Importance and Practices of Digitalization and Social Media usage in Hospitality Industry

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Abstract: According to the latest WTTC (2022:2) report, tourism and traveling provide one out of four of total new workplaces created throughout the globe, which stands for 10.3% of overall jobs (333 million), and 10.3% of global GDP (US$9.6 trillion) (WTTC, 2022:2). In many countries, tourism is supposed to be one of the most attractive activities and a lot of people around the planet fulfil regularly their travel experiences.

The role of digitalization is becoming more important and is spreading wider. Interestingly, advanced information technologies provide assistance for small businesses to represent themselves on the market in an electronic form (Yaldaie, 2019:2). Using digital tools and channels, both industry and customers benefit from its advantages. Hospitality brands are using more and more diverse digital instruments to support and develop their brand awareness, brand equity and, furthermore, brand loyalty. Hospitality enterprises demonstrated a high level of incorporation into social media, adopting it to the needs of a brand and demands of customers. Starting with establishing social media accounts players in the tourism market now exploit social media marketing tools, create and maintain online communities, encourage visitors to co-create a strong brand awareness by posting, sharing and spreading information about the brand. To our mind, the contribution and originality of the present research will lie in the focus on the digitalization phenomenon as a whole, while summarizing its components and elements, wide usage of systematic approach for analyzing digitalization, consolidating the knowledge previously presented in the academia.

Keywords: Digitalization, social media, hospitality industry

1. Introduction

The rising popularity of digital means of communication where social media plays a significant role stipulates for reconfiguration and redesign of the marketing approaches and models in the hospitality industry. Businesses are affected by a new paradigm of relationship between a brand and customers associated with a trend to provide consumers more power (Pires et al., 2006:937). Now consumers start contributing to co-creation of the brand by posting, sharing and commenting any information related to a brand. Moreover, businesses have to incorporate social media techniques into their strategies to obtain sustainable competitive advantage (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014:339). There are different formats that social media exists in such as blogs, virtual communities and online channels, online comments and reviews, and social networks: 'Blogs, product reviews, discussion groups, product ratings, etc. are new important sources of information describing how customers collect information, use that information, and how that information is used in their decision-making, shopping behavior, and post-purchase behavior' (Leeflang et al., 2014:2).

The practice of brand consumption is now changing its location towards online communities where the process of stakeholder interactions takes place (Vock et al., 2013:311). Consumption itself evolves into social co-production marking a greater meaning of online communities in the consumption process (Tuominen, 2007:189). The role of consumers changes dramatically from 'quiet, unnoticed individuals into a loud noisy collective' of people who understand their power and have influence upon brands (Libai et al, 2010:267). Through active online interactions consumers create and exchange content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010:61), which appear to be quite democratic,

and where exchange and accessibility become a norm. All these lead to forming a better understanding on how online consumption behavior functions and can be managed.

According to the latest WTTC (2022:2) report, tourism and traveling provide one out of four of total new workplaces created throughout the globe, which stands for 10.3% of overall jobs (333 million), and 10.3% of global GDP (US$9.6 trillion) (WTTC, 2022:2). In many countries, tourism is supposed to be one of the most attractive activities and a lot of people around the planet fulfil regularly their travel experiences. According to UNWTO (2022: 8), international tourism continued its revival in 2022, demonstrating a dramatic change in comparison to 2020 and 2021 respectively. The industry is experiencing a constant growth and after a dramatic fall-down caused by pandemic situation in the world, it is recovering at a high speed. Global tourist arrivals demonstrated a dramatic increase and reached a peak of 116 million tourists in August 2022.When compared to the same period of 2020 and 2021, the absolute number of tourists has almost doubled (UNWTO,2022:8).

In the recent time latest technologies have changed the service industry dramatically (Yaldaie, 2019:2). The role of digitalization is becoming more important and is spreading wider. Interestingly, advanced information technologies provide assistance for small businesses to represent themselves on the market in an electronic form (Yaldaie, 2019:2). Using digital tools and channels, both industry and customers benefit from its advantages. Hospitality brands are using more and more diverse digital instruments to support and develop their brand awareness, brand equity and, furthermore, brand loyalty.

However, challenges caused by using digital means are also there and can be found everywhere throughout the process. Enormously wide spread of information, very high speed of delivering news and comments force brands to take precautions and pay additional attention to the e-WOM (electronic word-of-mouth), which becomes one of the most powerful digital armors which customers use to interact with brands in the hospitality industry. The aim of the master thesis is to take a glance at the phenomenon of digitalization and clarify digital means and tools, to consolidate and summarize the effects of digitalization upon brands in the hospitality industry context.

To our mind, the contribution and originality of the present research will lie in the focus on the digitalization phenomenon as a whole, while summarizing its components and elements, wide usage of systematic approach for analyzing digitalization, consolidating the knowledge previously presented in the academia.

2. Current Trends in Hospitality Industry

The 21st century and the rise of economy 4.0 bring more challenges in developing and creating a relevant and modern customer-service business model and still maintain exclusiveness of their products. Intensive competition in the hospitality industry characterized by raising number of hotel bedrooms and services throughout the world, high level of customer mobility and transformation of traditional marketing into digital now become a reality. Global hotel industry now experiences a dramatic change. Inevitable and incredible technological progress affects the whole humanity, every aspect of our life and business and becomes a driving force for the development of the industry. Naturally, there is a great challenge that affects hotels on how to satisfy needs of their customers in a constantly changing environment (Tutek et al., 2018:3).

Hoteliers are now facing the necessity to provide an individual personalized experience for each customer which they have to find out. Customers' expectations and preferences have to be collected and analyzed and necessary changes have to be made into principles of segmentation and ways of measuring collected data. Thus, companies have to start treating their customers mainly as individuals with the idea to satisfy their personal demands rather than form a general segment based on a common feature. Higher level of digitalization causes a larger transparency of information and this leads to a special importance of 'knowing your customer' as the main principle. The 'tourist has demanded better experiences, faster service, multiple choice, social responsibility and greater satisfaction' (Yeoman, 2010: 6).

