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Research Paper

## Hotel social media metrics: The ROI dilemma

Eleni Michopoulou<sup>a,\*</sup>, Delia Gabriela Moisa<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> University of Derby, United Kingdom<sup>b</sup> Manchester Metropolitan University, United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

This study offers a perspective of social media performance measurement techniques adopted by hoteliers, with a focus on financial returns. The research adopted a qualitative approach, data was collected through semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Findings indicate that ROI is understood as an umbrella concept, where engagement rates, customer response and volume of likes and comments are most important. However, the element of ROI in the form of financial outcomes derived from social media remains elusive.

This research contributes to social media adoption literature by investigating current social media measurement practices within the hospitality industry. While hotel managers employ diverse strategies for social media deployment, the focus on the effectiveness of these strategies is questionable, particularly considering financial metrics. This study presents key metrics currently used, but more importantly highlights which aspects of social media performance measurement are neglected and the gap they create in assessing social media strategies holistically and effectively.

## 1. Introduction

The present times phenomena represented by the worldwide accessibility to the Internet is reshaping the world as we know it. Defined as ‘the lovechild’ of the World Wide Web, social media comes in various forms, including forums, blogs, microblogs, photo-sharing platforms, social gaming, business networks, chat apps, and social networks (Statista Inc., 2016). The power of social networking is supported by the recent statistics, showing that the number of worldwide users on social networking is expected to reach 2.5 billion by 2018, an equivalent of approximately a third of the Earth’s entire population (Statista Inc., 2016).

Global internet users spend, on average, 101.4 min per day surfing social networks, with user engagement continuing to grow (Statista Inc., 2016). The main social networking sites including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, and their global usage have grown to a scale that can only be described as ubiquitous (Hoffman and Novak, 2012). In the United Kingdom alone, the statistics from January 2016, show that 59.47 million people are internet users, a total of 92% of the total population of the country using the Internet, and 85% of them using it on a daily basis. This prompts the regional, national, worldwide brands and marketers to use that time and screen space to promote various products or services via social media advertising or marketing. For example, considering its 22 billion ad clicks per year, Facebook is offering businesses the biggest advertising opportunity since search

functionalities (Wordstream Inc, 2015). However, finding a firm foundation on which to base strategic decisions regarding on how to employ social media, to influence, and to engage their customers, still remains a challenge for many marketers. And although it has become easier to set a well-established social media strategy, the question naturally arises whether the money and time invested into a social media strategy is actually resulting in a better performance for the whole business (Nadda et al., 2015).

In 2016, the hospitality industry generated over 73bn of Gross Value Added directly to the UK economy, it accounts for 3.2 million jobs through direct employment, which makes it the 4th biggest employer in the UK, succeeding the business services, wholesale and retail, human health and social work (BHA, 2017). The industry’s success is heavily dependent on consumers’ purchasing patterns, which have recently been shaped by the various dimensions of social media, including social networking sites, user generated content, Web 2.0 contents and mobile applications (Kizildag et al., 2017). As studies have shown, social media directly affects consumer experiences, travel movements, selections as well as behaviours (Kizildag et al., 2017), and managers must place great importance on the use of technological advances, while aiming to boost market performance growth and profitability. Even more importantly, considering the nature of the hospitality industry, which is characterized by seasonality, intangibility, and perishability (Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2018), and the current market conditions where people are constantly connected to social media, it becomes clear that

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [E.Michopoulou@derby.ac.uk](mailto:E.Michopoulou@derby.ac.uk) (E. Michopoulou), [moisa.delia@yahoo.com](mailto:moisa.delia@yahoo.com), [deliagmoisa@gmail.com](mailto:deliagmoisa@gmail.com) (D.G. Moisa).<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2018.05.019>Received 27 October 2017; Received in revised form 15 May 2018; Accepted 16 May 2018  
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hoteliers' failure to devise and execute an effective social media strategy could be regarded as a "dereliction of duty" (Bowen, 2015).

Considering the variety of different platforms and engagement types available through social media, measurement may prove to be rather difficult (Dahl, 2015), and Berkowitz (2009) proposed a list containing 100 different ways of measuring social media including likes, comments, ratings, clicks, changes in market share. However, some of these measurements have been questioned, suggesting that social media activity is itself inherently immeasurable (DiStaso et al., 2011). On the contrary, Dahl (2015) further claims that not all measures are completely meaningless, and scrutinising data and interpreting it with great care is key. Nonetheless, managers and marketers are still facing challenges to demonstrate the value of their investment on Twitter or Facebook, while the most common model used to measure the impact of their social media strategy is by 'reach and frequency' (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010).

