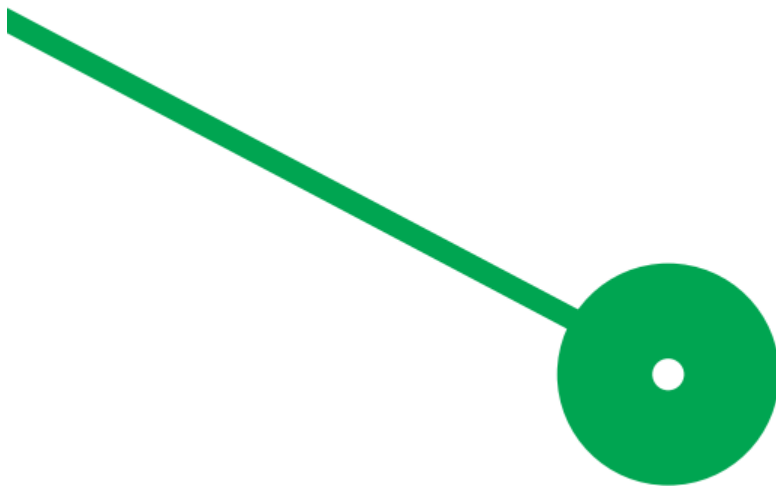**P.PORTO**

M **MESTRADO EM DIREÇÃO HOTELEIRA**
DIREÇÃO COMERCIAL E MARKETING

"The Influence of Digital Customer Network Strategy on Hotel Business"

Nguyen Thi Ly

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The Influence of Digital Customer Network Strategy on Hotel Business

Dissertação de Mestrado

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Orientação: Professora Especialista Teresa Dieguez

Professor António Manuel da Silva e Melo

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ABSTRACT

The digital age evolution is transforming and influencing the hotel industry in various ways. The hotel industry is one of the sectors where present-day customer satisfaction impacts future business positively or negatively. In the digital age, customer feedback and reviews have moved to digital platforms leading to the formation of customer networks. Digital customer networks influence consumer perceptions, attitudes, and decisions to purchase. However, these digital customer networks are applicable as strategies to improve sales, reduce costs, and build loyal relationships with customers by maximizing access, engaging the customers, connecting, and collaborating with them. The present research slicked to assess the influence of digital customer network strategy on hotel business. For this purpose, it has been conducted an exploratory study, through interviews, in July 2020 and near five General Managers of five different hotels based in Portugal. The study shows that nowadays the digital is effectively transforming the way stakeholders do business, innovate, work and cooperate. It also adds that in future this influence will be higher, which demands an accurate attention from the management and an incorporation of digital on hotel strategies.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Customer Network, Business Strategy, Digital Customer Network, Marketing Strategy, Hotel, Hotel Business.

RESUMO

A evolução da era digital está a transformar e a influenciar, de várias maneiras, a indústria hoteleira, que é um dos setores onde a satisfação do cliente atual impacta os negócios futuros de forma positiva ou negativa. Na era digital, o feedback e as avaliações dos clientes migraram para plataformas digitais, originando a formação de redes de clientes. E estas redes digitais de clientes influenciam as perceções, atitudes e decisões de compra do consumidor. No entanto, essas redes digitais de clientes são aplicáveis como estratégias para melhorar as vendas, reduzir custos e construir relacionamentos de fidelização com os clientes, maximizando o acesso, envolvendo os clientes, conectando-se e colaborando com eles. A presente Tese procurou avaliar a influência da estratégia de rede digital de clientes na Hotelaria. Para o efeito, foi realizado um estudo exploratório, através de entrevistas, em julho de 2020 e junto de cinco Diretores Gerais, de cinco diferentes hotéis, sediados em Portugal. O estudo mostra que hoje o digital está efetivamente a transformar o modo como os *stakeholders* fazem negócios, inovam, trabalham e cooperam. Acrescenta, ainda, que no futuro esta influência será maior, o que exige uma atenção apurada da gestão e uma incorporação do digital nas estratégias hoteleiras.

Palavras-chave: Marketing Digital, Rede de Clientes, Estratégia de Negócio, Rede Digital de Clientes, Estratégia de Marketing, Hotel, Negócio Hoteleiro.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Digital customer network strategy is increasingly becoming a focus for business seeking to expand their operations and profitability (Nylén, & Holmström, 2015). Almost all industries in the global business environment are exploring ways to harness the online business environment and reach new market and clients. The hotel industry is one of those who have joined the online business community, an Internet marketplace not very different from the physical business environment in what concerns challenges, competitiveness and rules.

Current research on hotel business shows the increasing significance of digital customer network strategy, representing a target group that hotel focus on for their many products and offers in order to increase their market share, target and serve new business markets (Verhoef et al., 2019). Every hotel business today must set up a working website that creates and builds on a community that will remain loyal to the brand (Gielens, & Steenkamp, 2019).

Current research approves the use of digital media in marketing the different offers to their customers (Kefley, & Mojumder, 2018). Every company has a defined strategy for its growth and an increase in profitability, being crucial to increasing specific marketing strategies to particular customer networks, especially when facing low seasons (Rogers, 2010). Most of the traffic generated in online websites is driven by the marketing strategies employed by the company (Ritter, & Pedersen, 2020).

Digital media can help hotel business to influence the behaviors of its customers through a community chat on their website (Hofacker, & Belanche, 2016) and also through the creation of a large community that maintains a steady stream of clients throughout different seasons, like international hotel chains already do through Facebook Group, Twitters chats, and Instagram posts (Hashima, & Fadhil, 2017). In this way, hotels can conveniently inform their customers of new and upcoming products (De Pelsmacket, Van Tilburg, & Holthof, 2018), while customers can plan their time around the purchasing and financing of their products. It allows reaching a broader population scale, reaching potential customers scattered around the world (Boston et al., 2018).

Secondly, digital customer networking strategies are inexpensive compared to traditional mass media channels of marketing and advertising (Galati et al, 2017). It usually requires the company's marketing team to create active and interactive media profiles to reach out to customers and attract new numbers. From a digital marketing perspective, the company only requires one staff member to make a relevant post that announces the product to the market (Kaakinen & Purketastha, 2016). Sharing this information to millions of potential customers does not require financial investment, except for the organization's foundational infrastructure. Compared to traditional marketing strategies, digital marketing is less expensive and accommodate different scales of business.

Current Covid-19 pandemic provides unique opportunities for hotel businesses across the world. Being one of the most affected industries by the pandemic (Tidey, 2020), the hotel industry has to find solutions to attract customers and get visibility and competitive advantages (Dwivedi, 2020). The customers are now more than a mass of isolated individuals, and hotels can develop their

customer network strategy by knowing their behaviors and generating real value. They also must provide online and app-based services to customers, producing attractive content on websites and social media, as well as engaging customers in various campaigns. Digital customer network strategy or digital marketing strategy is, then, an inevitable part of the marketing and branding (Verhoef et al, 2019).

The present study is divided in 4 chapters. After the introduction is presented a Literature review about the state-of-the art, related to the concept, role and elements of digital marketing, strategy of digital marketing in business development and customer network. Chapter 3 explains the research methodology and finally Chapter 4 presents conclusions, limitations and suggests future research. Figure 1 summarizes the logic of this study organization.
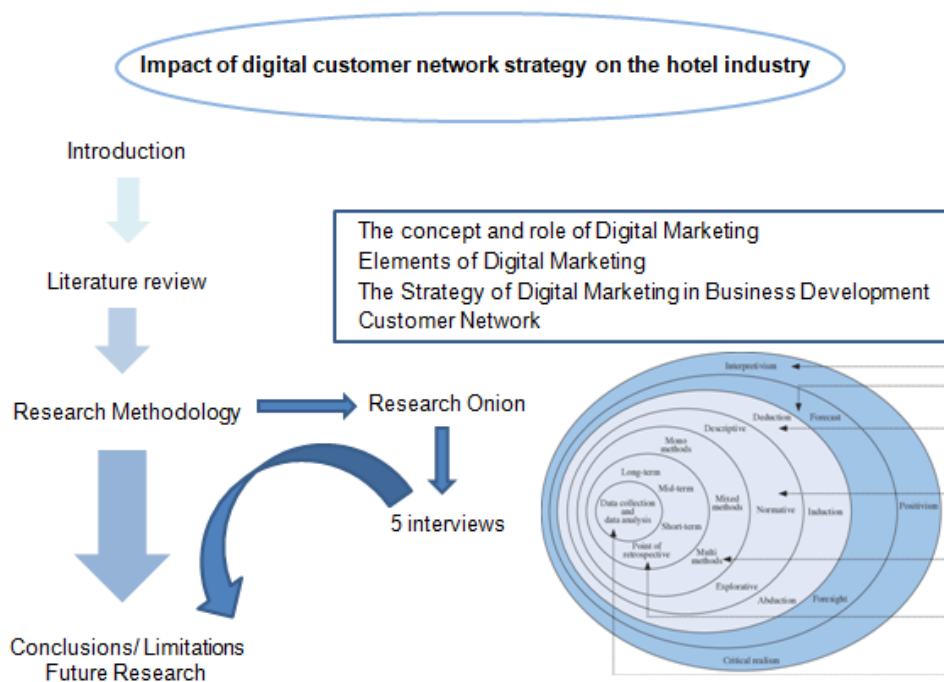
Figure 1 – Structure of the Dissertation
Source: own elaboration

Chapter 2: Literature Review

1. The concept and role of Digital Marketing

Digital marketing can be defined as management of digital technologies, which are used to create channels to reach potential recipients, aiming to achieve the enterprise's goals, through more effective fulfillment of the consumer needs (Sawicki, 2016). The Digital marketing is oftentimes considered as a synonym of Internet marketing or e-marketing, but in fact is a digital identity of a company. It consists in promotion of products or brands through one of more electronic forms, with which companies can send personalized contents to particular recipients (Sawicki, 2016).

In reference to the earlier development of fast and efficient transaction technologies, Digital marketing as a concept majorly outlines a group of processes that integrates all the digital channels around to promote a brand, product, or service. In the past decades, Digital marketing revolved around websites, but later diversified into the advertising industry and various bidding sites like Alibaba among others (Aslam, & Karjaluoto, 2017). Digital marketing is viable through the internet both as working and displaying platform (Ghotbifar, Marjani, & Ramazani, 2017). To unveil the real usefulness of Digital marketing, it is essential to consider the work scope of e-commerce specialists, which majorly involves the processes that are established and developed in an entity to identify, attract and build customer loyalty. The customization and peculiarity of Digital marketing are created by some specific and relational characteristics in various operational functions such as customer service, promotion of sales, confidentiality, security, personality, and the community, among others (Ahmed, 2019).

Digital marketing creates and leads to various dynamics not only among businesses but also among customer behavior (Baumöl, Hollebeek, & Jung, 2016). For such an environment to be operational, Digital marketing gives a unique platform for companies to identify and understand customer requirements and create various prospects for them based on the place and time. It is also useful in reducing the cost of marketing by doing away with unnecessary transactions. In the last decades, Digital marketing has rapidly undergone positive changes and developments; this is evidenced by the widespread use of the Internet by various companies in the world, majorly for product marketing and brand promotion. Other entities have fully integrated Internet facilities into their departments, which are considered as the modern platform that is necessary for the development and growth of business in the current era (UNCTAD, 2019).

2. Elements of Digital Marketing

Over the past few decades, global industries faced technological changes that led to opportunities such as greater flexibility, reactivity and product individualization. However, they also presented various challenges such as rapid technological change, increased complexity, changing customer preferences and legal requirements (Rachhinger, 2019). In such a situation, shaping digital markets involves the success factors of the traditional marketing channels by moving from the publishing of ads in magazines and newspapers to social media platforms, among other virtual platforms (Mata, Polanco, & Tusev, 2017). In this case, the tools that are connected to the internet marketing also facilitating the design and development of different transactions within different supply chains, namely: Websites, Search Engine Marketing, Social Media Marketing, Affiliate Marketing, Email Marketing, Mobile Marketing, Video Marketing, Corporate Marketing and Blogging, as can be seen on Figure 2.
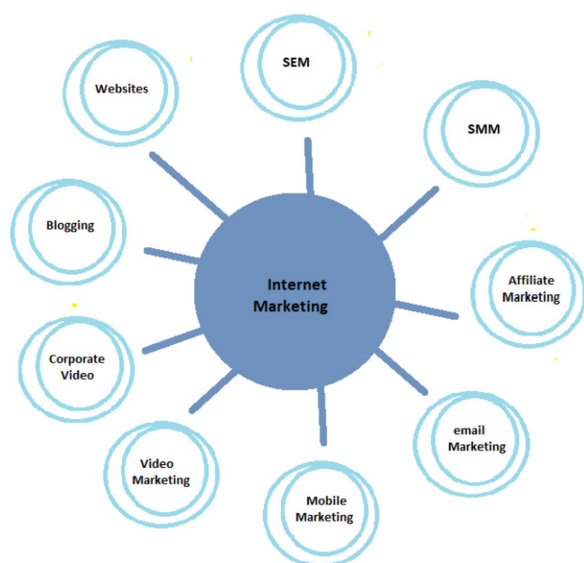
Figure 2 - Areas of Internet marketing
Source: own elaboration

Internet marketing or online marketing refers to marketing using diverse channels on the Internet. "This includes, search engine optimization, pay per click, social media marketing, e-mail marketing, web banners, digital online advertising, online marketing platform, mobile marketing (apps), content marketing to some extent, etc" (Atshaya & Srysti, 2016, p. 30).

Scholars argue that the difference between Digital marketing and marketing over the Internet is differentiated and materialized in the planning and successful development of the entity (Kannan, 2017). Digital marketing uses all the channels of electronics or electrical gadgets or the electronic media for marketing or promotion of products, services or brands. Also helps companies to analyze, record data and measure the effectiveness of all their marketing campaigns. Digital marketing actions are placed in the context of Internet marketing as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 - The structure of Digital Marketing
Source: own elaboration

Digital marketing keeps a record of the number and duration of views of any particular ad, post, etc. and the effect of it on the sales, thus measuring the total impact of it. Some of the channels associated with Digital marketing are SMS marketing, digital print ads, television marketing, radio advertising, corporate video, influence of blogging, etc. (Atshaya, & Srysti, 2016). The subsequent sections will give an in-depth explanation of the stated platform of digital platform.

2.1 Websites

Websites can either be personal or corporate websites or, in some cases, it could include an own blog that has been hosted on a marketing platform such as Wix and Wordpress. From a business perspective, a website can be useful both at the start and at the end of a Digital marketing campaign. For instance, it is understood that the marketing department of a company would conduct a Digital marketing campaign to promote a website (which is the means) to get more visitors (which is the end). Figure 4 presents various options that can establish a communication mix that is sustainable for the sake of increasing the number of visitors on a company's website.
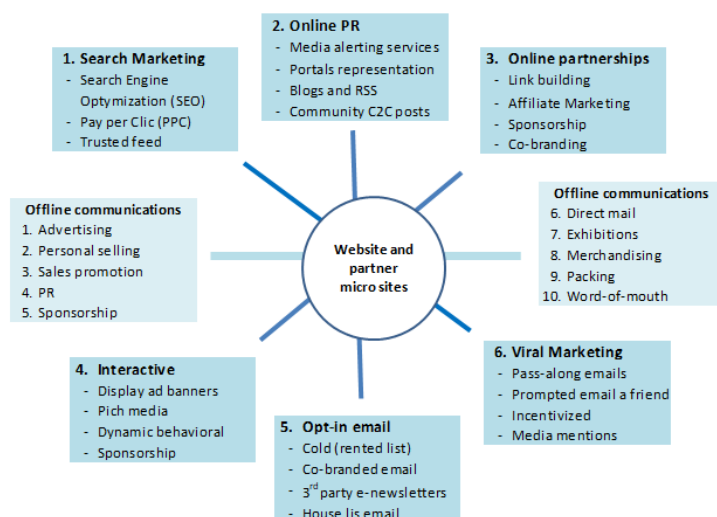
Figure 4 - Options for Communications in Digital Marketing
Source: Adapted from Bala & Verma, 2018

For example, offline communications such as word of mouth, personal selling and exhibitions would always direct a new client to the organization's website so as to learn more. A common phase that has been developed from this strategy is "to know more about the company and product kindly visit us at www…." Other framework such as online PRs, search engine marketing and opt in the email also help to promote websites, by the fact that they refer new visitors to company's website.