Digitalization is defined as the usage of digital technologies in order to modify a business model and secure new revenue schemes and value-creating opportunities; this is the process of transforming analogue business into digital (https://www.gartner.com/en/information-technology/glossary/digitalization Access date: 27.04.2023). A variety of definitions in a multidimensional context will be presented later in chapter two. Segmentation itself has

to be modified and new approaches to collecting, evaluating and accessing digital data need to be employed: 'For hotel chains seeking to embrace the future, it is vital that they master: analyzing big data to understand their customers beyond simple segmentation, measuring and monitoring evolving customer expectations, and creating authentic experiences' (Richard, 2017:60). In the times of 'digital world' segmentation should focus on activity-based data on the web and particularly in social media platforms and communities. Obviously, segmentation changes its nature from generalized market segmentation into individual and personalized based on digital activity of potential customers. Special attention has to be paid to data collected during the customer monitoring focusing on customer's preferences, selection, purchasing habits, and all relevant information concerning consumption at the time of travel. Such information has to be properly analyzed and customized in order to produce adequate service to satisfy the customer and reflect on redesigned marketing strategy and tailor an individually-oriented supply. In addition to that, a concept of 'total service model' is established to explain and justify individual, customer-tailored attitude. The meaning of the following model circles around customizing of every aspect of customer service. According to Destors and Talwar (2011: 8), a customer is given a possibility to make their choice from a variety of offerings and, therefore, to control and personalize their travel experience from intention and evaluation to decision-making and setting out on a travel. This trend is growing faster than counterparts in a luxury segment where marketers are trying to reach their clientele with the best supply and establish and encourage loyalty within repeat consumers (Richard, 2017:60).

Digitalization has not just affected hospitality but also other spheres and aspects of peoples' life (Klimova and Glumova, 2020:14). Global economy becomes digital and digitalization opens up new opportunities and causes innovation and new principles of work. Digital tools change their nature from the auxiliary to the main stipulating for the shift in priority in using industrial instruments. Countries start to invest in developing digital tools for tourism such as Turkey and Kazakhstan, which declared the creation of concept 'Tourism 4.0' (Klimova and Glumova, 2020:16). The major idea behind the concept is the wide connection between systems within 'Tourism 4.0' and interconnection which ties all stages of a tourist product lifecycle.

Due to the fact that 74%of travelers are making their travel plans online, hospitality and tourism are becoming a 'mainstream digital economy' (Klimova and Glumova, 2020:14). As far as Google statistics go, there are around 400 search calls during trip planning on average. This insight can be effectively used by businesses who can take advantage and manage the process at all stages from planning till purchasing and traveling (Klimova and Glumova, 2020:16). Up to 2019, the number of online sales increased up to 1 trillion rubles (Klimova and Glumova, 2020:14).

3. Digitalization as a Social and Technical Phenomenon

Due to the multidimensional character of digitalization researchers come up with a variety of definitions. It mainly depends on the angle they are looking at this phenomenon from and, therefore, various characteristics of it they are identifying. Maxwell & McCain (1997: 147) state that digital technology divides information into small elements. By converting an analogue signal into discrete, digitalization manipulates information, visuals, texts, sounds and videos in a new way, which had never been done before. Hagberg et al. (2016: 2) focus attention on social character of the phenomenon saying that digitalization is one of the most important and valuable transformation of the contemporary society that has been continuing at present and effecting dramatically business and personal life. Researchers also mention conversion from analogue to digital in a broader meaning providing examples from the financial sector (cash payments are being substituted by electronic). They also highlight the 'new forms of value creation' such as transparency, availability, accessibility, to name a few.

In broad meaning, 'digitization essentially refers to the process of converting analog information into its digital form' (Kumar and Shekhar, 2020:93). Digital means can help use and manage information with higher efficiency and handle better operations (Kumar and Shekhar, 2020:93). Lenka et al. (2017:93) refer to the industrial management literature that defines digitalization as a phenomenon of intelligent machines connected to one another, which are using digital technologies and information in a digital format as a source of energy. Machekhina (2017:2) states that digitalization is defined as a transformation of various types of information (written, audio, video and other types) into the digital format. Similar attitude we can find with some other researchers such as Parviainen et al. (2017: 64) who describe digitalization as a digitizing process – transformation of analogue type of information into the digital. Valenduc and Vendramin (2017: 126) come to a conclusion that

digitalization is not 'irruption of a new revolution but the pervasive synergy of digital innovations' used in economy and social life.

Almost all researchers admit that digitalization has a global character and its role is gradually emerging due to a broader usage of technology for every aspect of social life, economy, and political activity and interrelations. Scientists agree on its innovative character and recognize its status as a global, multidimensional phenomenon. A larger role of technology is being emphasized as catalyst of the digitalization, also its source and driving force. In addition, we can admit that digitalization became a planet-wide phenomenon due to a higher level of a demand from the society that is seeking for faster, easier and cheaper solution. Digital technology has been able to offer a solution of such kind and, therefore, expanded its influence on each aspect of life.

Since the start of the phenomenon, researchers were trying to evaluate the impact that is made by it upon every sphere of social life. There are certain advantages for the economy that digitalization creates such as innovation opportunities for each industry. In various aspects of our life including academic sphere 'a full reinvention of goods, services and experiences' is offered. A lot of businesses have introduced the process of digital transformation of a company into a 'digital enterprise' using automatization of their business functions and processes(https://www.idginsiderpro.com/article/3305780/how-digital-transformation-is-shaping-industries.html Access date: 12.04.2023).

According to Goasduff (2023), the CIO Agenda Industry Insights report says that digitalization in business is listed as one of the top priorities for the industry. The survey has covered 98 countries and 15 major industries and CIO respondents of 11 admitted digitalization as the supreme business target for the year of 2018 (Goasduff, 2023).

Due to technological innovation and higher involvement of information technologies into our life, the impact produced on economy stipulates for introducing the notion 'digital economy'. In the digital economy innovations in technology enable transition to digital ways of organizing processes, managing them, facilitating and working (Ruel and Njoku, 2020:3). Colbert et al. (2016: 737) broaden the impact of digital technologies upon a variety of spheres of human life, including economy and labor in a global scale. With the vast establishment of Artificial Intelligence (AI) implications have been spread for the 'nature, structure and conditions of work', and as a result, changed Human Resource Management practices in dealing with talents. Following the topic of Artificial Intelligence, Bringsjord and Govindarajulu (2023) attract attention to using intelligent machines with the idea to provide design facilities for work. AI devices are becoming able to 'react, learn and train as humans' in order to use human intelligence and execute tasks only humans could have taken through their ability to analyze a great amount of data in real-time and enable higher performance comparatively to human efforts (Bringsjord and Govindarajulu, 2023).