Furthermore, the literature provides valuable information supporting the successful contribution of various social media platforms both in terms of financial as well as non-financial returns. However, when investigating the phenomenon of metrics, the existing literature mainly focuses on testing formal relationships between financial and single marketing metrics, for example Ngobo et al. (2011), and Luo et al. (2010), O'Sullivan et al. (2009) looking at customer satisfaction metrics. Similar studies explored the use of social media for hotel human resource activities (Gibbs et al., 2015), and how social media can be used as an augmentation to traditional internal communication channels with hospitality employees (King and Lee, 2016). However, the extant literature suggests that limited research has taken place in this area, and it highlights the fact that there is no dominant framework to measure success. More importantly, the research undertaken by Simply Measured (2016) on 350 social media marketers found that the metrics being focused on do not match the needs highlighted, with 56% of them focusing on engagement metrics, and one of their greatest challenge being represented by the ROI measurement. Wozniak et al.'s (2016) study on Swiss Destination Marketing Organisations reveal that ROI is a key performance indicator, however direct sales are not core focus. Kim and Park's (2017) study demonstrated the impact of social networking sites and online travel intermediaries' review rating on RevPAR, ADR and TrevPA Aluri et al. (2015) examined the effectiveness of embedded social media channels, suggesting that these positively affect ROI (Phelan et al., 2013), while Buhalis and Mamalakis's (2015) research based on a hotel in Rhodes suggests that social media ROI can be measured in two forms, financial and non-financial. In other words, the performance measurement for social media is highly variant and dependent on the type of the industry, as well as the organization.

Therefore, this research contributes to the growing body of literature by raising awareness on the impact that social media can have on a business, and by bringing new interpretations of ROI to light, which have yet to be adequately discussed. This study investigates whether hotel managers are measuring the effectiveness of their businesses and provides a deeper understanding on *how* they measure it, and *what* metrics are used when defining success. Through the data collected, the study contrasts and compares various practices across different hotels, providing guidelines which are currently unavailable to practitioners operating in the hospitality industry.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Social media as part of marketing strategy

Defined as "the pinnacle of an integrated marketing effort" (Constantinides, 2014: 44), social media marketing plays a significant part of a company's marketing mix (Sterne, 2010). An increasing number of studies provide a comprehensive view regarding basic patterns of engaging social media as part of a company's marketing strategy (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009; Bernhoff and Li, 2008; Prahalad

and Krishnan, 2008), and two main approaches appear to emerge: a passive approach, and an active approach (Constantinides, 2014). The passive approach focuses on social media as a potential source of customer voice (Parise and Guinan, 2008; Anderson, 2007), while providing marketers with information regarding customer experiences, needs and expectations, trends. In the Active approach, social media represents a tool of communication, customer acquisition and retention, as well as direct sales (McKinsey, 2007a, 2007b).

Marketer's recognition of the need to regain some control over the customer-controlled social media space, together with competitive pressure, has prompted many organisations to invest in their social media presence and develop plans to launch marketing activities in this domain (Constantinides, 2014; Barwise and Styler, 2003). Recent reports show that social media teams that are integrated within the marketing organization has grown from 49% in 2015–63.2%, in 2016 (Simply Measured, 2016). However, when it first emerged as a category, there were no standards for expertise and experience, and companies relied on hiring young staff and interns to post on Facebook and Twitter, without any goals, process, or understanding of the networks used (Simply Measured, 2016). As Lovett (2011) confirms, this might be irresponsible and short-sighted, as social media's value is not any less important than customer service or product development.

Hotel industry executives and managers have received much evidence that social media influences guests' booking behaviour, hence rates and occupancy. In an attempt of determining ROI for social media efforts, Anderson's (2012) study confirmed that a 1% increase in a hotel's online reputation score leads to an occupancy increase up to 0.5%, 1.42% increase in revenue per available room (RevPAR), and 0.89% increase in the hotel's average daily rate (ADR). Also, online customer reviews play a key role in optimising sales conversion rates, and research shows that positive reviews can double the conversion rates (Saio, 2012). However, managing online reputation, content strategy, social media platforms for customer service and support, marketing, reaching international audiences and using social media as a booking channel, are just a few drivers leading the businesses to embrace social media (Mintel, 2016). For example, Holiday Inn Express Hyatt trialled using Facebook Messenger to communicate with guests, while Best Western International, Accor and Marriott International adopted the TripAdvisor Instant Booking. Loews Hotels & Resorts in the United States have been using Twitter to make reservations, and in 2015, the Hilton owned brand, Conrad Hotels & Resorts, started offering bookings via Instagram (Mintel, 2016). Nonetheless, engaging social media as a marketing tool directs towards the company's final step of consistent strategic efforts to improve their services or products (Constantinides, 2014).