2.2 Search Engine Marketing (SEM)

Search Engine (SEM) is the foundation of Digital marketing and offers two main functions, which are Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Paid Search Advertising (PSA). Search Engine Optimization uses the relevant optimization structures to get higher rankings through search engines as per the options for services, products, offers, customers, suppliers, and distributors. It majorly has two elements On-Page elements SEO and Off-Page SEO. Paid Search Advertisement is meant to attract various visitors to place ads in search engines. The most common approach of doing this is Pay per Click and Google AdWords, which allows business and private users to advertise on Google and their affiliate networks (Gramatikova, 2019).

2.3 Social Media Marketing

Social Media Marketing (SMM) is also part of Digital marketing that has developed to become an essential aspect of marketing in recent years. From a business aspect, social media represents a group of internet-based applications that are mainly founded on the ideological and functional foundations of the Internet (web. 2.0 platforms), and it allows the users to create and exchange content such as videos, network links, images, sounds, and texts. The content can be used to transmit various information and promotions intended to reach a vast population. Currently, millions of users use social media daily, such as YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, Google +, Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter, among other SSM platforms. The significant number of users has prompted digital marketers and companies to focus on these platforms and to include them in digital campaigns. A study by Saura, Palos-Sanchez, & Correia (2019) reveled that useful information on various issues that are directly linked to multiple problems majorly target the commonly used platforms, frequency of social media use, companies' strategies, the budget allocated and the essence of social media in the company.

2.4 Affiliate Marketing

Experts in the Digital marketing field claim that affiliate marketing properly functions in relational terms as follows: the trader who sponsored the program, the intermediary (the individual who accepts the terms of the program), the owner of the network, which is also referred to as affiliates. The platform generates revenue in the position by offering the needed space to create various affiliate programs for businesses. The intermediary is formally contracted to meet the needs of the affiliate marketing program that is already pre-defined by the market and will be given a commission for every visitor that uses the company's site (Kumar, & Pradha, 2018).

2.5 Email Marketing

This type of marketing is among the essential tools in any Digital marketing campaign. As much as most people are using social media, e-mail remains the most efficient way of converting visitors or readers into customers (Datta, & Sanyal, 2016). However, in consideration, e-mail marketing as a concept involves the collection of e-mail addresses from the current and potential clients who are interested in the products or services offered by the company to send them different information concerning the process such as offers, newsletters, and coupons.

2.6 Mobile Marketing

Currently, it is estimated that 95% of Americans own a mobile phone, and the same trend is also increasing in other countries (Harding, & Schenkel, 2017). Therefore, there is a need to build mobile-based websites and integrate them into a company's social network or identify the products and services on the same site. It's approximated that 60% of the current traffic flows on different websites are made through mobile phones. Mobile marketing revolves around the dedication of business staff in establishing viable mobile content and adverts. Companies should, therefore, struggle to have a mobile compatible version (Costa, Borges - Tiago, & Tiago, 2018). For instance, an ad that has been received on a mobile device by users can lead to the nearest store selling the merchandise that has been stocked. In short, mobile phone owners are likely to become into potential buyers and within a short time, turn into a loyal client for a company or a brand. The best part is that this digital platform has the potential of reducing costs and can reach a wider audience. However, it is limited due to the fact that online clients can easily ignore an ad or content that they have viewed. Some clients could also falsely report an advert as spam for no proper reason.

2.7 Video Marketing

When embarking on a digital campaign, a video can be integrated into various websites (it can be the company's website or contracted/third party website) to increase traffic and reach a wider audience. The messages being conveyed in these videos ought to be relevant to the needs of the targeted audience. Hence, the video must be made in a way that is in line with the perception and understanding capabilities of both the existing customers and potential ones, or else the whole project will fail immediately after implementation because it does not appeal to the target audience (Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017).

2.8 Corporate Video

Corporate video platform would allow the development of joint entities' actions in an interactive online video mode and has proven to be effective in delivering the needed message to the targeted audience. Besides, it is easy to share and pocket friendly in terms of its creation and global access (Järvinen, 2016).

Blogging

Blogging has evolved to become very popular worldwide and does not have any barrier because of the age of members groups' interest in applying the same method (Järvinen, & Taiminen, 2016). Hence, it is therefore useful to the public due to the fact that it provides the opportunity to express its views and allows the business to capitalize on various business opportunities at a meager cost.

3. The Strategy of Digital Marketing in Business Development

From earlier discussions, it is clear that Digital marketing is among the essential types of marketing in the current era and has become popular due to the low costs associated with the processes. Using this platform, enterprises can accurately reach a targeted group of clients at the lowest price and reduced loss in marketing campaigns (Atshaya, & Srysti, 2016). Digital marketing majorly works by creating customer engagement using various platforms such as e-mails, mobile applications, social networks, and websites. Digital marketing can be done via other platforms such as TV, Radio, billboards, and SMS, as shown in Figure 3.

Digital marketing has gained its popularity because it allows marketers to target and track various aspects of the businesses, such as the customer satisfaction index and the return on investment (ROI). Satisfaction is the consumer's assessment of a product or service in terms of the extent to which that product or service has met his/her needs or expectations (Gitomer, 1998). The customer satisfaction index is self-weighting to maximize the explanation of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty. Looking at the indexes and impacts, users can determine which drivers of satisfaction, if improved, would have the most effect on customer loyalty (Ilieska, 2013). ROI is the ratio of net profit from any investment. In the field of marketing, ROI could be derived by getting the revenue received by the business minus the strategic investment cost divided by the investment cost (Negoiţă et al, 2018). By applying the method of financial formula, ROI could lead to errors in the data because it cannot easily substitute the values only because of the marketing campaign earned revenue. Most researchers have resorted to separating the expenditure for marketing. Therefore, in this regard, the subsequent sections will examine how the strategies of Digital marketing lead to business development, namely access, engagement, connection and collaboration.

3.1 Access strategy: Faster, Easier, and Convenient

With the existence of the Internet, the world has adopted a fast-moving pace. Consumers want easy and quick information from various platforms. Also, time is considered as a precious commodity that consumers are always mindful of. Fortunately, the Web provides a platform in which people can access information, and quickly, and conveniently purchases items; this is among the benefits of Internet marketing to consumers. The targeted consumers can always get quick and convenient information about a brand when they need it (Zhu, & Gao, 2019). When a company markets its products, services, or brand to the public, consumers have a convenient time of viewing it. It implies that once a Digital marketing campaign has been deployed, the website or any used platform will continuously be marketing the business. Unlike conventional marketing strategies, Internet

marketing, which is part of Digital marketing, stores information for the client to access it in the future. If the client is satisfied with the product, he can proceed to order it online at his convenience. The Internet has also developed to allow for quick transactions that do not include a lot of process and time wastage for consumers. The digital platform is much easier to access than finding a physical store to ask about a certain product (Kaur, 2017).

Additionally, the Internet provides a platform where clients can access business customer service. Most entities have resorted to offering online chats and e-mail services that would allow people to contract business whenever they needed help. It is among the benefits of Digital marketing since it will enable visitors and consumers to contact the market when it is convenient for them (Jackson, & Ahuja, 2016). The business can also be exposed to a variety of consumers who will give reviews about the company's services. The studies of these reviews are also critical in terms of developing a satisfactory customer index and the necessary strategies to be implemented to increase the client satisfaction.

3.2 Engage strategy: creating a source of valued information

With the rapidly changing business environments, new challenges, opportunities, products, issues and needs arise every day. In such an environment, consumers have the urge to stay informed and relevant to the current situation. The Internet provides an excellent platform for keeping the client informed about a particular brand, product, or service. Consumers can access a wide range of information that is relevant to their needs and at the same time, become engaged. The platform also helps clients to keep tabs on the business. In cases where there are changes in the industry, consumers expect to be able to find them immediately, and therefore, it is up to the business to find a proper channel of conveying promptly the message and at a convenient place (Järvinen, & Taiminen, 2016). Digital marketing allows the consumer to know the relevant information as soon as they emerge, and at the same time, business can inform their clients on the latest trends and changes. It is much more convenient for clients to find a business site and learn about the changes that are currently being undertaken. At the same time, they can find the necessary information about new products, services, exclusive deals, and any future events, if it will be the case.

When clients can benefit from such information, they can easily access relevant information that would help them to make the right decisions when purchasing. Information equips clients with the right to make informed decisions. In other words, convenient access to information empowers the consumer (Baltes, 2016). In the perspective of the business, Digital marketing would help to enhance the brand recognition with the audience by keeping them engaged and increasing their interest on the company's webpage. With heightened brand recognition, clients are more likely to choose the brand they recognize the most over other competitors due to the fact that they are more familiar with the brand.

3.3 Connect strategy: interacting with customers

Due the fact that most companies have embraced Digital marketing, consumers have become more critical about brands. The more information clients have about a particular product, brand, or company, the more they feel comfortable using the product/service or being associated with a

specific brand. Such an environment creates an opportunity where the business can build the necessary relationship with the companies that they trust. Thus, Digital marketing platforms have the capacity to help one to build trust with their audience. The clients have a chance of analyzing the business's materials and learn more about the company and hence convert to loyal customers (Kaltenrieder, D'Onofrio, & Portmann, 2016). Clients have the chance to have a personal connection with the business, give their respective feedbacks, and learn more about the business. Some customers might opt to sign up for newsletters or follow the company's social media pages. Due the fact that consumers are able to build a relationship with the company, they are likely to get a better customer experience and feel more valued by the company.

For the business, it is an opportunity to provide clients with a better experience since the company can learn more about the intrinsic needs of their clients and use the information to provide a better experience for them (De Ruyter, Keeling, & Ngo, 2018). At the same time, the business can get more valuable leads from this process. The entity gains new followers in social media or has new mail subscribers, which can transcend to actual consumers; it is an opportunity for the company to convert a one – time to a loyal or regular consumer.

3.4 Collaborate Strategy: sharing projects to build business

In the current environment, it is implausible that companies can exist without any relationships in the market. For example, a business might have the ability to provide its services but would need a partner to host its websites, and e-commerce platform and those that have focused on conducting e-commerce will still need other entities to supply them with the merchandizes. The digital platform is continuously evolving, and firms need resources to remain relevant in the market. These resources include the necessary Human Resources, technical skills, competence, and the right knowledge. Therefore, collaborative relationships would offer companies the prospects of accessing such resources. Digital marketing enhances collaborative marketing by allowing various activities that would allow firms to coordinate their skills, resources, and interests with non-competitors (Stephen, 2016). For example, an e-commerce business such as Alibaba would partner with local suppliers to supply them with the necessary goods needed by their clients. At the same time, a typical business would have to partner with an IT-based firm to help it in launching and running a Digital marketing campaign. Therefore, through Digital marketing Business-to-Business (B2B), links are established.

Such Business-to-Business collaborations lead to resource sharing to complement each other. Therefore, it can be assumed that the limitation in personnel, technical resources, and the infrastructure of one firm can be complemented with the other. Such strategies are essential for the sake of business survival in the current competitive environment. With the existence of resource sharing, there is a likelihood that companies would engage in risk- sharing, meaning that certain losses and uncertainties. In this case, risk sharing revolves around various exchanges that would give room for adequate flow of capital to match the joint investment and the apparent risks that are linked with the investment. The fact is that firms can collaborate and share certain risks that encourage businesses to venture into shunned investments (Subramaniam, Singhai, & Hopkinson, 2019). For example, a manufacturing firm can contract a Digital marketing firm to market its

product, and the contract could involve specific clauses such as if the manufacturing country does not attain a certain number of clients from the established channels by the Digital marketing firm, then the marketing firm would be liable to reimburse the manufacturer some percentage of the agreed sum. Risk sharing among companies would also be beneficial in terms of accommodating economic shocks in an economy (Mohinder, Rayinder, Luhach, & Vikas, 2018).

Therefore, collaborative marketing relations give some benefits to the parties that are participating in the business, by making the risk-sharing possible via the transfer of resources from different units to those that are struggling in the current changing times (Gvili, & Levy, 2016). For the sake of sustainability and long-term survival, Business-to-Business relationships prompt firms to help each other in tough economic times. Thus, a company that is not performing well in the relationship might fall back on other parties for the sake of funding, skills, or technologies that can protect them from the adversities in the environment. Besides, the existing technologies in Digital marketing can also help the same companies to improve their own *status* during an economic recession. Collaboration provides the company with various resources that would protect from different financial crises (Valos, Habibi, Casidy, Driesener. & Maplestone, 2016).

4. Customer Network

Any marketing campaign aims to help the organization to identify, satisfy and retain their current customers. Such activities are necessary for the formation of strategic customer recruitment methodologies and relationship management. For marketing practitioners, Digital marketing presents an automatic outgrowth of the marketing concept, which majorly orients the entire organization around understanding and addressing the necessary customer needs (Samran, Wahyuni, Misril, Nabila, & Putri, 2019). Technology has enabled companies to collect and analyze client information in a meaningful and great extent. The Internet has provided the necessary platforms for customers and businesses to discover each other and communicate together.

4.1 Main Reasons and Advantages

The customer network helps the firm to achieve the following outcomes: maximizing the client´s lifetime value, creating competitive advantage, turning customers into Marketers, network science, social network analysis, and capital network analysis.

4.1.1. Maximizing the Clients' Lifetime Value

The main reason for establishing a customer network is to develop a longer client lifetime value. A lengthened client lifetime value will help the business to predict how much income connects to a consumer during the progression of their overall purchases with a company or product. One-time consumers tend to have a little client lifetime value, while recurrent and devoted consumers characteristically have a high client lifetime value (Berghofer, Hofbauer, & Sangl, 2018). Therefore, digital marketing helps to turn one-time buyers into loyal clients that will, in turn, have an increased lifetime value. Digital marketing leads to a customer-oriented mindset that enables

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marketing and promotional activities to make initial contacts with clients and transcend through different stages of the client relationship, to increase the client's lifetime value. Table 1 gives a summary of the involved activities in maximizing the client's lifetime value.

Naturally, recruiting new clients in business takes more time and effort and the necessary market resources that do not require expanding the operations of the business but rather improve only the image of the company. Therefore, the only way to grow the business is through recording heightened sales from marketing activities and, as an advantage of effective client association management, decreases the fee of marketing, and subsequently increases viability.

Table 1 - Involved activities in maximizing the clients' lifetime value

Stages of Relationship	Digital Marketing Activities
Getting Acquitted by the Client	- Understanding the needs, taste and references of clients. - Identifying the desirable target customers, especially those that have the contribution of loyalty. - Create business awareness and the product that the company offers.
Offer a satisfactory customer service	- Evaluate the evolution of customer needs, tastes, and preferences. - Estimate and enhance the customer satisfaction level. - Assess and counter competitive forces.
Long term and committed relationship	- Expect and react to the evolving needs of customers - Turn the existing contract into loyal and frequent customers instead of one-time customers - Forster a personal relationship with clients to expand the reach and reliance on the product or brand in question.

Source: own elaboration

4.1.2. Source of Competitive Advantage

As the international market offers more options for customers, the relationship can evolve to primary drivers on why customers choose a company over its competitors. When consumers are satisfied with a specific product or brand, it usually simplifies their purchasing choices (Trejo, 2018). For instance, why would a female client choose to shop in Zara rather than in other stores or various online stores? It could be possible that she prefers the selections stocked by Zara and the services offered by the company. It is also possible that the practices of Zara have allowed the same clients to create a relationship with the company through the attentive after-sales services that are associated, which influenced her to make such decisions. Besides, the client could know the store's policies to its clients, such as return policy, just in case, the clothing sold does not fit them, which is essential in some cases. Delivering such satisfactory experiences would enable customers to return.

4.1.3. Turning customers into Marketers

The successful turning of clients into active marketers is an objective that every marketing campaign aims at achieving. Customer recommendations and testimonials are a robust marketing framework that is an outcome of a dynamic campaign regime. Customer relationships that result in

turning clients to marketers can persuade new clients to try out the company's products. Currently, various opportunities enable companies to engage consumers as credible marketers. If a business can build a healthy relationship, such activities are particularly fruitful (Samran et al, 2019). For instance, service providers such as private healthcare centers, therapists, hotels, and restaurants, among others, request their clients to write reviews on various platforms such as Google+. Suppliers also do the same on online platforms such as CNET.com. Even so, as much as these a wide range of consumers can access platforms, companies risk getting negative reviews; however, any positive review has the potential of attracting more clients that the company did not anticipate. In the process of writing these reviews, businesses also tend to gain the necessary feedback on what is working and what is not. Using online reviews and client systems, businesses can retool their brands, goods, services, or methods to match the needs of clients and improve the overall company outcomes.

