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## Digital Marketing: The Case of Digital Marketing Strategies on Luxurious Hotels

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### Abstract

Digital marketing has been on the epicentre of many researches. However, there is the need to make clear which are the current trends of the Digital Marketing Strategies regarding luxurious hotels. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has seriously “damaged” the hospitality industry and it has affected the digital marketing strategies of hotels. The aim of this paper is the evaluation of the most recent applications of digital marketing and especially the social media used by luxurious hotels and their guests (such as Facebook, Trip-advisor). The outcome of the research indicates that social media play a key role on the marketing of luxurious hotels. More specifically, a hotel should take into serious consideration the reviews made on social media by customers. A review can leverage a hotel but also it can doom its reputation. For this reason, the practitioners must give special attention on the reviews that the guests post on social media. The methodology of the paper is literature review. Hence, it will rely on publications. The authors have collected publications from various academic databases, such as SCOPUS, by using the appropriate keywords. The publications were selected based on how relative are with the purpose of this paper. To sum up, the hotel industry has to face a major challenge due to COVID-19 crisis. This crisis, which is an ongoing phenomenon, is expected to change the way that hotels are coping with. One of the changes that the hotel should take into consideration is which strategy will use on social media. This paper has relied on existing theories and speculations that have been made by several authors and they have not been cross-checked with primary researches. Therefore, there is the need for more primary data coming from upcoming publications.

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## 1. Introduction

The tourist industry is important for the economy of many countries, such as Greece [1], [2], [3], [4]. An important insight of tourism is the fact that during the past years it had developed a number of different approaches as far as hospitality is concerned as well as it had developed different models of tourist development [5]. At this point, there are surveys about which tourist development model can be the most effective and it can bring wealth and sustainability for a tourist destination. For example, mass tourism has been heavily criticized for its consequences on the destinations [6], through [7] have argued that luxury-based tourism cannot generate wealth for the sum of the economy of a destination, like mass tourism can do, hence it is important for a destination to try a combination of tourist models. Nonetheless, the majority of the tourist industry experts as well as the academics conclude that luxury tourism can bring a number of benefits for a destination and also can contribute to its sustainability [8].

A luxury tourist organization, in this case a hotel, has to achieve high quality of services on all of its operations, especially those who are interacting with the guests. Now days, many of those functions rely on the use of ICT (Information Communication and Technology) [9]; [10]; [11]. ICT offers a variety of applications which can provide a luxurious hotel with a competitive advantage. For example, it can improve the internal operations such as housekeeping [12], the CRM (Customer Relationship Management) functions [13], [14], [15], and the relationships with the suppliers [16]. Besides this, there is a debate on how ICT can contribute on digital marketing. It seems that during the past years there is a growing number of research indicating different ways that digital marketing, mostly promotion, can contribute to a luxury hotel [17]. For example, user-generate content can help the hotel to adjust the services on the needs and expectations of tourists [18], while social media reviews have an important role [19], not only because of the stories made on social media from the hotel but also because of the influencers [20] who seem to have a positive impact on the promotion of a luxury hotel [21], [22]. Nonetheless, not all of the academia agrees for the positive role of digital marketing, especially of social media. According to [23] the overuse of social media can expose the hotel to negative comments and often to a negative behavior on behalf of the customers, that the hotel may not be able to control or to convert them into a positive review. Actually, this is a point where it seems to be a gap of research since a majority of the practitioners believe on the value of social media, without taking into consideration the possible negative outcomes.

Indeed, digital marketing may have a positive contribution for the performance of a hotel but this does not mean that it does not hide threats and risks. For this reason, the hotel managers need to gain a full knowledge of digital marketing in order to understand when and how to use it [24], especially when it comes to luxury hotels which need to achieve a competitive advantage [24]. For this reason, the purpose of this paper is to make a critical review of the digital marketing tools and techniques used from luxury hotels in order to provide an insight for the practitioners on Greek hotels and also to trigger for future research. The methodology of this paper is literature review with critical analysis. This means that it will make a synthesis of related publications. The material used for this paper has been retrieved from scientific journals, books, papers, conference proceedings, and scientific websites. The scientific databases which were used were Scopus, Science Direct and Google Scholar. The selection criteria for the data used were the relevance to the topic as well as the date of the papers (recent publishing of the last 5-10 years). The authors used keywords such as “digital marketing”, “luxurious hotels”, and “social media” as well as a combination of the used keywords. The authors chose these words because of the fact that they are strongly related to the subject of the research. All the sources that were used, should have contained one or more of the keywords in their topic, abstract or keywords. Finally, the authors expected for the data collected to be as recent as possible, to cover a wide geographical coverage, and to provide theoretical and practical framework.

