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Customer evangelists: Elevating hospitality through digital competence, brand image, and corporate social responsibility

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary digital landscape, the frontline employees' proficiency in forging relationships holds immense strategic importance for organizational success. This study examines the impact of frontline employees' digital competence, proactive assistance, and relationship-building on customer brand evangelism with the mediating role of brand image and the moderating role of perceived corporate social responsibility. The research utilizes a time-lagged data collection approach, employing a multistage random sampling method to gather data from patrons visiting both five and four-star hotels. The data collection spans two points in time, separated by a four-week interval. This study employs Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS v. 4 to analyze the proposed relationships, ensuring robust analysis for complex models. Findings suggest that the digital competence, proactive support, and interpersonal skills of frontline staff significantly contribute to the emergence of brand evangelists directly and through the mediation of corporate image. This study highlights the pivotal function of frontline employees within the domain of sales and marketing, particularly in the context of hospitality management, in influencing customer perceptions and cultivating brand evangelism.

1. Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of modern business, organizations are continuously challenged to sustain themselves in the highly competitive environment (Rungruangjit et al., 2023). While effective marketing strategies and sales management practices have long been recognized as essential for achieving business goals, there is a growing recognition of the need to tap into the power of brand evangelism (Mansoor and Paul, 2022; Sohaib et al., 2022). Traditionally, businesses have relied on brand advocacy as a means to establish a loyal customer base. Brand advocates are customers who, having had positive experiences with a product or service, willingly promote it to others (Wong, 2023). However, in an era characterized by an abundance of information and the proliferation of social media platforms, mere advocacy may no longer suffice to elevate a brand's prominence in the minds of consumers. Instead, harnessing the ardor of brand evangelism has become imperative for maintaining a competitive edge in a digital age characterized by information saturation (Shang and Li, 2024). Brand evangelism has been described as a customer's proactive and dedicated effort to spread positive opinions, passionately persuading others to engage with a brand (Mansoor and Paul, 2022). This concept essentially functions as an unpaid sales force involving activities like endorsing or defending a brand.

Hence, brand evangelists represent a distinct category of customers who go beyond mere advocacy; they are zealous supporters who fervently and actively disseminate the brand's message (Sohaib et al., 2022). Their satisfaction with the product or service transcends mere contentment; it evolves into a profound emotional connection, compelling them to share their joy and satisfaction with others

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(Rungruangjit et al., 2023). This shift from passive advocacy to active evangelism signifies a paradigmatic transformation in brand management. It involves a community of devoted advocates who spontaneously and enthusiastically promote the brand, generating a ripple effect that extends well beyond conventional marketing endeavor (Sharma et al., 2022). Consequently, organizations must acknowledge and harness the immense potential of brand evangelism in the contemporary business landscape (Mansoor and Paul, 2022). The objective of this research paper is to delve into the underlying factors that drive brand evangelism in the hospitality industry.

In the hospitality industry, frontline employees serve as the embodiment of a company, reflecting its values, image, and offerings (Beeler et al., 2021). As such, they wield significant influence over customer perceptions and play a critical role in fostering customer behaviors. Hence, the relationship between the customers and brands is significantly dependent upon the interaction of frontline employees with the customers (Hughes et al., 2019), making them important agents for cultivating brand evangelists. Despite extensive research on brand advocacy and customer satisfaction within the hospitality and tourism sector (Shekhar and Jaidev, 2023; Wilk et al., 2024), there remains a noticeable gap in understanding how frontline employees' attributes contribute specifically to brand evangelism. While previous studies have examined predictors of customer advocacy, they often overlook the deeper, emotionally charged engagement of brand evangelists (Mohammed et al., 2024; Soliman and Al Balushi, 2023), who actively endorse a brand beyond mere satisfaction (Mansoor and Paul, 2022). This study addresses this gap by exploring the influence of frontline employees' competencies on brand evangelism and examining how brand image and CSR perceptions play mediating and moderating roles in this dynamic. This exploration aims to shed light on the nuanced mechanisms through which frontline employees transform satisfied customers into enthusiastic brand evangelists.

This study also seeks to address the literature gap by investigating the underlying mechanisms of brand image and its role in conveying the importance of organizations' relationship-building in cultivating brand evangelists. Brand image pertains to the collective perception of a company among its stakeholders, including customers (Nurapni et al., 2024). It encompasses several factors, such as reputation, brand identity, and perceived quality, which collectively influence the organization's overall image (Foroudi et al., 2021). This study aims to uncover insights that can inform marketing strategies and nurture stronger relationships between organizations and their stakeholders by exploring the underlying mechanism of brand image in transmitting the characteristics of frontline employees to create customer evangelism as a function of co-creation.

Furthermore, CSR denotes a company's commitment to conducting business ethically and making positive contributions to society (Swaen et al., 2021). This study contributes to the existing literature by examining the contingent effect of customers' perceptions of CSR during digital transactions on the relationship between brand image and brand evangelism. Therefore, to address the literature gaps and identify the significance of proactive service delivery, the primary objectives of this research paper are to assess a) the influence of frontline employees' digital competence, proactive assistance, and relationship building on corporate image and brand evangelism; b) the influence of corporate image on brand evangelism; c) the role of brand image as a mediator in the association of frontline employees' digital competence, proactive assistance, and relationship building with brand evangelism; d) the extent to which perceived CSR moderates the impact of brand image on brand evangelism.

Theoretically, this research enriches the literature on brand evangelism by identifying frontline employee attributes as key drivers of brand image and customer evangelism in the hospitality industry. It also advances understanding by revealing the mediating role of brand image and the moderating effect of CSR perceptions in these relationships. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for hospitality organizations striving to foster brand evangelism. By investing in frontline employees' digital competence, relationship-building skills, and proactive service delivery, businesses can enhance their brand image and leverage CSR initiatives to nurture stronger, loyalty-driven customer relationships. These strategies collectively position organizations to build a dedicated customer base that actively promotes the brand, thereby enhancing competitive advantage and driving business performance in a digitally saturated marketplace.

