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SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN HOTEL INDUSTRY. THE CASE OF FACEBOOK USE IN BULGARIA

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate how 4 and 5 star hotels in Bulgaria use the social media Facebook and to what extent they have implemented it in their marketing and sales strategies. Based on a framework of 28 criteria, the Facebook pages of 60 hotels were analyzed. The results report that nowadays almost all hotels have a presence on social networks, but still their function is mainly presentational. Incomplete descriptions, episodic posting, weak interaction with users, and insufficient use of the possibilities of the media in terms of distribution and marketing largely characterize their use. At the same time, large deviations are reported between the results of some of the hotels, which can be taken as an indicator of the wider use of social networks in the future. This article extends the research done in this topic. The framework used in the study is a combination of components based on previous studies and can be useful for future research as well as serve as a tool for hotel managers and marketing professionals.

Keywords: Bulgaria, social media. hotels, Facebook, marketing

INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the 20th century marked the emergence of social networks. Their original idea was to be a platform for connecting people, sharing experiences, and exchanging ideas between them. After their rapid growth, businesses saw huge potential and started implementing them in their operations. Thus, in a very short period, corporate social media profiles have become an essential part of companies' marketing strategies. For the hospitality industry, social media has been of utmost importance since its inception. Sharing photos and videos of trips and stays has proven to be highly inspirational (Bilgihan et al., 2016) and has created new motivation when choosing a destination. Already in 2011, a study by Skyscanner (2011) reported that 52% of Facebook users were inspired to book a trip by friends' pictures posted on social media. Ten years later, this influence not only remains but continues to grow. According to a brand new Statista (2023) study, 75% of travelers were influenced by social media posts. The same study also points to another intriguing result: 48% of respondents travel to destinations to show them on social media. To leverage the strong influence of social media on travel and its undeniable

potential for access to an unlimited number of customers, most hotel companies nowadays have at least one profile on different social platforms. But social media presence alone, without strategic management of the corporate profile, does not bring about significant business benefits. To guarantee this, the hotel must follow pre-prepared marketing and sales strategies that correspond to its objectives and implement them systematically in its profile. Various factors, such as a complete description of the hotel, appropriate format of the posts, and impactful content, are essential for increasing the satisfaction and engagement rate of users on social media. Of equal importance for hotels is the inclusion of components that enable direct communication and booking. Posting various achievements and innovations, organizing games, conducting marketing research (surveys), and maintaining a calendar of upcoming events are all activities that contribute to fully exploiting the potential of social media. Despite these opportunities, research to date reports that hotels are still timid, their profiles are mostly presentational, and suffer from low activity in both interacting with consumers and using the medium as a distribution channel for sales.

The aim of this article is to investigate the use of social media in the Bulgarian hospitality industry. The research question is: How do 4- and 5-star hotels in destination Varna manage their own social media accounts and to what extent do they take advantage of the opportunities they provide? The study focuses on the main attributes of hotel profiles, the type and content of publications, as well as the levels of user engagement. On the basis of 28 evaluation criteria from previous studies in science literature, a content analysis of Facebook profiles of 60 hotels was conducted. The paper concludes with an interpretation of the results and valuable information for hotels to improve their marketing strategies.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social media are online applications and platforms that aim to facilitate interaction and content sharing in an innovative way (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015; Weber, 2009; Ahammad et al., 2024), by enabling real-time interactions with global users (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). According to Dewing (2012), social media are used as reference for many services based on the Internet and cellular services that make the user participate in online exchange, contribute to content, or join community online such as blogs, wikis, social media sites and media sharing site.

Social media presence is essential for hospitality (PR Smith, 2011). Through it, hotels with enhancing its visibility (Belias et al., 2022; Rossidis et al., 2021), can increase company and brand recognition (Fanion, 2011; Malik, 2023; O'Flynn, 2017; Veríssimo & Menezes, 2015), improve the hotel performance (Arusho et al., 2023), hotel sales (Choi et al., 2016; Dimitrios

et al., 2023; Hue et al., 2022) and hotel's online reputation (Kim et al., 2015). Social media also has a significant impact on tourist behaviour and attitudes (Han et al., 2025). They enhance customer experience (Veríssimo & Menezes, 2015), influence the preferences and choices of other travellers (Abuhashesh et al., 2019; Ladhari & Michaud, 2015; Khaki & Khan, 2024; Luong & Nguyen, 2025; Veloso et al., 2024; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Ye et al., 2011) and lead to increasing customer satisfaction (Kang, 2018).