## 2. A brief introduction on digital marketing

### 2.1. Definition of digital marketing

The term digital marketing refers to virtually all marketing activities that take place online. It is a collective term that includes all the digital communication and promotion channels that businesses can use to connect with existing and potential customers [25]. The terms internet marketing, e-marketing and online marketing are often used to describe digital marketing, which are very much synonymous [26]. Emphasizing the relationship with customers,

[27] defined e-marketing as the use of information technology in the process of creating, communicating and delivering value to the customer, in a way that favors the business (when it comes to customer relationship management). According to [28], digital marketing is a new approach to marketing, and not just traditional digital media marketing.

During the past years, digital marketing has taken by storm the marketing industry. Indeed, without a doubt, technology has radically changed the marketing industry. Much has changed since the era of Web 1.0, when the technological wave enticed companies to create corporate websites that looked a lot like their print brochure, to Web 2.0 where the consumer is becoming a dominant element of marketing, while new technologies are changing constantly rules with innovative practices [29]. With the advent of what we call Web 2.0, corporate communication, and especially the field of advertising, have changed dramatically. The traditional one-dimensional approach to advertising, where the company was delivering an advertising message and the audience was the passive recipient, has changed. The public now has new online tools and platforms to express their views on the company's advertising message and share personal experiences of the product or service with other users, thus influencing potential consumers. A typical example of such tools are social media and online review sites [30]. Therefore, with Web 2.0, the power of communication passes from companies to consumers [31].

Digital marketing has also changed the way consumers search and buy products and services, creating a consumer-driven economy. Consumers have become more demanding, have higher expectations than ever and of course more choices. Marketing is no longer just about the brand, but also about the consumer experience, which has now become the focus of every marketing strategy. While traditional marketing sought to create awareness for the product, the goal of marketing in our time, is to create experiences around the product that will stimulate consumer interest and action.

While consumer behavior is changing, influenced by technological innovation [32], [33], [34], [35], [36], [37], [38] and businesses are looking for ways to reach their consumers online, the new opportunities emerging with digital marketing are having a significant impact on the marketing industry [29].

## *2.2. The benefits and challenges of Digital Marketing*

Digital marketing offers many benefits to companies that choose to use it. Through digital marketing, businesses find channels of direct communication with consumers; this can occur even in real time. Hence, companies can gather various information and valuable reviews to improve their product. In addition, by adapting their content and message, businesses can focus on more targeted and different audiences, which can extend to infinity as a size [40].

A very important benefit, in relation to offline marketing actions, is that digital marketing allows marketers to accurately measure the results of their actions (even in real time). This can happen as long as the promotion is in progress. This facilitates any changes in energy promotion material or consumer targeting to optimize communication or advertising [25].

Apart from benefits, of course, the digital revolution in society and marketing has brought great challenges for businesses. With the development of social media, companies have lost control of the message they want to convey to their audience. According to research, [41] claimed that the 90% of consumers read online reviews before buying a product, and in fact at least four reviews, while 67% of all purchases were made by consumers who were influenced by user-generated content, ie material uploaded by users on social media. Therefore, other users' content on social media motivates and convinces consumers more than advertising. Blogs, forums and other online discussion groups are also important sources of consumer information. It is therefore a challenge for companies to maintain a healthy reputation in an environment where social media plays a very important role [41].

As multiple sources of information give consumers the power of knowledge and comparison, the challenge of competition is greater for businesses. Also, the constant evolution of technology and its entry into the daily lives of consumers has knocked down obstacles such as geographical borders or time. Consumers now want the information they are looking for right away, so businesses need to be available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week [42]. Another challenge for companies, regarding digital marketing, is the staffing of the digital marketing department with the right professionals, who will know how to manage digital communication and advertising channels, and will be systematically informed about the new possibilities that technology constantly offers; also, they must be able to cope with new trends such as the Internet of Things [43].

### 3. Digital Marketing in the Hotel Industry – A critical Review

#### 3.1. A brief introduction

The development of ICTs has radically changed the traditional way of promoting a hotel business, as well as the way of selling its rooms. Now, it is easier for users to search for information, compare products and services, bypass intermediaries, contact the hotel business directly, and book easily and directly from their computer or mobile phone. The Internet has also given hotel businesses the opportunity to reach out directly to their customers more easily and at a lower cost, to bypass the intermediaries' commissions and to organize their own marketing strategy more easily, something that was difficult and very costly to do with traditional marketing methods [44].