### 2.2. Metrics and measurability in social media

Considering the vast number of databases available, companies now have the potential to extract all kinds of information and understandings related to their current or potential customers. However, in practice, organisations are underutilizing what they know (Michopoulou and Buhalis, 2008; Rust et al., 2010). In this context, metrics are seen as lenses through which this data is approached, converted into information and later on, into knowledge that further guides strategic decisions at a corporate level. Rust et al. (2010) suggested that metrics can be tools helping to drive customer engagement, to minimize the wrong application of financial metrics that lead to short-sighted management practices and processes (Mizik, 2010), and also to support the establishment of customer centricity (Wind, 2008; Shah et al., 2006).

Marketing performance literature has previously identified various manners or attributing value to marketing actions (Vassinen, 2011; Rust et al., 2004; Lenskold, 2003), which have eventually led to a ramification of two viewpoints: on one hand, financial metrics, and on the other hand, indirect measurements (Ambler and Roberts, 2008). For

instance, Ryals (2008) introduces the direct value approach, which suggests that the success of a campaign is determined by its direct revenue for the business, measured through the ROI indicator. Complementarily, the indirect value, focuses on an additional value accrued by the company through their relationship with the customer, such as advocacy, reference, learning and innovation (Ryals, 2008).

Furthermore, the Altimeter Group's report distinguishes between two types of metrics: Activity-based metrics, such as followers, likes, shares, and Result-based metrics, such as conversions (Etlinger and Li, 2011). However, Dahl (2015) divides the existing social media metrics and measurements into two different types: volume measures and sentiment measures. Volume measures are characterized by their quantitative nature, including numbers of fans, likes, posts, while the sentiment measures are often considered pseudo-qualitative due to their automated nature. This means that the sentiment ratio aims to provide information regarding the overall emotions of the social media streams examined while relying on computer algorithms, which cannot distinguish between an ironic and non-ironic mentioning of a brand (Dahl, 2015). Further, Lovett (2011) proposes a multi-hierarchy of social media measures ranging from Foundational metrics to Business value metrics, Outcome metrics, and Counting metrics.

Authors have argued that although it is not easy to measure social media success, there are ways through which it can be done, but it is the manager's duty to decide on what could be regarded as 'return' (Bitzer, 2012). In fact, the challenge in defining marketing ROI is not solely a technicality, as Ambler and Roberts (2008) confirm, but also a discursive issue, considering that marketers generally use the term social media ROI correspondently with any metric which can be related to social media marketing. Therefore, while metrics such as reach, retweets and conversions may be important when monitoring the evolution of marketing outcomes, distinguishing these from the ROI becomes highly important, as the latter cannot be linked to the other social media metrics unless they involve the economic terms (Traudt et al., 2010). In this context, Pay-Per-Click advertising's greatest strength is that it is easy to generate reports showing critical metrics including number of clicks, number of ad impressions, number of sales and cost of sales, click-through rates (CTRs) and so on (Szetela and Kerschbaum, 2010).

New technology enables more sophisticated methods to track and measure marketing performance, however the fast-changing nature of the industry and emerging marketing approaches require better and more adequate methods (Lenskold, 2003). Whether using Google Analytics, a proprietary analytic software, or a mixture of paid and free social and web analytics tools, the business's main goal is to identify meaningful data, apply to the company's social media objectives, and finally evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy (Kim, 2016). Complementarily, one central theme of Blanchard's (2011) book points out that one-size-fits-all solutions rarely work in the world of social media program management and measurement and a mix of tools will work better even within the same organization. Moreover, Kaushik (2010) highlights that metrics and tools alone will not provide comprehensive social media analytics, it is the people who can discover actionable insights.

The importance of measurement is further highlighted by Lovett (2011) who confirms that measurement not only allows managers to put a stake in the ground for what they are working towards, but it also creates milestones and check points which help to determine how successful their actions are. However, many organisations erroneously take the metrics that they are offered, and consider that they are doing well, with most businesses looking at numbers of fans, followers, visits, and views. As Lovett (2011) named them, 'the digital trivia of social media', although important, they are, in fact, just numbers. Therefore, businesses often fall victims to reporting counting metrics as the measures of success for their social media initiatives, which can not only be misleading for the company, but it could also place the organization's social media programs in jeopardy (Lovett, 2011).

Although it is clear to academics and industry professionals that social media contributes to firms' financial performance, there is no theoretical certainty or solid consensus about what we do and what we do not know. (Kizildag et al., 2017). Lu et al.'s (2018) study on 105 social media articles from major hospitality and tourism journals identified a lack of diversity in terms of social media topics researched, with more than half of them analysing online reviews only – for example Kim et al.'s study (2016), and Ha and Lee's study (2018) – leaving other forms of user generated content such as discussions, online inquiries, photos, videos and management responses not fully explored. This highlights a major gap in the academic research field of social media and financial performance, which appears to be devoid of new perspectives.

