Digital marketing strategies and tools in hotels: Managers' perceptions

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Abstract | This article examines the importance attributed to digital marketing strategy and digital marketing tools in the hotel industry, to customer engagement, according to managers' perceptions. The research was conducted in 2022, surveying 40 hotels (75% of the universe), located in São Miguel Island, in the Azores (Portugal). It was concluded that a significant majority (72.5%) have a well-defined marketing plan outlining their digital strategy. The greatest emphasis goes to the use and trust attributed to websites, social networks, and Online Travel Agencies (OTAs). Facebook and Instagram are the most important social networks; Booking.com is the platform that best captures customer attention. Search Engine Optimization stands out as the most important tool. Using a multiple correspondence analysis, a typology of profiles of hotel managers was identified, based on their perceptions regarding the digital marketing strategy and tools used: the social networks apologists, mainly directors and managers of 2 or 3-star hotels; the digital marketing enthusiasts, associated with higher-star hotels; and the digital marketing laggards, linked to lower-tier hotels. Hotels can use the data and information to track how they engage with current and potential customers, target areas for improvement, and make informed decisions.

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1. Introduction

Tourism has undergone a dramatic transformation due to the explosive growth in digital technologies, as recent research demonstrates the profound effects of digitalization and smart tourism on the industry (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). Traditional marketing techniques are increasingly being put aside, mainly due to their high costs, more disruptive and less measurable and less effective results, when compared with digital marketing: the promotion of a product or brand using the internet and other forms of digital communication (Parvez, Moyeenudin, Arun, Anandan, & Janahan, 2018). Digital and social media marketing provide exciting opportunities to extend customer engagement and get people talking about a brand (Yoong & Lian, 2019).

The Internet, in the age of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), has become a fundamental component of business activity, but also a popular phenomenon that links humanity to the simple click. This redefined marketing as Digital Marketing came after that and even overpowered traditional marketing making it harder for those of conventional methods to get their voices heard above this new, niche, and growing realm. Tourism is essentially a service industry and the Internet, as well as mobile technologies, are critical distribution channels that act for primary promotion which helps small businesses promote themselves globally in a much more cost-effective way (Sinha, Hassan & Ghosh, 2020; Bayram, 2020; Çınar, 2020).

The tourism industry in the Azores (Portugal) has been a catalyst for economic growth, since the early 21st century, making substantial contributions to wealth creation and employment. The liberalization of airspace in 2015, coupled with the advent of low-cost airlines, triggered a notable surge in guests and overnight stays across various types of tourist establishments from 2014 to 2021. While 2019 marked a prosperous period, the challenges of 2020 were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pinto, 2020). Also, the Azores was officially recognized, in 2019, as the world's first island archipelago to be certified under the EarthCheck Sustainable Destination program, making it one of the most sustainable tourism destinations in the whole world. The destination is internationally recognized as preserved volcanic islands, of exuberant nature, exclusive, of mystical beauty, where the visitor is welcomed to various land and sea activities.

This research addresses hotels on São Miguel Island, in the Azores, aiming to explore the significance of digital marketing and its tools—such as websites, social media, and

TripAdvisor—in engaging customers, fostering relationships, and creating value. Within the parameters of the current investigation, we shall fill in two important gaps. Firstly, to comprehend how these practices affect customer involvement and the hotels' overall performance, we will examine the efficacy of the digital strategies implemented by these establishments. Secondly, we will consider how various hotel categories may see efficacy differences in digital strategy depending on their unique attributes, such as customer profile and hotel rating. These methods will give a more thorough and useful grasp of digital tactics in the hospitality sector.

This article is organised as follows: the introduction presents the context and relevance of the study, research gap, and objectives; the theoretical framework addresses the importance of digital marketing strategies in hotels; the methods section outlines the research design; the results present the main findings; the conclusion summarizes the main insights, offers managerial recommendations, and suggests future research directions.

