The effectiveness of Social Media Marketing as a Branding tool for hoteliers

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Abstract

The internet revolution has shifted business practices into a more complex and interactive manner through the development of Web 2.0 applications. As time goes by, businesses in particular the hospitality industry has acknowledged the importance of using social networking sites to drive their branding strategies online, enabling easier access to target audience and generate brand equity through selected platforms. Both academic and non-academic sources support my research study, however a gap in the literature was identified due to lack of information focusing on the Maltese hospitality industry on related subject.

The main aim of this dissertation is to discover business practices adopted within the Maltese hospitality industry and reveal the effectiveness and degree of significance in using social media marketing to drive potential branding strategies adopted by hoteliers. Main findings from selected sampling within the hospitality industry suggest that social media marketing is effective in driving the corporate branding strategy, but high graded hotels tend to employ more online branding practices through social media marketing over low graded hotels. Findings also indicate the importance of synchronized efforts in online and traditional marketing, especially in targeting the locals.

Key words: Internet, Social Media, Social Media Marketing, Branding, Social Media Platforms, Internet Marketing, Hospitality and Tourism Industry.
Declaration of Authenticity

I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work, gathered and utilized especially to fulfil the purposes and objectives for this study, and has not been previously submitted to any other University for a higher degree. I also declare that the publications cited in this work have been personally consulted.

Signature: Roxanne Debono

Date: ID 0005692 (M)
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List of Acronyms

Internet Marketing  IM
Online Marketing  OM
Social Media Marketing  SMM
Social Media  SM
Social Media Platform  SMP
Social Networking Sites  SNS
Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Events  MICE
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The reason behind the selected study area is because of personal interest in marketing and branding, by which have always been part of my passion throughout my academic years due to the complex psychological and behavioural elements that these subjects entail. Acknowledging best practices in the way marketing and branding are applied within technology nowadays is crucial due to the rapid growth and high dependency on the internet, which is significant within the tourism industry.

The use of social media to drive marketing and branding facilitates dissemination of viral content, allowing consumers to control what to be shared and in what ways. The study will focus on the supply side and analyze perceptions and attitudes of hoteliers in relation to social media marketing and branding. Internet communication technology has radically changed the way firms interact with their consumers and how consumers communicate with organizations which resulted in a complete shift of effectiveness and efficiency within the tourism industry (Buhalis, D; Law, R., 2008).

1.2 Background to the Study

"Tourism and the Internet are ideal partners" (UNWTO., 2001).

The United Nations World Tourism Business Council in November 2001 issued report discussing the significance of online business within the tourism industry. Nowadays the growth of the internet and Web 2.0 applications have revolutionized business practices of firms operating with the hospitality industry and without a strong internet marketing strategy, firms would find it difficult to compete and successfully operate in today's market place.
In the last seven years, business practices within the tourism industry have changed drastically, with the introduction of low cost carriers to Malta in 2006. Up to 2005, seventy percent of holiday makers came on a 'package tour'. This went down to just thirty-five percent in 2010-2011 and Malta joined the 'internet revolution' and the age of 'dynamic packaging' (Quintano, A., 2013). Tourists are becoming less dependent on tour operators, enabling travellers to plan and shape their own holiday package, including direct hotel booking through booking engines such as booking.com, corporate website and social media platforms. This has brought about a new paradigm shift in business practices, especially within the hospitality industry. Hoteliers need to embrace new technology and keep abreast of current trends. Establishing an online presence is significant in sustaining competition, communicating brand meaning and establishing strong relationships with customers.

Moreover, social media may be defined as: "a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and it allows the creation and exchange of User Generated Content". (Kaplan Andreas, M; Haenlein, M., 2010).

Social media marketing is "any form of direct or indirect marketing that is used to build awareness, recognition, and action for a brand, business, product or person, or other entity and is carried out using the tools of the social Web." (Gunelius, S., 2011).

Two sets of open-ended questionnaires were designed in attempt to research this subject through seven participants working within the hospitality industry. Six different hotel categories including; three chain managed hotels, and three independent hotels of different ratings were selected. To further evaluate research subject and attain sound conclusions, an interview was carried out with an e-commerce business professional.
1.3 Research Aims, Hypotheses and Objectives of this Study

This study aims to acknowledge rational behavioural attitudes and perceptions of hoteliers and e-commerce specialist in using social media marketing as a branding tool and identify in which manner this connection is done, what measures are used to evaluate success and precautions enforced to overcome negative online brand reputation. The study aims to provide concrete conclusions and evidence to prove hypotheses set in addressing the Maltese hospitality industry:

- Embracing social media marketing is significant in successfully driving the hotel's branding strategy.
- Chain Managed and independent high rated hotels are more likely to follow a two-way communication, engaging a brand and an audience on social media platforms than low rated hotels.
- Social media marketing provides potential advantages to the hospitality industry over traditional marketing.

Main target objectives for this long essay include:

- To explore the use of social media platforms by hoteliers in terms of preferable platforms, content posted and basis of interaction.
- To identify the significance and extent of using social media marketing to drive the hotel's branding strategy.
- To determine best practices in evaluating the effectiveness of social media marketing on the overall corporate brand.
- To critically analyze, compare and contrast main practices of using social media marketing as a branding tool between six hotels within the Maltese industry.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1: Introduction: The role of Social Media in Hospitality.

Social Media (SM) consists of various internet-based applications that build on the foundations of Web 2.0 (Laroche, M; Habibi M, R; Richard M, O., 2013), empowering online communities to share individual content through representation of personal identities and interests, allowing for real time, two way communication.

Web 2.0 has enabled easier and faster circulation of information, referred to as a "demand-pull and supply push for knowledge" via different forms of social networks (Liburd, J. J., 2012).

SM is highly significant within the tourism industry notably for the search of travel experiences on blogs and reviews (Callarisa, L; Garcia J. S; Cardiff; Roshchina, A., 2012). Hoteliers embarking on SM will adopt selected web-based applications for acquisition of target audience through marketing, to drive sales, generate brand equity and build public relationships via text, images, visual and sound audios. Using SM, hotels can easily follow online activities, effectively respond to public queries and feedback on hotel sales promotions (Nassar, M. A., 2012), establish a loyal base and provide a personalized service to guests.

2.2 Social Media Marketing in Tourism and Hospitality.

The growth of the internet has allowed the hospitality industry to embark on various social networking sites (SNS) providing an effective competitive advantage. The use of internet marketing (IM) through social media platforms (SMPs) is an effective medium to drive the company's branding strategy. Social media marketing (SMM) facilitates induction of brand awareness (Mohammadian; Mohammadreza, 2012), enhance viral-spread of brand messages
and brand democratization by inviting consumers to actively engage in the brand's meaning (Tuten, T.L., 2008), establish brand loyalty, enhance online brand reputation, drive sales and profits.

Successful hotel SMM involves the creation of connections rather than impressions, referred to as "a two-way process engaging a brand and an audience" (Drury, G., 2008).