Thus, this study focuses on determining whether hoteliers are measuring the success of their social media strategies through more than simple numbers of followers or numbers of tweets, while focusing on their return on investment derived from social media. But the concept of ROI has always been challenging to define and conceptualise, with experts reporting that no ROI method is entirely sound, and for some departments, measuring ROI is not even practical (Harris, 2007). Since the early understandings and attempts (Dawson, 1983) to calculate ROI, the traditional definition of ROI has been accepted in the business performance literature as a mere indicator of return on investment, which involves the direct costs and revenues of each transaction (Powell et al., 2012). However, the concept of ROI has evolved to reflect not only monetary, but also social value (Harris, 2007). Evidence from literature (Lovett, 2011; Romero, 2011) suggests that within the social media marketing arena there is no congruence about the definition and therefore the operationalisation of ROI. While Traudt et al. (2010) confirm that ROI can be defined only when economic terms are involved, Bitzer (2012) allows managers to create their own definition of 'return'. Hence, this study is seeking to explore current practices of social media ROI within the hospitality industry, in order to better understand this phenomenon and its inherent complexities.

Consequently, the question raised by this paper is: *how do hoteliers measure their social media efforts, specifically their ROI?*

### 3. Methodology

This study examines the social media measurement processes and techniques adopted by hoteliers, and the objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate the approaches taken by hospitality businesses with respect to their marketing strategy through social media
2. To examine the hoteliers' social media metrics and tools used for social media measurement

Considering that there is no sufficient knowledge on this particular area, as highlighted in the literature review, this study adopted an exploratory design. Furthermore, Stebbins (2001) acknowledges the importance of exploration research approach during such times where technology generates rapid and widespread change, which perfectly positions the existing study related to social media metrics within the mentioned category. As in most exploratory studies, qualitative data predominates (Given, 2008). Accordingly, this study adopted a qualitative methodology in order to provide essential information to analysing the 'what, why and how' hospitality businesses measure their social media efforts, while focusing on the Return on Investment. Similarly, Harris and Brown (2010) stated that the research question in a qualitative study generally starts with a 'what' or 'how' so that the research highlights what it is about, and Creswell (2009) complements the idea by stating that the qualitative research helps in understanding the studied phenomenon more deeply as the researcher analyses the reasons behind it. Moreover, in order to understand the 'why' and the 'how' of the process used by the hoteliers when measuring their social

media efforts, within their companies, the qualitative research method adopted is represented by the semi-structured, open-ended question interview format.

The study used expert sampling, as participants who were invited to assist with this research were selected as experts in the field of social media by virtue of their industry experience. The sample was divided into the characteristics of importance for the research, with the inclusion criteria being strictly related to the business's social media presence across multiple social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. All participants had strategic and operational level exposure to social media platforms through their workplace, with all of them being currently employed on a management level position to independent and chain hotels within the area of Greater Manchester. Hotels were chosen as most appropriate for the subject studied considering their size, type of ownership and permanent employment with dedicated roles and functions involving Operations, Sales, Marketing and Social Media. Also, due to the fact that larger hotels often have more effective social media marketing campaigns considering their large network.

In order to satisfy the objectives of this research, a number of face-to-face interviews as well as telephone interviews with managers with considerable expertise in the subject of interest took place over the course of 4 weeks, from the 27th of July to the 24th of August 2016, in the area of Greater Manchester, United Kingdom. The geographical area covered by this research was chosen due to its wide variety of large chains and independent hotels, their presence and engagement with social media, but also due to the lack of previous studies focusing on this particular area. Interviews were also conducted over to phone in order to maximise the number of responses in a limited time period.

Following the critical analysis of the current literature, and with the working experience in the hospitality industry, the researcher was able to formulate a semi-structured questionnaire, entailing the main points of discussion prior to the interviews. Therefore, the respondents were encouraged to discuss their answers and provide justifications for their choices, elaborating on their social media usage within the company's marketing department, the objectives, tools, and strategies designed in terms of their social media development, as well as the metrics used for measuring their social media efforts. Actual interview questions relating to the main research question of this study, are presented in Table 1.

All conversations, including the telephone ones were recorded and manually transcribed, and the respondents were given the opportunity to make any necessary changes after the interviews were transcribed.

The initial targeted sample size comprised the total of 88 hotels in Greater Manchester, among which 36 are hotel chains and 32 independent hotels in the chosen location ([Hotelchains.com](http://Hotelchains.com), 2017). However, the final response consisted of 28 hoteliers, of which 19 are chains and 9 are independent hotels, providing a response rate of 32%. All hotels are located within the area of Greater Manchester, including Manchester city (15), Oldham (2), Bury (2), Salford (5) and Bolton (4). Data saturation was achieved within the first 19 interviews, however additional participants were involved in the study to confirm what the

**Table 1**  
Interview Guideline.

<p>Could you please expand on your journey and responsibilities within the company?          What kinds of social media does your company use in marketing today and why?          How does your company measure its social media marketing activities?          What measures/KPI's do you follow in your activities?          Do you use a particular software to measure social media? Is it tailor made or a standardized one? Why did you choose that/those particular one (s)?          Do you use a different measurement tool for each social media platform? Which one (s), and why?          How do you define ROI?          How do you measure ROI?          Does ROI define success in social media?          What does success in social media look like?          How do you see your social media strategy moving forward?</p>
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researchers already sensed with regards to social media measurement and the notion of social media ROI, as it is understood as an umbrella concept, encompassing various elements, and it is not defined by accurate financial values. Therefore, the non-response bias does not affect how well data represents the hoteliers in Greater Manchester.