2. Theoretical framework

The effects of a hotel's digital marketing strategy on its performance, whether directly or indirectly through its influence on online reviews, require further attention in the academic literature. This area is particularly significant, given that digital marketing strategies impact hotel performance metrics like room occupancy and revenue per available room (RevPAR) and shape the volume and sentiment of online reviews. These reviews, in turn, mediate the relationship between digital marketing efforts and overall hotel success. The growing importance of this dynamic is especially evident in chain hotels and higher-rated establishments, where the effects are more pronounced (De Pelsmacker, van Tilburg, & Holthof, 2018). Therefore, hotels should establish a digital marketing plan, and hotel managers should actively manage their online presence (Levy, Duan, & Boo, 2013; Melo, Hernández-Maestro, & Muñoz-Gallego, 2017).

The increasing prevalence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), in daily life, has facilitated widespread access to the Internet and the digital realm. This shift has not only reshaped personal relationships, transitioning them from the physical to the virtual realm through electronic communication devices (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014), but has also redefined business-consumer interactions. The Internet acts as a bridge connecting businesses to customers and fosters customer-to-customer engagement through diverse digital platforms,

amplifying the influence of electronic word-of-mouth as a potent marketing tool (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2017).

The pervasive use of electronic devices connected to the Internet underscores the pivotal role of digital marketing for businesses. In this landscape, online strategies have surpassed offline campaigns, due to cost-effectiveness and enhanced audience targeting capabilities. The ease of implementing online campaigns and understanding consumer habits further propels this transition (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014).

The evolution of the Internet from Web 1.0 to the present Web 4.0 has significantly shaped the landscape of digital marketing, incorporating a myriad of channels and methods to promote products or services online. A strategic approach to digital marketing necessitates a profound understanding of human connection, culture, and associated factors (Goran, Laberge, & Srinivasan, 2017).

Crucially, the digital marketing realm requires the careful definition of goals and objectives, distinguishing between sales-related goals and those associated with brand-building. This strategy demands the seamless integration of content distribution channels and sales channels. The traditional 4 P's (Product, Price, Communication, and Distribution) have evolved into the 4 C's (Conversation, Community Activation, Currency, and Co-creation) to align with the demands of the digital era (Kotler et al., 2017).

Market segmentation, targeting specific audiences, and tailored communication strategies empower companies to better comprehend their consumers. The creation of personas, representing fictional profiles based on customer history, emerges as a recommended practice to deepen understanding across diverse target audiences (Novais de Paula et al., 2019).

The tourism sector, encompassing services such as accommodations and restaurants, has witnessed a significant shift towards online operations due to the evolution of the Internet. In the hotel industry, the utilization of technology is paramount, especially since hotel searches and reservations are predominantly conducted in the digital sphere. With a marketing budget typically allocated at 4-5% of total revenue, strategic tool selection is imperative for managers aiming to promote their establishments effectively.

Lam and Law (2019) underscore the critical role of hotels embracing technology to gain profound insights into their customers, offering experiences that foster satisfaction and loyalty. In the digital realm, where easy comparison with competitors is prevalent, differentiation becomes a key imperative. This necessitates the development of a unique value proposition

with distinctive features aligned with the company's competitive advantages (Novais de Paula et al., 2019). In fiercely competitive sectors such as hospitality, technological innovation emerges as a linchpin for sustaining competitiveness (Lam & Law, 2019).

The arsenal of e-marketing tools spans from website creation to promotional emails (email marketing), social media, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), to the website monitoring and analysis service, exemplified by Google Analytics. These tools represent just a glimpse of the array available, each contributing to enhancing business performance in the dynamic landscape of the digital world, particularly within the intricate domain of the hospitality industry.

3. Methods

This study employed a comprehensive online questionnaire via the Google Forms platform with the link sent by email to all hotels on the island of São Miguel, conducted in 2022, aimed at gathering insights from hotel managers regarding their perceptions and practices in digital marketing. The survey specifically targeted a sample of 40 hotel managers, including Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), Chief Commercial Officers (CCOs), and marketing managers, collectively representing 75% of the target population. The selection of these professionals was deliberate, considering their pivotal roles in decision-making processes related to marketing strategies within their respective establishments.