Digitalization became one of the most influential developments that has invaded each sphere of human life. Businesses and a customer-brand relationship were impacted by a new paradigm of digital solutions to redesign the nature of this relationship. Berthon et al. (2012: 269) describe a180-degree shift in the manner of how customers use information technologies for the period from2002 to 2010. O'Reilly (2007: 30) states that the development and wide usage of social networks (Web 2.0) become a driver for such a shift, helping passive users become active, supplying a variety of interactive digital solutions which then lead to customer engagement. As soon as social media networks become a reality, hospitality professionals need to keep up with the latest changes in using technology and adapt it to brand-related practices. Social media channels such as online networks and communities, photo and video sharing platforms, blogs and forums, wikis and online review websites appeared in the recent time. As Hanna et al. (2011: 2) mention, such channels grow in popularity and importance in the large range of platforms covering all social media dimensions and including conventional channels such as mass media.

Kim et al. (2016:2) examined reviews from TripAdvisor hotel users in New York to find out the level of satisfaction with visitors. Surprisingly, "staff and their attitude" was proven to be the most influential factor. Furthermore, King and Lee (2016) studied the role of social media as stimulator of internal communication among employees in a hospitality enterprise. Ladkin and Buhalis (2016:327) examined the role of social media as a source of recruitment for employers and prospective employees in the hospitality industry.
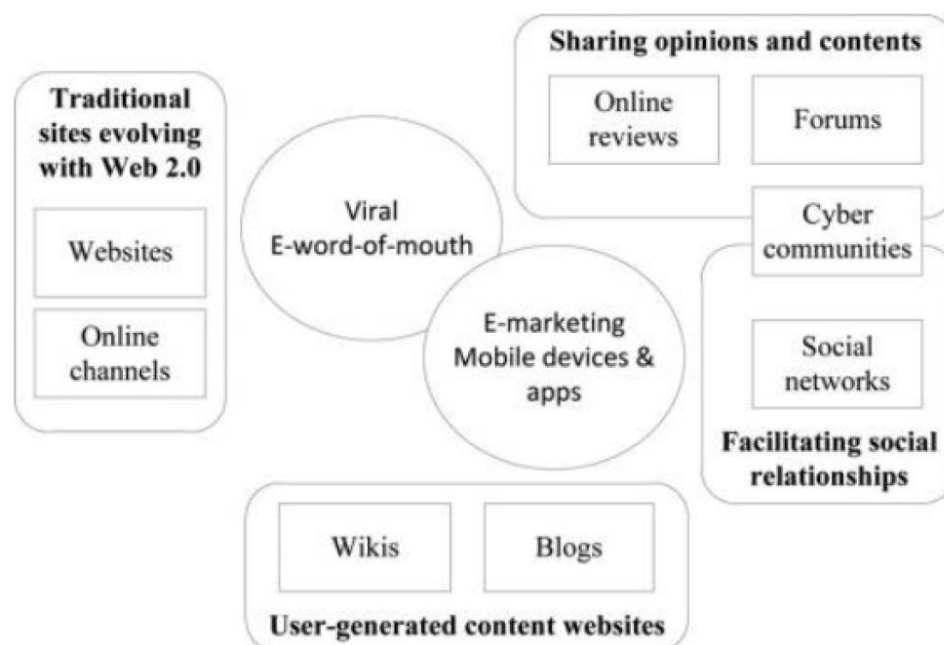
Figure 1. New social media emerged from web 2.0. Adapted from Moro and Rita (2018:348)

In the course of online digitalization special attention is attracted to corporate websites, which still play a significant role in affecting customers, who are seeking interactive relationship, receiving their feedback and stimulating their online activity, and, therefore, getting advantages from IT technologies within the Web 2.0 (Berthon et al., 2012: 261). According to Hoehle et al. (2015:1), who examined digital channels of interaction within customer-brand relationship paradigm, such tools as smart phones and online apps (applications) are now taking the dominant position in the rankings. Figure 1 demonstrates the framework of the main new social media originated from Web 2.0.

According to the framework in Figure 1, traditional websites along with online channels evolving with the Web 2.0 are the beneficiaries of the Web 2.0 technology. Websites that contain other types of user-generated content, such as wikis and blogs, evolved afterwards, and appeared to be the most representative. Websites with technical possibility of sharing opinions and contents, such as online reviews and forums and also cyber communities, which develop the function of facilitating social relationships, become more and more popular. In the recent time researchers mark a transition to social networks, which are becoming probably the most representative types of social media. There are also other types of social media where users can share images (e.g. Instagram) or videos (e.g. YouTube) and which can be described as websites for sharing content. Viral posts and pieces of information in the form of e-WOM (electronic word-of-mouth) along with E-marketing (electronic marketing) tools delivered via mobile devices and apps (applications) take a medium position between different categories of online channels enabling wide spread of information at the speed of a click.

4. Traditional versus Digital Marketing

American Marketing Association (https://www.ama.org/the-definition-of-marketing-what-is-marketing/ Access date: 21.04.2023) gives the following definition of marketing (traditional marketing): 'Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large'. According to Kotler and Keller (2016:27), marketing is how to 'identify and meet human needs and social needs. One of the simplest definitions of marketing is "meeting needs profitably", mainly focused on how to turn a need into a profitable business opportunity (Kotler & Keller, 2016:27). With the development of global economy customers came up with the demand to 'question' a product before buying it (Durmaz and Efendioglu, 2016:35). This is how marketing as a business practice appeared. Gradually, with the establishment of 'brand' concept and 'advertising', marketing became a regular and necessary

business activity. Companies came to a conclusion that to gain competitive advantage and profitability they need to put a customer into the central position trying to satisfy their needs and demands. With establishing marketing companies started to focus on customer satisfaction. To set up marketing activity businesses used a variety of channels they had access to: radio, newspapers and magazines, television, billboards, etc. The abovementioned (traditional) channels are still used, however, with the development of digital technology and electronic means of communication, more and more companies started to adopt digitalization and include it into their marketing practices.

At the end of the 20th – start of the 21st century brand new technologies appeared on the market and started dominating in the core spheres of traditional marketing. Companies started to use advanced technologies for interacting with their partners and competitors which was later called 'business to business' (B2B). To win the competition, companies began to actively employ technologies in electronic trade and digital marketing. With the help of that, businesses realized that they have to establish a two-way connection between companies and customers (Durmaz and Efendioglu, 2016:36). Therefore, both sides tend to understand that digital marketing is very different from traditional. Unlike traditional marketing with its idea to change customers' perception of a product or service, digital marketing aims at meeting customers' demands at the highest speed and being guided by customers at the same time (Durmaz and Efendioglu, 2016:36). Digital marketing is a 'broad term that refers to various and different promotional techniques deployed to reach customers via digital technologies. Digital marketing is embodied by an extensive selection of service, product and brand marketing tactics, which mainly use the Internet as a core promotional medium, in addition to mobile and traditional TV and radio.