A total of 28 hoteliers participated in the interviews of which duration range from 30 min to 1 h. Of those interviewees, 16 are males and 12 are females. Ten of the participants fall in the age range of 25–30 years, 14 of them are between 30 and 40 years old, and 4 of them are between 40 and 50 years old. Half of the participants are employed in a marketing management position, 6 of them work in guest relations, 3 participants work in sales, 3 interviewees work in operations, and 2 of them hold a social media executive position.

The study adopted the conventional approach of thematic analysis as it is best used when gaining an in-depth interpretation of data, facilitating thoughtful understanding of social phenomenon (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Data analysis followed Altinay and Paraskevas' (2008) framework involving: familiarisation with the data, coding, conceptualisation, ordering, and enfolding the literature. Familiarisation with data involved the manual transcription of the recorded interviews, reading all transcripts repeatedly and gaining familiarity with the data (Tesch, 1990). Open coding was used within individual interviews to highlight key observations from the data, as these were further grouped together, representing the initial codes (Marshall, 1999). This allowed comparison of multiple accounts on similar subjects, allowing identification of the emerging themes presented in Table 2.

The coding process was divided into two steps. First, it started with the two major themes developed from theory (social media marketing and social media measurement), followed by the cutting and sorting technique. The investigators went through the transcripts and identified quotes that seem important, cut out each quote and wrote down the quote's reference (who said it, where it appeared in text), and finally sorted them into piles of similar quotes. Each pile was given a name, representing the theme. Furthermore, the 'constant comparison method', as named by Glaser and Strauss (1967:28) was adopted in order to generate a more detailed analysis on the subject studied. Comparing and contrasting of the emergent themes and concepts with the extant literature allowed the researchers to identify differences and tie together similarities that emerged from the material.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

The results of the study indicate that social media analytics within the hospitality business is still in its infancy, and the element of ROI in the form of financial outcomes derived from social media is completely absent, as none of the interviewees confirmed to have an established strategy or a tool which they could rely on to track financial returns derived from social media.

Table 3 presents a summary of the analysis results and the following sections discuss the emerging themes derived from the interviews transcriptions.

##### 4.1. Management of social media

The findings of this study confirm that hoteliers are still at an early stage of integrating social media as a separate role, with only 7% of participants holding a social media position within a hotel chain. While companies used to rely on hiring young staff to post on social media platforms, without standards or established goals (Simply Measured, 2016), this study confirms that the same practice is still adopted on a large scale, and hoteliers' approach is to include social media into other roles' duties.

The fieldwork highlights that social media marketers within the hospitality industry are wearing many hats, as they are often in charge of not only creating content, researching, analysing, but their main role

**Table 2**  
Themes of Hotel Social Media Metrics.

Initial codes	Themes emerged
Title and role of respondents	<b>Management of social media</b>
Duties	
Social media responsibilities	
Challenges	
Social media strategies	<b>Social media marketing</b>
Social media platforms	
Social media investment	
Metrics	<b>Social media measurement</b>
Software/methods used for tracking	
Appealing features of software	
Interpretations of ROI	<b>Social media ROI</b>
Measurement of financial returns	
Definitions of success	<b>Defining success and future strategies</b>
The future of social media within the company	

within the company primarily covers other functions, such as Operations, Sales and Guest Services. This often strains professional capabilities, and time constraints are highly demanding. Although the interviewed global and national brands generally employ a marketing strategist at a high level, each property maintains its own voice, and supplies its own content. The approach adopted is to nominate a ‘Social Media Champion’, a person generally involved in more than one department within the hotel, and that person becomes responsible for the hotel’s social media platforms.

However, this approach has not been successful yet, as this strains professional capabilities, time constraints are highly demanding, and social media is often neglected, as confirmed by one of the respondents *“Being honest, it’s probably at the back of my mind sometimes, there’s bigger contracts and things I’m dealing with. When I’m sat in on a Saturday*

*morning I think maybe I should do a couple of posts, so it works like that”*. Moreover, staff turnover is another common issue, and all the respondents involved in this study have only recently taken their social media responsibilities as part of their roles. The lack of a designated person taking full responsibility for the hotel’s social media, the accounts remain inactive for the time until someone else takes the responsibility, linking directly to another challenge, which is a lack of consistency in terms of content posted, with regards to the nature of the content, tone of voice and the style of posts.