The questionnaire was meticulously structured into three sections, each utilizing a 5-point Likert scale to capture detailed responses. The first section assessed the importance attributed to various digital marketing tools, allowing respondents to evaluate the significance of each tool in their marketing efforts. The second section explored the digital marketing strategies implemented by the hotels, providing insights into current practices and industry trends. The third section gathered sociodemographic data from the respondents and their respective hotel units, facilitating a nuanced understanding of how these factors might influence marketing decisions.

The questionnaire design was grounded in established studies, ensuring the relevance and reliability of the questions. The questions were adapted from the works of Boaria, Anjos, & Raye (2014), Cantinho (2015), Leite (2017), and Macedo (2018), which provided a robust theoretical framework for the survey.

Upon completion of data collection, the responses underwent rigorous analysis using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics were employed to

summarize and interpret the data, offering an overview of the observed trends and patterns. Inferential statistics, including the chi-square test of independence, were used to explore relationships between categorical variables. Additionally, Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) was conducted to identify associations among categorical variables, and a non-hierarchical cluster analysis using the k-means method was performed to segment the respondents into distinct groups based on their responses, yielding deeper insights into various profiles of digital marketing practices within the hotel industry.

4. Results

This section initially presents the analysis of the perceptions and opinions of hotel managers regarding the importance of digital marketing and the adopted digital marketing strategies, and, subsequently, the identification of the respondents' profiles, taking into account the position held in the hotel, and their respective opinions about the importance of digital marketing.

4.1 Analysis of the perceptions and opinions of hotel managers

The majority (72.5%) of respondents reveal that their hotel has a marketing plan detailing the digital marketing strategy associated with their brand.

Nowadays, social media platforms offer paid services that enable companies to create advertisements for their products. Despite this option being attractive for increasing the number of reservations, it was observed that the majority does not prioritize investing significantly in hotel promotion on these channels (57.5% invests 0% to 10% of its marketing budget).

The use of online platforms that enhance hotel bookings has been growing in recent years. However, only about 32.5% of respondents report that 0% to 20% of their sales come from these platforms, with 25% stating that 61% to 80% of their bookings are obtained through these channels. Only 5% achieve 81% to 100% of their sales online (see Figure 1).
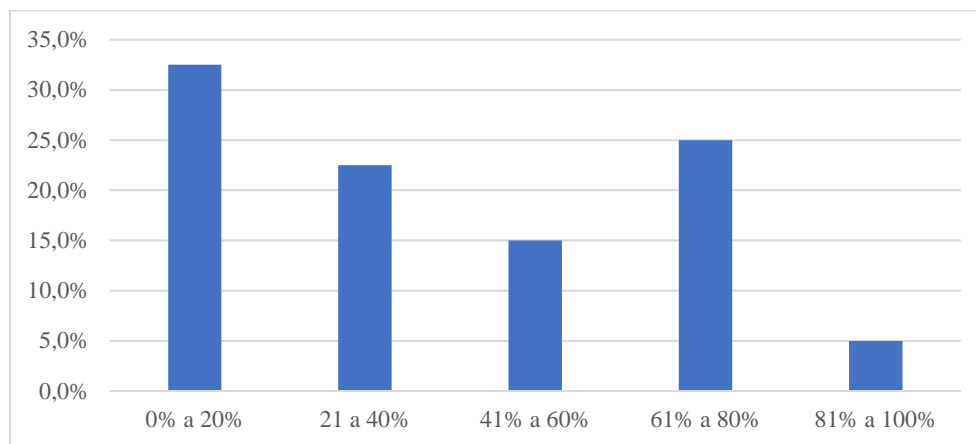
Figure 1- Total percentage of sales through online platforms reported by respondents (%).