With the help of digital technologies customers can easily access products and services, collect information and make a decision, exchange their ideas of a product and spread information of a product widely which positively affects the purchasing process. Traditional shopping is now being substituted by online which speeds up the process and eliminates unnecessary time spending. The main objective of online marketing is ultimately monetizing resources to make profit. Nowadays, all major business activities such as pricing, promotion and distribution are also transferred online. Advantages that are brought by online marketing are multiple.

At the moment there are various ways how digital marketing is being done. The most common ways include using social media, search engines, viral applications to name a few. For most businesses digital marketing becomes a common practice which substitutes traditional marketing activity. In the hospitality context traditional marketing is being rapidly substituted but digital. For hospitality enterprises this opens large opportunities to connect directly to their customers, influence their decisions, inform and increase their brand awareness. Social media platforms are now the places which are broadly used by hotels and travel agents with the idea to attract more potential visitors.

5. Advantages and Disadvantages of Digitalization

Global phenomena such as digitalization always contain pros and contras and cannot be measured only in a single paradigm. Obviously, the process of digitalization has an enormous impact on almost all spheres of human life (Hansen and Salskov-Iversen, 2005:34). Digitalization becomes the 'most significant on-going transformation' of human society and influence almost all spheres of our life, such as social (Ringenson et al., 2018:5), economic and organizational sphere (Gebre-Mariam and Bygstad, 2019:1).

Hospitality industry was one of the first sectors to establish and actively use the new digital technology innovations such as computer reservation system (CRS) in the 1970s, global distribution system (GDS) in the 1980s and the Internet in the 1990s (Buhalis and Law, 2008:3). Since the start, the technology has gone a long way to excel enabling faster and more convenient purchase of hospitality services at lower expenses. According to Mihajlovic (2012: 153), a few of the biggest advantages of adopting information computer technology (ICT) is a wide access to reliable information that helps customers find an easier way to a service provider, ability to share data and knowledge with large number of potential customers, increased quality together with reduced costs. For businesses, digitalization becomes a tool to increase revenues along with lowering operational costs, fast and effective marketing research and creating databases, and encouraging customer loyalty (Morrison et al., 1999:100).

For individuals, the benefits are obvious and digital technology can multiply them. With the development of Hospitality Industry 4.0 mass tourism should be reduced and the trend to individual, personalized approach would continue to dominate putting a customer in the center of value chain (Ben Youssef and Zeqiri, 2020:14). Moreover, digital platforms enable fast as a click information sharing which would bring benefits to either individuals or shareholders of hospitality enterprises (Buhalis and Amaranggana, 2015:386). Ben Youssef and Zeqiri (2020: 5) argue that consumers would benefit from digital environment as being incorporated into various activities with the idea to satisfy more extended, more sophisticated demands. Table 1 demonstrates the overview of technologies and their usage within the industry.

Table 1. Main pillars of hospitality industry 4.0. Adapted from Zeqiri et al. (2020: 59-60)

Authors	Pillar	Description of the technology	The technology in hospitality industry
(Lee et al., 2015)	CPS	CPS are defined as integrated and interconnected physical and virtual arrangements based on computation, communication, and control systems.	CPS consists of two aspects: first, interconnection of the physical and cyber worlds which enables access to the real-time data; second, smart data management, analytics and computational capability.
(Munir et al., 2017); (Kansakar et al., 2019)	IoT	**IoT** involves interconnectivity among physical devices and cyber worlds.	**IoT** enables interactions with tourists and collection of real time tourist data, thus creating personalized and localized services, and accurate evaluation of tourists' behaviors and preferences.
(van Krevelen and Poelman, 2010); (Kounavis et al., 2012)	AR	**AR** involves the combination of real and virtual objects in a real environment, synchronization of real and virtual objects, and interaction in 3D and real time.	**AR** provides tourists with more personalized services and several additional benefits. It enables tourists to share and exchange information and opinions with other tourists in large networks.
(Desai et al., 2014); (Wiltshier and Clarke, 2016).	VR	**VR** simulates reality. VR is "a computer simulated (3D) environment that gives the user the experience of being present in that environment".	**VR** provides people with opportunities for virtual travel with a low cost and contributes to sustainable tourism.

| (Ben Youssef and Zeqiri, 2020); (Buhalis and Leung, 2018) | Big data | **Big data analytics** are related to recent technological developments, which cope with the data processing and analysis. | In the hospitality sector, **big data** include internal and external big data. Data can be classified based on their characteristics and type, and hospitality ecosystem actors can access and use these data to prepare strategic business plans and manage their operations in a dynamic way. |
| (Tung and Law, 2017); (Horváth and Szabó, 2019); (Ben Youssef and Zeqiri, 2020) | AI and robots | **AI and robots** are used in workplaces to maintain contact with people in a shared non-industrial environment and can replace humans in R&D activities. | **AI and robots** are used in the hospitality sector to create more personalized and unique experiences, for instance at traveller information centres in the airport. |

Together with positive, wide usage of digital technologies could also bring negative results. Table 2. summarizes the future trends and challenges for the industry caused by the development of technologies within Industry 4.0. Murniati (2012: 237) argues that the changing business environment demands a rapid response to challenges arising and mainly caused by extended usage of technology. There is a great shortage and, therefore, a great demand for skillful, well-qualified and capable labor force who can deal with the latest technological innovations and can function in constantly changing environment. Because of higher competition and more demanding customers, hospitality professionals now have to demonstrate top level competencies and soft skills with the emphasis on developing human relations.

Personalization, creating an individual experience, becomes probably the most notable change in the industry. Together with value for money, customers put forward higher demands to hospitality enterprises and staff. Obviously, it brings challenges for industry professionals and necessity to differentiate the tourist product and adjust to changing environment. Companies are encouraged to provide individual tourist experience as soon as it is 'exceptionally vivid and long lasting' (Kim, 2010:781). Nowadays the central position in the 'company-customer relationship is occupied by a customer allowing them to have power and control over this relationship. Along with higher level of competition and cost pressures these become a sufficient challenge for industry players to redesign and reconfigure their proposals. For managers it is also connected with increased level of responsibility and higher time spending.