#### 4.2. Social media marketing

Two approaches on the patterns of engaging social media have been identified as part of a marketing strategy, the passive, and the active

**Table 3**  
Summary of the analysis results.

Themes	Results
<b>Management of social media</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A very small minority of participants hold a social media position</li> <li>● Social media is included into other roles’ duties i.e. Operations, Sales, Guest Services</li> <li>● A common approach is to nominate a ‘Social Media Champion’, and the work to be done on a ‘pro bono basis’</li> <li>● Challenges: inactive accounts, lack of consistency in terms of content posted, variant nature of content, tone of voice and style of posts</li> </ul>
<b>Social media marketing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Passive and active approach adopted</li> <li>● Used because it is a cost-free platform to advertise and PR</li> <li>● Social media is not tied to the overall business’s goals</li> <li>● Hoteliers tend to focus on commonly used platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, without looking to expand</li> <li>● There is no financial investment allocated to social media</li> </ul>
<b>Social media measurement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Costs associated with social media analytics constrain hoteliers into adopting them</li> <li>● Some free branded in-house platforms are used, such as Revinat, SALT</li> <li>● Free social analytics tools used by chains and individual hotels include Facebook Insights, basic version of Hootsuite</li> <li>● Tools assisting with content sharing mostly used are Tweetdeck and Buffer</li> </ul>
<b>Social media ROI</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Social media ROI undergoes many challenges in terms of demonstrating the link between activities and financial results</li> <li>● Social media ROI is understood as an umbrella concept, encompassing various different elements and other social media metrics</li> <li>● ROI element might be interpreted in a different way through other metrics such as Engagement, being more adequate in the context of social media</li> </ul>
<b>Defining success and future strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● ROI and the success of a social media campaign is not measured through specific financial values</li> <li>● Success in social media translates through customer engagement</li> <li>● Indirect value of social media represents a priority: new followers, response, user interaction, getting feedback, generating and keeping conversations</li> <li>● Forward planning involves the development of a clear social media strategy</li> <li>● High interest in refining strategies and implementing processes and procedures which would help with measuring hoteliers’ social media efforts</li> </ul>



approach. While the passive approach focuses social media as a source of customer voice (Parise and Guinan, 2008), the active approach identifies social media as a communication tool, customer acquisition, retention, and to stimulate direct sales (McKinsey, 2007a, 2007b). These purposes resonate well with fieldwork findings, and the present study confirms that hoteliers adopt both approaches in their use of social media, however, the terminology may slightly differ from business to business. While direct sales generated through social media are not a priority for hoteliers, all the respondents confirmed that social media is an effective way of marketing, mainly because it offers a *cost-free platform* to advertise and PR opportunities. The present study identified the main benefits of social media marketing, including the most important factor which was the very little to no cost involved in using social media platforms. Other benefits included the free information provided, the ability to track how competitors are performing, and access to a better targeted audience, as confirmed unanimously by the respondents. However, the issue of the costlessness of social media may not be fully understood. While hoteliers may think that there are no costs involved, other than the campaigns they choose to pay for, the participants appear to ignore opportunity costs when employees are updating their profiles on Facebook or Twitter posts rather than doing their other job-related deeds.

Although all the respondents are confident about using social media as an advertising platform, the study confirms the growing demand for a more strategic approach towards how to use social media in order to generate measurable benefits. The participants confirmed that social media is not tied to the overall business's goals, meaning that, for example, when the company decides to increase sales by 5% over the next year, social media is not being taken into consideration, as confirmed by one participant *"We don't actually include social media in our business goals. Social media is just an extra part, and we do not tend to focus on it. We don't set specific goals for social media, but do recommend regular messages"*.

The main platforms used by the hoteliers in Manchester area are Twitter and Facebook, the only two platforms mentioned in unanimity by the respondents, due to the wide audience reached through these platforms. Instagram, LinkedIn, Periscope and TripAdvisor have also been mentioned by hoteliers, however, the adoption of newer social media platforms such as Snapchat or Pinterest do not appear to be of interest for them, as these may not fit with the company's view. What needs to be noted here is that hoteliers appear to hold this view without having even tried using such newer platforms, and they may have not found ways of using them to their advantage yet.

In this regard, the participants seem to have an implicit assumption of what the company wants from them and the suitable types of social media platforms. This appears as an unwritten social media strategy, where the company's social media performance has to suffer as the employees happen to make assumptions in terms of what is best for the firm. Moreover, the respondents confirmed that in the context of the lack of resources available, spreading on more social media platforms will not benefit the brand, hence fewer platforms allow better management of content. This directly links to the way hoteliers are using social media and the social media platforms. As the study revealed, hoteliers tend to stick to the commonly used platforms, Twitter and Facebook, without considering expanding and adopting newer platforms. However, as social media is constantly changing and evolving, (and in order to be effective), brands must be willing to adopt new platforms, strategies, and be willing to attempt new processes.