Nowadays consumers are heavily engaging in media communication channels than ever before, a new trend which is heavily referred to as "convergence culture" (Mansson, M., 2011). This implies that SMM limits control of hoteliers over shared content, since online consumers are now more powerful and demanding (Russell, J., 2010). Due to its huge network connections, IM has a wide audience reach globally, with non-geographic barriers and time zone constraints, allowing companies to easily reach out and target profitable niche segments (Ryan, D; Joens, C., 2012). Firms cannot ignore its customer's online feedback and should be aware of online generated content (Dwivedi, M; Shibutani, T.P; Venkatesh, U., 2007).

Hotel marketers should be aware of the potential benefits and harm viral marketing could have on the company's brand reputation. Managing online reputation especially through word of mouth and interpersonal influence is highly significant within the hospitality and tourism industry for various reasons namely (1) hospitality is based on service provision, being an intangible product (2) production and consumption are inseparable (3) consumers look out for reference groups before high-risk purchase decisions and (4) the tourism product is seasonal and perishable (Litvin, S.W; Goldsmith, R.E; Pan, B., 2008). Hoteliers should engage and effectively communicate with its target audience through SMM in order to stay ahead of competition within the hospitality industry. (Russell, J., 2010).
2.3 The effectiveness of Social Media Platforms as a branding tool in hospitality.

2.3.1 Social media Platforms in Tourism

In this subchapter, the following four SMPs will be discussed: Twitter, Facebook, Trip Advisor and YouTube. Academic sources researched upon indicate that these four platforms are predominant within the hospitality industry especially in terms of branding and their usage rate is growing exponentially. Marketing personnel should acknowledge the potential of SMM and be able to handle online criticisms promptly and effectively to enhance online brand image (Callarisa, L et al.,2012).

**Twitter**

Twitter is the basic tool for embarking on SM, (Lanz, L et al.,2010) possessing over five-hundred million active registered Twitter users (Twitter Statistics, 2012). Twitter users' primary demographic is mature ranging from thirty-five to forty-five and is a perfect tool for the service industry, using Twitter to grasp opportunities in customer service, generate sales and drive marketing activities (Lewis, K.,2009). Twitter assists companies to determine customer's needs and expectations through information gained, which is particularly significant in terms of the brand perspective in acknowledging the different cultures of target audience (Bough B.B., 2011). Hoteliers are embracing Twitter to post links to press releases and generate price-driven promotions, for example Starwood Hotels and Resorts, was one of the first hotels embarking on SNS amongst of which using Twitter to run promotional campaigns such as discounted room-rate packages (Lanz, L et al. 2010).
**Facebook**

Facebook has successfully reached the one billion user rate, with one-hundred and sixty-seven million unique visitors per month (Job Stock., 2012). Facebook is the most dominant platform used, which allows companies to build and sustain relationships with stakeholders and customers, get effective messages across and attain confidence (Lanz, L et al., 2010).

According to Gunelius, S (2011) "Social networks like Facebook present a significant opportunity for hotels to build relationships that lead to brand awareness, word-of-mouth marketing, and ultimately sales".

Content generated on Facebook should be significant to target audience and in line with the brand (Expedia, Inc., 2011). The Distrikt Hotel in New York City, posts updates that focus on current issues about the city to engage its community. The hotel acts as a source of information for international visitors, therefore is more likely to attract online consumers (Mackenzie, J., 2011), and generates interest towards corporate brand. Moreover, Jorgen, K (2012) argues that eighty percent of social network users prefer to connect with brands through Facebook and of much importance is the fact that SM has a hundred percent higher lead-to-close rate than outbound marketing.

**Trip Advisor**

Referred to as, "The largest site for unbiased travel reviews which gives you the real story about hotels, attractions, and restaurants around the world" (Litvin, S.W et al., 2008).

Excessive online user-generated content on hotels, travel destinations and travel services have increased due to the rapid growth of the Web 2.0 applications, which allow internet users and travellers to increasingly use SMPs for travel planning (Sigala, 2008 as cited by Ye,Q,
Law, R., Gu, B., & Chen, W. (2011). User-generated reviews such as Trip Advisor, are more significant in the travel and tourism industry due to the intangible element of services the industry supports, therefore its quality is unknown prior to consumption. In order to ease the risk of purchase, most people rely on travel blogs (Dwivedi, M. et al., 2007), and on electronic word-of-mouth which helps managers to facilitate brand awareness, ensure quality standards and sustain product improvement (Dellarocas, 2003 as cited by Ye, Q. et al., 2011).

You tube

According to Lewis, K (2009) You Tube is SMM in action. This medium allows users to produce and consume viral media content which can be disseminated via blogs to other online consumers (Mansson, M., 2011), sharing visual and sound audios (Russel, J., 2010) and engaging customers in real time communication and rate posted videos. As part of a SMM strategy, viral video is particularly significant to convey a message or entertain your audience to encourage active engagement (Burstiner, M., 2011). The Westin Dragonara Resort Hotel in Malta makes use of viral video content to depict and express the brand’s meaning. In two minutes and thirty seconds, the hotel manages to combine all its excellent services in an extraordinary manner to illustrate the typical luxurious service it delivers, including the Meeting, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions niche segment the hotel caters for (The Westin Hotel in Malta, 2012).
2.4 Benefits and success factors of social media for hoteliers

SNS enable online material and media to be easily shared and searchable, dominates lead-generation information for sales and marketing and enable better insight of your customers' requirements (Bough, B.B., 2011). On the other hand, harnessing SMPs could be an effective tool to measure customer-based brand equity (Callarisa, L et al., 2012) and create real-time communication which builds trust and eventually leads to brand loyalty (Laroche, M et al., 2013). Any firm can potentially benefit from SM in generating brand reputation and enabling faster audience reach in a cost-effective manner (Nassar, M.A., 2012). Moreover, according to a recent study carried by Mohammadian et al (2012), reveals that security, attractive content, reputation, interaction and communication factors have positive influence on SM success.

Additionally, Lewis, K (2009) suggested that transparency, honesty, relevance, value and commitment are key success factors within SM. In order for online interactions to be successful, hoteliers need to focus on speed of response to build trust and strong communications with customers and can adjust their cost to deliver precisely what the customer wants. Firms within the tourism industry need to adopt and develop marketing strategies addressing the role of SNS (Callarisa, L et al., 2012), to successfully operate on a daily basis and remain competitive. However, according to Griffith, E (2013), measuring the return on investment (ROI) on sales generated is difficult unlike search and conversion rates tend to be low when hoteliers use SMM as a branding tool.
2.5 Branding and Hospitality.

"A new dimension in building the essence of business is to harness a firm's core values, solidify its reputation, and communicate its products and services in the market place through branding" (Okapara., 2007 as cited by Nassar, M.A., 2012).

The brand is the company's main asset, significant in establishing key relationships with customers and embodying their thoughts, attitudes and recognition towards the company's product performance (Armstrong & Kotler., 2009). Within current trends in the hospitality industry, the concept of branding has dominated hotel business practices and most hoteliers have adopted branding strategies to facilitate hotel differentiation, thus sustaining a competitive edge over other hotels (Fung So, K.K; King, C; Sparks, B; Wang, Y., 2013). Hoteliers should aim to develop brand equity by creating a positive differential effect in the consumers' mind (Prasad & Dev., 2000 cited by Fung So, K.K; King, C., 2010) and providing premium value through five main assets; brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other proprietary brand assets (Tuominen, P., 1999).