Regarding the level of importance attributed by hotel managers to e-marketing tools: 65% refer to SEO, which is seen as the one that will create greater customer engagement on websites found by search engines; 57.5% Google Analytics; 52.5% social networks, and 50% Google Ads. Social media enables a direct connection with customers, allowing promotion of all the latest offerings, and aiding with any queries the community may have about the hotel. Google Ads (formerly Google Adwords) and Google Analytics are directly linked to SEO. The former helps discover the most searched keywords in the search engine, thereby improving SEO. The majority consider it extremely important to increase the number of customers (85%), build closer relationships with customers (72.5%), retain customers (75%), understand customer behaviour (55%), and enhance reservations and sales (80%). In all these objectives, a common theme emerges: a focus on customers and sales, showcasing the company's desire to boost sales and increase the number of guests. Regarding other motives, only market research is deemed very important by the majority (50%), while the others aren't considered important, but they also aren't deemed unimportant.

Most hotel managers consider the digital marketing strategies associated with their hotel to be extremely important: 82.5% of them report having a website, that is complementary to the company's image; 82.5% advocate being present in OTAs, this presence will serve to increase bookings and sales; and for 72.5% social networks play an important role in creating a more direct and closer relationship with customers and engagement. Presence on social media is extremely important for around 62.5% of respondents on Facebook and 60% on Instagram. In

contrast, respondents consider Twitter to have little importance (57.5%) or none (15%) for the hotel industry in the Azores.

Implementing digital marketing strategies necessitates certain requirements. Without them, a company will struggle to achieve the goal of boosting sales and acquiring customers. In response to the question "Indicate the level of importance of the following obstacles (constraints) to evaluating your company's presence on digital marketing channels," respondents don't reach a consensus. However, four factors stand out as very important: the need for human resources with training (47.5%), technical information on how to monitor digital marketing channels (42.5%), knowledge of which strategies to use (45%), and a larger budget for utilizing these channels to develop tools and marketing channels (47.5%).

Digital marketing channel management, in the hotel industry on São Miguel Island, is primarily conducted internally by the hotel's staff (37.5%) and by hotel directors or managers (27.5%). Alternatively, 35% turn to external entities, either hiring a company solely for these functions (25%) or engaging a specialized freelance collaborator (10%).

Within various digital marketing channels, measuring visitor quantity and other metrics is possible through diverse measurement systems like Facebook Insights (for Facebook), Instagram Analytics (for Instagram), or the widely used tool for viewing website statistics: Google Analytics. Respondents revealed that a significant majority use these statistics measurement programs (77.5%), allowing them to understand their target audiences and devise strategies to increase these numbers.

Digital marketing strategies involve strategic plans to achieve marketing objectives, helping to identify consumer needs and promote hotel units effectively. An example of a digital marketing strategy is whether to be present on social media (Chong, Bian & Zhang., 2016).

Regarding the level of trust that hotel managers have in digital marketing channels to promote their hotel, around 69.2% fully trust the hotel's website, highlighting that this will be the best way to promote the establishment, followed by Booking for 55% of respondents and 50% refer other OTAs. This leads us to believe that partnerships between hotels and these OTAs are an asset to enhance the number of hotel reservations, as these platforms are the most used for accommodation searches due to their numerous advantages (ease of search, a variety of available filters, price comparison, free cancellation in many cases, the possibility to change reservations, payment methods, insurance, etc.).

Hashtags allow for keyword searches, generating greater interaction of hotel posts with other social media users. There are internet pages where it is possible to check which hashtags are most used in their country and worldwide (Novais de Paula et al., 2019). Regarding hashtags, 67% of respondents consider them extremely important (20%) or very important (47%), while the remaining either do not use them (10%) or do not give them due importance (10%).

Creating targeted ads for specific target audiences allows the company's value proposition to reach a possible target customer more quickly, generating a new sale. Based on the results, it is observed that respondents create ads on social media frequently (35%), always (27.5%), or occasionally (25%).

Activities in the digital marketing area require many hours of dedication. It is noted that 37.5% of respondents spend, on average, between 2 to 4 hours per week, 25% of them spend, on average, between 16 to 24 hours, and 12.5% of respondents spend, on average, more than 24 hours per week. Respondents reveal the times of day their teams work with digital tools. It is possible to verify that this mainly occurs during daytime working hours: in the morning (45%) or in the afternoon (45%). These activities usually do not take place at night (30%), or only occasionally (32.5%). If these activities are related to social media, posts or ads can be scheduled to be published at night. Notably, these activities are carried out on weekdays (Monday to Friday), with the result being 32.5% from Monday to Thursday, increasing to 35% on Fridays. This work is often done on weekends (35%). These results are because marketing departments work on weekdays and during working hours, and posts can be scheduled for other days/times, in the case of these channels being social media.