4.2. Network worldwide communication

The Internet is currently one of the largest platforms that host various Digital marketing platforms, providing a worldwide communication platform for data exchange. The worldwide web is among the services that have been provided by the Internet and used to connect to other users. World wide web browsers like Opera browser, Google Chrome, Mozilla FireFox, and Apple Safari, among other browsers, allow internet users to move from one website to the other and easily browse the web (Centobelli, Cerchione, Esposito, & Raffa, 2016). The same Internet also enables quick communication that would quickly build up high quality connecting among various people across the globe. E-mail is among the essential communication platforms that are available on the Internet, facilitating file sharing and vast amounts of data.

The Internet has led to a massive social impact due to the fact that has expertly facilitated new forms. With the expansion of Web, 2.0, individuals and companies can easily create webpages and apps that are more practical and easier to use, but can manipulate data. Digital marketing is among the most important usages of Internet and social media marketing. In this sense, virtual networks create economic value by establishing the necessary groups for a particular brand, ads, and fan pages (Ul Haq, Majeed, Magoulas, & Jamal, 2020). In recent development, social media has been used to create online surveys and update clients on what is happening. For example, airlines have used social media platforms to give updates on flight cancellation, delay, and any additional information that the customer might need to know.

4.3. Social Network Analysis

Software Network Analysis is majorly founded on the network theory utilizing nodes that represent various groups and individuals and ties which represent any form of relationship between them, like blogger opinions, Twitter followers, e-mail, and e-mail correspondence, among other hyperlinks (Herttua, Jakob, Nave, Gupta, & Zylka, 2016). For instance, a marketing strategy can be assessed using a social network analysis such as NodeXL, which operates as an open-source tool for network visualization. Such a tool can be used in marketing applications when defining the best offers for some clients, the most effective promotional campaign, the identification of new product opportunities and improved customers services. Social Network tools also help marketers to

identify brand ambassadors and loyal customers who are active and vocal in various online platforms.

Apart from NodeXL, Gephi is also an open-source visualization tool and exploration platform in any social network that can accommodate between 50,000 to 1 million edges. It has the potential of generating the necessary metrics, identify various sub-clusters and focus on some specific nodes in a network. The application can be used to analyze various groups on twitter, e-mail, and Facebook, among others. These tools identify the most influential people in a network and also those who are isolated (Stankovska, Josimovski, & Edwards, 2016). Generally, the tools measure the role of every individual in a social network by identifying the leaders and followers, the leading network, and the periphery. Another fundamental significance use of Social Network Analysis is to measure closeness or centrality since it represents the speed of information that is distributed among various nodes.

Bhandari & Bansal (2019) provided a case study of a business that used SNA on a brand page on Facebook. The researchers conducted the case study in Greece, where YouTube is the most widespread social media stand being used at 93%, followed by Facebook at 82%. Besides, social media is continuously adopted by the population in Greece (Bhandari, & Bansal, 2019). Recent trends have shown that both the younger and the older residents are continually embracing the use of social media. Facebook is perceived to be among the most significant platforms to communicate the ideologies of people and share them across various populations. Other platforms such as twitter Snapchat and Instagram are also attaining more prominence. The case study explored multiple ways in which companies could identify social media influencers not using the insights provided by Facebook through SNA frameworks and the tools that support such processes, such as NodeXL.

The case study is relevant to this study because it involves a Greek company that makes traditional coffee. The researchers conducted the study between August 2013 to October 2013, and the page in question had 168,651 followers. The data was collected using NodeXL features. The analysis was in three primary levels that are, between posts, between the followers and between followers and posts. The researchers analyzed the social interaction between the users, the content that the company made, and the posts commenting on the material. The researchers calculated network cluster using the Clauset-Newman-Moore algorithm (Figure 5).
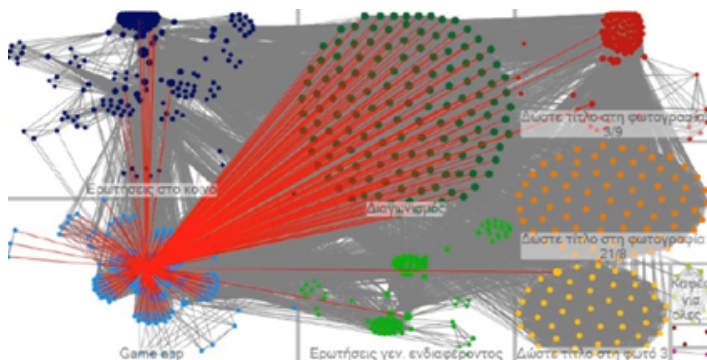
Figure 5 - Followers Network Cluster
Source: Clauset, Newman, & Moore (2004)

The study unveiled that games and contests activities are among the most popular types of posts among the page users because they elicited more reactions from the page's followers. Most content posted in the Fan Page had a photographic attachment, even if the marketer provided it via a link. The researcher conducted a post-post analysis, user-user analysis, and post-user examination. In the post-post examination, the investigators examined the contents that were established by the page administrators and the connections among the users are dependent on their comments in the same post. Next figure (Figure 6) presents the studied post interaction analysis.

Figure 6 - Post Interaction Analysis
Source: Clauset, Newman, & Moore (2004)

The nodes are content that is linked as per the users that could have commented on both materials. It also reveals the thickness that varies depending on the number of individuals that have commented on either post. It also stated that the thickness differs depending on the sum of individuals that have commented on both postings. From Figure 6, one can see how the betweenness and degree centrality have different metrics. It is also visible that the nodes in the square are linked to fewer nodes when comparing them with the node in the circle. Though the magnitude of certainty is less, its betweenness centrality is highest as compared to the other because it is in the path of nodes that are independent from other. At the same time, the circled one has various connections, but each user connects to the other in one way or the other. Creating content and actively interacting with clients seems to have a positive outcome on the business.

The last type of cross-examination was between the posts and users. Nodes in Figure 7 represent both the post and users and are connected following which the post every user gave a remark. The blue nodes stand for male consumers while the red ones stand for female one, while the purple nodes represent the posts. From figure 7, it is clear that women are actively engaged in the posts in comparison to men. Secondly, the other crucial analysis conducted showed that the essence of social capital is the analysis between users. From the study it is clear that the eigenvector centrality of the page is more in the graph because it was effective in responding to the contents posted by users in the company's group.
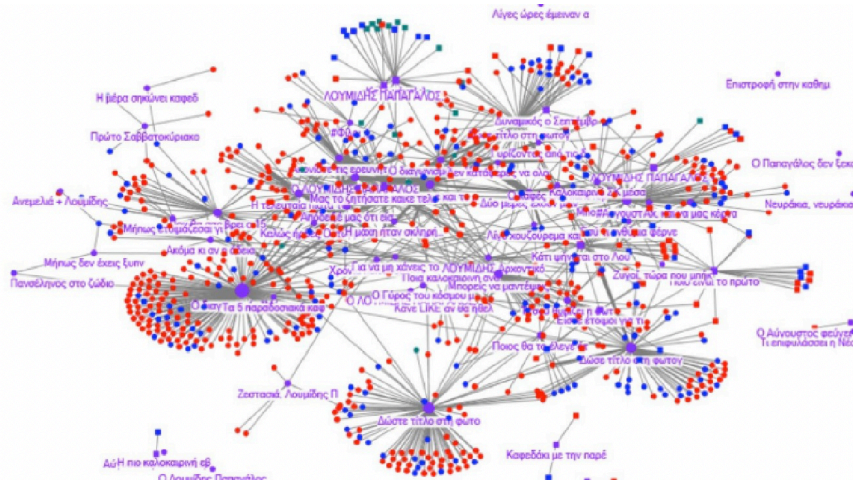
Figure 7 - Analysis of Users and Postings
Source: Clauset, Newman, & Moore (2004)

In fact, the growth of the intent and social media has revolutionized various relationships between companies, their products, and consumers, which has rendered the traditional marketing techniques absolute and promoted digital marketing techniques. Currently, consumers develop an array of brand relationships that connect with a more significant number of brands in comparison to the previous years, using social media and other virtual platforms, without engaging the manufactures or the brand owners. Such relationships are always out of control for manufacturers or retailers (Mandal & Joshi, 2017). After the purchase and consumption of the product or services, clients still actively engage in activities that would praise, promote, or demote the product or services that they once bought. In this manner, customers contributed to the development of the brand and determined future marketing strategies. Such networks are a source of value for both the business and the consumer and are a metric of social capital that the social network established by the creation of active systems of customers and brands.

The more the consumer is involved in a brand or product's networks, the more advantage derived from the participation of the same network. A study conducted by Rohm, Stefl, & Saint Clair (2019) revealed that the focus of economic literature in the meaning and essence of social capital on both the individual's incentive to interact and out of self-interest, to invest in social capital and the system and the effect of both the informal and formal institutions. Social capital provides more benefits to the active users of a social network in comparison with those who are not active. The derived benefits are in the form of focusing on the access of information and other resources, enhanced coordination as an outcome of a higher level of trust, control on the flow of information, and the necessary resources that create content and value. As per the findings of a study by Taneja & Vij (2019) who conducted a factor analysis to unveil the primary motivations of people who are participating into Facebook groups. The study found that most people engage in this practice for entertainment, socialization, and self-seeking and to find the necessary information that is relevant to the social capital in that system. The fundamental aspect of the social network is the role that trusts plays in sustaining the network since a higher level of communal social capital is likely to have the ability to build consumer trust. Once a consumer trusts in the product, they are likely to be

loyal to the band. It leads to the establishment of social capital in a network. The information that social media users pass through online platforms could be perceived to be correct by other clients because of the dependability and knowledge of the community members. Most individuals in various digital platforms are content consumers or passive observers. Content creators, on the other hand, add value to the platforms by updating information and sharing product content. In the process of consumer interactions through social communities, content creators exhibit higher levels of involvement. Active participation can help to establish higher loyalty by building up social capital.

4.4. Network based Marketing

Companies consider possible that network-based marketing is more profitable than traditional marketing, not only because targeting costs can be low, but also because adoption rates are supposed to be higher (Rosenbaum, & Rubin, 1984). In addition, traditional marketing methods do not appeal to some segments of consumers. Some consumers apparently value the appearance of being on the cutting edge or "in the know," and therefore derive satisfaction from promoting new, exciting products (Hill, Provost, & Volinsky, 2006). In this sense, there are three major complementary networks in digital marketing, namely: Explicit Advocacy, Implicit Advocacy and Network Targeting.

4.4.1. Explicit Advocacy

In such a network, individuals are converted into vocal marketers for the brand or product by recommending it to their acquaintances (Ek Styvén, & Wallstrom, 2019). The success of previous products has been due to such networks; for example, 'The Da Vinci Code' became popular mainly due to the fact that the initial readers were able to convince third parties to read the book. When marketing the book, close to 10,000 copies were given to various influential figures for free to stimulate sales for the paid edition. In cases, where businesses decide to give incentives to consumers to market it through word of mouth, the type of marketing is usually referred to as viral marketing, though the term has also been used to describe network-based marketing which involves a pattern of awareness or adoption that is spread from one consumer to the other.

4.4.2. Implicit Advocacy

In some cases, individuals fail to speak about a particular product, might market it through their advocacy, which is majorly through their own adoption of the product (Arkhipova, Abaev, & Gurieva, 2017). Designer labeling has a history of using consumers as implicit advocacy. In this case, companies will capitalize on influential personalities such as media presenters and athletes to promote their product by conspicuously adopting them (Ivanov, 2019). In recent times, companies have made an effort to go inducing the same effect by convincing individuals who are deemed as 'cool' by their respective societies to adopt their products.

4.4.3. Network Targeting

In network targeting, firms ought to have a means of identifying the social neighbors of their previous clients. Network target involves either implicit and explicit advocacy frameworks based on the situation or underlying that calls for appropriate type of advocacy. To get social neighbors, the company can use both implicit and explicit advocacy (Copulsky, Richardson, & Simone, 2017). An example of a campaign that involved implicit advocacy and network targeting is the Hotmail service, which appended a link on the bottom of every mail sent with a message "get a free e-mail at Hotmail," thus targeting the social neighbors of their current users, while at the same time applying the principles of implicit advocacy. The approach leads to an increase in clients using Hotmail. In the first month the company recorded an increase of 20,000 customers in July 1996, by September, the number has increased to 100,000, and by April 1997, the number of subscribers had risen to 1 million.

The outcomes that have been achieved through customer networks has made firms to embrace this type of marketing as compared to the physical marketing activities; this is because network marketing targets the right clientele in the market, it is cheaper and targeting costs are also low. Besides, the adoption rates realized through network marketing are high as compared to other methodologies. Additionally, traditional marketing approaches fail to appeal to some segment of consumers. A primary assumption is that network-based marketing only propagates positive information about a product, service, or brand after consumers have been made aware by other approaches to marketing inform customers.

As an outcome, there are various tools now as compared to the previous years that can facilitate companies to maintain and manage their relationships.

4.5. Behaviours of Customers Networks in Digital Age

In the current market, most consumers tend to learn about brands through the Internet (Barreto, Barbosa, & Barbosa, 2020). Consumers have the potential of generating more than 500 billion impressions on a product or service in a year through social networks, which is about a quarter of the total number of ideologies that companies create via online advertising (Li, Vlassis, Kawale, & Fu, 2016). These online impressions help other parties to know more about a particular brand or product. In a study by Alam, Wang, & Waheed (2019) over 50% of all the users were able to remember an ad when their friends appeared in it. Thus, for one to truly understand consumer behavior in social networks, it is essential to unveil their motivations for using these sites.

A study by Dahl, D'Alessandro, Peltier, & Swan (2018) using SNA revealed that the main reason why people use social networks is to communicate with other people that the individual interacts with frequently, to keep in touch with those people that they rarely meet and to rekindle old relationships. Social capital is the linkages within and between these platforms. Social network platforms facilitate users to maintain and establish relationships with more robust bonds with those people that they are adjacent to, and weaker ties with those people who they are less adjacent with and eventually essential social capital.

Establishing relationships with more fragile relations is referred to as social capital, and it is facilitated by the capacity of social network services to allow users to have various means of maintaining more than one distant relationship. Watrobski, Jankowski, & Ziemba (2016) documented that in cases where people have the right access to the devices that would allow them to connect to the internet, they are free to communicate with various people whom they did not know before. The formation of such a connection could never be possible without the Internet. Once there are some forms of communication between the newly formed ties, there is a possibility that such linkages might grow to become stronger ties. The development of these ties is made possible by the existence of the Internet. At some point, marketers perceived the Internet as a medium that would decrease social capital. However, Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick (2019) stated that the Internet maintains and supplements social networks when used in the right context. Acquaintances and friendships are part of an essential role of social networks by allowing the users to discover friends within their network and to distinguish the fabric of the community. Having online acquaintances is as easy as sending a 'friend' invitation, irrespective of whether one knows the other party or not. The development of such ties in online platforms is essential because new information is likely to be acquired from such networks.

According to Swist, Hodgle, & Collin (2016), the development of digital technology has rendered the traditional factors of advertisement obsolete. Besides, the media and market have become more fragmented. The evolution of digital platforms has rendered consumers more empowered and paved a modern era for prompt producer-consumer interaction. Besides, the Internet has turned consumers into knowledgeable people. The difference between the new consumer and the traditional consumer is that the current consumer is more knowledgeable about various goods and services and could play a crucial part in enhancing these services, products, or brands. Moreover, due to the existence of a close community of consumers and widespread knowledge would only be exploited by a business only in cases where they know that the exploiter would give value-added services or products (Swist, Hodgle, & Collin, 2016). This new breed of consumers could use the Internet and tell the brand owners what they want, their expectations, and their thoughts (Kim, 2016). In short, the client makes clearly their demands and needs, and it is up to the business to deliver.

Social networks have contributed to the establishment of the traits exhibited by the current consumer, which allows them to take part in a brand, service, or product discussion, assess the posted information, and share it with other consumers. They also have a platform to share their opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts regarding to the content shared by the company. Jackson & Ahuja (2016) argued that the existence of these close clusters of consumers is an indicator that power is shifting from brand owners and marketers and to the current consumers. Because of the satisfaction drawn by members by the virtue that they belong to a particular group that is enabled by social networks, they can attain the influence of the majority to the entities through digital groups, which has brought them in one space. Given the currently existing factors, marketers and manufactures should consider engaging with clients through online platforms. This type of marketing can be described as a virtual relationship marketing (Haq, 2017). The current customer will always anticipate receiving something as a result of their contribution. Therefore, it is upon the marketer or the business to offer these consumers incentives that will keep them engaged in these

platforms. Consequently, it is never about pushing the message to the consumer. The essential part is creating a meaningful conversation with this group.