2. Theoretical foundation and hypothesis development

2.1. Social identity theory (SIT) and relationship marketing theory

In the contemporary business landscape, where competition is fierce, and markets are saturated, cultivating brand evangelism has become a paramount objective for organizations (Mansoor and Paul, 2022). The concept of brand evangelism, where customers become passionate advocates and promoters of a brand, is crucial for achieving long-term success. To better grasp and leverage this phenomenon, this study draws upon the theoretical framework of relationship marketing theory and social identity theory. Social Identity Theory (SIT), a foundational psychological concept, suggests that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept from the groups they belong to (Shoukat et al., 2024). Within the context of relationship building and brand evangelism, this theory is particularly relevant. Frontline employees serve as the link between customers and the brand, thus exerting considerable influence over how customers perceive their group affiliation with the brand (Huang et al., 2024). When customers view frontline employees as proficient in digital competence, proactive in assistance, and adept at building relationships, it fosters a sense of connection and belonging. This, in turn, strengthens the customer's identification with the brand, a fundamental aspect of brand evangelism.

Furthermore, Relationship Marketing Theory accentuates the strategic significance of cultivating long-term, trust-based relationships with customers (Lewin and Johnston, 1997). Frontline employees, being the face of the brand, play a pivotal role in nurturing these relationships. The theory emphasizes the importance of understanding customer needs, preferences, and behaviors to tailor marketing efforts effectively (Nagar Koti et al., 2024). This theory becomes particularly relevant in the digital buyer markets, where customers have diverse preferences and expectations. The research shows that frontline employees' digital competence empowers them to provide personalized, anticipatory service, aligning customer needs with tailored solutions (Good and Schwepker, 2022). Hence, the proactive assistance they offer and the relationships they diligently cultivate results in heightened customer satisfaction and loyalty. Loyal customers, as per the literature, are more inclined to evolve into brand evangelists (Matzler et al., 2007; Safeer and Le, 2023). In this intricate interplay, brand image emerges as a central mediating factor. Salespeople's actions shape the customer's perception of the organization's image. Hence, based on theory, positive customer interactions, driven by digital competence, proactive assistance, and relationship-building efforts, are projected to contribute to an elevated brand image. This, in turn, significantly influences brand evangelism.

Additionally, the SIT can be applied to understand the influence of brand image and CSR on brand evangelism. The corporate image represents the organization's identity and values (Cao et al., 2024). When customers identify with and perceive a positive fit between their self-identity and the organization's image, they are more likely to engage in positive behaviors (Hsu, 2024), including brand evangelism. CSR is another element that can influence customer brand evangelism through the lens of social identity theory. Customers who identify with and value social responsibility are more likely to evangelize for a company that aligns with their social identities. Hence, by integrating the relationship marketing theory with the SIT, this study provides valuable

insights into the psychological processes and motivations that underlie customer brand evangelism. Moreover, this study proposes a theoretical framework (Fig. 1).

2.2. Frontline employees' characteristics, brand evangelism, and brand image

To delve into the relationship between frontline employees' attributes and brand evangelism, this study examines three key characteristics: digital competence, proactive assistance, and relationship building. Digital competence depicts the proficiency of frontline employees in using digital tools and platforms to engage and offer valuable information (Shahmehr et al., 2024). Proficiency in navigating digital platforms significantly impacts customers' perceptions of service providers, leading to an enhanced likelihood to advocate for those brands (Peng et al., 2024).

In addition, proactive assistance among frontline employees pertains to their readiness and capability to anticipate and cater to customer needs proactively (Cheng et al., 2023; Valle and Rivera, 2022). At the same time, digital transactions, characterized by their 24/7 accessibility and diverse electronic payment methods, transcend physical boundaries and emphasize personalized experiences and cost-efficiency through data analytics and automation (Battisti et al., 2022). In an evolving service landscape, customers expect more than mere product introductions; they seek personalized solutions and valuable insights (Jauhari et al., 2024). By offering proactive assistance, frontline employees can forge stronger connections with customers and stimulate brand evangelism by providing tailored support and insights. Moreover, the relationship-building efforts of frontline employees encompass their abilities and endeavor to cultivate trust-based relationships with customers (Good and Schwepker, 2022). Research shows the significance of building rapport and consistent communication as building blocks of effective relationship-building (Itani et al., 2023). Likewise, a stronger association between sales personnel/representatives and customers has been linked with enhanced customer satisfaction and loyalty (Anaza et al., 2023).

Research in the field suggests that individuals who possess strong digital competence can play a pivotal role in nurturing brand advocates. These digitally adept professionals excel in delivering personalized and timely information, engaging effectively with customers, and adeptly addressing their unique needs (Latinovic and Chatterjee, 2022). This competence significantly elevates customer satisfaction, fosters trust, and instils confidence in the salesperson/ frontline employees (Cheng et al., 2023; Hughes et al., 2019). Hence, this ultimately leads to an increase in brand evangelism. Empirical evidence from Ramos et al. (2023), corroborates the positive relationship between digital competence and customer satisfaction. Sales experts have adapted to the digital landscape by harnessing tools like email marketing campaigns. They employ digital marketing automation solutions to send precisely targeted and personalized email content, demonstrating their adeptness in utilizing digital platforms to maintain meaningful customer connections (Chaker et al., 2022). In the absence of physical showrooms, frontline employees utilize digital tools like video conferencing and screen sharing to provide virtual product demonstrations, offering customers an interactive and informative experience.

Furthermore, proactive sales professionals excel in identifying customer pain points, anticipating future needs, and providing tailored solutions or recommendations (Hughes et al., 2019). Research conducted by Cheng et al. (2023), supports the positive impact of proactive assistance on customer loyalty. Additionally, relationship-building strategies involve building rapport, demonstrating empathy, and showing genuine interest in customer needs, all of which contribute significantly to building customer loyalty (Parris and Guzman, 2023). It is also noteworthy that loyal customers are inherently inclined to become ardent brand evangelists, enthusiastically promoting the brand or product within their social networks (Rungruangjit et al., 2023). Synthesizing these empirical findings, we hypothesize that:

H1:. *Frontline employees' a) digital competence, b) proactive assistance, and c) relationship building positively affect customers' brand evangelism.*

With the proliferation of digital channels and technologies, frontline employees need to possess the knowledge and skills to engage with customers and navigate these platforms effectively. Studies indicate that representatives proficient in utilizing digital tools and platforms can effectively engage customers, offer personalized experiences, and showcase the organization's technological capabilities (Ismail, 2023). This, in turn, enhances the perceived brand image among customers. Frontline employees may promptly respond to customer inquiries on Twitter, provide product recommendations on Instagram, or share informative content on LinkedIn. Through adept use of these platforms, they establish a robust online presence and engage with customers in a personalized manner, thus significantly influencing the overall brand image perceived by customers. Furthermore, by taking a proactive approach, salespeople contribute to fostering a positive organizational perception (Anaza et al., 2023). Alongside proactive assistance, relationship building emerges as another critical factor shaping the brand image. Customers tend to view an organization more favorable if they have a positive relationship with its representatives (Swaen et al., 2021). Additionally, Khan et al. (2022), underline the significant impact of relationship building on corporate reputation. Drawing from literature support and theory integration, the following hypotheses are proposed:

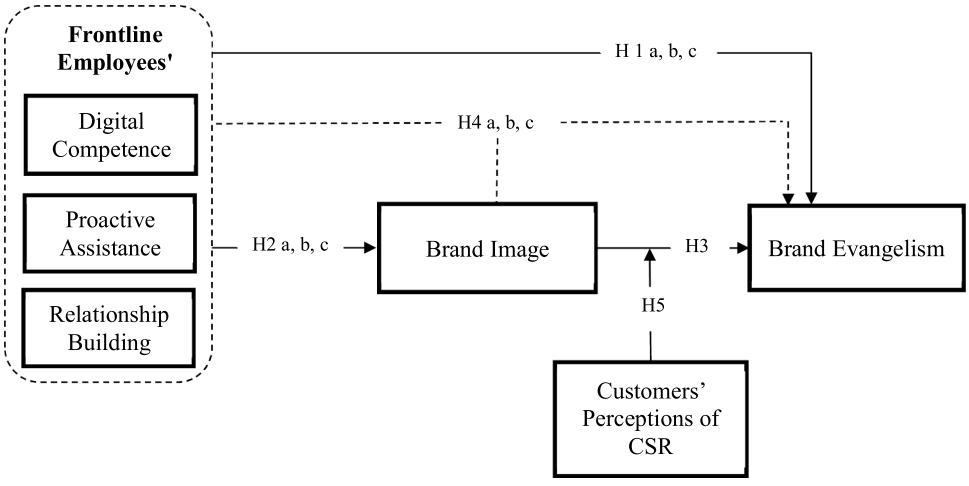


Fig. 1. Theoretical Framework of the Study.

H2:. *Frontline employees' a) digital competence, b) proactive assistance, and c) relationship building positively affect brand image.*

The influence of brand image on the emergence of customer evangelists is deeply rooted in fundamental psychological principles, including trust, satisfaction, and loyalty. A positive brand image goes beyond instilling confidence in customers and ignites their eagerness to become fervent advocates for the brand (Nguyen and Leblanc, 2001). Considering the hospitality industry, a strong brand image holds immense significance. Hotels and resorts that have meticulously built a reputation for delivering high-quality services and exceptional guest experiences naturally evoke trust and satisfaction among their patrons (Sun et al., 2022). This trust, in turn, fuels a desire among satisfied guests to transform into enthusiastic brand evangelists eager to spread the word about their remarkable experiences (Choi et al., 2022). Besides, a company renowned for consistently meeting and exceeding customer needs is more likely to foster a community of loyal patrons within the hospitality sector. These loyal customers do more than simply continue to choose the same establishment for their stays; they actively endorse it to friends, family, and acquaintances, becoming influential promoters of the brand (Foroudi et al., 2021). Therefore, it is postulated that:

H3:. *Brand image positively influences customers' brand evangelism.*

2.3. Brand image as a mediator

The significance of salespeople's role has been widely acknowledged in the realm of sales. However, the extent to which brand image acts as a mediator in the association between the frontline employees' capabilities and brand evangelism remains largely unexplored. By delving into this uncharted territory, this study sheds light on the intricate dynamics of brand image within the sales environment. Leveraging technology and effectively communicating with customers through digital channels is essential for service success (Popkova and Sergi, 2023). However, a positive brand image enhances customers' confidence in the employees' technological skills, leading to higher levels of trust and advocacy (Shekhar and Jaidev, 2023). Moreover, a favorable brand image instils a sense of reliability and customer-centricity, enhancing proactive assistance's perceived value (O'Connor and Assaker, 2022). Consequently, customers are more likely to engage in brand evangelism. Furthermore, establishing strong relationships with customers fosters loyalty and long-term commitment (Lasrado et al., 2023). Hence, it is postulated that;

H4:. *Brand Image mediates the association of salespeople's a) digital competence, b) proactive assistance, and c) relationship building with customers' brand evangelism.*

2.4. Moderating role of perceived corporate social responsibility

The impact of CSR perception goes beyond reputation-building; it acts as a powerful amplifier of the connection between customers and the brand (Mooneeapen et al., 2022). When customers perceive a company as actively engaged in CSR, it sends a compelling message of genuine commitment to societal and environmental well-being (Xue et al., 2022). Customers no longer view the company solely as a profit-driven entity but as an organization deeply concerned about the welfare of society and the environment. This alignment between customers' values and the company's perceived CSR efforts forms a sturdy bridge that reinforces the positive correlation between corporate image and customer evangelism. Hence, the interplay between corporate image and customer evangelism gains its full potential when grounded in a solid foundation of authentic CSR efforts, thereby cementing the bond between customers and the brand. Hence, it is postulated that:

H5:. *Perceived customers' CSR moderates the association between brand image and customers' brand evangelism.*