Fung So, K.K et al (2010), argues that hoteliers first need to understand the role of brand equity as the foundation of a successful branding strategy. From a business perspective, strong branded hotels tend to perform better than non-branded ones in terms of level of occupancy, total revenue per customer and per room, profits and return on investment (Forgas., 2003 as cited by Fung So, K.K et al 2010). On the other hand, from a customer perspective, branded hotels moderate perceived risks, reduce costs tied up with search and facilitate pre-purchase decision in service evaluation (Kayaman & Arasli et al., 2007 as cited by Fung So, K.K et al 2013). Within the hospitality industry, advertising, word-of-mouth and service performance act as catalysts in establishing a differentiated brand image, which will ultimately lead to brand equity (Xu, B.J; Chan, A., 2010).
Brand equity should be built and reflected through online generated content, "Businesses leverage their brand name to generate awareness of their online presence" (Ilfeld & Winer., 2002 as cited by Hashim, N.H; Murphy, J., 2007).

Consumers must not be bombarded with price-driven promotions since this could reflect the company's sole interest in money and not in building trust and customer-based brand equity which affects buying intentions (Sparks, B.A and Browning, V., 2011). In fact, consumers seek trusted online brands and loyal customers are likely to repurchase the brand and do not need to seek for other online alternatives (Hashim, N.H; Murphy, J., 2007).

Hoteliers should establish a unique brand and, "not only improve its image, but also provide a personality to its business" (Aaker., 2004 as cited by Nassar, M.A., 2012) and be integrated with the company's overall communication and business strategy.
2.6 The use of social media marketing as a branding tool for hoteliers: Brand awareness, Brand Image and Brand Loyalty.

2.6.1 Brand Awareness

There is a strong relationship between SM and generation of brand awareness which is supported by a research study conducted by Maria Johnson (2010) on social media (Mohammadian,M et al.,2012). Hoteliers should drive marketing initiatives targeted to enhance visibility to generate a distinct and unique brand (Fesenmaier, 2007 as cited Callarisa,L et al.,2012).

According to Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), "Brand awareness is the ability for a buyer to recognize or recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category..." (as cited by Callarisa, L et al., 2012).

Developing and maintaining customers' brand awareness would enhance customers' knowledge, resulting in a more familiar and positive response towards corporate brand (Xu, B.J et al., 2010). Moreover, brand awareness is determined by both the company's presented brand and external brand communication factors including advertising , promotions, publicity and word-of-mouth communications ( Fung So,K.K et al., 2010). Hoteliers should constantly expose the brand to create brand associations in consumers' memory attached to its product category (Tuominen, P.,1999) and identify potential brand influencers to enhance online visibility (Gunelius,S.,2011).
2.6.2 Brand Image

Touminen, P (1999) defines brand image as, "Consumer perceptions of a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumers' memory", and is considered as an element of brand personality (Callarisa, L et al., 2012). Hoteliers leverage SMM content to manage online reputation, create positive online brand image and link hotel services to the brand personality. Hoteliers should expose brand image on selected platforms in line with the overall branding objectives set by the company and focus on significant platforms that enable a wide audience reach (Agresta, S., 2011), and embody brand personality through the type of conversations engaged in (Bough, B.B., 2011). Moreover, corporate brand meaning is influenced by direct customer experience and is dependent on internally focused brand promotions such as employees' behaviour, overall design and structure of service provision and the ability to successfully deliver the brand promise (Xu, B.J et al 2010).

2.6.3 Brand Loyalty

There is a strong relationship between brand awareness, brand image and brand loyalty. Brand loyalty should be reinforced though provision of direct positive customer experiences with the brand which will result in repeat purchase. (Nam, J; Ekinci, Y; Whyatt, G., 2011). A successful brand retains satisfied and loyal customers which are key influencers in generating positive word-of-mouth advertising and respond more favourably to the brand than non-loyal ones (Callarisa, L et al., 2012). Online brand loyalty is shaped through the company's conversational engagement with its target audience, by listening and researching customer's behavioural patterns (Zucal, C. 2012), embracing customer's requirements to deliver what they want, providing fast responses and excellent online customer quality service. Generating brand loyalty elicit potential profits for the firm and will be much easier to retain and possibly attract potential
customers which are willing to pay for price premiums due to price insensitivity towards a loyal brand (Xu, B.J; Chan, A., 2010). Rewarding loyal customers is crucial in showing appreciation, such as the case of Hilton, whereby loyal customers can download a $50 resort credit redeemable at check-in from selected Hilton chains (Lanz, L et al. 2010).

2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, the subject of SMM and branding in hospitality was covered as broadly as possible, by primarily researching the most recent academic and non-academic sources and filtering information obtained to develop a realistic, informative and in-depth argument on the subject matter. From research carried out in the literature review, to best knowledge as evidenced from references, I can conclude that a lot have been written on this subject but I believe that there is a gap in the literature when linking SMM and branding, with special reference to the Maltese hospitality industry. Moreover, many academic sources have researched on potential use of SM in hospitality, but very limited information was found on the use of SMM as a brand-building tool in tourism.

To sum up, SM should be used to promote the hotel brand and not sell the brand. No more than twenty percent of SM content should be spent on SMM efforts and at least eighty percent should be ideally spent on non-self-promotional activities (Gunelius, S., 2011). It is important to remark that the use of SMM as a branding strategy is selective, implying that according to studies by Nassar, M.A (2012) concludes that high graded hotels being the four and five-star hotels engage more in SM for branding practices than low graded hotels.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Data gathering techniques employed within this research will be discussed including: primary and secondary research methods, formulation of interview questions, and criteria for sampling. Moreover, respondents' profiling, data collection and method for analysis will be discussed and finally research limitations encountered throughout will be listed accordingly.

3.2 Primary Research

According to Armstrong & Kotler (2009), "Primary data consists of information collected for the specific purpose at hand".

In order to effectively prove hypotheses set and reach target objects, the selected method of primary data collection is a qualitative approach. Qualitative techniques include the collection of large amounts, to some extent detailed information in relation to generally few cases including people, organizations, facilities, programs and location (Veal, A.J., 2006).

The qualitative approach was more suitable for this study due to:

- Research focus is on meanings and attitudes.
- This study is based on exploratory theory building.
- Primary research was based on self-reported data which is effective in identifying respondents' attitudes, perceptions and beliefs on subject matter
- Subjects will define concepts, terms and issues in relation to this field.
- Subjects chosen represent the supply side of the hospitality industry.

The use of semi-structured interviews is an appropriate qualitative method to collect in-depth information, involving small numbers of individuals being interviewed at length. A semi-
structured interview allows the researcher to investigate, collect detailed information in a conversational manner and enables recognition of provided answers. Participants can interact more freely with researcher and provide a broad perspective on subject which enhances research quality.

3.3 Secondary Research

According to Veal, A.J (2006), "Secondary data is data that already exists and was collected for some other (primary) purpose but which can be used a second time in the current project- the researcher is the secondary user".