Table 2. Future trends and challenges in hospitality caused by technologies within Industry 4.0. Adapted from Murniati (2012:238)

No	Future trends in tourism and hospitality industry
1.	Rapid change of information technology
2.	Increased competition and globalization
3.	More demanding customers
4.	Value for money sensitivity
5.	Increased demands for quality
6.	Lack of professional manpower
7.	Pressure from tour operators
8.	Increased responsibility for managers
9.	Cost pressures in hotel operation
10.	Increased demands for safety and security
11.	Increased sensitivity for environment responsibility

Digital technology allows companies to collect personal information easier and many enterprises now do not delete their customers' data but rather use it for maintaining relationship. It causes additional demands for responsibility in operating and storing personal data and protecting it from invasion or theft.

Sustainable hospitality requires using environmentally-friendly practices to minimize the negative outcome caused by human activity. According to statistics, tourism takes responsibility of 5% of the carbon emissions on the planet where transport, in particular, accounts for 75% of carbon emissions in the industry (Peeters and Dubois, 2010:447). More than a half of that percentage has been caused by the air travel – 40 percent (Gossling, 2009:1).

6. Digitalization in Hospitality Industry

Tourism and Hospitality also experience influence from digitalization (and Artificial Intelligence as one of its elements) and its effects on the nature of the whole industry. Overall global trend to digitalize each part of our life is being recognized by Team (2023), who focused on an emerging role of the digitalization process in modern life. Moreover, a demand for digital tools and resources becomes higher and the constant growth of the market becomes a reality (Team, 2023). Yaldaie (2019: 1) admits that humankind now lives in a digital era that changes the nature of business-customer relationship and with the idea to attract more customers hospitality enterprises have to adopt and master new technologies. With the greater possibility to use digital booking platforms visitors receive a powerful tool to supply their own bookings at a less time and more convenience (Yaldaie, 2019:1)

Team (2023) highlights the possibilities that digitalization can bring in order to provide assistance and a better quality service. Moreover, the chance to reach millions of customers with the help of digital tools becomes a great advantage for the industry today. Team (2023) argues that a well-designed website today becomes an effective platform where larger numbers of potential customers could be reached. Appropriate software such as a digital Content Management system is recommended for adoption and implementation (Team, 2023). A thoroughly-designed online platform brings a variety of benefits such as fast and efficient reservation system and an intensive communication together with a better management and lower expenses. Such tools are a perfect instrument for businesses to maximize their revenues and achieve a sustainable competitive advantage (https://www.onyxcentersource.com/blogs/hotels-online-platforms/ Access date: 28.04.2023).

Due to age and ability to master new technologies, younger generation can be an object of such technological innovation that will enable including this segment into the list of active visitors. According to Yaldaie (2019: 2), such technological improvements will enable reaching the variety of the 'new generation of technophile individuals' who are characterized by a limited budget for traveling. Personalization of the travel experience and digital service tools become the target of such improvements. Kansakar et al. (2018: 1) admit that digitalization can be an efficient solution for the current operational problems for businesses. Designing individual customer offers for every visitor may take efforts from guests and service providers. However, a digital platform that enables effective business-customer communication can potentially eliminate such issues and lead to a higher level of simplicity for the operations (Kansakar et al., 2018:1).

Moreover, digitalization of services can contribute to fulfilling travelers' experience allowing visitors to personalize their preferences and demands, and, therefore, enable the 'smooth incorporation of technology' into their experience. Online ticketing and service booking through internet aggregators become quite popular along with personalized communication and interaction through social media (Yaldaie, 2019:2). In addition, Kansakar et al. (2018: 1) recommend hotel brands to create their own applications in order to improve their services and reach visitors directly. Using incentives such as discount prices, points, bonuses and coupons will encourage customers to broadly use the following applications and maintain a direct contact with service providers (Kansakar et al., 2018: 1).

Lai and Hung (2018:39) have introduced the notion 'intelligent hotel'. 'IT revolution' has dramatically changed ('reshaped') the hospitality sector where IT became an inevitable trend 'Intelligence of the hotel' – a broader usage of IT solution for each aspect of hotel activity – can be a valuable solution to limitations and challenges arising in the sector. Information technologies can be established in order to enable operational control and general optimization (Lai and Hung, 2018:39).

Tourist companies and organizations are now taking advantage of adopting the latest information technology solutions such as intranets to modify internal processes and extranets to establish relationship with partners, and the Internet in order to have a direct communication with customers and stakeholders. 'Use of ICTs allows for combining customer-relationship management and supply chain management into a single source that facilitates a variety of operations – product selection, ordering, fulfillment, tracking, payment and reporting, which are all performed with one easy-to-use tool'(Zlatanov and Popesku, 2019:84). With the development of Web 2.0 a broad introduction of information technologies into tourism and hospitality becomes a global process with the vast 'informatization' of every aspect of the hospitality sector. Web 2.0 applications 'have led to the "informatization" of the entire tourism value chain and the development of the concept of Travel 2.0, that is, internet sites that allow tourists to publicly express their opinion about any travel-related content' (Zlatanov and Popesku, 2019:85). These technological solutions now dominate and change dramatically the whole hospitality environment to enabling direct contact between guests and the industry. Lai and Hung (2018:37) also admit that digitalization could make travelling and booking more affordable and convenient, enabling more differentiated pricing models and more universal services at the highest standard, giving businesses a chance for achieving sustainable competitive advantage on the market. They highlight a bigger role of digital platforms and a 'degree of hotel and tourism intelligence' and also information collected with the help of technological platforms (Lai and Hung, 2018:37).

7.Development and Importance of Social Media in the World

Nowadays we witness the fact that wide employment of social media by brands enhances marketing capability in tourism and improves performance because a lot of tourists, both real and potential, perceive a strong reliability to social media and its dominance over conventional for brand marketing, bearing in mind ease of use and higher functionality of social media platforms in contrast with conventional media (Kim et al., 2016:30).

The number of relevant studies in the social media usage context is emerging to be used in tourist brand-related marketing and scholars suggest a wide usage of social media for tourism marketing activities. Meanwhile, recently published studies refer to a broad perspective, for example, social media as a marketing instrument (Hays et al., 2012) or concentrate on a particular aspect of social media platforms, for example, social media usage for the search of travel information (Kotoua and Ilkan, 2017) or as a tool in tourism marketing, for example, usage for destination marketing (Song and Kim, 2016).