The biggest social media nowadays with over 3.05 billion monthly active users, is Facebook (Statista, 2024). Founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, today it is in the marketing portfolio of many companies worldwide. According to Buffer's State of Social annual report (Buffer, 2019), 93.7 percent of businesses use Facebook. In the field of hospitality, the social media Facebook has many applications. It has the capabilities of supporting hotel guests throughout numerious activities, such as inspiration, preliminary information search, comparison, decision making, travel planning, communication, engagement, retrieval of information asweel as post-sharing and recollecting travel experiences (Owoche et al., 2019). This diverse variety of functionalities makes Facebook among the most used social platforms in the hospitality industry (Ferrer-Rosell et al., 2020; Minazzi & Lagrosen, 2013; Moro & Rita, 2018; Sanchez-Casado et al., 2019).

Numerous academic studies have examined how hotel companies manage their social media accounts, primarily Facebook, and the extent to which they have implemented them in their marketing and distribution activities. In most of them, scholars use different, but at the same time similar evaluation criteria based mostly on content analysis. Some of the first studies noted the use of social media in its very early stages of entry into the hospitality industry and predictably noted tentative steps. For example, in 2010, O Connor (2011) examined the Facebook pages of 50 international hotel chains and found that only 28 of them had fan pages. At the same time, a large part of those who have suffered from low levels of visibility, activity and engagement, which, according to the scientist, is a sign of the still ineffective use of Facebook pages by hotel chains. Similar results were reported in a study by Chan & Guillet (2011), which focused on the marketing performance of 67 hotels in Hong Kong on 23 social media sites. Based on 18 criteria, adapted from previous studies, the researchers also found low performance in the social media usage, with some of the main problems being related to the lack of interaction between hotels and customers, inaccurate content and unresponsiveness to guests. Low interaction between hotels and followers was also observed on the Facebook pages of major hotels in Taiwan in a study by Hsu (2012). In it, the author draws attention to another important component, namely the language used in social media. In his study, most of the publications were in Chinese, which according to the scientist, is a barrier to reach a wide range

of users. The social profiles of European hotel chains have been studied by researchers Minazzi & Lagrosen (2013). Their results were not significantly different from those of the previous studies. According to researchers, hotels use Facebook to promote the hotel brand, but the potential of customer engagement is still undervalued. As scientists have concluded, hotels are still in the initial phase of developing social media strategies. In the same period, Virginia Phelan et al. (2013) analyzed the Facebook pages of 100 hotels in the United States using 23 criteria divided into three aspects: hotel content features, property information, and interactions between hotels and customers. Some of the results indicated that only 57% of studied Facebook pages were updated on a daily basis, only 17% utilized online surveys to obtain customer feedback, and only 16% have more than 5000 followers. Based on the results of the research, the scientists conclude that hotels still do not fully exploit the possibilities of social media as a marketing tool. Studies conducted a few years later have reported no major improvements. A large-scale study by Denizci Guillet et al., (2016) examined the profiles of 133 hotel brands on top four Chinese social media sites. According to the results, hotels have a low posting frequency, respond selectively to customers, and conduct unilateral interactions with them. The study also focuses on the non-use of social media as a distribution channel for direct sales. Radwan & Radwan (2016) examined the profiles of hotels in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, and the trend of ineffective social media management continues. According to the researcher, the use of media is mainly limited to updating hotel status, promoting hotel products, services and offers and posting blogs, mostly once a month. The results also reported that hotels do not use social media as a channel to book or sell rooms. More recent research reports slightly more, but still insufficient, activity on social media use. In a study by (2019), 64% of hotels in Kenya in the 3 to 5-star category have a Facebook page. The results of the content analysis also show that hotels still do not use their pages effectively, either for branding their hotels or for promoting the services they offer. According to scientists, a significant disadvantage is the low use of videos, although according to their research, it generated the highest number of reactions. Low use of interactive content in the form of videos and non-interactive content in posts was also observed in a study by Aydin (2020), who examined the Facebook pages of 5-star hotels in Turkey. In the researcher's study, despite the luxury star category, 28% of hotels still did not have a Facebook page, and the rest mostly have low post frequencies (42% posted once a month). The Facebook pages of 360 5-star hotels, half located in Greece and half located worldwide, were also examined by Kotzaivazoglou et al. (2021). The results again report that hotels do not take full advantage of social media, which was confirmed, for example, by Pícha

et al. (2025). Only a minority of them present their history or mission, have a link to other social sites, and post news about their events, offers, achievements or career opportunities.