Hotel's websites need to be as updated as possible, to provide reliable, correct, and timely information. Many (62.5%) respondents update the website whenever is necessary to add new information.

4.2 **Profiles**

To study the perceptions of respondents (considering the position held in the hotel) regarding the importance of digital marketing, the chi-square independence test was used to investigate which variables in the study were statistically significant. Given the relatively small sample size (n=40), some variables were recoded to meet the assumptions for the application of statistical techniques, particularly for the use of the chi-square independence test. For this purpose, the following codifications were used in this section:

(i) Sociodemographic variables used: position held (recoded into 2 categories: 1- director and manager; 2- others), gender (1- male, 2- female), age (recoded into 2 categories: 1- 22 to 39 years; 2- 40 years or older), level of education (recoded into 2 categories: 1- Secondary education or equivalent; 2- Higher education).

(ii) Type of accommodation/Star rating of hotels (recoded into 2 categories: 1- 2 or 3-star hotel; 2- 4 or 5-star hotel).

(iii)Variables associated with the importance of digital marketing: "The hotel has a marketing plan that details the Digital Marketing strategy" (1- No, 2- Yes); items associated with questions "Level of importance of E-Marketing tools" (recoded into 2 categories: 1- Unimportant to important; 2- Very to extremely important), "How long have you been using these digital marketing channels in your hotel?" (recoded into 2 categories: 1- 5 years or less; 2- more than 5 years), "Level of importance attributed to the reasons/objectives for using digital marketing channels" (recoded into 2 categories: 1- Unimportant to very important; 2- Extremely important).

To identify profiles of respondents considering their position and opinions about the importance of digital marketing for their hotels, particularly regarding variables associated with questions "The hotel has a marketing plan that details the digital marketing strategy associated with its brand", "Level of importance of e-marketing tools", "How long have you been using these digital marketing channels in your hotel?", and "Level of importance attributed to the reasons/objectives for using digital marketing channels", a multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) was conducted, selecting two dimensions as structuring axes of the space of representations.

MCA was performed, considering all variables as active variables; among those where statistically significant associations were found (see Table 1).

Table 1. Test statistic values and p-value

Position held versus:	Test statistic and p-value
The hotel has a marketing plan detailing its Digital Marketing strategy.	χ^2=11.192, p<0.001
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: Social Networks	χ^2=10.852, p<0.001
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: Sponsored Links	χ^2=8.376, p=0.004
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: Google My Business	χ^2=18.241, p<0.001
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: Google Ads (formerly Google Adwords)	χ^2=9.122, p=0.003
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: Google Analytics	χ^2=20.193, p<0.001
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: SEM	χ^2=16.822, p<0.001
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: SEO	χ^2=10.852, p<0.001
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: E-mail Marketing	χ^2=17.325, p<0.001
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: METRICS	χ^2=27.356, p<0.001
Usage Time for Digital Marketing Channels: Internet	χ^2=5.877, p=0.015
Usage Time for Digital Marketing Channels: Websites and Blogs	χ^2=8.315, p=0.004
Usage Time for Digital Marketing Channels: Social Networks	χ^2=16.832, p<0.001
Reasons/Objectives for using digital marketing channels: Create Closer Relationships with Customers	χ^2=6.705, p=0.010
Reasons/Objectives for using digital marketing channels: Build Customer Loyalty	χ^2=8.574, p=0.003
Reasons/Objectives for using digital marketing channels: Understanding Customer behaviour	χ^2=12.212, p<0.001
Reasons/Objectives for using digital marketing channels: Boost the increase in reservations and sales	χ^2=4.103, p=0.043

Source: Authors's Elaboration

The information obtained regarding the association between the variables used in MCA, based on the position held by the respondents and the level of importance given to e-marketing tools,

was synthesized into two orthogonal components explaining 71.2% of the total variance of the original variables.