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 61) suggest the following definition of social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content". Social media is defined as 'forms of electronic communication (such as Web sites) through which people create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, etc.' (https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/social-media Access date: 28.04.2023). Cambridge dictionary (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/social-media Access date: 28.04.2023) comes up with the definition of social media as 'websites and computer programs that allow people to communicate and share information on the internet using a computer or mobile phone'. Technologically, potential consumers receive access to social communication platforms in various ways from blogging to information sharing and networking. 'User Generated Content' concept changes dramatically the environment and status of people who are treated not just as consumers of the content, but those who are actively involved in generating, distributing and using the content and, as a result, treated as co-creators of value for brands (Habibi et al., 2014:124).

According to Habibi et al. (2014:123) 'life in the internet' is going to be a 'new reality'. Fournier and Avery (2011: 194) name social media a "People's Web". Unique character and widespread coverage of audience have made a revolutionary change in marketing and marketing activities (Hanna et al., 2011:1) and consumer behavior starting from sharing information, continuing to purchase intention and finalizing with post-purchase experience (Mangold & Faulds, 2009:358). Although the new phenomenon of social media has agreed to be influential and dramatically increasing in popularity, a consensus and overall systematic understanding by practitioners on how to use it effectively is still underestimated (Habibi et al., 2014:123).

Social media now becomes not only technological but also a social phenomenon with its unique characteristics. According to Kaplan & Haenlein, (2010: 61), the possibility to create and share (i.e. generate) the content is the most important feature of social media as well as building relationships between consumers and brands. In

addition, a few other unique characteristics come to mind when describing social media in the context of online communities. One of such is the cost of creating such online communities which is relatively low and the outcome that is much larger than the traditional online activity (LaPointe, 2012:286).

Social media with the help of online platforms establish the dialogue between customers and brands and, which is also important, with other customers (Mangold and Faulds, 2009: 358). Social media stimulates customer engagement and at the same time establish interaction between customers and customers with enterprises (Fortezza and Pencarelli, 2015: 564). Being engaged, customers and brands create a unique type of relationship which makes customers (products and service users) into brand advocates, a significant marketing tool that is used by companies in the promotion and market development (Zivkovic et al., 2014:758).

Hospitality enterprises demonstrated a high level of incorporation into social media, adopting it to the needs of a brand and demands of customers. Starting with establishing social media accounts players in the tourism market now exploit social media marketing tools, create and maintain online communities, encourage visitors to co-create a strong brand awareness by posting, sharing and spreading information about the brand.

8. Social Media Tools

There is a variety of social media tools which have a different function and characterized by a set of features. According to Tatar and Erdogmus (2016:252), the most significant tasks here are to precisely identify online behavior of a target audience and then to generate the appropriate content that will appeal to their needs and demands. Unlike the idea of using external online tools, the first instrument to be suggested is hotel's own website with a communication space such as blog, forum, FAQ section. Owned and controlled by hotels, these tools will take charge of creating positive online customer experience, contributing to building a strong and well-reputable brand image and then value for brands. Companies tend to establish a unique online brand experience which is a combination of content, visual presentation, technical support, connection speed and comfort in navigation, distribution and outcome (de Chernatony et al., 2011:298). Naturally, this experience consists of cognitive and affective aspects (Rose et al., 2011:28). Functionality and usability form a bunch of cognitive elements (Flavian et al., 2006:2), whereas satisfaction (enjoyment) and impressions (fun) make up an effective range of aspects (Bridges and Florsheim 2008: 314).

8.1. Twitter

Twitter is one of the most popular social media platforms that is preferred by enterprises globally for communication, dealing with customers' issues and generating positive impressions of a brand. Different 'social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are increasingly being used as tools for external stakeholder engagement. The increased outreach and richness offered by these platforms facilitates many-to-many interactions and are a powerful knowledge source' (Mount and Garcia Martinez, 2014:124). Social networks such as Twitter effect management evaluation in a negative way but have to influence on new product development team collaboration (Marion et al., 2014:1). However, Twitter is not only a communication and customer care tool but also a mean of broadcasting events and showcasting advertising campaigns.

8.2. Facebook

Facebook is another social media platform with enormous exposure which could enable creating online marketing campaigns and accessing the appropriate target audience in case of a proper analysis (Tatar and Erdogmus, 2016:252). According to Sullivan (2023: 13), Facebook is the largest social network with over a billion users. For hotels it gives a great chance to directly connect their potential guests and deliver its information through its virtual network (Sullivan, 2023:13).

In the hospitality context Facebook hotel started to be 'real' for potential guests (Neti, 2011:9). First, hotels use Facebook as a showcase platform to demonstrate their visual presentation of hotel facilities and services. Second, they encourage communication with clients and, therefore, maintain their customer loyalty and stimulate customer retention (Neti, 2011:7). To achieve high level of brand loyalty and increase in sales, hospitality enterprises are recommended to exploit Facebook facilities and post textual, audio and visual information of high quality.

Moreover, they have to encourage guests to come up with structured feedback such as putting grades and writing reviews so that to use those for re-thinking and redesigning their social media practices.

Overall, hotels can reach their marketing strategy goals to attract and retain new customers by utilizing resources of Facebook in a skillful manner (Russell,2010:6).

8.3. YouTube

YouTube is a video social media platform and a hosting for videos not only for entertaining but also for generating electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and attract new clients by demonstrating videos to the defined target audience (Grieve et al. 2014: 2).YouTube is a global internet-based video channel that provides access to millions of videos and has an enormous number of views daily (Shipley, 2023).Interestingly, videos to be broadcasted on the platform can be produced by the hotel or by its guests (Yu, 2023).Hotels create and demonstrate corporate videos to attract more customers and spread information about their facilities and services out there (Lim, 2010:16). Obviously, the content created by hotel guests is perceived as more reliable and trustworthy so it can then have a greater effect on potential guests to persuade them using the hotel services and book their reservation with the hotel (Tatar and Erdogmus, 2016:252-253).

According to Lim (2010: 15-16), hotels can also use YouTube videos for keeping their guests informed and provide necessary instructions on using facilities within the hotel. Hotels also tend to motivate their guests to write reviews and comments for corporate videos to share their impressions and thoughts. Then, this information will be used as an attraction for potential guests to book the hotel. Therefore, the personal impression of the hotel is likely to be impacted more by experience than by its product (Lim, 2010:29).

8.4. Instagram

Instagram is a photo and video sharing platform and a social media which was established in 2010. According to Instagram - Statistics & Facts, as of January 2023 Instagram unites over 2 billion users. India and the United States are the leading countries with most users: almost 330 million in India, and 143 million users located in the United States. Interestingly, Instagram is more popular with men than women, and people aged from 18 to 34 years old, who make up almost 60 percent of users (Dixon, 2023).

