution caused by these digital technologies, customer relationship management is not only restricted to customers but include other significant numbers of processes like relationships with employees, suppliers and the likes. These in effect have necessitated the need for businesses to develop multilayered perspectives of relationship dynamics and processes. Thus, businesses build an integrative system to include digital platforms and processes.

#### ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE B2B CONTEXT

As stated in our theoretical framework, it will be expected that B2B relationships will be capable of been initiated, intensified and integrated/bonded through social media. The business was identified to be sharing marketing campaigns, sales promotions, invitations and information of the company on social media platforms. This was confirmed by Lipiäinen (2014) who identified social media to mainly used for awareness creation in a B2B context as earlier stated in the literature. This was further confirmed by Heikki et al. (2015), as such interested parties then contacted the business and not as an organization but rather as individuals. In effect, a connection is first established with an individual who might probably be working in an organization. Consequently, there is a tendency for such communications or interactions to remain at a personal level because such individual may or may not refer the business to his or her organization. As such, there is either a possibility or not to initiate a relationship with the person's organization. In any case, when there is an initiation of a relationship with the person's organization, such, interaction is then first in person and subsequently on private digital platforms between both parties only. Thus, social

media has the tendency to either or not to initiate a relationship between two businesses. As such, there was almost no possibility for the next stages of relationship development, including, intensification and bonding/integration stages to be accomplished through social media. In effect, there was no way by which B2B relationships could be developed fully, by the use of social media. It is therefore not surprising Heikki et al (2015) identified that a bulk of industrial firms revealed social media as irrelevant to their businesses.

With regard to building and running networks with business stakeholders on social media, it can be deemed to be quite difficult. This is as a result of the failure of businesses to develop their relationships on via such medium. However, as earlier noted, the key roles it can play in that regard is only at initial stages where awareness and leads are created. Notwithstanding, it can be argued only a limited number of these initial interactions may result in the formation of these networks. The results of the study revealed that social media enabled businesses to come in contact with many individuals. More so, the level of transparency of activities, attraction, and access to people has been enhanced through the use of social media. These were backed by Dumitrescu et al. (2018), who also went further to identified lower cost and increased speed of delivering messages to prospective customers. However, key threats to the use of social media were with regard to the security and lack of privacy issues. There is a tendency for corporate accounts to be hacked as well as leaking of key corporate information to competitors, which might result in some costs and conflicts. Dumitrescu et al (2018), supported these perspectives while stating the operation of these social media accounts demands enough time and dedication from personnel of the organization. These are likely to negatively affect organizations in diverse ways if not checked properly.

Social media can be said to have revolutionized CRM to a large extent, in that it has improved the level of interactions that will have pertained without its presence. Wang & Kim (2017) recognized this and further identified that social media have improved customer relationship capabilities which have consequently resulted in the new concept of Social CRM. It was identified also from the study that, social media could serve as a platform to aid businesses in pursuing satisfaction and loyalty among customers which in effect improves customer relationship performance, particularly within a B2C relationship. However, it can be noticed that the role of social media in a B2B relationship is very limited. In effect, the diagram below explains the role of social media in B2B Environment per our results.

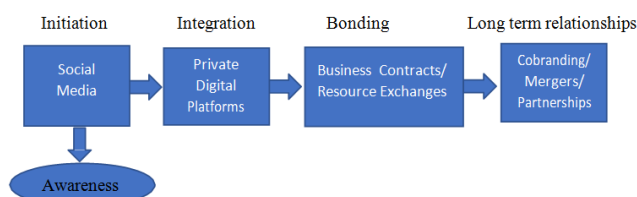


Figure 3: B2B Relationship Environment

## VI. CONCLUSION

Digital platforms including social media are now part and parcel of our daily routines. This necessitated the need to ascertain the roles of social media in establishing B2B relationships and as well ascertained the impact of digital platforms on CRM of businesses. Digital platforms present the best of mediums to companies in reaching a larger number of people, so that knowledge of the company and their products could be extended to them. Moreover, communications with customers as well as staff and other stakeholders are been made easier with a lot of transformations to daily activities as a result of these digital platforms. The collection of market information and conducting marketing activities across the global market have been relatively made easier with the use of these digital platforms. As such, these digital platforms have a huge impact on creating awareness of the products, provide opportunities to covers wide varieties of the customer, helps them to track customers, which makes it more likely to improve on work outputs and targets as well as the profitability of the business. In effect, digital technologies have great potential to improve customer relationships and change business processes in companies.

From the study, social media helps in attracting customers, creating awareness, generating leads, sharing information regarding companies and their product whiles producing quick and informal communication among parties. In as much as companies gain massively from the use of social media, they should be mindful of associated threats which could derail them of their hard- earned benefits within a very short period of time. Despite the enormous benefits of social media in building and managing relationships between businesses and their individual customers, its role in terms of building and managing B2B relationships is very scanty. In that, it is likely to be effective, only at the initial stages of building B2B relationships. In today's digitalized world, it is an undeniable fact that billions of people are using social media. This as such is aiding in the generation great values to businesses all over. Subsequently, there is, therefore, a tendency for some features of social media to permit the building of trust and networks in B2B in the near future.

From a managerial point of view, businesses must seek to optimize the quality of leads generated as a result of promoting their products or activities on social media. By generating quality leads, there was the tendency for businesses to get in touch with individuals who will most likely recommend the business to the various organizations they work for. In effect, a B2B relationship stands to be created in the long run.

This study has contributed to current literature, by identifying the potentials and threats presented by digital platforms, including social media. This has further explored the current roles played by social media in building B2B relationships. Businesses, particularly startups have the chance to make strategic decisions to optimize the benefits of these platforms and much as possible reduce related costs.



## VII. LIMITATION AND FURTHER STUDY

The generalizability of our findings is likely to be limited as a result of our inability to get other businesses who were customers to larger businesses. Furthermore, we were unable to bring on board more businesses in diverse industries. Several attempts to gain a more balanced sample also proved futile. In the future, it will be important to ascertain and validate the relational value created by social media in a B2B relationship. Furthermore, it will be imperative to determine mathematically, the correlation between the performance of firms and the use of social media.

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