3. Research methodology

The study adopted a stratified random sampling technique, a method carefully chosen to provide a comprehensive view of the target population, i.e., customers of upscale hotels. Stratification involves dividing the target population into distinct subgroups, or strata, namely, Hotel Type (four-star and five-star establishments) and Hotel Location (Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Faisalabad, and Quetta). The rationale for selecting four and five-star hotels is rooted in the unique characteristics of these establishments. These hotels are renowned for their unwavering commitment to delivering exceptional customer experiences, epitomizing luxury, and embodying the pinnacle of hospitality (Khalid et al., 2022). By choosing such hotels, the study ensured that the respondents possessed exposure to top-tier service standards, making them well-qualified to provide valuable insights into the study's central themes. The hospitality industry strongly emphasizes customer service and the quality of personal interactions (Cai et al., 2022), frontline employees within these establishments are pivotal in shaping the overall guest experience, making them highly relevant subjects for the study. Likewise, luxury hotels operate within a highly competitive landscape, so understanding the factors influencing customers' positive outcomes in this context is crucial for maintaining a competitive edge (Raza and Khan, 2022). The data collection in this study utilized the original English-language survey. In Pakistan, English is the medium of instruction across all education levels and is taught from early education onwards (Jabeen, 2023), ensuring respondents' proficiency. To further confirm content validity, three hotel managers and two hospitality experts reviewed the questionnaire. A pilot study with 30 consumers who had stayed in the selected hotels also validated the scale's clarity and relevance, confirming that language did not impede comprehension. Thus, conducting the survey in English was appropriate and did not compromise the study's accuracy or reliability. During the data collection process, research teams physically visited the selected hotels to engage directly with guests. Prior to initiating the survey, formal permission was obtained from hotel management, ensuring adherence to privacy protocols. The recruitment process involved direct engagement with guests in common areas such as hotel lobbies and restaurants, as well as during check-in and check-out processes. Data collection took place on various days of the week and at different times of the day (morning, afternoon, and evening) to minimize potential biases and ensure a diverse pool of respondents. Upon engaging with potential participants, they were informed about the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and voluntary nature of participation. Individuals who consented were asked to complete a questionnaire. The research teams approached every third guest they encountered during their shifts, ensuring a systematic selection process and reducing potential interviewer bias. The data collection process consisted of two-time points: Time 1 and Time 2. Time 1 data collection was conducted between October 15, 2023, and December 15, 2023. During this period, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that assessed their perceptions of frontline employees' digital competence, proactive assistance, relationship building, and corporate image. They were also requested to provide digital contact details (e.g., email addresses) to participate in the Time 2 survey. In order to mitigate potential biases, a four-week time lag was introduced before collecting Time 2 data, starting from February 15, 2024, to April 15, 2024. The same participants who completed the Time 1 questionnaire were invited to provide their responses for the follow-up. The Time 2 data collection aimed to attain the consistency and evolution of customers' perceptions of CSR and brand evangelism over time. The response rate at Time 1 was approximately 52 %, as 285 participants completed the survey out of the 550 guests approached. At Time 2, the questionnaire was distributed digitally to those who participated in Time 1. Out of 285 participants, 237 completed the follow-up survey, yielding a response rate of 83 %. To encourage participation, reminders were sent twice during the data collection period. The participants who provided data at both time

points were retained for the final dataset (N = 237), ensuring consistency and reliability in our time-lagged approach. Several measures were implemented to address common method bias and non-response bias. To mitigate common method bias, the data collection involved multiple scales and questionnaires, each measuring different constructs. This approach minimized reliance on a single measurement method and reduced potential biases. Questionnaire items were designed to be clear, unbiased, and neutral, avoiding language that could sway respondents' answers. Additionally, a time-lagged design was employed, collecting data at two different time points to examine consistency of responses over time. Regarding non-response bias, efforts were made to maximize response rates and minimize associated biases. Participants were provided with clear explanations of the study's objectives, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. This ensured transparency and informed consent. To address non-response bias, the characteristics of respondents at Time 1 and Time 2 were compared to identify differences, assessing the potential impact on dataset representativeness. Furthermore, continuous contact was maintained with participants through reminders and follow-up messages to encourage participation and minimize attrition rates.

3.1. Measures of the study

Frontline employees' digital competence was evaluated using a set of 5 items sourced from prior studies (Bharadwaj and Shipley, 2020; Chaker et al., 2022). The extent of proactive assistance offered by sales personnel was gauged using a 3-item scale derived from Liu and Leach (2001). The efficacy of frontline employees' relationship-building endeavors was measured using a 4-item scale from Schwepker and Good (2021). Customers' perceptions of brand image were assessed using 3 items adapted from Nguyen and Leblanc (2001). The degree of customer evangelism was evaluated using a set of 4 items from Matzler et al. (2007). Finally, to measure customers' perceptions of CSR, 8 8-item scale was adapted from Swaen et al. (2021). The responses were measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Moreover, Appendix A presents all the items used to measure the study constructs.

3.2. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

The respondents in this study exhibited a diverse range of demographic characteristics, reflecting the inclusiveness of the sample. A total of 237 participants visiting Pakistani hotels were included in the study. 68.2 % were male, while 31.8 % were female. In terms of age, 22.2 % fell into the 18–24 years category, 42.4 % were aged 25–34 years, 25.4 % were in the 35–44 years range, and 10 % were 45 years and above. Regarding educational level, 15.2 % had a high school education or below, 39.3 % held a bachelor's degree, 35.1 % had obtained a master's degree, and 10.4 % possessed a doctoral degree or above. In terms of occupation, 9.5 % were students, 34.5 % were employed, 41.6 % were self-employed, and 14.4 % were others. Furthermore, the income distribution revealed that 7.5 % had a monthly income below 100,000 PKR, 37.3 % fell into the 100,001-200,000 PKR range, 38.2 % had an income of 200,001-300,000 PKR, and 22 % earned above 300,001 PKR per month. Geographically, the sample was representative, with 45 % from Punjab, 24 % from Sindh, 15 % from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 11 % from Baluchistan, and 5 % from others. The diverse demographic characteristics of the respondents ensured a comprehensive representation of Pakistani consumers visiting four- and five-star hotels, contributing to the generalizability and robustness of the study's findings.

4. Analysis and results

To assess the causal relationships between independent and dependent variables in the context of personal selling strategies and brand evangelism, we employed SmartPLS v.4 software. This software facilitated the analysis of these relationships using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The choice of partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS v. 4 is grounded in its extensive use in prior literature, particularly in studies involving complex models with multiple constructs and small to medium sample sizes (Becker et al., 2023). This technique is well-suited for predictive research (Hair et al., 2021), making it an appropriate choice for our study. We assessed the psychometric properties of the variables to ensure their validity and normality. We employed four criteria for evaluation: factor loadings, Cronbach alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE) (Sarstedt et al., 2017). Our findings indicated that all study items demonstrated factor loadings above the threshold of 0.70, indicating strong associations between observed variables and their underlying latent constructs. This suggests the reliability and validity of the measurement instruments utilized in our study (Hair and Sarstedt, 2021). Additionally, the AVE values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating substantial variance captured by observed variables in relation to their respective latent constructs. This supports the convergent validity of the measurement instruments employed (Hair et al., 2019). Furthermore, both Cronbach alpha and composite reliability values surpassed the minimum threshold of 0.70, confirming the internal consistency and reliability of the measurement scales used (Hair et al., 2019). These results accentuate the robustness of our measures in capturing the intended constructs. For detailed insights into these psychometric properties, refer to the comprehensive results presented in Table 1.

In order to address concerns regarding multicollinearity among the examined constructs, we conducted a thorough evaluation of their discriminant validity. This assessment aimed to confirm the distinctiveness of the constructs and minimize any potential overlap or similarity between them. To achieve this objective, we utilized the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, a well-established metric for evaluating construct similarity (Henseler et al., 2015). These HTMT values were compared against the recommended threshold of 0.85, beyond which multicollinearity becomes a concern. As outlined in Table 2, all HTMT values obtained were below this critical threshold. This indicates the absence of significant multicollinearity issues among the constructs under investigation.