Since tourism is identified as a multidisciplinary approach, it is significant to consolidate with previous knowledge about subject matter. In chapter 2, existing literature within the field of social media and hospitality were analyzed that act as a strong building foundation for primary research and formulation of data collection techniques, including identification of literature gaps that could serve as potential research questions for future studies. Major academic journals used include; Journal of Tourism Management, Annals of Tourism Research, International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, Journal of Brand Management, International Journal of Business and Management and Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice. Other sources include websites, e-books and academic books.

3.4 Method and Formulation of Interview Questions

Open-ended, semi-structured interviews have been carried out with seven representatives of the Maltese hospitality industry. The study focused on the supply side of the tourism industry due to time constraints and research question employed. Two sets of interview questions were created for two types of participants. First set is targeted for six hotel representatives and the other set is for an e-commerce leading professional. Ten set of open-ended questions were formulated per interview for respondents chosen, for a comprehensive and detailed background
on subject matter that would facilitate better data analysis. After formulating all interview questions, a pilot study was carried out with the tutor and a volunteer, to ensure quality of questions designed, including grammatical errors and spelling.

### 3.5 Ethical considerations

Confidentiality was given importance throughout the interviews held and all hotel respondents were kept anonymous, including the hotel itself, except for the leading e-commerce professional Mr. Frankie Spiteri. The latter was asked via an email for his private consent and permission to be mentioned by name during data analysis and the respondent agreed likewise. Respondents were not considered to be a vulnerable group and consequently there existed no issue of potential breach of ethics. Respondents are not identified by name, not even actual name of hotel. Hotels are merely labelled as 'chain' or 'independent' managed. In the case of social media specialist and independent respondent, Mr Frankie Spiteri (MBA), a consent form was duly obtained.

### 3.6 Criteria for Sampling

The purposive sampling was selected, since it is a non-probability type of sampling, and the respondents chosen were based on the criteria of holding specialized knowledge in the field of hospitality and on the capacity and willingness to participate. The sample chosen is a non-representative subset of the larger population, and respondents chosen have satisfied specific needs and objectives set for this research.

Selection criteria for hotels was based on the type of category, ranging from chain managed hotels to independent hotels from five to three rated. This sampling technique was employed to gather substantial information from different hotels and highlight main comparisons and similarities between representatives on subject matter. Moreover, to enhance research quality, a leading e-commerce professional, Mr. Spiteri was interviewed to disclose significant information
about social media practices within the Maltese hospitality sector, thus managed to get a better insight of the supply side.

3.7 Respondents’ Profiling: Hoteliers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hotel number</th>
<th>Rate</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Rooms</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>5 star</td>
<td>Chain Managed Hotel</td>
<td>340: guest rooms and suites</td>
<td>St.Julians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>5 star</td>
<td>Independent hotel</td>
<td>433: guest rooms and suites</td>
<td>Valletta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>3 star</td>
<td>Independent hotel</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>Sliema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>4 star</td>
<td>Independent hotel</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>Sliema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5</td>
<td>5 star</td>
<td>Chain Managed Hotel</td>
<td>252: guest rooms, executives, suites.</td>
<td>St.Julians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6</td>
<td>5 star</td>
<td>Chain Managed Hotel</td>
<td>294: guest rooms, executives, suites.</td>
<td>St.Julians</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Respondents’ Profiling
3.8 Data collection and Method of Analysis

All participants were asked for an interview appointment and contacted via email and telephone. All interviews were conducted in April 2013 and took a span of three weeks to be finalized. The interviews conducted were all face-to-face and length of discussion varied between thirty minutes to two hours maximum depending on the respondents' willingness and degree in disclosing potential information. To facilitate detailed data analysis and enable a more conversational and interactive interview, a voice recorder was used through informed consent and privacy assurance of all participants.

All interviews were transcribed by listening carefully to the voice recorder and interpret word by word, aspiring not to misinterpret or misquote provided answers. Another set of open-ended questions were designed for Mr.Spiteri, which perfectly supplements previous data collected from hoteliers. The same process was repeated for the second set of interview and analyzed in line with previous respondents. In a way, this entailed a process of triangulation between the first set of data and the opinion of an independent expert.

3.8 Research Limitations

Lack of academic sources which focus on social media, marketing and branding in Maltese hospitality industry were the first limitation encountered in secondary research. However, on the whole, a lot of academic journals and online sources including books were available to successfully build a good base for the literature around subject matter. Most of the limitations were encountered while conducting primary research namely;
• Identifying sampling criteria and respondents' profiling was somewhat difficult due to the adequate and limited participants required to make the findings valid.

• Contacting and fixing an interview appointment with some of the respondents was difficult since not all were willing to help or some even took weeks to reply.

• Taking into consideration the qualitative and descriptive approach used, the word limit and deadline for this long essay exercised a lot of pressure and constrain on the limit of respondents and interviews to be carried out, due to the lengthy process and words involved during analysis.
Chapter 4: Analysis

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will critically analyze, compare and contrast information gathered in the primary research through seven in-depth, semi-structured interviews with personnel working in the Maltese hospitality industry. In line with subject matter, I will analyze results from an interview with a leading e-commerce professional who provides products and services for the local hospitality industry, such as websites, booking software, marketing and social media (SM) services. The following analysis would bring to light main findings and aim in fulfilling objectives set for the long essay. To facilitate in-depth analysis of research findings, these will be discussed under relevant topic subheadings for all seven participants. The order in which these subheadings are listed is not necessarily the same order as in the questionnaires.

4.2 Internet marketing and the online consumer.

This section will provide a critical discussion on the use and significance of embracing an internet marketing strategy by hoteliers and analyze the participants' attitude in relation to online consumers.

4.2.1 Embracing an internet marketing strategy

Mr. Frankie Spiteri argued that internet marketing (IM) is very important within the tourism industry. Business transactions via the internet have increased significantly, implying that the hospitality industry should likewise increase its interaction on IM. Five out of six respondents, argued that the hotel possesses an IM strategy which is significant as part of the overall business strategy. The chain managed hotels researched upon, follow standards set out by the mother company when it comes to IM, such as directives, guidelines, policies, brand standards
and rules to be up kept, most of which have to be adapted to the local market to successfully operate.

Respondent H1 claimed that amongst other policies set out by the parent brand is the consistency of marketing the brand differentiating factors the hotel offers. Similarly, respondents H2, H5 and H6 agreed on the importance of adopting an IM strategy and justify the significance and benefits of driving online marketing (OM) through SM, some of which include scientific gauge which facilitates evaluation of marketing campaigns and the measurement of return on investment. Respondent H4 explained that the hotel's main marketing strategies adopted should be in line with the hotel's website, including search engines and internet companies such as booking.com or Expedia.