After the literature review, we could conclude that hoteliers are slowly recognizing the role of social media in the hotel's marketing and distribution policy. Insufficient interaction with followers, infrequent posting, not customer-oriented content, and very few options for direct bookings are some of the significant shortcomings of social profiles.

DATA AND METHOD

The aim of this study is to investigate how four- and five-star hotels in Varna Municipality use Facebook and the extent to which they have integrated it into their marketing and sales. To achieve this objective, the research methodology was implemented in three consecutive phases, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Research methodology
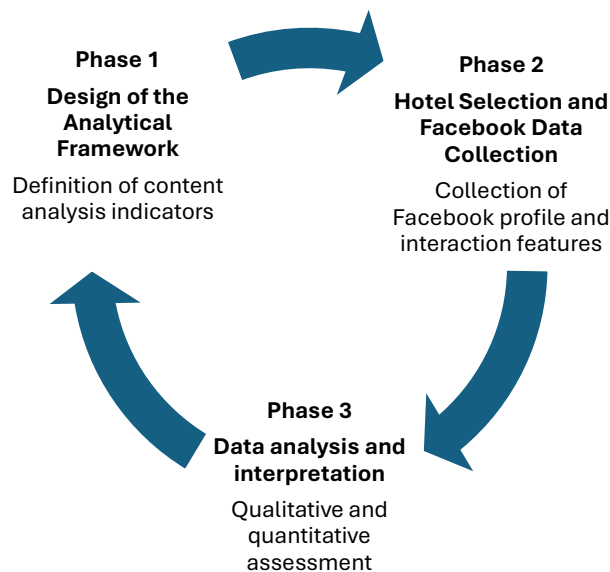
Source Authors

Phase 1 involves the design of the analytical framework. For the purpose of the present study, content analysis was used. There are two main reasons for this choice. First, content analysis allows for a systematic and objective data collection process that is suitable for exploratory and descriptive research, and enables the identification of current status and trends based on predefined categories in large datasets (Krippendorff, 2004; Virginia Phelan et al., 2013). Second, content analysis is one of the most commonly used methods in studies focusing on social media in the tourism and hospitality sector (Denizci Guillet et al., 2016; Leung, 2012; Owoche et al., 2019).

After reviewing existing research on hotel social media practices (Chan & Guillet, 2011; Denizci Guillet et al., 2016; Kotzaivazoglou et al., 2021; Liang & Law, 2003; Mich & Baggio, 2015; O Connor, 2011; Virginia Phelan et al., 2013), a total of 28 indicators were selected to assess how hotels use Facebook. These indicators are grouped into three main categories: hotel profile, post characteristics, and interaction characteristics.

The first category aims to identify the main attributes of hotel profiles. These include basic indicators such as description, logo, address/map, phone number, calendar of upcoming events etc., as well as online reputation indexes and direct booking options. Publications by type and content are grouped under the second category, referred to as "Post characteristics." The third category covers indicators related to the interaction between hotels and customers, including the number of Facebook followers, posts, shares, and likes.

The complete list of indicators used in the content analysis is presented in Tab. 1.

Table 1 Content analysis form

№	Criteria	
	Hotel profile	
1.	Description	yes/no
2.	Logo	yes/no
3.	Instant messaging	yes/no
4.	Calendar of upcoming events	yes/no
5.	Phone number	yes/no
6.	E-mail address	yes/no
7.	Address/map	yes/no
8.	Web site link	yes/no
9.	Reservation button	yes/no
	Online reputation indexes:	
10.	Facebook rating	yes/no
11.	Outdoor rating (Booking.com, Hotel.com…..)	yes/no
12.	Publications activities in surveyed period	yes/no
13.	Marketing surveys	yes/no
	Links to:	
14.	TikTok	yes/no
15.	Instagram	yes/no
16.	YouTube	yes/no
17.	Twitter	yes/no
	Post characteristics	
	Post type:	
18.	Video	yes/no
19.	Picture	yes/no
20.	Audio file	yes/no
	Post content:	
21.	Inventions/ renewals	yes/no
22.	Achievement/ awards	yes/no
23.	Promotion	yes/no
24.	Career opportunities	yes/no