The research utilized SmartPLS v.4 software for structural equation modeling to examine the hypothesized causal relationships. The analysis of direct hypotheses unveiled significant positive impacts of frontline employees' digital competence (ß = 0.230 **, t = 4.432), proactive assistance (ß = 0.302 ***, t = 5.950), and relationship building (ß = 0.357 ***, t = 6.569) on customers' brand evangelism. Additionally, these factors positively influenced customers' perceptions of brand image. The coefficients for frontline employees' digital competence (ß = 0.303 ***, t = 5.953), proactive assistance (ß = 0.427 ***, t = 7.789), and relationship building (ß = 0.290 ***, t = 5.480) were all statistically significant, indicating their substantial impact on brand image. Moreover, customers' perceptions of the brand image significantly positively influenced their brand evangelism (ß = 0.270 **, t = 5.105). These findings provide empirical support for hypotheses H1 to H3, as outlined in Table 3. Furthermore, the mediation hypotheses (H4a, b, and c) received empirical support, indicating that frontline employees' digital competence (ß = 0.173 **, t = 3.125), proactive assistance (ß = 0.213 **, t = 4.222), and relationship building (ß = 0.249 **, t = 4.631) positively influence customers' brand evangelism through the mediating role of brand image. To further explore the role of customers' perceptions of CSR in strengthening the relationship between brand image and brand evangelism, we employed the product indicator method in the SmartPLS v.4 software. We generated an interaction term, CP-CSR*CI, to examine whether customers' perceptions of CSR catalyze the influence of brand image on brand evangelism. The analysis revealed that including the interaction term significantly augmented the association between brand image and brand evangelism. The moderation results, as

Table 1
Factor Loadings, Reliability, and Validity.

Constructs/Indicators	Factor Loadings						AVE	CR	CA
	1	2	3	4	5	6			
Digital competence							0.629	0.894	0.743
DC1	0.764								
DC2	0.765								
DC3	0.840								
DC4	0.801								
DC5	0.794								
Proactive Assistance							0.644	0.884	0.739
PA1		0.883							
PA2		0.763							
PA3		0.755							
Relationship Building							0.539	0.824	0.727
RB1			0.787						
RB2			0.708						
RB3			0.731						
RB4			0.709						
Brand Image							0.564	0.795	0.703
BI1				0.709					
BI2				0.765					
BI3				0.777					
Customer Brand Evangelism							0.656	0.884	0.828
CBE1					0.846				
CBE2					0.798				
CBE3					0.821				
CBE4					0.772				
Customers' Perceptions of CSR							0.620	0.929	0.820
CP_CSR1						0.773			
CP_CSR2						0.804			
CP_CSR3						0.813			
CP_CSR4						0.797			
CP_CSR5						0.760			
CP_CSR6						0.803			
CP_CSR7						0.786			
CP_CSR8						0.762			

Table 2
Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio.

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6
Digital competence	**0.793**					
Proactive Assistance	0.502	**0.802**				
Relationship Building	0.599	0.501	**0.734**			
Corporate Image	0.430	0.444	0.577	**0.750**		
Customers' Brand Advocacy	0.490	0.491	0.488	0.527	**0.768**	
Customers' Perceptions of CSR	0.515	0.596	0.460	0.498	0.477	**0.787**

"**Note:** the square roots of AVEs of the constructs are shown in bold in diagonal."

Table 3
Hypothesis Testing Results.

	Hypotheses	Std. Beta	t-value	p-values	Supported
H1a	DC→CBA	0.230	4.432	0.003	Yes
H1b	PA→CBA	0.302	5.950	0.000	Yes
H1c	RB→CBA	0.357	6.569	0.000	Yes
H2a	DC→BI	0.303	5.953	0.000	Yes
H2b	PA→BI	0.427	7.789	0.000	Yes
H2c	RB→BI	0.290	5.480	0.000	Yes
H3	BI→CBA	0.270	5.105	0.001	Yes
H4a	DC→BI→CBA	0.173	3.125	0.009	Yes
H4b	PA→BI→CBA	0.213	4.222	0.005	Yes
H4c	RB→BI→CBA	0.249	4.631	0.003	Yes
H5	CP-CSR*BI→CBA	0.197	3.423	0.008	Yes

Where: DC= Digital competence; PA= Proactive Assistance; RB=Relationship Building; BI= Brand Image; CBA= Customers' Brand Advocacy**;** CP-CSR= Customers' perceptions of CSR

presented in Table 3, provide robust empirical evidence supporting the acceptance of hypothesis H5. A graph is presented in Fig. 3 to illustrate these moderation effects.

Fig. 3 illustrates the interaction effect graphically, effectively capturing the fluctuating degrees of brand evangelism corresponding to distinct levels of customers' perceptions of CSR and brand image. It's worth noting that lines associated with higher CP-CSR values display more pronounced gradients compared to those linked with lower values. This observation emphasizes the significant influence of customers' perceptions of CSR in shaping and amplifying the effects of a positive brand image, ultimately fostering brand evangelism. Prior to interpreting the results, we conducted a thorough assessment of the structural model to identify any collinearity issues. We examined Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance values to gauge multicollinearity among the variables. VIF values measure multicollinearity, while tolerance values indicate the unique information contributed by each variable (Mansoor and Paul, 2022). Typically, VIF values exceeding 5 or tolerance values below 0.2 indicate high multicollinearity. In our study, all VIF values fall below this threshold, ranging from 1.75 to 2.24. Likewise, tolerance values range from 0.45 to 0.57, all above the critical value of 0.2. These findings suggest that each variable contributes a significant amount of unique information to the model, as none of the tolerance values approach 0.2. This implies that there is no excessive redundancy among the predictors. Concurrently, we utilized the Coefficient of Determination (R2) to evaluate the overall model fit. The R2 values demonstrated a 78.5 % (Fig. 2) variance in endogenous variables (Customer Brand Evangelism), reflecting good model fit results.