In contrast, respondent H3 has no marketing strategy in place but affirms that "In our own hotel's perspective, internet marketing is about brand loyalty and to drive sales" and adds that businesses in Malta do not need to strive for higher occupancy rates, but in maximizing revenue from each room capacity, concluding that IM is not effective in driving the hotel's branding strategy. An effective manner of using IM is to facilitate direct room reservations and minimize dependence on intermediaries such as Tour Operators. IM facilitates repeat visitors and generate brand loyalty through effective online communication, specifically on Facebook and remarks that chain managed hotels have more power in terms of branding through IM over independent hotels. In my opinion, hotel H3 is underutilizing the potential benefits of IM.
4.2.1 The online consumer

Most respondents agreed that the online consumer is more active, demanding and in control of content shared online. Respondent H1 argued that since, "Obviously now, everything is a click of a button away", online content can easily go viral, unlike traditional media. Respondent H6 stated that "The most important thing is to learn how to manage it", through interaction and communication. The hotel has staff specifically assigned to reply and keep constant relations with consumers and handling complaints in the best manner. Similarly, respondent H5 claimed that since online consumers are more assertive, hoteliers are obliged to communicate and actively engage with them. Heavy interaction will facilitate better response towards customers’ requirements and identify content that is likely to be more successful than other, in emphasizing that, "They control the content, it's no longer us providing just random content".

Respondent H2 asserted that consumers are aware of the power they can exercise on SM and there is no way to stop them from doing any harm or good. Information asymmetry used to dominate in traditional marketing practices, resulting in an imbalance of power and knowledge between supply and demand sides. The internet and accompanying online reviews, enable the consumer to be informed prior to their service experience, implying that consumers are at an equal level with the suppliers. However, respondent H4 argued that online consumers have the right to exercise such power but within limits, explaining that consumers are continuously searching for the best deals, but sometimes abuse of their right, "However, I find it very unfair to be faced by consumers who are expecting a five star service when paying for three star rates".

In addition, respondent H3 remarked that most clients can actually be very demanding and powerful if standard expectations are not met. The participant argued that review sites such as Trip Advisor, are tools that enable consumers to share their experiences and opinions on the hotel service, which will ultimately influence their pre-purchase decision making. The hotel ensures that standard expectations are met, departing guests leave satisfied and are
encouraged to post reviews on Trip Advisor and SM. The respondent stated that, "**What is very important in marketing is to make people feel important, and if you do they will come back to you**". In my view, consumers are more assertive of business practices adopted by firms and the internet has enabled them to exercise more power and thus control viral business marketing.

### 4.3 Social Media Platforms and content posted.

Discussion will focus on the different types of SM platforms (SMPs) hoteliers heavily engage in, the frequency of interaction made on SMPs and the type of content posted on SM, with special focus on non-price driven promotions.

#### 4.3.1 The use of social media platforms by hoteliers.

Interaction on SMPs depends on the type of hotel, brand, location and target audience.

Prevailing platforms amongst surveyed hotels are Facebook and Trip Advisor, while less popular include; Twitter, Blogs, LinkedIn, YouTube, Pinterest, Google Plus, Instagram, Flickr, Bright Cove and Weibo. As supported through research, Mr. Spiteri asserted that Facebook is the predominant SMP amongst hoteliers but the most significant is Trip Advisor. On the other hand, interaction on Twitter is very limited and YouTube can be effective if used wisely.

Respondents H5, H1 and H3 similarly argued that the hotel interacts on specific SM according to the type of market being catered for. Respondent H5 and H3 target the local and international market through Facebook, while respondent H1 embarks specifically on Facebook and LinkedIn to reach two separate markets. Facebook is effective to promote food and beverage events, room offers, and casual dinner restaurants while LinkedIn is used to promote fine dining restaurants to reach the corporate market, for business incentives and meetings. Mr. Spiteri insisted that three star hotels are more affluent than five star hotels, but they tend to allocate less budget on "extra" hotel services, one of which being OM. In fact, as explained by Mr.Spiteri,
the low rated, independent hotels interviewed, have minimal interaction on social networking sites (SNS) when compared to the other four respondents.

However, respondent H4 insisted that, "If I had to take a cross section of the people I spoke to over the past six years, who have used the net for their accommodation requirements, I doubt if any one of them mentioned Facebook or any other social media". Moreover, the participant argued that most SNS are not effective, for example compulsive shoppers are less likely to complain on reviews, while budget clients tend to criticize more often since the level of service paid for was quite less.

Moreover, respondent H3 argued that Twitter and YouTube are not effective for the hospitality industry. However, as supported from the literature review and other participants, Twitter and YouTube provide significant branding benefits if managed professionally. Respondent H3 explained the significance of making a distinction between the quality and quantity, implying that it is more effective to target the actual market through SMPs, since they are likely to disclose genuine information about services provided.

4.3.2 Interaction and content posted on social media

Respondents vary in the degree of interaction on SM, many of which heavily engage on a daily basis, especially when specific staff is assigned to do so. Most hotels use Facebook to drive food and beverage or room promotions, while some participants focus on non-price driven promotions to generate more interest. Mr. Spiteri remarks that "If I put myself in the shoes of the booker, I will want to look for information that's relevant". In order to increase the hotel's brand awareness and reputation, hotels should update attractive content such as uploading images of sunny Malta, in a way that markets the country's comparative advantages, against wet countries such as Britain.
As asserted by respondents H2 and H3, Mr. Spiteri insisted that online communication should never induce hard selling, since it will divert attention. The participant strongly believes that SMPs can be more beneficial in terms of branding rather than generating business. Generating thousands of likes on the hotel's Facebook page doesn't imply that these people are going to give you business, perhaps from locals, but on an international scale it is questionable. Trip Advisor is the best tool that can generate business and if a hotel adopts a strong reputation management strategy through all SMPs, specifically Trip Advisor, it is much more likely to be spending its budget wisely and thus be successful.

Participant H1 argued that the hotel interacts daily on SMPs and uploads content to drive the hotel's key brand differentiators and brand personality through SNS. As asserted by Mr. Spiteri's, the hotelier remarks that people need to be consistently fed with interesting content in order to engage. Most of the brand differentiating factors are related to well-being and travel including healthy eating, super foods, heavenly beds, the famous "Ging Tea" made up by international sommelier and special work-outs by professionals. Similarly, respondent H1 and H6 agreed that driving competition events through SNS can be quite successful, especially amongst the locals. Moreover, participant H6 comments that communication is a significant element on SNS, including subjects that focus on destination or news updates. Respondent H6 use SM to drive public relations, stimulate corporate interest and promote food and beverages events most of which are not always price-driven.

Respondent H5 said that interaction via SM depends on seasonality, since it will be useless to overwhelm the clients with irrelevant content. To reach the local market, content posted include; food and beverage promotions, photos of food displays, special rates on weekend breaks, upcoming events and initiatives on Facebook, which result in a high response rate. In contrast, destination news updates, hotel renovations, local events, local produce and local talent are continuously promoted on SNS, mainly targeting the international market.
Moreover, respondent H2 insisted that they interact three to four times daily, especially on Facebook and most subjects focus on Malta, history, culture or even the location of the hotel itself. The participant explained the fictional character of Gran Jean, which was purposefully created by the hotel team members to showcase the history of Malta and Valletta through updates via its own Facebook page. The participant argued that whatever is posted online is in line with the corporate brand, including promotions or any theme-related activities. The hotel's Facebook page includes; spa events, wedding campaigns, food and beverage promotions such as cuisine offered and new menus. Communication via You Tube is very effective especially creating videos which broadcast the destination's main tourist highlights. As supported earlier by respondent H1, respondent H2 argued that the MICE segment should be managed professionally and use platforms such as LinkedIn to effectively reach this profitable market.