Table 1 (Continued)

	Interaction characteristic	
25.	Number of Facebook followers	numeric
26.	Number of posts	numeric
27.	Number of post shares	numeric
28.	Number of post likes	numeric

Source: prepared by the author

Phase 2 involves the selection of eligible hotels from the National Tourist Register of Bulgaria and the collection of data from their official Facebook pages. This step was carried out based on the indicators defined in the analytical framework established in Phase 1. To define the study sample, a specific geographic focus was first established. For the purposes of this research, four- and five-star hotels located within Varna Municipality were selected. Varna was chosen as the destination due to its popularity as one of Bulgaria's leading seaside resorts.

Information about accommodation facilities was obtained from the National Tourist Register of Bulgaria, which includes all hotels with a valid operating certificate. According to the register, as of August 2023, there were 85 four- and five-star hotels operating within the territory of the destination. To achieve the objectives of the study, several inclusion criteria were applied. First, the hotel must have a Facebook page. Second, the page must be individually managed—not shared with other properties. Third, the page must show evidence of activity within the past year. Applying these criteria resulted in a final sample of 60 hotels, of which 51 are four-star and 9 are five-star.

For the study, the Facebook pages of the hotels and their posts in July 2023 were analyzed. Considering that Varna is a seaside destination with strong seasonality, and that July is one of the most active months for travel, the author of the study believes this is an appropriate period to explore the activity of hoteliers on social media. The data required for the study were manually collected and double-checked during a 48-hour period in August 2023.

Phase 3 involves the analysis and interpretation of the data collected from the Facebook pages of the selected hotels. The study applies a content analysis approach that combines qualitative coding with quantitative measurement.

Each of the 28 indicators was coded according to its nature: binary (yes/no) for the presence or absence of profile and content features, and numeric values for measurable engagement metrics such as number of followers, likes, shares, and posts.

Both qualitative and quantitative data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics. The binary indicators were summarized using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages), enabling the identification of patterns in structural features and post types. The numeric data were used to provide an overview of engagement levels and to support comparisons between hotels in terms of activity and user interaction.

RESULTS

The results of the first group of indicators "Hotel profile" (Tab. 2) report heterogeneous values. One of the most basic components of a hotel's Facebook page is "Property's description". It enables the property to make a first impression (Virginia Phelan et al., 2013) and is extremely important, especially for new customers. In the present study it was posted by only 61.7% of the hotels. The hotel logo was implemented in 78.3% of the profiles and a calendar of upcoming events was adopted from 73.3%. The same percentage of hotels 73.3% (n=44) have posted their Facebook rating on the wall. Only two hotels have published ratings from external booking sources. One of them has posted travellers' choice awards from Tripadvisor.com, and the other its score from an external platform, in this case, Agoda.com. Only 40% of hotels have implemented a direct booking button, which shows the still weak integration of social media in sales channels. Publication activity is also not particularly strong. Only 61.7% (n=37) reported publishing activity (at least one post) in July. None of the hotels posted a marketing survey in the month of July when Facebook page traffic is expected to be the highest. Strong activity was reported in the ways of contacting the hotel. A link to the hotel's website, e-mail, address/map, and phone number were posted by all 60 hotels in the study. Instant messaging as a quick connection component was also used by all hotels. Links to social networks were low performed on the hotels' Facebook pages. Links to Instagram were indicated by 11.7% of hotels, links to TikTok (1.7%), and links to YouTube (1.7%). None of the hotels has a link to Twitter.

Table 2 Hotel profile

Criteria	Frequency	Percent
Description	37	61.7%
Logo	47	78.3%
Instant messaging	60	100.0%
Calendar of upcoming events	44	73.3%
Phone number	60	100.0%
E-mail address	60	100.0%
Address/map	60	100.0%
Web site link	60	100.0%
Reservation button	24	40.0%
Facebook rating	44	73.3%
Outdoor rating	2	3.3%
Publications activities in surveyed period	37	61.7%
Marketing survey	0	0.0%
Links to TikTok	1	1.7%
Links to Instagram	7	11.7%
Links to YouTube	1	1.7%
Link to Twitter	0	0.0%