To evaluate the model's out-of-sample predictive capacity, we conducted the PLSpredict analysis (Ringle et al., 2023; Shmueli et al., 2016). For our focal construct within the model, i.e., Customer Brand Evangelism (CBE), all Q2predict values (i.e., the benchmark for average prediction indicators) surpass zero (Table 4), affirming the model's

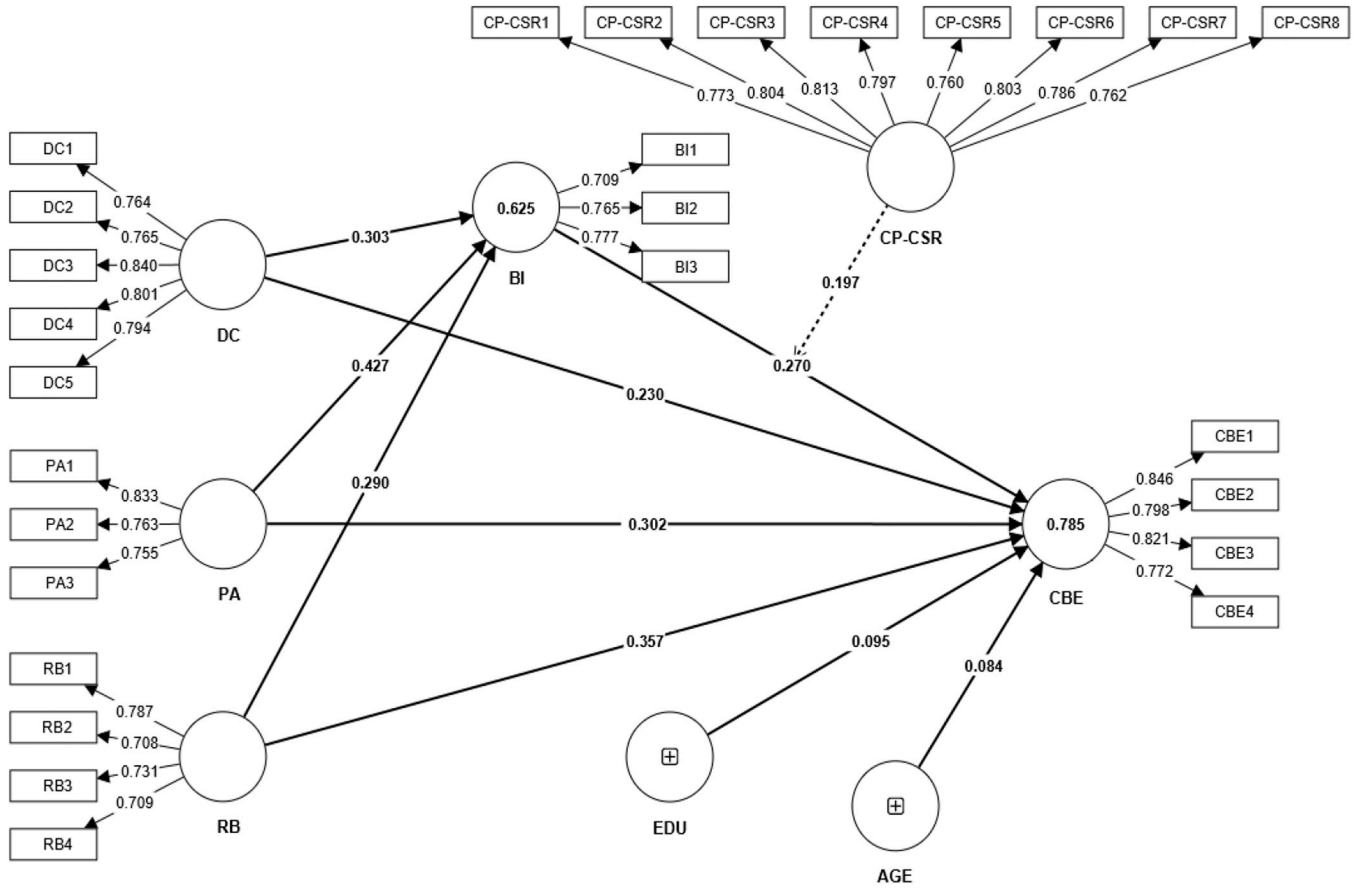


Fig. 2. Full Measurement Model.

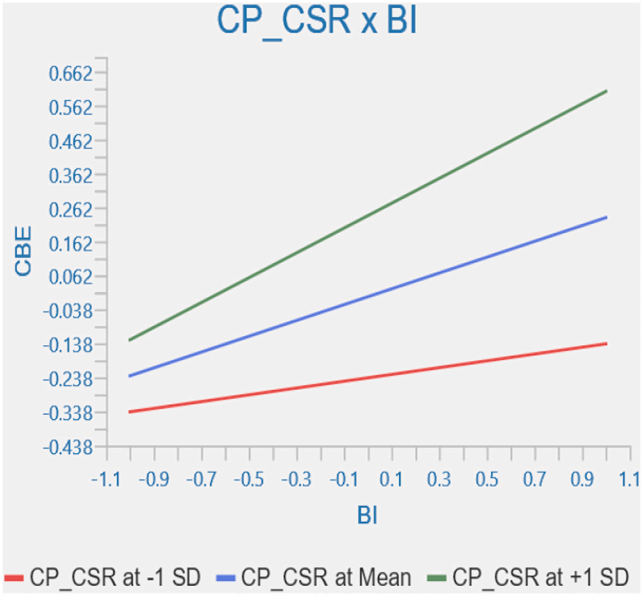


Fig. 3. Moderation graph for the impact of CP-CSR*BI on customers' brand evangelism.

predictive relevance. Following the guidelines delineated by (Shmueli et al., 2016), we rigorously assessed predictive validity by applying the Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE) to evaluate the efficacy of the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) model in comparison to the linear model (LM). Importantly, our examination revealed

Table 4
PLS-Predict Results for the Target Variable (Enhanced Performance).

Indicators	$Q^2_{predict}$	RMSE $_{PLS-SEM}$	RMSE $_{LM}$	RMSE $_{PLS-SEM<\ RMSELM}$?
CBE1	0.203	0.910	0.920	yes
CBE2	0.195	0.855	0.863	yes
CBE3	0.135	0.865	0.889	yes
CBE4	0.110	0.920	0.937	yes

Notes: PLSpredict is based on k-fold cross-validation with ten folds and ten (random) repetitions.

that all metrics related to customer brand evangelism exhibited reduced prediction errors when employing the PLS-SEM-based prediction approach, as illustrated in Table 4. This discovery highlights the strong predictive capabilities of our model, a viewpoint also supported by Becker et al. (2023). Additionally, our analysis included the assessment of a standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) with a value of 0.063, significantly lower than the accepted threshold of 0.80. This compelling result further strengthens the suitability of our model for the observed data.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The research findings highlight the importance of frontline employees' digital competence, proactive assistance, and relationship-building in nurturing brand evangelism, a critical component of contemporary marketing strategies. Employees equipped with strong digital competencies are better equipped to understand and meet customer needs through digital channels, thereby enhancing brand evangelism. Additionally, the study reveals a significant positive impact of proactive assistance from frontline employees on brand evangelism.