Because of its rising popularity, Instagram also becomes a business-related platform where brands can showcase their products and maintain contact with customers both current and potential. Encouraging followers and comments from people, companies rely on establishing a mutually useful dialogue with users and other brands. This is how brands can occupy a leading position in customer-brand relationship. The major purpose of the social media is to lead generation (Tuten & Solomon, 2018:45). Data collected while the interaction goes, can be analyzed and used for future strategy development and design of a more appropriate proposal, increasing brand awareness and popularity and development of business.

Picture marketing, demonstrating visual side of their products and services, is especially significant for sectors with a high visual presentation and hospitality is one of such. Beautiful nature and landscapes together with renewed facilities and interior of hotels make a great impact on guests and stipulate for the turn to visual demonstration through pictures and videos. Brands often use influencers and celebrities who help make the desirable impression of a brand. Famous brand ambassadors are used as an instrument for spreading word-of-mount.

8.5. TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Airbnb, etc.

Instead of using social media individually, hotels may want to join the user-generated review portals because of their frequent citation that makes them a powerful tool to influence travelers with their purchase behavior (Patel, 2011:4). Those websites such as TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Airbnbpublish a user-generated content and enable free flow of information current without restriction to achieve objectivity and present the unfavorable information for hotels (Katsoni, 2014:111). The following principle of organization makes such web portals another form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which has an influential power over customers and, therefore, it is highly recommended for hotels to carefully design an action plan to achieve favorable publicity (Patel2011:5).

TripAdvisor is considered to be the largest web portal of the following category (Miguéns et al., 2008:2).It allows its users post 'unfiltered' comments and 'honest' reviews (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Tripadvisor
Access date: 12.02.2023). According to Sim (2023), in 2013 TripAdvisor reached the bar of 150 million reviews and tourism-based comments on a web portal. Every year more than 2 billion people regularly use TripAdvisor for planning their trips, booking their space in more than 3.7 million accommodations, restaurants and places of interest globally (Sim, 2023). With this, TripAdvisor proves to be one of the most convenient web portals for marketing hotel services and facilities and attract potential customers and service users (van Niekerk, 2014:36).

Due to recent changes and rapid speed of digitalization, new players appear on the market. Damnjanović et al. (2020: 235) call the newcomers 'new digital attackers' claiming that they are changing the rules of the game and disrupt the traditional value chain in hospitality and tourism. There is a classification for newly appeared players who are divided into three groups and compared according to the level of change and share in value chain:

- Disruptors (Airbnb, HomeAway). According to the diagram, the following group is described as a high change level and highest value chain share. Airbnb occupies a leading position in providing peer-to-peer accommodation. As concluded by Boswijk (2017: 3), Airbnb's primary value proposition for users comes from forming a combination of memorable experience and financial benefits.

- Innovators (Booking.com, Expedia) is another group of players on the tourism market that is characterized by a medium position in the change section and also medium share of value chain. They position themselves as online travel agents specializing in providing rental, booking opportunities and tools for hotel stay. According to Damnjanović et al. (2020: 235), brands 'Booking' and 'Expedia' 'have almost replaced hotel brands.

- Aggregators (TripAdvisor, SkyScanner, Kayak) are the websites specializing in metasearch. Their key characteristics are low level of change and low share in the value chain. The primary task for an aggregator is finding a variety of alternatives for accommodations, hotel stay and price offerings and accumulate (aggregate) that information on a single website. It provides a lot of benefits and comfort for travelers to use such web portals and find the most relevant information and offerings. Damnjanović et al. (2020: 235) state that users find lots of benefits in accessing the best option at the lowest price still beingassured in the quality level.

8.6 Blogs/Microblogs

A 'blog' is defined as an internet page which contains individual's thoughts, beliefs, and discussions and is a part of a personal online journal with a hyperlink provided by writer (Kichatov & Mihajlovski, 2010:7). Interestingly, business blog can be an effective tool to spread word-of-mouth with the information from a brand. Therefore, blogs like other social media tools provide opportunities to maintain relationship between enterprises and customers, reach their audience and, as a result, to stimulate customer loyalty (Castronovo & Huang, 2012: 123). Due to their mobility and flexibility, blogs are often updated faster and easier and make a comfortable platform for sharing ideas, comments, discussions, and any type of audio and visual information while reaching the right reader (Weinreich, 2011:219).

Figure 2. New 'digital attackers' in hospitality and tourism. Adapted from Damnjanović et al. (2020: 236).
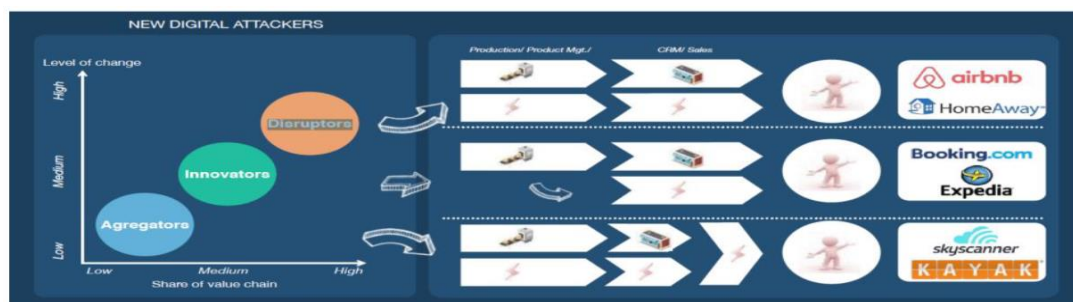
microblog 'is a type of blog in which users can post small pieces of digital content like pictures, video or audio on the Internet' (https://www.techopedia.com/definition/4946/microblog Access date: 29.04.2023).According to Weinreich (2011:220), microblogging means providing concise updates and pieces of information via services such as Twitter designed to use a limited sized posts. Normally, large marketing campaigns start with short messages on Twitter (twits) and prepare the audience for a large portion of information through other social media portals.

Smart marketers are recommended to use carefully their online resources such as blogs/microblogs on the corporate websites to appropriately market their activity and get feedback from their customers (Colomo-Palacios et al., 2014:792). Blogging and microblogging are popular with hospitality brands due to the relatively low cost and enormous outcome. A smart blogger with an 'army' of followers can spread positive (or negative) information and/or impression extremely widely at the speed of a click. Now hotels prefer to establish a tight contact with a blogger/micro blogger to enable spreading information through the blog channel and maintain relationship with visitors.