A very important element of digital marketing is the fact that it also gives fully measurable results and opportunities for instant optimization, even while the advertising campaign is still active [26]. Digital marketing allows two-way communication between business and consumers, making it easier for the business to understand its audience and needs. It is very important that digital marketing with Web 2.0 is based on the so-called user-generated content, where the content and communication message is defined and transmitted by users [41].

Moreover, digital marketing is direct, economical and allows more personalized communication than any other form of marketing. It allows communication without geographical or time barriers, at any time of the day and anywhere in the world. For the customer himself, in fact, it greatly reduces the cost and time of searching for the service, while it also allows him to make more comparisons between services and direct purchase [45]. Disadvantages of digital marketing can include the need for multifaceted and coordinated communication from many different media, dependence on users to convey the message, especially in the case of social media, and finally the need for continuous updating and updating of business promotion channels [46].

#### 3.2. The digital tools used from the hotels – A critical perspective

A well-designed social media strategy can effectively promote a hotel and enhance its visibility [47], [48], [49], [50]. Indirectly, social media can also increase hotel sales and, by staying in touch with customers, boost recurring bookings. The most powerful of the social media is of course Facebook, as it gives access to millions of users around the world. Very useful tools for a hotel's social media strategy are also Twitter, due to the fast news transmission, as well as Pinterest and Instagram due to the emphasis on photographic material. YouTube, the second most popular search engine in the world, is an extremely useful tool too. LinkedIn is also emerging in the social media industry, where due to its serious and professional profile, the information published on this channel is considered more reliable [51].

In order to make good use of social media, hotels should invest in attractive photographic and video material, as this material attracts the interest of users. Of course this material should be in line with the aesthetics of the hotel. It is essential that hotel accounts on social media should be regularly updated, to provoke the public to interact, while it is important to have a separate strategy for each of the social media, adapted to the style, functionality and audience of each medium as it derives from a research among Greek hotels [52]. A particular strategy for attracting social media audiences is the use of social media influencers [53].

#### 3.3. Social Media promotion as the key approach for digital marketing

##### 3.3.1. Online Reviews

Reviews published online by consumers of a product or service are considered particularly important for the business and potential customers [54]. In fact, they are one of the most common ways for the company to attract the interest of potential customers [55].

As [56] note, these potential customers consider online reviews to be authentic, trustworthy, helpful, and objective, and are therefore influenced by them. In fact, consumers prefer and trust reviews that have been published on independent review platforms, rather than on the company's official website [57].

Online reviews are especially important in the hospitality industry, which focuses on customer satisfaction. By posting an online review, customers offer free information and help other potential customers make purchasing decisions, while they are also encouraging or pushing hotel businesses to improve the quality of the product or service they offer [54]. Most online reviews consist of two sections: the overall score and the detailed description [58]. For example, review sites such as TripAdvisor allow the evaluation of a hotel's services based on a 5-star rating system, as well as a description with comments from the user experience during their stay at the hotel [59].

Online reviews in the hospitality industry act as an intermediary between the customer and the hotel business as a service provider [60]. For consumers, an online review is the most common way to express a complaint, comment, or satisfaction, and rate the hotel or service they received. For hotel managers, online reviews are the best channel to get additional information about the quality of services they offer and customer requirements. In fact, this information is easier to be obtained by negative reviews with a low score, as they are more likely to express real problems. Analyzing information by online reviews helps a hotel improve its services [61].

So even for the smallest hotel business, online reviews are an inexpensive way to find out what their customers think about their services and a good opportunity to develop a competitive edge in their industry [62].

The review reflects the customer satisfaction with the experience offered, and gives important information to potential customers to decide whether to use the experience or not. Reliability is therefore a very important factor in online reviews, especially in hosting company reviews, as they focus on the personal feelings and experience of each customer. Important factors for the credibility of an online review are the credibility of the website in which it was published and the personality of the reader [63].

In fact, users waste a lot of time reading reviews from previous users before booking a hotel, as well as they waste a lot of time to see if the sources they are reading reviews are credible and if the user who posted the review is reliable [54].

### 3.3.2. *Why consumers post reviews online*

Customer review websites are an important source of information for visitors [64] as online content changes the way consumers compare products and services. According to research made by [65], the main factors that motivate a visitor to post a review online include: a) personal satisfaction, b) willingness to help other visitors, c) the social benefit, d) increasing the power of consumers, and e) providing assistance to hotel businesses. According to [63], the user's personality is very important as a motivating factor for the publication of a review. Users who post reviews online tend to be more generous as characters and altruistic, while those who are not used to posting reviews tend to be more focused on themselves and their time.

