


Chapter 6

The Role of Digital Touchpoints in the Five-Star Hospitality Customer Journey

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this chapter is to study the digital touchpoints influencing customers' decisions in the five-star hospitality industry. This chapter adopted a qualitative methodology in the form of semi-structured interviews. The findings suggest the preeminent role of online travel agencies and hotel websites as the two most powerful touchpoints influencing the decision-making of the customer and serving as the principal means of making the reservation at the hotel. It also stresses the growing influence of customer-owned touchpoints, particularly user-generated content, in influencing customer perception. This research emphasizes the significance of personalized engagement in influencing customer satisfaction and loyalty. Overall, the study presents practical managerial implications for hoteliers, offering insights on how to effectively interact with customers at each stage of their journey, thereby

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enhancing both service delivery and overall guest experience.

INTRODUCTION

According to Fortune Business Insights (2023), the five-star hospitality segment is poised to experience significant growth, projected to increase from USD 140.28 billion to USD 293.66 billion between 2023 and 2030. This surge positions it as a rapidly expanding niche within the hospitality industry (Correia et al., 2022). Overall, the luxury hospitality industry has undergone a significant transformation due to technological advancements and the widespread influence of digital platforms. With the projected number of internet users set to reach 5.3 billion by 2023 (Petrosyan, 2024), the number and relevance of digital touchpoints between customers and luxury travel service providers are expected to continue to increase.

Customer and supplier interactions, whether digital or in-person, are collectively referred to as touchpoints. Additionally, the customer journey is defined as the dynamic experience a customer has with a company over time through various touchpoints across three main phases: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In this context, the digital customer's journey is distinguished by a proliferation of digital touchpoints, which include websites, chatbots, social media content, and blogs, all of which contribute to shaping the shopper's experience and informing their ultimate purchase decision (Ozuem & Ranfagni, 2021).

The hospitality sector is swiftly adjusting to the evolving digital landscape, resulting in changes across initiatives, products, experiences, business ecosystems, and destinations (Al-Mulali et al., 2021). Current topics deserving a lot of attention from researchers and managers include studies on artificial intelligence and personalization in the customer journey (Gao & Liu, 2023; Weidig et al., 2024), making strategic approaches to cybersecurity and data protection particularly relevant.

Despite this transformation, a significant challenge in delivering outstanding customer experiences lies in establishing connections among various touchpoints throughout the customer journey to achieve positive outcomes (Verhoef et al., 2015). Luxury hospitality holds the third-largest market share in the global luxury industry, ranking only behind the automotive and personal goods sectors (Peng & Chen, 2019).

The recent review by Jain et al. (2023) demonstrates that, in the last ten years, there has been a significant increase in articles on luxury hospitality. Through this increase, these authors found that there are six thematic clusters within luxury hospitality research: (i) digital interactions, online reviews, and complaint handling; (ii) brand attributes and service encounters; (iii) status consumption and premium pricing; (iv) service quality and consumer experiences; (v) sustainable practices and workplace environment; and (iv) workforce-related traits. Jain et al. (2023) emphasizes

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