9. Social Media Marketing

Since the rise of popularity of social media marketing, the phenomenon started to attract researchers' attention (Vinerean, 2017: 28). According to some of them, social media marketing is a foundation element in a search for business objectives because of its close connection with customer loyalty, purchase intention and rights of a client (Felix et al., 2016:6). Another group of researchers define social media marketing as an instrument that maintains the link and relations with current and prospective customers (Choi et al., 2015: 4). Yadav and Rahman (2017: 3) come up with the definition of social media marketing as the way how companies create online marketing products and services and maintain relationship between shareholders. Saura (2020: 92) focuses attention on value creation aspect as social media marketing (SMM) does for stakeholders by sharing information, purchase proposals, stimulating word-of-mouth (WOM) regarding products and services. Cormier (2023) defines social media marketing as a way how businesses utilize social media for marketing purposes. Jayasuriya and Azam (2017: 179) establish a similar definition of SMM as an activity that facilitates promotion of products and services via online platforms. Such activities include blogging, sharing text, audio and visual information, posting and commenting. According to Jayasuriya and Azam (2017: 179), such activities enable customer-brand relations, communication and interaction.

Social media marketing enables a variety of opportunities for customers and also for businesses (Vinerean, 2017: 30). Focusing on innovative character of the SMM, Nadaraja and Yazdanifard (2023: 3) state that it has already become a new trend and has given businesses a chance to establish a direct contact and communication with customers. In addition to traditional online ways of promotion such as newsletters and online advertising campaigns, SMM completes the variety of methods adding and modifying its methodological structure. Driving traffic to websites and web pages, social media marketing stimulates brand awareness, widespread reach and access to global customers (Flavin, 2023). As an instrument for that social media platform such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, etc. are utilized. The connection between a customer and a brand is the most significant advantage businesses could gain from it as it results in customers' perception of a brand. Naturally, marketers concern of the correct interpretation of their brand because the risks of misinterpretation are high and it could end up with "massive success" or a "total disaster" (Flavin, 2023).

With such wide spread of brand-related information, social media has established new opportunities of 'exponential dissemination' and reliability to mass communication and online marketing. For hospitality companies using social media marketing becomes one of the primary tools in order to reach the right target audience with relatively low efforts. Promoting their brands on the digital platforms, hotels and tourism-related firms spread widely necessary information and keep control over its delivery. Posts, pictures, discussions in communities and forums became available and effective tools the industry started adopting quite intensively.

10. Managing Social Media

Providing unique opportunities social media can also hide potential risks for brands and, therefore, they need to be treated with a high level of accuracy. Momtaz et al. (2011: 4) suggest a three-step structure for companies to utilize effectively their social networks. First, a company is recommended to find an appropriate social media

platform for communication and interaction with customers. Second step is to define opinion leaders among customers to use their communication in order to influence other customers. The third step is when opinion leaders spread information about the brand and its products/services as their network is large and various.

Opinion leaders possess higher level of reliability and are able to influence other people's thoughts, preferences and even behavior and they reach a bigger group of potential customers using blogs and social media platforms (Acar and Polonsky, 2007:60). Such social communication and interaction platforms enable innovative ways of reaching potential customers and accessing the right target audience with their marketing message (Trusov et al., 2009:98). Bashar et al. (2012: 98) suggest that brands should include social media into their marketing schemes as one of the most powerful tool. Moreover, it is recommended to reconsider marketing strategies with inclusion of social media activities through social media networks. Analyzing customers online preferences through their communication might help design a picture of a potential audience and receive feedback with opinion about company's products/services. The second element here for brands is to establish a social relationship with potential customers. Naturally, consumers are more responsive to marketing proposals if they are involved into relationship with brands and other customers (Moran and Gossieaux, 2010:234). Therefore, a wise marketing strategy is supposed to stimulate customers' sharing information and contribution to the content in an interactive format. Encouraging guests to send feedback, post, vote, like and comment becomes now a regular practice for hospitality brands. A variety of social media platforms enable now a direct contact for companies and customers becoming a place where enterprises can stimulate the desired interaction with a hospitality firm.

There are several ways to measure effectiveness of social media engagement in marketing activity of a brand. Trunfio and Rossi (2021: 267) have reviewed literature to summarize methods on measuring social media engagement. All methods have been divided into 4 macro-categories: quantitative metrics, normalized indexes, set of indexes, qualitative metrics (Trunfio and Rossi, 2021:267). Quantitative approach was dominating and was used in 66% of studies (Trunfio and Rossi, 2021:284). However, such metrics cannot be absolutely reliable because of the vulnerable character of human interactions. 'Despite their great diffusion among academics and practitioners, some scholars (7% of the studies) argue that quantitative metrics are not enough to appreciate the real value of customer engagement on social media, and a qualitative approach is more suitable' (Trunfio and Rossi, 2021:284).

11. Conclusion

Latest virtual technologies give a fantastic chance for tourists and visitors to influence and impact the creation of the tourist product. Posting opinions and information, sharing content and engaging other travelers are the tools that are used by the audience. Digitalization in general and social media communication have dramatically changed the interrelations between brands and customers and have given a chance to tourists to come up with their valuable contribution. Hotel professionals are recommended to include these insights into their branding strategies.

Digitalization now becomes more than just a technical term but a social and cultural phenomenon. It has an impact on almost all spheres of human professional and personal life. Digital channels are treated as a direct way to access customers which wise brands employ in their everyday practices. Brand building process is being highly affected by digital instruments which companies are using to establish, maintain and manage strong brands.

Hospitality industry became one of the pioneers of using digital tools with the idea to incorporate modern instruments and channels which proved their effectiveness, reliability and low cost. Social media appeared to be a direct way to access customers across borders on a global scale. With the help of that, hospitality enterprises started to emerge from local to global players establishing global character of their business. Being one of the most contemporary agendas, digitalization in the hospitality attracts attention not only from the industry but also from the academic world.

Positive and negative effects of digitalization make an influence on brand development and marketers have to consider such facts. With the help of co-creation of a brand, businesses are characterized with high level of adoption of new digital technologies which improve the quality and increase expansion. However, with a broad online presence companies and organizations experience lack of control over a brand. This interesting phenomenon deserves attention from practitioners and its careful exploration may lead to valuable benefits for

those brands, which take it into serious consideration.

Continuous adoption of digital technologies together with careful usage can also be recommended as a practical solution to various issues. Especially hospitality companies may want to focus on broader usage of digital solutions in order to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

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