4.6. The effects of Customers behaviours on marketing strategy of companies

Concerning the connectedness through social networks, Kingsnorth (2016) states that the potential of these platforms offers regarding reaching out to a higher number of consumers. This author also illustrated the prolific network of contacts that a marketer or a company can utilize to reach out to potential clients. Social networks have nodes with various links that can extend to other nodes in various areas, such that networks connect to each other via ordinary members. These networks operate on the principle of expansion and privileged add-on and outline the essence of connectedness and vital mass within social networks. In case a member/ a connection has various connections, they will have multiple systems and are expected to have contacts, links, and more acquaintances. The same connectedness will, in turn, increase the chances of connections to other systems and therefore broaden communication abilities and reach out to a growing colossal network. The same networks can also be a source of medium for companies to establish word of mouth regarding the products, services, and brands. Chester & Montgomery (2017) grouped social network influencers into mavens, salespersons, and connectors. Franssen, Rombaut, Devroe, & Stevens (2016) added that these influencer clusters could also be helpful in an online setting. The author stated that mavens are individuals who gather product and service information and are requested by other users to give information concerning the services and products in question. On the other hand, connectors majorly connect marketers to other people they know. Lastly, salespersons are those people who influence other users to buy or refrain from purchasing the product or question in question.

Candraningrum (2019) argues that most members of a social network have similar behaviors as their connectors. Even so, in displaying these traits, they lack the key elements that influencers have, which are not discussing various products and services in their platforms as influencers do. Thus, how to group social network users to organize themselves into engaging in focused conversations and turn clients into connectors is the most significant issue facing marketers. Technology-enabled various linkages of collaboration, having an extended social network to become a worldwide instrument of interaction between social players with significant consequences for the sake of distributing and influencing markets and interactions. Besides, it will have an impact on the mandate of consumers in creating value addition to the product/ service proposition and offering. However, there is a need for another methodology of reaching and engaging with clients in online social networks and the consideration of power that consumers have because of the existence of such systems: the strength and the types of ties (weak or strong) play a crucial part in the decision-making procedure and purchasing patterns of clients. Additionally, a two-means discourse between the evidence's source and the customer will have a more profound influence in comparison to one-way communication.

Another study conducted by Aswathy & Nair (2020) among 900 business individuals in the Business-to-Business sector revealed that the interviewed subjects' professional connection was extremely worthy in respect to their level of influence and the recommendations that would give on

other contacts. However, this study failed to outline that the most trusted sources of information in the network consisted of friends and professional contacts. It is essential for marketing models to dedicate various resources towards engaging with the reception brink of marketing communication by encouraging influencers that are not part of the company to advertise and promote their services, products, or the generic brand. Also it is relevant for marketers, concerning the increasing in consumer power, to include customer advocacy in the process of marketing a product or brand (Patrutiu-Baltes, 2016). Customers can also look for information that will assist in the process of decision-making and buy products from various sources, which have been given by technologies, especially on the Internet.

Moreover, Turnbull & Jenkins (2016) reported that in the past, if clients were dissatisfied, they would only tell only the closest people around them who are fewer in numbers, which would imply that the company could only lose a handful number of consumers. But through the Internet, dissatisfied customers can tell various friends on the effects of the product, and the result would be detrimental for the company. The advantage of this type of communication (word-of-mouth), is the degree to which the consumers' communication can reach a wider variety of clients, and provide extended opportunities for the company. Rao, Srivatsala, & Suneetha (2016) outlined that client advocacy means adrift from the traditional procedures of promotion to that of a firm by giving an open, authentic, and holistic evidence to customers.

Instead of pushing a product's market onto consumers, marketers should consider dialoguing with their clients to gain their trust. Generally, this is the future of marketing since it hugely recognizes that consumers are in control of the whole process as opposed to the traditional forms of marketing. Rao et al. (2016) stated that information technology has resulted in established consumer-producer collaborative relationships. The authors outlined that, as customers are continuously becoming less trusting of companies, the remaining trust should direct in those companies that work in tandem with them when developing products and services. However, consumers trust each other a lot as compared to the manufacturer; they tend to find the information given by their fellow consumers as credible. Producers and marketers should never ignore the influence that clients have on their fellow consumers in terms of passing various messages. Marketers should note that an individual's social network does not finish with their direct network. However, users can pass communications from one system to another provided that there is commonality of members in one or two more networks. Consumers trust in each other, and social network platforms have the potential as a word-of-mouth communications medium in regards to the services, brands, and products (Ridge-Newman, & Mitchell, 2016). The main concern for marketers and firms should be how to generate this faith and dialogue with various consumers and inspire them to influence other consumers by passing on the marketing/promotional messages and recommendations to each other.

Consumers that use social platforms view these spheres as their personal space, where they can freely air out their opinions, beliefs, insights, and thoughts with those that have similar interests. The capacity to become broadcaster and share vital information has allowed consumers to become more influential and command their needs and anticipate from the brand, business, or the marketers (Dodson, 2016). Empowered consumers expect that companies should meet their

demands. With the appropriate use of social networks, platforms can be a means for entities to engage with consumers and encourage them to pass on the firm's messages to their networks that the company established on-site. Since consumers spend most of their time on social networks, engaging them through these platforms is an essential act.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

1. Introduction

Research methodology refers to "a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge" (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016, p.124). It plays a "vital role in academic research" (Crisan & Borza, 2015, p.38) and its aim is to provide a structure for planning and do operational activities that follow up the carrying out of the procedures (Gupta, 2016).

2. Research Problem definition

It is important to have a clear and specific focus for the research from the beginning (Cameron & Price, 2009, p.189-190), as stakeholders must clearly understand what the research project is trying to achieve. For the purpose of the present Thesis, the research Question is expressed as follows: "What is the impact of digital customer network strategy on the hotel industry".

3. Research Objective

While "research Questions is What different digital media strategies the hotel industry use to position itself in the competitive environment generally more accepted as an evidence of researchers clear sense of purpose and direction" (Saunders et al., 2016, pp.45-46), research objectives express how the researcher intends to structure the entire research process in order to answer the research Question. Research objectives complement a research Question and provide means to put into operation it (Gupta, 2016).

The main goal of the Thesis was to examine how the digital network strategy influences the hotel business. From the main goal, it was essential to outline specific objectives.

For the present research the specific objectives are additionally intended to understand:

- To investigate the overall influence of digital technology on the hotel industry;

- To examine the impact of social media marketing on the hotel business;

- To explore whether SEO strategy is impactful in the hotel industry;

- To explore the role of the website in boosting the hotel industry;

- To investigate the challenges and risks in the use of social network.

4. Methodology introduction

The research methodology consists of several steps, which have been illustrated in different layers by Saunders et al. (2016). It is an attempt to analyze the methodology with the help of Saunders's research onion (figure 8), which is as follows:
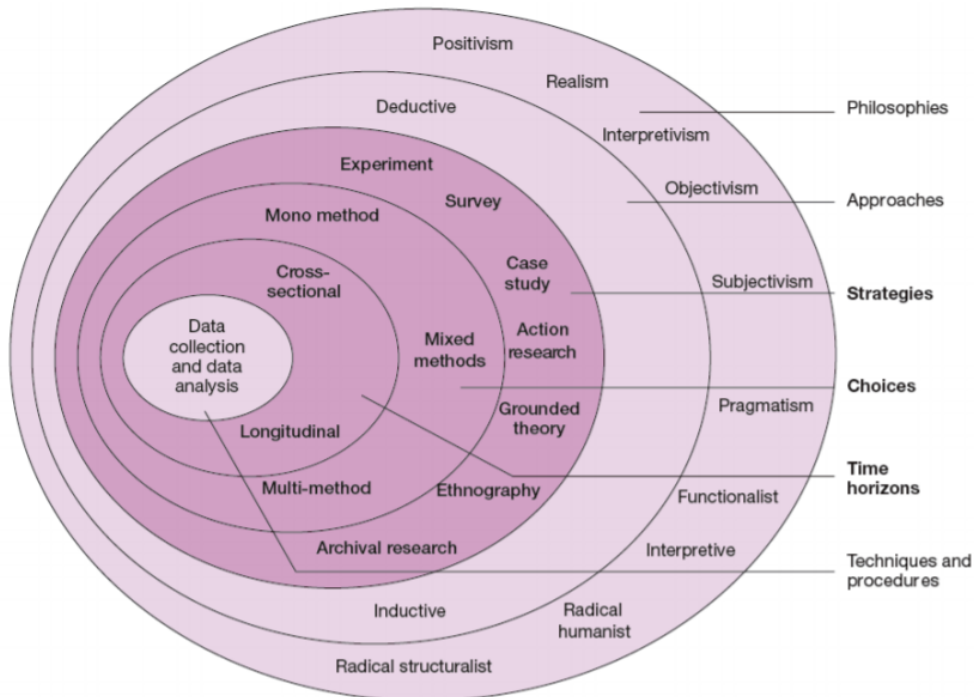
Figure 8 - Research Onion
Source: Saunders et al. (2016)

Research is, according to Saunders et al. (2016), something that people assume to find out things in a systematic way, thus raising their knowledge. Research "onion" is classified into six stages: philosophy, approach, choice, strategy, time horizon and techniques & procedures. This model suggests a comprehensible structure for the appropriate strategies to address a research question. According to Saunders et al. (2012), the research onion should be used from the outer layer to the inner layer. Accordingly, the outer layer of the onion is the research philosophy.

This topic details the adopted research process. It also explains the data collection and data analysis methods that will be employed, including a justification for the selection of approach and method. Moreover, the section continues with a discussion of the limitation of the methodology.

4.1 Research Philosophy

As stated by Saunders et al. (2016) in the research onion, there are three types of research philosophy: positivism, realism and interpretivism.

The positivist philosophy takes a stance of objectivism. In it, the role of the researcher is neutral to narrate the facts without any influence from external faculties such as cultural, social, moral, religious beliefs and the past experiences of the researcher. According to Easterby-Smith & Lowe (2002), positivist research is based on formulating hypotheses and their testing. The hypotheses are measured and analyzed by applying multiple statistical formulas. In the present thesis, no hypotheses have been formulated. The main goal is to analyze the impact of digital customers network or digital marketing on the hotel industry. The researcher does not intend to measure the impact on any statistical or mathematical tool. On the contrary, it is attempted to analyze in what ways this impact is there on the hotel industry and whether the impact is positive or negative.

Realism is the philosophy of research that focuses on inquiring reality scientifically. Our sense projects this reality as truth. There are two forms of realistic research philosophy, direct realism and critical realism. Direct realism is used for action research. The observation of the participants and the world around them is also crucial for direct realism. Critical realism uses qualitative methods (which will be discussed later in the same section), such as convergent interviews and case studies (Rowlands, 2005). The present research partially adopts the realism philosophy as it relies on such convergent interviews for gathering the data. However, like realism, the case study method has not been used for the research. The present research does not follow the viewpoint of realism that the objects are independent of the human mind.

Interpretivism is the knowledge and interpretation of the social role of others in accordance with the viewpoints or perspectives of the researcher. In this, researcher tries to analyze human emotions and the social role. In interpretivism, the methods used are interviews, observations and analysis of the existing texts. Rowlands (2005) states that in interpretivism, the researcher interacts with other people (interviewees) and he/she constructs a meaningful reality by collaborating with the people through interview sessions. In the present thesis, the researcher has followed the same method of collaborating with the people through long interview sessions. Therefore, the present thesis follows the interpretive research philosophy.

4.2 Research Approaches

Saunders et al. (2016) refer to the two research approaches: deductive and inductive approach. The deductive approach is like a waterfall or top-down approach in which the researcher works from general to specific. Firstly the theories are studied, and based on that, the researcher formulates hypotheses/ hypotheses, which are analyzed by using quantitative methods or statistical analysis. The last step is to derive a conclusion. The inductive approach is also known as a bottom-top approach in which the researcher follows the hill-climbing process. The researcher here works from specific to general. The attributes of both of these approaches are given below, on Table 2.

Table 2 - Inductive & Deductive Research Approaches

Inductive approach	Deductive approach
• Qualitative method is used, and the concepts are related to the same method.	• The concepts are related to quantitative analysis
• The researcher maintains subjectivity	• The researcher's approach is objective
• Open-ended questions are used in which the participants have a lot of scopes to talk in detail on the topic.	• The question types are close-ended such as multiple-choice, Likert scale yes/no type
• Narrative type	• Numerical and statistical inference
• Meanings are derived instead of causation	• Based on causation

Source: own elaboration

For the present thesis, the research approach is inductive, in which the researcher intends to use a thematic analysis. One of the popular methods of qualitative approach, i.e., coding, will be used for the analysis. It is hard to maintain objectivity in the research considering its objectives, for data analysis, the narrative type. Every theme derived from the coding will be analyzed narratively.

4.3 Research Strategies

Five types of research strategies are mentioned in the third outer layer of the research onion. In Table 3, all these types are mentioned in one column. In the second column of the table, the description of each of the types is given. In the third column, yes or no is mentioned. It means whether the research follows the strategy or not.

Table 3 - Types of research strategies and type of the present thesis

Research Strategies	Description	Use
Experiment	Laboratory experiments are conducted to obtain primary data. Two types of experiments are performed; true experiments and quasi-experiments	No
Survey	List of questions (Questionnaire) distributed to the participants. Usually, the number of participants is high. The survey can be conducted via phone, emails, face-to-face or internet.	No
Case study	Obtaining data from a single individual, group, events, organization/s to conduct research	No
Grounded Theory	It is a systematic qualitative inductive approach of researching developing theories	No
Ethnographic	This strategy examines the behavior and base on the observation of the group. Thorough interviews of the focus group are conducted. There are two types: Classic and contemporary ethnographic research (The group in the study become from different places)	Yes
Action research	A real-world problem is taken, and the research is conducted to resolve the problem with a practical, rational, and logical solution.	No

Source: own elaboration

4.4 Time Horizon

When the research is conducted one-time, it is called cross-sectional or short-term research. The data is collected only once, and a specific point of time. On the contrary, the other type of research is longitudinal research in which the data is collected repeatedly over a long period. The data collected in different time horizons are compared. The present research aims at conducting cross-sectional research in which the researcher has conducted the data one time. There is not a comparative analysis.

4.5 The Data Collection Methods

Saunders et al. (2016) propose different types of data collection methods. The two types of data are the primary data and secondary data. There are the following sources of obtaining primary data, namely: Interview, Survey, Experiment, and Observations.

In the interview, the semi-structured or unstructured interview questions are incorporated. The interview questions are usually open-ended or wh-type questions. The interview session can last 30 to 60 minutes. Due to the time-consuming process, the number of participants is limited. The more participants, the more will be the complicated and time-consuming process. However, the researcher manages to gain even subtle details through interviews. The participants become more open once the process starts. If the researcher is approachable and makes the participants relaxed, they are likely to talk freely and openly. In this process, the role and overall approach of the research are crucial indeed to obtain detail and maximum information from the participants.

In the present thesis, the researcher has conducted interviews with five general managers (GMs) of five hotels. It is a convenience sampling, also known as haphazard sampling or accidental sampling, because the interviewed were chosen due their easy accessibility, availability at a given time and willingness to participate. Although commonly used in research, it is neither purposeful nor strategic (Palinkas, Green, Wisdom, & Hoagwood, 2013). The main supposition associated with convenience sampling is that the members of the target population are homogeneous. That is, that there would be no difference in the research results achieved from a random sample, a nearby sample, a co-operative sample, or a sample gathered in some inaccessible part of the population (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2015). One of obvious disadvantage of convenience sampling is that it is likely to be biased (Mackey, & Gass, 2005), but the author of the present Thesis is aware of it and presents it as an exploratory study.

For the interviews, an interview guided was prepared (Annex I). The interview questions are divided into four different parts. In the first part, the researcher asked them some demographic questions such as their years of experience in the hotel industry, their educational background and their duties and responsibilities. The second section of the interview is the web and social network, which is one of the key concepts of our research aim. Eleven questions are formulated under this section. In the third part, the questions are based on the key goals of social media in the context of the hotel industry. A total of six questions are included in this section. The fourth and last part of the interview consists of the questions related to the impact of using social media. In annex (Annex II) the questions of the interviews are presented.

Table 4 - Research Stages

Layers	Types of Research	Applying
Philosophies	Positivism, Realism, and Interpretivism	The interpretive research philosophy
Approaches	Deductive and Inductive	Inductive approach
Strategies	Experiment, Servey, Case Study, Grounded Theory, Ethnographic, and Action research.	Ethnographic
Choices	Mono, Mixed, and Multi method	Mono method
Time Horizons	Cross-sectional and Longitudinal research	Cross-sectional Research
Procedures	Primary and Secondary data	Primary Data

Source: own elaboration

4.6 Pilot Testing

As stated by Saunders et al. (2016, p.273), "pilot study is crucial before the actual interview process. Pilot testing is a process in which the researcher finds out whether the respondents will likely face any issue during the interview process". The difficulty can be anything such as technical, or understanding problems etc. A pilot study helps to keep the research accurate.

