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## **International Journal of Information, Business and Management**

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# THE VALUE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS DIGITAL TOOL IN HOSPITALITY

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## **Abstract**

A few years ago, there was no way of foreseeing the impact that social media would have on the hospitality industry. In 2018, 2.3 billion people were active on social media, and that number increases daily. Hotels should no longer debate having a social media presence and using them as digital tool, but rather how to utilize the various platforms to increase the experience for their guests and value for their hotels. Because most hotels are dependent on word of mouth and good reviews from loyal guests, social media is a natural digital tool for marketing and branding.

**Key words:** hotel, hospitality, digital, digitalization, social media

## **1. Introduction**

Social media on the Internet today is used more often than the physical participation of individuals in a particular communication. Some of the popular social media are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and YouTube (Andrew, 2014). It is important to note that communications in the digital world are very fast and news is spreading faster than any other form of communication over the Internet. It is no longer necessary for individuals to wait, to communicate physically to understand the actual situation of the hotel they wish to stay for the purposes of tourism.

There can be no doubt about the impact of social media in the world of hospitality. Thus, hospitality uses social media because through them it has a quick way to reach thousands or millions of people. By positioning on the tourism market through social media, hospitality allows people to speak on Facebook of great and not so good experiences, to become instant critics on Twitter and through YouTube to become instant stars. Tourists and guests have created the social media networks in which they share reviews of hotels, restaurants and / or attractions. These people often publish stories about their experiences, good and bad, and since these media are becoming more and more popular, they also affect

not only the reputation of the hospitality business, but also the way it should position itself on the tourism market and promote it.

## **2. Who are social media?**

Social media is a term that is quite commonly used these days. It's the new "in" thing and something one can imagine is that everyone knows or understands what a social medium is. The fact is that 90% of all online users use social media in one way or another. It's also a fact that most of these people will not be able to name more than a few social media platforms, other than those they use. This may be due to the constant pace of social media development or simply representing an insufficient interest in the happenings, which makes social media appear to have appeared on the market from nowhere and surprised people.

The emergence of social media began in the early days of the Internet when people began to exchange information and communicate with each other. Only the previous platforms were more “technologically intensive” and demanded some knowledge of their use, and so the number of people using these platforms was limited. For a certain period of time as digital technology matured, the platforms were developed and regular users without any technological background could use the services. This was a turning point in the history of the Internet, making digital technology more comprehensive, where people no longer kept silent about the content they were presented / displayed. Now they can create their own content, share it with others, answer people, collaborate with them and much more. This user interaction is what inspired the development of social media, as we know them today.

Contrary to the general perception of social media that is limited to, networking with websites, for example: Facebook and Twitter, social media cover all services that facilitate the creation, sharing and exchange of content created by users. These include, but are not limited to, online forums, groups, blogs, microblogs, network sites, social bookmarks, podcasts, content groups for articles, video / photo sharing sites, and more. Social media has its own benefits and there is something for everyone. Unfortunately, people tend to be part of the more popular websites and expect them to meet all their needs, rather than registering for a service that best serves their needs. If one has focused goals and knows exactly what he wants, he will surely find a social media platform that will meet his / her special needs.

Social media also caused social change. Social media empowers people to express their thoughts and opinions and share them with others. Social media have their own character; there is nothing that can be assumed or taken for granted. There is no “one hat corresponding to all” kind of solution. Yes, there are certain aspects of dealing with social media that apply to everyone, but they can in the best case be called guidelines or best practices. Otherwise, managing social media are a learning process. After all, it all comes down to the understanding of social media, gathering relevant information and then analyzing it to improve the activity, whether it's online or offline.

### 3. What are social media?

Social media has a major impact on all the spheres of our lives. We often rely on social networks to find out new hotel destinations and plan our stay. We share our travel experiences and special moments, our opinions about hotels or restaurants. By expressing our opinion, we affect the decisions of our peers in planning their future trips (*Ristova & Angelkova, 2018*).