Source: prepared by the author

The second group of indicators relates to the type and content of posts published in the study period (July). Only hotels with at least one publication (n=37) per month were included in this part of the study. The results (Tab. 3) report that the main preferred type of posts for 94.6% of the hotels was picture. Video was used by 56.8% of them. Audio file was not used by any hotel. The content of the publications was considered in several categories: promotion, news, inventions/renewals, achievement/awards and career opportunities. Promotions (package deals, discounts) were offered by 54.1% of hotels in July. News was published by 21.6% of the hotels and was mainly related to upcoming cultural events in destination Varna, such as international festivals, exhibitions, culinary events, sports tournaments, etc. Only one, Palm Beach hotel, has made a publication in the achievement/awards category. It was for the "Fashion and Style 2023" award, and was received during the surveyed month. None of the hotels has made a publication in the inventions/renewals category, which could include not only innovations in hotels, such as new services or facilities, but also upgrades to room equipment, restaurant, lobby bar, etc., that are common especially in seasonal hotels. There is also no publication in the career opportunities category.

Table 3 Publication characteristics

Criteria	Frequency	Percent
Post type		
Picture	35	94.6%
Video	21	56.8%
Audio file	0	0.0%
Post content		
Promotion	20	54.1%
News	8	21.6%
Inventions/renewals	0	0.0%
Achievment/awards	1	2.7%
Career opportunities	0	0.0%

Notes: only hotels with at least one post in July are included in the table
Source: prepared by the author

The last part of content analysis includes indicators analyzing the level of engagement (Tab.4). One of the most important of them is the number of Facebook followers. Facebook followers are users who see every single post on a company's page and may comment, like or share it. With a good marketing strategy, they can be an extremely useful source for promoting the hotel and attracting new bookings. According to the results of the study, hotels in the Varna municipality with their own Facebook page have an average of 6177 followers. Their number varies within a wide range from min 131 to max 61000, which explains the high standard deviation of 9241.19. In total, the hotels on the territory of Varna Municipality have 370 071

followers. It should also be noted that the majority of hotels (68.3%) have up to 5000 followers and only 3% exceed 10000. In the present study, the hotel with the most followers (61000) is International Hotel Casino, which offers a casino with 24-hour operation and understandably targets a different market segment.

Table 4 Interaction characteristics

Criteria	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std.Deviation
Number of followers	60	131	61000	370071	6176.85	9241.193
Number of posts	37*	1	73	516	13.95	17.871
Number of shares	37*	0	169	915	24.73	38.083
Number of likes	37*	0	2533	16131	435.97	558,810

Notes: *hotels with at least one post in July.
Source: prepared by the author

To measure the average number of posts, publication's shares and publication's likes, we will exclude hotels without a single post in the month of July. The remaining hotels (n=37) have published a total of 516 posts, which amounts to about 14 posts per month. One post received an average of 31.26 likes and 1.77 shares during the study period. It is interesting to note that the hotel with the highest number of posts (hotel Sofia) was not the hotel with the most shares and likes on its posts. The one with the most likes on posts is Argisht Partez with 13,000 followers, although it has relatively few posts. The one with the most shares is Prestige deluxe hotel aquapark club, which may be due to the fact that the hotel posted many promotions during the research period. It should be added that there are also hotels with posts but without a single like or share, which undoubtedly confirms that content is more important for good engagement than quantity.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicate that most hotels in Bulgaria have a Facebook page, but they are still not fully utilizing the platform's potential. The inclusion of basic features such as hotel descriptions, messaging tools, and contact details suggests a predominantly presentational and informational approach to social media use. The weak integration of a booking button (present in only 40% of the hotels), compared to other studies (Kotzaivazoglou et al., 2021), shows that social media is not yet viewed as a fully integrated distribution channel. While this may be due to strategic preferences—such as reliance on OTAs, tour operators, or direct website bookings—adding this functionality could increase the volume of direct reservations(Leung, 2012). Another notable gap identified in the study is the lack of use of Facebook for marketing