With regards to the investment allocated to social media marketing, literature suggests that investment in tools and people are mandatory in order to discover actionable insights derived from social media metrics and analytics (Sterne, 2010). Kaushik (2010) recommended the '10/90 rule', meaning that if the cost of a tool is 10, then people and marketing analysts must be 90. However, findings demonstrated that hoteliers do not invest in marketing analysts, but they add on this responsibility to one of their employees. Therefore, the percentage of financial

investment allocated to social media is confirmed as 0%, as the work is done on a 'pro bono basis', and no salary involved.

#### 4.3. Social media measurement

Technologies change fast and truly helpful software can assist marketers in measuring their social media efforts (Blanchard, 2011). However, hoteliers still remain critical of relevant platforms and tools, and their willingness to consider new tools which may add value to the way they measure their efforts is actually limited. One major factor contributing to hoteliers' attitudes are the *costs* associated with implementing social media analytics, and as they do not see the value provided, they are reluctant to invest in such technologies. For this reason, many of the tools used by them are not measurement analytics tools, but tools designed to assist with scheduling content, posting, monitoring. These are in-house platforms, including Revinat and SALT, used by a particular hotel chain, or other free social analytics tools commonly used by both chains and individual hotels – Facebook Insights, basic version of Hootsuite, and tools assisting with content sharing including Tweetdeck and Buffer.

#### 4.4. Social media ROI

All the respondents claimed to have deployed social media initiatives, however they confirmed confusion and inability to effectively measure their Return on Investment, which still represents a dilemma in terms of measurement. Marketing analytics provide a lot of data through metrics and measurements, but there are still fundamental barriers to acquiring actionable insights in terms of understanding indirect customer value. As such, social media ROI undergoes many challenges in terms of demonstrating the link between activities and financial results, and hoteliers confirmed that determination of ROI represents a challenge.

While some participants remain persistent and plan to focus on uncovering the social media ROI in the form of revenue, others indicated that the ROI element might be interpreted in a different way through other metrics such as Engagement, being more adequate in the context of social media. The literature established that through a strong base of fans, qualitative content, and engaging users, will in a longer term convert to paying customers (Kelly, 2013). One participant recognized that conversions rates are not even on a long-term plan to be focused on within the company, strictly *"cause it's such an early step in the customer journey, it's more of sort of an online PR. You wouldn't necessarily expect someone converting of the back of it"*. At the same time, the discussion is drawn towards other relevant metrics and measurements of greater importance in the context of social media, and which in effect contribute to the social media ROI *"But ultimately, to increase engagement, to create varied content, increased user-generated content, showing the people are more engaged and it falls back on that, positive feedback."* In this regard, the notion of ROI in social media is extended over a longer period of time, it focuses on creating customer equity, therefore challenging the determination of a specific financial value.

These findings plausibly demonstrate how social media ROI is understood as an umbrella concept, encompassing various different elements and other social media metrics, with no one definition governing. Without a definitive method to measure ROI, hotel businesses focus on developing their performance dashboards to show ROI from other perspectives, and the success of a social media campaign is not measured through accurate financial values. Hoteliers confirmed ability to notice a boost in figures followed by the advertisement of a new offer, for example introducing a weekly menu has given a boost into the hotel's restaurant business. However, there are no written reports kept sustaining the successful outcomes of the social media campaigns, as these are not recorded, but simply observed and declared as successful.

#### 4.5. Defining success and future strategies

All interviewees agreed in unanimity that success in social media translates through customer engagement. Other important factors contributing to success in social media include: new followers, response, user interaction, getting feedback, generating and keeping conversations. This clearly shows that hoteliers are above all, interested in the relationship they create with the customer, the indirect value they get through social media as confirmed by Ryals (2008).

Therefore, success may not be immediately visible, and because of the nature of social media, hoteliers do not expect sales and do not plan to sale through these platforms, as confirmed by one respondent: *“I think social is a bit too instant to translate to in an immediate sale, to especially say like a hotel stay. I think a hotel stay it takes a bit longer planning, rather from one particular post or a series of posts, or a campaign. I think, you know, raising that awareness is one thing and hoping that it will be at the forfeit of their mind when they come and make a booking reservation for Manchester”*.

Nonetheless, hotel managers involved in this study confirmed that their future plans focus not only on increasing engagement, and user-generated content, but also *“to create more of strategy in the traditional sense of the word”*. Forward planning appears the second most important step when looking to future steps towards improving social media. More importantly, it is reassuring to see that businesses are thinking about their social media impact and hoteliers mentioned interest in refining their strategies and implementing processes and procedures which would help with measuring their social media efforts. However, direct and indirect cost involved remains a key determinant for resource allocation.