4.7 Data Analysis Steps

The research follows thematic analysis, one of the most commonly used methods of qualitative data analysis. The obtained data from the interview is analyzed by identifying common themes of the interviews. The thematic analysis has both an inductive and deductive approach. In the inductive approach, the procured data determine the theme, whereas the deductive approach comes with some preconceived themes or existing theories. The thematic analysis is conducted with the following steps:

Step 1: Familiarization: Familiarization is the first stage in which the researcher makes himself familiarized with the procured data. He/she tries to know what the data states. Transcription of the data is the common way of familiarizing with the data. The researcher recorded the interviews conducted with the five GMs of the hotels. It is not practical to transcribe the interviews because the interviewees sometimes are informal in their tone and using the vocabulary. Sometimes, there were fragmentary sentences that cannot be included in the analysis part, as they do not sound academic. Therefore, the transcribed interviews were paraphrased to bring an academic tone in the language.

Step 2: Coding: After paraphrasing the data, it was coded. The key phrases and sentences from the paraphrased material were highlighted, and they were put short labels or codes. The extracts from the interviews were highlighted in different colors for different codes. Only relevant information was extracted. The phrases or sentences that indicate the same ideas were incorporated into a single code. Thus different codes were formulated.

Step 3: Generating Themes: The theme is the concept broader than the codes. The theme is made with incorporating different codes. The patterns among the codes were identified, and

thus the broader themes were developed. In this process, the irrelevant codes were discarded, and thus the themes were finalized.

Step 4: Reviewing Themes: In these steps, the researcher obtained the relevant, useful and accurate themes to analyze the data precisely. In this process, the researcher made sure whether the themes are related to the aims and objectives of the research. They were split, sometimes combined, discarded them to create the most relevant and effective themes.

Step 5: Defining themes: After making the list of most relevant, useful, and accurate themes, the final list of the themes were made. In the process of defining the themes, the researcher precisely explained what the meaning of each theme and its usefulness in the context of the research is. While defining the themes, the succinct and simple names were chosen for each theme.

Step 6: Writing analysis: The formulated themes were analyzed thoroughly. It is an academic and in-depth analysis conducted from different dimensions and perspectives. The analysis is written in an organized and logical manner so that the researcher can reach a precise conclusion.

4.8 Errors and Biases in Research

The term research bias is associated with the deviation from the truth in different phases of the research, such as data collection, data analysis, and interpretation. Sometimes, due to such deviations, the researcher is likely to derive a biased conclusion. Biases in research can be intentional or unintentional. The critical bias in this research is the external barriers that were prevalent during the interview. Some parts of the interviews had been interrupted by the outside sounds, technical issues such as interrupted recording. It was also observed that some of the GMs were distracting from the main question. Sometimes the interviewer could not get precise answers to some of the questions.

4.9 Ethical Consideration

Research is an ethical process in which transparency and integrity are of the utmost important issues. During the entire process of research, the researcher has to abide by the ethical compliances. Major ethical implications of the research are as follows:

4.9.1 Voluntary Participation

Five GMs from the hotels participated in the interview sessions. Their participation was voluntary, and the researcher took their consent for joining the interview sessions. They were not forced, and they had the right to withdraw themselves from the interview at any stage if they wanted to do so.

4.9.2 Privacy and respect of the respondents

Keeping the identity of the participants is a very crucial part of ethical consideration. Instead of mentioning the names of the participants, the researcher called them by initial letters of their

names; GM P, GM D, GM N, GM T, and GM J. They were honored and respected while asking the questions to them. Keeping the dignity and respecting of the precious time of the participants, the researcher asked the respondents their convenient time at the time of inviting them for the interview sessions.

4.9.3 Use of language and formulation of questions

The researcher did not use any offensive or derogatory language while asking questions. No discriminatory questions based on race, religion, ethnicity, and gender were asked. The questions were only related to the research objectives. No other personal or controversial topics were discussed during the research process.

4.9.4 Honesty and transparency

The researcher demonstrated immense transparency during the research process. The participants were informed about the aims and objectives of the research. They were clarified that the information derived from them would be used only for the research purpose. The researcher also was transparent while communicating with his professors and the entire research team.

4.9.5 Acknowledgement

This ethical part is especially during conducting the literature review. While deriving information from the previous studies, the researcher acknowledged their work by providing in-text or parenthetical citations and enlisting the authors in the bibliography or reference list. The researcher did not get involved in the practice of plagiarism.

4.9.6 Reliability and Credibility

The researcher did not misguide the readers and ethical committee by incorporating false or unreliable information. For keeping the reliability and credibility in secondary data, it was ensured that the data is obtained from authentic and academic sources such as peer-reviewed journals, published books, dissertations, government and educational websites and authentic articles in which the content is factual and empirically proven. The researcher did not use blogs and opinion-based articles.

4.10 Data Analysis

4.10.1 Population

As earlier mentioned, the researcher relies on a thematic analysis of the collected data. The researcher conducted interviews with five general managers of five different hotels. They have been working in their respective hotels for several years, and they have extensive experience of more than 15 years in the hotel and hospitality industry. It was a semi-structured interview in which the respondents were asked questions related to the research topic. Their interviews were recorded. These five respondents are:

- ➢ GM P: is in charge of in 5 stars hotel located in a historic South Portuguese town.

- ➢ GM N: manages in 4 stars hotel situated in the capital of Portugal.

- ➢ GM J: takes responsibility for a 4 stars hotel being in the North of Portugal.

- ➢ GM D: manages a 4 stars hotels group in Portugal.

- ➢ GM T: is responsible for a 5 stars hotel in North of Portugal.

All of these participants have been working in the hotel industry for many years, and they are on the GM position due to their education, skills, knowledge and experience.

Some information about the interviewed hotel is now presented, namely:

This hotel is managed by GM P is located in a historic town in Portugal. The hotel is equipped with several lavish facilities such as spa, gym, family activities space, restaurant, and swimming pool located in the greenery. The hotel offers custom-designed premium services for the families. The hotel claims to be the most romantic resort in Europe. They are equipped with luxurious suits with charming décor with other attractive facilities. The website is updated, dynamic and appealing. The hotel has prepared to deliver clean and protected services to their guests on the background of COVID-19.

The hotel GM N being in charge of is situated in Lisbon, Portugal. The hotel is a subtle combination of tradition and trend and strives to attain perfection. Comfort, confidence and centrality have been the three commitments of the hotels to its guests. The hotel has some attractive promotional offers in which the facilities such as spa and a one-day visiting to Oceanarium. The services of the hotel include pool and bar, spa, restaurant and bar.

GM J has responsibility to manage the hotel that is in the North of Portugal. Along with spa services, it offers rural tourism experience to the guests. The hotel location is a historic town of Portugal. The hotel claims that it provides personalized treatment to its guests. It also provides the luxury accompanied by the closeness to the natural beauty. The hotel is the recipient of several awards and certificate for its excellent service.

GM D managing the hotel has located in the pristine and beautiful natural landscape. For sports lovers, the hotel offers the service of swimming and football. The hotel provides services such as a restaurant in which the guests can enjoy regional dishes and wines that are the key attraction of this location. It has conference rooms with a capacity of 12 to 200 people. The other facilities provided by the hotel are a games room; reading room, wine tasting visits, free parking, free Wi-Fi, luggage rack, and 24-hour reception facility.

The hotel GM T is responsible for is in Porto city of Portugal. The hotel provides the same facilities as the other hotels are providing such as gym, spa, and restaurant. The hotel also has prepared her for delivery clean, protected and efficient service to its customers during COVID pandemic. The hotel has succeeded in maintaining its significant and attractive presence through dynamic and customer-friendly information.

4.10.2 Extract and Coding

The first two steps of thematic analysis, as mentioned above, are the familiarization and coding in column A of Table 3.3; all GM's interviews are extracted. The familiarization process is mentioned in which the extracts from the paraphrased content are highlighted in different colors. In Column B., the codes are given.

Table 5 - Extract (Familiarization) and Coding

Column A: Extract	Column B: Coding
GM P: Interview Extract (In paraphrasing form)	
Social media is a turning point for the hotel business. Have you seen the video? The video was to create awareness about the hotel service. The commonly used social platforms are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram). This video is from April. It was shot in April. The video was made to pass the message to the guest and customers. Thus, we reach to the customers. We understand the value of the video This video has 24000 viewings, only one platform. We see an increase in some sales. There is an increase in booking because of the videos.	Video Marketing
We did social initiative because people are going through a difficult situation. It is the message from the hotel that it wants the customer should trust. It is safe to stay with us – the name of the video. We follow all the safety measures. It is safe to come on holiday. They will enjoy in the new environment… oh. in the pandemic.	Customer safety Adherence to safety measures
We can also see some differences if I can tell you. We see age wise people interacting on Instagram with us. Then the people interact with us on Facebook. They don't want to go to our website. We can see the profile of the customer, which is quite different. On LinkedIn, we don't have much Interaction but the post, but many business people go. But they don't interact with us on LinkedIn.	Using Facebook and LinkedIn. Customer s' profile review
We understand the language (the customers) they have is quite different. The age difference is there. They communicate. It is quite different. It is the most romantic resort and… We are lovely… not lovely; we are loving people, caring people. It's a part of our DNA to be ourselves. We send a message in a loving and caring language. All our communication is done in a way that the people appreciate it. The guests feel that we are there for them. The way we communicate. The CEO appreciates our communication. We use Portuguese and the English language for communication always.	Language Communication Messages Portuguese English Customer experience
Not exactly. We block the people if we feel they do not behave properly, quite simple. We are human, and we are not flawless. Sometimes the expectations of the customers are different because we don't know where they are coming from. Sometimes, of course,	Risks

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some guests don't like the service, and they go on and use social media and try to damage the brand. But most of the customers are satisfied. We cannot control people.	
Ours is not a big team. So, I know everybody. It is like a family. I know where they come from, what they know, and I try to grow all of them. Some of them work for marketing, digital marketing and a girl is working on digital marketing. She has a degree in hospitality management. We also have a backup of a designer. We do a lot of videos. Our team is our family. It was a surprise to my female colleagues. It was Mother's Day. I call my team members my family. I know all of my team members. I contacted their husbands on Mother's Day to know the children of our female employees … a nice drawing and record a voice why your mother is the best in the world. This was the question to those kids… and they recalled memories, drew the pictures of their mothers. It had a lot of nice feedback, very nice feedback.	Familial relationship with employees Involvement of employee families Social media usage Employee recognition
It has benefits. It's a promotion point; we sell a lot. We can also keep them measures because we don't know how the customers change. Social media is almost free-of-charge. Everybody is there. If you are not on social media, you do not exist. It's easy to spread the message.	Social media benefits Free-of-the-charge Spreading message Company's existence Promotion points Knowing the customer
Risk – The customer knows he can do whatever he wants on social media. Many customers research and complain about something and say well…Some of them blackmail…. Some of them… They invent things to complain about fake pictures. Threaten of going to the supervisor, and say that if you do not want me to go to the supervisors, you should give me compensation. We are treated like hostages in such a situation. Of course, there are risks and frauds. If you see a profile of a normal hotel, you see that they please everybody, then that is something wrong with it because it is not possible to please everybody. So it means that either they are paying, giving them things…It is proven to be that way. In the customers, not all of them behave well; not all of them are nice. We cannot satisfy all of our customers, but we try our best. The guests are sometimes so clever smart (manipulative), and social media gives them the power to do so, but I don't know whether it is social media. It's a customer perspective. Crazy people also travel, and we have to be prepared.	Risk
We asked the guests to write reviews about the hotel. Nowadays, it's all about showing. It feels that the hotel is giving them … if the guests put a nice story about the hotel on Instagram, and if we share it, well, the guests say Wawww… this is wonderful. Thus you can interact with your customers. That is the new influence. They have thousands of followers. If the feedback of the customer is positive, but sometimes the followers can think that he/she is paid for such writing. But some followers think that the person whom they are following is reliable, so as his/her feedback.	Interaction with the customers
For communication, promotion of romantic trips which have now	Communication

Extract	Codes
become very trendy. The strategies of all competitors to get more customers are almost the same.	Promotion Trendy
The guests are showered with the message that you are safe and clean. Everyone is communicating the same thing. We try to be creative, but it's not that easy to be creative. We don't copy them, but we try to do something different from our competitors. And that is why we did the videos you might have seen. We try to be different when we are creative. We use emojis in different ways. We are very, very attentive to market trends. We try to do as the customers like by using our creativity (Customer-oriented strategy).	Assurance of safety Strategies
We have a lot of initiatives for our team. I used to ask the customers who you are and about them. Are you married, do you have the kids? How was your day The content on social media is quite interactive. We receive comments	Interaction with the customers
Social media is beneficial in the hotel industry for getting audiences. To make people realize how we work it and to let them appreciate it. The idea is to get to the people fast.	Advantages
We have a website, Google apps. A lot of advertising on Google apps, SEO is also there. We are on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. We also post so lot on LinkedIn though it is a different network. We adapt the content. The one that sends us more customers, so the one that we have for Interaction with the customer we use Instagram. We also do a lot of agreement with Instagram. On the last two weekends, I have had a lot of domain. Pushing the stories and pushing all of that. Interaction with the new customers, we focus on the bookings.	Marketing tools Marketing techniques Marketing Social media interaction Marketing tools
We didn't think about that yet. We are popular with just social networks. In the future, we will go according to the demands and trends of the market. We follow the time. We have a lot of people booking on our website. Booking.com.	Market situation Demand and trend

GM J – Interview Extract (In paraphrasing form)

Column A: Extract	Column B: Codes
We are on Facebook, Instagram, Google. Facebook is most effective and in the range of our customers. We communicate with the customers on Facebook and Instagram (for the younger customer). Their way of communicating is different On Instagram, communication is more objective There are visuals and pictures. They communicate almost every day. If we want to communicate on Facebook. We know the background of customers we can help them more effectively	Internet Social media tools Social media customers Communication pattern Knowing customer
We post Romantic couples' pictures on Instagram. To keep the customers informed, to interact with them. Price range Evaluation through customers' comments. We are targeting young customers	Customer interaction Targeting
Social media is a good way to reach and communicate with the	Effective

| audience with small sentences, pictures. It's more effective. There is a picture; there is an effect. | communication |

GM N. – Interview Extract (In paraphrasing form)

We have a marketing manager. He takes care of social media promotion. We are present on Facebook and Instagram. We have a separate strategy. We are a low profile people. Like celebrities, we are not interested in establishing followers for our social media pages.	
Analysing customer experience (negative, positive, and neutral) I was answering the queries of the question correctly.	Customer interaction
Customers' negative feedback is the major risk on social media We are maintaining an emotional bond with the customer. We use word of mouth strategy.	Risk

GM T. – Interview Extract (In paraphrasing form)

Column A: Extract	Column B: Codes
Technology is very special. We make a customer chain on social media. The strategy should be designed on what you want to communicate and what kind of information do we want to communicate	Customer network Right information
We commonly use Twitter, and along with it, we also use Facebook and Instagram.	Social networking tools
We communicate with our customers that we are safe to deal with us. We also take strict safety measures and keep cleanliness, especially during COVID. But our focus is not on promoting safety.	Safety
We should fulfil the promises that have been given to the customers. While posting something on social media, we should know what we are posting and who is the target audience.	Knowledge Public accountability
Getting public opinion is also very important. Image building is possible only through public opinions and your interaction with the people.	Communication
We use social media to inform the customers about the events we are going to conduct.	
The content analysis is important. It is crucial to know how people react to special content. While answering, the social media person prepares the content and gets it approved by me (the GM)	Content analysis
When we receive good comments from our customers, we reply to them saying 'thank you for your feedback' and thus keep our interaction with them.	Communication
Our guidelines are that we never post and offensive, discriminatory or provocative content on social media.	Content analysis
The basic language of communication is English. Other languages used are French, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Mandarin.	Languages
On social media, the content should be posted in such a way that the	Communication

customer should understand what you want to say. It is two-way communication. Social media gives a lot of scopes to make the communication interactive and a two-way process.	
Social media make communication easy, but it does not improve communication. It improves reach and capacity to reach.	Communication
If the company has an established brand, social media makes the business process even easier.	Building brand
The connections can be built through social media and not the relationship. A relationship develops only when the customer visits the hotel and interacts with the staff face-to-face.	Connection
Posting messages on social media is challenging because if the wrong message is posted, it has its adverse impact. So the company has to be careful and ensure to send the right messages.	Risk