Even if you are not familiar with the term “social media”, it is unlikely that you have not heard and even used many of the social tools themselves. They can be divided into several categories and the authors describe several examples of them. The authors divide the tools that are used most often, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Social media - tools**

<b>Communication</b>	
<b><i>Blogging:</i></b>	Blogger, LiveJournal, TypePad, WordPress
<b><i>Micro blogging:</i></b>	Twitter, Yammer, Google Buzz
<b><i>Location:</i></b>	Foursquare, Gowalla, Facebook Places
<b><i>Social networking:</i></b>	Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace
<b><i>Aggregators:</i></b>	Google Reader, Netvibes, Pageflakes, iGoogle
<b>Collaboration</b>	
<b><i>Conferences:</i></b>	Adobe Connect, GoToMeeting, Skype
<b><i>Wiki:</i></b>	PBworks, Wetpaint, Wikia
<b><i>Social bookmarking:</i></b>	Delicious, Diigo, BibSonomy
<b><i>Social bibliography:</i></b>	CiteULike, Mendeley
<b><i>Social news:</i></b>	Digg, Reddit, Newsvine
<b><i>Social documents:</i></b>	Google Docs, Dropbox, Zoho
<b><i>Project management:</i></b>	Bamboo, Basecamp, Huddle
<b>Multimedia</b>	
<b><i>Photography:</i></b>	Flickr, Picasa, SmugMug
<b><i>Video:</i></b>	Viddler, Vimeo, YouTube
<b><i>Live:</i></b>	Justin.tv, Livestream, Ustream
<b><i>Presentation:</i></b>	Scribd, SlideShare, Slidrocket
<b><i>Virtual world:</i></b>	OpenSim, Second Life, World of Warcraft

Source: Cann, A., Dimitriou, K. and Hooley, T.,  
*Social media: a guide for researchers, 2011 pp. 7*

The most commonly used social media platforms in hospitality are: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Google,



Google Street View, Instagram, Flickr, Tencent, Weibo, Sina Weibo, Foursquare, Yelp, Android applications and Smartphone applications (Mukherjee & Nagabhushanam, 2016).

#### **4. Why use social media?**

The authors named five advantages of why should hotels use social media as digital tool:

- *Reduced costs.* Based on the fact that most of the social media sites are free, there are no costs for creating a profile and sharing information. The most famous example will be, certainly Facebook, where it is said to be “free and will always be”. However, these sites offer the ability to target guests by using specific criteria, which cost less compared to other ads such as television.
- *Social interaction.* The Internet has become an influential arena, having in mind the number of hours spent online, checking email, social networking sites, blogs, reading newspapers, watching videos. Consumer behavior studies reveal that individuals are increasingly looking at tips and information that are shared online, spending more time with websites that provide third-party assessments.
- *Direct market.* Thanks to the ability to focus on target groups and different groups based on their preferences, online marketing has become very popular and is often used. This means that, based on preferences, it checks, social media (such as interest in some kind of movie or travel), one will get accessories in relation to their interests, where by using the algorithm you will be offered products on the demand of your recent search.
- *Customer service.* Social media offer different types of abbreviations with the idea of facilitating the process of buying easier and faster. One of the most famous is “Frequently Asked Questions” where quick links are reached with an explanation about the content of the product.
- *Interactivity.* It can be described as “the extent to which users can participate in changing the shape and content of the environment in real time”.

#### **5. Value of social media as digital tool**

##### **5.1 Influence on the decision process**

According to (Gretzel *et al.*, 2007) internet reviews and ratings of websites, they increase guest's confidence in the decision process. Guests read reviews through various stages of travel planning - before, during and after the trip. During the decision-making process for visiting a particular hotel, guests pass through five phases in the decision-making process:

- *Need for recognition;*
- *Search of information;*
- *Evaluation;*
- *Purchase decision and*
- *Behavior after purchase.*

However, from the foregoing, the authors noticed that social media caused a fundamental change in the decision-making process of guests and this resulted in the emergence of a more sophisticated view of engaging guests with various brands.

1. *The need for recognition.* Social media is relevant to recognizing the need of guests. Many people understand their need for journeys from social media itself. When other guests announce their personal experiences, the need is activated with other hotel destinations for visiting that particular hotel destination. Without social media, some individuals may ignore this need for travel, or may be aware of the need but have no motivation. Exactly, social media has the power to wake up the need for traveling with individuals.
2. *Searching for information.* Shared information on social media is an important source of information about the points and can affect the decision itself to travel to potential guests in the hotel. The information from the guests themselves is considered to be more reliable than the information of the corporate organizations. Guests require different information from social media at different stages of their stay.
3. *Evaluation.* The interaction of guests towards a tourist through social media plays a key role, for example on social media like TripAdvisor or the blog [www.traveblog.org](http://www.traveblog.org). Online reviews of hotels in one destination play an important role in the evaluation phase.
4. *Purchase decision.* More than half of individuals in social media, especially under the age of 35, tend to follow their friends' recommendations on travel destinations, products and services. Hotels on their social media profiles, except for information, also offer a booking option which means a significant increase in sales.
5. *Behavior after purchase.* Social media provides a good platform for guests to rate their experience and express their feelings. After returning to their homes, guests often want to share and share their experience. Given that guests enjoy sharing their “diaries” on social media, the content of social media influences the viewer's perception of the image for a particular hotel, thus increasing popularity, and guests get more power because the authority of travel agencies is shrinking.