Variables related to the importance of e-marketing tools (Google Analytics, SEM, METRICS) and the importance of reasons/objectives for using digital marketing channels (customer loyalty) are the most discriminating in dimension 1, with contributions to the dimension ranging between 6.85% and 8.30%. In the case of dimension 2, the variables that contribute the most are the usage time of digital marketing channels: Internet (31.72%), websites and blogs (28.33%), and social networks (11.15%).

The first dimension is primarily structured by variables related to the importance of e-marketing tools and the importance of reasons/objectives for using digital marketing channels (particularly in terms of customer loyalty, creating closer relationships with customers, and knowing customer behaviour), whether in the second dimension, variables related to usage time of digital marketing channels (Internet, websites and blogs, and social networks) are found.

Based on the study, it is observed that the first two dimensions explain about 71.2% of the variation in the data, and that first dimension (59%) generally opposes directors and managers of hotel establishments, who attribute less importance to e-marketing tools, reveal a lower degree of importance regarding the reasons/objectives for using digital marketing channels, and admit that they do not have a marketing plan detailing the digital marketing strategy, to those with other positions in hotels, but who consider the use of digital marketing channels in hotels extremely important and very or extremely important the use of e-marketing tools in hotels, also noting that they do not have a marketing plan detailing the digital marketing strategy. The second dimension (12.2%) opposes mainly those who state that they have been using digital marketing channels for a relatively short time (5 years or less) to those who have been using these digital marketing channels in hotels for more than 5 years.

Based on the coordinates of individuals on the two main components retained in MCA, the non-hierarchical k-means method was applied to maximize differences between individuals included in different classes, to group individuals into these classes, and to confirm the profiles identified in MCA. Thus, the main characteristics of the 40 respondents were evaluated for each of the three clusters found. Cluster 1 contains 12.2% of the total individuals, the second, 65% of the total, and the third cluster aggregates 22.5% of the total.

To help detail the analysis developed, a cross-tabulation of all variables used in MCA was performed for the characterization of the respondents and the level of importance given to digital marketing in hotels (see Table 2).

Table 2. Cluster profiles combining sociodemographic variables and those associated with the importance given for digital marketing in hotels

