Chapter 95

Understanding the Role of Social Networks in Consumer Behavior in Tourism:
A Business Approach

Luís Ferreira

School of Economics and Management, University of Minho, Portugal

Bruno Barbosa Sousa

iD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8588-2422

Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave, Portugal

ABSTRACT

This research seeks to understand the type of influence that the hotel sector in Portugal can achieve in its consumers, being the tourism sector an area in constant growth. To that end, a qualitative methodology was adopted, using semi-structured interviews, as a data collection tool to understand the type of use that hotels attribute to social networks, as well as the results obtained from their practices. In the investigation nine hotels were analyzed, presenting a diversified sample between the participants in terms of capacity, as well as recognition, proving that, in a general way, social networks help in the divulgation of the hotel, presenting these as a direct channel for consumers, facilitating brand exposure as well as interaction with customers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is assumed as one of the major engines with more significant impact on the global development and growth of many economies. Year after year there has been an increase in competition in this sector, although this competition is established between tourism destinations (Becken & Simmons, 2002). Studies in tourism are increasing, although with different points of view and perspectives (Echtner & Jamal, 1997), for example on the planning of tourism destinations, local development, environmental impact,

territorial brand management or even the loyalty of tourists (Getz, 1986; Backman & Crompton, 1991; Ramos, Matos, Sousa, Correia & Cascada, 2017; Ferreira, Sousa & Gonçalves, 2018).

Also in tourism, and nowadays, companies take their presence in the online world as imperative, whether it is to reach new consumers, promote the brand, better know their customers, ensure competitiveness or maintain its relevance in the market. However, maintaining the online presence may not be so easy to do, at least in a successful way. Many companies demonstrate difficulty with the use of various social media for communication purposes, especially in encouraging consumer involvement (Tsai et al., 2017). To Jafari and Aaser (1988), tourism as a study area has gained space, reflecting its increasing recognition in the academic community, an application of interdisciplinary concepts and methods. The field of tourism marketing is no exception and has faced increasing challenges caused by the diversity and demands of markets which call for new marketing approaches. New habit needs and trends in the global tourism creates more sophisticated consumers who systematically look for different and specific tourism experiences.

Digitization was a real challenge for any company, requiring cautious and well-planned action to be successful. Presently being present in social networks presents itself as a high value advantage, allowing to expose the brand, product or idea, at a low cost, to a high audience. However, there are risks if, on the one hand, exposure can increase the company's reputation, on the other hand, if it is not well achieved, there is the possibility of creating a bad image for the brand or a social controversy. The objective of this study is to understand the phenomenon of social networks in companies, especially in the hotel sector. The choice of this sector is that it has a high need to use social networks in order to be in constant contact with its customers, as well as to create a wide exposition of the establishment. Since tourism has a high internationalization load, that is, it attracts different types of nationalities to the establishment, social networks appear as a great tool of communication, since its audience is not limited to national borders. This study aims to show how the hotel sector sees and uses social networks, the level of importance attributed to them, the types of difficulties they entail and also what kind of results are obtained. For this purpose, the following research objectives were elaborated:

1. To explore the use and impact of social networks on consumer behaviour.
2. Reveal the functions of social networks within the hotel sector.
3. Understand the importance of the use of social networks for the hotel sector.
4. Provide a deeper understanding of the potential implications of social networking in the hospitality industry.

2. DIGITAL MARKETING AND SOCIAL MEDIA

It has been nearly a quarter century since the commercial use of the Internet and the World Wide Web. During this time the business landscape has changed at a frenetic pace. Large multinational corporations such as Google, Facebook, Amazon, Alibaba, eBay and Uber (Kannan, 2017). There is general agreement that digital media have greatly impacted the way a marketer reaches today's consumer. Digital media refer to electronic media that disseminate information in digital formats (Ramos & Rodrigues, 2011). This includes any media available via computers, mobile phones, smart phones, or other digital devices such as digital outdoor signs (Alves et al., 2019). The Internet is a prominent venue of digital marketing (Smith, 2011). According to Alves et al. (2019), the online relationship quality is an integra-

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