According to research by [65], there is an interesting relationship between the average score in online reviews and the size of the hotel. In particular, the smaller the size of a hotel, the higher the rating that consumers tend to give to the hotel during their review. This phenomenon has significant implications for the hospitality industry, as smaller hotels can effectively compete with larger hotels by adopting a quality-based, consumer-centered approach, which should also be reflected in the way the business manages online customer reviews.

### 3.3.3. *Reviews management as an emerging part of digital campaign*

Online reviews, as well as the responses to any review, can give the hotel business an important form of communication with their audience [59]. However, managing eWOM (electronic word of mouth) and the reputation of a business, as shaped by online reviews, is a vulnerability for the business itself. By responding publicly to their criticism, either by thanking them for a positive review, or by trying to reverse the negative climate, businesses gain impressions [66].

A survey of review sites TrustYou and TripAdvisor found that four out of five users believe that hotels that respond to reviews care more about their customers, while 85% believe that an appropriate response to a review will improve their impression of hotel [67]. A recent study by [68] also showed that if the hotel's response comes within 24 hours of the review, the immediate result is an increase in the number of hotel reservations and an indirect result is an increase in the number of reviews. The answer, of course, should vary depending on the criticism, and not a standard and predetermined answer for everyone. The default response to all reviews, even positive reviews, creates

a negative impression on the public and can negatively affect the performance of a hotel. It is therefore very important that the hotel's response to a review is personalized and addressed to the user who posted the review [59].

An important factor is how the hotel will handle the negative reviews. Qualitative research by [69] in 500 negative online hotel reviews showed that negative reviews in a hotel business are primarily due to the following reasons: non-performance of the expected service, non-response to requests, delay in service delivery, rude staff, booking problem, and inappropriate complaints management.

Responding to a negative public criticism plays an important role in limiting the negative experience of the specific user and increases the chances of the dissatisfied user returning as a customer, if given a proper explanation and incentive to return [70]. It is very important for a company to listen and react to the complaints of its customers, so that customers feel that their opinion is taken seriously. Such an approach mitigates the negative customer experience and reduces the chances of spreading the negative experience of a dissatisfied user to other online media [71]. In fact, according to [72], if a company takes responsibility for a problem and gives the right explanation, potential customers show more understanding. Of course, the first important step is to react to a public criticism, as many hotel companies do not respond to negative reviews at all, further jeopardizing their reputation [73]. Responding to a negative review is so important that hotel businesses should have prepared in advance ideal responses to complaints and negative reviews that may arise [59].

Although online reviews are an important communication tool because messages are shared among consumers, consumers are often suspicious of the many positive reviews for a business, especially if the reviews are complimentary. To avoid the risk, less daring visitors are more likely to consult multiple online review sources, compare information, and check reviewers' credibility. For this reason, less daring visitors usually find negative reviews more useful, as they consider that those critics would protect them from danger. In contrast, the most adventurous visitors more easily trust positive reviews [74].

As an example, in the case of Greek luxury hotels, [1] have remarked that the control of digital content, especially the reviews and the online interaction with the customer, is a vital part of a hotel's CRM. For the case of Greek luxury hotels, special attention is given, on how the digital marketing tools are contributing so as to leverage the image of the hotel through the storytelling of the experiences of the guests [75]. A comparative research among hotels in Europe was made by [76]. For the case of Greek hotels, they have a high percentage of positive reviews while it seems that they can cope with the negative reviews in order to convert them into positive reviews.

According to [77], one of the reasons of the emerge of Athens as a destination during the past years was the use of social media on behalf of its luxurious hotels. The hotel management have created affiliated digital strategies where the guests have become part of the digital campaign of Athens as well the campaign of the hotels. Nonetheless, the research made by [78] indicates an important aspect: many hotel managers regard the digital media as the "holy grail" of branding for the hotels, without having in mind the potential risks. The risks often are not recognized by the hotel managers and this is why, on some cases, the digital campaign has negative results.

#### 4. Conclusions

The paper has examined the latest trends on digital marketing. As it is indicated by various researches [1], [77], [78], [75] the use of digital marketing can bring a number of benefits for a luxury hotel [79], [80]. Nonetheless, it is important to remark the fact that digital marketing, as it happens today mostly by social media, may hide a number of threats which can create a negative image of the hotel. Most of the threats derive by the negative comments on social media and the inability of the hotel's management to convert the negative comments. Based on the findings of the above mentioned researches this is the most critical point for the digital campaign of a hotel. For this reason, there is a need for further future research which will help the academia and the practitioners to better understand the case of digital marketing and especially of the reviews made. Especially the current situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, means that digital marketing may play a crucial role for the recovery of the tourist industry [81], [82], [83]. For this reason, future research should direct to the use of social media and overall of digital marketing, in order to recover from the pandemic of COVID-19.

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