| Variables | Categories | Cluster | | | Total |
		C1 (12,5%)	C2 (65%)	C3 (22,5%)	
Gender	Male	80,0%	23,1%	55,6%	37,5%
	Female	20,0%	76,9%	44,4%	62,5%
Age	22 to 39 years old	60,0%	69,2%	66,7%	67,5%
	40 years old or more	40,0%	30,8%	33,3%	32,5%
Level of Education	High School or Equivalent	0,0%	23,1%	11,1%	17,5%
	University Education	100,0%	76,9%	88,9%	82,5%
Type of Accommodation	Hotel 2 to 3 stars	80,0%	23,1%	66,7%	40,0%
	Hotel 4 to 5 stars	20,00%	76,9%	33,3%	60,0%
Position held	Diretor_manager	80,0%	11,5%	66,7%	32,5%
	Others	20,0%	88,5%	33,3%	67,5%
The hotel has a marketing plan that details the Digital Marketing strategy	No	40,0%	7,7%	77,8%	27,5%
	Yes	60,0%	92,3%	22,2%	72,5%
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: Social Media	Unimportant to important	20,0%	3,8%	77,8%	22,5%
	Very to extremely important	80,0%	96,2%	22,2%	77,5%
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: Sponsored Links	Unimportant to important	100,0%	38,5%	100,0%	60,0%
	Very to extremely important	0,0%	61,5%	0,0%	40,0%
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: Google My Business	Unimportant to important	80,0%	15,4%	77,8%	37,5%
	Very to extremely important	20,0%	84,6%	22,2%	62,5%
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: Google Adwords	Unimportant to important	60,0%	0,0%	100,0%	30,0%
	Very to extremely important	40,0%	100,0%	0,0%	70,0%
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: Google Analytics	Unimportant to important	80,0%	0,0%	88,9%	30,0%
	Very to extremely important	20,0%	100,0%	11,1%	70,0%
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: SEM	Unimportant to important	60,0%	0,0%	88,9%	27,5%
	Very to extremely important	40,0%	100,0%	11,1%	72,5%
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: SEO	Unimportant to important	60,0%	0,0%	66,7%	22,5%
	Very to extremely important	40,0%	100,0%	33,3%	77,5%
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: E-mail Marketing	Unimportant to important	60,0%	7,7%	88,9%	32,5%
	Very to extremely important	40,0%	92,3%	11,1%	67,5%
Level of Importance of E-Marketing Tools: METRICS	Unimportant to important	80,0%	3,8%	77,8%	30,0%
	Very to extremely important	20,0%	96,2%	22,2%	70,0%
Usage Time for Digital Marketing Channels: Internet	5 years or less	100,0%	0,0%	0,00%	12,5%
	More than 5 years	0,0%	100,0%	100,0%	87,5%
Usage Time for Digital Marketing Channels: Websites and Blogs	5 years or less	100,0%	0,0%	11,1%	15,0%
	More than 5 years	0,0%	100,0%	88,9%	85,0%
Usage Time for Digital Marketing Channels: Social Media	5 years or less	100,0%	0,00%	44,4%	22,5%
	More than 5 years	0,0%	100,0%	55,6%	77,5%
Reasons/Objectives for using digital marketing channels: Create Closer Relationships with Customers	Important_without_much	40,0%	3,8%	88,9%	27,5%
	Extremely important	60,0%	96,2%	11,1%	72%
Reasons/Objectives for using digital marketing channels: Build Customer Loyalty	Important_without_much	40,0%	0,0%	88,9%	25,0%
	Extremely important	60,0%	100,0%	11,1%	75,0%
Reasons/Objectives for using digital marketing channels: Understand customer behavior	Important_without_much	80,0%	19,2%	100,0%	45,0%
	Extremely important	20,0%	80,8%	0,0%	55,0%
Reasons/Objectives for using digital marketing channels: Boost the Increase in Reservations and Sales	Important_without_much	40,0%	3,8%	55,6%	20,0%
	Extremely important	60,0%	96,2%	44,4%	80,0%

Source: Authors's Elaboration

Next, we describe each of the three profiles of respondents that could be identified in this study.

The first profile (corresponding to the first cluster) is that of men who are directors and managers of hotels, relatively more mature compared to individuals in other clusters, advocating the use of social networks, but attaching less importance to the use of other digital tools. This group consists mostly of males (80%), in the age range of 22 to 39 years (60%) but contains the highest number of respondents aged 40 or older (40%), all having higher education (100%). About 80% of them work in 2 or 3-star hotels, and the majority (60%) report that the

hotel has a marketing plan detailing the digital marketing strategy. Regarding the importance given to e-marketing tools, they mostly consider social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) to be extremely important (80%), while the other listed e-marketing tools are not considered extremely important. All of them state that they used marketing channels (Internet, websites and blogs, and networks) in their accommodations for 5 years or less (100%). About 60% of individuals reported the reasons for using digital channels (creating closer relationships with customers, customer loyalty, and promoting increased reservations and sales) are extremely important for their hotels. In this group, regarding the reasons for using digital channels, knowing customer behaviour was not considered extremely important. Because of these characteristics, cluster 1 was named social networks apologists.

The second profile (corresponding to the second cluster) is that of women, who are marketing managers and assistant directors, younger, attentive to the importance of e-marketing tools and the use of digital marketing channels. This group consists mostly of females (76.9%), in the age range of 22 to 39 years (69.20%), having higher education (76.9%), associated with a 4 or 5-star hotel (76.9%), and the majority of these (92.3%) report that the hotel has a marketing plan detailing the digital marketing strategy. Regarding the importance given to e-marketing tools, they consider Google Ads (formerly Google Adwords), Google Analytics, SEM, and SEO to be extremely important (100%). The other tools are also considered very or extremely important, for the most part. All report that their hotels have been using digital marketing channels (Internet, websites and blogs, and social networks) for more than 5 years (100%). About 93%, on average, reported that the reasons for using digital channels (creating closer relationships with customers, customer loyalty, knowing customer behaviour, and promoting increased reservations and sales) are extremely important. For these reasons, cluster 2 was named digital marketing enthusiasts.