In the case of Facebook and Trip Advisor, respondent H4 argued, "No, I don't think they are effective, this is my opinion and I might be wrong". Interaction is in fact quite limited, specifically on Trip Advisor, since no branding activities are embraced. In contrast to other respondents, content on Facebook is mostly price-driven such as hotel's facilities, events' update and special room offers, which in my opinion is limiting the potential use of SMPs in driving sales.

On the other hand, respondent H3 explained that they target the British grey market through the Facebook page and upload content according to their tastes' such as old Maltese post cards, destination broadcasting, including images and videos of refurbished rooms. As similarly argued by Mr. Spiteri and respondent H2, price-driven promotions generates no hits on Facebook. The respondent asserted that using Facebook is effective in generating positive reputation and results from Facebook Analytics illustrate that the British segment and women tend to be more active on the hotel's Facebook page, thus most of the content posted relates more to these segments' tastes.
4.4 Social Media marketing and Branding.

I will discuss the use of SM marketing (SMM) in driving the hotel's branding strategy and identify how Facebook, Twitter, Trip Advisor and YouTube are used as a branding tool in generating corporate brand awareness, sustaining brand image and creating brand loyalty. Various SMPs are used for different branding activities, some of which are more important in influencing corporate brand than others.

4.4.1 The application of social media marketing by hoteliers.

The majority of respondents embark on SMM to drive their branding strategies but the degree of significance tends to vary from one hotel category to another. Mr. Spiteri argued that SMM is effective in driving the hotel's branding strategy, but insisted that "If you have people writing, you must have people moderating it". SMM should be professionally managed and controlled through proper SM strategies, back office support and guidelines.

Chain managed hotels follow standards issued by the mother company and have an advantage over independent ones since they have more budget allocated for implementing the branding strategy through SMM. However, SMM is more significant for independent hotels since things can be done quicker and at a much cost-effective manner than chain managed hotels. The latter have a lot of costs being imposed from their mother company. Moreover, Mr. Spiteri argued that SM is marketing in itself since it involves a two-way interaction with your audience, in fact most websites are evolving to entice more interaction through communication, such as blogs and reviews. Also, one has to keep in mind that different generations tend to value SM differently and the more interaction you have on SM the more commitment and budget you need.

Respondent H1 uses SMM as a public relations tool rather than a branding tool, although the brand's message is delivered indirectly through uploads on SNS. Since the core brand focuses
on well-being and travel, using SMM to push its differentiating factors will generate a high comparative advantage over other competitors. Moreover respondent H5 argued that, “Social media marketing is definitely our primary tool because it gives us direct communication and direct access to our audience, especially when it comes to the brand”. The respondent further justifies the effectiveness of using SMM, specifically for the direct and measurable results it facilitates and to successfully drive promotional campaigns and advertising.

Respondent H2 stated that ideally, encouraging interaction between people to disclose positive information about the hotel proves to be successful to generate viral marketing. Most subjects posted on SM do not necessarily focus on the hotel's facilities, such as YouTube videos which generate a lot of positive feedback. The brand's significance should consistently be reflected throughout the hotel's OM, in which I strongly agree with.

Moreover, respondent H6 stated that their mother company focuses on the branding strategy and establishes brand standards to upkeep worldwide, whilst the franchise hotel in Malta uses SMM to communicate the excellent experience offered by the hotel, rather than brand itself. In addition, respondent H4 argued that the use of SMM is to effectively communicate brand meaning and induce adverts, “If you ask me how will I sell the hotel, I will sell the hotel as I've always branded it on our adverts; the three star hotel with a five star heart”. The participant insisted that the power of marketing is the hands of the consumer, therefore they tend to shape more or less the image of the company, regardless of the image the hotel tries to establish.

Respondent H3 pointed out that the branding strategy of the hotel is being re-done through the use of main selling points, establishing a new website in line with the brand, creating new brand images and a hotel logo. The selling points will act as the basis of developing the brand and will be constantly pushed through SMM such as the hotel's Facebook page, website and Trip Advisor to generate brand awareness. As similarly stated by participant H2, the hotel will take into consideration the consistency of brand personality in the use of colours, text format and
images. For example the main website will reflect the calm atmosphere supported through the use of light brown colours.

4.4.2 Using Facebook, Twitter, You Tube and Trip Advisor to drive the hotel's branding strategy.

Participant H1 remarked that generating brand awareness, driving brand differentiators, and establishing brand loyalty is significant through Facebook, and Twitter. The hotel has its own You Tube channel account Bright Cove, most of the videos focusing on different facilities supported by the hotel, including MICE events. As further argued, You tube yields potential brand benefits including product awareness and expressing brand meaning, while using Trip Advisor to generate brand interest is not effective due to the limited interaction it entails. In contrast, respondent H5 remarks that Trip Advisor generates immediate responses and is an effective medium in terms of marketing, communication, reflecting brand image and inducing brand awareness through feedback and reviews posted, on a twenty-four hour basis. Similarly, as stated by respondent H1, Twitter is an effective medium to provide feedback and engage with consumers through generating brand loyalty and awareness, while maintaining consistency of the hotel's image throughout.

Respondent H5 fosters the 'Yes I can' attitude amongst employees, in being loyal to the customer, while concurrently showcasing the hotel's brand image. Both employees and guests act as excellent brand ambassadors on behalf of the hotel, thus it is crucial to engage and encourage them to disclose positive reviews and information on SM, specifically Facebook. The participant insists that YouTube is very effective in generating brand awareness, showcasing the hotel's property and the professional service catered for by skilled employees.

Participant H2 agreed that SM could be one of the tools in achieving brand loyalty and insisted that, "Brand loyalty eventually comes when a client experiences your product and he likes it,"
you deliver the experience based on what you promised and he comes back”. In addition, Facebook, Twitter and Trip Advisor are effectively utilized to showcase the brand in terms of awareness, image, meaning and style. The hotel needs to enhance its effectiveness on YouTube channels due to potential branding outcomes it generates, and is competent in exposing brand image, generating brand loyalty and successfully delivering the brand's message.

Respondent H6 stated that SMPs are used to communicate with its audience and ensure that brand image is protected through all SNS, in the way messages are conveyed, the tone of acknowledgement on reviews and type of language used. Moreover, respondent H3 argued that the new hotel's branding strategy will aim to generate loyalty and brand personality by focusing on the main selling points and driving them through Facebook, Trip Advisor, website and newsletters. On the other hand, respondent H4 said that Facebook is mainly used to provoke loyalty through number of fans on their page and induce brand awareness by generating interest in relation to the hotel. Respondent H5 argued that the firm's management believes that internal communication facilitates projection of brand personality through the staff, by illustrating the benefits of the hotel even through their personal Facebook page, to boost visitor's interest and positively expose the brand.

4.4 Leveraging online brand reputation and measuring effectiveness of social networking sites.

This chapter will focus on best practices used by hoteliers to leverage online brand reputation. Discussion will also focus on the implications of electronic word of mouth generated through SM in influencing online brand reputation, including measures and precautions hoteliers undertake to manage negative online reviews. Moreover, the various modes of online measurement tools to evaluate the effectiveness of SMM will be discussed.
4.4.1 Brand Reputation through Electronic-word-of-Mouth.