research purposes. One of the most accessible and low-cost tools available on social media is the use of customer surveys, which can provide valuable feedback on guest satisfaction, expectations, and content preferences(Virginia Phelan et al., 2013). Despite this potential, none of the hotels in the sample published any surveys during the observed period. Online reviews from platforms like TripAdvisor and Booking.com are widely acknowledged as a key factor influencing the hotel selection process and enhancing trust and brand credibility (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015, 2015; Ye et al., 2009). Although Facebook provides the option to integrate these ratings, only two of the hotels in the sample have taken advantage of this opportunity. This represents a missed opportunity, especially for hotels with high ratings, which could leverage these external reviews to strengthen their reputation and attract new customers. A substantial proportion of hotels (38.3%) exhibited no publication activity during one of the peak travel months. This finding underscores the inconsistent use of social media, even during periods of high tourism demand. Among the hotels that were active, visual content remains dominant, with image-based posts being the most commonly used format, followed by video. This pattern reflects trends reported in prior studies on hotel social media practices (Aydin, 2020; Kotzaivazoglou et al., 2021; Owoche et al., 2019; Virginia Phelan et al., 2013). In terms of post content, promotional messages—such as discounts and package deals—were the most frequently observed, followed by news updates. However, strategic content types such as announcements of achievements, service innovations, or career opportunities were largely absent. Only one hotel published a post related to an award during the study period. None shared information about recent improvements or new services, and none posted details about job openings. The lack of social media usage for HR research is also confirmed by other studies(Gehrels et al., 2016; Kotzaivazoglou et al., 2021). These categories – especially innovation and HR-related content – can play a key role in strengthening brand positioning, attracting talent, and maintaining competitiveness, particularly during the high season when customer attention is at its peak. The complete lack of such posts suggests that many hotels are not yet leveraging Facebook as a multi-functional communication and engagement tool, but rather rely on it for basic promotional visibility (Kotzaivazoglou et al., et al. 2021; Virginia Phelan et al., 2013). Additionally, another indicator of limited social media performance is the relatively low number of followers per hotel. The average was 6,177 followers, which is modest considering the overall volume of social media users globally (Denizci Guillet et al., 2016). This may reflect insufficient efforts by administrators to grow and engage their audience. Among hotels with at least one post during the study period, the average number of posts in July was 14—roughly consistent with the industry benchmark of 3.36 posts per week (RivalIQ,

2023). Still, the data revealed high variability, with some hotels posting frequently and others only once. On average, a post received 31.26 likes and 1.77 shares, but these numbers varied widely across the sample, with some hotels receiving no engagement at all. This suggests that posting frequency alone is not enough to drive interaction; instead, more attention must be paid to the relevance and appeal of content shared with followers(Nastisin et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study examines the use of Facebook by hoteliers in Bulgaria and analyzes the extent to which they integrate it into their marketing and distribution strategies. In our opinion, this is the first such study that provides valuable information about the current state of social media in the Bulgarian hotel sector.

The results of the study confirmed the conclusions of previous studies, which showed that hotels are still not fully utilizing the potential of Facebook(Chan & Guillet, 2011; Hsu, 2012; Owoche et al., 2019; Radwan & Radwan, 2016; Virginia Phelan et al., 2013).

In order to achieve higher efficiency, managers can take action in several key areas:

• To increase the audience – they should provide quality and diverse content that attracts new followers and generates a high level of engagement with them.

• To reach more direct bookings – hotels should add functionalities that enable direct booking.

• To improve the image – hotels should integrate online ratings and reviews received from external booking platforms

• To improve competitiveness – hotels should share their new features and innovations especially during peak seasons.

• To better understand customers – hotels should use social media to conduct surveys that will provide valuable information about customer preferences and needs.

Paper limitations and future research suggestions

The study has its limitations. One significant limitation is the scope of the survey, which only included hotels from specific star categories. Future research could consider a broader sample, incorporating hotels from different star ratings to provide a more comprehensive overview. Additionally, this study examined social media activity during only a single month, which coincided with peak travel season. To gain a fuller understanding of social media usage, future studies should include data from less busy periods to assess if the trends observed during peak season are consistent throughout the year. The study also included both year-round and seasonal

hotels together, but it might be more insightful to treat these two types of establishments separately in future research.

For future research related to the extent of Facebook usage in the hospitality industry, it is good to consider other factors such as the number of rooms and occupancy rate. Additionally, the use of direct and indirect distribution channels and specifically their ratio should also be considered when measuring hoteliers' activity on social media. It is also important to assess consumer perception of the content of hotel Facebook pages and its impact on trust and the intention to make a direct booking. Finally, investigating the perspectives of hoteliers and marketers regarding the barriers and concerns they face in using social media as a marketing and distribution tool would offer valuable insights for future studies.

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