#### 5. Conclusion

The research on how social media is measured within the hospitality industry is very limited, perhaps due to the novelty of this phenomenon. This study attempts to provide an understanding of social media ROI in the context of hospitality industry, focusing on hotels. This study confirms that social media analytics within the hospitality business is still in its infancy, and the element of ROI in the form of financial outcomes derived from social media is entirely absent. Although investment allocated to social Pay-Per-Click adds or boosted promotions varies from very little to zero, hoteliers do not track their returns, hence their cost of investment is not linked to ROI. Nonetheless, using ROI as a meaningful metric involves challenges, as it not only concerns return on investment and optimum profitability, but it is also a management challenge because it is the means to convince top management of the business value of social media. However, the study identified a growing demand for a more strategic approach towards social media, aligning social media actions with business objectives and developing campaigns based on understandings from who the community is, what they value, and the conversations they wish to have with the brand, rather than scripted and pushed. One imminent issue in demonstrating the hotel's marketing performance is concluded by this study's findings that results do not directly translate into financial value, and there is more than a monetary version of ROI. As hotel managers focus on analysing volume of likes, comments, shares and engagement rates, they do not expect sales to derive directly from social media, and therefore the softer meanings of ROI require further research. Nonetheless, it is imperative to highlight that hoteliers do not neglect the ROI which directly translates into financial results, but they simply do not possess the knowledge or the tools of a definitive method to measure ROI. Hoteliers are aware of that the number of followers or the number of tweets per day provides just the initial basis, which is not enough to provide a true picture regarding success of a social media initiative. From a theoretical perspective, the research on how social media is measured within the hospitality industry is very limited, and this study represents one of the few attempts to provide an understanding of social

media ROI in the context of hospitality industry, focusing on hotels. This phenomenon in the hotel industry differs from that of other industries specifically due to the interpretation of the term 'ROI'. As findings of this study suggest, the definition of ROI does not necessarily involve financial elements in a hotelier's perspective, but it involves non-financial elements, it is more customer-oriented, with metrics such as Engagement being defined as more adequate in the context of social media. However, hoteliers are interested in determining financial ROI providing there was a magic formula which would help them with their goals. In terms of methodology, this empirical study focused on in-depth interviews with current employees within various branded hotels extends the literature by introducing new perspectives which could be further applied for future research. Considering the novelty nature of the researched topic, the interviews support and further construct on the existing theoretical frameworks, by providing real-life, practical insights from experts within the hospitality industry. Moreover, the interviews provide different approaches into various hotels' experiences in marketing through social media, and different measurement techniques, all these different perspectives helping to answer the proposed research question.

The findings of the study bring implications both for the hospitality industry practitioners, and for the social media analytics vendors. The study highlights that through enhancement of relevant analytic capabilities, managers may become able to gain an understanding of the value of their social media. Although social analytics tools and technologies have become more sophisticated, hotel managers claim that with the lack of a magic formula providing their social media ROI, the investment in these tools and analytics is unnecessary. The study identified that social media performance is suffering when not managed by the right person. As a result, hotels should focus on establishing a structured human resources format and set specific tasks, while allocating the necessary time in order to lead a successful social media campaign. Furthermore, hoteliers should establish achievable goals and align these goals to the overall business strategy. Moreover, in the context of the lack of a strategy, the adhoc response adopted may be good, but it could be detrimental to the brand. Concurrently, hotel businesses must put a concerted effort in understanding the potential for adopting social media metrics and analytics in the context of their business. Therefore, the development of a solid analytics strategy, the human resources to manage it and the investment in a tool to support the measurement process represent the key towards success.

The study also highlighted the lack of knowledge in the area of calculating social media ROI, and this brings implications for social media analytics vendors. Vendors should focus on designing special features which would help hotel managers understand the ROI in the context of different social media platforms, finding ways of customising their services and products better. They must enhance their products with accurate metrics for advertising and marketing profit calculation. Also, through implementation of consulting services, or web based seminars, their clients can become more knowledgeable, understand the functions of their products, and train hoteliers on how to use these tools to maximise revenue.

Considering the exploratory nature of the study, further work focusing a more diverse sample, using larger pool of respondents from different regions, on a national, and international level, would benefit the hospitality researchers from better generalizing the results. Within the context of a lack of social media strategy in firms, further research could focus on upper management's point of view with regards to their social media performance. Research should also focus on the efficacy and suitability of a particular social media platform, and its application as marketing tool and measurement analytics. Moreover, as consumer behaviours change over time, with new technology developments, a longitudinal study might provide insights into how various metrics develop and software analytics improvements which could potentially assist hoteliers in achieving their objectives.

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