Four out of the six respondents, asserted that monitoring, providing professional and immediate response on SMM facilitates positive brand reputation, limits unfavourable comments and negative search results. Respondents H2 and H4 argued that since the internet enabled online consumers to be powerful and informative, managers need to be promptly aware of online content being generated.

In addition, respondent H5 remarks that immediate reactions to online reviews would reflect commitment and dedication towards the brand, while H3 participant claimed that in order to avoid negative brand reputation, the hotel should generate interesting online content for its guests. In this case, people are more likely to share positive viral content on Facebook about the hotel's benefits and the comparative advantages it distinctly offers. However, respondent H4 insists that since consumers are demanding and powerful, SM is not an effective medium to get a message across.

4.4.2 Measures and Precautions in managing negative online reviews.

As agreed by most hoteliers, immediate reaction and prompt reply to online criticisms is a top priority in effectively managing brand reputation. The second priority is to apologize for not reaching guest’s expectations, address the mistake immediately and ask them to contact the management personally to sort out the problem.

As pointed out by respondents H6 and H2, delivering the brand promise and ensuring that guests leave the premises satisfied, would facilitate trust and loyalty amongst clients, which is a pro-active manner of avoiding online criticisms. Respondents H3 and H4 argued that the hotel constantly aims in offering the best service, but if things remain unsolved, the management contacts the individual and ease the problem by offering compensation such as room upgrade for their next visit. Thus is a regular system procedure that most hotels embark upon to avoid
negative brand reputation. In addition, some of the participants interviewed said that encouraging guests to comment on Trip Advisor is a good way to enhance brand image.

4.5 Evaluating the effectiveness of social media marketing on corporate brand.

Mr. Spiteri pointed out significant practices that hoteliers should embrace in order to effectively expose their brand through SNS. First and foremost, every hotel needs to allocate manning and budget required, then embark on online initiatives and embrace consistency in line with the brand, work, schedule and the whole strategy. Ultimately, measuring the success of strategy comes into play by recording performance throughout. Due to rapid change in technology, measuring success is crucial since hoteliers need to build on past performances in order to enhance future activities. The participant argued that there are various tools available for measuring online performance on SM; ranging from free, simple to ones against payment, the latter being more detailed and accurate.

It all depends on the capability to choose the right tool adequate for your business and embracing reputation management tools which are very important. The most popular type of measurements used to evaluate the effectiveness of SMM include: Google Analytics, Facebook Analytics and Revinate. Respondent H1 insisted that Facebook Analytics is effective in analyzing people's behavior on SM such as number of likes generated, posts viewed and shared content.

Participant H6 pointed out that the hotel's mother company runs a measurement system that monitors guests' online presence in terms of sentiment, competition, hotel performance, interest generated, number of comments posted and people visiting the site. Other measurement tools used include Maestro, Google Analytics and Revinate, the latter being a measurement that focuses on the global web and systemically issues an analytical report on guests' interaction vis-à-vis the hotel.
The same types of measurements are effectively embraced by respondent H5, including Facebook Analytics and in particular Revinate which measures sentiment and consumer's perceptions. The participant argued that Google Analytics is heavily used for the website and the hotel's internet presence. The respondent further explained that local events are the main source of measuring the effectiveness of campaign initiatives on SMM amongst the locals. The hotel measures the whole path of a user's journey and identifies the level of engagement in relation to the brand and the audience, including booking proceedings.

Moreover, in contrast to respondent H5, participant H2 argued that there is currently no specific tool that measures success against corporate brand, but in effectively measuring consumer's behavior in engaging through SMPs. In addition, the participant argued that effective measurement of SM on the corporate brand is through people's perceptions in physically interacting with the clients and gain insight on the hotel's valuable content online.

Respondent H3 makes use of Facebook and Google Analytics which proves to be very effective in identifying consumer's online routine. Data from Facebook Analytics is very detailed, such as gender and age type which facilitates better analysis of target audience. Google Analytics illustrates the origin of online traffic to the website, being fifteen to twenty percent from Facebook and seventy percent from Google search engine. The participant comments that Trip Advisor also has its own metrics in measuring review sentiments and ratings thus identifying the overall successful performance of the company against other competitors. In contrast, respondent H4 only measures the number of friends requested on their Facebook page and makes no use of other measurement tools available.

4.6 Integrating social media and traditional marketing.

Mr. Spiteri pointed out that, "I think hotels are now realizing the importance of online marketing, but in the past they used to be more on the print. Now the internet is becoming stronger". The hotel incurs a cost of hundreds of thousands of Euros to print a brochure, which ultimately is not
in line with current business practices. During international business fairs like Travel Market or ITB Berlin, marketers are less likely to distribute brochures, but instead resort to compact disks or ask members to visit the website or join their online pages, specifically on SMPs. As illustrated by other respondents, Mr. Spiteri identifies the main benefits of SMM against offline marketing: more cost effective, easily adaptable to change, enables marketing of current events, is flexible and facilitates outcome measurement including user's booking history.

Respondent H1 argued that whatever is done offline is always backed up by an online campaign, either on SM, website, banner campaign or newsletters. As argued by respondents H1, H5 and H6, offline marketing is still very significant in reaching the locals, especially in driving food and beverage promotions, including festive events. Therefore marketers have to resort to print and media adverts such as Television or magazine. On the other hand, as supported by Mr. Spiteri, respondent H1 argued that SMM is much more effective than offline because it can be tracked, it facilitates evaluation of return on investments and it is more cost-effective in reaching a wide audience.

In addition, as remarked by respondent H5 and H2, SMM is more flexible, provides immediate results, gives a clearer consumer insight, allows conversations, generates more interest and is measurable. In the case of hotel H5, whatever is marketed online and offline is always directly linked to the website and Facebook. Respondent H6 said that online promotions are consistent with printed campaigns in terms of style and message conveyed and points out that the use of SM is more effective in reaching the international audience. Target marketing is generated through the hotel's website and online campaigns launched by the mother company, which directs people to either the hotel's website or booking engines such as Expedia.

As supported by Mr. Spiteri, respondent H2 emphasizes that OM through SM is more cost effective and interactive than traditional marketing, whilst the latter is diminishing rapidly as evidenced from sales of publications. The participant argued that they try to keep continuous
presence on both online and offline, including overseas promotions, but the majority of the hotel's promotional campaigns are done online: twenty percent offline and eighty percent online. In addition, both respondents H3 and H4 said that their hotel lacks a lot of synchronized effort between the two types of marketing. Respondent H3 argued most offline promotions are driven by tour operators so the hotel doesn't need to invest in such marketing. Since Malta is a small island, OM is more significant than offline marketing, the latter being more expensive to run and less effective than online media.