## **5.2 Millennials, impact on hospitality digitalization**

Generation Y, also called the Millennials, are individuals who were born between 1980 and 2000 (Viswanathan & Jain, 2013). They are also called “Net Generation” because they are the first generation to spend their entire lives in the digital world (Viswanathan & Jain, 2013). Millennials rely on entertainment technology and communication with others (Bolton *et al.*, 2013).

According to Bolton *et al.* (2013), Millennials actively contribute, share, search and consume content on social media platforms. Although some studies suggest that Millennials are actively contributing to the content of social media, there have also been some findings for students who indicate that they spend a lot of time consuming information instead of contributing (Pempek, *et al.*, 2009; Bolton *et al.*, 2013).

Millennials are perhaps the most popular demographics in today's tourism and hospitality industry, but they may also be the most difficult to attract and target. They want individualized experiences while traveling where they can express their personality and taste, but also require accessibility and flexibility in packaging, booking and more. Part of the fact that it has been difficult to attract the Millennials is that it often avoids conventional communication channels - print ads, radio and television – because Millennials

find social media to be crucial to their professional and personal lives. Millennials are checking their smartphones or mobile devices at least 45 times a day, and more than 80% of them cite Facebook as an inspiration for future travel plans.

It is important to remember that Millennials should not be seen only as tourists and guests who use social media as a way to share photos of their everyday life. In a highly connected digital world, many Millennials actually work and contribute to this industry, which makes them a highly demanded market.

## **6. Social media and hospitality: Statements and facts**

One of the defining phenomena of today's time transforms the world as we know it, and that is access to the Internet. The invention of the "World Wide Web" is the social media that comes in many forms, including blogs, forums, business networks, photo sharing platforms, social games, microblogs, chat applications, and more. According to Statista (2018), a statistical portal, the power of social networking is such that the number of worldwide users is expected to reach about 3.02 billion monthly active social media users by 2021, about a third of the entire population on Earth. About 750 million of these users in 2022 are expected to be only from China and approximately one third of a billion from India. The region with the highest penetration rate on social networks is North America, where about 70% of the population has at least one social account. Since 2017, 81% of the population in the United States have a social networking profile.

Facebook is the first social medium that exceeded the number of 1 billion monthly active users in the first quarter of 2017 and now has more than 2.2 billion users around the world. Immediately after its launch, the relatively newcomer social media Pinterest was the fastest independent website in history that reached more than 10 million monthly visitors, but fell behind other players that appeared in recent years, such as Instagram's social network or platform for microblogging Tumblr.

According to the World Travel Market and their publication "WTM Industry Report 2017":

- 40% of online travelers visit social networking sites to influence destination choice,
- 87% responded that the criticism influenced the choice of the hotel,
- 84% said that the comments influenced the way of travel,
- 78% responded that the criticism influenced the choice of eating.

70% of consumers believe online recommendations, while only 14% trust their ads:

- 50% of blog readers read blogs for travel,
- 57% of travel-related visitors read tourism reviews,
- 97% of readers think that these criticisms are correct.

Facebook has the biggest impact on leisure choices among users aged 25 to 34 and the biggest impact on men:

- More than 1 billion active users per day,

- About 70% of Facebook users are outside of the United States,
- People spend over 700 billion minutes a month on Facebook,
- Each month more than 30 billion pieces of content are shared (web links, news, blog posts, notes, photo albums, etc.).

TripAdvisor has the biggest impact on female reservation habits:

- 34 million monthly visitors,
- 35 million views,
- 98% of the topics posted on the forum are answered within 24 hours.

Twitter:

- Twitter's search engine gets about 600 million searches per day,
- 336 million registered users,
- 95 million tweets written daily.

## 7. Conclusion

Social media is one of the most powerful digital tools and nowadays is integrated into the social and economic life of each individual. Social media platforms are easily accessible, direct and attractive, and allows guests to become engaged in the same ways. The use of social media platforms has become widespread, and guests consistently use social media to express pleasure or frustration about their experiences. Whether it is used intentionally or inadvertently, the hospitality industry cannot ignore the impact of the social media paradigm on their businesses.

The real value of social media as a digital tool in hospitality is seen is the possibility for guests to turn to social media throughout every step of their journey, from start to finish. Here hotels have the opportunity for a focused approach to social media that can result in a stronger brand, greater exposure and better relationships with first-time and repeat guests.

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