This finding supports and extends existing research emphasizing the positive influence of proactive behaviors on customer advocacy (Peesker et al., 2022). Previous studies have shown that salespeople or employees who proactively engage with customers, offering personalized recommendations and addressing concerns promptly, are more likely to stimulate positive word-of-mouth (Shekhar and Jaidev, 2023). In contrast, this study demonstrates the positive contribution of frontline employees' characteristics in fostering customer evangelism. Building upon previous findings (Schwepker and Good, 2021), this research underlines that frontline employees who invest time and effort in cultivating relationships are more likely to cultivate customer evangelists who speak positively about their interactions with the company.

Furthermore, the study's findings reveal a significant positive impact of frontline employees' digital competence, proactive assistance, and relationship-building on corporate image. In today's digital era, employees with strong digital skills can effectively engage with customers across various digital platforms, thereby enhancing the organization's image (Hussain et al., 2020). This result resonates with previous research emphasizing the importance of digital competence in shaping customer perceptions and attitudes toward the company (Peng and Tao, 2022). Additionally, proactive behaviors have been focused for their ability to build customer trust and satisfaction, consequently bolstering corporate reputation (Bouchriha et al., 2023). This supports the organizations incentivize proactive behaviors, empowering frontline employees to exceed expectations in assisting customers and positively representing their organizations. Similarly, the study emphasizes the significance of relationship quality in influencing brand image, aligning with prior research findings (Lasrado et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the study reveals a robust positive relationship between brand image and customer evangelism. Previous research highlights that a positive corporate image significantly contributes to a company's overall reputation and competitive advantage (Foroudi et al., 2021). These findings further reflect the significance of enhancing brand image that enable organizations to leverage the benefits of increased customer evangelism, leading to enhanced brand visibility and sustained business success. Furthermore, this study adds value to existing literature by revealing the mediating role of brand image in the relationship between personal selling strategies and customer evangelism. These findings present the significance of brand image as a mechanism through which frontline employees' behaviors and competencies influence customer evangelism. Additionally, the study findings indicate that the influence of brand image on customer evangelism is reinforced when customers perceive a higher level of CSR from the company. Previous research suggests that companies can enhance employees' perceptions of corporate reputation by engaging in responsible business practices, such as environmental sustainability, social initiatives, and ethical conduct (O'Connor and Assaker, 2022). Customers who perceive the company as socially responsible are more likely to become evangelists, aligning themselves with the company's values and initiatives. These results reflect the importance of integrating CSR practices into business strategies.

5.1. Theoretical implications

The study makes a significant contribution to the field of hospitality marketing by highlighting the crucial role of frontline employees' digital competence in driving customer evangelism by applying Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Relationship Marketing Theory (RMT). First, within the SDT framework, it positions frontline employees' digital competence as an essential factor in fulfilling customers' intrinsic needs for autonomy and relatedness (Scharp et al., 2022). In the hospitality sector, where customer service heavily relies on personalization and real-time interaction (Moriuchi and Murdy, 2024), digital proficiency allows frontline employees to deliver seamless, customer-centric digital experiences. This not only empowers guests by providing convenient access to services but also fosters meaningful connections between customers and the brand, ultimately cultivating internal motivation for brand evangelism. By integrating SDT into the hospitality literature, the study highlights how digital competence contributes to creating emotionally satisfying experiences, addressing a critical need in a digitally evolving industry. Moreover, the study enhances the concept of proactive customer engagement by examining how frontline employees' anticipatory actions such as pre-emptively addressing guests' needs can deepen customers' emotional connections with a brand. By demonstrating that proactive assistance, characterized by anticipating and addressing customer needs (Xu et al., 2024), has a profound impact on brand evangelism unique to luxury hotels, the research contributes to the theory of proactive customer orientation. It theorizes that this type of engagement extends beyond traditional customer service, evolving into a strategic mechanism that strengthens brand loyalty through tailored, memorable guests' experiences. This perspective suggests that proactive engagement in hospitality, suggesting it functions as a co-creation mechanism that transforms customer-employee interactions into value-driven experiences(Itani et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the study refines relationship marketing theory by highlighting the pivotal role of relationship-building in cultivating brand evangelists. Unlike basic brand advocacy, brand evangelism requires a deeper, trust-based relationship that frontline employees foster through consistent communication, rapport-building, and trust (Safeer and Le, 2023). In luxury hotels, where customer expectations for personalized service are high, the ability of frontline employees to create enduring relationships directly influences guests' willingness to passionately endorse the brand. This study situates relationship-building as a central pillar of hospitality marketing, extending RMT by suggesting that such relationships are not merely outcomes but catalysts for brand evangelism. Finally, the study emphasizes the mediating role of brand image and the moderating influence of CSR perceptions in the relationship between frontline employee attributes and customer evangelism. It contributes to brand image theory by suggesting that brand image serves as a bridge, amplifying frontline employee efforts in ways that positively shape customer perceptions. Furthermore, CSR is theorized here as a critical moderating factor that influences customer responses to brand image, suggesting that customers are more likely to become brand evangelists when they perceive the brand's values as aligned with ethical and social responsibility. This insight adds a new dimension to the understanding of CSR in marketing theory, positing it as an enhancer of brand evangelism when customers' values resonate with those of the organization.

5.2. Practical implications

The findings of this study hold significant practical implications for organizations especially hotel managers aiming to enhance customer evangelism through strategic relationship-building approaches. These implications are deeply rooted in contemporary marketing practices and hospitality industry and have the potential to profoundly impact business strategies. Hotel managers should create a supportive organizational environment that empowers frontline employees to anticipate and address customer needs proactively. This includes implementing training programs focused on improving employees' ability to observe, understand, and predict customer preferences. Managers can introduce role-playing scenarios, simulations, or real-time feedback systems to refine employees' proactive engagement skills. Moreover, incentive structures such as recognition programs or performance-based rewards should be aligned to encourage anticipatory actions, ensuring employees are motivated to go beyond basic service expectations and create memorable guest experiences. In an increasingly digitalized hospitality landscape, managers must prioritize the development of employees' digital skills. Comprehensive training programs should cover the use of hotel management systems, social media platforms, and digital communication tools to deliver seamless customer experiences.