4.8 Conclusion

Most respondents acknowledged the fact that SMM is or could be an important branding tool if used correctly and managed professionally as supported by Mr. Spiteri. Chain managed hotels have more power, tools and professional insight into applying SMM within the hospitality industry, while some independent hotels, specifically H3 and H4 tend to lack insight of the potential that SM could exercise on corporate brand.
4.9 Comparing and Contrasting Results

4.9.1 Chain Managed Hotels

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Table 2: Chain Managed Hotels : Results
### 4.9.2 Independent Hotels

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<tr>
<td>Question 4</td>
<td>Very Important</td>
<td>Not effective for branding</td>
<td>Very Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 5</td>
<td>Three to Four Times Daily</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>Minimum Interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 5 (b)</td>
<td>Non-Price driven promotions</td>
<td>Non-Price Driven Promotions</td>
<td>Price Driven Promotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 6</td>
<td>4/4 platforms are effective for branding.</td>
<td>2/4 platforms are effective for branding.</td>
<td>2/4 platforms are effective for branding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 7</td>
<td>Effective Management</td>
<td>Be Cautious and avoid hard-selling</td>
<td>Communication via social media is not effective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 8</td>
<td>Effective communication</td>
<td>Good Service, Immediate response</td>
<td>Verify comments and offer compensation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 9</td>
<td>Physical Interaction with clients</td>
<td>Facebook and Google Analytics, other metrics.</td>
<td>Friends and Likes through Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 10</td>
<td>Online and Offline.</td>
<td>Online.</td>
<td>Non- synchronized effort.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3: Independent Hotels: Results**
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Research Findings and Hypotheses.

1. Embracing social media marketing is significant in successfully driving the hotel's branding strategy.

Internet marketing has facilitated the use of SMPs amongst selected participants to drive marketing, sales, communication and branding. Facebook is the main platform used, Trip Advisor ranking the second, while the degree of interaction on Twitter and You Tube varies according to target segment and hotel category. To some extent, selected SMPs are used to drive the hotel's branding strategy, specifically Facebook, Twitter and Trip Advisor which facilitate brand awareness, are excellent for driving marketing campaigns, enable direct communication, assist brand exposure and generate brand loyalty. You Tube is the least utilized platform amongst participants although some do point out the potential brand benefits videos can generate for corporate success, since it is an effective medium to deliver the brand message, generate brand loyalty and express brand personality.

As supported from the literature review by Sparks, B.A et al (2011), most participants agreed that it is not effective to use SMM to drive price based promotions and induce hard selling, since it would ease consumers’ interest towards corporate brand and damage online reputation. Moreover, as supported from literature review and demonstrated through primary research, SMM is very significant in successfully driving the hotel's branding strategy and as stated by Mr.Spiteri, SMM is more effective in generating brand benefits rather than generating potential business opportunities if managed in a professional manner. Delivering the brand promise is very important if a hotel strives for online success and positive brand reputation globally, which will eventually built trust and loyalty.
2. Chain Managed and independent high rated hotels are more likely to follow a two-way communication, engaging a brand and an audience on social media platforms than low rated hotels.

Chain Managed hotels, including the five-star independent hotel, value all selected SMPs, while four and three star hotels tend to limit interaction to Facebook and Trip Advisor. SMM is heavily used as a branding tool amongst five-star hotels while low rated hotels use SMM to drive sales and profits. The research supports findings from literature review by Nassar, M.A (2012) in stating that higher graded hotels tend to use SM as a branding strategy over low graded ones. As stated by Mr.Spiteri, high graded hotels follow brand standards issued by mother company and have more power and budget allocated at hand to drive branding through SMPs, while low graded hotels tend to spend less in online marketing and branding and focus more in driving sales and direct reservations.

3. Social media marketing provides potential advantages to the hospitality industry over traditional marketing.

As supported through research findings, SMM is more cost-effective, facilitates wide audience reach, enables direct communication and marketing of current events, provides potential brand benefits, is more flexible in terms of content, assists business practices, empowers consumers' knowledge and facilitates measurement of return on investment, including tracking devices and online measurement tools such as Google and Facebook Analytics. On the other hand, traditional marketing is more expensive and interaction is quite limited, reach of target segments is less effective and costly and is hard to measure success of branding, marketing campaigns, users' journey and return on investment. As supported by Gunelius, S (2011) from the literature review, research indicates that most hotels apply the 80/20 rule, since the
majority of participants argued that most content posted on social media is not self-promoting and involves other subjects such as destination's news updates, while very limited marketing promotions are done on SNS, mainly food and beverage promotions. Moreover, it can be concluded that research findings indicate the importance of embracing a synchronized effort between the online and traditional marketing, especially if the hotel aims to target the local market.

5.2 Recommendations and Issues for further research

Since the study was based on qualitative research, generalizations to the Maltese hospitality cannot be drawn up, since the selected sample is not strong enough to do so. However, the study can be further improved if the sample obtained is bigger and the research done over a longer span of time which will enable a more detailed approach. The research findings managed to prove hypotheses set and can conclude that there still need to be increased awareness towards potential brand benefits that SMM entails especially amongst independent hotels that in return would help to facilitate effective business practices and build a stronger brand, at least on a local scale. The study focused on four selected platforms; however other potential studies could be carried out in focusing on a larger selection of SMPs. A quantitative study on related subject matter based on the demand side would further support the research conducted in analyzing the consumers' perceptions and engagement on SMPs and marketing in relation to corporate brand.
References


Appendices

Appendix A : Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Hoteliers

1. Internet marketing has revolutionized the way hotels facilitate exchange with their audience. Does the hotel have an internet marketing strategy as part of its overall business strategy?

2. Do you find online consumers have become more demanding, active and in control of content shared through social networking sites?

3. Which Social Media Platforms does the hotel actively engage in?

4. Hotels worldwide, are successfully embracing social media marketing as part of their branding strategy. How important is social media marketing to communicate your brand's meaning with target audience?

5. What type of content is posted on social media platforms apart from price-driven promotions?
   
   (b) How often do you interact on these platforms?

6. Kindly explain the use of social media marketing to generate brand awareness, drive brand personality and create brand loyalty through the following social media platforms:

   - Twitter
   
   - Facebook
   
   - Trip Advisor
   
   - You tube
7. Social Media marketing generates what is called "electronic word of mouth". How does this new phenomenon effect your online brand reputation?

8. What measures and precautions does the hotel undertake to handle negative online reviews posted on social networking sites that could possibly damage the brand.

9. How do you measure success and effectiveness of social media marketing on the overall corporate brand.

10. How does the company integrate offline and social media marketing?
Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions for an e-commerce specialist.

The following set of questions are in part fulfilment requirements of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts(Honours) Tourism Studies.

1. Briefly explain the significance of your business in relation to the hospitality industry.
2. How important is internet marketing within the tourism industry?
3. What do online consumers look for on social media platforms?
4. To what extent is social media marketing effective in driving the branding strategy of hotels?
5. Which social media platforms are most effective within the hospitality industry?
6. Do you think that branded hotel chains have more power in terms of branding through social media marketing?
7. Can budget or three-star rated hotel afford to hire your skill?
8. How significant is social media marketing for an independent hotel?
9. What are the best practices hoteliers should embark on to successfully embrace their brand's meaning through social networking sites?
10. Which measurements are best suited in evaluating the effectiveness of social media marketing on corporate brand.