GM D. – Interview Extract (In paraphrasing form)

Column A: Extract	Column B: Codes
The department of social media conducts social networking activities. We are active on Facebook, Instagram, and company website Normally use Instagram, because you can post attractive pictures	Tools
People make their bookings after seeing on Instagram. They come on the website after seeing the pictures on Instagram.	
Google gives many reviews The hotel uses customer-centric software	Tools and software
We obtain information about the guests about what they say, what they like, high-performance dept, other hotels in the area, Tripadvisor, comparison with other hotels	
Tools are Instagram, Facebook, website and guest-centric software. All employees use software – customers directly send messages to housekeeping – directly send messages for events like wine or cocktail tasting, trails, breakfast	Direct interaction
Content posted on media- it is the key – depends on the target audience (couple, groups, kids) it is usually in Portuguese or Spanish)	Content and language
Guests want to know your location, rooms, cost, etc. when guests book, 24 hours check-in, update messages sending, sending messages to tell directions, if you need something in the room, after check-out – thank you, reviews. Smartphones and apps offer this info. So technology IS the future. There is a customer engagement on every platform. All information of the guest is uploaded on software, which delegates it to different departments so that they can act on it.	Guidelines to the Customers digitally Future strategies
For negative review: Every month – a meeting with the team and discuss- we must correct this or do it differently – direct feedback is always beneficial	Customer feedback
The customers can see everyone's (all hotels) reviews and complaints, social media, messages on the software.	Customer feedback
Channel management – the manager can go to the competitor's account and see what they have to say about; it can increase and	Competitors' actions update

decrease the price of the room according to that.	
You can publish a promotion and directly share it on Instagram and Facebook without a separate post. Can also give beneficial pop-ups	Promotion points
There are low-cost websites, so no need for travel agents and operators.	Low-cost option
Future strategy for the social network – the focus is artificial intelligence, better ways for the customers to connect to him directly in any way they this is easy, even voice recording Smartphones and apps are the future technology that we actively use.	Future tools and technology

Source: own elaboration

4.10.3 Generating, Reviewing, and Defining Themes.

In this section, the codes are integrated into the relevant themes. Every theme and the codes related to it are highlighted in different colours so that every theme should be distinct from each other. Out of the extract, the researcher obtained a total of six themes:

1. Digital Customer Strategy

2. Building an employee-friendly image on social media

3. Risks of using social media

4. Language and communication (verbal and nonverbal, interaction)

5. Importance and essential of social media

6. Public accountability

Table 5 summarizes Codes and Themes.

Table 6 - Themes and coding colours

Codes	Themes
Video marketing Interaction on social media Market demand and trend Market situation Social networking tools Customer's Profile Review Content analysis Appointment of an experienced marketing manager Customer interaction Brand Building Making customer change Right interaction. Tools and software	Digital customer strategy for present and future

Artificial Intelligence	
Familial relationship with employees Involvement of employee families Social media usage Employee recognition	Employee-friendly reputation on social media
Threatening from customers Fake pictures Spoiling reputation Blackmailing by using social media Complaining Writing negative reviews Wrong message	Risks of social media
Language Communication Messages Portuguese English French Italian Customer experience Customer feedback Reaching to the audience Public opinion Image building Direct interaction Customer safety	Language and Communication (Verbal and non-verbal, safety Interaction)
Social media Free-of-the-charge To inform Spreading message Adherence to safety measures Assurance of safety and cleanliness Use of masks Company's existence Promotion points Low-cost option Knowing the customer Competitors' actions update Helping customers more effectively Analyzing customers' feedback on social media	Importance and essentials of social media
Fulfilment of promises Responsibility regarding content Awareness about the customers	Public Accountability

Source: own elaboration

4.10.4. Thematic Analysis:

The thematic analysis contains the analysis of the themes that have been procured from the primary data. Thematic analysis is one of the flexible and widely used methods of qualitative data

analysis. Since the main goal of the thesis was to examine how the digital network strategy influences the hotel business, under these goals, some key themes were formulated to examine the impact of social media marketing on the hotel business. For the present analysis, the derived themes are:

A.   The digital customer strategy for present and future

B.   Employee-friendly reputation on social media

C.   Importance (benefits) of social media

D.   Risks of social media

E.   Communication and interaction

F.   Public accountability

Next paragraphs further analyses and discuss the gathered information in what concerns all of the derived themes, namely:

A.   The Digital customer strategy for the present and future

As reviewed in the literature section, digital marketing consists on the use of digital technologies to reach the target audiences. After the emergence of digital technology, it spread rapidly in all sectors. Social networking is the 21st-century outcome of the unprecedented digital revolution. In the literature review, the different areas of digital marketing have also been discussed. Some of the most popular areas are email marketing, marketing on social media, mobile marketing, corporate videos, websites, blogging, SEM, and SMM. Here it should be noted that digital marketing is not just about selling the product or service. Marketing is a much broader concept that being just a promotional activity. For successful and effective marketing, it is important indeed to have an interaction with the customers as well as develop customer networks. During the interviews, the interviewees mentioned some of the strategies to interact with the customer. The researcher clubbed the strategies suggested by the interviewees. GM D, for example, predicts that artificial intelligence would be a future communication strategy, which sets up a direct way to connect between guests and hotels from whatever they want even voice recording. In addition, GM P believes that customer-oriented strategy is the effective method to catch customers for present and future by the way of using creativity, so that they can attract market.

Video marketing: The proliferation of digital technologies has made it easier to record and make videos speedily and more professionally. Pantelidis (2009) researched video marketing in which the author stated that the impact of videos is of paramount importance, especially in the hospitality industry. It is because the guests tend to pay their attention to the videos as they attract them even more than the content. Telling stories in the form of video is more interesting for the customers than to read the same story in text form. It is a common saying that pictures

are worth a thousand words. GM P stated that their focus is on posting videos on Instagram and Facebook. The GM P also told that there was a substantial increase in booking after they posted videos on social media. For every event, for every message, GM P focuses on the strategy of posting videos. The rest of the GMs are not that much keen on using videos.

Interaction on social media: Interaction and a strong presence on social media help the hotels to inform the people about the upcoming events, amenities and services, and other specialties of the hotels that set them apart from their competitors. The interactive elements used by the hotels on social media help to gain long-term consumer followings. The interaction takes place in several ways, from informative content to fun events in which the guests are made involved. The hotels also comment on customers' feedbacks by saying them thank you. The more interactive the hotel is on social media, the higher are the chances of business growth. As GM P mentioned that compare to 2 year ago, the number of customers interacting with them has an increase significantly via Facebook and Instagram. The comment, message and viewing of every content posted on social media become more active and frequent.

Social Networking tools: Using appropriate tools for increasing customer networks on social media are also crucial. From the interviews, it was observed that the preference of the hotels is for Instagram, and Facebook followed by LinkedIn and Twitter (Social media). Nowadays, exclusive mobile apps on Smartphones are also effective tools for interacting with customers. There are no limits to creativity while using digital tools. The success of digital marketing depends upon what tools the hotels are using and how effectively they are using these tools. GM D said besides Instagram and Facebook, Google also gives many reviews, and Review Pro is one of useful software that gives all helpful information, for instance, which departments reach high performance, which issues hotel should improve to catch customers' satisfaction.

Market Situation: Market situation research is also extremely crucial. It makes the hotels informed about their target market, competitors, challenges and risks, customer behavior and the new trend of the market. Digital tools help to analyze and research the market. The customer network is developed by interacting with the customers how the service is beneficial for them. But it is possible only when the market situation is analyzed properly. The market situation analysis may help the hotels to serve their customers efficiently and effectively.

Customer profile review: GM P mentions that the hotel conducts customer profile review, which is crucial to know the customer in a better way. Instead of speculating the persona, trend, likings and inclination of the customers, the profile review provides factual information to the hotels. As stated by Hassan and Tabasum (2018), customer profile review acts as a descriptor of customers. It helps to assess the customers, marketing of suitable products, enhanced experience, direct marketing, customizing of products/services, cross-selling, deep-selling, up-selling to increase profitability, churn prevention, risk categorization, default prediction and considering customer's eligibility for different banking products/services.

The researcher could not procure the information on how customer profiling is conducted in the hotel industry. But GM P gave a hint about customer profile review. In this sense, Figure 9 shows the diagram of customers profiling and next sentences explain its logic.

The company obtains required information about the customers based on 2 main clusters: data set and customer's segmentation. The customer data (see Figure 9) carries five types of data, namely transactional, demographic, psychographic, behavioral and financial. Demographic data means information about the customer's age, gender, education, profession, income, etc. Transactional and financial data are associated with the banking transaction details and the history of the customer, such as their buying preferences, repayment behavior, purchase history etc. Psychographic data is related to the customers' attitudes, interests, and personality traits. The behavioral data provides details about customers' engagement with the business and their behavior of buying products or services.

The data set (with all five types of data) helps the companies to make a customer segmentation in which it is decided whether the product or the service of the company is suitable for the customers and aligns with the data. It is a cluster segmentation.

The customers are classified into four categories; negative value customer, low-value customer, medium value customer, and a high value customer. The negative value customer means the customers incur more cost than the profit. Low-value customers are less profitable to the business and can pose a high risk. Medium value customers are moderately profitable, and the risk level from these customers is also moderate. High-value customers mean a highly profitable customer.

The customers' data thus helps the company to classify the customers. Once this classification is done, the business concentrates on the high-value customers. The chances of failure in such cases are lesser as the businesses already know their customers.

Figure 9 - Customer Profiling
Source: Hassan and Tabasum (2018)

Other strategies: The respondents also mentioned different strategy executed in the hotels for enhancing customer networks. They include content analysis, brand building, appointing expert and experienced marketing managers, etc. Among these strategies, content analysis needs to be elaborated. Content is an effective tool to interact with the guests. The content can be in the form of text or images. According to one of the respondents, the content should be appropriate and right. False and misguiding content results in the credibility and reliability of the hotel.

While responding to the comments and feedback of the clients, it is also crucial to use proper and customer-friendly content.

Future Strategies: No one except one among the respondents was clear about the future strategies of the company. GM T explains about their future goals and future strategies of enhancing digital customer network. These strategies will mainly be dynamic marketing on mobile apps. GM T also informed that the future would be dominated by artificial intelligence (AI). This strategy is going to utilize as one of the prominent marketing strategies.

B.   Employee Friendly Reputation of the hotel

GM P discussed a lot about her relationship with her employees. She thinks that it is much more than employer-employees' relations: they are like a family. She shares an incident that indicates how she cares for her employees. She uses a digital platform to maintain healthy relationships among the team members. According to her, for maintaining such a relationship, we have to be a bit personal and care for our employees and their families. Employees are the backbone of any organization, especially the service industry like hotels. Qoura and Khalifa (2013) called employees' the internal customers of the organization'. Like the external customers, they also expect that their needs and wants should be satisfied by the company (here hotel). They should be appreciated and acknowledged for their good work and contribution. Apart from the monetary benefits, such appreciation and acknowledgment are also important to keep the morale of the employees high. These happy employees will deliver good service to the customers. The satisfaction of the employees (internal customers) and the external customers are correlated, according to Xiong et al. (2013).

Employee-friendliness is of utmost importance in the hotel industry as it is a people-oriented service sector. Attitudes and behavior of the hotel staff are the cornerstones of the hotel industry. The sector is experiencing fierce competition. When the employees are satisfied with their job, and even when they leave the hotel, they should leave it with goodwill so that they can spread a positive image of the company. There are some major job portals such as Glassdoor, Indeed, Vault, CareerBliss, JobAdvisor, etc. The employees post reviews about the companies, their culture, salary, benefits, the scope for the career growth and overall company environment. The job-seekers, especially talented and skilled people, read the review of the company and then decide whether to join the company or not. However, no one except GM P talked on these internal customers and the interaction of the hotel management with these internal customers.

GM P knows the importance of keeping the employees satisfied and happy. She shares the incident in which she contacted the husbands and the kids of the female employees and appealed the kids to draw the pictures and write something about their mothers on Mother's Day. Thus she made the day special for every female employee. She posted this event on digital media. It was a happy moment for the employees. The rest of the GMs did not discuss anything about such events. But in the interviews, they appreciate the hard work of their team members. For example, GM N stated that the marketing manager efficiently manages the media department. There may be some acknowledgment and employee appreciation programs in other hotels, but the GMs did not refer to them.

As stated by GM P, various employee-related programs and events need to be posted on social media and websites. It helps the company to gain the reputation of being an employee-friendly company. It has several benefits. The employee-friendly company is always the top priority of the talented workforce. Research should be conducted on how hotels make their reputation as an employee-friendly workplace in the market.

No one also revealed what facilities they provide to their internal customers and what strategies they design to attract and retain talent from the job market. GM P just talked about the familial relationship with her employees, but she did not talk on other monetary and nonmonetary benefits.

The GMs talked about the situation in the hotel industry during the difficult time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher could not procure information on the strategies designed by the company for employee retention during such an adverse situation. Hence, it is also the recommendation from the researcher that the hotels should reveal their employment strategies on social media and disclose the benefits and facilities of internal customers to external customers. The employees should be encouraged to write feedback on the internal portal of the company. Such type of interaction is also necessary, especially to pick up talents from the job market.

Table 7 - Employee-friendly Strategy

Interviewee	Way of employee-friendly strategies	Benefits of the strategy
GM P	1. Developing familial relationship with the employees 2. Celebrating events 3. Involving family members of the employees 4. Conducting activities 5. Posting the event on social media	1. Employee satisfaction 2. Feelings of appreciation and acknowledgement 3. Delivery of good service to the external customers 4. Stakeholders interest

Source: Creating Employee-friendly Image on Social Media

C. Importance (benefits) of social media:

The third theme derived from the interviews is the importance of social media in the hotel industry, especially to stay connected to the customers. All of us very well know that social networking sites are the internet or digital-based platforms where the people can make friends and stay connected with family, friends, colleagues, customers and other stakeholders (on the business scenario).

The first and most important benefit of social media is that they are almost free-of-cost platforms. Indeed, some paid services are also offered by these sites. But one can even show the presence on it without paying anything. For example, people can share photos and videos on Instagram. They can get the maximum number of followers by some simples strategies such as promoting the dedicated hashtag, being creative to the hashtag, watching relevant hashtags, using the bio link to drive traffic to the newest content, participating in popular conversations, making captions descriptive, etc. And all these activities can be performed without spending any single penny. The marketing managers should be well-informed about such strategies on Instagram and other websites.

All five participants in the interview stated that they had created a Facebook page, and they also have a presence on Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. However, they did not mention what strategies they use to make their hotel popular on social media. According to them, they are low-profiled hotels, and they are happy with their low-profile status. Some of them answered that

they do not know about the digital and social media marketing strategies because that department is handled and managed by the marketing team. So, the researcher could not obtain concrete information regarding what strategies they use to get followers.

The participants said that social media is beneficial to inform the customers, to spread the message, and to promote the services of the hotel. They also use digital platforms to know their customers. It is easy and fast to tap the customers regardless of the geographical remoteness. According to some participants, social media has made it easy to serve their guests so easily. For example, the booking has become quite easy and fast. The hotels can also send them facilities and amenities they will be getting in the hotel. The guests do not face any problem while finding the hotel location due to the Google map and GPS technology. Table 7 shows some benefits of social media.

Table 8- Benefits of Social Media with their description

Types of benefits of social media	Description
Functional benefits	1. Online booking and transactions 2. Amenities and facilities of the hotels. 3. Online itinerary
Social benefits	1. Online community development 2. Sharing mutual interest 3. Exchanging ideas 4. Conducting dialogues with the clients
Psychological benefits	1. Creating bond with the customers and employees 2. Developing and cherishing good relationship
Hedonic Benefits	1. Entertaining the clients with online events, appealing videos, catchy images and content 2. Arranging competitions quizzes for the customers 3. Offering discounts etc.

Source: Al-Msallam & Alhaddad (2016)

According to the study of Al-Msallam and Alhaddad (2016), hotels have ample scope of engaging their guests and potential customers in dialogues, and thus they can identify their needs. Social media is a viral platform, and anything posted on it can quickly become viral and reach millions of people all around the world. The authors have explained several benefits of social media, such as functional benefits, social benefits, psychological benefits, hedonic benefits, and monetary benefits.