The last group (corresponding to the third cluster) is that of individuals who are out of sync or on the sidelines of the importance of e-marketing tools and the potential use of digital marketing channels. This is composed of males (55.6%) and females (44.4%), mostly in the age range of 22 to 39 years (66.7%), having higher education (88.9%), about 66.7% of them associated with a 2 or 3-star hotel, and the majority of these (77.8%) report that the hotel does not have a marketing plan detailing the digital marketing strategy. Regarding the importance given to the listed e-marketing tools, none are considered extremely important. The majority states that their hotels have been using digital marketing channels (Internet, websites and blogs, and social networks) for more than 5 years. In this group, regarding the reasons for using digital channels

(creating closer relationships with customers, customer loyalty, knowing customer behaviour, and promoting increased reservations and sales), these were considered of little importance. Given the characteristics of this group, it was named digital marketing laggards.

5. Conclusion

The study examines the digital marketing landscape within the hotel industry, revealing that a significant majority (72.5%) of surveyed hotels have a well-defined marketing plan outlining their digital strategy. Notably, hotel managers express varying levels of importance assigned to different e-marketing tools. SEO takes the lead at 65%, perceived as crucial for enhancing customer engagement through search engine visibility. Other key tools include Google Analytics (57.5%), social networks (52.5%), and Google Ads (50%).

Emphasizing the paramount role of digital marketing, an overwhelming 82.5% of hotel managers view their associated strategies as extremely important. This sentiment translates into a high adoption rate, with 82.5% maintaining a dedicated website, positioning it as a complementary asset for shaping the company's image. Additionally, an equal percentage advocates for a presence on OTAs, citing the potential to boost bookings and sales. Social networks are recognized by 72.5% as instrumental in fostering direct and engaging relationships with customers.

The survey underscores the significance of specific social media platforms, with 62.5% and 60% of respondents emphasizing the importance of Facebook and Instagram, respectively. Relating trust in digital marketing channels, 69.2% express full confidence in their hotel's website, positioning it as the primary vehicle for promoting their establishment. Booking follows closely with 55% of respondents, and other OTAs are cited by 50%.

According to respondents' opinions, it was concluded that the greatest emphasis goes to the use and trust attributed to websites, social networks, and OTAs. Facebook and Instagram are the most important social networks for hotels; Booking.com is the platform that best captures customer attention. The main obstacles to evaluating the digital presence are the lack of training in human resources, the scarcity of budget, the little information on the strategies to be used, and the limited technical information to carry out the monitoring. Regarding the most important tools, SEO stands out. A typology of profiles of hotel managers was also identified based on their perceptions regarding the digital marketing strategy and tools used.

Statistical analyses such as the chi-square test of independence and MCA were employed to further understand the dynamics between hotel managers' perceptions and the importance of digital marketing. The latter identified three distinct clusters among respondents: the first (12.2%) comprises social network apologists, mostly directors and managers of 2 or 3-star hotels, predominantly male, mature, and with higher education; the second group (65%) consists of digital marketing enthusiasts, including marketing managers and assistant directors of 4 or 5-star hotels, mostly female, younger, and highly educated; and the third cluster (22.5%) represents digital marketing laggards, predominantly young, with higher education, linked to 2 and 3-star hotels, lacking a digital marketing plan, and attaching little importance to e-marketing tools in general. These clusters offer insights into diverse perspectives and strategies within the hotel industry regarding digital marketing.

From a managerial perspective, this research highlights the importance of investing in digital marketing strategies and tools to gain visibility in the infomediary space, because they will lead to greater customer engagement and awareness and, consequently, better business performance. Future research should expand the sample to other regions or countries to allow benchmarking and enlarge the approach to new and expanded tools, platforms, and metrics since technological evolution is constant and accelerated. also important to investigate is how digital marketing strategy's components affect a hotel's performance.

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