Managers could adopt a phased training model, beginning with foundational digital skills and progressing to advanced capabilities like personalized messaging, digital marketing support, and data-driven customer insights. Additionally, investment in user-friendly technologies—such as AI-driven chatbots or customer relationship management systems—can further enhance employees' ability to provide timely, personalized solutions to guests.

To build strong emotional connections with customers, hotel managers should align their operations with socially responsible practices that resonate with their target audience's values. For example, managers can initiate environmentally sustainable practices, such as reducing plastic usage or implementing energy-efficient operations and communicate these initiatives clearly through marketing campaigns and in-hotel materials. Regularly organizing community involvement activities—such as partnerships with local charities—can further bolster the hotel's reputation and strengthen customer loyalty. Managers should also provide frontline employees with talking points on CSR initiatives, enabling them to authentically engage with guests about the brand's commitment to ethical practices. A strong brand image is pivotal in driving customer evangelism. Hotel managers should consistently deliver exceptional value by ensuring service quality, reliability, and responsiveness across all touchpoints. This can be achieved through periodic brand audits to assess alignment between the brand's values and customer perceptions. Additionally, maintaining consistency in visual branding elements and service delivery across locations can reinforce a unified and positive brand identity. Leveraging guest feedback systems to collect actionable insights and implementing changes based on customer suggestions further demonstrate a commitment to excellence and build trust in the brand. Finally, hotel managers must instill a culture of relationship-building among frontline employees, emphasizing the importance of personalized interactions, transparent communication, and trust-building. To achieve this, hotels can adopt a customer profiling system to tailor services based on guest preferences and history. Managers should encourage employees to engage in rapport-building activities, such as remembering guest preferences or following up on previous visits. Additionally, loyalty programs that reward repeat guests can serve as a foundation for nurturing long-term relationships and creating brand evangelists.

5.3. Limitations and future research directions

Although this study provides valuable insights into relationship building, a notable limitation is the rapid pace of technological advancements. This study collects data at two time points, offering valuable insights into the relationships between variables. However, the current analysis did not explicitly compare responses across Time 1 and Time 2. Instead, the focus was on ensuring data consistency and reliability across the two time points. Future research could incorporate comparative analyses to explore potential changes in customer perceptions. Also, this study did not specifically measure participants' prior familiarity with the hotel, loyalty program membership, or frequency of visitation. While these factors may influence customer perceptions, they were beyond the scope of the current research and could be examined in future studies to provide deeper insights. Another, limitation of this study is the demographic skew of the sample, which predominantly consists of younger, self-employed males with a certain level of education. While we mitigated nonresponse bias by comparing the Time 1 and Time 2 samples, the lack of a direct comparison with population statistics, such as those from hotel surveys or internal records, restricts the representativeness of our findings. This limitation is particularly evident in the context of the global luxury hotel guest population, which encompasses a more diverse demographic profile in terms of age, employment status, and other characteristics. Although the sample may reflect the typical demographic of 4-star and 5-star hotel guests in Pakistan, its generalizability to international contexts remains limited. Future research should address this issue by incorporating a broader demographic distribution and aligning sample characteristics more closely with comprehensive population statistics from hotel guest data. Additionally, new platforms and tools may emerge, thereby potentially influencing the dynamics between company representatives and customers. While the study examines the impact of frontline employees' digital competence, it is crucial to acknowledge that technology is constantly evolving. Consequently, it is recommended that future research delves into the implications of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, or chatbots, on frontline employees' interactions, brand evangelism, and brand/corporate image. This exploration will provide valuable insights into how evolving technologies reshape the landscape of customer engagement and brand evangelism.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Mahnaz Mansoor: Writing – original draft, Software, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Justin Paul:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration. **Tariq Iqbal Khan:** Resources, Methodology, Data curation. **Rawan Abukhait:** Resources, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **Dildar Hussain:** Visualization, Validation, Data curation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Study Variables and Their Measures.

Variables/items	Source
Digital competence	
DC1: The frontline employees effectively use digital tools and platforms to assist me during our interactions.	(Bharadwaj and Shipley, 2020; Chaker et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2023)
DC2: The frontline employees demonstrate a deep understanding of the digital tools and technologies they utilize.	
DC3: The frontline employees are able to troubleshoot and resolve any technical issues that arise during our digital interactions.	
DC4: The frontline employees proactively suggest and recommend digital solutions that enhance my overall experience.	
DC5: The frontline employees are adept at personalizing their digital interactions to meet my specific needs and preferences.	
Proactive Assistance -Compared to the salespeople of other hotels…….	Liu and Leach (2001)
PA1: The frontline employees from this hotel visit our rooms(s) and address our concerns as needed.	

(*continued on next page*)

(*continued*)

Variables/items	Source
PA2: The frontline employees from this hotel provide extra planning assistance for us.	
PA3: The frontline employees from this hotel go through and check up with us as needed.	
Relationship Building	Schwepker and Good (2021)
RB1: The frontline employees of the hotel listen attentively to identify and understand my real concerns.	
RB2: The frontline employees of the hotel work out solutions to my questions or objections.	
RB3: The frontline employees of the hotel work with us to help improve their services.	
RB4: The frontline employees of the hotel work with us to develop long-term partnerships.	
Band Image	Nguyen and Leblanc (2001).
BI1: I have always had a good impression of the hotel (ABC).	
BI2: In my opinion, the hotel (ABC) has a good image in the minds of consumers.	
BI3: I believe that the hotel (ABC) has a better image than its competitors.	
Customers' Brand Evangelism	Wilder (2015)
CBE1: I have proselytized several of my friends to visit and stay at this hotel.	
CBE2: I try to convince as many people as possible to visit and stay at this hotel.	
CBE3: I feel the need to tell everybody that this is the most appealing hotel to visit and stay.	
CBE3: I feel the need to persuade everybody that this is the most appealing hotel to visit and stay.	
Customers' perceptions of CSR -The supplier/company (ABC)…….	Swaen et al. (2021)
CP_CSR1: Implements fair sales practices.	
CP_CSR2: Labels products/ service charges clearly and in a comprehensible way.	
CP_CSR3: Meets quality standards.	
CP_CSR4: Sets fair prices for products and services.	
CP_CSR5: Offers safe (not harmful) products.	
CP_CSR6: Showcases seasonal products.	
CP_CSR7: Ensures the quality of products and services delivered to customers.	
CP_CSR8: Fulfills its commitment towards customers.	

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