As mentioned above, the transactions (purchasing hotel services) have made it easier. Sometimes, though the people might not have any plan to travel, dine out or live in a restaurant, they go on collecting information about the hotels and destinations or the best restaurants in their areas. They are also likely to visit the online community and participate in it. In social benefits, the members on social media come together on the platform, share and exchange the ideas, opinions and their interest or purposes. They share a mutual interest and thus stay connected with other members on social media platforms. In the off-season, the hotels can take social benefits from social media.

Psychological benefits can be derived by being connected with the community members and thus creating a bond with them. GM P's statement that they are like family is about creating bonding. However, GM T stated that on social media, we could develop connections through social media, but we cannot develop a relationship. But according to the researcher, in the hotel industry, the relationship between the hotel and guests can be and should be developed on social media platforms. It is imperative for the hotel industry. It is because if you develop a relationship with the potential clients, they will visit the hotel. Like you, the customers have a hundred other options. But when the strong relationship is built, your name will be on the top in the priority list.

While explaining the hedonic benefits, Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) state that hedonic benefits are associated with the feelings of being entertained and amused while participating in the community, GM P narrated her experience regarding her relationship with her employees. She makes her employees engaged on social media by amusing them with Mother's Day event. For the customers also the hotels implement such kind of events so that the customers will be amused on the platform, and thus, they will stay connected. As stated by GM N., they amuse their customers by posting photos, especially of the enjoying couple or about their amenities. Watching such photos or videos are amusing and entertaining. This amusement creates curiosity among the customers to visit the place once. They spend more and more time on the hotel page on Facebook or Instagram.

The customer network is also associated with the competitors' activities. It is because the competitors also behind expanding their customer network. Hence it is important indeed to keep an eye on their activities so that we can design or redesign our strategies. It is also important to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the competitors. The competitors can be found with specific keywords. Social media are also beneficial to know the hotel's position and rank in the market. The hotels can find which hotels are popular in the customers and what reasons are there behind their popularity. It was also informed by a respondent that they use twitter more than Facebook or Instagram. They also have a lot of scopes to know their competitors on Twitter. For that, the marketing people can open Twitter Analytics and research the number of followers, their frequency of following. The digital media also helps the hotel to make a SWOT analysis of their competitors. There are several competitor analysis tools that the hotel can use to check its position and customers' views about their hotel and their competitors. The interviewees focused on their activities and strategies, but they did not mention anything about their competitors' strategies, which is equally important in enhancing customer networks on digital platforms.

However, almost all of them are active and attentive to the customers' feedback, which the GMs feel very crucial to measure their performance. They feel it necessary to answer the queries of the clients, their positive, negative and even the neutral reply. When the client receives immediate feedback to their queries and feedback, they are likely to stay connected with the company personnel. The responsiveness from the company is one of the key dimensions of the SERVQUAL (Service Quality) Model. Min, Lim, and Magnini (2014) point out that the hotel industry is vulnerable to the negative online review, and the reason behind it is that the

maximum number of hotel bookings take place online. From the interviews with the five GMs of the hotel, it is observed that our findings are consistent with the findings of Levy, Duan, and Boo (2013), who confirmed that the strategy of hotels in dealing with the negative response is not uniform. Still, they have a divergent approach in their response to negative feedback.

D. Risks of social media

In the widespread use of social media, the customers' complaint has not been a private issue and can be limited within the hotel. It has become a public issue. The complaints and negative feedback are likely to tarnish the image of the hotel, and it is one of the most serious risks of social media (Ward and Ostram, 2006). The unsatisfied customers share their negative views about the hotel to other people from his/her network. Consequently, it is aired on the Internet.

Consequently, negative feedback spread extremely fast. The marketing so as the feedback system has transformed from word of mouth to word of web, which provides a huge platform for grievance even if something minute mistake and failure occur in delivering the service to the consumers. On this background, there is no option but to be responsive, resolve the issues the customer has raised and try to retain the customer. The GMs told that they are responding to the client on social media.

GM P was also told that there are some incidents in which the customers tried to blackmail her by using social media. Raas (2015) states that blackmailing from customers has become quite a common issue in the hotel industry. The hotels are under the risk of customers' approach of holding them to ransom by threatening them of a bad review if they do not get their funds back. It has become a widespread and rapidly growing problem. Vollero and Siano (2013) argue that the problem of threatening and blackmailing has been rooted in consumer empowerment and their privilege to access, understand and share and exchange information and opinions. It has given the power to the consumers to dictate on the company and the business (Vollero and Siano, 2013). Publishing a series of the wrong review eventually leads to damaging the reputation of the company. There is a famous quote of Warren Buffet regarding the risk of damaging image and reputation. He says, "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and 5 minutes to ruin it". Walsh (2004) also comments on the risk of reputation damage when he states, 'reputations are made or destroyed online by any of the many different kinds of stakeholders who now have inexpensive and effective means to do it' (Walsh, 2002, p. 38).

Though customers are the kings with immense power and control the market, many times, they also misuse their power and attack on the reputation of the company. It is serious harm because they control the easiest and most impactful weapon of social media. The negative reviews posted by the consumers can affect the hotel business adversely because the process of hotel booking is online. While booking for any hotel, the potential consumers tend to check the review of the hotel and based on them, and the consumers make the decision of booking. According to the statistics revealed by TripAdvisor (2013), 89% of the global travelers check the review of the hotels and then decide whether to make their bookings. It is also revealed in the survey that

96% of the hotel personnel strongly agreed that the rating of the hotel is extremely crucial while generating bookings. Online reviews are considered to be the most reliable information about the hotels. That is why the hotel industry is affected by the reviews of the customers. Sometimes due to the fear of bad reviews followed by a tarnishing reputation, the hotels are forced by the customers to fulfill the crooked demands of the customers. That is why the hotel is one of the industries for the greedy and ill-minded people to blackmail.

The reputation attackers on the hotel industry commonly are the competitors, dissatisfied employees, investors, and customers. All these stakeholders are, for some or other reason, upset with the hotel. Revenge or retaliation is also the key motive behind damaging the reputation of the hotel. These reputation attackers put their frustration and retaliate in several ways by posting malicious articles, blogs on complain websites, false information on social media, posting wrong and misguiding reviews on social media etc. The hotel GMs revealed that they ensure to answer to every query and feedback of the customer. It is a great move indeed. In this context, Craig (2013) states that the threat posed by the client should be treated as a traditional complaint. If the hotel personnel show an empathetic and professional approach, it may help to calm down the customers. However, it is also important that the hotels should never entertain the sleazy demands. If the management of the hotels fulfills those demands, the blackmailer shares this deceptive success to the others on social media, and a new (obviously negative) reputation of the company will be built, and that is the susceptibility of the hotel to such kind of blackmailing.

While dealing with the customers' blackmailing, documentation of every feedback is extremely important. It becomes easy to take further action if the feedbacks are documented properly. The documents consist of the calls, notes and other written records. It is also possible for the hotels to protect themselves to some extent from these blackmailing activities, and it is through reporting. Some review systems have introduced a reporting system for protecting the hoteliers from the potential threat of blackmailing. An exclusive mechanism has been developed. The TripAdvisor gives this facility to the hotel owners to report threats. However, the report needs to be submitted immediately after the threat has been voiced. According to TripAdvisor (2013), the report is valid only if it matches to the blackmailing report.

Many review sites also provide the hotel owners a facility of replying or responding to the review. It helps the hotel owners to put forward their side also so that the review will not be a single-sided. The potential customers will be able to check both sides and then make their decision to book accordingly. Whatever it may be the hotels should keep it in mind that the blackmailing threat should not be overlooked, as it is a poor strategy of handling the threat. It leads to establish the bad reputation of the hotel that it is careless about its customers and does not care if the customer is complaining about something. So, it is the best way to answer every negative post.

Table 9 - Risks of Social Media

Types of Risks	Means	Consequences	Solutions
Customers'	- Sharing customer's un-	- Airing fastly on	- The

Complaint and Negative Feedback	satisfaction from their network - Publishing bad reviews on form room	the Internet - Transformed from Word of mouth to word of web speadly	responsibility and resolve the issues - Trying to retain customers
Blackmailing	- Threatening with a series of bad reviews in order to get refund back - Sending fake pictures when using services to get compensation	- Ruining image and reputation - Losing revenue	- Using documents to eliminate

Source: Own elaboration

E. Communication and Interaction

The scope of the term communication is not limited to verbal communication, but the non-verbal mode of language such as signs, codes, and sounds body language is also considered.

In the context of social media, non-verbal Communication appears in the form of images, visuals, videos, emojis etc. Based on the information derived from the participants, some codes related to the Communication are formulated. These codes are divided into the verbal and non-verbal mode in the following table. They can also be labeled as explicit and implicit communication, as shown on Table 9.

As far as implicit or non-verbal communication is concerned, the hotels are active on Instagram and Facebook. Along with the texts, the photos (e.g., of romantic couples), videos are posted to attract the clients and to provide them information about the hotel. GM P also told that she celebrated Mother's Day with her employees' families. It is also the non-verbal way of image building of the hotel. One of the participants also informed that they use emojis as a part of creatively communicating with their customers. Everyone seems to be focusing on the effective non-verbal way of connecting with his/her customers.

Table 10 – Explicit and Implicit Communication

Verbal or Explicit Communication	Non-verbal or implicit Communication
Languages: English, Portuguese, Italian, French, German Customer Feedback Messages (text)	Image building Events Photos Videos

Source: Own elaboration

The five participants stated that their internal and external communication takes place in different languages, among which English is the primary language. Along with English, the

above-mentioned European languages are also used. It suggests that the hotel industry is becoming the multilingual industry. The usage of different languages suggests that the guests coming to the hotel are not local, but they are international. It is very crucial to embrace the multicultural approach to succeed in the global market.

There are several benefits of being multilingual. Suhaimi and Abdullah (2017) elucidate the importance of multilingualism in the hotel and hospitality industry. According to the author, multilingualism is beneficial for reducing the risks of miscommunication. English plays the role of a lingua franca, but some non-English speakers find it challenging to communicate in English. In such circumstances, there is an issue of communication barriers. That is why the respective hotels should review the origin countries of most of their guests. The usage of the languages mentioned above indicates the most of the guests of all five hotels are from Western Europe (France, Germany, Italy, and the English-speaking countries). After reviewing the linguistic backgrounds of the client, the hotel can develop its facility to communicate with most of their guests into their language. The communication skills of the staff and their multilingual ability play a crucial role in making tourists comfortable and satisfied (Suhaimi and Abdullah (2017). When the hotel employees speak the guests in their native language, the guests feel happy and comfortable. It helps to build a strong relationship between the guests and the hotel personnel. For example, if a French customer arrives in the hotel and he found a French-speaking person in the hotel, he feels extremely comfortable during his stay. Though the guest is fluent in a second language, he has an emotional attachment to his native language. If someone is speaking to them in their native language during their hotel stay, it is an unexpected pleasure for them. As a result, customer retention also becomes easy.

After the process of globalization, the world has become like a global village in which knowledge of different languages is a strong ladder to climb towards success and growth. Multilingualism is very effective to sustain in the competitive environment of the hotel industry. Along with multilingual skills, the person should also be well-acquainted with how to use the language skills in a specific situation. Multilingual skills are thus perceived to be the valuable commodity of the business and especially in the hotel and tourism industry.

In some interviews, the GMs were talking with the interviewer in English and in between, they had to talk to a couple of people from the hotel. They immediately switched to the local language and again switched back to English. It means that internal communication is in all of these hotels is in their native language. But while showing their presence on social media, they cannot stick to the native language if they want to attract the customers from the other European countries.

Along with multilingualism, the multi-culturalism or cross-culturalism is also crucial in communicating with the foreign guests. According to Grobelna (2015), awareness of the guests' cultures, sensitivity, and the knowledge of cultural diversity are the critical skills and qualities the hotel staff should acquire in the background of globalization. The hotels cannot rely just on native guests. So, multilingualism is undoubtedly a great advantage for the hotels. Knowing the language of the guests is not a mere prerequisite, but the cultural factors are also important to be understood. At the same time, the hotel representatives should also have sound cultural knowledge of the countries in which most of the guests come to the hotel. Many countries in the

world have experienced a remarkable growth in the number of tourists arriving each year in their countries. For example, in 2019, a total of 12.8 million foreign tourists visited Portugal. Not every tourist may be well versed in English. To serve such a large number of guests, the hotels need to know the cultural background of the guests so that they can help them within their cultural framework. It is an excellent experience for the client.

Multilingualism will also help the hotel staff to understand and analyze the feedback of the customers, especially the non-English speaking guests, who tend to post their feedbacks in their native languages. The multilingual skills of the staff help to respond to the customers from a multilingual background. The multilingual tools and software are available. However, skilled employees become the asset of the hotel industry.

According to the respondent, along with easiness, communication on social media is cost-effective as well, and it is a fact. The cost of advertising on print media and television is much higher than social media. There are several options in social media available for businesses to show their presence on social media. Many of the respondents said that they are active on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Due to its cost-effectiveness and global reach, it has become an optimal solution in which the companies can save money and, at the same time, form the customer network through several cost-effective strategies.

The importance of social media in business and promotional activities has been a widely discussed topic. The interviews with the GMs revealed how social media strategies are used by the hotel administration to attract and retain, send their message to the customers and thus attain a fruitful and constructive communication. Baruah (2012) states that hotel leaders strive to maintain a healthy relationship with their guests. For that, they use social media as a promising means of interacting and communicating with the customers. The GMs also state in their interview that they use this platform to monitor the hotel industry, to make themselves informed about their competitors, market conditions and trends. At the same time, they also communicate with their valued customers about what they are doing and what they are offering to their customers. While elucidating the importance and benefits of social media communication, Baruah (2012) focuses on: Sharing ideas, Tools of communication, Tools for bridging the communication gap, Source of information, Important customer interaction tool, Important crisis communication tool, The low-cost or cost-effective option of communication, Rapid communication with less time.

The benefits of social media communication, as explained by the hotel leaders during their interviews, are

➢ To publish – blogs, micro blogs, videos, and photos

➢ To share – the information related to the service, small post.

➢ To respond – to the customers' complaints and their feedbacks (positive, negative, and neutral).

> ➢ To build an image – as a good, safe and reliable service provider and an employee-friendly company.

Publishing blogs is a useful communication tool in boosting search engine optimization. It is because the search engines are keen to highlight the new and fresh content. Posting blogs and micro blogs consistently provide Google and other such search engines a new content. Thus it is possible to create opportunities for plugging important keywords and increase the visibility of the business on Search Engine pages. Blogging also provides benefits from backlinks, which are used by the search engines as a tool for endorsement. Blogging and Vlogging allow the business to build a position and trust within the industry. It helps to increase the customer conversation rates. Blogs and Vlogs unfold the personal side of the business. In the blogs and vlogs, the marketing leaders allow the audience to share the blogs with others. It also invites people to share their thoughts on blogs and vlogs. The readers can share the link on social networking sites.

Like blogs and vlogs, the podcast is also one of the influential tools used by companies to communicate with their potential customers. Nothing about this online platform has been mentioned in the interviews. A podcast is a prerecorded program that is published on the company website. It is available for download for the target audience. They can download it and listen to it anytime, as per their convenience. Podcast has provided itself as a versatile and powerful tool in marketing and promotional strategies. There are several advantages to creating the podcast. It helps the company to increase the website traffic. The brand appears in more places online because of the podcast; it helps to keep the brand up in search results. The company can host a podcast on the site, a separate network or other places online. It is accessible easily to the listeners, and they can listen to the podcast any time anywhere. If the company is regularly releasing podcast episodes, it helps to build a strong relationship between the company and the customers. In the future, the hotels that participated in our research can think of taking advantage of this online strategy to reach to the maximum number of customers and enhance the customer network.

To design various marketing and promotional strategies, it is crucial to know the actions of the competitors. In this context, GM D said that the media and marketing manager could visit the competitors' accounts and check their posts, the offers they are giving their customers. It is easy to check whether the competitors have decreased their prices, and accordingly, the hotel can design price strategies and other such strategies.

GM D elucidates one more benefit of social media communication (both verbal and nonverbal). He said that there are several low-cost websites on Internet that work as virtual travel agents and operators. So, there is no need to be connected with the actual travel agents, which are pretty expensive options. Social media and digital technology have helped the hotel owners to control their marketing budget. The cost-effectiveness of social media has been confirmed in the previous studies as well. For example, Bansal, Masood, and Dadhich (2014) state that not huge funds are necessary for marketing on social media. The company does not need to pay for opening an account and building a profile on it. The authors also state that social media has emerged as a big frontier for interacting and engaging customers. We see millions of customer

interactions of the company take place on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other such sites. Internet providers throughout the world provide customers with cheap and attractive data plans. It has spread the use of the Internet unprecedentedly. The interaction with the product and the company on social media makes the existing and potential customers feel personal due to their two-way interactions with the company.

It has become much more comfortable with social media to know more about the customers. Nowadays, marketers heavily rely on big data to shape their marketing strategies. Big data analytics is an indispensable tool for marketing and knowing the customers. Understanding Your Customers (KYC) has been the concept initially created to mitigate the risks of bank frauds, and it was previously limited to financial sectors only. But cloud computing and big data analytics have made it possible to know the customer behavior. Big data analytics helps the hotel owners in accumulating customer data, financial data and operational data. The target audience can be understood through big data analytics. The information such as name, email address, histories and web searches of the customers will help the hotels to make their services customized wherever possible.

F. Public Accountability

The main aim of the present Thesis was to examine the impact of digital customer network strategy on the hotel industry. While talking about digital networking, content is one of the crucial factors. A crispy and appealing content of social media helps to attract customers. In this regard, GM P told that their focus is on posting vlogs to attract their guests. Content appears on social media in a variety of ways such as blogs, microblogs, routine posts, feedback, visual content (in the form of vlogs), picture and images (as a non-verbal content). There are lots of strategies discussions on how to use this content, but at the same time, it is essential to be responsible while posting content on social media. The companies should stick to some ethics while posting content. GM T explained the guidelines of their hotel while posting the content. She said that they always ensure whether the content is non-discriminatory, and it is not offensive. The GMs also focused on professional content. For example, GM D and GM T informed that they always say thank you to their clients, who post positive feedback. It is engaging and interactive and, at the same time, ethical and professional as well. While responding to the negative feedback, particularly, it becomes more challenging to convince the customers in a professional and sensible language, especially when the client is trying to blackmail or tarnish the image of the company. From an ethical perspective, the content should be honest, transparent, credible, and truthful. Meaningful content helps to foster a trusted relationship, and it also creates value (PRSA, 2015). The marketing manager should also have a sense of which content should be disclosed on social media. Transparency should be there, but at the same time, the company's private and confidential content must not be disclosed in any circumstances. The GMs said the person who being in charge of social media needs to get approval from the GM before posting anything on social media. One of the GMs also said that there is a discussion on the content before it is published on social media.

The necessary content is necessary to be sent to the customers. For example, the GMs said that through the content, they tried to build confidence among the customers that they will be safe and secure during their stay in the hotel. The GMs expressed their need, especially during the recent pandemic. The content in such circumstances should be trustworthy and motivating. It should form trust in the minds of the potential guests.

Types of Public Accountability	Means
Fulfilment of promises	- Building confidence among the customers that being safe and securing.
Responsibility regarding content	- Sticking to some ethics while posting content - focused on professional content - Having the guidelines while posting the content

Chapter 4: Conclusion, Limitations and Recommendations

The use of the Internet and social media has changed consumer behavior and business practices. Social and digital marketing offers considerable opportunities to organizations through lower costs, brand awareness, loyalty and increasing sales, among others. Digital transformation and consequential business model innovation have deeply changed consumers' expectations and behaviors, putting enormous pressure on traditional firms, and disrupting numerous markets. Digital customer network strategy is increasingly becoming a focus for business seeking to expand their operations and profitability. Almost all industries in the global business environment, including the hotel industry, are exploring ways to harness the online business environment and reach new market and clients.

The main goal of the present Thesis was to examine how the digital network strategy influences the hotel business. For that purpose, an exploratory research was carried out, in July 2020, through qualitative techniques. Five interviews were conducted, between five general managers of five different hotels. The communication was based on the key objective of investigating the overall influence of digital technology, impacts of social media marketing and SEO strategy on the hotel industry, exploring the role of the website in boosting the industry, and the challenges and risks of using the digital technology and social media.

For digital customer strategy for the present, the study shows that Digital technology has influenced the hotel industry in many ways and it has become the major driver of it. The positive influence of technology is that it has helped to enhance customer service. Digital technology has penetrated almost all operations and functions in the hotel and hospitality industry. The major influence is on marketing activities, which are more sophisticated and cheaper than before the emergence of the Internet and social media. Social media helps the hoteliers to market their services at a surprisingly low cost, which otherwise is extremely high when the conventional media such as newspapers, hoardings and TV commercials are used for promotion. The digital technology has influenced the traditional booking system. The guests can book the hotel service online. They do not need to show their physical presence for booking the hotel. Even the small hotels can also attract more customers just by using their websites and social media presence. The hoteliers and the potential guests can communicate with each other just by using a compact device called Smart Phones.

In what relates to impacts of social media marketing, interviewers' agree that social media has helped the hotels to grow their business in a very short time span. The image building has also become much quicker than before. Within a short period, hotels can reach millions of potential customers. They can gain followers and convert them into loyal customers. They can attract customers through their creative way of promoting their services on social media. The strategies they use are always in constant interaction with the followers and customers through posting textual and visual messages, informing the clients about the mission and activities performed in the hotel, conducting a discussion on the virtual platform in which they involve their customers and the followers. However, every coin has two sides. The impact of social media presence can also be negative. The clients are likely to tarnish the image of the hotels by posting negative reviews on

social media. Therefore, it is necessary to handle the negative feedback with utmost care and patience. The effective way is to respond to the customers' negative feedback so that the potential client should develop the impression that the hotel cares about its customers and acknowledges them.

For understanding SEO strategy on the hotel industry, research shows that the number of people using the search engine is in millions, and people are constantly searching for good hotels and quality service. With an on-page search engine optimization technique, the hotels can gain a higher rank in their business. The important thing in this technique is the appropriate and precise use of keywords. It is a free-of-cost SEO strategy that has a long-lasting impact. Making the website attractive and thus optimizing it is also a major SEO Strategy. It can be made attractive by using creative and appealing visuals. Visuals are more important than verbosity.

Along with the appealing visuals, the small crispy and appealing texts also help to optimize the website. The five hotels analyzed in the hotels have followed these SEO strategy techniques. Their websites are extremely creative and appealing. The hotels should also tag the images with an alt tag, making it easy for the search engine to read the images. A mobile-friendly and responsive website can generate a maximum number of followers and customers. Including keywords in page titles and Meta descriptions of the web page content is also a smart SEO strategy with a significant positive impact on the hotel business.

The role of Websites in boosting hotel business is clear evidenced during the research. In fact, when customers learn about the hotel, their first reaction is to visit the hotel website. The website is also the key platform to communicate with customers. The major operations of the hotel, such as customer care (through chatbox on the website), booking process, customer complaints and feedbacks, are possible through responsive and dynamic websites. Thus, it is a medium of direct sale. The brand image can also be sustained with the help of the website.

During the interview, some respondents discussed the risks and challenges of using social networking sites. One of the most important challenges is to sustain the image of the business. Sometimes, the customers and other stakeholders deliberately post negative feedbacks to spoil the image of the hotels. Such feedbacks are read by millions of followers and viewers on social media. The customers also threaten and blackmail the hotel administration by using social media as their tool. The other challenges and risks are there, which were not discussed in the interviews.

Sometimes the privacy-related issues can also take place. Losing IP and sensitive data is also a great threat to hotels. The young tech-savvy generation uses new technologies that the hotels have to be updated with, and it is a great challenge before the IT and Social media marketing personnel. It is also challenging to design tailor-made content to reach the maximum number of targeted audiences. The threat of brand hijacking can also damage the hotel business. The hijackers can create fake logos and names and thus misrepresent the company.

Apart from the threats and risks of social media, hotels cannot boost and sustain their business without using digital technology (including social media). The strategic and careful use of social

media ensures quality service to customers. It also has made the operation of this industry easy and hassle-free.

Limitations and recommendations

The primary data derived from five participants. Hence the representing population is small in size. If the researcher had included more participants, more information could have been obtained. Moreover, it is a qualitative method in which the researcher relied only on the five interviews. Future studies can use quantitative methods with a large number of participants. A case study method can also be used for future studies.

Validity is the central issue of many of the scholarly studies. It means that the conclusion and findings derived from the research may not be applicable after some years. It is because of the market trend, technology, and other factors that change over time. That is why future researchers should conduct ongoing research in this area.

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Annex

Annex I –Interview Guide

Task: to understand how social networks are used to promote, communicate and interact with the target audience, in order to draw practical and useful recommendations for Hotel destinations

Goal: to understand how social networks are used to promote, communicate and interact with the target audience, in order to design practical and useful recommendations for Hotel attractions:

• Organization

• Presence / Use on Social Networks

• Goals

• Credibility / Impact of Social Networks

Target audience: Hotel Directors and Managers of Social Networks

1) Group I – Organization and interviewed
(Question 1 to 12)

GOALS	QUESTIONS
1. Better know the organization	• Hotel nationality • Hotel belongs to a group (y/n)?. If yes, the name • What is the communication department structure in your organization? What is the total affected number of people in the communication department: • How are the guidelines for the web and social networks defined? How are these guidelines conveyed and communicated? • Is there a strategic communication plan or brand communication? If yes, is it the same for the group or not (if the hotel belongs to a group)
2. to know the interviewee's profile and main functions	• Function in Organization • What is your background Education? (tourism / management / communication / other). If other, which? • Is the Communication Director responsible for the contents of the website and social networks? And the rest of the content? • Who is responsible for brand communication? • How are the guidelines for the web and social networks established? How are these guidelines conveyed?
3. to know the target brand and communication strategy	• When was the destination mark created? Who created it and how? What does it symbolize? Main attributes • Is there a strategic communication or brand communication plan?

(Organizational environment and HR structure related to Social Networks)

Group II – Presence on Social Networks
(Question 13 to 22)

GOALS	QUESTIONS
4. To know which Social Networks you use and why you chose them	• What social networks are you on? What social network do you use? • Why do you use these and not others? What criteria did you take into account when selecting them? • What is the social network (s) you use most? • Do the social networks you use give you different results?
5. to know the associated risk's perception with Social Networks	• Do you see any risk in the use of social networks? If yes, what kind of risk? • Have you already decided not to use a particular social network because of the perceived risk? • Do you think social networks are beneficial for your organization? Why?
6. to know specific objectives associated with Social Networks	• Who manages social networks? What is the profile of those HR? What is their academic background? • Do you have specific goals related to social networks, such as reaching a certain number of fans and followers? • Does the website have specific links to social networks? What about informational pamphlets? Does it work together with the objectives and contents of the website?

(Using Social Networks: typology, perception, management, objectives and connections)

Group III – Goals / Use of Social Networks
(Question 23 to 31)

GOALS	QUESTIONS
7. to know the main reasons for using Social Networks	• What are the main goals of social media? What are they used for? To be fashionable? Why do competitors use them too? To disseminate information? To convey the brand and create a positive image? To get the public's opinion? To create relationships with users? To build / create loyalty? To facilitate participation? • Do you consider and take advantage, for the communication strategy, of the information and comments provided by users? • Do you think there is external pressure to use social media? Do users ask for this?
8. to know target audience and possible specific strategy	• Who is the target audience for social media? Internal or external public to the organization? • Is there a distinctive strategy for each of them?
9. to know the main contents and guiding rules	• What are the main content or themes that appear on social networks? • Are there rules / guidelines regarding openness allowed to the public? Is there any control over your comments? Are there any rules / guidelines with procedures for dealing with negative content?
10. to know commitment to Social Networks	• Does the organization you represent believe in social media? Is there a commitment / pressure from Top Management to use them? Or is it not a priority for them? • Does Top Management provide the necessary resources to create and use social networks?

(Objectives of using Social Networks: motives, target audience, content, guidelines and commitment of Top Management)

Group IV – Credibility / impact of Social Networks
(Question 32 to 41)

GOALS	QUESTIONS
11. to know the impact of Social Networks	• Do you carry out any kind of assessment on the impact of social networks? In case they have followers, you try to understand which ones are national and international; try to understand if they respond to your goals and strategy; try to know if a given campaign has had results….)
12. to know the type of analysis made to Social Networks - Monitoring: timings, classification, used tools	• What kind of analysis do you do regarding comments made by different audiences? How regularly is the analysis performed? Does it establish a content classification according to themes or audiences? • What tools / software do you use for evaluation? With what criteria?
13. to know the perception of the use of Social Networks	• Do you think social networks have improved communication? • Did the public respond satisfactorily to the use of social networks? • Did social networks increase the visibility of the website's brand? And the brand itself? In what sense? • Do social networks help to get to know audiences better? What kind of audiences? And help to build a relationship with them? Has it authorized public participation?
14. to know future strategy (s)	• What future strategies do you foresee for social networks? Through which social network? Are you planning to use new social networks …? • For the organization you represent, what opportunities would you highlight with reference to social networks? • For the organization you represent, what risks would you highlight with reference to social networks?

(Impact of using Social Networks: monitoring, evaluation, and future strategy)

2) Select the type of survey
Semi-structured interview (in person or via Skype)

3) Select the sample and target population
    Directors and Managers of Social Networks

4) Develop the script
   1. Description of the interviewee's profile (gender, academic degree and scientific area) - the interviewee must be an individual who holds the position of Director or Manager of Social Networks in the organization. He should have autonomy and be well positioned in terms of hierarchy. The academic degree and the scientific area are not relevant, but it will be interesting to collect the information for further analysis.

   2. Selection of the target population and the sample of individuals to be interviewed - Hotels operating in Portugal. Sample: 7 Hotel, different dimensions and stars.

   3. Definition of the questionnaire's purpose (theme, objectives and dimensions) - the interview aims to understand how social networks are used to promote, communicate and interact with the target audience, in order to draw practical and useful recommendations for Hotel attractions:

       • Organization
       • Presence / Use on Social Networks
       • Goals
       • Credibility / Impact of Social Networks

   4. Establishment of the communication means (oral, written, telephone, e-mail…)

       • Space (room, garden…) and the moment (morning, duration…)
       • Means of communication: in person or via Skype
       • Space: organization to interview or home (comfortable site with internet access)
       • Moment: during working hours, as soon as the questionnaire is validated by one of the researchers in the present study
       • Expected duration: 30 minutes

Annex II –Questionnaires of the Interview

Main data

- Which is the concept that the hotel has in its genesis?
- Function in the Hotel?
- Years of professional experience in hospitality?
- Background Education?

Web and social network

- How are the guidelines for the web and social networks established in the Hotel? How are these guidelines conveyed?

- In what social networks are you on? What social network do you use?

- Why do you use these and not others? What criteria did you take into account when selecting them?

- What is the social network (s) you use most?

- Do the social networks you use give you different results?

- Do you see any risk in the use of social networks? If yes, what kind of risk?

- Have you already decided not to use a particular social network because of the perceived risk?

- Do you think social networks are beneficial for your organization? Why?

- Who manages social networks? What is the profile of those HR? What is their academic background?

- Do you have specific goals related to social networks, such as reaching a certain number of fans and followers?

- Does the website have specific links to social networks? What about informational pamphlets? Does it work together with the objectives and contents of the website?

Main goals of social media

- What are the main goals of social media? What are they used for? To be fashionable? Why do competitors use them too? To disseminate information? To convey the brand and create a positive image? To get the public's opinion? To create relationships with users? To build / create loyalty? To facilitate participation?

- Do you consider and take advantage, for the communication strategy, of the information and comments provided by users?

- Do you think there is external pressure to use social media? Do users ask for this?

- What are the main content or themes that appear on social networks?

- Are there rules / guidelines regarding openness allowed to the public? Is there any control over your comments? Are there any rules / guidelines with procedures for dealing with negative content?

- Does the organization you represent believe in social media? Is there a commitment / pressure from Top Management to use them? Or is it not a priority for them? Does Top Management provide the necessary resources to create and use social networks?

Impact of using social media

- Do you carry out any kind of assessment on the impact of social networks? In case they have followers, you try to understand which ones are national and international; try to understand if they respond to your goals and strategy; try to know if a given campaign has had results....)

- What kind of analysis do you do regarding comments made by different audiences? How regularly is the analysis performed? Does it establish a content classification according to themes or audiences?

- What tools / software do you use for evaluation? With what criteria?

- Do you think social networks have improved communication?

- Did the public respond satisfactorily to the use of social networks?

- Did social networks increase the visibility of the website's brand? And the brand itself? In what sense?

- Do social networks help to get to know audiences better? What kind of audiences? And help to build a relationship with them? Has it authorized public participation?

- What future strategies do you foresee for social networks? Through which social network? Are you planning to use new social networks...?

- For the organization you represent, what opportunities would you highlight with reference to social networks?

- For the organization you represent, what risks would you highlight with reference to social networks?